Summary

When Weiss Schnee was recruited into Vale PD’s Bureau of Supernatural Affairs by Inspector Ozpin she had no idea what she was getting into. She certainly wasn’t expecting to have such a dolt for a partner. Or for someone to try to usher in the apocalypse.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Weiss snuggled against her mother. The woman smiled down at her, eyes warm with affection. It was something she saw so rarely, but it filled her up inside, making the little girl feel as though she could burst.

“Weiss?” her mother asked.

“Yes, mom?” Weiss answered, voice soft.

“I know your father and I are often busy,” she said.
“It’s okay!” Weiss interjected. “You do important work. Without the Schnee Dust Company, people wouldn’t be able to fight against the monsters.”

“That’s right,” she answered with a sad sigh. “You do know we love you though, right? I know we can’t spend time together often, but I love you and your siblings more than anything in the world.”

“I know,” Weiss whispered, tears in her eyes as she hugged her mother tighter. “I love you too.”

Her mother opened her mouth to speak again, when she was cut off by a bang. The car flipped over, tearing a scream from both of their throats as they were tossed around. The windows shattered as the vehicle broke, and Weiss felt a line of hot fire burn her face as she screamed again. Then suddenly, it was quiet.

Everything was upside down. Weiss frowned in confusion, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. Eventually she realized that she was being held upside down by her seatbelt, the car sitting on its partially collapsed roof. A moan from beside her drew her attention.

“M-mommy?” Weiss whimpered. Her mother was hanging limply beside her. “Mommy?”

She heard footsteps from outside the car, and Weiss painfully turned her sore neck to look out of the broken side window. Kneeling on the ground was a thin, hard looking man who carefully examined them. Weiss blinked in confusion as she spotted goat-like horns on the top of his head. It took her scattered mind long moments to remember what he was. A faunus.


The faunus didn’t change expression at all. Instead he turned around and spoke to someone behind him. Weiss could hear him clearly, but his words didn’t make any sense to her. Not for a long, horrible moment.

“They’re alive,” the faunus said. “Guess they care about safety for themselves. I’ll finish ’em off.”

He turned around and stuck something through the window. It was a handgun. Weiss had only seen them carried by her family’s bodyguards occasionally.


“Die, Schnee,” he snarled, pulling the trigger twice.

Weiss had never experienced anything like it in her eight years of life. Physical pain had been tripping while running, or over exerting herself while learning to dance. Winter had always been distant but caring, and the constant nannies and maids would never have permitted roughhousing between the sisters. Whitley was too young for her to really interact with. Nothing had prepared her for the terror and pain of a car crash. Nothing could’ve prepared her for the agony of a gunshot wound.

For a time Weiss blacked out. When she came to it was listening to voices. They murmured indistinctly, impossible to make out at first. Only when she recognized the sound of her mother pleading did she force her eyes to open, swimming to consciousness through a blanket of pain.

“She will know peace and rest, until she becomes one with creation.”
“She hasn’t even had a chance to live,” her mother sobbed. “She’s just a little girl. Please, please don’t take her.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman said. Weiss could tell that she truly meant it. “She awakens into death even as we speak. She is already in my realm.”

“No,” her mother moaned. “Please, she’s still breathing. Please don’t take my baby.”

Weiss finally opened her eyes to find herself in a dim room. Machines hummed all around her, one beeping out the steady, slow beat of her heart. Something was down her throat, but for some reason it didn’t hurt.

“She only breathes because of the machine,” the stranger explained. “The best healers and finest doctors in the world have worked past the point of reason, and still she fades. I’m sorry, child. There is nothing I can do. She passes before our eyes.”

“There has to be something,” her mother sobbed. “Please.”

“I’m sorry,” the strange woman repeated.

Weiss looked around the room. Standing on her right side was her mother. She looked desperate and sad, and for some reason Weiss could see through her, like she wasn’t really there.

On her other side was a strange woman wearing a white hooded cloak. She was also translucent, but Weiss found her gaze drawn to the enormous scythe she held with a gentle grip.

“I will pay the price,” her mother begged. “Wouldn’t you for your daughter? Wouldn’t you want her to have the best chance?”

“I-,” the woman said, looking away. “Is this for the best? She’s in my realm now. She would be changed forever by this.”

“It’s better than never living. She’s never really had friends. Her father and I... we were always so busy. With things that seemed to matter at the time. But nothing – nothing – matters more than my daughter. I just want her to live. To have a life of her own.”

“She will always be connected to the other side,” the woman said. “She will be different. It will be hard for her.”

“But it will be a life,” her mother said fiercely.

“Yes, I suppose it will be,” the strange woman said. “Say goodbye to your daughter, Ms. Schnee. Your family has long been involved in the arcane arts. You know what this will require.”

“Yes,” she said, looking down at Weiss with a sad smile. “I freely sacrifice my soul to guide her back to the land of the living. Weiss... I love you. More than my own existence. Live. Grow. Be your own person. And always remember... I love you.”

With that her mother leaned down and kissed Weiss on the brow. A strange sensation flowed from the kiss, like an icy warmth that spread across her whole body. She closed her eyes against a bright, blinding light, and slowly the pain returned, spreading across every inch of her person as she was dragged down into the darkness of unconsciousness.
Introduction: Beacon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Weiss paused for a moment, examining the sight before her. It was an old building, built in a more ornate style than was used in more modern architecture. It was vaguely castle-like, with many sharp angles to the construction, which seemed to warn off anyone foolish enough to approach.

Of course, what really kept out unwanted visitors wasn’t the design of the building. It was the wards that wrapped around every inch of it. Weiss unfocused her eyes and channeled a small amount of aura to them, activating her second sight as she carefully studied the building’s mystic defenses.

Every square inch of the structure was covered with iridescent strands of dust empowered magic. The details were so complex that it looked as though the building was covered in a neon spiderweb, but the closer she looked the more layers she saw. It was one of the greatest concentrations of wards she had ever seen, although not nearly so dense as those that guarded the ancestral Schnee Manor, and she couldn’t help but be impressed.

Weiss was just beginning to shake off her second sight when something crashed into her back, knocking her to the ground.

“Ouch,” a woman’s voice mumbled from on top of her. “Oh, sorry!”

Weiss felt her heart stop for a moment, before pounding in fear. Someone was on top of her – touching her. The contact filled her with terror, sweat breaking out on her forehead from a combination of shock and intense fear. Were they touching her skin?

“Get off of me, you dolt!” Weiss barked, her fear smothered by anger as it usually was. Fear was paralyzing. Anger was something that she could work with.

“Sorry!” the voice apologized again, scrambling off of her.

Weiss turned her head to glare at the cause of her fall. It was a woman, perhaps slightly younger than her own twenty-three years, with a soft, round face, wolf cut black hair with scarlet tips, and strange, silver eyes. She was dressed all in black and red, with a skirt, leggings, and a comfortable hoody. On one hip a police badge was clipped, and the other had her service pistol. She gave Weiss a sheepish grin and offered her a hand up.

Weiss ignored the gesture, standing on her own and quickly brushing dirt off of her outfit. She was dressed all in white, including a comfortable, flowing skirt, long sleeved bolero jacket, and high heeled combat boots. Under her skirt were white leggings, and her hands had white gloves on them, leaving the only exposed skin as her face and throat. Her white hair was pulled back in an off-center pony tail, and her beautiful face was a mask of disdain and anger, with her pale skin and icy blue eyes drawing attention to the large scar over one eye.

“Watch where you’re going!” Weiss snapped. “You’d think a police officer would pay attention to their surroundings!”

The other woman looked sheepish. “Sorry! I was just so excited! I’m not just a police officer anymore – I just made detective!”

“Then you really should’ve been paying attention!” Weiss exploded. “I feel sorry for whoever your
partner is going to be if you can’t even notice someone dressed all in white standing in front of you!”

“Well, excuse me princess, I wasn’t expecting someone to be zoned out in front of Beacon!”

“Heiress, actually,” another voice interjected smoothly. “Weiss Schnee, heir to the Schnee Dust Company, the primary source of dust and dust related products in the world.”

Weiss turned to looked at the newcomer, grateful for the distraction from the humiliating scene unfolding. It was not how she had hoped that her first day would go. Or any day, for that matter. She had never really spent much time around normal people, but she found them to be even more infuriating than she had imagined they would be.

The first thing that Weiss noticed when she looked at the new stranger were the cat ears sticking out of her long black hair. For the briefest moment she found herself once again hanging upside down in a car, a gun pointed at her. She took a deep breath to push the fear at facing a faunus away, focusing on examining what kind of threat she could be instead.

She was dressed in a tight fitting black and white outfit that left her arms exposed and granted plenty of freedom of movement. Like the first stranger she had her badge clipped to her belt, along with her service pistol. In addition, she had a kusari-gama attached to the back of her belt. Seeing the well used weapons the faunus woman openly carried made her heart start to speed up again, and the angry glare her amber eyes focused on Weiss didn’t help either.

“The same company infamous for its controversial labor forces and questionable business partners,” she finished disdainfully, staring Weiss down.

Fury filled Weiss, her fists clenching so tightly that only her gloves kept her nails from drawing blood. “How dare you,” Weiss hissed. She wanted to scream. She wanted to knock the smug look off the faunus’ stupid cat eared face. She wanted to run away and hide somewhere where faunus weren’t allowed to carry weapons.

“What’s your business here?” the faunus demanded.

“That is none of your concern, changeling,” Weiss spat, turning on her heel. As furious and embarrassed as she was by the incident, the question had reminded Weiss that she hadn’t gone to Beacon, the central headquarters for the Vale Police Department, on a whim. She had business, and a glance at the platinum watch she wore over her glove told her that she had little time to spare for idiots and angry faunus.

“Bitch,” the faunus muttered.

“Who was that?” the other woman asked quietly.

Weiss slammed through the front doors before she could hear the reply, having no interest in hearing what terrible slander the faunus would say about her. Weiss took in the entryway in a glance before stalking up to the scared looking person manning the front desk. “Weiss Schnee. I’m here to see Inspector Ozpin.”

“Of-of course,” he stuttered. “Please sign in...”

Weiss grabbed the paper, casting a quick glance over it. No matter how angry she was she wasn’t so foolish as to sign her name to something without carefully scrutinizing it. A name freely spoken or written in one’s own hand had great power if one knew how to use it. Fortunately the document in question was simply an entry form with no magic to it.
With a flourish Weiss signed it and handed the clipboard back, still glaring at the man. “Um, Inspector Ozpin is-”

“I know,” Weiss said, turning on one heel and stalking towards the elevator. She had spent a few hours the night before researching everything she could about Beacon, including memorizing all publicly available information about its layout and floor plan.

Once she was on the elevator Weiss slumped slightly, sighing. She shouldn’t have lashed out the way she had, especially calling the faunus a changeling. It was incredibly rude, and despite all of the evidence she was racking up to the contrary, she liked to think of herself as better than that.

A few deep, calming breaths later she stepped off of the elevator and strolled down the hall. Beacon had a tall central tower where the head of each bureau had their office, and it didn’t take long for Weiss to find her destination. A secretary sat outside of Inspector Ozpin’s door, and she gave Weiss a professional smile when she saw her.

“Weiss Schnee?”

“Yes,” Weiss answered.

“You’re right on time. The Inspector will see you now.”

Weiss gave the woman a curt nod and headed into the office.

It wasn’t quite what she was expecting. The room appeared to be built into an enormous clock, with slowly turning gears and strange moving parts, all made of pure silver and covered with very finely etched runes infused with high quality dust. Her eyes widened slightly as she took in the sight. Mobile wards were very difficult to create, but by keeping the rune anchors constantly in motion it made them much more difficult to break than a standard ward.

“I see you’re as knowledgable about wards as I would have expected a scion of the Schnee family to be.”

Weiss turned her attention to Inspector Ozpin. He was a middle aged man wearing a nice black suit, with small tinted glasses and somewhat disheveled gray hair. He was sitting behind a large desk in front of a broad window, with a silver cane resting against its side and a cup of coffee with the Vale Police Department logo on it in his hand.

“Inspector Ozpin,” Weiss said with a professional nod and a slight blush tainting her pale cheeks at her distraction. She was just glad that her father wasn’t there to notice her inattention.

“It’s my pleasure, Ms. Schnee,” he said. “Please, sit. This won’t take very long.”

Weiss sat carefully in the surprisingly comfortable chair in front of his desk. She nervously arranged her skirt before giving him a stiff smile. Neither said anything for a long moment as Ozpin sipped his coffee while studying her.

“I want to thank you for agreeing to join my bureau, Ms. Schnee,” Ozpin began. “Your abilities are exceedingly rare, and few of those with them have a clean police record. Of the rest, even fewer are as capable of taking care of themselves beyond using those powers as you are.”

Weiss simply nodded, and after he gave her a long moment to speak Ozpin moved on. “You will be working under Captain Goodwitch. She’s in charge of the Investigative Division. I can have my secretary escort you down-”
“That won’t be necessary, Inspector Ozpin,” Weiss said with a nod as she stood. “I can find my own way down.”

“Very good,” he said with a smile, standing as well, although she was relieved when he didn’t try to offer his hand. “Glynda will be expecting you shortly. Unlike your colleagues you will be a detective without any prior police experience. You aren’t the first person to join my bureau because of their other gifts, but the ones who succeed are those who learn from their partners. You tested very well on the police and detective exams, but that isn’t the same as actual experience.”

“I will,” Weiss said with a confident nod.

“Good,” Ozpin smiled. “Then I welcome you to the Vale Police Department Bureau of Supernatural Affairs. My office is always open if you need something.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said with one last nod before turning and leaving. She breathed a sigh of relief when she left the room, glad to be away from him. Everyone respected Ozpin, and he’d founded the Supernatural Affairs Bureau ninety years before when the last great Grimm Invasion forced the city to improve its response to paranormal issues.

The length of his experience was exactly the problem, though. Weiss had had little direct contact with supernatural beings, and the fact that none of Weiss’ research could determine what the man was only served to put her further on edge. She was happy to be as far away from him as possible.

When she reached the elevator she pushed the button to send her to the second basement. Despite the importance of the work the Supernatural Affairs Bureau did most people tried to stay as far away from them as possible. Weiss smiled wryly for a moment, as it was for very similar reasons as her discomfort around Ozpin.

The second basement was a bit more run down than the more public areas of Beacon. Everything was clean enough, but just enough. Weiss knew her father would’ve fired anyone who allowed even the most unused passages of Schnee Manor to become so dingy, but she ignored it and simply strolled down the hall to her destination.

The room she was looking for was a large, open space with desks clustered about, partially separated into pairs by low dividers. Even with her own petite five foot and a little more height she could easily look over the cubicle dividers, and many of the people around the room simply stood at their desks, talking to people nearby. The lack of privacy was slightly unnerving, but before she could worry about it her attention was drawn to a large, older man with a huge, bushy gray mustache.

“Can I help you, young lady?” he asked in a cultured voice.

Weiss nodded sharply. “I’m looking for Captain Goodwitch.”

“Of course,” he said jovially. “Right this way!”

Weiss strolled through the room, ignoring the curious stares that followed her. She hadn’t spent much time out in public, but she’d found that people tended to stare at her whenever she did go out. It was unpleasant, but there was nothing that she could do but ignore it and pretend that she wasn’t bothered by the attention. A Schnee was supposed to be above such things, after all.

At the back of the room were a pair of doors. One was labeled ‘Lt. Oobleck’, the other ‘Captain Goodwitch’. The man knocked on that door, and opened it a moment later when a stern female voice called “enter”.

The inside of the captain’s office was a shrine to perfectly regimented order. Clearly labeled trays
held mountains of paperwork, all of it so neatly organized and stacked that even an outsider could navigate the thick pile of documents. Shelves covered the walls, half of them full of sorted, well cared for books and binders, the others covered with paraphernalia used in witchcraft.

Sitting behind the paper covered desk reading a file was a blonde woman in her late thirties. She was dressed in a nice black and white skirt suit, with black blazer lined with purple hanging from the back of her chair. She looked up through thin spectacles when they entered, studying Weiss for a long moment before snapping the file closed with a sharp motion.

“Thank you, sergeant,” she said. “That will be all.”

The man nodded and exited, closing the door behind him. “I’m Captain Glynda Goodwitch,” the woman said pleasantly. “You must be Weiss Schnee.”

Weiss nodded. “A pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

The woman smiled slightly. “Please, have a seat. When your paperwork crossed my desk I must say I was quite surprised. Why did you decide to join the force?”

“Ma’am?” Weiss asked, taken slightly aback by the question. When the captain simply stared at her, waiting for an answer Weiss looked down at her hands which were tightly clasped in her lap. She carefully relaxed them before smoothing down her skirt. “My family has done a lot for the world, good and bad. I don’t want to just be another Schnee. I want to do something for myself. When Inspector Ozpin contacted me I realized that this was my chance to.”

“I see. Well, it won’t be easy. This is tireless, thankless job, with little pay and a low life expectancy. Less than one in ten retire from Supernatural Affairs without medical dispensation. Half don’t survive at all. Are you sure that this is what you want to do?”

Weiss glared. “I’m certain.”

“Alright,” Goodwitch said. “I’ve seen your test results. They were very impressive, and I’ve been told you can take care of yourself with a rapier as well. You’ll need it – while you will be issued a service pistol, far too many things that we fight are hard to kill with bullets.”

She pulled out several documents and handed them to Weiss. “Fill out these forms. Once you have, I will introduce you to the squad.”

Weiss immediately set to work filling out several long, dry forms. Once she was finished she sighed and handed them to her new boss, who gave them a quick glance before pulling a badge and a holstered pistol from her desk. “Very good. These are yours, Detective Schnee.”

Weiss gingerly took them. The badge was silver in color and simple in design, and it was attached to a leather case which had a photo ID taken from an image she had sent in the week before. The gun was a semi-automatic pistol, black in color and small in size, and the holster included two spare magazines, one marked ‘S’ and the other ‘I’. Weiss looked at her captain in confusion.

“Silver rounds are kept in ‘S’ magazines,” Goodwitch explained. “Fire dust infused incendiary rounds are kept in ‘I’ magazines. According to your paperwork you’ve taken a firearms safety course?”

“Of course,” Weiss said as she attached both items to her belt. The belt was thin white leather, and didn’t carry the weapon as comfortably as she would like, digging into her slim hips under its weight in an unpleasant fashion.
“Good,” Goodwitch said. “Go on out. I’ll introduce you and the other new member in a moment.”

Weiss left the office quickly. She was glad that her new boss was simply a witch, a fact that she would’ve realized with a single glance at her office if she hadn’t already known it from her research. Glynda Goodwitch was a member of an old family long steeped in white witchcraft, similar to the way the Schnee family was long associated with binding magics. Despite her greater comfort with what Goodwitch was over whatever Ozpin was, she was still intimidating. Weiss was glad to be away from her.

She took in the room quickly. There were more than a dozen detectives scattered about, all working or chatting with each other, but despite that she still felt as though everyone was looking at her. Maybe they were – unlike the dolt who’d run into her outside, the people here were no doubt actually competent at their jobs.

Eager to get away from their eyes, Weiss walked to the far corner of the room. She reached it in time to hear a familiar voice whining.

“I didn’t mean to bump into her, but she was yelling, and mean, and I just wanted to get away from her!”

“You!” Weiss snapped.

“Oh god, it’s happening again!” The idiot yelped, jumping into the arms of a purple-eyed woman with far too much shiny blonde hair, far too large of breasts, and far too little clothing. If it weren’t for the badge at her side Weiss would’ve suspected that she was a stripper rather than a detective. “She’s here now!”

“Hey, pretty lady,” the blonde said with a grin. “Looks like you and my little sister got off to a good start.”

“If by ‘good start’ you mean ran me down because she wasn’t paying any attention to where she was going, then I suppose so,” Weiss snapped.

“I said I was sorry!” Ruby yelped. “I didn’t mean to!”

“Hey, now, let’s not fight,” the blonde said. “Why don’t you guys start over and try to be friends? I’m Yang Xiao Long.”

“Yeah, hey!” the other woman said, climbing off of her sister. “I’m Ruby. Ruby Rose. Let’s be friends!”

“Great!” Weiss said sarcastically. Jealously burned her for a moment as she watched the two sisters smiling and happy and so close to each other. “We can paint our nails, and try on clothes, and whatever other insipid activity you can think up!”

“Really?” Ruby asked, her smile awkward as she said it, obviously knowing something was wrong.

“No,” Weiss snapped, turning her back to them and watching as Goodwitch left her office.

“Wow, what a bitch,” Yang muttered.

“Everyone,” Captain Goodwitch called. The room immediately became quiet as all eyes focused on her. “I’d like to introduce you to our two new members. Normally we prefer to have an older, more experienced member partner with someone new, but it’s against bureau policy to break established teams. Therefore, our two new members will be partners.”
“Oh, no,” Weiss whispered under her breath.

“Everyone, please welcome the new team of Ruby Rose and Weiss Schnee.”

Chapter End Notes

This AU involves the characters being part of the police department. I’m not an expert on the police – everything I know comes from mass media and google searches. I’ll try my best to keep things quasi-realistic, and any differences you can blame on this being another world full of supernatural shenanigans.

Basically, a wizard did it.

As for ages – Ruby is 21 here, which is the youngest I could accept for a fresh detective. That accounts for joining the force at 18 and serving three years as a normal officer before being promoted to detective. Weiss and Yang are both two years older than Ruby like in canon, so they are 23.
Weiss took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment as she adjusted the heavy hearing protection and put on her eye protection. A quick glance beside her showed that the only other person shooting, her idiot of a partner, was already taking aim at the target. Unlike Weiss, she handled her service pistol with the ease of long practice.

That wasn’t to say that Weiss didn’t know what she was doing. She had never fired a gun before she was approached by Inspector Ozpin, but she’d quickly arranged for the most skilled bodyguard in her father’s employ to teach her how to shoot while she was considering the offer. She practiced diligently, and as with most things, she was a gifted student.

Something about the cold, dead weight of a pistol in her hand felt different from the keen balance of a sword. No matter how much she practiced, no matter how many times she hit her target on the first try, she still didn’t like the weapon.

Weiss flinched slightly as Ruby fired off a series of fast shots down range. Gritting her teeth, Weiss took a deep breath in, looked down the sights, and slowly breathed out.


Slowly, carefully, Weiss fired each bullet down range. Her form perfect, every motion exactly as her instructor taught her. She ignored the silence beside her after Ruby finished firing, carefully making her own shots one after another before finally lowering the weapon when it was empty, ejecting the magazine and ensuring that the chamber was clear.

When the silhouette reached her Weiss felt a spark of satisfaction at her shooting. All of the bullets had hit the small targets she had been aiming for, each of them clean kill shots. It had taken endless practice to reach Schnee standards, and she was glad that the weapons test for the day was simply in a shooting range. She had a long way to go with the weapon in general.

Ruby giggled beside her, and Weiss threw her an annoyed and haughty look. Her eyes widened before she was able to master her expression, but fortunately Ruby was too distracted by her laughing to notice. Instead of hitting the target properly Ruby had created a perfect smily face with the bullet holes, and that despite how quickly she had fired.

“Very good, Ms. Schnee,” a man behind her said.

Weiss turned to examine him. He was the older mustachioed man from the squadroom. He gave her a kind smile after looking at her results. “Very good form, and you didn’t miss a shot. I would advise getting more practice in less controlled conditions, however. In the field you won’t always have time to do everything by the book.”

“Yes, Sergeant Port,” Weiss said with a nod. There was something comforting about the manner of the gruff older man. He reminded her of some of her tutors, but warmer somehow.

“Alright, that was all I needed to see,” he said. “You’re now qualified to carry that weapon, so why don’t you head back to the squad room and get to know the others better?”

Weiss glanced over at the smily face that Ruby had made out of her paper target. “What about
Detective Rose?”

Sergeant Port chuckled slightly. “Ah, she’s already qualified with her sidearm, and any doubts I had about her scores are laid to rest after watching that display.”

Weiss grit her teeth but didn’t say anything. She had to admit, as much as she didn’t want to, that Ruby’s shooting was... impressive. It was also childish. They were practicing lethal techniques at work, but instead of taking it seriously, she made silly pictures with her bullet holes.

Ruby grinned and reloaded her gun before holstering it, and Weiss did the same. The guns were both loaded with conventional ammo, rather than the special rounds they also carried with them. When they were finished they wandered through the building towards their division.

“So, um, Weiss…” Ruby started eventually.

“Yes?”

“It sounds like you don’t have any records of you’re shooting from before. I guess, um... you’re new to the force?”

Weiss nodded sharply. “Yes. I was recruited by Inspector Ozpin.”

“Oh!” Ruby said, looking her partner over more closely. “Um... so you were hired for... special reasons?”

Weiss paused for just a second, turning her head slowly to look her partner in the eye as she began walking once again. Whatever she saw in Weiss made Ruby flinch. “Yes. I was.”

Ruby cleared her throat and looked away. “Right. Um... I went through the police academy, and I was part of patrol for the last three years. Actually, Inspector Ozpin recruited me as well. I was shopping at a dust store when someone tried to rob it. I helped stop them, and the inspector said I should try the detective test.”

Weiss nearly sighed in relief when they reached the squad room, glad to finally have something else to do but be trapped by her idiot partner’s endless rambles. She was even more annoying than Weiss had expected her to be when she was run over by her that morning.

“We’re over here,” Ruby said, reaching out to grab Weiss’ hand to drag her across the room.

Weiss flinched back, jerking her hand away just as Ruby touched the white glove she wore. “Don’t touch me!”

Ruby flinched in shock, her mouth hanging open as several others looked up at the sharp words. “S-sorry.”

Weiss looked away, trying to force her cheeks to stop blushing as she glared at a pair of detectives that blatantly stared at her. She took a deep breath and looked sideways at her anxious partner. For a human police detective she looked remarkably like a puppy that had been kicked.

“I don’t like being touched,” Weiss said, her tone firm and cold.

“I’m sorry,” Ruby said, looking down and biting her lip.

Weiss glanced over at her and suddenly realized that it looked as though she was on the verge of tears. It made Weiss want to apologize for snapping, but she wasn’t sure how. She sighed and started
walking again, not wanting to encourage Ruby to touch her by making her think that it was okay.

Ruby cleared her throat and pointed towards the far wall as they walked. “Um, our desks are over there.”

Weiss nodded sharply and followed her partner across the room, her skin crawling as she felt all of her fellow detectives subtly studying her. Part of her wondered how many were human, and how many of those were normal detectives, and how many had some kind of supernatural ability. From what she could gather through her internet searches, the department didn’t generally hire many normal people.

“I’ll take this one!” Ruby chirped, sitting down in the rolling chair behind a desk. The cubicle was the same as the others, containing two large desks that faced each other with rolling chairs behind them, filing cabinets beside them, and shelves along the walls. Unlike the other cubicles this one had no documents, pictures, knick knacks or other decorations, only an outdated computer on each desk, and a telephone.

Weiss carefully sat down in her own rolling chair, making a face at the uncomfortable cushion and lack of proper back support. She’d never sat in such a poor chair before, and already thoughts of replacing it filled her head. She hesitated only because everyone else still seemed to be using the chair, not wanting to look silly if they weren’t allowed to change them.

“So, um, Weiss,” Ruby tried after a few minutes. “Do you want to do anything to fix this place up? Or, you know, do our own thing?”

“It’s fine,” Weiss said. “This is a place of work, you know.”

“Right,” Ruby mumbled despondently.

Ruby kept fidgeting until a voice behind her made them both jump.

“Hey, sis,” Yang said.

“Yang!” Ruby shouted, her tone relieved. “What are you doing here?”

“I work here,” Yang said, rolling her eyes.

“Right,” Ruby said, drawing an exasperated sigh from Weiss. “But, um, why are you here.”

“’Cause I work here, sis,” Yang said. “This is mine and Blake’s cubicle.”

“Oh, cool,” Ruby said. “So, um... this is Weiss. My partner.”

“Weiss Schnee,” Weiss said stiffly.

Yang made a face at her. “Right. Like I said earlier, I’m Yang Xiao Long. Ruby’s sister.”

Weiss nodded and looked down at her desk, hoping to appear busy so that she wouldn’t have to talk anymore. It would’ve been more effective if she’d been assigned any work.

“So, I’ve heard that Ozpin hired you from outside the force,” Yang said casually. “Why’s he interested in you?”

Weiss raised her chin, staring at Yang confrontationally. “I have abilities that will be useful, of course.”
“Of course,” a voice drawled, and Weiss turned her attention to the faunus that she had had such a volatile encounter with outside. “A Schnee can bring many useful connections in exchange for getting to play detective.”

“You,” Weiss snarled, before taking a breath and regaining control of her temper. “And what do you provide to the department? Disdainful conclusions?”

“Among other things,” the faunus said.

“Well, isn’t this charming,” a male voice interjected. The owner was a lean, pale man in his mid twenties, with gray hair and gray eyes. He was dressed in black with a gray bullet proof vest on his chest, and a sidearm at this side.

Beside him was a woman with long red hair, bright green eyes, and a bronze colored breastplate over red clothing. She stood out from the rest of the room, both in terms of beauty, as well as her somewhat outlandish dress.

Weiss recognized her instantly. “You’re Pyrrha Nikos.”

The woman smiled. “I am. It’s a pleasure to meet you...”

“Weiss Schnee. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Hey, how come Pyrrha gets the red carpet treatment, and the rest of us are treated like trash?” Yang complained.

“Pyrrha Nikos deserves the respect I am offering,” Weiss snapped. The implication, that none of the rest deserved any respect went unspoken but not unheard.

“You stuck up b-” Yang started to growl, only to be cut off by Pyrrha.

“Ruby, Weiss – you don’t mind if I call you that, do you?” Pyrrha asked.

Weiss shook her head. “Weiss is fine, Ms. Nikos.”

“Then please, call me Pyrrha,” the redhead said as Ruby nodded as well. “If you don’t mind, Sergeant Port assigned us to work together on a new case that just came in."

“That’s right,” the gray haired man drawled. “We get to baby sit you newbies on your first day on the force. Aren’t we lucky?”

Pyrrha smile grew strained. “Mercury...”

“Fine, fine, I’ll play nice,” the man said, rolling his eyes. “I’m Mercury Black.”

“Weiss Schnee,” Weiss said with a sharp nod.

“Um, I’m Ruby,” her partner said. “Ruby Rose. Hi?”

“Now that the pleasantries are dealt with, what is the case?” Weiss asked, her voice demanding.

“Follow me,” Pyrrha said. “I’ve already pulled the case files.”

Weiss stood, strolling swiftly away from her cubicle after Pyrrha, eager to get away from Yang and the faunus. She heard Ruby saying bye to her sister before scurrying to catch up, and Weiss did her best to focus on Pyrrha rather than her idiot partner.
“So, why’d you join the force?” Mercury asked, moving too close for Weiss’ comfort. She shifted sideways a step before answering.

“I was asked by Inspector Ozpin, and I decided to accept.”

“We’re glad to have you,” Pyrrha said with a gentle smile. “We’re a small department, so it’s always nice to meet new people. Very few have what it takes.”

Pyrrha didn’t take them far, just across the room to the tiny cubicle area that she and Mercury shared. Half of it was neat and well organized, and the other had to be swept clear of food wrappers and have documents shoved aside in order to work. With a subtle twitch Weiss found herself lamenting her own likely future.

Pyrrha handed them each folders, and Weiss opened her’s, flipping through it quickly to get an idea of what the case was about. Her lips tightened at the gruesome imagery. Her first case involved violent, messy deaths.

Weiss glanced over at her partner, and was slightly surprised at how well she was handling flipping through the documents, although she was not at all surprised that she was just glancing at everything. Weiss was at least flipping around to get a feel before actually reading the case file; Ruby, Weiss presumed, was just flipping through because she didn’t want to bother reading it.

“Grimm?” Ruby asked.

“We believe so,” Pyrrha agreed.

“Four in a week is a lot for Grimm, though,” Mercury drawled. “It certainly pushed the priority up quite a bit.”

Weiss finished glancing over the documents and started at the beginning again, reading while listening to Pyrrha explain the case to her and her partner.

“It started six days ago, with the death of a homeless man by Grimm,” Pyrrha said. “Such things are unfortunately all too common here in Vale, and often don’t require our division to deal with – Grimm are dangerous, but a prepared SWAT team can handle one when we’re busy.”

“If it was just one Grimm, how come it attacked four people?” Ruby asked. “Don’t they usually wait weeks between attacks? Unless someone enters their territory, I guess.”

Weiss side eyed her partner, impressed with her knowledge of Grimm. Perhaps she wasn’t as complete of a dunce as she came across as. Weiss internally rolled her eyes and went back to her reading.

“You are correct, which means that either a strong Grimm has established a nest in the warehouse district, or a pack of Grimm are hunting in the area,” Pyrrha said.

“Or both,” Mercury interjected with a leer. “Don’t forget that possibility.”

Pyrrha nodded. “Indeed. Regardless, this has the potential to become very dangerous. Grimm are less intelligent than most supernatural dangers, but they are strong and difficult to bring down. Are you both prepared for combat?”

“I am,” Weiss said. “I need to retrieve my rapier before we leave, however.”

Mercury snorted. “I don’t think a fencing foil will do much against a Creature of Grimm.”
“I would imagine one wouldn’t,” Weiss snapped. “My dust infused rapier, Myrtenaster, however, should be more than sufficient.”

“I want to get a rifle,” Ruby said. “I’m a really good shot with one.”

Pyrrha smiled at them as she stood and grabbed a gladius from beside her desk. The short bladed sword was in an intricately tooled leather sheath, and Weiss knew that the blade would match the hilt in being made of bronze rather than steel. Despite that, she had seen enough pictures of the detailed rune etchings covering the weapon to know that it would be more effective than a normal blade despite the material it was crafted from.

“Why don’t we meet downtown at the warehouse where the first victim was found in an hour?” Pyrrha offered. “That should give you both the time to prepare and acquire a vehicle.”

“I’ll drive us!” Ruby interjected cheerfully, all but vibrating in place.

“Are you going to pay more attention to the road than you did the sidewalk this morning?” Weiss asked sharply. As much as she wanted to put up a fight over driving, she had only barely passed her driver’s test, and she hadn’t driven a vehicle of any kind in over a year. If her partner was willing to chauffeur her about, she wasn’t going to object too much.

“I’m a great driver,” Ruby said, hopping in front of her, forcing Weiss to stop and glare at the idiot. “You’ll be really impressed!”

“Fine,” Weiss sighed. “Just get ready!”

“Okay, meet me in the garage upstairs as soon as you can, I’ll take care of the paperwork,” Ruby said, running off to find someone to get her a rifle and a car.

Weiss left the squad room, pulling out her phone as she did. She found her driver in her short contacts list and pressed call, putting the device to her ear as she strolled towards the elevator. When the man picked up she gave her orders without any preamble. “I need you to bring my sword to the entrance immediately.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the driver said. “Will you be needing anything else?”

“No at this time,” Weiss said.

Twenty minutes later Weiss was tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for the white car to pull up. It looked like a standard luxury vehicle, but it was in fact heavily armored and warded. Her father wasn’t going to risk another Schnee to a simple vehicular ambush.

When it pulled to a stop Weiss opened the back door and grabbed the sword, closing it again and walking away without even acknowledging the driver, who simply drove off, well used to his employer. Weiss studied her blade for a moment, looking for any damage it might have sustained since her last training exercise.

Made of an advanced alloy of titanium, meteoric iron and mithril, infused with millions of lien worth of dust, and covered in tiny, laser-etched runes to anchor powerful enchantments, Myrtenaster was the finest sword that the Schnee family could create. After ensuring that it was still in perfect condition, Weiss carefully sheathed it at her side and strolled to the parking garage.

With a sigh she hoped that her dolt of a partner could at least manage to acquire a vehicle.
I love how prickly early Weiss is, so I’m looking forward to playing with that, but also eventually seeing her grow. Don’t forget that since this has been from her point of view, her opinions are coloring the descriptions of everyone else.
The car that Ruby picked up wasn’t clean to Schnee standards. The moment Weiss opened the door she wrinkled her nose, but didn’t say anything. She simply climbed into the unmarked black sedan, sniffed disdainfully, and carefully put on her seatbelt before closing the door.

Ruby backed the car up quickly and revved the engine, pulling into traffic so sharply that Weiss was thrown against her seatbelt. Before she could say anything Ruby giggled like a child. “I’ve never driven an unmarked car before – this thing has a lot of power!”

“If you want to drive again you need to be more careful,” Weiss snapped.

Ruby chuckled sheepishly and slowed down a little. After a few long, quiet moments she reached over and turned on the radio, cycling through various music channels. “So, what kind of music do you listen to?”

“Classical,” Weiss said flatly, crossing her arms over her chest and looking out the side window.

Ruby slumped and turned the radio off, concentrating on the road again. “Right,” she muttered.

Weiss took a deep breath, enjoying the quiet despite the awkward atmosphere. She was surprised to see that it was already well after noon, a fact that Ruby apparently noticed as well, as she pulled into some greasy drive through. “Do you want anything?”

Weiss pursed her lips. She’d never had fast food before, and she really didn’t want to start, but she was getting hungry, and with a long day of work ahead of them she really couldn’t afford to skip lunch. “I’ll have a salad.”

“They have those?” Ruby asked.

“How should I know?” Weiss snapped.

As it turned out, they did sell salads, although Weiss picked at it slowly, disgusted by how wilted the greens were. She’d found salad dressing in tiny packets as well, but the thought of whatever cheap filth the fast food restaurant considered salad dressing worthy of a plastic packet put her off of trying them.

Weiss also had to concentrate to ignore Ruby. Her dolt of a partner was actually eating while driving, one hand loosely holding the wheel while the other gripped a hamburger and stuffed it almost whole into her maw. It was both disgusting to watch and terrifying to consider, so Weiss decided that she was happier not looking.

Ruby at least had the grace not to talk with her mouth full, or, Weiss considered, more likely she simply couldn’t stand the silence any longer once she didn’t have anything else to do. “That was good.”

Weiss snorted but didn’t say anything, carefully wrapping up the remainder of her meal in the bag that it came in, folding it neatly for later disposal.

“Right,” Ruby sighed. “So, Grimm, huh?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “They are the most common supernatural predator in Vale.”
“Right,” Ruby said, seemingly latching onto the only conversation that really started. “I wonder what kind it is?”

Weiss considered. “All Grimm are drawn to places strong in negative emotions, but only ones small enough to avoid attention could make it as far into the city as these have. Most likely Creeps, Beowolves, Ursa, or Boarbatusks. From the autopsy report, I would say Beowolves are the most likely candidate.”

Ruby nodded. “Probably. I hate Beowolves.”

“I should hope so,” Weiss snorted. “They are vicious, bloodthirsty monsters that are responsible for dozens of deaths each year, even with the best efforts of the police and military.”

“I mean, you know, more than most Grimm,” Ruby tried to clarify.

“I’ve never picked favorites,” Weiss drawled. “They’re all demonic spirits that are drawn to negative emotions and torture and kill humans.”

The silence returned, until finally Ruby tried another conversational tack. “So, you’ve got a rapier.”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Myrtenaster. Its a dust infused weapon made from advanced alloys. It should be very effective against Grimm.”

Ruby nodded. “Yeah. Make sure you switch to your red dust incendiary bullets. You’ll need the magic to do much damage to the Grimm.”

“Of course,” Weiss said, although she had forgotten to do so. She wasn’t going to admit that, however.

“I picked up some red dust rounds for the rifle, too,” Ruby said. “You should see it – its a thing of beauty. Semi-automatic, medium caliber with a long barrel and a pretty good scope for long distance shooting. It’s the gun they give SWAT snipers.”

“You should’ve grabbed a melee weapon of some sort,” Weiss scolded. “Grimm are hard to spot at a distance, and they only come out at night. How do expect to use a sniper rifle against them? Especially with how stealthy most Grimm are. If you waste time looking through a sniper scope you’ll find yourself torn to pieces by one that gets close. That’s why I have a sword.”

“I know what Grimm are like,” Ruby said quietly, her voice harder and colder than before.

“Then you have no excuse for being unprepared,” Weiss concluded.

Ruby gritted her teeth, but before she could say anything else she pulled to a stop at their destination. Like the rest of the warehouse district, the street had more potholes than people, and even more litter and gang signs graffitied on the walls. Weiss had never seen anything like it outside of the occasional crime movie, and she found the theater did nothing to convey the stench of gasoline and garbage to the viewer.

“This is it,” Ruby said as she joined Weiss, gesturing at the building.

It looked much like all of the other warehouses on the block; it was a large, cheaply built building, dingy and covered with layers of graffiti, with enormous loading doors as well as the normal door they had parked near. There was only one difference from the other buildings, although it was a quite obvious one.
“Did the bright yellow crime scene tape give it away?” Weiss drawled. “I see why they made you a detective.”

Weiss opened the door, ducked under the crime scene tape and headed into the warehouse. It was mostly empty, with a small number of pallets and crates scattered around the cavernous room. Across the way she could see Pyrrha and Mercury examining a large gap in the far wall.

“Good, you made it,” Pyrrha said with a smile. “This was the first site where a body was found. Unfortunately there was no camera, but maintenance records don’t show any evidence of this damage prior to the death.”

Weiss moved close enough to examine the hole. It was a great, jagged tear in the side of the building, and she could see a few claw marks, as well as locations where something heavy rammed into the side of the building.

“So a Grimm smashed through the wall and killed a homeless person?” Ruby asked, leaning close and examining the damage.

“It would appear so,” Pyrrha agreed. She checked the file before continuing. “Police said that the door was unlocked, so most likely the homeless man entered that way, looking for shelter for the night, and the Grimm sensed his presence.”

Mercury pulled out a tape measure and began to examine the claw marks carefully, while Ruby slowly walked around the room, looking for anything that had been missed by the regular police. Weiss closed her eyes, taking a deep breath, and slowly extended her aura outward.

She could feel the presence of the others. Mercury felt like a normal human, but she could feel something mystical about both Ruby and Pyrrha, as well as Pyrrha’s weapon and armor, along with some object tucked in Mercury’s vest. Focusing away from them, she tried to sense anything else of interest, but found nothing.

Focusing her aura to her eyes, she then opened them and looked around the room. She walked slowly over to a dark patch, looking down at the floor, which was stained with black ichor to her mystical sight.

“That’s where the man was killed,” Pyrrha said quietly, having followed her across the room. Weiss jumped slightly, losing her concentration and accidentally releasing the aura from her eyes, returning her vision to normal. The section of concrete looked like all the rest that way, without any evidence of the death that had so recently occurred there.

“The body wasn’t dumped,” Weiss observed. “He was killed right here.”

“I see,” Pyrrha said, nodding slowly, making a note of that. “Can you determine anything else?”

“No,” Weiss said. “When was the last death?”

“Two nights ago,” Pyrrha said.

Weiss frowned. “I might not be able to find much after so long, but if I could see the most recent victim I might be able to learn something.”

Pyrrha pulled out her phone and placed a call. Weiss tried not to eavesdrop, instead looking around for her partner. Ruby was examining the entire area in careful detail, enough so that heiress was almost impressed. Forensics hadn’t found anything of interest, so she doubted that Ruby would either, but Weiss was happy that she at least seemed to know how to do something useful.
“The most recent body is still in the city morgue,” Pyrrha said finally. “I’ve arranged for you to see it.”

“I might not find much – it’s been a long time, and the autopsy won’t make things any easier,” Weiss cautioned.

“Anything that you can find would be beneficial,” Pyrrha said with a small smile. “If you don’t mind my asking, what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to see if the victim has anything to say,” Weiss said simply, before walking over to her partner, who was on her hands and knees, peering inside of a pallet. “We need to go.”

“Where?” Ruby asked, standing and brushing off her knees.

“The morgue.”

The trip was quick, although somewhat slowed down by traffic, and still awkward as neither partner had anything to say to the other. Weiss was happy to be out of the car and striding into the morgue with Ruby trailing quietly behind her.

The building was large and plain, obviously not designed for aesthetics, and the inside continued the theme, with concrete floors, off white walls, and bright, piercing fluorescent lights. The receptionist had more than a bit of stubble, and squinted at her when she entered. “Can I help you?”

Weiss pulled out her badge and presented it. “I’m here to examine a body.”

The man frowned tiredly, before typing on his computer. “Of course. You’re expected, Detective Schnee. Follow me.”

The hallways were dingier than the lobby, and the smell of harsh cleaners barely covered up the underlying charnel stench of the large city morgue. The air was cool enough that Ruby was shivering even before they entered the examination room, which was kept cold enough that Weiss felt goosebumps forming.

“What are we doing here?” Ruby asked nervously.

“I’m going to examine the latest victim,” Weiss said simply.

“I didn’t know you were a doctor,” Ruby said. “Well, coroner. Medical examiner. Whatever.”

“I’m not,” she said. “I’m a necromancer.”

Ruby gasped loudly, and the man fumbled with the cabinet he was trying to open. Both stared at her for a moment, and Weiss repressed the urge to smirk. When she had first come into her powers she had hated how people reacted to them, but over the years she had come to appreciate their shock and fear in a twisted sort of way.

“Are you going to open that?” Weiss demanded bluntly.

The man blinked, before swallowing hard and nodding, opening the wall cabinet and pulling a drawer out, revealing a long metal bed on which a body bag rested. He pulled it all the way open before stepping back nervously, eyeing Weiss like she was a Grimm that had somehow wandered into the room.

“That will be all,” she said dismissively. “We can close up when we’re finished.”
“But...” the man muttered, looking between her and the door.

“You may go,” Weiss said coldly, walking over to the body. Ruby reluctantly followed, moving around to the opposite side of the open cabinet drawer. The man all but ran from the room, closing it behind him with a loud bang.

Weiss slowly reached over and grabbed the zipper, opening the body bag. She could hear Ruby stop breathing, and she wanted to hold her breath herself, but despite the nerves and smell she managed to keep herself steady. She did swallow hard when the body was fully revealed, however.

The damage was extensive. A huge, gaping tear on his abdomen revealed the absence of most internal organs, and the shredded remains of whatever was left. Ragged cuts and tears covered much of the body, making it obvious that the man hadn’t died quickly or cleanly.

“Definitely looks like Beowolves,” Ruby said in a haunted tone.

Weiss raised her eyes, looking at the other woman. She seemed shrunken into herself, eyes distant as she stared at the corpse, obviously thinking of someone else. Weiss felt a sudden strange urge to do something, but what she didn’t know. With a sigh she returned her gaze to the body.

“He’s been dead for a long time, so this may take a while,” Weiss said.

“Right,” Ruby said, shaking herself from her dark thoughts. “Is there... anything I should do?”

“Just don’t interrupt me, and don’t touch me, okay?”

“Okay.”

With that Weiss sighed and slowly removed her white gloves, tucking them into her belt. Gingerly she reached down, laying a hand on the dead body, bracing herself for the sensations. Barely seconds later the body twitched, making Ruby yelp.

Weiss closed her eyes and focused her aura, carefully sending necromatic energies into the stirring corpse. The body stilled, and with a sigh of relief she felt it return to death. With that out of the way she focused her powers into the body, suffusing it with her aura before she began her work.

Time passed quickly for Weiss, who was deep in a meditative state. Delicately she worked her magic, trying to find anything she could from the body. Finally, with a deep sigh she finished her efforts, withdrawing her aura and removing her hands. In an instant she was suffused with a bone deep weariness, the hours of magic suddenly taking its toll as she slumped, barely standing.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked, reaching a hand out to steady her.

“Don’t touch me!” Weiss rasped, jerking so sharply she almost fell over. “I’m fine.”

“Right,” Ruby said doubtfully. “Do you need to sit down?”

Weiss frowned. “In a minute. I want to close this up and wash my hands first.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “I’ll help.”

Ruby did most of the work, zipping up the body bag and closing the drawer, before finding them both a sink to wash their hands in. By the time they did Weiss was feeling stronger, and she led the way from the building, sweeping past the wary receptionist as if he didn’t exist as she headed for the car.
Weiss was surprised to find the sun low on the horizon, the sky dim and clouds red as blood. Glancing at her watch, she frowned at how many hours she had spent examining the corpse. It was no surprise that she was so tired.

“Are you hungry?” Ruby asked as they settled into the car, the first words between them since Ruby offered to help clean up.

Weiss started to open her mouth to reply in the negative when her stomach audibly growled. Her pale face turned red, and she crossed her arms, not speaking aloud as Ruby chuckled. “How about we grab something to eat?”

“No fast food,” Weiss said firmly.

“Sure,” Ruby said. “There’s a diner not far from here – we’re actually pretty close to Beacon.”

“A diner?” Weiss asked dubiously.

“Yeah, it’s great!” Ruby enthused. “My sister and I eat there quite a bit. They have great breakfast.”

“Do they have something acceptable for dinner?”

“Yeah, their food’s great,” Ruby said. “Of course, if you really want breakfast, they serve it all day.”

“That’s unnecessary,” Weiss said.

The drive to the diner didn’t take long, and while the silence between them wasn’t friendly, it wasn’t as unpleasant as their earlier drives. With a few moments of introspection, Weiss decided it was because she was too tired to be annoyed by Ruby’s... Ruby-ness.

The outside looked like it was falling apart, with half the lights on the sign reading Signal no longer glowing. The inside was even worse. Weiss barely contained her outrage as she delicately sat on the worn out vinyl seat, careful not to touch the no doubt sticky table.

“The food’s great!” Ruby said, as she plopped down across from her, grabbing menus from a holder at the end of the booth, handing one to Weiss, who fumbled to take it.

Weiss flipped through the picture filled menu, wrinkling her nose at what she saw. “Do they offer anything that isn’t composed entirely of sugar or grease?”

“I think some of it is made of sugar and grease,” Ruby teased, looking back at her menu at the glare she received. She cleared her throat nervously. “Actually, I think they have a salad... yeah! Salad with fried chicken in it.”

Weiss glanced at it dubiously before sighing. “I suppose it will have to do.”

After placing their orders with a tired looking waitress, Ruby refocused her attention on Weiss. “What did you find out?”

Weiss frowned. “Less than I hoped. His soul had already passed on, and the damage to the body, the time, the autopsy... it destroyed most of the traces. He was definitely killed by Beowolves, though, and more than one. And I think... I think there was something else there. I can’t be sure though.”

“So at least a pack of Beowolves, and something else?” Ruby murmured, her brow furrowing in thought. “Like, an Alpha Beewolf or something? Or something really different, like an Ursa?”
Weiss considered as the food was brought over. She was pleasantly surprised to see that the salad greens were crisp and fresh, and the meal had a variety of different fresh, high quality vegetables included, in addition to thin cut, golden brown strips of chicken. It was far simpler than she was used to eating, but the quality was actually quite high.

“If I had to guess, I would lean towards the latter,” Weiss said. “I got the impression that whatever else was there wasn’t any kind of Beowolf.”

“Hmm,” Ruby hummed. “Strange for a variety of Grimm to work together in the city. Usually you don’t get anything like that except deep in the wilderness.”

Weiss had tried her meal, and had begun eating as quickly as propriety would allow. The food was far better than she had expected, and combined with the long, tiring day and poor lunch had left her quite hungry. She paused at those words, bristling slightly. “I’m only telling you what I learned.”

Ruby held up her hands in surrender, almost dropping her burger as she did. “I didn’t mean anything by it. It’s just strange.”

Weiss settled down and went back to eating, looking up with a frown when Ruby’s phone rang.

“Hello?” Ruby asked. Her eyes widened and she turned pale. “Where? Alright. We’ll be there.”

“What is it?” Weiss asked as Ruby stuffed her food in her mouth in a disgusting fashion, trying to finish her meal as quickly as possible.

“There’s been another killing.”
First Case: Ambush

Clouds had started rolling in not long after sunset, and the sky was pitch black by the time Ruby found a parking spot near the latest victim. Only street lamps, police car headlights, and the flashlights carried by officers provided any illumination, leaving shadows everywhere as black as pitch.

Ruby pulled out a flashlight of her own, and Weiss followed her as they approached the crowd of police officers still setting up a perimeter. They were a few blocks from the first crime scene where they had spent some time that afternoon, but instead of being indoors the latest body was simply lying in the pot holed, trash filled streets. Given that common Grimm didn’t bother with things like dumping bodies, it most likely meant that the man had been killed right there, on the road.

A lanky blonde wearing the uniform of a beat cop suddenly staggered away from the crime scene, leaning against the wall and vomiting loudly. Weiss wrinkled her nose in disgust, but for some reason Ruby veered towards the man.

“Jaune?” Ruby called.

He vomited one more time, before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and turning around to face them. “Ruby? What are you doing here?”

She beamed at him, pulling out her badge and waving it around excitedly. “I’m a detective now! With Supernatural Affairs.”

“Whoa,” Jaune said. “Congrats, Ruby! Is this your... partner... H-hello. My name’s Jaune. Jaune Arc. Short, sweet, rolls off the tongue, ladies love it.”

As he introduced himself Jaune adjusted his uniform, trying to make himself look attractive. He then reached out his hand, which happened to be the one that he’d used to clean vomit from his mouth seconds before.

Weiss sneered at him and turned to face Ruby. “If you’re going to waste time with vomit boy over here I’m going to check on the body.”

“So sorry, Jaune,” Ruby said quietly. “My partner’s kind of a b-, um, not very friendly. Don’t take it personally.”

After showing an officer her badge Weiss strode past the outer perimeter, walking towards the body. Mercury was crouching next to it, looking for clues of some kind, while Pyrrha nodded stoically at her approach.

“I’m glad that you could make it,” Pyrrha said. “Did you learn anything from the previous victim?”

“Some,” Weiss said. “He was killed by several Beowolves, and something else was present at the time of the attack. He’d been dead for too long for me to learn more than that, though.”

“I see,” Pyrrha said. “Do you think the latest victim can provide more information for you?”

“Certainly,” Weiss said, looking down at the body for the first time. It was as gruesome as the last, made even more disturbing by how recent it was. The blood pooled around the body was still wet, and the body cavity where the Beowolves had eviscerated him still steamed into the early evening air. Weiss carefully schooled her face to keep it blank, but it wasn’t easy.
“Who was he?” Ruby asked, her voice strained as she came up behind them.

“Tom Gray,” Mercury said, as he slowly flipped through the man’s wallet with gloved hands. “Thirty-seven years old. No drivers license in his wallet, but he’d just finished getting a sandwich club reward card punched. Little cash, nothing else interesting.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I’ll need a minute with the body before I can get any answers.”

“What are you going to do?” Mercury asked as he stood.

“What I was hired to do,” Weiss said simply, pulling off her gloves again and tucking them into her belt. She then crouched down beside the body, wrinkling her nose in distaste at having to step onto the fresh blood with with her white boots, taking care to touch as little as possible. After taking a deep breath she reached out with a hand and carefully laid it on the body on the cleanest spot she could find.

The reaction was immediately, the body stirring in response to her touch. “Holy shit!” Mercury yelped, stumbling away from her.

Weiss ignored him, as well as Ruby’s rushed explanation and the upset sounds of the surrounding police. She couldn’t afford to pay attention to those things as she carefully channeled her aura into the body, taking control of the freshly awakened zombie. Once she had it firmly under her command she mentally ordered it to lay still before starting her next task.

The man had been very recently killed, and using his body as a conduit, she channeled her power through him to what lay beyond life. Slowly she could feel her connection to that strange place between life and death grow, until she was able to call out for the man. Before long he responded, and she brought his spirit into the world.

Carefully she reduced her control over the zombie, and it began to stir again. She opened her eyes in time to see the body do the same, and she saw that his eyes were glowing a dull, sickly green. “What is your name?” she asked calmly.

The body’s chest slowly inflated, and a ragged, echoing voice emerged from the mouth. “Tom... Gray.”

Weiss finally looked away from the body, taking in the reactions of the others. Ruby had wide open eyes, but she stayed close to Weiss, not reacting negatively at all. Mercury and Pyrrha stood on the other side of the body, expressions stoic. Pyrrha nodded to her when she looked up.

“Can I ask him questions?” Pyrrha asked.

“Who... are you?” Tom asked, turning his head towards the redhead. His neck flopped limply with the motion, the torn out throat causing it to move unnaturally.

“I am Pyrrha Nikos,” she said, pulling out her badge. “I’m a detective. Do you know what happened to you?”

“I- I died,” the man said, looking down at his ravaged body as best he could. “I died.”

“Yes,” Weiss said, her voice unusually gentle. “Don’t worry – I will release you soon. We just need some questions answered.”

“Like what killed me?” the man asked.
“Yes,” Pyrrha agreed. “What can you tell us?”

“She killed me,” Tom rasped.

The detectives exchanged looks. “Who is ‘she’?” Weiss asked.

“I don’t know,” the man said. “She was beautiful. Dark hair. Pale. Red dress. Controlled the Grimm.”

“That’s impossible,” Mercury said. “Grimm can’t be controlled. They’re demons that hate all life.”

“The dead don’t lie,” Weiss said sharply.

“Why did she have the Grimm kill you?” Pyrrha asked.

“I don’t know,” the man said. “She just... watched.”

Suddenly a howl could be heard. It was deep and loud, and all heads turned to face the sound. A moment later another howl rose, and then another, and another, until it was obvious that they were surrounded by them.

“Beowolves!” Ruby shouted, and the scene dissolved into chaos as panicked officers ran towards their vehicles.

“Wait, don’t!” Pyrrha shouted, standing and trying to gain the attention of the others.

It was too late. A piercing scream split the night as a policeman was slammed to the ground, a massive form crouched over him. It was pitch black, except for a bone white mask-like covering, enormous teeth and claws, and spines protruding from various points on the body. While vaguely humanoid in form, it hunched unnaturally, and otherwise strongly resembled a wolf.

Blood sprayed like a fountain as the scream cut off in a sickening gurgle as the creature tore the policeman’s throat out with its fangs. The man thrashed weakly, drowning in his own blood, while the monster sank its claws into his stomach, ripping and tearing through his bulletproof vest like it wasn’t even there, before pulling out long ropes of entrails that it stuffed into its mouth. It paused, gore dripping from its canine maw to howl loudly as the man finally expired.

“Beowolf!” Ruby shouted, finally rousing everyone from their stupor.

The police pulled guns and began firing, bullets tearing into the figure. It ignored most of the rounds, but some had thought to prepare their dust rounds, and the burning bullets bit deep into the creature’s hide, catching it aflame. Its triumphant howl transformed into a pained sound as it staggered towards the closest policeman. The man continued to panic fire useless normal bullets, and despite its terrible injuries the Beowolf managed to make one slash towards him, its claws ripping his head off. Then, seemingly satisfied with the carnage it had wrought, the Grimm collapsed to the ground, slowly dissolving like a shadow faced with the dawn.

When the gunfire stopped Pyrrha shouted again. “Everyone! We need to withdraw to a defensible position or we will be overrun. Follow me!”

“You heard her!” Mercury called, pulling out a heavy, triangular shaped dagger from the inside of his shirt to complement the pistol already in his hand.

Weiss looked down at Tom, carefully twisting the aura she had filled his body with. “Return to your rest, Tom Gray.”
The green glow left the dead man’s eyes, and Weiss stood, finally breaking contact with his skin. After a moment the body rose, eyes blank and unseeing as it stood as still as an undirected marionette in front of the heiress.

“We need to go!” Ruby shouted, grabbing Weiss by the arm.

She shrieked and jerked away, desperate to avoid Ruby’s grip. “Don’t touch me! I’m coming!”

Ruby flinched back, rifle in hand, but nodded, raising the weapon and looking at her partner. Weiss started to frantically pull her gloves back on as she looked at the zombie again. “Cover our retreat!”

With that the two took off running, the zombie staggering after them slowly, a deep, unsettling groan escaping its torn lips.

Another policeman behind them screamed, knocked to the ground from behind by a Beowolf who leapt out of the shadows and onto his back. Claws slashed at him, drawing blood, and the man reached out towards the closest officer desperately. “H-help!”

The man turned and stopped to help, which proved to be his undoing as another Beowolf landed on him, slashing the man brutally. Ruby turned, raising her rifle to fire a few shots, the burning incendiary rounds making the two Beowolves howl in pain and turn their attention to the detective.

“We have to run!” Weiss shrieked at her partner.

“We can’t leave them!”

“They’re already dead,” Weiss said. It wasn’t strictly true, but the two policemen had suffered devastating injuries. They would probably survive if they were on the way to a hospital, but lying on a street swarming with Grimm gave them no chance to live. “Keep running or you’ll be joining them!”

Ruby’s face contorted, and she fired another shot, hitting one of the Beowolves right in the head. Its howl was cut off as it collapsed, flames starting to consume it as it burned away to nothing. She began to turn her rifle towards the other when a Beowolf leapt towards her, howling with bloodlust.

Ruby stumbled back, barely avoiding being eviscerated. Before the Beowolf could press the attack it was tackled from behind by the zombie, torn arms wrapping around the creature’s body, seeking to hold the monster still. It yelped in shock, thrashing, but could not dislodge the undead attacker.

“Ruby!” Pyrrha shouted from down the street. Weiss glanced at her, and saw that the tall redhead was standing guard at the entrance to a large warehouse. “Hurry!”

Weiss began running, and Ruby finally followed her. They were both considerably faster than most of the police, catching up to the group quickly as they scrambled for the dubious shelter that Pyrrha had found. Weiss tried to ignore the screams around her as Beowolves caught the occasional officer, and simply ran harder until finally she made it to the redhead, spinning to look back, drawing her sword once she did.

The Beowolves were right behind the fleeing officers, and beside her Pyrrha calmly drew her pistol and took aim, firing one bullet after another to harass the creatures. Several howled in pain as the burning bullets struck them, but none fell. Despite that, she slowed them enough for more officers to make it inside, and as the last one did she stepped fully into the doorway, switching to her sword.

The first Beowolf leaped, but it was cut down in an instant by the redhead. Two more swiftly followed, and then another fell before it reached her, struck down by a loud gunshot from behind
Weiss. She turned and looked, surprised to see Ruby crouched on top of a pile of pallets in the center of the warehouse, taking aim with her rifle and providing cover fire for Pyrrha.

A few moments later someone blew a whistle outside, and the Beowolves reluctantly backed away, growling angrily before running for the shadows to avoid any more gunfire. Pyrrha stepped back inside and closed the door, looking around the warehouse.

Fully half of the uniformed officers from outside hadn’t made it, torn to pieces by the Beowolves. Several of the survivors had minor injuries, but most that were caught never made it into the warehouse. Everyone had shell shocked expressions on their faces, many crouching on the ground simply looking lost.

Mercury and Ruby walked over to join Pyrrha and Weiss, Mercury hanging up his phone as he approached. “Port grabbed everyone who was in the squad room,” he said. “We’ll have reinforcements as fast as they can come.”

“Will they get here in time?” Weiss asked.

Pyrrha looked her in the eye for a moment, weighing her. Weiss straightened her back and raised her chin in the air, refusing to look away from the woman’s emerald eyes. “Not before they attack again. Maybe more than once. We need to prepare.”

“What can we do?” Weiss demanded. “They tore through the walls of that other warehouse. I doubt that this one will last much longer.”

“We need to rally the officers,” Ruby said. “If we can get some barricades up they can shoot a bunch of Beowolves before they get close.”

“That’s a good idea,” Pyrrha agreed with a nod. “Why don’t you and Weiss see to that.”

“Come on!” Ruby said. “Lets build it around my sniper post.”

“It’s a pile of rickety wood,” Weiss deadpanned.

“It’s a sniper post now,” Ruby countered. “How about you get them working on that, I’ll try to get their spirits up.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes at her partner, but decided to go with it. She didn’t have any other plan, and she doubted they would find the words of a necromancer very reassuring, even if she wasn’t so... difficult.

The room was full of scrap wood and even some abandoned machinery in one corner, and with a few sharp words and harsh glares she managed to get a crude barricade built by any policemen that Ruby managed to rally. Before long her partner was standing on top of her ‘sniper post’ haranguing them while they took up positions behind the hasty defenses.

Howls suddenly erupted from all around the building, and Weiss crouched behind her barrier, pistol in hand and with her rapier leaning against the wall, ready to be grabbed at any time. Pyrrha and Mercury were spaced evenly around the defenses, guns at the ready, while Ruby crouched above, rifle up. Weiss took one last moment to carefully switch to her incendiary rounds, wishing she had done like Ruby had and grabbed spares.

Before she had time to do more than regret her armaments something slammed into each wall of the building, ripping and tearing at the sheet metal to open gaping holes. Howling Beowolves began to pour in from each side, and she no longer had time to think about anything.
The creatures moved exceedingly fast, looking like little more than hideous shadows outlined by
sharpened bone and with glowing eyes as they charged across the room. Incendiary dust rounds
burned like tracers as the wild, staccato gunfire filled her ears, the melody punctuated by the deeper
bangs of Ruby’s rifle. The room looked like some maddened dance club, complete with flashing
lights, furiously moving bodies, and a pounding beat.

Then the Grimm arrived, and the screaming began.

When the first Beowolf reached her part of the barricade Weiss pointed her gun at it and kept pulling
the trigger, confused by the lack of reaction until she glanced down, finally realizing that the weapon
had run out of ammo while the Grimm were still crossing the room. With a grimace she simply
dropped the gun, having no time to even put it away properly if she was to defend herself.

She grabbed her rapier, sticking the blade between her and the leaping Beowolf, which proceeded to
impale itself on the weapon. Weiss fell to the ground, dragged down by the heavy weight, flinching
in terror. A moment later the weight began to leave as the Beowolf dissolved, and she opened her
eyes to see that her blade had impaled it straight through the heart, killing it instantly.

Weiss struggled to her feet, staring around for one wild moment at the frenetic melee that her portion
of the defenses had become. Beowolves had simply jumped over the wooden barrier, and they were
tearing the police apart. Beside her one man screamed as a Beowolf tore into him, his intestines
spilling across the floor even as he tried to somehow hold them in. The man locked eyes with Weiss,
desperate to live.

There was only one thing that she could do.

The shock of impact shot up her arm, making her grimace as the point of her rapier hit bone, slowing
it but not stopping the incredibly sharp blade. An instant later the point burst from the Beowolf’s eye
socket, completing the brain destroying path that had begun at the back of its head. Weiss pulled the
blade free, before finally turning away from the dying man.

The officer on her other side was still putting up a fight, fending a Beowolf off with a heavy length
of pipe. Before the Grimm could find a way to kill him she lunged, blade sliding between two ribs in
a perfect killing blow. She swiftly removed the blade, raising it before her face, and spun around,
blade at the ready to meet the next enemy.

The melee was brutal and confusing. Weiss moved about, stabbing any enemy she found, trying to
defend others as best as she could without dying herself. There were just so many Grimm.

Too many.

Weiss had moved part way round the circle to where Pyrrha was fighting. She was magnificent,
standing on top of the barrier, bronze sword flickering about as she cleaved Beowolves like
cordwood. Unfortunately, she didn’t see one coming up behind her. “Pyrrha!”

Before she could move the stupid looking blonde officer that Ruby had greeted bashed the Beowolf
on the head with a two by four. The cheap wood splintered, doing very little damage to the demon,
but before it could finish him off Pyrrha spun, easily slaying it as well. She paused just long enough
to offer the man a hand up from where he’d tripped trying to avoid the Beowolf’s claws, before she
was fighting again.

Weiss turned around at a nearby scream, tripping and falling over part of a dead officer as she tried to
attack the Grimm eating his comrade. Weiss twisted her face in disgust, before an idea came to her.
She took one last glance around the darkened room, and after noting how few guns were still firing
she decided to follow her crazy idea.

She tore her gloves off, placing both hands on the concrete floor, ignoring the slick, hot blood that she had inadvertently stuck them into. Closing her eyes, she began to channel her power into the ground, hoping that it would work. She’d read the theory once, long ago, but had never been so desperate as to try it.

Pushing her aura into the concrete felt like trying to push a boulder up a mountain. Modern materials usually didn’t take magic well, needing dust and lengthy rituals to enchant them. Without even the help of words or symbology Weiss desperately channeled her power into the ground, using it as a medium as she sought her targets.

Beside her something moved, and with a deep, unearthly groan a dead officer rose to his feet, shambling toward the closest Grimm. Shouts of fear and horror rose around the warehouse as one after another every dead body animated, all of the under her control. She panted and opened her eyes, only to blink against sweat. Finally clearing them, she took in what she had done.

Zombies fought Grimm, most of them even less effectually than the living police had been, as they used no weapons, nor did they have the speed or combat training of a real person. What they did have was an immunity to pain or fear, and a deathless determination to fulfill their purpose.

Here and there Grimm were literally torn apart by the zombie cops, but for the most part they simply managed to hold the Beowolves still long enough for the living to get clear blows to finish them off. Some were destroyed permanently by the Grimm or overzealous officers, as the destruction or removal of the head stopped the magic keeping them animate without even more power than Weiss was expending, but the undead had turned the tide.

In the distance the whistle sounded again, and the Beowolves ran away, and it was all that Weiss could do not to collapse completely as she tried to catch her breath.
“What the hell did you think you were doing?”

Weiss slowly raised her head from where she was still crouched on the ground, trying to catch her breath. The man standing over her had obviously spent far too much time at the gym, and she found him more intimidating than she wanted to admit, crouched as she was at what felt like knee height to a mountain.

“Hey!” Ruby suddenly shouted, jumping down from her sniper post and standing between Weiss and the police officer. “Back off! If she hadn’t done that we’d all be dead.”

“She turned everyone into zombies!” the man spat.

“What, you think they wouldn’t want to donate their bodies for a few minutes to save all of our lives?” Ruby asked. “I was a beat cop, too, and if it meant saving everyone I’d gladly be made into a zombie!”

The man simply snarled before turning and stomping away.

Ruby turned around to face Weiss, beaming at her, before her expression became concerned. “Oh, Weiss! You’ve got so much blood on your face. Did you break your nose?”

Her partner started to reach towards her to check her nose, and Weiss could only yelp embarrassingly and collapse backwards to avoid the touch, falling completely onto her ass in the puddle of blood and filth that filled most of the bottom of the barricade. Fortunately Ruby froze, not moving any more as Weiss glared up at her.

“It’s fine,” Weiss snapped a few moments later when she finally caught her breath. “I didn’t get hit in the face. It’s just a nosebleed.”

“From your magic?” Pyrrha asked, making Ruby jump and squeak from her unexpected presence. “That’s very dangerous – pushing your aura so much that you get a nosebleed does serious damage to yourself and can cause an aneurysm.”

Weiss frowned and struggled to her feet on shaking legs, ignoring her partner’s offered hand. “If I hadn’t we would all be dead.”

Pyrrha sighed. “I suppose that is true. Still, please be careful.”

Weiss nodded sharply and finally looked around, taking in the warehouse. Only seven officers remained on their feet, and no one looked at their best. Pyrrha turned away slightly, pulling out a small med kit from her belt and began giving first aid to the blonde officer, who yelped like a small child when she did.

“Are you alright, Jaune?” Ruby asked him.

“This?” he asked, looking down at the long gash on his side that Pyrrha was trying to stop bleeding. “It’s just a scratch! It’ll take more than that to stop Jaune Arc!”
Mercury wandered over, joining them as they stood together. “Do you think that’s the last of them, or are they going to attack again?”

“Probably the latter,” Pyrrha said with a sigh. “They are most likely regrouping in response to that whistle.”

“I saw who made it,” Ruby said, drawing their attention. “She was standing back really far, and it was dark, so I didn’t, you know, get the best look. But she was definitely the woman that dead guy said killed him. She had some weird looking whistle that she blew into to make them stop attacking us.”

They exchanged looks, before Weiss sighed and looked over at her zombies. Half of them had become too damaged to stay combat ready, but the rest were still on their feet, ready to fight. “Gather all of the ammo from the dead that you can,” she said. “Put it down in front of me, then fix the barricades.”

A zombie groaned, and then the others soon took up the call, before the undead gathered up spare ammunition from the fallen, putting it on the ground. Pyrrha sighed, looking over from where she was finishing tying off Jaune’s bandage. “Weiss? I’m not sure that using the police zombies as servants will help your position, given the general attitude towards them.”

Weiss simply sniffed disdainfully, making a face at the blood clots from her nosebleed moved about. “It’s work that has to be done. We’re low on ammunition, and the barricades need to be fixed.”

Despite the glares she received from the normal cops, they did gather in front of her to take spare magazines, getting ready to fight once again. Ruby grabbed several as well, before leaving her rifle leaning against her sniper post and checking her pistol. Once she was sure that it was fine she climbed back on top of the pile of pallets in the middle of the barricade.

“Leaving your rifle?” Jaune asked.

“Yeah,” Ruby said a little sheepishly. “I ran out of rifle rounds a little bit ago. Otherwise I’d have shot whistle girl.”

Before they could say anything else howls rose again, and while there were still far too many, it wasn’t as overwhelming as before. Still, so few police were still standing, and everyone was exhausted. Weiss hadn’t expected to die on her first case, but as the Beowolves stormed through the walls again she found herself resigned to the inevitable.

When the first reached her she lunged forward, stabbing it in the throat, then danced back out of claw range before it even touched their defenses. Still, more came on, and she once again lost herself in a haze of stabbing and slashing, trying to stay alive, the adrenaline giving her enough energy to keep moving.

The zombies once again proved their worth, slowing down and tying up the Beowolves to give them time to defeat the creatures, but it still wasn’t enough. Weiss’ arm felt like lead as she tried to kill another, only to be knocked to the ground by a hulking Grimm that had just finished tearing one of her zombies into useless shreds.

Weiss’ life flashed before her eyes as the monster crouched on top of her, claw in the air, about it bring it down to end her existence. It had been a cold, miserable life, and only pure stubbornness kept her from closing her eyes and just giving up. Instead she locked eyes with her killer, ready to spit one last time into the face of her death.
“Weiss!” Ruby screamed, and then she landed next to her, swinging a huge red bladed scythe, which cleaved through the Beowolf like it was made of paper.

Weiss stared up at her savior, mouth hanging open in shock, unable to believe what had just happened. From the expression on Ruby’s face, she wasn’t able to believe it, either. She stared down at the weapon in her hands, obviously confused, and even a little scared, completely zoning out for a moment.

Unfortunately for Ruby, a battlefield surrounded by Grimm wasn’t a very safe place to zone out, and a hulking Beowolf appeared behind her, both arms raised to tear her apart. Weiss grunted, lunging from the ground, her rapier thrusting past Ruby’s head so closely that the blade rustled her hair, striking through the top of the Beowolf’s mouth and sinking into its brain.

Ruby glanced over at the dying Grimm, and then looked at Weiss. Their eyes locked for a fraction of a second, and an understanding passed between them. Without any hesitation they went back to back, weapons raised and ready to fight off more enemies.

With her back guarded Weiss had an easier time fending off the Grimm in front of her, and she mentally directed a few of her remaining zombies to shamble closer to help them. After killing another Beowolf Weiss cautiously took in the battlefield, trying to get a sense of the situation.

Things were very grim. While the number of enemies had declined sharply, the decrease in combat ready officers was even more dramatic. Past Ruby she could see Pyrrha and Jaune standing back to back, with several wounded officers beside them, guarded by the pair. Jaune was awkwardly using a piece of wood to keep the Grimm at bay, with Pyrrha occasionally spinning to deliver brutal blows to them before turning around and defending her other side again.

The only other person still up and fighting was Mercury. He had run out of bullets like the rest of them, and he was relying on a combination of impressive kickboxing to disorient and wound the Grimm, and his dagger to actually finish them off. She was considering making her way over to him to join their formation into three when, slowed by exhaustion, he mistimed a kick, resulting in his leg being caught in the mouth of a Grimm. It bit down, and in a spray of gore it bit his leg off at the knee, sending him to the ground with an agonized scream.

“Mercury!” Pyrrha shouted, somehow having noticed what was happening despite guarding so many wounded police.

The Beowolf raised an arm, bringing it down to finish him off. Despite the agony and shock of losing one leg, he brought the other up in a desperate defense. He screamed again as the Grimm mauled his other leg, but it did keep him alive a moment longer.

Before Weiss could figure out some way to help him, a chain with a silver weight on the end suddenly wrapped itself around the Beowolf’s throat several times. The Grimm choked for a moment, and then was pulled roughly backwards, slamming into the crude barricade. Before it could recover a small sickle attached to the other end of the chain was placed in front of its throat. When the chain was then released the Beowolf, which had been struggling the entire time, lunged forward, chopping its own head off.

Weiss raised her gaze to the person holding the weapon. It was Blake, the faunus detective, who immediately hauled in the chain end of her kusari gama before she flipped over the barrier and took a position guarding Mercury, casually swinging the weight on the end of her chain as she did.

“Yahhh!” a female voice bellowed, and suddenly Yang was diving into the fray, eyes glowing red and fists burning with searing flames. She tore into the rear of the Beowolves, smashing into them
like a living, enraged battering ram, crushing and tearing them apart.

“Yahoo!” another woman shouted, obviously having the time of her life. She was a short, red haired woman, who was somehow wielding an enormous silver warhammer. Following stoically behind her was an asian man with long hair wielding a pair of pistols. He made each shot count despite the pace he was firing, the incendiary bullets killing any Grimm that threatened the hammer wielding maniac.

The Beowolves found themselves trapped between the remaining defenders and the charging reinforcements, and they cast about desperately, unable to adapt to the changing tactical situation. Before they could recover the newcomers had dramatically reduced their numbers. A few tried to run away, but loud gunshots cut them off, as Weiss could see Sergeant Port wielding a shot gun, accompanied by a lean green haired man armed with a large pistol, who together prevented any from escaping.

“Let’s get them!” Ruby shouted, jumping over the barrier to plow into the confused Grimm with her red scythe.

“You dolt!” Weiss shrieked, but despite her angry protest she scrambled after her parter. Her body was shaking with exhaustion, but she somehow managed to follow Ruby, protecting her back as best she could with her rapier. Fortunately the Grimm were too confused and panicked to put up much of a fight, as Weiss privately doubted that she’d be much use against anything but thoroughly distracted foes.

Then, as suddenly as the battle had begun everything became silent. Weiss blinking in surprise, before slowly looking around the warehouse. The detectives, Jaune, and her last two remaining zombies were all of the police that were still standing, and those hit the floor a moment later as she withdrew her aura from them, letting the bodies fall like puppets with their strings cut, and she accompanied them a right after, collapsing first to her knees, then to her butt as she couldn’t find the energy to still stand.

“Ruby!” Yang shouted, her hands no longer burning and her eyes turning back to their natural lilac color.

Ruby grinned, and Weiss could only stare in shock as the red scythe scattered into rose petals, leaving her partner empty handed. Ruby barely noticed as Yang slammed into her, lifting her off of the ground into a bone creaking hug.

“Can’t... breath...” Ruby gasped, flailing her limbs until finally her sister released her, leaving her gasping and holding her knees to stay upright.

“I was so worried about you, sis,” Yang said. “You’re new to this stuff, and this was bad even for us.”

Weiss stopped paying attention to the family drama, ignoring the jealous burn from seeing the sisters happily hug each other. The green haired man had approached her and he gave her a sharp nod when he was in front of her.

“Lieutenant Oobleck, at your service,” he said, his words fired rapid pace. “Are you injured?”

“No, sir,” Weiss said, frowning at how shaky her voice sounded. “Just exhausted. I used a bit too much magic.”

“I see,” he said, looking around sharply. “Then you are one of the lucky ones. Ambulances are on
their way – would you like a paramedic to check you out? Even a small wound can be far more serious than expected, between infection and the ability of adrenaline to hide the true extent of the damage.”

Weiss shook her head. “No, thank you. I just need a hot shower and a good night’s sleep.”

“Well that, I suppose, can be arranged,” he said. “When we get finished up here, you and your partner can go to your homes. Report back tomorrow for debriefing and paperwork.”

Weiss actually smiled at that. “Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t thank me,” Lt. Oobleck said. “You did good work today.”

With that he walked away to check on Pyrrha, who was trying to keep Mercury alive with Jaune’s help. Weiss almost jumped out of her skin when Ruby spoke next to her. “Weiss! Are you going to be okay?”

“I’m fine,” Weiss said, too tired to snap at the repeated questions about her health.

“Do you need to see a doctor?” she asked, waving a hand at the EMTs who had finally arrived and were rushing over to check on the injured.

“No,” Weiss said shortly.

“Okay,” Ruby sighed. “Want a ride home? Port said we could go.”

Weiss sighed, looking down at her filthy body. If she called for a ride the upholstery in the car would need to be replaced. With a sigh she nodded.

Ruby beamed at her and offered a hand up, which Weiss ignored, somehow making it back to her feet. Her legs were shaking slightly, and she felt like a newborn doe as she stumbled toward the front of the warehouse. Ruby kept reached out to steady her every time she stumbled, but Weiss’ glare managed to keep her at bay.

Once they were outside Weiss took a deep breath. The stench of gasoline and garbage burned her nose, but it was better than the abattoir she had just left. It was still terribly dark though, with the main light coming from the horde of emergency vehicles that had arrived.

“I’ll get the car,” Ruby said. “Just get to the edge of the police line.”

Before Weiss could make up some excuse to prevent that (despite very much wanting it) Ruby dashed off. Instead she shook her head, unable to believe her partner’s energy, and stumbled towards the edge of the police line, pointedly ignoring the people buzzing about, save for a glare for the press who started shouting questions at her. She really didn’t want to think about how her family would react to seeing her looking as she did on the news.

Ruby pulled the unmarked police car up, and Weiss thankfully opened the door, all but collapsing into the seat. Ruby was actually considerate enough to let her take her time putting on her seatbelt, before finally pulling away.

They hadn’t made it very far from the site of the battle before she spoke. “So, um, that was pretty crazy.”

Weiss snorted. “Where did that scythe come from?”
“Scythe?” Ruby parroted. “Oh… um… I don’t know. It was really weird. I mean, I saw that Beowolf and I just kinda jumped down to fight it, ’cause I was, um, out of bullets, and then suddenly there was this big honkin’ scythe in my hands!”

“That’s never happened before?” Weiss questioned.

“Nope,” Ruby said. “That was pretty weird, huh.”

Weiss didn’t say anything else, pondering the possible origins of such a strange magical gift. She definitely needed to do some research… tomorrow. She almost didn’t notice that the atmosphere managed to be less tense than earlier that day, and Weiss could see from the corner of her eye that her partner wasn’t as upset about being in a car with her as she had been.

“So, where are we going?” Ruby asked.

Weiss blinked, feeling her cheeks blush slightly at the oversight, and swiftly rattled off her address.

“So, Weiss, um…” Ruby started, trailing off.

“What?”

“We actually worked together pretty well today, didn’t we?”

Weiss thought about it, and finally had to agree with Ruby. Things had often been verbally tense, but the two of them had worked surprisingly well together, even fighting back to back at the end. “We did.”

“I know you weren’t very happy to be working with me, but… I hope that we can get along in the future, you know? Like real partners?”

Weiss turned her head to face Ruby, who had paused at a red light and was looking at her. After a long moment she gave the other woman a tiny smile. “Alright, partner. I suppose you weren’t quite as terrible as I expected.”

Ruby grinned, the expression infectious enough to make Weiss’ own smile widen slightly. “Don’t worry, Weiss. Before you know it we’ll be the best of friends!”

Maybe it was the exhaustion. Maybe it was the result of the desperate battle for her life that she’d just barely survived. Maybe it was the lifetime of bitter loneliness, but the offer suddenly sounded like the best thing that Weiss had ever heard. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Yay!” Ruby cheered. “This is going to be great, I promise! Before you know it you’ll be like, ‘wow, that Ruby is so cool, I’m glad I’m her friend!’”

Weiss groaned. “And the moment is gone.”

Ruby laughed cheerfully, making Weiss smile again. For the rest of the trip Ruby rambled on and on about nothing important. Weiss found the babbling to be strangely soothing, and it was all that she could do to stay awake until finally the car pulled to a stop.

“Is this it?” Ruby asked.

Weiss looked out the window at the tall building in the heart of the city and nodded. “Yes. Thank you for the ride.”

“No problem!” Ruby agreed. “Do you want me to pick you up tomorrow? I guess your car is
probably still at Beacon.”

Weiss shook her head. “You don’t have to. I was driven this morning, and I can do the same tomorrow.”

“Really?” Ruby said, blinking. “That’d just be a waste of money for going to work every day. Why don’t I just pick you up?”

“You don’t need to go out of the way,” Weiss said. “I’ll be fine.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Ruby said. “We can even eat breakfast together!”

Weiss narrowed her eyes at her. “What kind of breakfast?”

“I usually just get doughnuts in the morning-” Ruby began.

“No,” Weiss said.

“Aw, but sugar is so good,” Ruby whined. Seeing her partner’s stubborn expression Ruby pouted. “What kind of police person doesn’t like doughnuts? Ugh. Fine. How about I pick you up and we go to that diner? I already told you they have great breakfasts.”

Weiss hesitated, but finally nodded. “I suppose the food there wasn’t too terrible.”

Ruby grinned. “Alright partner! I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow!”

Chapter End Notes

This was a very short case, just getting our feet wet. Next chapter is a wrap up for events, as well as a teaser for the second case (which is considerably longer).

I hope you’ve enjoyed this so far!
Mercury glared up at the ceiling. One hundred sixty-one tiles. He had counted them. Seventeen times.

The only thing worse than counting ceiling tiles was thinking about what had happened. What he’d lost. He briefly lifted his head and glared down at the stumps of his legs, both amputated above the knee.

“Mercury?” Pyrrha asked. She was hovering in the doorway, the look of concern that covered her face revealed for what it really was by the pity in her eyes.

He had forgotten about visitors. They were even worse than thinking about what had happened.

When he didn’t say anything Pyrrha took that as an invitation to enter. “How are you feeling?”

“How am I feeling?” Mercury scoffed. “I feel like I just got my legs bitten off. How’s that for how I’m feeling.”

“I am sorry,” Pyrrha said.

“For what?” Mercury asked. “For what happened to me? For not watching my back like even the rookies were doing for each other? For bringing it up?”

“All three?” Pyrrha offered. “I can’t imagine how difficult this must be for you, but...”

“No,” Mercury snapped. “No, you really can’t. But don’t worry, you don’t have to keep coming by. I finally got my official retirement papers through, so you can go back to Beacon and never think about me again.”

“Mercury...” Pyrrha sighed. “I know that we were never particularly close, but we were partners for a year. I’m not simply going to forget about you.”

“Try,” Mercury growled. “In a few more days I’m going home, and there I don’t have to let you in. Just... go away.”

“I will for now,” Pyrrha said sadly. “I’m sorry, Mercury.”

He didn’t respond, simply glaring at the ceiling until his former partner had finally left. He heaved a sigh of relief when she did, only to tense up when someone else walked in.

She was a beautiful woman, with dark hair covering one eye, and a long, flowing red dress that clung to her curves very enticingly. If he wasn’t angry and doped up on painkillers he might have found her to be quite a bit more interesting than he did. Instead he simply returned his gaze to the ceiling and tried to ignore her.

“Hello, Mercury,” the woman said as she approached his side.

“I’m not interested in visitors,” Mercury growled.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “I heard the way you drove off little miss Pyrrha Nikos. Very cruel. I was most impressed.”

Finally he turned his gaze to her, locking his eyes with the strange woman. At first they had looked
to be a cinnamon brown color, but the longer he held her gaze the more they seemed to glow, until they flickered and burned like a bonfire.

“Who are you?” Mercury asked quietly.

“You can call me Cinder Fall,” the woman said, smiling predatorily. “I’m here to make you an offer; I find myself in need of your skills.”

Mercury laughed mockingly. “My skills? I lost those along with my legs.”

“The skills are still there,” Cinder said. “As for the legs? Well, those can be fixed.”

“What?” Mercury asked. “Even magic can’t fix missing legs.”

“Not mortal magic, maybe,” Cinder said dismissively. “Tell me, how much would you be willing to offer to walk again? Not just with some metal prosthetics, but to run, to fight, to do everything you could before?”

He stared up at her for a long time before finally licking his dry lips and speaking. “Anything.”

“That’s a good offer, Mercury Black,” Cinder chuckled. “I believe we can make a deal.”

“Good evening, Mr. Arc,” Ozpin said, looking up at the blonde police officer nervously fidgeting in front of his desk. “Please, have a seat.”

“I’m not sure why you wanted to see me,” Jaune said with a little laugh. “I already told Pyrrha, um, Detective Nikos everything I know. And Captain Goodwitch. And Beacon’s shrink.”

“Oh, I know all about the recent incident,” Ozpin said, gesturing vaguely at the pile of reports on his desk. “Although I suppose, in a sense that is related to what I wished to speak to you about.”

“Alright,” Jaune said. “Um, what do you want to know?”

“Why did you choose to become a police officer?”

“Why?” Jaune asked, furrowing his brow. “Well, I’m guessing you know who my father is. And my grandfather, and well, you know. I guess I just... I wanted to make a difference, you know? Do some good in the world, but in my own way. I tried a few things, but the only place I was able to make it in that would really be good was the police. Not that I’m not happy here! The police does great work. Important work. I’m really happy to be a part of it.”

Ozpin smiled slightly. “Although not perfectly happy, I think, given the number of applications to every specialized department at Beacon.”

Jaune blushed. “Yes, well. I guess giving out parking tickets and occasionally standing outside of crime scenes isn’t really what I had in mind when I wanted to make a difference.”

“I can’t help but notice that you never once applied to my bureau,” Ozpin continued. “Is there a reason you didn’t ask to join Supernatural Affairs?”

“Well, yeah,” Jaune said. “I’m not some magical mystical... whatever. I’m just... me.”
Ozpin smiled and took a sip of his coffee. “While I will admit that the vast majority of those employed by my bureau have supernatural abilities of one form or another, that isn’t always the case. We have several people in our employ that are completely normal humans.”

“Oh,” Jaune said. “Still, I can’t imagine any of them are really normal. I mean, they might not have magic, but still... they’ve gotta be pretty special to keep up with all their peers.”

“True,” Ozpin allowed. “Although the physical training needed can be taught like any other skill to willing students. No, the most important factors are the intangible things. Bravery. Clear thinking. A willingness to help.”

“Oh, yeah,” Jaune said, nodding. “Like I said, you really only take the best of the best.”

“Exactly,” Ozpin said. “The kind of people we want are those willing to fight against evil no matter the risk. The kind of people that would stand back to back with a stranger armed with nothing more than a hunk of wood against an army of Grimm to save their fellow officers.”

“Oh,” Jaune said, eyes wide as he followed what Ozpin was saying.

“Tell me, Mr. Arc... would you be interested in moving to Supernatural Affairs after all? With the unfortunate injuries Detective Black recently suffered, Detective Nikos is in need of a new partner.”

“Y-yes, sir!” Jaune said, jumping to his feet in his excitement.

“Very good,” Ozpin said. “Go see Captain Goodwitch to deal with the administrative details. I’m looking forward to following your career, Detective Arc.”

“Thank you, sir!” Jaune babbled. “Thank you for the opportunity!”

Ozpin smiled thinly. “This job is a tremendous responsibility. The person who’s place you are taking was forced to retire due to injury, as does almost every living retiree from my bureau. It’s dangerous work, Detective Arc. I’m not sure that you should be so pleased to have joined.”

He grinned sheepishly before becoming serious. “I know it’s dangerous. I was there when Detective Black... was hurt. I saw most of my coworkers get killed that day. But I know that you guys make a difference.”

“Good luck,” Ozpin said, nodding to him. He had considered saying more, but his phone was vibrating in his pocket. When Jaune left he pulled it out and checked the message.

‘The queen has pawns.’

“This weather’s terrible!” Shane said, glaring out over the water.

The air was so thick with fog it almost seemed as though he should be able to swim through the air. It was cold, cloying, and miserable to be standing in, but worst of all, it completely killed visibility. He could barely make out the glow in the distance that was the city of Vale, and anything smaller and dimmer than that was completely invisible.

Shane glared for a moment longer, before a smirk slid onto his face. “I guess... it is hard to see.”

Titus grinned. “Good one! But yeah, the weather sucks. How ‘bout I go to the bow, you stay here at the wheel, and if I see something I’ll shout.”

Shane sighed. “Alright. Best idea I’ve got.”

Shane walked back over to the ships’ wheel, taking over for Titus who patted him on the shoulder as he passed by. The two had been friends for as long as they could remember, and had owned the fishing ship together for almost a decade. They had three more crew, but they were all below, taking care of the hold full of fish they’d caught.

Suddenly the ship shuddered, and Shane gripped the wheel hard, afraid they’d run into something. A glimpse at his instruments showed that they should still have plenty of safe distance before shore, and after years of fishing the same waters around Vale, he couldn’t think of anything that they could’ve run into.

“Titus, you see something?” he shouted. “Titus?”

After another minute without a response he frowned, throttled the boat down and walked out of the tiny bridge and onto the deck of the ship. “Titus, this isn’t funny.”

Still without a response he carefully made his way to the bow of the ship. Before he reached it he knelt down and made a face as he examined something on the deck. It was a patch of seaweed surrounded by a pool of thick, slimy green algae. “Where the hell’d this come from?”

He looked around, but couldn’t see any reason for the mess to be on his deck. Eventually he shrugged, carefully kicking it overboard before he continued walking, ignoring the occasional slimy puddle as he went. He decided that it was most likely caused by an unusually strong wave, and his heart rate sped up as he considered that in connection with Titus no longer answering.

Just as he was getting truly worried he saw a shadowy form perched on the bow of the ship, staring out over the water. “Titus... what the hell man. I was-”

Before he could continue a sudden scream came from below deck, followed by two more. All three went on and on, and he gaped, unable to imagine what could make his crew sound like that. “Titus, we’ve gotta go see what’s wrong! Titus?”

When the man still didn’t move Shane pursed his lips, before marching angrily over to him, intending to grab him by the shoulder. “Titus, what’s wrong... with...”

It wasn’t Titus. The figure on the bow of the ship was short and hunched, with a barrel chest that screamed power, and arms far longer than human. The limbs ended in webbed hands and feet, with massive black claws on the tips. When it turned around he saw that the face was vaguely humanoid, but with an enormous, sharp-toothed mouth, scaly skin, and huge, black eyes.

Before Shane could react the creature grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled, dragging them both overboard. Shane barely managed to take a breath before he was pulled into the cold water of the bay and then deep under it. The creature swam incredibly swiftly, dragging him down into the cold, dark depths, his struggles to escape stymied by wiry, inhumanly strong muscles and sharp claws.

Eventually the pain and terror were too much, and what little air Shane had escaped in a silent scream.
Weiss frowned as she finished filling out the last few lines of the form. Once she was finished she sat back in her chair and held up the document, something vaguely resembling a smile on her lips. There was something incredibly satisfying about completing a piece of paperwork, and as she carefully read through it again she found herself remarkably content with her new job.

It had been two weeks since the massacre fighting the Beowolves, and in that time Weiss and Ruby had slowly learned to work together. The process hadn’t exactly been easy – one look around their shared cubicle told that story.

Weiss’ half of their work space was a living testament to perfect order. Her documents were neatly sorted into half a dozen different inboxes, each piled more neatly than a bound book, and all carefully arranged with more precision than a ruler could offer. Everything about her half of the cubicle was a perfect display of exquisite precision, with only a single painting of a forest in the fall, as well as her very expensive personal chair, to give her area any character.

Ruby’s section of the cubicle, on the other hand, was a mess. Documents were piled in loose stacks, and whenever she needed to find something she had to go digging through endless pages trying to locate whatever she had lost. She had also decorated her desk with photos of family and friends, as well as a few small figurines of some kind under her computer monitor.

While the clutter of pages on Ruby’s desk was infuriating, the worst part of sharing a workspace with Ruby was her loose relationship with the concept of throwing away garbage. While Weiss had been able to largely eliminate fast food from their diet when they ate together (which given their schedules was fairly often) the dolt still managed to eat a ridiculous amount of sugary alleged food products, whose wrappers inevitably ended up forgotten (sometimes half filled) on her desk. Before Weiss resigned herself to serving as a maid to avoid attracting ants it hadn’t been uncommon to figure out when Ruby had had a certain snack based upon the document layers the wrappers were found under.

Despite how annoying the other detective was, they had found a rhythm over the two weeks, and had managed to close out four different cases, two of them by themselves. None of the cases had been major – a pair of weak Grimm, an unlicensed magic dealer, a ghost, and a cursed heirloom had been all that they had done, but it had let them ease into the job, and after the disaster of a first mission Weiss was very grateful for that.

“Are you done, yet?” Ruby asked.

Weiss’ eyes snapped up to meet her partner, and she sneered slightly. “Of course. I was just proofreading the last of the paperwork for the heirloom case. Something you should consider doing a bit more often.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “It’s paperwork, Weiss. People barely even glance at this stuff, and they want quick, simple answers not some huge dissertation on how you solved some nothing case that no one is ever gonna look at.”

“If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing with class and distinction,” Weiss sniffed.

“Oh, look at me, I wrote a book about a cursed thing,” Ruby squeaked in a sing song tone. “Now no one has the time to read it, since they’d need a dictionary and a week to find out what happened. That’s you, by the way. That’s what you sound like.”
“That sounds nothing at all like me, you dolt,” Weiss growled with a frosty glare.

“Hello, snow angel,” Jaune said, drawing both of their attention to him. He no longer wore a police uniform, instead wearing jeans and a hoody with a bullet proof vest over it. He had what he most likely considered a suave grin on his face as he looked at Weiss. “Having a good morning, beautiful?”

“I was,” Weiss ground out, the glare she leveled at him so cold that he gulped audibly.

Behind him came his partner Pyrrha, who waved a little awkwardly at them. “Good morning. I hope that we are not interrupting anything?”

“Nope,” Ruby said cheerfully. “We’d just finished the paperwork from our last case.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Pyrrha said, smiling gently. “We did your first three cases together, so I’m very glad to see that I was a good enough teacher to show you how to complete your detective work.”

“You were an exemplary teacher, Pyrrha,” Weiss said with a nod.

“You know, I’m sure we could find a case big enough for all four of us to do together again, Weiss,” Jaune said. “You want to join the winning team again? I can make room for you in our squad car.”

“Pyrrha?” Weiss groaned, palming her face with a gloved hand.

“Come on, Jaune, before she does something to you that I doubt she’d regret,” Pyrrha said cheerfully, grabbing him by the shoulder and hauling him away.

After a few quiet moments, Ruby leaned back in her chair studying her partner. “Hey, Weiss? Why are you always so much nicer to Pyrrha than anyone else?”

Weiss scoffed loudly. “I show people exactly the respect that they deserve. It’s not my fault that I’m surrounded by so many nincompoops.”

“Heh, poop,” Ruby chuckled, receiving a deadpan look from her partner for her idiocy. “What’s so special about Pyrrha, anyway?”


“Ahh, sounds like someone has a crush,” Ruby teased.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Don’t be absurd. Romance is a chemical imbalance in the brain, and one that I’m grateful to have avoided succumbing to entirely. No, I simply have respect for her many accomplishments.”

“Chemical imbalance?”

“Yes,” Weiss asserted. “It makes otherwise intelligent people do stupid things and generally act like idiots. I’m glad that I’ve never been affected by it.”

“That’s... kinda sad,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss glared. “Shut up.”

They sat awkwardly after that for a long moment. Weiss didn’t want to pursue the current (or
frankly, any topic), and Ruby’s face was scrunched up like a confused but upset puppy. Fortunately they were saved from further conversation by the arrival of Sergeant Port.

“Hello, ladies,” Port drawled cheerfully. “How are you this fine morning?”

“Great!” Ruby said quickly. “You have a case for us?”

Port chuckled. “Ah, so eager! I remember when I was a young detective, just having joined the department. Why, in those days—”

Weiss tuned him out for the most part, letting him ramble through his story without losing the appearance of interest, or risking losing her sanity. Port was a good commander, but he liked to tell stories about his youth, and after paying close attention to the first few she realized that they didn’t actually impart any useful information.

“-and that was how we caught the killer!” he finished. “Ha ha! Ahem. But, I’m sure that you want to continue with your own cases, so that you can have as many stories to pass on to future generations.”

Weiss could tell from her partner’s slack expression that Ruby had completely zoned out during the long story and was on the verge of falling asleep. She cleared her throat and smiled at Port. “Of course, sir. Is that a new case?”

“It is indeed, young lady,” Port agreed, handing them each a folder. “I’ve prepared you each a copy of what we have. It looks like it could be quite the case, but it should be just the thing to get your feet wet.”

“Thank you, sir,” Weiss said, opening the folder.

“Yeah, thanks,” Ruby agreed.

Weiss flipped through the documents, getting an overview of the situation as Port left. Her eyes widened slightly as she saw the information already gathered. The last few cases had been dull, routine work. The new one was anything but.

The files were a scant few pages, just consisting of a preliminary report emailed to the bureau asking for assistance from Supernatural Affairs. The crime scene was a fishing trawler that had run aground in the harbor, with several torn and mutilated corpses found in its cargo hold near a magic sigil on the deck. She frowned at the crude, low resolution image of the symbol, immediately recognizing it as a magical circle of some sort, but without a better look she couldn’t say much more than that.

“Ready to go?” Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded, gathering the files and sticking her sword on her belt. “Let’s go.”

“New case, Rubles?” Yang asked from where she stood at the divider.

“Yup,” Ruby said. “We’re heading down to the docks.”

Yang groaned. “Lucky. I’m going to be stuck doing paperwork until I’m old and gray.”

“If you didn’t want to do paperwork, you probably shouldn’t have smashed all that stuff,” Ruby pointed out.

“Hey, I only smashed half,” Yang said. “The rest was all those gremlins.”

“I didn’t know that gremlins were strong enough to do that much damage to cinder blocks,” Blake
drewled, standing up next to her partner.

“I’m not going a dime over 60-40,” Yang said. “Anyway, you guys get a good case? Or are you looking for a lost magic puppy?”

“There are magic puppies?” Ruby asked, eyes shining, before blushing as three sets of eyes stared incredulously at her. “Never mind.”

“Come on, sis, we’ve gotta live vicariously though you,” Yang said. “If I know Goodwitch she won’t give us a good case for weeks.”

“Well... is multiple homicide a good case?” Ruby asked.

Yang’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? What happened?”

Ruby shrugged. “Dunno yet. They just found the crime scene with some mystic symbol on the ground and called us.”

“Ruby, we need to get going,” Weiss said, crossing her arms. “You can brag about how many victims we’re investigating later.”

Ruby hung her head in shame, flinching slightly, while Yang and Blake glared at Weiss. “I’m guessing the victims were human,” Blake drawled. “Since you’re actually pretending to care, Schnee.”

Weiss’ glare could’ve stripped paint, before she turned and faced Ruby, ignoring the other two. “I’m going to the car. If you intend to drive I suggest that you not leave me waiting.”

“Eep!” Ruby objected, jumping slightly.

“How do you put up with the ice queen,” Yang asked in what she thought was a quiet voice. “She’s awful.”

“She’s right,” Ruby mumbled. “People are dead. I was just trying to not think about it, but whoever or whatever did it is still out there. Bragging about getting a big case wasn’t the right thing to do.”

“Ruby,” Yang sighed. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just... this is the way people react to this job. Staying tightly wound like the princess over there will just drive you crazy.”

“Thanks, sis,” Ruby said with a tremulous smile. “And Blake... we don’t know anything about the victims. The files don’t have any details about the crime...”

Weiss sped up slightly, not sure what to make of what she’d overheard while leaving. She wasn’t surprised that the blonde brute and the faunus hated her, but she wasn’t expected her partner to actually stick up for her. It created a strange, almost warm feeling in her chest. After a few seconds she shook her head, ignoring it. She had a job to do.

As expected Ruby jogged to catch up, meeting Weiss by the time she reached the parking garage. “I’m driving!” she insisted, dashing past and pulling the keys from her pocket. Weiss just rolled her eyes and sat down in the passenger seat.

The trip was reasonably fast, having missed rush hour traffic. As usual Weiss wasn’t interested in making conversation, and after a few fumbling attempts Ruby turned on the radio. Listening to the screeching guitars almost made Weiss regret not participating in her partner’s small talk, although she was impressed by the complexity of the music. It was wild and grating, but at least Ruby hadn’t turned on some vapid pop hits.
Even though it was after ten it was still a little foggy, the sun slowly burning through the thick cover that had rolled in from the sea the night before. It gave the view of the ocean a mysterious quality, with tiny rock islands poking out of the mist here and there, breaking up the choppy blue of the harbor.

The ship where the crime scene was located had run aground on some rocks within a stone’s throw of the docks. Weiss could see the damage it had done to the hull of the ship, which listed slightly where it rested on the rocks. Police were scrambling all around it, taking pictures and keeping the press away.

“You ready?” Ruby asked.

Weiss just snorted and left the car, her partner scrambling to follow as they walked towards the ship. A nervous looking officer tried to stop them, but she simply flashed her badge and kept walking, Ruby mumbling quick apologies behind her as she followed.

Even before she reached the ship Weiss could feel a wrongness in the air. Narrowing her eyes, she reached out with her aura and frowned at what she felt. Something dark and twisted had happened magically, and even from a distance it made her head throb.

While Weiss was taking in the feeling of the ship, Ruby had been asking questions of the two detectives that had already checked over the scene. As she returned her senses to reality she sighed at what she heard.

“So, uh, you thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’,” the first said.

“Oh, yeah, uh, definitely weird,” the second replied. “It’s why we called you guys down. We took one look and was, uh, was sure it was too weird.”

“In what way?” Ruby asked.

“Oh, in a, uh, weird way,” the first said.

The second nodded at his partner’s insight. “That’s right. Things looked normal above, but uh, lookin’ below, definitely weird. So we called you in.”

“Yeah, you could tell from how it was,” the first said. “It’s best to let you spooky types, uh, deal with things.”

Weiss smacked a hand to her forehead at the sheer idiocy contained within the pair of detectives. “Ruby? Something magical definitely happened here.”

“How can you tell?” Ruby asked curiously.

Weiss gave her a flat look. “You have magical ability as well. If you ever bother to train it you could sense things with your aura.”

“What, me?” Ruby scoffed. “Yeah right. I’m just a normal girl, with normal knees. I don’t have any magic.”

Weiss felt her headache coming on stronger as she stared at the fidgeting idiot. “What do your knees have anything to do with magical ability, you dolt?”

Ruby cleared her throat. “Um, anyway, shouldn’t we check out the crime scene?”
“That’s, uh, that’s down below,” the second detective said, glancing at his notes. “Ship ran aground about two hours ago, no one living on board. Controls were set to, uh, to a slow speed and left to go. No sign of anything else, uh, strange, above deck. Just no one around, and, uh, the thing in the hold. Forensics is down there now, but they haven’t touched the creepy, uh, thing.”

“Right,” Weiss said. “Let’s take a look around above deck before we go below. Make sure they didn’t miss anything.”

“Sorry,” Ruby murmured to the detectives as Weiss carefully climbed onto the ship. It was fairly large, which meant that the surf didn’t cause it to rock very much where high tide had deposited it. It was still treacherous to navigate, both because of the fifteen degree angle it was sitting at, as well as how slick the deck was.

“Whoa!” Ruby said, waving her arms as she grabbed the railing along the edge of the ship to avoid falling. “It’s slick!”

Weiss gave her a look. “It’s a ship sitting in the surf.”

“Right,” Ruby blushed, looking at the ground. “Hey, what is this stuff?”

Weiss looked closely at what Ruby was examining. “Looks like algae.”

“Is that normal?” Ruby asked.

“No,” Weiss said with a frown. “The waves shouldn’t have been able to deposit this here, and I’m not sure where else it would’ve come from.”

“Maybe whoever did this tracked it onto the ship?” Ruby suggested.

“Actually, I’m not sure what ‘this’ is yet,” Weiss said. “Other than a blurry picture of a mystic sigil and reports of deaths, we don’t know what happened yet. Don’t make assumptions that there was an outside perpetrator.”

Ruby blushed, and with a nod Weiss continued their search. They found nothing else of interest, with the bridge being left exactly as the detectives had described, although someone had turned off the engine during the past few hours. They could see signs of forensics work having been done, and while it would take time for a formal report to be put together, at least nothing big had been noticed.

“Ready to head below?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “Are you ready?”

Weiss snorted. “Of course. I’m not like vomit boy.”

Weiss led the way over to the hatch, but the moment she touched it she froze, the malignant feeling from before magnified as she came close to its source. The sheer wrongness was sickening, and she suddenly found herself hesitating, not sure that she wanted to go below after all.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked.

“Nothing,” Weiss said, taking a deep breath, before opening the hatch.
Second Case: Something Fishy

The air was thick with the stench of dark magic and fish, both overpowering the sharp smell of blood and death. Weiss had to take a moment to steady herself as the miasma washed over her after opening the hatch before she could even think about climbing down into the hold.

The hold itself was starkly illuminated by dirty industrial lighting, along with the occasional flash of cameras as the forensics crew did its work. The room was quite cold, as enormous containers of ice were designed to safely hold the fish caught by the ship’s nets. That ice had been scattered everywhere, and Weiss could see that many of the fish had been torn apart, some with ragged teeth marks on them.

At the center of the room was a huge circle painted on the ground. It was crudely drawn, and as Weiss moved closer she could see that it had been done in blood. Several dead bodies, torn to pieces and partially eaten lay next to it, but the pile of cut and squeezed fish near the circle implied that the blood may have been from them rather than the people.

Weiss ignored the bodies as Ruby walked over to the leader of the forensics team and started speaking with him quietly. Instead she focused first on the magic circle, trying to get some idea of its purpose and whether it had actually been used.

Magic circles were a common kind of magical sigil. Drawn on a surface, they pooled magical power into them, both the aura of mages and the natural power that flowed through the world, and if created correctly, a magical ritual could be used to perform an effect using that power. It was the kind of magic the Schnee family was famous for, but most magical traditions employed at least a small amount of the practice.

Weiss carefully inspected the sigil, examining it thoroughly with her eyes before she employed her more esoteric senses. The circle had many small runes drawn around its edges, along with curved lines which crossed at the center of the circle, creating an unusual pattern. She frowned thoughtfully as she studied the runes, but despite her extensive knowledge of magical languages and symbols, she didn’t recognize the language that they were written in. The script was cruder than most runic systems she had been exposed to, with only a few simple looking letters repeating themselves in various combinations. The writing actually resembled cuneiform, but didn’t exactly match any of the Sumerian alphabets with which she was familiar.

Finally she sighed and closed her eyes, reaching out carefully with her aura to get a sense of the room. She flinched, retracting it at first as she felt a sickening, twisted wrongness in the air. She had been expecting such, both from bodies at the crime scene and the feelings that she had experienced as she approached the ship, but standing where she was was like the difference in knowing an oven was warm, and climbing into one that had spent the day baking bread.

After adjusting as best she could Weiss slowly reached out again, trying to get a more detailed feeling about the magic that had been employed without endangering herself. Opening her eyes, she could see from the twisting, pooling black shadows that hung in her aura enhanced perception that the bodies had been a part of the magic, and the circle had gathered their dying energies and coalesced them in a strange swirling pattern at the center of the symbol.

She spent a long time watching the flows of energy and carefully getting a feel for the magic, before finally reaching some basic conclusions about what she was seeing. With a sigh Weiss released her aura, blinking her eyes to clear them. It was a relief to no longer be focused on the residue of dark magic, although after immersing herself in it she felt the need for a long, hot shower.
Weiss looked around, nearly jumping out of her skin when she saw that Ruby was standing next to her with a concerned look on her face. “What?”

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked. “You’re looking a little green.”

Weiss frowned. “I’m fine. There’s simply a lot of dark magic in the air. Even you can probably feel it.”

Ruby frowned and hugged herself, rubbing her hands up and down her arms vigorously to warm them. “Yeah, I guess I can. It all feels... wrong.”

Weiss nodded. “Dark magic always does.”

“Did you figure anything out about it?”

Weiss slowly nodded. “A little. It’s definitely a form of binding magic designed to create a connection to another plane of existence.”

“Huh?”

Weiss sighed. “There are a lot of planes... no. Do you know what a plane is?”

“Um, something you fly on?” Ruby hazarded.

Weiss covered her eyes with her hand. “Think of a plane as... no, simpler terms....”

“I’m not that stupid,” Ruby complained.

“Our universe is a plane,” Weiss finally said. “Everything everywhere is a single plane of existence. Does that make sense?”

“I guess,” Ruby said. “So other planes are like... other universes?”

“Exactly,” Weiss said. “Except they aren’t like ours. They have different laws of nature that govern them, and they behave very differently from this universe.”

“Okay, so... what does that mean?” Ruby asked.

Weiss frowned. “My family mines dust, but we can’t get it in this world. Instead we mine it on another plane called Faerie. The reason that we employ faunus labor is that Faerie is very dangerous for humans – only those with an active aura can visit it at all, and even we have to keep our visits short. But faunus can stay there as long as they like. It simply has to do with the way the natural laws of Faerie differ from our own plane.”

“Okay...” Ruby said. “So planes can be really different.”

“One of the more important differences is that on other planes the native beings aren’t human, but rather a variety of spiritual entities, some of great power. That’s why faunus can stay in faerie – they have ancestors that interbred with the native life of Faerie, and that’s the origin of their unique traits.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “So what does that all mean?”

“It means that the purpose of this circle was to interact with some other plane,” Weiss explained, returning finally to her original point. “It wasn’t a summoning circle, which is used to bring something from another plane. It didn’t fully open a portal, either, which would allow travel to a different plane. It just established a connection.”
“What does that do?” Ruby asked.

Weiss pursed her lips. “I’d like to do some research on the circle before I make any definitive statements – I don’t recognize the runic alphabet used, and the geometry employed in the circle design is unusual...”

“Do you have any theories?” Ruby interrupted.

Weiss glared slightly, before looking at the circle again with a sigh. “I want to examine the bodies to be sure, but... I suspect that the circle created a connection to some powerful entity on another plane, and then the people were sacrificed as an offering to it.”

“That sounds bad,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss simply nodded and carefully walked around the circle, moving to where the body parts were lying. Weiss felt her stomach churn, but was able to keep it from rebelling as she examined them. A crime scene investigator kneeling over them looked up at her approach.

“You from the spook squad?” he asked.

“Supernatural Affairs,” Weiss said, holding up her badge.

The man nodded. “Right. We’ll be able to tell you more once we get ‘em back to the morgue, but it looks like three bodies. Heads are missing, though, and all are dismembered and torn apart by something. Lot of claw marks and teeth marks, and whatever did this ate quite a bit of ‘em.”

“Any sign of tool use, or was it all done with claws?”

“There’s a few wounds that might’ve been a dull blade of some kind,” the man said. “Might’ve been an axe. Won’t know for sure ‘til the coroner does his job.”

“Right,” Weiss said, looking down at the bodies. She concentrated for a moment, pulling up her aura senses again, and after once more acclimating herself to the horrific sensations of the room she focused on the corpses. After studying the thick residue of death upon them she released her aura and faced Ruby, who was hovering beside her.

“Find anything?” Ruby asked.

“They were sacrificed,” Weiss confirmed.

Ruby nodded. “Can you do your, you know... talking to them thing?”

“No,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “The heads are required for them to speak.”

Ruby made a face. “Right. Um, crime scene guy? Are any of them faunus?”

“At least one is,” the man confirmed. “This body has the base of a fox tail. The others don’t show any obvious signs, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t – could just be on the missing parts.”

“Thanks,” Ruby said. “Do you want to check anything else?”

“I just need some good pictures of the circle for analysis,” Weiss said.

Ruby grinned. “Already got it. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Weiss nodded and followed her partner out of the cargo hold. She released a breath in relief when
she finally walked out of the stinking, dark magic infested room, and the more distance she put between it and herself the better she felt. She almost collapsed with the release in tension when she finally sat down in the passenger seat of their car.

“Where are we going?” Weiss asked a few seconds later as Ruby drove a different route than the one back to Beacon.

“The ship had five crew,” Ruby said. “Two are missing, three dead. I’ve got their addresses.”

Weiss nodded, looking out the window as they drove. The trip was short, and the neighborhood they stopped in was the worst that Weiss had ever seen. It was obvious with even a casual glance that the section of the city suffered from crippling poverty, and she clenched her teeth when she looked up at the large piece of graffiti on the wall calling for the destruction of the SDC.

“This is a faunus neighborhood,” she said accusingly.

“Yes,” Ruby agreed, eyeing her suspiciously. “One of the bodies had a fox tail, so I thought we’d start with him. If he was from the crew it was Nyan Blackthorn.”

“Right,” Weiss said, looking around carefully. A few people were out and about, including several faunus that appeared to be living on the streets. She carefully checked her sword and pistol, making sure that both were ready for use before opening her door and cautiously exiting the car.

Ruby led the way, and Weiss felt herself sweat slightly as her eyes darted everywhere as she followed. The street was full of graffiti, and the first tag wasn’t the only one calling for the destruction of her family business. She even saw several calling for the death of her family.

A tall faunus with dog ears lounged against the entrance to the apartment building they walked to, eyeing them both like meat as they walked past, although the openly carried sword and guns probably had something to do with him keeping silent as they passed. Weiss felt her skin crawl as his eyes followed them, as he no doubt knew exactly who she was – white hair was quite distinctive on a young person.

The inside of the building was even shabbier than the outside. It had obviously been built cheaply, and had been poorly maintained, with peeling paint and threadbare carpets that reeked of piss. There was no elevator, and Weiss silently followed Ruby up three flights of stairs and down a long hallway to a door that was missing one of the two numbers written on it.

Weiss stood back, looking around warily while Ruby knocked, and after a few moments the door cracked open, revealing little more than an eye past the chain keeping the door shut. “Yes?”

Ruby held up her badge. “Excuse me ma’am, we’re with the police. We’d like to speak with you for a moment.”

“What’s this about?” the woman asked suspiciously. “I haven’t done anything.”

“It’s about Nyan Blackthorn,” Ruby said. “Can we speak inside?”

“What did you arrest him for,” the woman demanded. “My husband doesn’t do anything you can arrest him for!”

“He hasn’t been arrested ma’am,” Ruby said. “Can we please speak with you inside?”

The woman eyed her carefully for a moment before closing the door and unchaining it. She then opened the door and stepped back, letting them into the apartment.
It was tiny and packed with possessions, but not filthy the way that Weiss half expected. Weiss took in the cramped furnishings and the children’s toys on the floor before turning her attention to their host.

The woman had fox ears on her head, revealing her faunus heritage. She was somewhere in her late thirties, with a tired expression on her wary face. She eyed Ruby with great suspicion, and tensed up when she took in Weiss’ features.

“What is a Schnee doing here,” she barked. “I haven’t done anything to your company, and neither has my husband! Get the hell out of my house!”

“Ma’am... please, Weiss is a detective as well,” Ruby said. “We’re not here for anything related to her family.”

Weiss swallowed the need to lash out verbally at the woman that was angry with her, her body tense as she took in everything the woman did. She couldn’t see any weapons hidden on her, but Weiss could feel her scar burn as memories of the first time she’d seen a faunus focus so much hate on her filled her head. It took some effort to keep her breathing even and not give away how frightened she was.

“What do you want?” the woman asked truculently.

“You mentioned your husband,” Ruby said delicately. “Do you mean Nyan Blackthorn?”

“Yes,” the woman said cautiously. “I’m his wife, Marian Blackthorn.”

Weiss felt her heart rate slow as she listened to her partner speak gently and soothingly to the woman. “I’m very sorry to have to tell you this, ma’am, but Nyan Blackthorn was murdered last night.”

“No... that’s impossible,” the woman said, shaking her head. “He was at work! He works on a fishing ship. He’s been gone for days, but he’ll be back soon. Whoever you found can’t be him.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Ruby said, reaching out a gentle hand and laying it on the woman’s shoulder. “We found three people dead on the fishing ship this morning, with the other two people missing and unaccounted for. Your husband was among the deceased.”

Marian’s lips had been quivering during the entire statement, and when Ruby touched her she broke down in tears. Weiss averted her eyes, unable to watch the raw grief in the woman’s face. Unfortunately what she saw when she looked away only made her throat close up more.

A small child, no older than two, sat on the ground, watching her mother cry with wide eyes. She had a bushy tail like her father, which hung limply behind her as she stared up at the strange scene. She was so young, and she had just lost a parent. Weiss had to look away, blinking back tears as her chest burned.

Eventually the woman calmed down, and Ruby began to ask her gentle questions. “Did you ever meet your husband’s coworkers?”

“Yes,” Marion said. “Lye Wenge lives alone just down the block. He’s a good friend of the family. Was he... was he among the deceased?”

“We’re still trying to identify two of the bodies,” Ruby said delicately. “Forensics is still going over the scene, and the coroner hadn’t arrived when we left to speak with you.”
“When can I... when can I get my husband’s body back,” Marion said, tears returning to her eyes.

“It will be a few days for the coroner’s office to process everything,” Ruby said gently. “You’ll be contacted by them soon. Can you tell me anything else about Lye Wenge?”

“Like I said, he lived alone,” Marion said. “He wasn’t involved with anyone lately, but he liked to come over and watch the game with my husband. Like I said, he was a good friend of our family.”

“What about the other three people?” Ruby asked. “Did you know any of them?”

“I’d met Rusty Cartwright a few times,” Marion said. “He was pretty young, just twenty. He still lives... lived with his parents. I never met the other two – Shane and Titus owned the ship. Lye, Rusty and Nyan just worked on it.”

“Did your husband say anything about his coworkers?” Ruby asked. “Any problems on the ship? Arguments, that sort of thing?”

“No,” Marion said, shaking her head. “They all got along pretty well. My husband was always happy to work for Titus and Shane; most humans discriminate against us faunus, makes it hard for us to get good jobs. They always treated him well, never said or did anything like that. He said they were quiet and kept to each other rather than mixing much with the rest of the crew, but he never had any complaints.”

“I see,” Ruby said. “Did your husband have any enemies? Or was he aware of anyone else onboard who did?”

“Besides bigots like your Schnee friend over there?” Marion asked with look of disgust at Weiss, who kept her expression carefully neutral. “We just tried to live our lives. We didn’t have any enemies.”

“Are you aware of any illegal activities, or any connections to organized crime that might have been related to the boat or anyone on board?”

“No,” Marion said, shaking her head. “My husband wasn’t like that, and he’d have told me if they were smuggling or anything.”

Ruby gave her a sad smile. “Thank you for your time, ma’am, and I’m very sorry for your loss. Here’s my phone number, and if you can think of anything else, please let me know.”

“Alright,” Marion said, taking the card that Ruby offered her.

Ruby gave her one last nod, and started for the door while Weiss hesitated for a second. She took another look at the lost looking toddler huddling in a doorway, before looking back at Marion. “My condolences for your loss, Ms. Blackthorn.”

“Get out, Schnee,” Marion spat. “We hear enough of your families empty lies on the news. Just get the hell out of here.”

Weiss nodded and left, moving ahead of Ruby, who gave her a concerned look but wisely didn’t say anything.
After visiting the first victim, they had checked out the other two crew members, as well as interviewed the neighbors and landlords of each of the victims. Weiss had stayed quiet through most of it, with her presence rarely helping the faunus they were interviewing speak up. Fortunately Ruby had years of experience dealing with people as a police officer, so they were able to make good progress.

“We didn’t learn much,” Ruby said, sounding a little down as she drove the unmarked police vehicle.

“No,” Weiss agreed. “There were no signs that any of the three were involved in planning what happened – I suspect that they were the source of all three dead bodies that were found.”

“It does seem likely,” Ruby agreed. “Hey, Weiss?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“I suppose,” Weiss said carefully.

“Do you hate faunus?”

Weiss was silent for a while. “I don’t hate the faunus, Ruby.”

“But... you called Blake a, um...” Ruby trailed off, biting her lip.

“I know,” Weiss interrupted before Ruby could find some delicate way of pointing out Weiss’ use of the slur ‘changeling’. “It was very rude of me to say what I did. I’m disappointed in myself for stooping to that level.”

Ruby looked over at her before focusing on the road again. “Why do all the faunus we meet not like you?”

“They hate my family,” Weiss said. “I mentioned that dust comes from Faerie, remember?”

“Yeah,” Ruby agreed.

“In the beginning my family acquired dust by summoning the denizens of Faerie and making deals with them,” Weiss lectured. “We discovered its many uses. Without dust we wouldn’t be able to create magic items, or work many of the greater forms of magic. Without those things we would be helpless against many of the evils of the world, like demons.

“Eventually we needed a greater supply of dust than we could get by making deals with the Courts of Faerie. My great grandfather hired faunus workers to search for where the dust came from, since they could spend more time in Faerie than he could. Eventually he acquired mining rights to several promising sources of dust, and to properly exploit them he founded the Schnee Dust Company.

“Unfortunately, mining is dangerous, labor intensive work, especially in a place like Faerie. Since the only workers he could use were Faunus, the SDC became, and still is today, the largest hirer of
faunus labor in all of Remnant.”

“But why do they hate you?” Ruby asked when Weiss didn’t continue.

Weiss sighed. “Mining is dangerous, so faunus die. It’s expensive to open portals to and from Faerie, so workers have to live in mining towns in Faerie, and usually only come home when their contracts terminate. Also, we offer similar pay to typical mining jobs, and no one has ever gotten rich from working in someone else’s mine.

“I’m not going to lie and say that the SDC labor practices are above reproach, but we follow all legal requirements. If the faunus truly wanted to improve their quality of life, they could band together with normal miners and push for legal reforms. Increased minimum wage, more requirements for safety standards, that sort of thing.

“Instead they attack us. Some simply protest, but too many have decided that violence against my family is the best way to improve their lives somehow. So for generations my family have been at war with them. War, as in actual bloodshed. Family members, board members, even innocent employees of the company have been murdered with regularity. Loads of dust, stolen.

“Do I hate the faunus?” Weiss finally snapped, pulling her hand away from the scar covering her eye that she had inadvertently covered while speaking. “No. I just don’t trust them. Far too many normal faunus have turned out to be assassins waiting for a chance to kill me, and the rest are all too gleeful at the possibility of my murder for me to ever be comfortable around them.”

“I’m sure they don’t all want you dead!” Ruby objected. “There are a lot of good faunus out there, Weiss.”

“Are you a complete dunce? I know, maybe there’s a friendly Grimm. How about we give them a chance, let them prove they have bad intentions before we act? I’m sure that will work out great!”

“Faunus aren’t monsters,” Ruby said. “They aren’t like the Creatures of Grimm.”

“You’re right,” Weiss hissed. “The Grimm have never hunted me in particular.”

Things were silent after that, and Weiss took advantage of it to try and calm down. She was absolutely furious over Ruby’s idiocy, but losing her temper wouldn’t help solve her current case. Eventually they arrived at Titus Drake’s home.

“This is it,” Ruby said awkwardly.

Weiss nodded. “Come on.”

The neighborhood they were in, Innsmouth Street, was along the waterfront. Unlike the nice boardwalk areas on the far side of the city, it was the home of people who had owned and worked ships for generations, as well as a few related industries, such as the large industrial fish cannery that Weiss could see at the end of the road near an old church.

Quite a few people were out and about, more than she would’ve expected on a Tuesday afternoon. Also, despite the warm early summer weather, most were wearing long clothing, most likely as a safety concern because of the dangerous ship work that they were almost all employed in.

Titus Drake was the owner of a small house on the city side of the street. It squatted between its two neighbors, the roof sagging slightly, giving it the appearance of something in a state of slow collapse. The paint had almost entirely peeled off of the outside, and thick curtains blocked the windows entirely.

“Do you have the warrant?”

“Of course,” Weiss said, holding up the paper version of their warrants to search the homes of the two owners of the ship. All of their employees families claimed that Titus and Shane lived alone, so they needed the judge approved documents to search the premises for clues.

Ruby knocked, and after a long moment looked over at Weiss and shrugged. “Guess no one’s home.”

“Can you get it open?”

“Of course!” Ruby said, pulling out a lock pick gun and sticking it in the lock. A moment later the door popped open and she grinned, gesturing like a magician as she put away the tool. “Ta da!”

Weiss rolled her eyes and stepped inside, wrinkling her nose at the filthy dwelling. It was obvious that the owner cleaned it very rarely, with personal possessions everywhere, all covered with a layer of dust or other grime. There was even mud worked into the carpets, showing how little concern he had for anything resembling cleanliness.

The search took quite a while, with Weiss delicately moving objects around while wearing plastic gloves over her normal pair, grimacing every time she found live insects or new kinds of filth. Unfortunately when it was finished she had nothing to show for her trouble.

“Find anything?” Ruby asked as they returned to the entrance room.

“No,” Weiss said.

Ruby shrugged. “I didn’t find much. The photos were kinda weird, though.”

“Photos?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, leading Weiss to the bedroom. “See, he’s got a bunch of photos, including some as a child with Shane. Do you see what’s missing?”

Weiss examined the pictures. They included Titus and Shane as small children, a prom picture of Titus with a particularly ugly date, a picture of all five crew members together, and what appeared to be the two of them at some church event. “No.”

“There aren’t any pictures of family,” Ruby said. “No mom, no dad, no anyone else. And they must’ve been there, since that prom picture is the sorta thing that family takes of you.”

“Maybe they’re dead,” Weiss suggested.

“Maybe,” Ruby said. “It just seems a little weird.”

“Come on,” Weiss said, heading towards the door. “We still need to search Shane’s home.”

It was almost nighttime by the time they finished searching Shane’s home, and it was much the same as Titus’ had been. They were both tired and hungry by the time they were finished, and once again they found nothing except for the strange lack of family in any of his photographs.

“What next?” Weiss asked.

“I’m hungry,” Ruby said. “How about we find something to eat, and ask the locals if they know
“Let’s ask a few people before we go anywhere,” Weiss said. “Excuse me, sir?”

“What do you want?” a man asked with a voice like he gargled gravel.

“Um, do you live near here?” Ruby asked.

“Yeah, right there,” he said, gesturing at a house two down from Shane’s.

“Do you know Shane Fulvous?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah, he leaves nearby,” the man said. “Why do you ask?”

Ruby pulled out her badge. “We’d just like to ask you a few questions about him.”

“Well, I’ve got a minute, but no more than that.”

“Do you know where he is?” Weiss asked.

“He should be on his ship about now,” the man said. “He and that Titus kid were off fishing last I heard.”

“What can you tell us about Shane and Titus?” Weiss asked.

“They’re good kids, hard working, always loved the sea,” he said. “They knew since they were children that they wanted to fish.”

“What about their families?” Ruby asked.

“No siblings,” the man said.

“And their parents?” Ruby asked.

“Don’t rightly know,” he said with a shrug. “Haven’t seen ‘em in a bit.”

“Right,” Weiss said. “So they aren’t dead?”

“I don’t think so,” the man said. “Now, if there’s nothin’ else? I need to be gettin’ on with my business.”

“Thank you for your time, sir,” Ruby said pleasantly. Once he was gone she turned to Weiss. “Was it just me, or was he kinda strange?”

“Definitely,” Weiss agreed.

The first man turned out to be indicative of the kind of people that were common in the neighborhood. Most didn’t want to talk to them at all, and those that did shared little of interest. The main things that they picked up from those that knew the two were that they always loved the sea, and that they were involved in the local church, which was near the large cannery.

The building was impressively old. It was made from large discolored bricks, with a steeple that leaned slightly to one side, and heavy wooden doors held in place with weathered green hinges. Despite looking like they would collapse, the doors opened readily to the touch, and the inside was lit by electric lights that had long ago replaced gas lamps on the walls.
“Can I help you two ladies with something?”

Weiss and Ruby turned to face the speaker, who was a very old man who had long ago gone bald. His skin was discolored with many liver spots, and his jaundiced eyes pointed in different directions behind his thick spectacles. He was dressed in somewhat faded and threadbare priestly attire, which looked ill fitting with his stooped posture.

“Is this your church Father...” Ruby asked.

“I am Thomas Avery,” he said. “I am indeed the priest of this church.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Father Avery,” Weiss said, pulling out her badge. “We had a few questions for you, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, child,” he said. “I always have time for questions, even without the badge.”

“Two of your congregation, Shane Fulvous and Titus Drake, are missing,” Weiss said.

“I see,” the priest said. “They should be fishing at the moment. They have a fishing trawler that they own together.”

Ruby shook her head. “I’m sorry to have to tell you of this, but the ship was found... they weren’t.”

The priest sighed. “Then I wish you luck with your investigation, detective.”

“Thank you,” Ruby said. “Do you have any idea where they might’ve gone?”

“They visited church regularly, and spent most of their time otherwise at sea,” the priest said. “They loved the ocean.”

“Did they have any enemies?” Ruby asked.

“No, no enemies,” he said. “We might be part of the big city, but this neighborhood is a nice, quiet community. We don’t have problems like organized crime and such here.”

“I noticed that this area is rather different from the rest of the city,” Weiss observed.

“Yes,” the priest agreed with a nod. “We were once an independent village, you know. A small fishing community that stood on its own, until we were absorbed into the larger city when its borders grew big enough to encompass us. Sometimes people move here from elsewhere, but for the most part the families that live here today can trace their roots back to the days before Vale stretched so far.”

“Can you think of anything that can help us locate them, or whoever may have, uh, hurt them?” Ruby asked.

“No, I’m afraid I cannot,” he said. “If you have any further questions, please do no hesitate to ask me, however.”

“Thanks!” Ruby said, leading the way out of the church. “Well, this has been a whole lotta nothin’.”

“We needed to do our due diligence,” Weiss said. “We may not have found much, but we have a better idea of how Titus Drake and Shane Fulvous fit into the local community.”

“I guess,” Ruby complained, before turning bright red as her stomach loudly growled at her. “I’m sooooo hungry, Weiss. I can’t take any more questions.”
“Fine,” Weiss said, rolling her eyes. “I suppose we aren’t going to find much more here tonight, anyway. Let’s find a nice restaurant and-”

“Ooh ooh – let’s eat there!” Ruby said, hopping in place and pointing at a small outdoor stall labeled ‘Fishballs’.

Weiss made a face. “Fishballs? Not only am I unsure exactly what that involves, but look at the place.”

“What about it?” Ruby asked.

“Not only is it a street food stall, but it looks as though it’s been there longer than we’ve been alive... combined.”

“Exactly!” Ruby cheered. “Street food is delicious! And they wouldn’t still be open after so long if they weren’t good at what they do!”

“It looks unsanitary,” Weiss complained. She made the mistake of glaring at her companion, who was looking up at her with huge, shining silver eyes. For some reason Weiss felt her resolve crumbling, until finally she sighed in defeat. “Fine, but if I get food poisoning from this...”

“Alright!” Ruby cheered. “I wonder what a fishball is, anyway.”

The stand was a simple wooden structure with a waist high wooden bar at its front with several ancient looking wooden stools sitting in front of it. Behind the counter were several antique fryers, which were used to cook the prepared fishballs right in front of customers.

Manning the stall was an older woman with one eye that squinted and the other bulged, with a scowl on her ugly face. Her posture was hunched, and her white clothing was covered in greasy stains. Weiss made a disgusted expression and sent Ruby a look, who ignored it and simply smiled at the woman.

“Hello, what do you have?” she asked cheerfully.

“Fishballs,” the woman said.

“O-oh,” Ruby said. “Um... I guess we’ll have fishballs then?”

Ruby and Weiss handed over their money, and the woman pulled out preformed globs of white dough, dropping them into the large, open fryer, causing them to sizzle. The woman stood, staring blankly down at them while Ruby fidgeted nervously. “Um, so what are fishballs?” she asked.

“Balls of dough and fish,” the woman said.

“Oh, that doesn’t sound too bad,” Ruby said. “What kind of fish?”

“Various fish,” she said.

“So, like, catch of the day or something?”

“No,” she answered. “The cannery fillets fish, and then takes the leftover scraps from the bones and makes a slurry. They sell it to me by the barrel.”

“So it’s made from barrels of fish slurry,” Ruby asked, looking slightly green.

“And flour,” the woman said. “A few secret ingredients, too. The slurry is thickened into a dough,
which is fried. Fishballs.”

“Glad you won now?” Weiss drawled sarcastically, to which Ruby simply whimpered.

A few moments later the woman used a metal spider to remove the golden brown fishballs from the hot oil, putting a pile into each of two separate paper bowls and handing them over. Ruby stared down at the food like it was a death sentence, while Weiss simply smirked.

Weiss was hungry herself, and with a shrug she grabbed a toothpick from a small container on the counter and speared the first fishball. Lifting it up, she studied it for a few moments before carefully placing it in her mouth. It was still very hot from the oil, but the flavor that burst across her tongue was surprisingly pleasant.

“How... how is it?” Ruby asked.

Weiss chewed cautiously, carefully considering the answer the same way she would’ve if she were taste testing a new dish at a five star restaurant. Eventually she swallowed and looked over at her nervous partner. “It’s actually quite good. The texture is more rubbery than I would have expected given its components, and I can taste a wide variety of fish, along with other flavors I can’t place. Not bad, although I wish we were eating something that wasn’t deep fried and entirely lacking in healthy vegetables.”

Ruby bit her lip for a moment before picking up a fishball with her fingers and carefully putting it in her mouth. Her eyes lit up while she chewed, and she grinned. “Iss goob.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Weiss chided.

Ruby finished chewing and swallowed. “It’s good! See, I knew coming here was a good idea!”

Weiss rolled her eyes as she speared another fishball with her toothpick. “Don’t let it go to your head, dolt.”

Ruby just grinned back, happy as could be as she grabbed another fishball.

Weiss was surprised at how happy she felt herself. Her partner was still a compete dunce, and she’d spent a long day trying to solve a difficult murder case with her. Despite that, she was happier than she could ever remember being while sitting next to her eating street food from a dirty stall.

Chapter End Notes

The name of the street is a pretty obvious H.P. Lovecraft reference. I would also like to point out that Weiss’ description of the situation with the faunus is quite biased. She’s not exactly lying, but things aren’t nearly so black and white as she’s describing, and she isn’t as fully informed as she thinks she is, either.
“Ugh, why did we have to come here?” Ruby grumbled, glaring truculently around the library.

Weiss pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to keep a hold on her temper so as not to be thrown out of Beacon’s library the first time she’d actually needed to use it. “We need to do some research.”

“Why?”

Weiss sighed. “Do you know exactly what that mystic circle did?”

“Um... something about contacting something in another universe?” Ruby hazarded.

“On another plane, yes,” Weiss agreed. Ruby grinned triumphantly until Weiss continued. “But I said ‘exactly’. I’m not sure all of the details of the sigil, and those details could be very relevant to the case. Hence, research.”

“Fine, but why do I have to be here?” Ruby complained. “I wouldn’t know a magic circle from a squared circle.”

“First, you need to do some research in records about our missing ship owners,” Weiss said. “The coroner confirmed the three partial bodies were the workers, which means that the owners are still missing.”

“Fine,” Ruby sighed.

Weiss glared at her. “This is a big part of being a detective, Ruby. I shudder to think how you would deal with a white collar crime – pouring through thousands of emails and dozens of ledgers looking for tiny inconsistencies that could lead to a money trail to follow.”

“B-but we’re in Supernatural Affairs! We don’t deal with embezzling.”

“And if a cabal of dark mages were operating in the city using some legal organization as a front for their murderous endeavors?”

“Um... ask you to find them?”

Weiss glared. “Go find their records, dolt.”

Weiss shook her head, despairing for her partner, before finally taking the time to examine Beacon’s library. In addition to a general collection, it had an immense law library, as well as a vast trove of books on various arcane subjects. It was smaller than the Schnee library, but she didn’t want to go to her family home if she didn’t have to.

Weiss grabbed several old and rare references, before finding an open table and laying the heavy tomes down on it. Time passed quickly, and she nearly jumped out of her skin when someone cleared their throat beside her. “What?”

Ruby yelped, jumping slightly, only to hiss as she burned herself with the coffee she was holding. “Ow... um, coffee?”
Weiss sighed, before giving her partner a slight smile, which made the other woman grin like an idiot. “Thank you.”

“So, did you find anything?” Ruby asked, sitting beside her and staring at the pile of books sitting menacingly on the table.

“Not yet,” Weiss said. “I’m still trying to narrow down the runic language used. Did you find anything? You did look, right?”

“Of course!” Ruby said, taking a sip from her own coffee. “I pulled their records, and their family records. I just thought we should get some coffee before we worked.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said, giving her a nod. “Now get researching.”

Weiss found herself lost in her work again. She’d never had friends growing up, and much of her life had been consumed by study, either imposed by various private tutors or to satisfy her own curiosity. She enjoyed the work, and she only stopped working when she finally found what she was looking for, only to look up and see a ridiculous sight.

Weiss pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache coming on. “Ruby... why are you balancing your coffee cup on your nose?”

Ruby jerked, dropping the cup, although she managed to catch it before it hit the ground. Fortunately it was empty or she would’ve spilled coffee everywhere. “Sorry, Weiss. I finished going over the records and, um, I guess I got a little bored?”


“Oh, um... well, not a whole lot,” Ruby said. “It seems like they don’t keep the best of records in that neighborhood – the two of them had birth certificates... um, they’re actually second cousins! Anyway, I couldn’t find much else. They graduated high school, haven’t been arrested, own a boat and their homes, pay taxes, you know, normal stuff. Their family is a little weird though.”

“How so?”

“Well... they have birth certificates, and um, marriage certificates, but otherwise their parents are even more ghosts than Titus and Shane are,” Ruby said. “Not many records at all. They retired years ago, and they don’t own any property, or pay any taxes... they don’t even collect Social Security anymore. But there aren’t any death certificates for them. They just... disappeared from records.”

“Coincidence, maybe?” Weiss offered. “Records aren’t always complete.”

“Maybe... but... all four of them?”

“Hmm... something to consider, although I’m not sure what it could mean,” Weiss said.

“Did you find anything?” Ruby asked.

“A start,” Weiss said. “I’ve narrowed down the language of the runes, and that tells me the region and era they were created in. Now I just need to do some historical research and I should be able to figure out the rest.”

“Oh... um, what should I do?” Ruby asked.

Weiss pointed a gloved hand at her partner melodramatically. “You... can help me research.”
Ruby made a face. “I don’t know anything about magic, though...”

“You need to learn,” Weiss said, carrying her books back to the shelves to put away.

“I guess,” Ruby said, trailing after her. “I am a detective now... and Supernatural Affairs does include, you know, magic junk.”

Weiss snorted. “Supernatural Affairs is almost entirely, as you put it, ‘magic junk’. That wasn’t what I meant, though.”

“Huh?”

“I meant that you have a strong aura, Ruby, and you are obviously magically gifted,” Weiss said matter of factly. “You need to learn about and nurture your gifts.”

“What?” Ruby asked, flabbergasted. “I’m not magical. I’m just a normal girl, with normal knees.”

Weiss shook her head. “How many ‘normal girls’ can make a giant red scythe appear out of thin air when they need one? A scythe that then falls apart in a cloud of red petals when it’s no longer required?”

“Um... some?” Ruby hazarded. “Maybe?”

“No, Ruby,” Weiss said. “I’ve never seen anyone capable of doing such a thing. I did some research after the incident, and I couldn’t find any records of such a gift. It’s very rare, possibly even unique.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “Um, if no one else has it, I guess I can’t really learn to do anything with it, so why worry about it?”

“Dunce,” Weiss said, rolling her eyes. “It’s a magical ability. You can be trained to control your natural gifts, and perhaps even learn about more. It’s not uncommon for those with one strange power to actually have access to more when they begin to learn how to use it.”

“But what if... what if I mess it up,” Ruby mumbled. “Isn’t magic dangerous?”

“Yes, Ruby, magic is,” Weiss said. “But ignoring it won’t make your ability go away. Once you first use your power you’ve awakened it, and ignoring it endangers not only yourself, but those around you.”

“Endangers?” Ruby asked.

“Yes. You have a strong aura, and if you don’t train it it can act in ways that you don’t expect, performing accidental magics that can be very harmful. You need training.”


“True, but then, you have a fully trained mage as a partner,” Weiss said with a superior sniff. “I can teach you.”

“Really?” Ruby asked. “You’d do that... for me?”

Weiss looked away uncomfortably, feeling her face heat up. She had never seen someone so truly appreciative of her or anything that she offered to do before. It was off putting, yet strangely it made her happy as well. “Of- of course, you dunce. I’m your partner, aren’t I?”

“First, you’re going to help me research,” Weiss said pulling several huge books from the shelf. “When you go home tonight practice meditating. I’ll start teaching you when you’re able to do that.”

“Ugh, fine,” Ruby whined. “But I don’t know what I’m looking for.”

“Because I haven’t told you yet, dolt! I’ll show you what to look for.”

When they returned to the table Weiss pulled up the pictures of the crime scene, as well as her notes, and explained exactly what to look for to Ruby. The other detective looked overwhelmed, but with obvious trepidation she cracked open the first leather bound tome and began flipping through it, looking for anything about the magic circle.

Hours passed, and Weiss was starting to get hungry enough to consider taking a break when she finally found what she was looking for. After reading through it she gave a triumphant smirk before clearing her expression. “I found what we were looking for... Ruby?”

Weiss looked over and sighed. At some point Ruby had fallen asleep, her face laying on the ancient tome, drool running from the corner of her mouth. She made tiny little wispy snores, like a small but cute animal. Shaking her head at the irrelevant thoughts Weiss reached over and poked her in the side with the eraser end of her pencil.

“Wha- huh- who... Weiss!” Ruby muttered as she sat up, looking around in frenzied confusion. “I was just reading about... about... um...”

“Unless you speak ancient greek you should probably give up on figuring out what the book is about,” Weiss drawled.

“Oh... right,” Ruby said, rubbing the back of her head with one hand while chuckling nervously. “Sorry... guess I fell asleep.”

“You did,” Weiss agreed. “Honestly, I don’t know why I thought you’d be helpful.”

“I’m sorry, Weiss,” Ruby said, looking upset at her partner’s statement. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep. Really. I’ll do better.

“Don’t worry about it,” Weiss said, unable to keep looking at Ruby when she had such a pathetic expression on her face. “It must be difficult looking for information on a subject you know so little about.”

“Yeah,” Ruby agreed. “But that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t try. I know I’m not what you wanted in a partner, but I think we can be a good team. I’ll try harder, and-”

“You’re fine,” Weiss interrupted.

“Huh?” Ruby asked.

“I said you’re fine,” Weiss repeated. “Look, I know I can be... difficult. I’ll try my best do be a little... nicer... if you work hard to do the job right.”

“I will,” Ruby agreed. “And you know, you’re not that bad, partner. I’m starting to tell the difference between actually mean Weiss and just kinda grumpy Weiss. Kinda grumpy Weiss isn’t too bad.”

Weiss glared at Ruby, who only gave her a cheeky grin in response. Eventually Weiss huffed and
looked back at the books. “I found what I was looking for.”

“Really?” Ruby asked.

“The magic circle was designed to contact an ancient Mesopotamian god named Dagon.”

“A god?” Ruby asked.

“Yes... quite a few powerful extra-planar entities have referred to themselves as gods throughout history. In actuality Dagon is a demon lord of modest power, well, for a demon lord.”

“So what does that mean?”

Weiss pursed her lips together thoughtfully. “Dagon demands human sacrifice, and the circle can be used to channel the energies released when a person is killed directly to it.”

“Wait, so... someone sacrificed people to Dagon, what, as a cult religious thing?”

“So it would appear,” Weiss agreed. “According to the records that I found, Dagon has been worshipped by small fishing communities since before recorded history. The religion is now proscribed for obvious reasons, but cults have popped up now and then to this day.”

“So that means... they were killed by cultists?” Ruby asked.

“It certainly looks that way,” Weiss said. “The magic used is obscure enough that I doubt anyone not involved with Dagon would’ve heard of it, so most likely a cultist. Which means most likely an entire cult is involved, yes.”

“Well, the priest said that street used to be a small fishing village before the city surrounded it,” Ruby pointed out. “Maybe there’s been a secret cult there for a long time!”

“My thoughts exactly,” Weiss agreed, picking up the books to put away.

“Just one thing to do then... get lunch!”

Weiss nearly tripped over her own feet in surprise. “Wha- what?”

“We need to eat, Weiss,” Ruby said. “I just woke up, and I’m hungry.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “You dunce.”

After putting the books away Weiss didn’t object any further as they dropped by the small diner that they had eaten at for their first dinner together as partners. They had eaten there off and on over the weeks that they had been working together, and despite putting up pro forma complaints, Weiss always enjoyed the food she was served.

Eventually Ruby stopped eating her pulled pork sandwich and looked up at Weiss with a face covered with barbecue sauce. “Hey Weiss...”

Weiss rolled her eyes, refusing to find the childishness endearing. “Clean your face.”

Ruby smiled sheepishly and did so. “I was wondering... were you serious about teaching me magic... stuff.”

“Of course,” Weiss said with a superior sniff. “A Schnee never promises what they do not intend to deliver.”
“And you really aren’t gonna teach me anything until I can meditate?” Ruby asked.

“Nothing practical,” Weiss said. “Using magic requires certain mindsets, and to enter those in a consistent fashion requires the discipline provided by meditation.”

“Huh?”

“Do you know how magic works? What it is?”

“Um... not really. Just that it can do cool stuff by saying words and waving your hands and stuff.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “That’s all theatrics. Things people do to put themselves in the correct mindset to perform magic. Fancy magic words and gestures are either showmanship or a crutch, depending on the level of incompetence of the magic user.”

Seeing the confusion in Ruby’s eyes Weiss placed her fork down, sitting up even straighter as she considered simpler explanations. “I’m not very good at spell based magic, but I’ve taught myself a few simple cantrips. For example... Ignium.”

With that word she snapped her fingers, and from her thumb a tiny tongue of flame appeared, making her thumb burn like a candle. Ruby looked suitably impressed, oohing and ahhing over the simple cantrip.

“Sitim,” Weiss said after a long moment, and the flame vanished, leaving no signs that it had ever existed in the first place.

“That’s so cool!” Ruby gushed. “Can you really teach me to do stuff like that?”

“If you have the discipline,” Weiss said. “Keep in mind, I’m not really a spellcaster – I know a few spells, but if you want to learn about that kind of magic you’ll need to speak with someone like Captain Goodwitch. It’s not my area of expertise.”

“What is your area of expertise? Isn’t it necromancy like what you did before? I guess you never really said anything when you did stuff like that though...”

“I was just trying to explain how words aren’t actually relevant before you got us off track,” Weiss said. “Observe...”

Weiss furrowed her brow, focusing her mind on the spell that she wished to cast. A real spellcaster would have had no trouble with the simple demonstration, but she wasn’t lying about it not being her area of expertise. Finally, after a long tense moment flame erupted from her thumb, exactly as it had before.

“See?” she said. “No words, no gestures, no snap of my fingers... none of that is necessary to perform spell magic.”

“You took a lot longer to do it though,” Ruby said.

“Of course,” Weiss agreed. “I’m not much of a spellcaster, and even experts use those things to make performing magic easier. They’re a tool to help, but ultimately unnecessary.”

“What is needed?”

“Magic is power,” Weiss said slowly, gazing at her burning thumb. “All around us, mana flows. It’s part of all life, and is part of every universe. It’s present in the ground, and the air, and everything
else you can imagine.

“The greatest source of mana in our world is the human soul.”

“The soul?” Ruby asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said, concentrating for a moment to cancel the flame cantrip from her thumb so that she could safely focus on her partner, who was staring at her with rapt attention. “The soul is what makes us uniquely the people we each are. It gives us life, gives us thought, and gives us magic.

“All living things have an aura. It’s a field of mana around the body, and it is a projection of the soul, made by it and reflective of it. Magic is ultimately the art of manipulating our aura to cause changes in the world around us.”

“So you made your aura turn into fire?” Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded. “Very good. Yes, auras are made of mana, and that spell allowed me to transform a small fraction of that mana into pure flame. Spellcasting is the art of transforming your aura to perform desired magical effects.”

“So I have to learn to control my aura to do magic?” Ruby asked.

“Precisely,” Weiss agreed. “Which is why you need to learn mediation. You need to have absolute mastery of your mind to perform powerful magics, although you’ll find it’s not very difficult to use your gift. Still, if you want to do something, you should do it right.”

“My gift?”

Weiss frowned. “Sometimes people have certain natural abilities that they can call up without needing to learn them. Your ability to conjure a scythe from nothing is a magical talent that could no doubt be replicated by an expert spellcaster given enough time and effort, but for you it’s something that you’ll be able to do with ease.”

Ruby was quiet for a long moment, and Weiss took advantage of that to finish her meal. “You said you aren’t a spellcaster. So... what do you do?”

“There are three kinds of magic,” Weiss explained. “Transforming your aura to cause an effect is spellcasting. It’s the quickest and flashiest form of magic, and while I know a few simple spells, it’s the kind of magic that I’m least proficient with.”

“The next kind of magic is binding magic,” Weiss said, grabbing a napkin and pulling out a pen. She quickly sketched a complex glyph on the paper. Once she was finished she touched it and pushed her aura into the symbol to activate it, causing a tiny tongue of flame to burn at its center.

“Binding magic uses mystical symbols to channel and control the mana in the world itself,” Weiss lectured. “Instead of transforming the mana in my aura into flame, I transformed mana from the world itself into flame.”

“Huh,” Ruby said, staring enthralled at the fire. “So what’s the advantage of binding magic? Why do it if you have to take the time drawing stuff instead of just thinking?”

Weiss nodded in acknowledgment of the good question. “Binding magic has several advantages. First, while my aura was used to trigger the reaction, it doesn’t actually use much of it up. Performing many spells in a row burns out your aura, requiring you to rest before you can do magic again. Binding magic doesn’t have that limitation – a magical glyph like this, or the circle the cultists drew,
will function as long as there is enough ambient mana in the environment to support it.”

“So mana can run out? Like, from a place?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “It’s quite rare, though. There’s a lot of magic in the world, and binders usually perform powerful workings at places where mana flows in greater quantity than other places, called ley lines. Beacon is built on top of a confluence of ley lines, for example.”

“So what’s the third type of magic?” Ruby asked.

“Invocation,” Weiss said. “Invokers channel magic from extra-dimensional sources. It’s by far the rarest kind of magic, since it requires a connection between yourself and another plane. Most invokers carefully maintain a magical circle or enchanted object that is bound to another plane to serve as a conduit for their magic.”

“Do you have something like that?” Ruby asked.

Weiss hummed thoughtfully. “I suppose so, actually. The Schnee's have an enormous collection of magical artifacts, which includes a variety of conduits. Binding magic is the source of magic items, after all, so it shouldn’t be a surprise that my family has made a great many of them over the years. I don’t actually need one, though.”

“Why not?” Ruby asked.

“I’m a necromancer,” Weiss explained. “Necromancy is invocation magic based upon channeling forces from the afterlife into the world of the living. I have a... connection that allows me to serve as my own conduit."


A dark look passed over Weiss face. “Right. Anyway, we’ve spoken long enough – we could spend all year discussing magical theory without ever getting anything else done, and we have a case to solve.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter turned into a bit of a data dump, but I wanted to start laying the groundwork for how my magic system works before we see it used much more. More information will come in the future (like why dust is used), but this covers the basics.
Second Case: By Sea

“Alright, that’s it,” Weiss snapped, glaring down the street with disgust. “I’m done.”

Ruby sighed, slumping slightly where she stood. “Yeah, I think I was done about an hour ago.”

It had been a long, pointless afternoon of searching, with the only highlight being a break to grab some more fishballs. Everyone they asked had acted shocked at the slightest implication of something unusual about the community or its citizens, with anger being the most common response to Weiss’ more blunt questions about a possible illegal cult in the area.

To make matters worse, they had had the feeling of being watched the entire time, and had even caught the occasional glimpse of someone, but even Ruby, who turned out to be a spectacular sprinter, had never been able to catch them. It had made them both irritable, and combined with the complete lack of progress had complete frayed their nerves.

“Come on, let’s just go home before it gets dark,” Ruby said. “I think we’re both done.”

“I concur,” Weiss said with a stiff nod.

When they reached the spot they had parked they found a man slouched near the car. He was short and round, with a long tan trench coat that wasn’t at all appropriate for the hot early summer day. When they came close enough to see his face Weiss wrinkled her nose involuntarily at his extensive and untreated dry skin as he stared at them with eyes that bulged unpleasantly.

“Detectives,” he rasped, revealing yellow teeth.

“Can we help you, sir?” Ruby asked.

“Not really,” he said. “I might be able to help you, though.”

“How?” Weiss asked, crossing her arms warily.

“I’m a fisherman myself, and that boat that had its crew gone isn’t the first disappearances there’s been out in that bay,” he said.

Weiss frowned, wanting to kick herself as she realized that she’d neglected to research other incidents. While other cases involving strange magic circles may have been pointed out, she doubted that they would’ve told them about disappearances of ships or just sailors.

“I glanced at records, but I didn’t see anything like that,” Ruby said.

Weiss looked at her partner in impressed surprise, not having expected her to have done any research. Ruby saw the look and blushed slightly before focusing on the man again.

He chuckled slightly. “It’s not too surprising. We don’t always report too much, and if we don’t find a body there ain’t much proof anything really happened. Quite a few people have gone missing off our boats this year, though.”

“And you’ve got a theory?” Weiss asked, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“Yup, I do indeed,” he said. “You see those rocks out there?”

Weiss squinted into the distance at the bay, or more particularly the collection of rocks and reefs...
which poked out of the water here and there. “Yes.”

“Some of ‘em have little sea caves, and somethin’ lives in one of those caves,” he said. “Late at night, if you’re out on the water you can see lights comin’ from a cave, and somethin’ there takes people.”

“Something takes people?” Weiss repeated skeptically. “If that’s the case, why haven’t you reported the situation before now?”

“We like to keep our business to ourselves. With you pokin’ your nose in it, I guess it’s time to help you so you can solve our trouble and be on your way.”

“Thank you for the help, mister...” Ruby started, trailing off expectantly.

He stared at her for a long awkward moment. “Sage Winnow.”

“Thank you Mr. Winnow,” Ruby said. The man nodded and walked away, and when he was out of earshot she faced Weiss. “What do you think that was?”

“Most likely someone trying to get us away from our current investigative tack,” Weiss said.

“Maybe,” Ruby said. “We’re kinda at a dead end here, though. Wanna check it out?”

Weiss frowned. “I suppose we could get out there a little before sunset and perform a stakeout.”

“Awesome!” Ruby grinned. “This is gonna be great! Come on, I’ll drive.”

Before Weiss could say anything in reply her partner had already climbed into the driver’s seat of the unmarked car, starting the engine and looking up at her expectantly. Weiss rolled her eyes and sat in the passenger seat, buckling before she spoke. “Where exactly are you going?”

“Um... oh,” Ruby said. “Uh, uh... somewhere we can get a police boat? Do they have those?”

“Just take us to the marina,” Weiss said.

The trip was fast, as the traffic had already cleared up and they only had to follow the small seaside streets around the busy harbor to reach the small marina on the opposite side of the bay. The area was the complete opposite of Innsmouth Street, with everything new and well cared for, from the smallest two person boat to the largest yacht.

Ruby parked, and Weiss led the way, stopping briefly inside of a service building before walking to the farthest pier. When they reached it Ruby took a moment to admire the amazing yachts all around them, which varied in size, but were all the best of the best. “Whoa,” she said. “These ships are amazing – is that a satellite dish? On a little fishing boat?”

Weiss glanced at it disinterestedly. “Yes. Some people think that they should go boating, but have little to no interest in the actual activities involved.”

“So what are we doing here?” Ruby asked, looking around. “I don’t see anyone to rent a boat from, and even if we could these things look expensive. I don't think Goodwitch would pay for us to use something cool like these.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Weiss said, stopping in front of a tiny yacht. Despite the small size it was gorgeous, the pure white vessel was obviously cared for well beyond all reasonable standards to hold ships to. “This one will do, I think.”
“Wait, you can’t just... get on a ship,” Ruby objected. “Don’t we have to rent it from someone, and, and get a crew or something?”

Weiss looked at her from the side of her eyes and smirked. “I’ve never heard of renting your own property before.”

“Wait, this is your ship,” Ruby yelped.

“This pier is my family’s,” Weiss said, gesturing to the large collection of extremely pricey looking yachts and fishing boats. “All of these ships are our’s.”

“Whoa,” Ruby said. “You’re really rich aren’t you.”


“Whoa, I’ve never been out on a boat before!” Ruby cheered, running onto the yacht and all but blurring as she ran from place to place, taking the entire thing in. “This is awesome!”

“Would you like a tour?” Weiss asked.

“Oh, yes, please, please, please,” Ruby chanted, vibrating in place.

Weiss smiled slightly. “Fine. You know, if this impresses you so much, I can’t imagine how you’d react to taking one of the larger luxury yachts.”

“Can we?” Ruby asked.

Weiss rolled her eyes and started the tour. It didn’t take very long, as Weiss had selected a very small yacht. Ruby was starry eyed as she looked at all of the fancy, computer assisted controls, the powerful engine, and the immaculate cabin complete with a large, soft bed and a surprising amount of luxurious comforts.

After showing everything Weiss went back to the controls, and Ruby followed behind, watching in awe as her partner brought the ship to life and slowly pulled away from the pier.

“Where’d you learn to drive a boat?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged. “My father loves going out to sea when he has to take a vacation. I was never fond of fishing or sunbathing, so I spent a lot of time watching how the ship works. Father wasn’t fond of teaching me, but when we took the larger yachts he rarely piloted, and the crew never minded indulging my curiosity.”

Once they were away from the docks Weiss pushed the throttle, and they began moving at an impressive clip. Ruby stepped back outside, and Weiss kept half an eye on her as she stood at the railing, watching the water go flying by. She rolled her eyes as Ruby walked to the front of the ship and leaned over the bow, shouting a ridiculous movie phrase that fortunately Weiss could barely make out.

It didn’t take long for Ruby to make her way back to Weiss. She was grinning like a loon, but Weiss didn’t do anything more than roll her eyes and contemplate whether or not she’d gone soft.

“This is awesome!” Ruby cheered. “I can’t believe we’ve never done anything like this before!”

“Why would we?” Weiss asked as she navigated them towards one of the far reezy obstructions. From what she remembered of the wrecked ship it was one of the closest to the trajectory that the
fishing trawler had been on when it became a ghost ship.

“Because this. Is. Awesome.”

Weiss rolled her eyes again. “However enjoyable going out on a ship is, that still doesn’t mean we would’ve had cause to do this previously. This is our first case involving the ocean.”

“Right, but friends do fun things together, right?” Ruby asked. “And you enjoy this, so...”

“Friends?” Weiss asked aloud.

“Well, yeah,” Ruby said frowning. “We are friends, right?”

“I...” Weiss trailed off, focusing intently on her instruments as an excuse to not look at Ruby. “Is that what we are? I’ve never... had a friend before.”

Ruby was silent for a long, long time, but when Weiss finally looked away from the instruments to see what was wrong she found her partner hovering right next to her, a compassionate look on her face. Weiss looked away again, not wanted to look into her eyes long enough to find any pity there.

“Weiss... I know things were a bit... rough, in the beginning,” Ruby said. “The whole me bumping into you thing, and the yelling, and the arguments, and, well, you know. All that stuff. But we’ve been getting along lately, haven’t we? Doesn’t that make us friends?”

“You’re a dolt,” Weiss grumbled, feeling herself blush. The entire conversation was incredibly embarrassing. If they weren’t alone she would’ve strangled Ruby for starting it.

“Aww, don’t worry partner,” Ruby said. “Before you know it you’re going to be saying, ‘wow, that Ruby is so cool, and I’m glad she’s my friend.’”

“I will never ever say that sentence,” Weiss said flatly.

“You know you love me,” Ruby taunted.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Weiss said.

“How about friends. Would you go with friends?”

“Fine!” Weiss shouted. “We’re friends! Happy?!”

“Yup,” Ruby grinned. “This is the part where I’d hug you, but as your friend I know you don’t want me to, but just so you know, offers always open, okay?”

“Not on your life,” Weiss grumbled, finally slowing the ship down. She felt entirely too hot, although as much as she was complaining she was barely able to keep a smile off of her face. “We’re here.”

Ruby walked out to the rail, and looked at the cluster of rocky islands in front of them. “This is it? Doesn’t look like much.”

Weiss brought the yacht to a stop and dropped its anchor before joining Ruby at the railing. “Maybe. The currents are pretty well mapped in the bay, and the fishing trawler was left adrift at the speed mentioned it could’ve passed by here from its trajectory.”

“I don’t see anything,” Ruby said. “I’m not sure what I was expecting, actually.”
“A big neon flashing sign saying cannibals here?” Weiss offered.

“It’d be convenient.”

Weiss couldn’t help but quirk a small smile at that comment. Unfortunately Ruby noticed, grinning back at her like the idiot that she was. “You’re insufferable,” she sniffed.

“I’ll take it, friend,” Ruby said.

“Ugh,” Weiss groaned. “I knew I would regret that. What was I thinking?”

“That Ruby Rose is super cool, and I can’t help being her friend?”

“No,” Weiss said flatly. “I don’t think anyone has ever thought that.”

Ruby pouted for a moment, before looking out at the rocky islands again. “So... what’s the plan? Do we check stuff out while we still have a little light, or do we do the stakeout thing from here?”

Weiss glanced at the setting sun for a moment, before pursing her lips and examining the rocky islands. “By the time we found a safe place to go ashore the sun will have set. I think we should just wait here for a while and see if we notice anything of interest.”

“Alright,” Ruby agreed. “I’m going to call my sister real quick, maybe check out that micro kitchen in the bedroom.”

“Cabin,” Weiss said. “That room was the cabin.”

“Aye, aye,” Ruby said. “Cabin it is!”

Weiss rolled her eyes and waited for Ruby to leave before tracking down the folding deck chairs and placing a pair of them at the back of the boat facing the small islands. After a moment’s thought she grabbed a pair of thin blankets as well. The evening was still warm, but the breeze on the ocean would become quite cool in a matter of hours.

Eventually Ruby returned carrying a pair of coffee cups. Weiss nodded gratefully as she took hers, sipping the high quality brew while Ruby got comfortable.

“Okay, so this yacht is awesome,” Ruby said once she had settled in and taken a sip of her own coffee. “I still can’t believe you know how to drive it.”

Weiss shrugged. “We had very different childhoods, I expect. And it’s ‘pilot’.”

“Okay,” Ruby agreed. “I just kinda ran around wild as a kid, whenever I wasn’t tinkering in the garage.”

“Tinkering?”

“Oh, yeah,” Ruby said. “I like building stuff. And taking stuff apart. Just kinda... tinkering with things. I used to find anything cool and with a ton of moving parts and just try to see how it worked. The first time I did it I completely dismantled the vacuum cleaner. Dad was pissed.”

Weiss pictured the reaction her own father would’ve had if she’d done something even remotely similar and shuddered involuntarily, pushing the painful memories of punishments for her many failings away as Ruby began speaking again.

“Of course, dad could never stay angry with me or Yang for long. He actually helped me find stuff
to take apart. Eventually I learned enough to actually put things back together again, too. I think he was happy he helped out the first time I rebuilt his car after it died on him.”

“If you liked that sort of thing so much, why didn’t you become an engineer or mechanic?” Weiss asked.

Ruby shrugged. “I loved to do it... still love it, really. My room in our apartment is full of junk I’ve been tinkering with. I always wanted to help people though. Not just, you know, fix their stuff, but make their life better. It’s probably ’cause Yang kept reading me fairy tales when I was little, but I always wanted to be the gallant hero, riding in to save the princess. Being a cop lets me do that.”

Weiss raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “A police officer is pretty far away from being a fairy tale hero.”

Ruby chuckled sheepishly. “I guess. But I still get to help people and save lives and stuff. I can’t picture myself doing anything else. Plus, now that I’m in Supernatural Affairs I can even carry a sword around if I wanted to.”

“How did you join Supernatural Affairs, anyway? You’re pretty young to be a detective.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I helped catch this gang that was trying to steal dust. One of them actually had some kinda magic powers or something, and he escaped from everyone that tried to stop them. He got away, but it was enough to get Ozpin’s attention I guess. Next thing I know he’s dropping by to interview me, and here I was. What about you?”

“Me?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah, how’d you join Supernatural Affairs?” Ruby asked.

“Nothing so dramatic as your story,” Weiss said. “Necromancy is a very rare gift, and most of those with it employ it for very dubious purposes. I had acquired every available resource that I could find to improve my understanding of my ability, and apparently some of my questions drew Inspector Ozpin’s attention.”

“So he hired you ‘cause of the necromancy... thing?”

“Yes,” Weiss drawled. “The necromancy... thing.”

Ruby chuckled sheepishly. “So, I guess it’s getting pretty dark now. Wanna take shifts watching?”

“That would be acceptable,” Weiss said. “Do you want to take first watch?”

“Sure,” Ruby said, settling comfortably into her seat. “I’ll wake you up in a few hours.”

“Alright.”

Weiss went to the cabin, dumping out her remaining coffee and grabbing a new toothbrush and toothpaste from the cabinet. She quickly brushed her teeth and washed her face, smiling slightly at her reflection, trying to ignore the ugly scar that bisected her eye.

With a sigh Weiss walked over to the bed, turning down the sheets and sitting down, before pulling off her heeled boots. Her feet hurt, and she spent several long moments massaging them as best she could before climbing fully into the bed.
Despite the recent infusion of caffeine she soon found herself falling into unusually pleasant dreams as she finally accepted, for the first time in her life, that she had a real friend.
Second Case: Lured

Weiss was quite tired, and she knew that she should sleep, but she had great difficulty doing so. She had never even tried to sleep in her clothing before, and while she had removed her heeled boots and bolero jacket, she found that she still had immense trouble getting comfortable. The end result was a doze that she drifted in and out of instead of proper sleep.

It was for the best, however, as it meant that the loud splash she heard woke her up. Blinking away sleep, she sat up, and was surprised to make out a faint, almost musical sound coming from outside of the ship. Frowning she quickly redressed, affixed her rapier and pistol to her belt, and headed topside.

The song was still faint, and she couldn’t make out any specific words. Something about it was extremely relaxing, however, and she felt her eyes start to droop before she shook the feeling away. Frowning, she concentrated on her aura, and immediately felt some kind of outside influence affecting it. With a forceful push of her will she shoved away the magic trying to enchant her before opening her eyes and looking around the deck.

Ruby was nowhere in sight, and she swiftly ran about, checking to make sure that she wasn’t anywhere on the yacht. A look at the surrounding area revealed a dull, blue-green glow coming from one of the rocky islands not very far away. After a long study of what she could make out of the rocks and reefs under the moonlight, Weiss eventually shrugged and decided to risk the yacht by approaching the light.

It didn’t take long to reach the small island, and she was glad that she had been lucky enough not to run aground on any underwater hazards. After anchoring again she dropped a line over the side so that she could climb aboard more easily later, then with a running start she jumped across to the small rocky island. She slipped a little on the slick rocks, but after waving her arms wildly for a moment she found her balance and slowly stood up straight again.

The glowing light came from the mouth of a small sea cave that was currently just above the water line, which meant that it flooded with every high tide. The cave was also the source of the strange music, which she could hear was sung by beautiful high voices, which echoed and joined together in a strange harmony like nothing she’d ever heard before.

Take a deep breath, Weiss rested one hand on the hilt of her sword and slowly made her way to the cave entrance. It was little more than a glowing crack in the rock, large enough for her to carefully walk through, although it would’ve been difficult for someone that wasn’t as petite as she was. She could see little within except for the glowing light, and so after a moment to prepare herself mentally she walked in as quietly as she could.

It wasn’t long before the tiny passage widened out into a large cavern. The far side of the room was dominated by a large pool of water, which was the source of the blue-green glow that lit the cave so brightly. Standing in front of the pool were three creatures.

They stood nearly seven feet tall, with bodies shaped like voluptuous women, but with a fine layer of shimmering scales instead of skin. They wore thin wisps of silky, translucent cloth for clothing, held in place by ropes made from seaweed. Except for their size and scales they would’ve looked like normal women, other than their heads.

The women had black eyes like sharks, with flat, ridged noses, fins on the side of their heads instead of ears, and coarse green hair that hung wet and limp to their lower backs. They had a strange beauty
to them, except for their mouths, which were wide open, revealing rows of sharp, triangular teeth.

The creatures were the source of the singing, which was incredibly beautiful as it echoed about the cavern. Weiss found herself becoming entranced by the music, losing track of herself for a moment as she drifted away in a mental fog. The women became blurry and indistinct, and for some reason she couldn’t make out what they looked like.

Weiss stared blankly for a long time, unable to focus on anything except the three indistinct figures in front of her. They had seemingly shrunk and become more petite, and sometimes she almost thought that she could make out silver eyes before the details would get lost once again.

It wasn’t until one of the three stopped singing that Weiss was finally able to shake the music off. Pushing with her aura again she was finally able to break the enchantment the magical song had over her, and she shook her head, banishing the effect entirely as she took in the grotto once more. She gasped when she finally noticed the other person in the cave.

Standing in front of the three women was Ruby. She swayed slightly, obviously lost in the magical trance the singing induced, and without Weiss’ formal training in magic she had no idea how to use her aura to fight against the ensorcelment. She was entirely lost to the world as the middle creature, the one who had stopped singing, stepped towards her.

Weiss racked her brain, desperate to identify the creatures, until finally the memory came back to her. Sirens were humanoid demons from the Abyssal Sea, a plane with conditions similar to the bottom of the ocean. They were rarely found in the real world, usually being summoned, but sometimes they were able to stay on their own long after their benefactor had left.

She couldn’t remember many other details, as they weren’t a creature that she had expected to ever encounter, but one thing that she certainly remembered was what they did with the people they entranced with their magical singing. Weiss was already fumbling for her gun as she watched the first siren grab her partner’s arm and lift her forearm towards its wide open, drooling, shark-toothed maw.

It felt like she didn’t have enough time, but Weiss forced herself to assume a proper stance and aim down the sights just as she’d been taught at the shooting range. On the outside she seemed calm as she steadied her breathing and aimed at the siren about to take a bite out of her partner... her friend, but internally she was screaming at herself for never getting around to practicing with her gun in more realistic scenarios than calmly plinking away at paper outlines.

In the end the only thing that saved Ruby from losing a good sized chunk of her arm before Weiss finally pulled the trigger was the siren deciding to savor the moment. Instead of simply biting it stuck out a long, black tongue and licked Ruby’s skin, tasting it like a connoisseur of human flesh. She had just retracted the long tongue and had brought the arm to her mouth when Weiss finally pulled the trigger.

Her extra time aiming paid off, as the bullet slammed directly into the siren’s forehead, rather than hitting her partner. The creature shrieked, the noise so loud Weiss flinched, spoiling her aim for a follow up shot as all that she could hear was the piercing, air raid siren wail of the hurt demon. It reeled back, blood dripping from the divot the bullet left in her flesh, revealed chipped bone but no further damage as it continued to wail.

While the shriek was painful to the point of being almost debilitating, it did have one positive; Ruby, no longer entranced by the singing, shook her head like a wet dog as she winced from the scream, jerking away in fear when she saw what had a hold of her arm. She managed to pull herself free and stumbled back, fumbling with her own gun for a moment before she managed to pull it out as well.
With Ruby out of the way Weiss finally had a clear line of fire, and she took advantage of it, emptying her entire magazine into the lead siren in the span of seconds. Black blood poured from more than a dozen holes in its flesh, but instead of falling it only seemed to become angrier as blood dripped from the corner of its mouth. It staggered forward, reaching for Ruby once more, but the younger detective had rallied and opened fire as well, and that finally finished it off, the demon starting to slowly melt away into an off yellow foam on the cave floor.

“You!” the siren on the left shrieked. “What have you done!? You killed our sister!”

“She was going to eat my partner,” Weiss snarled, holstering her gun and drawing her rapier. She raised it in front of her face in a salute before assuming a left handed fencer’s stance.

Ruby backed away quickly while blushing furiously, changing her magazine. “Wh-what happened? I don’t... I’m so confused...”

Weiss pursed her lips. “Not the time, Ruby. Focus on the sirens.”

“We will gnaw the flesh from your bones!” that siren shrieked, before darting forward, the other only a step behind.

Weiss focused on her opponent, hoping that Ruby could handle her own as she would need everything she had to beat her foe. Myrtenaster was made for fighting deadly supernatural opponents like sirens, but they were still much more dangerous than the simple Beowolves that they had fought weeks before. She needed every bit of skill and focus she had acquired in more than a decade of harsh lessons by a master fencer if she wanted a chance to win.

Everything seemed to slow down for Weiss as adrenaline kicked in. She could see every drop of spittle dripping from the multitude of triangular teeth as the mouth opened impossibly wide, revealing that the siren’s jaw was hinged differently from a human’s. She could also see that the siren had gills on its neck, which pulsed open and closed as they sought water to breath rather than the air that its ridged nose took in.

When it reached the proper range Weiss lunged, blade aimed more true than any bullet that she had ever fired. As she’d been trained she struck exactly where she intended, sinking Myrtenaster deep into the siren’s chest exactly where the heart should be. She started to smirk before she was slammed with a powerful open handed blow by the demon, sending her tumbling backwards, barely keeping a grip on her weapon as she hit to the ground and bounced several times.

The world spun for a moment, and everything started to fade into darkness before Weiss took a gasping breath and forced herself to stay conscious through sheer force of will. All that she could hear was a ringing sound in her her ears as she staggered to her feet, unable to fully focus her blurry eyes on the siren that had knocked her nearly to the wall of the cave. It snarled angrily, advancing towards her despite the small river of blood pouring from the perfect hole that Weiss and put in its chest.

Weiss blinked several times, trying to comprehend how the siren could still be alive, before her eyes widened as the truth hit her. She was fighting a siren, a demon from a different plane of existence. Just because the demon had a humanlike shape didn’t mean that it had a humanlike anatomy. Its vital organs could be anywhere. Some demons didn’t even have vital organs, or at least none that directly replicated those of mortal life. For all that she knew, it didn’t even have a heart, much less one in its chest.
Rather than make the first move she waited, steadying her stance as the siren advanced. When it came close she took a single step forward, swinging her sword in a wide, looping arc, the magically sharp edge cutting a deep wound across the siren’s stomach. It howled, the sound thankfully dampened by the ringing in her ears, and she followed up with two more quick slashes, although they were blocked by the siren’s arms, which bled freely from the desperate defense.

The siren tried to rally by striking out her with its inhumanly strong swings, but Weiss swiftly displayed the overwhelming advantage of weaponry over an unarmed attacker. Despite being almost two feet shorter and much, much weaker, Weiss had a reach advantage, and blocks with a sword against flesh, or blocks with flesh against a sword, ended very badly for the unarmed fighter.

Slowly she pushed the siren back, and once its arms began having trouble moving because of the damage to ligaments and muscles she put on more pressure, and soon began to drive her opponent towards the pool of water. She found an opportunity to go for another serious hit when it stumbled slightly, giving her enough space for a lunge.

The siren reacted quickly, moving backwards with incredibly speed to avoid the hit, but Weiss followed up by crossing her leg over for another step, converting her lunge into a flèche that sank home. Unlike her first strike, which relied upon the placement of internal organs for effectiveness, Weiss made the powerful full body thrusting motion directly into the eye of siren. The blade sank deep until it hit the back of the demon’s skull before she ripped it free as she dashed forward, the momentum of her attack carrying her past her opponent.

She reached the edge of the pool before she could stop, and when she did she span around instantly, flicking her blade to clear it of the black blood as she faced the siren again, weapon swiftly returned to a ready position. She held it for a moment as she studied the still figure, before it collapsed to the ground, breaking down into yellow foam the same as the first did.

Weiss turned to look at Ruby, ready to help her parter, but she relaxed as she saw her battle coming to an end as well. The final siren had been slain by gunfire, two magazine’s worth, all emptied directly into its face, reducing the head to pulp like a smashed, overripe pumpkin. As the creature broke apart into foam Ruby met her gaze, reloading her gun as she did.

The stared at each other for a long moment as Weiss regained her breath, the intensity of the brief battle taking far more of a toll upon her endurance than she would’ve expected. After a long moment Ruby turned bright red and looked away, unable to meet her gaze.

Weiss rolled her eyes as she examined her sword. There were no nicks or other damage to the magical weapon, and fortunately the black blood had broken down into foam as well. With a complicated flourish she cleefed the majority of the mess from the blade, and a piece of cloth from her jacket pocket finished cleaning it. With one last glance she sheathed it and strolled over to her partner.

Ruby had put her gun away and was fiddling with her fingers nervously. Weiss smirked at her obvious embarrassment, finding it funny for a moment, although it was sure to get annoying given enough time. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Huh?” Ruby asked, glancing up for a moment before averting her eyes again.

“Don’t worry about it,” Weiss repeated herself. “They were sirens. They’ve been tricking people into walking into their bellies since the ancient greeks, and probably long before that.”

“Um...” Ruby muttered, still unable to meet her eyes. “It’s just...”
“Just what, dolt?” Weiss snapped.

“I- I thought, um...” Ruby murmured.

Weiss sighed. “Look, I already told you, that’s just how sirens work. Their singing is enhanced by their magic to overwhelm people and make them desperately desire them. It’s how they feed; you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“O-okay,” Ruby said. “So... what did, um, what did you see?”

“What do you mean?” Weiss asked.

“Well, I saw, um, never mind,” Ruby stopped.

“Ruby... we’re friends right?” Weiss started awkwardly, more confused at the slightly pained expression that caused. “I might not know how to be a friend, but as I understand it I’m supposed to help you with whatever is bothering you. So... let me help you, dolt.”

Ruby was finally able to look at her, a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. She tried to say something before she giggled slightly, covering her mouth for a moment in surprise before laughing fully.

“What?” Weiss demanded, crossing her arms over her chest self consciously.

“Sorry, sorry, just,” Ruby stopped to giggle a little. “You are so bad at this.”

“W-what!” Weiss snapped. “I never... what... hmph! See if I ever try to comfort you again.”

“Wait, no, Weiss!” Ruby shouted, jogging in front of her as Weiss began to stomp away, forcing her to stop so that they wouldn’t hit each other. “Sorry, I wasn’t trying to be mean!”

“Right, I’m just a failure at this, right?” Weiss ground out.

“No! No, no, not at all! I mean, well, yeah, kinda...”

Weiss growled and tried to stomp past her again, but once more Ruby interposed herself between her fuming partner and the exit. “Sorry! Really, I’m glad you tried...”

“And failed?” Weiss offered flatly.

Ruby began to wave her arms around desperately as she spoke faster and faster. “No! No, I am feeling better, see? I’m laughing and smiling and not embarrassed anymore at all! You did great, honest. Just, you know, not the normal way. But that’s fine! You did you, and you are great and all, so its fine. Really. Thank you. See? I’m thanking you. For being my friend.”

Weiss stopped, crossing her arms and eyeing Ruby suspiciously before finally rolling her eyes. “You can stop babbling, dolt.”

“Sorry,” Ruby said. “Really though, the fact that you cared means a lot. I’m glad you’re my friend... even if you are really bad at this.”

Weiss huffed and rolled her eyes. “Come on, we need to call this in, and I for one am ready to get out of here.”

“Sure thing, partner.”
Second Case: Red Herring

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Weiss stared out the window of the moving car, fiddling with her phone for a moment before finally dialing her partner’s number and placing it by her ear. Several long moments passed before a groggy Ruby answered it. “Hello?”

“Ruby,” Weiss said. “I don’t need a ride to work today.”

“Huh?” Ruby mumbled, before seeming to gain proper consciousness. “You don’t? Why not? Are you okay? You didn’t get hurt by the sirens did you? Do you need me to come over?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I’m fine, dolt. I’ll explain when I arrive at work.”

“So you’re coming in today?” Ruby asked.

Weiss looked out the window at the distant gates the car was slowly approaching. Beyond it lay the sprawling Schnee Estate, her lamentable destination. “Yes,” she said, slightly distant. “I will be late, though.”

“O-oh,” Ruby said. “I’ll, um, I’ll-”

Weiss cut her off as the driver made it past the entrance gate and onto her family property. “I need to go. I will see you in a few hours.”


“Goodbye.”

Hanging up, Weiss studied the grounds that had once been her home as they passed through them. The Schnee Estate had been built by a distant ancestor on a hill above the once modest town of Vale, but passing centuries had caused the hungry metropolis to devour it the same as the small fishing village that was now Innsmouth Street. Unlike the rundown fishing community, the Schnee territory was acres of fenced fields surrounded by upper class homes, a crown jewel among fine diamonds.

The Schnee Manor itself was an enormous building whose foundations were first laid when Vale was young. Every generation had made their own changes to the building, expanding and modernizing it as required, but all had spent enough money that the changes appeared beautiful rather than tacked on.

Weiss allowed her eyes to unfocus as she channeled aura into them, and until the car finally pulled to a stop at the base of the steps she studied the wards that protected the estate. Nothing in the city, nor anything in the country, resembled the wards of the Schnee Estate.

With passing years wards grew stronger rather than weaker, as they were formed from binding magics channeling the energy of nature into their works. The Schnee Estate had been built upon a nexus of ley lines, the same way that Beacon was, and every scrap of mana had been tamed and directed through the centuries to the defense and use of the Schnee family. The end result were individual wards stronger than most could afford to have created, spun into massed protections of such unimaginable complexity that a colony of spiders could not trace the strands in a hundred generations.

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When the car finally pulled to a stop the driver hurried to open the door for her, and she nodded to him as she stood and made her way inside. The front room, like all of Schnee Manor, was huge, imposing, and cold, aesthetically and in temperature. No highly paid decorator, no luxurious furnishing, no careful work by the army of maids employed by the family could bring life to the place after her mother passed, and she doubted that the manor would ever truly feel like a home again.

“Miss Schnee,” a man said. “It’s good to see you again, if you don’t mind my saying.”

Weiss felt a tiny but real smile cross her face as she looked at the balding, mustached butler that had come to greet her. “Klein! It’s good to see you again.”

“It has been some time,” he said, smiling happily at her. “Your sister isn’t in, and your father is away on business. Your brother is upstairs, but he’s in lessons, if you wish to see him.”

“No thank you, Klein,” Weiss said, shaking her head. She hadn’t spoken to her brother since she’d moved out of Schnee Manor the week before starting at Beacon, and other than speaking to him as form required at her departure, she hadn’t really interacted with him in years. “I’m here to check something in the private library.”

Klein’s eyebrows shot up. “I see. Follow me then. I hope you’ve been well?”

Weiss smiled slightly again. “Indeed. It’s been a bit of a change, living on my own. Even with a maid cleaning every weekday when I’m at Beacon, its very different living in the penthouse than here. I like it, though.”

“That’s good,” Klein said. “Are you enjoying your work?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, nodding slowly. “It’s very difficult, but it feels as though I’m doing something valuable. The city is a safer place when I finish a case.”

“And your coworkers?”

Weiss shrugged. “I don’t know most of them well, although I get along with my partner. She says...”

“Yes?” Klein asked when she didn’t say anything for a while.

“She says that we’re friends,” Weiss finished shyly.

Klein lit up at that, grinning happily at her. “Very good! I’m happy for you, Weiss.”

“It’s strange,” she confessed. “I do like spending time with her, but I’m never sure what to do or say. Friendship is very strange.”

“It is indeed,” he chuckled. “Don’t be afraid to meet others as well. You’ve got a good heart, miss, and I look forward to the day you show the world that.”

Weiss blushed but smiled again as Klein opened the library door for her. “Thank you. Now, I’m going to be researching for some time, and then I will need to return to work. It was good seeing you again, Klein.”

“You as well, miss,” Klein said warmly. “Please, return soon. Maybe bring your partner.”

Weiss chuckled at the thought. “I’m not sure how well she’d get along here, although if the manor survived it I’m sure she would enjoy herself. Perhaps sometime... when father is away.”
“Of course, miss,” Klein said. “I think that went without saying.”

Weiss giggled slightly, a tiny smile on her face, and Klein grinned at the reaction, winking at her. “Well, I’ll leave you here. Have a nice day, miss.”

“You as well, Klein.”

The library took up an entire wing of Schnee Manor. It was considerably larger than the one under Beacon, covering all imaginable topics, with a strong focus on the supernatural. Weiss strolled past the majority of it, until she reached a small locked door at the far end of the library. Placing her hand on the knob, she focused her aura and carefully manipulated the wards on the door in the proper sequence, unlocking it.

Inside of the warded room was the private collection. While the main library had powerful wards to keep the books safe and undamaged, they were nothing compared to what was in use in the private collection. The air hummed with magic, making Weiss’ skin itch, and any attempts to enter the room without properly being keyed into the wards would’ve caused her swift death.

The private collection was fairly large, taking up an entire thirty foot by forty foot room with shelves along every wall and numerous rows of shelves in the middle. The only break from the books was a small work table with a pair of chairs.

It didn’t take Weiss long to find the books that she was looking for. She carefully pulled several ancient tomes from the shelves, placing them gently on the work table as she sat down and began researching.

The books in the private collection were there for three possible reasons. The first, was because they were very rare and valuable, and so needed to be kept away from maids or children who could steal or damage them. The second, was because they were forbidden tomes that would’ve been burned and their owner imprisoned if their existence was confirmed. Finally, the back of the room had a special reinforced shelf for books that were actively dangerous, such as those filled with knowledge that damaged the mind and soul, trapped grimoires which would kill the unwary, and prison books for dangerous entities.

Weiss began her research with a book of the first type, *Things of the Water*. It was an exceedingly rare work with only a few extent copies remaining in the world, but it had all of the information that she could ever desire about sirens and similar aquatic demons.

When she finished reading it she frowned. The strange blurring effect that she had observed while they had been singing was caused by the magic trying to make them appear to be what she was attracted to. The various accounts in *Things of the Water* all insisted that the sirens appeared either as specific people the viewer was attracted to, or as general body types and appearances that they found highly arousing.

None of the accounts gave any explanation for why she saw nothing but a blurry petite figure with unusual eyes. Was there something wrong with her? Weiss looked down at her hands, forcing them to relax where they had been tightly clenched. She carefully smoothed her gloves while she briefly thought about it.

She had never really spent much time thinking about love or attraction before. Schnee Manor was a cold place, especially after her mother’s passing, and she spent most of her time in her room, or studying with venerable tutors. She had never really interacted with anyone close to her age, and she had never really thought much about romance or even simply sex.
Weiss scoffed as she rubbed her gloved hands. It was pointless to think about, anyway. Whether she had something wrong with her or not didn’t really matter. Love, she felt, was a chemical reaction that caused people to behave like fools. She worked very hard to convince herself that she was glad that the sirens hadn’t looked like people, and when she was able to she put away that first book and began her next research.

Several rare tomes didn’t reveal anything useful, but finally, in a book that had been banned centuries ago called *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* she found what she was looking for. The book was an account of various cults that worshipped ancient deities, and it contained numerous references to the worship of Dagon, including details about the binding magics employed by the cult.

With her more obscure research complete Weiss put away her books and returned to the main library, grabbing a number of the better books on binding magic that had been collected or written by her family over the centuries. After another hour of work she finally confirmed her suspicions and put everything away, heading back to the front of the building and calling a driver on the way.

Weiss spent most of the trip lost in thought, carefully considering what she’d found, although she had the presence of mind to have the driver stop at a gourmet sandwich shop before they left the upperclass section of Vale for lunch for herself and her partner. It was shortly after noon when they finally arrived at Beacon, and after grabbing the sandwiches Weiss hurried down to the squad room in the basement of the building.

When she walked in she saw Captain Goodwitch standing at the entrance to her cubicle, hands on her hips as she interrogated a nervous looking Ruby. Weiss quietly approached in time to hear her partner’s fumbling attempts to answer the woman’s angry questions.

“Um, she’ll be here soon....”

“And why isn’t she here now?” Goodwitch demanded.

“She had a good reason,” Ruby defended her staunchly.

“Which was?” Goodwitch demanded.

“Um... that is...”

“I was performing necessary research on the case using the Schnee Library,” Weiss interjected, slipping past the captain. She nodded to her frazzled looking partner before sitting down and facing Captain Goodwitch.

“Research?” Goodwitch asked. “I thought you caught the sirens responsible for the disappearances.”

“We caught three sirens,” Weiss agreed. “Unfortunately, they didn’t do it.”

“What?” Ruby and Goodwitch asked simultaneously.

“As I said, something was bothering me about the case,” Weiss said. “Several somethings, to be frank. Why would no one have said or done anything about a group of sirens picking off sailors in the bay for an extended period? Sirens are messy eaters, so why was there no sign of bone piles around the grotto? Why did we wander around all day without any results, before directions to find the sirens just fell into our laps?”

Goodwitch’s eyes narrowed. “Those are good points, and it’s nice to see you starting to think like a detective, but I wouldn’t say that is proof of anything.”
“No, but it was what made me visit the Schnee Library,” Weiss countered. “I did further research into the binding magic employed in the ship, and came to several disturbing conclusions. First, while I was correct in that it is used to contact Dagon and funnel energies from sacrifices to it, I did miss a detail. The sigil is part of a larger ritual of manifestation.”

Goodwitch paled slightly, while Ruby simply looked confused. “Are you certain?” the captain demanded.

“Yes,” Weiss said, nodding. “The Schnee Library is far more extensive than Beacon’s, and I ran the numbers myself to verify the possibility.”

“What does manifestation mean?” Ruby asked.

“Powerful entities, like demon lords, cannot simply enter our plane of existence,” Weiss lectured. “In order to come here, a large number of people must channel energies through an elaborate string of rituals to pave the way, or an enormous quantity of mana must be used to transform a region of this plane to be like the demon’s, making the transition easier.”

Ruby’s brow scrunched her face as she tried to follow the explanation. After a moment Weiss sighed and tried again. “You can bring a demon lord into the world by sending a bunch of mana from here to the demon by a bunch of rituals, or you can use a bunch of mana to make part of this world so similar to the demons’ that they can easily cross over.”

“I presume this ritual was part of the first kind of manifestation?” Goodwitch asked. “Don’t sirens come from Dagon’s home plane? Why couldn’t they have done it?”

“Like I said, I did some research into the rituals,” Weiss said. “The binding magic employed in that sigil are truly ancient and poorly formulated. It had several otherwise unnecessary requirements, one of which was that the caster be a native of the plane in question.”

“So since sirens come from Dagon’s plane-” Ruby started.

“-and the magic has to be done by people from here, that means they couldn’t have done it, right?” Ruby finished.

“Very good,” Weiss said with a tiny smile, nodding to her partner, who bounced in place, beaming at the praise.

“How did you discover this?” Goodwitch asked. “I’ve never seen any references to such a thing.”

The question strayed into dangerous territory, as *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* was illegal to own. Weiss waved her hand dismissively and answered as blandly as possible. “Like I said, the Schnee Library is quite extensive, and after I found a reference to that I worked through the theory behind the sigil and my conclusions. If you would like to check my arithmancy, I can walk you through how the binding magics function on a theoretical level.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Goodwitch said. “I presume that you will be continuing the case, then?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “In fact, it’s become an even higher priority.”

“Why?” Ruby asked.

“There was one other point about the sigil,” Weiss said. “Dagon’s manifestation rituals take many
forms, but the one that was used in that ship has one additional detail. It is only performed after many, many preparatory rituals have been done, and is in fact one of the final steps in the process.”

Goodwitch’s eyes widened. “How much time is left?”

Weiss shrugged. “They still need to perform a few rituals, but those have fewer intricate requirements. If the cult is small we have weeks, but with enough numbers they could force things through much, much faster.”

“Then we really need to hurry,” Ruby said, standing up. “If we haven’t heard of them before now, they must’ve been careful, and this was all really not careful. They probably think they’re in the home stretch and it doesn’t matter if we notice anything.”

“Alright,” Goodwitch said. “Good work, detectives. I’ll get in contact with SWAT and make sure our own people are on call. We’ll be prepared to offer backup as soon as you find something.”

“Come on,” Ruby said, leading the way to the cars.

“I never thought I’d see the day that you weren’t interested in stopping for lunch before working,” Weiss drawled.

Ruby’s stomach growled in response, making her blush. “I guess we’ll have to eat on the way.”

Weiss rolled her eyes and tossed her partner her sandwich. “I already picked something up, dolt.”

Ruby’s eyes opened wide, and she grinned from ear to ear as she looked at Weiss with a strange expression that she had never seen directed at her before. “Thanks Weiss. You’re the best.”

“Of course,” Weiss said with a superior sniff. “Now hurry up. We have a cult to catch.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter made references to a pair of magical books, and as will always be the case in this story, books of that nature will be mythos books related to the world of H. P. Lovecraft. Things of the Water was created by Brian Lumley for the story “The Cyprus Shell”. Unaussprechlichen Kulten was originally created by Robert Howard, although Lovecraft made use of it himself.
Second Case: Caught

“So, fake name or are they all in on it?” Ruby asked.

Weiss sighed. “Could be both.”

The entire trip to Innsmouth Street Weiss had been forced to keep her eyes on the sandwich she was eating to avoid a panic attack at Ruby’s driving. The woman had had the audacity to eat her sandwich while doing so, and as if that wasn’t bad enough, she’d made disturbingly pleased moans and groans the entire time.

Weiss had felt strangely warm by the time they arrived, although she quickly chalked that up to the early summer heat along the waterfront. After throwing their garbage away properly (which had required a glare from Weiss to prevent her partner from leaving the trash from lunch in the car) they had begun looking for Sage Winnow.

They had done so until well into the afternoon, leaving both tired, but it seemed that despite searching the entire waterfront community, no one had heard of Sage Winnow, nor seen anyone matching his description.

“Maybe we need to try a different tack?” Weiss suggested. “Perhaps we can try looking for cultists again? Although I’m starting to wonder just how many of these people are actively involved with Dagon and how many are silent accomplices... are you listening?”

Ruby had been focused on something down the street, and Weiss followed her gaze. She was staring at a man casually leaning against a building near the entrance to a narrow alley with incredible focus. Weiss glanced at him, but couldn’t see any difference between him and a hundred other people they’d seen that day.

“What is it?” she demanded. “You really aren’t listening at all, are you?”

The man shifted slightly, revealing just a bit more of his face, and suddenly Ruby took off running. Weiss blinked in shock before chasing after her partner, although she was considerably slower than the other woman, who was an incredible sprinter.

Running as they were gained quite a bit of attention, and the man Ruby had been focused on turned to look towards the source of the commotion. Weiss snarled as she recognized Sage Winnow immediately, speeding up her own run even as Ruby continued to extend her lead.

Sage proved to be quite fast himself, ducking into the alley without hesitation. Ruby followed him shortly afterward, and finally Weiss came dashing around the corner, almost running into the far building’s wall as she tried to make the turn. She staggered over some garbage on the ground and barely kept her balance as she slowed down to figure out why Ruby was kneeling in the middle of the alley.

“What... are you... doing?” Weiss panted when she finally reached her partner.

Ruby looked up at her, and Weiss could see that despite her speed she wasn’t at all short of breath or otherwise showing the strain of running so hard. “He went down the sewer right when I turned the corner. I was just figuring out how to lift the cover.”

Ruby worked her fingers into the gaps and crouched to get better leverage. Fortunately the manhole cover was an old design that didn’t require special tools to lift, although it was very heavy. “When I
lift you have your gun ready – he could be waiting for us.”

Weiss nodded and pulled out her pistol, checking to make sure that she had normal ammo in the magazine before chambering a round and disabling the safety. “Ready,” she said, taking a two handed grip and centering her stance to fire.

Ruby grunted with the effort of lifting the manhole cover, screwing up her face with the strain as she raised the heavy metal slab with little more than her than her fingertips, before she was able to adjust her grip to more easily lift it the rest of the way. She pulled it up with a full body motion, ending standing behind the cover with the edge of it still resting on the ground.

Weiss stepped forward and aimed her pistol down into the sewer. She flinched at the horrific stench that wafted up from the open hole, but managed to keep steady otherwise as she peered into the darkness below. Unfortunately the surrounding buildings blocked the afternoon sunlight, and she couldn’t see anything.

“Do you see him?” Ruby asked.

“It’s too dark,” Weiss said. “Are you sure he went down there?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I’ve got a flashlight... let me just set this down.”

Ruby shifted her feet and carefully laid the manhole cover down, letting it drop the last few inches on its own with a loud clatter before stepping away and stretching her back with a grunt. She then pulled out her own pistol as well as a small handheld flashlight which she turned on and shined into the sewer depths.

“Guess we’ve gotta go down there,” Ruby said quietly after a moment of study.

Weiss screwed her face up in disgust but didn’t say anything as Ruby holstered her gun and stuck her flashlight in her mouth before carefully climbing down the rusty ladder into the sewers below. Weiss waited above, gun at the ready until Ruby drew her own gun and pointed her flashlight around for a little while.

“All clear,” she called up.

Weiss took one last deep, clean breath of air before holstering her gun and climbing onto the ladder. Weiss’ heart pounded in her throat with every vibration the rusty ladder made as she carefully picked her steps on the rungs, but it held up until she reached solid ground again.

While the stench had been almost overwhelming above, it was nothing compared to what it was like being surrounded by the oppressive miasma that filled the poorly maintained sewer system. She choked slightly, almost vomiting, before finally managing to get her rebellious stomach back under control. Once she did she carefully looked around the passage.

It was small, dirty, and she could see rats and insects scurrying about their verminous business. It was obvious that no one bothered to maintain the crumbling passage, and the only cleaning it seemed to receive was when heavy rain ran through it.

“This is foul,” Weiss said, breathing shallowly through her mouth.

“Yup,” Ruby agreed.

“It’s also vermin infested.”
“Uh huh.”

“And filthy.”

“Sure.”

“How are you so blasé about this!” Weiss finally snapped.

Ruby giggled, looking up from where she’d been carefully studying the ground. “‘Cause this is a sewer, silly. They’re all like this.”

Weiss huffed angrily, regretting the extra air intake when she nearly vomited. “Ugh. What are you doing, anyway?”

Ruby pointed at the ground. “Looking for tracks. Looks like our guy wasn’t the only person using these tunnels, but we got lucky – it’s been days since the last time someone else was down here, and I can just make out which set of prints is the newest. Looks like he went that way.”

“Alright,” Weiss said. “Let’s get moving then – we don’t want the scum that made us go into the sewer to get away.”

Ruby chuckled. “Alright. I wish we could go back and get a flashlight for you. It’s dangerous being down here without one.”

Weiss blushed, furious at herself for forgetting something so basic. “Meridiem.”

With that word and a careful focusing of her aura she made a glowing orb of light appear in the palm of her right hand, which she was holding in front of her. The gentle golden glow lit up the sewer far better than Ruby’s tiny flashlight, bringing all the filth into stark contrast and sending a swarm of vermin running for the shadows.

“Oh, jealous now,” Ruby said. “Magic is so cool.”

Weiss smirked standing up straighter and raising her chin. “It’s the result of years of practice. Now, are we going to find Sage Winnow or are we going to stand around admiring my abilities?”

Ruby smiled fondly while rolling her eyes, but she raised her pistol and led the way down the sewer passage. Weiss pulled out her own gun, keeping the orb of light in her right hand held above her head, lighting the way even more effectively than Ruby’s flashlight, which her partner still held in her left hand crossed under her handgun.

The sewer passage went straight for only a short distance before reaching a branch, and they had to pause again while Ruby studied the floor for a while. Eventually she determined the way to go, turning left down a side passage. Unfortunately it soon reached another intersection as well, and once again Ruby paused to study it.

“This place is like a maze,” Weiss complained.

“Yeah, Vale’s sewers are really old, and not very well laid out,” Ruby agreed. “These are actually worse than most though.”

“How so?”

“Well, normally the storm sewers are completely separate from the utility tunnels, which are completely separate from the sewage maintenance system. Just... not here.”
“What does that mean?” Weiss demanded.

Ruby frowned. “Well, for starters, I’d fire whoever built the tunnels this way, but they’re probably long dead given how old this construction looks. Unless they aren’t human. But they’re probably human, so—”

“Without the rambling,” Weiss interjected.

Ruby blushed. “Right. Um. Basically, the city has a bunch of different tunnel systems under it, and normally they’re all separate from each other. This one has ‘em all connected, so it’s really really confusing. And messy.”

Twenty minutes later they reached a much wider passage which had a deep channel splitting it in the middle full of slowly flowing dirty water. “Ugh,” Weiss said, covering her nose with the back of her gun hand. “Is that... is that... sewage.”

“No,” Ruby said, shaking her head as she squinted into the sluggishly flowing water. “That’s part of a really old storm sewer system. It’s supposed to get water away from the streets when it rains.”

“Oh,” Weiss said, lowering her hand. While the tunnel stank just like the rest of the sewer system, it didn’t smell significantly worse. “It hasn’t rained that much lately.”

“No, but that’s probably salt water,” Ruby said. “We’re really close to the ocean, so I bet this old tunnel flooded at some point and they never fixed it.”

Ruby spent several minutes studying the ground again while Weiss stared at the sluggishly flowing water. A fish surfaced briefly, backing up Ruby’s theory, although Weiss regretted looking so closely when she noticed a bloated rat carcass float slowly by. Wrinkling her nose in disgust she turned away from the water, looking down at the ground at what Ruby was looking at.

“This is weird,” Ruby said. “It looks like several people have been here... really recently.”

“So we lost him?”

Ruby bit her lip, shrinking into herself slightly. “Maybe I can figure it out.”

Weiss opened her mouth before closing it with a sigh, not knowing what to say for a long moment. “If you can’t maybe we can find where he went the old fashioned way. I mean, he has to be nearby, right?”

Ruby looked up, scrunching her eyebrows in confusion. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, we know a cult’s involved, and a bunch of people taking the same path in some abandoned sewer tunnel screams bad guys are here. I bet we’re close to their lair.”

“You might be right,” Ruby said. “Still, maybe I can find something.”

Before she could finish her sentence a loud splash behind Weiss cut her off. The heiress started to turn, but before she did something slammed into the back of her head, making her see stars. She slumped to her knees, the glow of her magic fading away slowly even as the light left her eyes. Her gun hit the ground and she could hear a scuffle beside her, with Ruby loudly screaming her name before the darkness consumed her.

The next thing that Weiss experienced was pain. Her head felt as though a flaming brand had been forced through the back of her skull and swirled about through her brain. She couldn’t do anything at
first except lay and suffer as feelings of nausea slowly grew until she found herself vomiting up the nearly digested remains of the gourmet sandwich she’d purchased for lunch.

“Weiss...” Ruby said quietly. Weiss could barely hear anything over the blinding pain that intensified with every heave. “Oh no, no, no, no please be okay, please be okay...”

Eventually, when Weiss fished vomiting and she laid still, panting and gasping for a while, only partially listening to Ruby’s worried drone. A faint ringing filled her ears, and she moaned, her voice hoarse and scratchy. “Ruby?”

“I’m here... are you... are you okay?” Ruby whispered.

Slowly Weiss opened her eyes, taking a long moment to adjust to the incredibly dim light pouring through the gaps around the doorway. The first thing besides the darkness that she could make out was the pool of colorful vomit next to her head, which made her stomach clench again. Swallowing she tried to ignore it, taking in the empty walls and concrete floor in front of her.

Weiss tried to move her arms only to hiss in pain as something prevented it. Frowning, she realized that her wrists were tied together behind her back tightly enough to minimize feeling in her hands. Fortunately she was able to move them slightly, and after taking a steadying breath she rolled over, flinching in pain both from her head and putting pressure on her bound wrists.

Beside her on the floor lay Ruby, who was similarly bound. Her partner was a bit bloodied, with a split lip and a black eye, although she didn’t look quite as rough as Weiss felt. “Ruby? You okay?”

“Yeah,” her partner said, smiling. “Thank god... I was so worried, Weiss. You’ve been out for an hour. I wasn’t sure if you’d ever wake up.”

Weiss gave Ruby a tight smile. “I’ve got a concussion.”

Ruby bit her lip. “Oh. That’s bad.”

Weiss snorted slightly. “I can do some things to improve it, but it’ll take time. I’m not great at normal self healing.”

“You can heal yourself?” Ruby asked, sounding awed.

Weiss scoffed. “Of course. It’s a basic trick when you’ve trained your aura.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “I thought you said you weren’t good at it?”

Weiss blushed slightly. “Well... that is... I’m just not very experienced. It’s not like I spent my childhood getting beaten up in gym class or something! Besides some muscle cramps from training my fencing too hard are all I’ve ever really needed to use the skill for since I gained control of my aura. I do have... other methods for self healing, but I can’t use them at the moment...”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “That’s... good?”

Weiss rolled her eyes, wincing slightly as she did. “Yes, it’s good. Now, be quiet for a while. I need to concentrate.”

Weiss closed her eyes after Ruby nodded, focusing on entering a meditative state. It wasn’t easy while nauseous and with a pounding headache, especially with the fear she refused to acknowledge at her and her partner being captured. Eventually she managed, and once she did she focused all of her aura to her head.
Self healing was one of the most basic activities because it simply forced the body to do what it was trying to do anyway, just with the help of additional energy to speed up the process. She knew of tricks that could improve the skill further, and if she’d been at home she would’ve found a book and researched them before healing herself, but in the dark cell she could do nothing but brute force it.

A little over an hour later she opened her eyes, breathing a sigh of relief. Her head still hurt a little, but the pain was manageable, and the ringing and nausea were gone entirely. She was certainly still suffering some symptoms from her recent concussion, but she could function, and even fight if necessary.

Ruby had spent the hour bored out of her mind, and she noticed the second Weiss opened her eyes, giving her a hopeful grin. Weiss rolled her eyes but gave Ruby a small smile. “I’m feeling a bit better. How long has it been?”

“How much better?” Ruby said. “I think. I’ve been trying to keep track since they took us, but it’s not easy stuck in a cell like this.”

“Hmm. What happened? The last thing I remember is walking through the sewers with you. It gets foggy after that.”

“Well, we were still trying to find our way, and there was this channel full of water. You had your back to it, and I was looking at the ground, so when two guys suddenly hopped out of the water they got the drop on us. One hit you over the head with a pipe and... and you just fell. You were so limp, and your magic just faded away. I was so afraid you...”

“I’m okay,” Weiss said, giving Ruby her most reassuring expression. She felt touched by how much her partner actually cared about her. It was a strange feeling.

Ruby sniffled slightly, wiping her eyes on her shoulder before continuing. “I tried to shoot one, but he got too close and knocked my gun away. I’m not the best fighter without a weapon, but I got a few hits in before he grabbed me.”

“Where are we?”

“I dunno,” Ruby said. “They tied us up and carried us here through the sewers. We’re still underground, but I’m not sure if this is some super secret underground lair or just a basement with tunnel access.”

“The room looks empty, and there’s just the one door,” Weiss said. “I don’t suppose there’s anything we can use to get these ropes off?”

“No,” Ruby said. “You don’t know any magic tricks?”

Weiss frowned, thinking through her modest collection of spells and aura abilities. “No. Given the trouble my family has had with the White Fang I probably should’ve learned something to escape after being kidnapped, but I never thought about it. My hands are bound wrong to burn the ropes, too. If I was a better spell caster...”

Before Weiss could finish scolding herself the door’s lock turned, and it opened, revealing bright, industrial light that stabbed at Weiss’ eyes. She blinked repeatedly, before finally making out who stood in the doorway.

“You,” she snarled.

Sage Winnow grinned. “Nice to see you too, officers. I trust you’ve been enjoying our... hospitality.”
Second Case: Escape

“The accommodations are somewhat lacking,” Weiss drawled, raising her head as much as she could from her position tied up on the ground. “A filthy concrete floor and hempen rope may be sufficient for low class reprobates such as yourself, but a person of refinement has more discerning tastes.”

Sage Winnow looked slightly impressed. “Damn. I don’t know whether you don’t realize your situation, or if you have brass balls. Maybe both.”

Weiss simply glared in response before finally Ruby broke the silence. “Um, so... are you going to untie us now?”

Sage chuckled. “Not a chance. If you had just written off those dead sailors as something normal, or at least accepted the sirens we summoned as the culprits you wouldn’t be in this situation. Well, we’re done hoping you go away. You’ve just volunteered to be our first sacrifices to Dagon when we summon him tonight.”

“Tonight?” Ruby gasped.

“Oh?” Sage asked. “You don’t seem surprised by our plans...”

Weiss scoffed. “Don’t take us for the kind of idiots that you are. Of course we know that those fishermen were sacrificed as one of the final ceremonies to bring Dagon into this world. I just can’t imagine why you think having a demon lord in Vale is a good idea for anyone.”

Sage grinned. “You know, we’ve been working towards bringing our god into this world since before I was born. It’s been the dream of our village since before Vale consumed it.”

“If you hadn’t gotten so sloppy with that last sacrifice we might not have noticed until the portal opened,” Weiss said. “Of course, being a pack of inbred idiots I’m not surprised that you made such a stupid mistake at the eleventh hour.”

“Don’t talk about us being inbred, Schnee,” he laughed. “I bet the only young people with white hair in the city are in your family. How many generations of Schnee’s married their kin for that to happen?”

Weiss scowled. “My family would never stoop to serve some barnacled excuse for a demon.”

“No, they’d just enslave changelings with faerie contracts,” Sage said. “Anyway, as charming as you two are, I’ve got a ritual to get to. Don’t bother trying to escape – the walls and door are enchanted to prevent any magic from effecting them. You won’t get out of here until we come to get you.”

“You won’t get away with this,” Weiss snarled.

“We already have, Schnee,” Sage said. “Now be good sacrifices and try not to hurt yourselves too much. The fresher you are the more Dagon will appreciate you.”

With that he left, closing the door behind him with an ominous bang. The lock loudly clicked shut, leaving the detectives blinking in the dark as they adjusted to the absence of light again.

“Well... this sucks...” Ruby said.

Weiss snorted. “We’ve been taken prisoner by an omnicidal cult bent on bringing a demon lord into
the world.”

“Right,” Ruby agreed. “See – sucks.”

“Right. ‘Sucks.’”

Ruby giggled. “Wow. I never thought you’d say something normal like ‘sucks’.”

Weiss sighed. “Just don’t tell anyone. Now, are you ready to escape?”

“Of course!” Ruby said. “But... um... how do we do that?”

“It’s really quite simple,” Weiss said. “The first thing we need to do is get these ropes off. So we’re going to have to use your scythe.”

“Um... Weiss? I don’t know how to get it.”

“Well, I guess you’re going to have to learn,” Weiss said. “I imagine you wish that you hadn’t avoided mastering your aura now.”

Before Ruby could reply a distant chant could faintly be heard echoing through the ceiling. It was strangely discordant, with an odd, staggering rhythm like nothing they had ever heard before.

“Right!” Ruby said quickly. “ Summoning the scythe. So... um... scythus cuttus?”

“You’re a complete dunce,” Weiss said with a pained sigh. “The first thing that you need to do is feel your aura.”

“How do I do that?”

“If you’d let me speak I’d tell you!” Weiss snapped before taking a deep breath to calm her nerves. “The soul is what makes us human. It gives us life. Makes us who we are. We are our soul, far more than we are these crude meat puppets that we inhabit.

“The soul is the source of our aura. It is you, the real you, imposing your will upon creation. To feel your soul, concentrate on the things that make you who you really are, not who you show the world. The most important, defining aspects of yourself. Concentrate on those, meditate on them. Be Ruby. Just Ruby.”

Weiss continued speaking slowly and patiently, focusing her partner as the other woman closed her eyes and slowly fell into a meditative state. Eventually with a hushed voice she continued her lecture. “You feel it, don’t you? Your soul?”

“Yes,” Ruby murmured distantly.

“Now focus not simply on your soul but on the effect it has on the world. When you decide to do something, when you focus your will to a task, your soul reaches out to try to help you accomplish it. Magic is learning how to make it succeed. Stretch your soul forth, reach into the world with it. Focus on how it interacts with the world around you.”

Nothing happened for a long moment, and just when Weiss was about to continue her lesson from another angle she felt the shift from her partner. A subtle ripple pulsed through the air, and when she called up her aura sight Weiss could see mana moving around Ruby’s body.

“Good,” Weiss said. “Your aura is made up of mana produced by your soul. You’ve been making mana unconsciously for your entire life, but you’ve never controlled it. Reach out from your soul and
feel the mana moving around your body. It’s a part of you, just as much as your body is. That mana, your aura, is as real as your skin.”

“I feel it,” Ruby gasped. “I can... I can move it!”

Weiss watched her aura ripple and move in strange, awkward ways, bringing a smile to her face. “Good. Your aura is as real as your own body, and with practice you’ll be able to control it as easily as you can move your hands, and feel it as much as your own skin.”

“What do I do now?” Ruby asked.

“Now that you know how to access your aura, you need to let it go down a familiar path,” Weiss said. “Feel the way your aura moves. Shift it around, feel what it naturally wants to do. You conjured a magic scythe without intending to, which means that the spell for that is an intrinsic part of your soul. That scythe spell wants to be cast, so let it. Find the way that you aura wants to move and do it.”

Weiss watched Ruby’s aura swirl and twist in strange ways as she manipulated it, trying to get a feel for how it should move. Weiss continued to lecture her, guiding her through the process of finding the spell that she had cast before.

Suddenly Ruby gasped, and Weiss smirked in triumph as she saw her aura twist and contort around her before forming a large weapon behind her back at her hands. “I did it... I did it!”

“Good job, Ruby,” Weiss said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Why can I summon a scythe, though?” Ruby asked as she began carefully moving the weapon down with her fingertips, not wanting to lose contact with it until she had a chance to cut the ropes binding her. “You said the magic to make this was part of my soul? What, um, what does that mean?”

Weiss frowned thoughtfully. “The ability to perform such complex magic innately generally comes from some form of... nonhuman heritage.”

“Huh?”

Weiss sighed, trying to find a delicate way to say it. “Someone in your family, whether immediate or a distant relative, wasn’t human. Whatever they were, conjuring up a magical weapon was something that they could inherently do, and you’ve inherited that gift from them.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Sometimes gifts like that spring up after many generations though, so it’s not surprising if you haven’t heard of such a thing about your genealogy.”

The blade was incredibly sharp, and once she got it in the correct position it only took Ruby moments to cut the rope binding her. She groaned in relief when blood began to flow correctly again, picking up the scythe and walking behind Weiss, who tensed up as Ruby carefully worked the blade.

The bindings coming undone sent revived pain shooting up her arms, and Weiss carefully massaged feeling back into her wrists as She sat up, grateful to be free. She gave Ruby a small smile, and the other detective blushed slightly before spinning around and stalking over to the door. She pulled the scythe back and swung as hard as she could, twisting her hips for power as she brought the large blade to bear on the door.
The impact of the weapon was muffled as the moment it hit the surface it burst into a cloud of petals, leaving Ruby holding nothing with a baffled expression on her face. “What happened?”

“He said the door was enchanted against magic, remember?” Weiss said. “Your weapon is made of nothing but mana, so it was destroyed immediately.”

“How are we gonna get out of here?”

Weiss frowned, walking over to the door to examine it with her aura senses. It looked dead, so she prodded the surface slightly with a tendril of mana from her hand, nodding thoughtfully at the dispersion pattern that formed. She repeated the experiment with the walls, floor and ceiling before finally looking at her partner again.

“Magic can’t break us out, but it isn’t impossible to perform in here,” Weiss said. “In particular the enchantment on the floor is weak, which is why touching the door with your scythe destroyed it, but touching the ground didn’t.”

“So what do we do?” Ruby asked.

“If we can find something to write with, I can lay a trap for the guards,” Weiss said.

Ruby looked confused for a second before grinning. “Great idea! We lay a trap, do something to attract the guards, they open the door and BAM! One escape plan!”

“Exactly,” Weiss said, smirking. “Do you see anything I can write on the ground with?”

“Um,” Ruby muttered, patting her pockets, while Weiss looked around the room. “How good of a mark do you need to leave?”

Weiss frowned slightly. “I need to leave something behind, and it has to be at least slightly visible. Ink is fine, but plain water isn’t a good idea, for example. Even if your on a surface where the water is visible the binding magics will fade when it dries and the sigil can no longer be seen.”

“So... colored, um, fluid would work?” Ruby asked.

“I... suppose,” Weiss said, turning to face her partner, who looked strangely queasy. “What did you find?”

“Well, um, the uh, well...”

“Spit it out already, you dunce!”

“Your puke!”

Weiss went still for a long moment, unable to trust what she her ears had heard. “My what.”

“Your puke,” Ruby said. “Um, it kinda... stands out. I guess it hasn’t been long enough since we had those sandwiches for it to be completely digested, so...”

Weiss swallowed, struggling to keep her stomach from rebelling at the memories of her earlier difficulties, and a glance at the thickened, hours old vomit made her almost do so again. “You want me to... to...”

“I don’t see anything else,” Ruby said meekly.

Weiss took a deep breath, feeling her own clothing for anything she might’ve missed. The only
possession she had on her person was her monogrammed handkerchief, and with an expression of horrified disgust she carefully bunched it up, creating a crude brush as she approached the cold pool of vomit.

It was fortunate that the concrete room was quite humid, being so near the waterfront, as the vomit had not dried excessively in the time since her stomach had rebelled, but that was little consolation as Weiss held her other hand over her mouth to keep from creating more material. She had never cleaned up her own mess before, and touching it, even indirectly with the handkerchief, was one of the most nauseating experiences of her life.

Slowly the glyph took shape in the form of a massive, complex circle that began right in front of the door and took up the majority of the room. Weiss had to pause twice in the thirty minutes she drew it to vomit slightly, overwhelmed by working with her previous puke. The new efforts produced nothing but stomach acid, having emptied herself quite effectively the first time.

It was during the second occasion, while Weiss was working on the finishing runes around the edges of the circle, that Ruby finally spoke up. “Um, Weiss? Why do we have to use the magic circle?”

“To ambush our jailers,” Weiss said, after getting control of her stomach again.

“Yeah, but... couldn’t we just jump them?” Ruby said. “They’re probably mostly upstairs doing the ritual, so I bet they don’t have many guards. I’m not a great unarmed fighter, but I know the basics...”

“And if they do grossly outnumber us?” Weiss demanded. “Or if they have summoned guards like those sirens? We can’t beat something like that bare handed.”

“I could summon the scythe again,” Ruby said. “They won’t be expecting us to be armed.”

“Well, what if they have guns?” Weiss demanded.

Ruby shrugged. “Actually, if they’re standing at the door I can probably get them with the scythe before they can shoot. Guns aren’t a very sure thing this close, especially with surprise on our side.”

Weiss was silent for a long moment before huffing angrily. “I did not spend this long working with my... my... regurgitation just to have it be a wasted effort! We are using the glyph and that is final.”

Ruby raised her hands in the air at Weiss’ glare, a smirk on her face. Weiss huffed and went back to work, not saying anything for another ten minutes until the complex sigil was done. When it was she sighed in relief, throwing away the ruined handkerchief and moving to join Ruby at the far end of the room.

“Is it ready?” Ruby asked.

“Almost,” Weiss said, reaching out a gloved hand and placing it palm down inside of the circle. She closed her eyes, focusing her aura to fill the circle, encouraging it to absorb the mana of the environment. Wherever they were was on top of a ley line, and while most of the energy was flowing into the ritual above she was able to gather enough mana to fully charge the circle in under a minute.

“There,” she said proudly. “Now, when it's activated it will take down anyone inside of the symbol.”

“Great!” Ruby said. “So, um, I guess we just knock and try to get their attention?”

Weiss hadn’t thought that far ahead, but nodded quickly at the suggestion. “Of- of course. Just, um,
don’t smudge any of the symbols. It would set the trap off.”

Ruby studied the floor. “It’s really hard to see. I mean, I’m still not sure how you could draw something complicated like that with just the light streaming in from the doorway.”

Weiss raised her chin proudly. “This is really quite a simple piece of binding magic. A Schnee like myself could perform this in total darkness.”

“Well, can you make your way over to the door and knock, then? I really don’t want to- um, whatever it is that would do to me.”

Weiss grumbled slightly before carefully picking her way over to the door. She didn’t want to admit just how difficult it was to trace a safe path through the circle in the dim light, but eventually she managed, knocking as loudly as she could several times before quickly making her way back to Ruby’s side.

They didn’t have to wait long as the door unlocked and was thrown quickly open, revealing a pair of hideous figures. The humanoid creatures were covered in scales, with dead black eyes and maws full of shark teeth. They were unarmored, but Weiss immediately recognized them as Deep Ones, dangerous ocean dwelling monsters that served Dagon.

“How did you get free?” the one on the left gurgled.

Weiss raised her chin. “Did you really think some rope could hold us?”

The two deep ones looked at each other and shrugged, before the one on the right spoke. “You two are the detectives, right?”

“Yes,” Ruby said, giving them a sickly smile. “We, um, we’re detectives. We’ve been looking for the people who killed five fishermen.”

“Three,” one of the Deep Ones said. “Only three were killed.”

“So the others were part of the cult?” Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow.

“We didn’t know it at the time,” the left Deep One said. “We just thought we were normal fishermen. We didn’t know our parents were part of the cult... that we were the children of a Deep One and a human.”

“Wait, Titus?” Ruby gasped. “Shane?!”

“Yes,” the left Deep One said. “I’m Titus.”

“I’m Shane,” the other gurgled.

“What- what happened to you?” Ruby asked.

The two looked at each other before shrugging. “We were on the boat, when we were grabbed by other Deep Ones and pulled into the ocean,” Shane said. “Turns out, my mother-”

“-and my father-” Titus interjected.

“-were Deep Ones,” Shane finished. “When they dragged us into the ocean they took us to a magical cave on the bottom. Before we knew it we were breathing under water, and over the last few days we’ve been changing. Now we’re both full Deep Ones.”
Titus took in their horrified expressions before grinning a shark toothed grin. “It’s not bad. We can swim anywhere now, and we’re much stronger and tougher than before. Being a Deep One’s great, and most of our community has some Deep One blood in us, even if most aren’t like us. Our village has been interbreeding with Deep Ones for as long as we’ve existed.”

Shane looked them over for a moment, before licking his lips with a swollen looking tongue. “You’re both pretty. Titus and I need some wives – I bet we could convince the Deacon to let you two live if you marry us. With the age of Dagon beginning we’ll be the new rulers of the world.”

“I would rather die,” Weiss said flatly.

Titus shrugged, the gesture awkward with his altered body. “Too bad. You’re cute, but I bet we’ll find some willing people soon – maybe even some of the new gilled folk.”

“Gilled folk?” Ruby asked.

Titus nodded. “The Deacon found a way to make people like Deep Ones, even without any blood in them. ‘Course, most of the people don’t survive the change. They just kinda... stop part way through the process. Still, with our god’s help I’m sure he’ll get it right.”

“You people are completely insane,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “Do you have the brains of a fish, too?”

They both growled at that, stepping into the room angrily. She heard Ruby gulp slightly as the two stalked towards them, but she simply smirked as one of them smudged a rune on the floor.

There was a great flash, like a bolt of lightning, and Weiss and Ruby felt their hair stand on end. Inside of the circle the two Deep Ones writhed in pain as blue electricity played over their forms, causing them to freeze up and painfully convulse for long moments. Smoke rose from their bodies, along with a smell like burning fish, before finally the magic ended and the two collapsed to the ground, still.

“Whoa,” Ruby said. “I’m really glad I didn’t smudge the circle.”
The magical glyph had completely discharged, leaving only a blurry outline of its form in gray ash. The two Deep Ones twitched slightly at the center, still smoking from the powerful electrical shock.

“Um... are they alive?” Ruby asked.

“Probably....” Weiss said, walking over to them and checking their necks for a pulse with a gloved hand. She had no idea how to check the vital signs of a Deep One, and the gills further complicated her attempt, but she found what appeared to be a pulse and decided to assume that it was. “Yeah, they’re alive. I made that discharge high voltage but with a low current for a reason.”

“Like a stun gun,” Ruby agreed, nodding. “So... you ready to go?”

“Yeah, who knows how long they’ll be out,” Weiss said, walking to the door. Once they had both left the room Ruby closed it behind them, locking it securely.

The hallway was made of cement and lit by flickering fluorescent lights. The door to their cell was at the end of the hall, and along its length were a variety of large wire cages, most of which were empty, although one had a person in it. He was short man with dark skin and hair, but one arm and leg were covered in scales like a Deep One.

“Who are you?” the man rasped, his breathing heavy and erratic.

“Detective Ruby Rose, and this is my partner, Detective Weiss Schnee, Department of Supernatural Affairs,” Ruby said, reaching for her missing badge before frowning. “Er, well, our badges were stolen when we got taken, but I promise we're really detectives. Um... who are you?”

“Cedric Mikado,” he answered.

“Why are you, um... caged up?” Ruby asked.

He chuckled slightly. “I went on a fishing trip with a couple friends... we got kidnapped. By these scaly monsters. They brought us through the sewers to these cages, fed us potions. They had other people here... they’ve all died. We all transformed into these.... things. Then they died. I don’t... have much longer.”

“We’ll get doctors!” Ruby insisted. “Just hold on a little longer!”

He gave her a sad smile. “I’m sorry... I can’t. I can feel my life... slipping away. Can you stop them?”

“Yes,” Weiss said firmly, locking gazes with the dying man. “We will stop them.”

“Good,” he rasped, his eyes slowly closing. “I’m going to rest now. I can rest...”

A few moments later he took one more rattling breath and then went still. Ruby looked away, biting her lip until it nearly bled, while Weiss felt her face grow still and hard. She found it more painful than she would've expected before she started the job watching a stranger die, especially without the adrenaline of danger to keep her focused.

“We need to keep moving,” Weiss said after a few moments. “The ritual has been going for a long time. We need to contact Goodwitch and stop this.”
Ruby nodded and started walking, leading the way down the hallway. Once they were past the cages they found a pair of doors. The first was locked from their side, and opened to reveal the sewers, but after a moment of discussion they decided to continue searching for their phones rather than risk getting lost and not knowing where they were or how to get in contact with the authorities.

The other door opened to reveal a room full of industrial equipment whose purpose they couldn’t guess at with a glance, huge barrels of some kind, and a row of hooks along the far wall. Half of the hooks had people dangling from them, with some of the bodies partially butchered, while a few were fully intact but showed evidence of partial fish conversion.

“Oh god,” Ruby gasped, staring wide eyed at the bodies.

“I guess this is where the people who died during the transformation ended up,” Weiss said.

“They... they butchered them...” Ruby muttered. “They eat people, don’t they?”

Weiss took a deep breath, trying to find a way to answer that wouldn’t rattle her partner further.

“Yeah. Deep Ones eat people.”

Ruby nodded, walking over to the industrial equipment while Weiss checked the bodies. They had all been dead for a while, long enough that she was unlikely to be successful in contacting most of their souls, and given what she learned from the dying man in the cage she didn’t expect any of the dead to be able to tell much of use. She did guess that the parts missing from most of the butchered people likely corresponded to fish parts.

“Find anything?” Ruby asked quietly.

“I think they removed the... fish transformations from the bodies when they butchered them,” Weiss said flatly as she headed over to the barrels. “I’m not sure why though. You?”

“This looks like fish processing stuff,” Ruby said. “Maybe we’re in the cannery?”

“I never would’ve expected that,” Weiss said thoughtfully. “Having a murderous demon worshipping cult using the building... how unsanitary. This has to violate the health code.”

Ruby giggled slightly hysterically. “Yeah, I don’t think the health inspector would okay the dead people in here.”

The barrels appeared to contain a disgusting goo, which looked like bloody chum and smelled like raw fish. The side was stamped with ‘Fish Slurry’. “This probably isn’t the primary processing area,” Weiss said absently. “I don’t see any way to get fish down here conveniently. Perhaps this is storage for spare equipment?”

“No, it's been used recently,” Ruby said. “You’re right, where’s the fish? Do they haul it down here by hand?”

“Surely not,” Weiss said. “The cannery looked quite large, so if we really are there an operation of that size must’ve had an enormous amount of product to process, and enough industrial equipment to work at that scale.”

“Then if this isn’t for working with the fish, why’s it here?”

Weiss frowned and started to turn away from the barrels, planning to continue through the only other door in the room as they searched for a way out when something caught her eye. Looking back, she frowned in confusion as she read a shipping label on top of one of the sealed barrels of fish slurry. It
was an address, along with the name of a street food stand named ‘Fishballs’.

Weiss paused for a long moment. “Ruby... does that machine... does it make slurry? From fish?”

“I think so...” Ruby said. “It looks like it takes fish and breaks it down to fill barrels. But, why would it be down here? Shouldn’t they do this stuff upstairs where they fillet the fish?”

Weiss slowly looked from the barrels of slurry, some of which were marked for delivery to the Fishball stand, to the dead partial fish people, to the processing machine. In shock, she slowly looked from one to another, over and over again, until her stomach rebelled and she dry heaved next to the barrels. Nothing came up besides some residue which burned her sinuses and eyes.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked. “What’s wrong?”

A small, petty, mean part of Weiss wanted to tell her partner what she'd concluded, but by the time she had mastered her rebelling stomach she had squashed the impulse. “Nothing, Ruby. We need to get the police here.”

“Weiss?”

“Come on,” she said sharply, heading towards the far door. “We don’t know how much longer we have.”

Ruby started to check the barrels, but changed her path when Weiss opened the door, revealing a dark staircase leading up. Weiss listened for a moment, satisfied that she couldn’t hear any other guards, although the chanting was certainly louder.

“Weiss, what’s wrong” Ruby whispered. “Is your concussion acting up? Do you need something?”

“I’m fine,” Weiss snapped. “We just need to keep moving. We can play detective when the world isn’t ending.”

“Right...” Ruby muttered. “Huh... no other way here except a staircase – how do they get the slurry drums out of here? And the fish down here to fill them?”

“Well, in additional to health inspectors, I doubt OSHA is pleased with their layout,” Weiss drawled before starting to climb.

The staircase only went up a single level and ended at another door, which Weiss cautiously opened, revealing an enormous room. Directly in front of the door were several large industrial fish canning machines, which didn’t appear to be active. They were arranged in such a way that the door was hidden from being seen by the rest of the room by the devices, no doubt part of a plan to keep outsiders from finding the horrors below.

That design was to the detective’s advantage, as beyond the machines was the vast, open room where people normally worked to prepared the catch the fishermen made. Carefully creeping to the edge of a canner, Weiss peeked out to see dozens of people wearing hooded robes gathered in a circle around an enormous glyph drawn on the floor in blood.

Ruby peeked past Weiss, biting her lip before the two crept back fully into cover and looked at each other. Ruby hesitated before making a shushing motion and miming walking before pointed to the various machines, barrels, and ice filled tanks around the edge of the room. Weiss frowned for a moment, peering out again, before nodding and pointing to the far end, where several doors could be seen. Ruby bit her lip, looking for a better option, before finally nodding.
Ruby led the way, creeping low to the ground, staying behind cover whenever possible and sticking to the shadows whenever that wasn’t. Fortunately the people performing the ritual were thoroughly distracted by it, and the cult didn’t have so many extra members that they could afford to post guards inside of the ritual chamber.

Only one place was frightening for the two detectives, and that was when they reached the enormous loading doors that covered much of one wall. Huge ice tanks sat between them and the cultists, but it still provided little cover compared to the rest of the trip. They waited to steel their nerves for a long moment before Ruby carefully crawled across.

Weiss held her breath as her partner cleared each of the exposed areas, hesitating a long moment before slowly crawling after her. She wanted to rush the move, run across and slide into cover, but Ruby moved slowly and deliberately and didn’t seem to get caught, so Weiss reluctantly followed her example, until finally they reached the far end of the room.

The first door they checked was locked, but fortunately the second was not. Ruby opened the door a crack, peeking out, before closing it again and raising two fingers to show Weiss, before pointing past the door to two different locations. Weiss took a deep breath, and nodded, steeling herself and deliberately removing her right glove, tucking it away in her belt. Ruby looked confused but shrugged a second later when Weiss gave her a nod.

Ruby held up three fingers and counted down while holding the doorknob, slowly opening the door when she hit zero and creeping through, Weiss grabbing it behind her and following after. They were in some kind of locker room, with a pair of disreputable looking men obviously guarding the entrance. They weren’t paying very close attention, and they were both facing forwards, obviously concerned with the idea of someone coming in through the far door rather than someone attacking them from the ritual chamber.

Ruby went left and Weiss walking quietly to the right, glad that the chanting muffled their movements. Weiss nervously flexed her fingers, coming up behind her guard as Ruby braced herself, taking a deep breath, before jumping up and wrapping an arm around the tall man’s neck, going for a sleeper hold.

Weiss’ guard started to turn to face the commotion when she reached up and placed a hand around his throat, squeezing gently as her other arm wrapped around his body to make sure that she stayed close to him. He thrashed in shock as Weiss felt an alluring, sinful warmth flow up her arm from her palm, before with a groan the man collapsed to his knees. She held on just a bit longer as he went limp, before pulling her hand away quickly as she released him.

Weiss stood still for a moment, panting heavily as the warm energy surged through her body, replenishing her aura and then pooling at her injuries, particularly her head, where it soothed the pain away, healing her incredibly quickly. She closed her eyes, barely containing a blissed out moan as the stolen life energies did their work.

It was only when the initial rush was gone that the guilt sank in. She had been reveling in stolen life force like some kind of vampire, and she quickly fumbled for her glove, desperate to put it on again. Only when her skin was sufficiently covered did she begin to calm down, although the guilt still sat heavily on her.

Ruby’s voice pulled her from her inner spiral. “Whoa, good job, Weiss! I can’t believe you dropped him faster than I did!”

Weiss looked up, impressed despite herself that Ruby had managed to successfully knock out the large dockworker without him make a commotion. She nodded and crouched beside her victim,
carefully touching his throat with her gloved fingertips to check his pulse. It was weaker than she would’ve liked, and his hair looked grayer than she remembered from her initial inspection. She swallowed hard, but focused on the fact that he was still alive as she stood back up and faced her partner.

“We need to find something to tie them up with,” Ruby said. “Then we’ve gotta get out of here and find a phone.”

“Right,” Weiss agreed, walking down the rows of lockers trying to find a belt or something similar to use as an improvised rope.

“Whoa, Weiss!” Ruby called.

“Don’t be so loud,” Weiss hissed as she jogged over to her partner. “We’re still next to the cult, and who knows if there are other guards!”

“Sorry,” Ruby whispered. “But look! They just put our stuff in this open locker.”

Weiss frowned as she checked her sword before clipping it to her belt and grabbing her gun. “That was sloppy of them.”

Ruby shrugged. “Well, they probably didn’t expect us to make it past all the cultists. It’s not like they just left it right outside the cell.”

“Still,” Weiss sniffed as she finished putting away her other possessions on her person. “It’s sloppy.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Fine. The bad guys were sloppy. I’m not going to complain, though.”

They struggled to drag the heavy guards to an out of the way section of the room and then used their handcuffs to secure the two to a bench. Once they were sure they wouldn’t cause anymore trouble they headed to the only other doors from the changing room.

After carefully peeking in to make sure it was empty, they entered the lobby and walked to the front doors, which were easily unlocked from the inside. The street outside was empty, and they slipped out of the building, confirming immediately that it was the cannery on Innsmouth Street.

Once they were a little away from the building they ducked into an alley and Ruby called Goodwitch. Weiss rested against the wall, closing her eyes and breathing deeply. She hadn’t wanted to drain the life force from a person ever again, but she’d had no choice if she wanted to take him down quickly and quietly. She lacked the skill with unarmed combat that Ruby obviously had in spades.

“They’re on their way,” Ruby finally said when she hung up. “Captain Goodwitch has some of our people coming, and she’s got a whole bunch of SWAT, too.”

“Good,” Weiss said with a sigh. “Did she say how long?”

Ruby shook her head. “No. Probably not too long, though. They were all on standby. Maybe we can grab something to eat, though.”

Weiss followed her gaze to the fishball stand, making Weiss’ stomach start to rebel again. “No!”

Ruby jerked in surprise. “Huh?”

“I- I don’t think I can eat right now,” Weiss said.
Ruby frowned and started to reach out to her partner, stopping when she remembered how Weiss reacted to being touched. “Sorry. It's probably not open anyway… and you threw up, like, a bunch. And you’re concussed! You should sit down—”

“I’m fine,” Weiss snapped.

“Sorry,” Ruby said meekly.

Weiss sighed and leaned against the wall. “Thank you your consideration.”

Ruby looked at Weiss for a long moment, making her shift nervously at the searching expression. Eventually Ruby grinned. “Any time, partner.”

The silence was comfortable after that, and surprisingly Weiss found herself more at peace than she would’ve expected after what she did. She glanced over at her partner... her friend and smiled slightly. “Ruby?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad we’re partners.”

Ruby bounced in place grinning from ear to ear. “Alright! Before you know it we’ll be BFFs, just you wait!”

“And the moment is gone,” Weiss said with a sigh, turning her head away to hide her smirk from Ruby as the other woman pouted.

“Hey, that’s them!” Ruby said.

Weiss followed her out of the alley to where a collection of SWAT vans and few police cars were parking a bit down the street from the cannery. Ruby pulled out her badge and waved it at them, swiftly getting directed towards the first SWAT truck.

Stepping out of the back were a team wearing full SWAT gear, followed by a tall white haired woman with a stern expression on her face wearing the same equipment but with her helmet under her arm and with the addition of a sword at her hip.

Weiss froze, a gasp escaping her lips. “Winter...”
Second Case: The Battle at the Cannery

“Winter!” Weiss called, walking up to her sister, a full smile on her face. When she came close she hesitated, making her expression neutral before curtsying. “I mean, it’s an honor to see you again, sister.”

“Weiss, it is good to see that you are well,” Winter said stiffly, nodding to her. “When I was informed that we needed to be on standby to perform a raid in pursuance to your investigation I became quite concerned.”

“Yes, it is a very serious situation,” Weiss said, before smiling slightly. “I’m glad that you are here to take care of things.”

Winter gave a few quick orders to her people before turning to face Weiss once more. “We have a few minutes while we wait for your people to arrive. How have you been, Weiss?”

“The investigation was more complicated than we expected, but we were able to-”

“No,” Winter said sharply, making Weiss flinch and look down. “I mean, how have you been personally? Do you enjoy living in your own apartment? Have you made any friends? Have you been eating well?”

“Oh,” Weiss said. “Yes. It has been very pleasant living on my own. I feel that I have adjusted well. Oh! And this is Ruby Rose. My partner. We, um, we’re friends. Right?”

Ruby grinned, bouncing in place. “Yup! I’m Ruby, it’s nice to meet you!”

“Ms. Rose,” Winter said, studying her so intently that it made Ruby squirm. “Thank you for taking care of my little sister. I know she can be difficult at times, but she is very dear to me.”

“Of course!” Ruby said, rebounding from her earlier nerves. “Weiss is great! I couldn’t ask for a better partner, and I’m really glad we’re friends.”

“Good,” Winter said.

Before they could speak any more one of the SWAT officers approached Winter, and the older woman nodded to the two detectives and followed him. Eventually Ruby turned to Weiss and grinned. “So, that’s your sister?”

“Yeah,” Weiss said, smiling thinly.

“She seems, um intense,” Ruby said. “But in a good way.”

A few minutes later several cars approached, and from them came Captain Goodwitch and a number of detectives from Supernatural Affairs. “Rubes!” Yang shouted, jogging up to her sister and pulling her into a huge hug. “I was so worried when you didn’t check in!”

“Air...” Ruby gasped.

Weiss hung back, watching Ruby's sister greet her, and felt a sharp pain in her heart at the way they interacted. If it wasn’t for her problems, could she and Winter be similar? She loved her sister dearly, but for just a moment she wished that she could have as demonstrative a relationship as Ruby enjoyed.
“Glad to see you’re okay,” Blake said, smiling at Ruby.

“Oh, yeah, Weiss needs to get checked out!” Ruby said, squirming away from her sister. “She got a concussion!”

“I’m fine,” Weiss interjected. “I healed myself.”

“Concussions are dangerous,” Ruby said. “You need to get tested.”

“I’m fine,” Weiss said sharply, glaring at Ruby who shrunk back from the expression.

“Don’t worry about her, sis,” Yang said. “If she wants to charge into battle with a concussion it’s on her head. Get it?”

“Yang,” Ruby groaned. “This is serious.”

“If you are injured, Ms. Schnee, then you should see our medics,” Captain Goodwitch said, walking up behind them.

Weiss shook her head. “I’m fine. I’ve healed all of the damage that I suffered, and am ready to do my part in the battle.”

Goodwitch studied her carefully for a moment before nodding. “What is the situation?”

Winter’s people had found building plans for the cannery, as well as surface and sewer maps of the area. Weiss studied them for a moment, trying to figure out how what she had seen related to the two dimensional line drawings, while Ruby quickly jumped in and started explaining what they knew.

“I see,” Winter said when she finished covering everything. “The building has three entrances – the front doors, which should still be unguarded for now, the side loading doors, which are large and lead directly to the ritual chamber, and the sewer entrance, which should also be unguarded but will take longer to reach.”

Goodwitch nodded. “Captain Schnee, why don’t your people breach the side doors, and have a squad hold the front doors. My people will enter through the front at the same time as you bring down those large doors, and I’ll send a pair to guard the sewer entrance.”

“That seems like the best that we can come up with on such short notice,” Winter agreed nodding. “My people will be ready to breach in ten minutes.”

“Understood,” Goodwitch said, before turning to the detectives. “Ms. Xiao Long, Ms. Belladonna, the two of you will guard the sewer door.”

“What!” Yang objected. “You can’t be serious! You want me to be on guard duty while my little sister goes into battle?”

“I expect you to follow orders, Ms. Xiao Long,” Goodwitch growled. “You and your partner are better suited to fighting in a confined space like the sewer tunnel than Ms. Valkyrie is, so she and her partner will be going into the ritual chamber.”

“Why can’t Pyrrha do it?”

“I want Pyrrha with me in case the situation escalates,” Goodwitch said. “Ms. Schnee will be of use in defusing the binding magics, and her and Ms. Rose are familiar with the entrance we will be using. Sergeant Peach’s squads are all busy with other assignments, so it’s just us, and that means that
you need to be on guard duty. Now, unless you want your next assignment to be to a desk, I advise you to quit arguing with me.”

Yang didn’t look happy, but she shut up, glaring angrily with red eyes. Blake leaned over and whispered something in her ear to help calm her down while Goodwitch finished giving orders. Once she was done Blake led her partner away to the sewer entrance to get into position.

“We haven’t spoken to each other much since you joined,” one of the detectives, an asian man, said to Weiss and Ruby. “I am Lie Ren, and this is my partner, Nora Valkyrie.”

“Hey!” Nora shouted. “Nice to meet you. Formally, you know. Because we met before. Twice. Once when you first joined the department, and then again when we fought off that giant army of Beowolves. Whew, that was fun! Except for the part where Mercury lost his legs.”

Weiss blinked, overwhelmed by the babbling, while Ruby grinned at her fellow detectives. “Hi! I’m Ruby Rose, and this is Weiss Schnee. Thanks for coming to help us, you know, again. With the big fight at the end.”

“Of course,” Ren, said, nodding solemnly while his partner cheered about going into battle. “While SWAT are very skilled, we are more used to dealing with esoteric threats, and most of Supernatural Affairs have skills beyond normal police officers.”

“You’ve go that right!” Nora agreed cheerfully. “I’m a valkyrie!”

“You mean... that’s not just your name?” Ruby asked.

“No silly,” Nora laughed. “I’m a real valkyrie. That’s why I named myself that! I met Ren when he almost died, but he managed to hold on, and I decided, wow, I want to come to the mortal world and get to know him! So here I am.”

“You just... left your task as a valkyrie?” Weiss asked.

Nora shrugged. “We don’t really do much anymore. The norse pantheon hasn’t had enough worship in years to justify having valkyrie, so most of us just do what we want. Anyway, unless something goes wrong souls just kinda go beyond without psychopoms like us interfering, or you know, Death getting involved. So I just put in my two week notice and retired from choosing the slain. You know, in the last fifty years I only had to gather the souls of, like, three people? Do you have any idea how few norse worshippers there are, and how many fewer die in glorious battle?”

“Very few,” Pyrrha said with a smile. “But we are very fortunate to have you in the department, Nora.”

“Thanks!” Nora said, bouncing on her heels. “So, we ready to do this?”

“Um... not really,” Jaune said nervously. “We’re going through the front door? Isn’t that a little dangerous?”

Pyrrha smiled at him. “That’s why myself and Nora will be leading the way, along with Captain Goodwitch. Hopefully when faced with ourselves and the presence of the SWAT teams the cultists will simply surrender, although I unfortunately doubt that that will be the case.”

“It’s time,” Goodwitch said, causing Nora to cheer and pull out her large silver warhammer. “Ruby, Weiss, show us the way, then as Ms. Nicos said, allow the three of us to be the first into the ritual chamber.”
Weiss looked for her sister, hoping to wish her luck, but Winter was busy giving the SWAT teams orders. After a moment's hesitation she followed Ruby to the front of the building, breathing deeply to steel herself for what was to come while pulling out her gun. She checked the magazine, chambered a round, and released the safety before nodding to Ruby, who had done the same.

The entrance was as they’d left it, and the group of seven moved quickly and quietly through the locker room to the door to the ritual chamber. Everyone had guns out except for Nora, who preferred her hammer, as they waited for Winter to start the operation with SWAT.

Weiss shifted nervously, checking her gun again. She glanced over at her partner, who was biting her lip while bouncing in place. The rest of the group looked concerned as well, except for Nora who was vibrating with excitement and who had an enormous grin, and Pyrrha, who just looked stoic. Weiss glanced down at the floor, before checking her gun again.

When the explosion finally happened she flinched, and Jaune squealed like a little girl. It wasn’t terribly loud where they were, but Winter had obvious not gone lightly on the door breaching charges. Captain Goodwitch held up a hand with five fingers raised and slowly counted them down. At two there were more explosions inside of the room as flash bangs went off, and when she reached zero Nora kicked in the door, knocking it from its hinges.

“Police, get on the ground!” Winter shouted, her words echoed by several of her officers as they swarmed through the side doors.

Weiss joined the pack rushing into the room, following behind Goodwitch, Pyrrha and Nora who led the way. The ritual chamber had changed since they had snuck through it a little less than half an hour before. The crowd of robed cultists gathered around the ritual circle was the same, except for a group of six who had formed an inner ring closer to the center of the glyph. With the police raiding most of the outer group turned to the doors, shouting in fear and confusion, while a few began casting spells, raising barriers to keep attackers away from the group.

While the cultists were arranged slightly differently, the circle on the ground was no longer a blood outline, but rather a red glowing glyph fully powered from the ley line. At the very center of the circle, hovering slightly above the ground was a portal, appearing like an oval tear in space. It was quite small, but it was slowly widening, even as they ran into the chamber.

“The portal’s opening!” Pyrrha shouted. “We must stop them!”

“Yahoo!” Nora agreed, leaping into the air to fly impossibly far forward, her silver hammer raised high and crackling with electricity. She slammed it into the shimmering white barrier that the cult mages were erecting with a sound like a thunderbolt as the lightning discharged. The barrier rang like a bell, and a ripple could be seen traveling down it, before cracks appeared. With a sound like shattering glass the main barrier dropped and the SWAT teams opened fire.

Several cultists were mowed down instantly in the hail of well coordinated bullets, but the innermost cultists were still surrounded by a barrier being maintained by a stooped man with black eyes and gills on his otherwise human throat. Three of the inner cultists continued chanting furiously, waving their arms and raving as they desperately tried to compensate for the loss of their fellows, while the remaining two, not counting the one maintaining the barrier, moved to its edge to face the attacking police.

Half of the outer cultists were down, either hitting the ground intentionally because of the bullets or shot and unable to stand any further. The rest were cowering on the far side of the internal barrier, using it to protect them from the gunfire.
Weiss noticed that the two that had stepped up to intervene were both familiar to her. Sage Winnow pulled a conch shell from under his robes and blew it, the instrument releasing a deep, echoing call. Beside him was Father Thomas, the local priest that they had interviewed. He was chanting an incantation, preparing some kind of spell.

While the cultists had been preparing, Nora hadn’t been idle. She had rebuilt the charge around her hammer and had backed up to get another running start. With another joyous shout she jumped through the air, hammer arcing with power as she descended upon the inner barrier.

“Mashbaa,” the priest snarled, pointing sharply at Nora as she passed the apex of her jump. A stream of blue energy erupted from his hand, writhing and twisting in the air as it struck the valkyrie. She screamed in pain as she flew backward, covered in a corona of magic as she plowed through the wall and disappeared into one of the offices.

“Nora!” Ren shouted.

“Go, Mr. Lie,” Goodwitch said, stepping forward. “Check on your partner.”

Screams erupted from outside, along with strange, guttural roars. Weiss could see more than a dozen Deep Ones charging into the back of the SWAT formation, no doubt called by Sage’s conch. Winter had prepared her formation to account for outside reinforcements, but the SWAT teams were being overwhelmed by the inhumanly tough Deep Ones. She was worried for a second, until she saw a Deep One's head go flying, and followed it back to Winter, who stood calmly in the midst of the battle, sword in hand while directing her troops.

“Jaune, I need to help the SWAT teams,” Pyrrha said.

“But...” he trailed off.

“That is acceptable,” Captain Goodwitch said. “Ms. Schnee, stay with me. Can you close the portal?”

Weiss pursed her lips as she studied it. The tear in reality was slowly growing larger and more stable, drinking greedily from the ley line they were situated upon to sustain itself. “Yes, but it won’t be fast. I can start weakening it from out here, but I can’t close it without getting inside the inner barrier.”

“Alright,” Goodwitch said. “Get to work, then. I’ll deal with them.”

Goodwitch stepped forward, pulling out a rune etched riding crop. “I advise you to surrender, gentlemen.”

Sage snorted. “It’s too late, witch. The portal is opening, and soon Dagon will walk this world again. If you surrender to his worship you might live.”

“Rumpere,” Goodwitch said, gesturing with her crop. A coruscating bolt of energy flew towards the barrier in lazy spirals.

“Osak'aro,” Father Thomas snarled, meeting the spell with one of his own, cancelling both. “Dagon is with me, witch. You have no power here.”
“We shall see about that,” Goodwitch said, twirling her crop, leaving blinding trails of light behind in the air as she built her next attack.

Weiss ignored the spell battle beginning, focusing her aura on her eyes and trying to avoid looking at the blindingly bright barrier or the twisting, nauseating distortion of reality within it. Instead she studied the glyph on the ground, seeking out its weaknesses.

The magic was impressive in scope, but was as subtle as a sledgehammer, relying on channeling the pure power of the ley line into the portal to sustain it. The entire design was based upon ancient and long antiquated magical principles, and the only thing that kept it stable was the large number of participants, all acting in sync with one another. With only three still chanting, the entire structure was fundamentally unsound.

After just a few moments of searching she found where to begin, holstering her gun and rushing over to a point near the edge of the glowing red glyph where she kneeled on the ground. On the side of her holster was a small pocket, and from it she pulled out a piece of chalk which she used to carefully draw another glyph inside of the larger one. It was simple but elegant, originally designed to leach away power from a set of wards to cause them to collapse. What she was doing wasn’t quite the same thing, but with a few on the fly modifications she was satisfied that her glyph would do the job.

Weiss placed her hand inside of her chalk circle, closing her eyes and ignoring the battles occurring all around her. She guided her aura in the proper fashion to steal some of the incoming aura that powered the portal. In moments her glyph was ready, and when she triggered it it began to glow a light blue, before slowly absorbing some of the red of the portal magic, turning it a rich magenta hue. The section of the glyph around it began to fade, becoming dull as its power was syphoned away.

Weiss glanced around, taking in the battle once again. Goodwitch and the priest were still fighting, exchanging spells at a blistering pace that was far beyond Weiss’ understanding of spell magic. Winter, Pyrrha, and the SWAT teams were battling Deep Ones outside, and while their training and skill gave them an advantage, the SWAT bullets had trouble penetrating the monster’s scaly hides, and as incredible as they were, Winter and Pyrrha couldn't be everywhere at once. Ruby and Jaune had rounded up the other cultists, who had been minimally armed and had surrendered when guns were pointed at them. They were busy hustling them towards the front of the building to be taken by the SWAT posted there.

Weiss stood and moved to another point on the far side of the circle, quickly beginning to draw another glyph on the ground which mirrored the first. She needed to weaken the circle at three points to initiate her plan to disrupt the ritual, and so she quickly got to work. She had just placed her hand on her glyph to begin powering it when she felt the shift in the air.

She looked up in horror just in time to see the portal fully open, revealing the Abyssal Sea.
Second Case: Dagon

Portals were mysterious things that straddled a line between being two and three dimensional in form. Despite only providing the view of a single direction on the other side, both ends of the portal were spherical in nature, allowing people from any position to see through them, or to move through them. No matter where you stood around the portal you saw a single view of the other dimension, and people that passed through at any angle around the portal exited from a single point on the other side.

Weiss stopped her efforts to stare through the portal, as did nearly everyone fighting, human or Deep One. The first thing they saw was the darkness of the Abyssal Sea. The view was deep, deep underwater, but Weiss knew that the portal was created in such a way so as to prevent normal water from freely flowing through it.

The darkness of the deep extra planar ocean was broken up by dim, glowing lights. Fish with bioluminescent lures, or glowing bodies, or even simply leaving lighted trails behind them were commonplace. The creatures were hideous, foul little monsters, all fangs and sharp angles, all eternally hungry.

Other lights were glowing orbs scattered about, or carried in the hands of Deep Ones who swam sluggishly in the water. Other undersea denizens existed as well, such as groups of sirens, and even stranger things that took longer for Weiss to place. In the near distance she could even make out a vast city of domes and curved streets illuminated by tiny streetlights that twinkled like stars, but with vast schools of predatory fish and enormous squid monsters swimming above instead of clouds.

The main focus of the portal, however, was a single vast figure sitting upon a basalt throne facing it. Scale was difficult to make out through the viewport of the portal, but she somehow knew that the figure was truly titanic in scale. It had a dozen arms down the length of its barrel-like torso, each folded or moving about independently in ways a human found difficult with only four limbs to account for.

The skin of the vast creature was covered in scales like a Deep One, but an even darker shade of green that seemed to absorb the dull blue lights placed around its throne. Atop the vast body was a hideous head, with four long, slit-like eyes that glowed red in the dark, above a nightmare in the form of a mouth. It was round, with teeth all the way around it, and inside the open maw she could see teeth lining the throat in irregular rows extending all the way down into the all consuming darkness of its gullet.

More than simply the appearance, however, was the sheer presence of the monster on the throne. Dagon, for it could be nothing else, drew the eye and dominated the minds of those unfortunate enough to look upon it. In Dagon they could see their doom, as the great aquatic demon would no doubt devour them, and all the world after through its gaping maw.

Slowly, one after another, various cultists dropped to their knees in fits of religious ecstatic faced as they were by their god in the flesh. They began to grovel and worship in the presence of the piscine abomination, all thought of battle forgotten. The work of uncounted generations was completed by their scaly hands, and they knew that they had won.

Many of the SWAT officers felt the same, or perhaps no longer felt anything. Some ran screaming from the glimpse they had had of Dagon, while others collapsed to their knees, broken by despair, or losing all control at the impossible fear of the demon lord’s presence. A few even joined the cultists in worship, in a sudden bout of madness hoping to be spared the fate that they were sure awaited.
“Weiss!” Ruby shouted. “Weiss, you have to close the portal!”

Weiss didn’t move, didn’t blink, simply kept staring into the red eyes of the demon lord of the Abyssal Sea. More than any of the others she was overwhelmed by its presence, as she had had her aura sight active when the portal opened. She had seen powerful artifacts, and even mighty beings before, but nothing in her existence had prepared her for the experience of seeing the sheer power of a demon lord. If a normal, untrained person was a candle, and a mighty magic user like Goodwitch a bonfire, then looking at Dagon was like staring at the sun.

A sun so close that she was sitting inside its very corona.

“Weiss!” Ruby tried again, then after taking a deep breath she reached out and grabbed her partner’s jacketed shoulder, shaking her hard.

“Don’t touch me!” Weiss shrieked, jerking away from the contact so fiercely that she collapsed onto her side, staring up at Ruby in horror, her heart pounding in fear. “What-”

“Weiss, but you have to close the portal!” Ruby interrupted. “If that thing comes through...”

Weiss blinked, before looking around, although she consciously avoided looking at Dagon again. The crowd was still entirely overwhelmed by the demon lord’s presence, putting up no fight on either side. Even Captain Goodwitch was stunned, slack jawed and vacant eyed, while her opponent, Father Thomas kneeled in worship to his true god.

“Right,” Weiss said, getting back to her knees and placing a hand on the chalk glyph that she had painstakingly drawn. A few long moments of concentration and it began to glow blue, and like its predecessor across the circle it absorbed the red light that made up the portal’s glyph, syphoning power away from the construct with each passing moment.

“One more, and then I’ll need to get closer,” Weiss said, struggling to her feet while she studied the magic circle, seeking the perfect spot to finish destabilizing it.

She froze as a vast, rumbling voice like an undersea volcano erupting suddenly filled the room, driving them back to their knees, even Ruby who had someone not been overwhelmed by Dagon’s presence. It spoke no language that a mortal voice could reproduce, but somehow everyone could understand it as though it were speaking plain english.

“My worshippers, the binder seeks to close my portal,” Dagon rumbled. “Stop her, or you will be devoured along with the mortal world rather than having a place at my side.”

“Oh, shoot,” Ruby moaned as the cultists and Deep Ones came back to themselves, searching for Weiss.

Sage Winnow grinned nastily and raised his conch again, blowing through it. The Deep Ones on the far side of the portal stopped what they were doing and began to swim towards it. In moments the first passed through, staggering as it adjusted to being in the air, taking in the sights of the mortal world. Sage pointed at Weiss and growled something in a strange, gurgling language.

Weiss hadn’t been idle, however. It had taken longer than she would’ve liked, but she had managed to find the best spot to draw the final glyph. It was slowly taking form in chalk, when she froze, fumbling for her gun as the Deep One moved towards her, passing through the barrier like it wasn’t even there.
“Just do the magic!” Ruby shouted, raising her own gun and taking aim. “I’ll cover you!”

Weiss returned her attention to drawing the glyph, flinching slightly when Ruby opened fire. Like the SWAT had discovered, bullets were very poor against the scales of a Deep One, but Ruby adjusted, carefully breathing as she focused her aim, until she fired one last bullet when the Deep One was almost in striking distance. The bullet passed through the creature’s open mouth, and the soft palate was considerably less armored than the monster’s skin.

The Deep One gurgled blood and collapsed, dead instantly. Unfortunately more were coming, and they had seen what Ruby was capable of, and with the barrier blocking gunfire until they closed she didn’t have much time to take aim at their weak spots before they would be upon her.

Suddenly more gunfire struck the creatures from the side, and then Ren was there, firing two guns with impressive accuracy, wounding the creatures slightly, but most importantly slowing them down. Ruby took advantage of that to hit several in the eyes, throat, and mouth, taking them out.

Weiss finished her glyph, pumping power into it until it also activated. Standing, she drew Myrtenaster and moved up beside Ruby. “How is Nora?”

“She will be fine,” Ren said. “The spell hurt her badly, but valkyries heal quickly.”

“You finished?” Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded as she studied the portal glyph. It had faded significantly, only the dull outline of it still visible, and it pulsed erratically, the pattern slowly increasing in speed. “Yes. If I can get closer to the portal, then I can finish collapsing it.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Nora called.

Weiss glanced back at her, feeling concern when she saw the detective’s condition. She had never really trusted nonhuman entities, but her heart clenched at the sight of the woman’s obvious wounds. Deep lacerations, an arm that was badly broken, and bruises that were slowly filling in gave her the image of someone who had barely survived a serious car wreck, and wouldn’t be on their feet at all for weeks or months.

“Nora, you should rest...” Ren started.

Nora snorted. “No time to be a sloth, Ren. Don’t worry, I’ll take it easy.”

With that she gathered power in her weapon again and stalked forward, ready to swing at the inner barrier. The priest started to cast another spell, only to scream when he was smashed into the ground telekinetically by Goodwitch, who was back on her feet. The cultist snarled as he stood, and once again the two magic users engaged in a furious spell battle.

“Hahhh!” Nora roared, swinging her hammer with a full body motion to make up for her single handed grip. The head slammed into the barrier, and like before it rippled and broke apart, leaving the portal and cultists within exposed.

“Open fire!” Winter shouted. Weiss glanced over to see her sister holding her sword in one hand and a pistol in the other as she began shooting at the standing cultists, along with half a dozen SWAT officers. The battle outside had turned in the favor of the police, although some of the Deep Ones were still fighting, but most had been brought down either by either massed firepower or Pyrrha and Winter’s swords.

“Sister,” Winter said as she led her people over. “You have a plan?”
Weiss nodded. “If I can get close to the portal I should be able to close it.”

“You heard her – drive the invaders back through the portal!”

Half a dozen of the scaled creatures were massed in front of the portal, obviously intending to hold it to help their compatriots pass through. The priest and Sage were both still up as well, the former surrounded by his own defensive magics as he continued to duel Goodwitch, the latter having hid among the Deep Ones, not making himself a target for the gunfire. Behind them Weiss could see a huge wave of Deep Ones swimming ever closer to the portal, and in moments they began to pour through.

Weiss adjusted her grip on her sword and stood beside Ruby, who put away her gun, concentrating for a long moment until her scythe formed. “Let’s go!” Ruby shouted.

SWAT provided cover fire until Nora, Ruby and Weiss got in close with their melee weapons. Weiss focused on a single target, a Deep One with several bleeding bullet wounds, although the injuries did little to slow it down. She set herself, focused on her target, and then lunged, driving her blade into the creature’s throat. It gurgled, reaching for her, but she twisted the blade before pulling it out and withdrawing. The Deep One managed a single step before falling to the ground, bleeding out swiftly.

Ruby’s weapon, unlike everything else that had been tried seemed to cut through the enemy with very little effort. One wild swing removed a Deep One’s arm, sending the limb flying, while the follow up sank deep into the creature’s stomach. It howled, batting at her with it’s other arm, which was longer than a human’s, but still too short to reach Ruby past her long weapon.

Weiss stepped forward and carefully stabbed Ruby’s opponent in the eye, killing it by the time the tip touched the back of the Deep One’s skull. She pulled the blade out and had to immediately use it to parry a swing from another Deep One, the force of the blow sending her staggering backwards and numbing her arm.

Ruby turned swiftly, jerking the scythe from the chest of the dead Deep One and bringing her weapon around to decapitate the one that was attacking Weiss. Unfortunately the blade came far too close for comfort, forcing Weiss to duck to avoid losing the top of her own head. “Watch it!”

“Sorry,” Ruby said, looking down and fiddling with her weapon.

“Look out!” Weiss screeched, lunging past Ruby to bury the tip of her blade in the face of another Deep One, the weapon scraping along scales before sliding into the eye socket. It thrashed and screamed for a moment, almost ripping her weapon from her hand, but in the end it collapsed, dead.

Ruby then stepped in front of her, scythe at the ready, and Weiss gave her a nod, following in her wake. They made a very impressive team, Ruby’s reach and power keeping the enemy at bay, while Weiss protected their backs and inflicted lethal wounds on any Deep One that was distracted enough to take its eyes off of her in favor of watching the wickedly sharp scythe.

They made quite a bit of progress, becoming the tip of the spear for SWAT, who had less effective weapons, but were well trained and drilled by Winter. Several fell, but in the end they reached the portal itself, killing more Deep Ones and holding the only side that allowed enemies to pass through. Nora grinned and took a position at the front, waving her hammer wildly and knocking anyone coming through the portal back into it.

“Well, this is awkward.” Sage Winnow said, raising his arms when the last of the Deep Ones on their side of the portal fell. “I surrender.”
“Contundito!” Goodwitch shouted. Weiss glanced up in time to see a large blast of magic slamming into Father Thomas, sending him flying away from her, his body limp as a rag doll.

He flew over the portal, and Nora, who while still wounded was already looking better, jumped up with a grin. “Fore!”

The hammer met his side with a crunch, shattering any remaining magic defenses he had left and caving in his chest. She grinned and bounded over to the portal, knocking another Deep One back in, spinning her hammer in her hand happily.

“Detective Schnee,” Goodwitch said, limping over to them. She had obviously had a difficult time with her battle, as she was soaking wet and bleeding in several places. Despite that her eyes her were still fierce and she spoke as firmly as ever. “Can you close the portal?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “It will take time, though.”

“Then we’ll give it to you!” Ruby said confidently, Jaune and Pyrrha both nodding as they joined the defensive line.

Weiss moved close to the portal, sheathing her sword and kneeling on the ground. She pulled out a piece of chalk before hesitating and looking over at her sister, who was standing nearby, sword at the ready. “Winter?”

“Yes?”

“Could you draw collapsing sigils there, there, and there,” Weiss said, pointing at several locations within the larger glyph.

“Of course,” Winter said, pulling out chalk of her own. “Standard variation?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Please, have them tap into my earlier glyphs.”

With that Weiss got to work. The glyph to finally collapse the portal was nothing like her earlier efforts, or even the glyphs that she had asked her sister to draw to speed up the process. They had all been quick, simple things that she had mastered as a child under the harsh scrutiny of her tutors. The glyph that she was working on was many, many times more complicated, and it had to be carefully adjusted based upon hundreds of factors.

“Weiss!” Ruby screamed, diving on top of her partner, pushing her to the ground, thankfully away from the delicate runes she had been drawing.

“Don’t touch me!” Weiss shrieked, thrashing away from the other woman, who rolled off of her immediately.

Looking up, Weiss felt her jaw drop. From the portal a long tendril of water had formed, the liquid darker than it should’ve been in the stark lighting of the cannery. The tendril had obviously been aimed directly for her, barely missing grabbing her because of Ruby’s efforts.

“Help!” the unfortunate SWAT officer who had been standing behind Weiss and hadn’t had as good of reflexes as Ruby screamed. The tendril had wrapped around him in an instant, and before anyone could react he was pulled off of his feet and dragged through the portal.

The Abyssal Sea was another plane of existence, but the water there behaved the same as the deepest oceans of the world. In a second the unfortunate man’s stomach had caved in, blood and air erupting from his mouth from the massive pressure. His limp body was dragged by the indistinguishable water
tendril directly to Dagon, and into its gaping maw. Weiss could see his body being torn to shreds from contact with the teeth inside of the demon lord’s throat, while the creature’s four eyes were locked onto her.

“Well!” Winter shouted. “You need to hurry!”

Safety protocols called for a team of binders to spend a week just planning such a complex glyph as she was drawing. Weiss dove for her chalk, continuing to work, and in a matter of minutes she had completed her efforts, the complex, rune-etched circle complete. She didn’t know if it would work. It could fail, perhaps even backfire entirely, ripping the portal even larger.

Looking up, she saw that the portal had sprouted dozens of tendrils, each reaching for her with incredible speed, only to be torn apart by a scythe, a hammer, her sister’s saber, and various bullets from Ren and the SWAT officers. One had even grabbed Jaune, although Pyrrha made short work of it, cutting him loose before it could pull him in. Through the portal she could see that Dagon had stood up from his throne, and had begun to slowly swim towards them, his immense bulk slowly filling their view.

“Well work,” Weiss whispered, placing both hands on the glyph that she had drawn, pumping every bit of her aura into it, desperately trying to bring it online as she stared armageddon in the eye as Dagon continued to swim closer, his wrath filled gaze locked with her terrified one.

Weiss almost didn’t notice when the binding magic was ready, only the sudden lack of drain from her aura pulling her back from her staring match with the demon lord. Taking one last deep breath, she triggered the magic.

The three glyphs that Winter had drawn tapped into the mana that had pooled into the power sinks that Weiss had used to drain away the stability of the portal glyph, triggering a wave of pure mana towards the portal. Everything went strangely still as the glyph under her hands pulsed, over filled with power from the sudden massive influx of mana, until it exploded outward, knocking everyone off of their feet.

Weiss stared up at the ceiling for a moment, her ears ringing, before rolling onto her side, desperate to see if her magic had worked. Everyone in the room had been knocked to the ground and were groggly trying to move. The only one on his feet was Sage Winnow, who staggered over to the portal, his arms still cuffed behind his back from his earlier surrender.

“Well me, Lord Dagon!” he shouted. “I can still reopen the portal!”

The portal was rapidly shrinking. While before it had been well over ten feet tall and steadily growing, it was now barely the height of a man, and in a few short moments it would close entirely. Weiss smirked triumphantly, before gasping as another water tendril passed through the portal.

Instead of attacking the crowd of downed police it wrapped around Sage, who began to scream as he was pulled through. Unlike the SWAT officer, Sage wasn’t entirely human, and he still thrashed and screamed even on the floor of the Abyssal Sea. The last thing that Weiss saw as the portal finished closing was his body being torn apart as he was stuffed alive down Dagon’s toothy throat.
Ruby collapsed face down on the couch with a long, drawn out moan. She was beyond exhausted, weary to her very bones and ready to stay still for the rest of forever if she could. The old, worn out couch in their apartment felt like the softest bed she’d ever laid on, and in moments she was drifting into a pleasantly warm haze of near sleep.

“Jeez, Rubes, are you sure you don’t need a doctor?” Yang asked, slumping onto the couch at her feet. If Ruby was a little taller she wouldn’t have been able to without moving her legs, which made Ruby pout slightly, annoyed that her small height was responsible for her being shaken awake.

“No... no doctors,” Ruby groaned. “They’re half of why I’m feeling this way.”

“What do you mean?” Yang asked.

Knowing that sleep was now going to be impossible to come by unless she was willing to get up and find her bed, Ruby slowly rolled over onto her back, getting more comfortable to actually talk. “Don’t ask me why, but for some reason Weiss had us go to the hospital and take about a billion tests. She kept making them check for food poisoning, and take blood tests, and who knows what else...”

“Did you eat anything weird at the cannery?”

“No,” Ruby complained. “She was just weird. If she wasn’t insisting she get tested too I would’ve just left, even if she did yell at me again...”

“Ugh, she’s such a bitch,” Yang complained.

“Hey, don’t call her that!” Ruby objected.

Yang gave her a flat look. “She’s the bitchiest bitch to ever bitch. She treats you like garbage-”

“She doesn’t!” Ruby objected. “...very often... anymore.”

“-she doesn’t have a single friend in the entire department-”

“I’m her friend!”

“-she called Blake the ‘c’ ‘h’ word...”

“Okay,” Ruby said, deflating. “That was bad. But... she knew it was bad that she said it, and she said she doesn't really hate faunus. She didn’t seem like some bad racist person when we interviewed some faunus for the case!”

“Her family enslave the faunus with magical contracts they can’t get out of until they’ve served for years,” Yang said. “The Schnees are monsters!”

“That’s what her family does!” Ruby defended. “Wait, her family does that? No, off topic. Weiss doesn’t have anything to do with her family’s business. She’s a detective, just like us!”

“Not like us,” Yang said. “I am a gorgeous bad ass, you are a bundle of heroic sunshine in a pint
“sized package-”

“Don’t call me pint sized,” Ruby pouted.

“-she is a crabby bitch who’s family probably bribed their way to making her a detective.”

“Hey,” Ruby said, her eyes narrowing, starting to actually get annoyed with Yang. “Don’t say that about her. She’s a detective ‘cause Ozpin wanted her to be, not ’cause of her money.”

Yang rolled her eyes. “Fine. She’s a detective because she’s a creepy necrophiliac or whatever-”

“No!” Ruby barked. “You do not get to make fun of her about her magic. She’s already used it to help a bunch, and she’s going to keep using it to- to save lives and help people and do good things. Don’t talk about her like that!”

Yang stared at Ruby like she was seeing her for the first time. “Where the hell’d this come from, Rubles? Just a little while ago you were the one sitting here eating ice cream and complaining about her like it was your job.”

Ruby frowned, looking down guiltily. “I shouldn’t have. She wasn’t... easy to get along with, but she’s not a bad person.”

“She’s still a racist ice queen.”

Ruby sighed. “Yang...”

“Why do you care so much all of a sudden?” Yang demanded, looking frustrated.

“We’ve come to an understanding,” Ruby said. “Like I said, she’s not bad. She tries really, really hard, and she might not know a ton about police stuff, but she’s super smart, and it’s not like I know a bunch about this detective stuff, either. We’re both learning together, and I think we’re really pretty good... ish, at this stuff, and she’s my partner, so-”

“Ruby,” Yang said. “You’re rambling. Look, I don’t like her. I'll try not to insult her in front of you, but still, you’re acting like you’ve got a crush on her or something.”

Yang laughed, and after a moment Ruby looked away, faking a laugh as best she could. “Right. That’d be crazy.”

Yang stopped laughing and stared at her sister. “Wait... you don’t really have a crush on her, do you? You can’t... she’s horrible!”

Ruby collapsed back into the couch again. “Yang! You just said you wouldn’t call her names...”

“No, seriously, all she does is yell at you and treat you like dirt,” Yang said. “She completely freaks out when you try to touch her-”

“Hey, I don’t think that’s her being mean,” Ruby said. “I think she’s got some... issue with being touched or something.”

Yang just stared at her. “Damn it, Ruby, you actually have a crush on the ice queen. What the hell?”

Ruby groaned again. “I don’t know if I do or not. I just... there were these sirens...”

“Sirens?
“Yeah,” Ruby sighed. “I got caught by their singing until Weiss saved me. But... the thing is... when I was hypnotized or whatever the one who did it... she looked just like Weiss. And I looked up sirens later... Weiss didn’t come in until lunch, so I spent a little bit in the library looking them up.... anyway. I looked up sirens, and if they look like a specific person... it’s the person you’re attracted to...”

“Ruby...” Yang trailed off. “Maybe the book’s wrong...”

“It’s not even just that,” Ruby said. “I didn’t really think about it until then, but... when she’s not being all mean and stuff... I do like her Yang. I’ve got a crush on Weiss Schnee.”

Yang just stared at her sister for a long moment, before leaning over to smack her on the back of the head. “Ow!” Ruby complained. “What was that for?!?”

“Just seeing if I can knock some sense into you,” Yang grumbled. “Look, I can kinda understand finding her attractive. I mean, except for the constant bitch face, the scar, and the fact she’s built like a twelve year old, height and all...”

Ruby glared, getting angry. “Don’t say that stuff! Weiss is beautiful, and, and she isn’t that mean, and you’re the big meanee.”

“Right,” Yang drawled. “But seriously, even if she wasn’t a total bitch, she’s mean to you. Like, all the time. Did we raise you wrong? Come on, sis, when boys pull your pigtails it’s ‘cause they’re assholes, not ‘cause they’re flirting.”

“Yang...”

“No, don’t ‘Yang’ me,” she said. “I’m serious. You’re crushing all over a girl who treats you like shit.”

“Yang...” Ruby sighed. “Look, she can be, um, difficult. But she’s really nice inside. She’s like a porcupine. All prickly, but really sweet underneath.”

“And you’ve actually seen this sweet interior?” Yang asked skeptically.

“Yes!” Ruby agreed. “A little. Sometimes.”

“Ruby...”

Ruby groaned, slumping and covering her head with an arm. “Fine. I’ll admit it. It’s the worst crush ever.”

“I’ll get us some beer,” Yang sighed. “I’m going to need a lot after this conversation. And hey, Goodwitch insisted the two of you take some time off after that case, right? Maybe some time away from her bitchiness will help you get over this thing.”

Ruby just whimpered, but didn’t disagree.

———

“Well, well, well, what do we have here,” Roman Torchwick said casually.

He wasn’t very tall for a man, although he wasn’t excessively short. He wore a long white coat,
black gloves, and a black bowler hat with a red band. He grinned, pausing to light a cigar, before tucking away his lighter and twirling his cane dramatically. “Can you believe it? All of these wards, and the idiots didn’t even bother to defend the interior. It’s like they didn’t expect someone to go around them.”

His companion nodded. She was a beautiful young woman with pink and brown hair streaked with white, with one pink eye and the other brown. She had a smirk on her pale face, and was wearing an open white coat lined with pink, brown pants with knee high white boots, and had a delicate parasol in her hands.

“Well, Neo, let’s make with the magic,” Torchwick said excitedly.

He pulled out an antique hand mirror with an elaborately wrought silver frame, adjusting it slightly to see better under the dim light of the crescent moon. “Mirror, mirror, in my hand, show me all the routes you can.”

The mirror clouded up, and when it cleared he could see a room. It looked to be fairly run down, and after a moment he shook the mirror. It became cloudy again, and when it cleared up it was showing a different scene. He frowned and repeated the process several more times.

“Ah hah!” he said finally. “This is it!”

Neo leaned around this arm, looking through the mirror for a moment before nodding in agreement. She took the mirror from his hand and held it out in front of her so that the glass faced him.

“Alright, wish me luck!”

With those words Torchwick placed his hands into the mirror, gripping the inside of the frame and pulling himself through. The further he climbed in the larger the mirror appeared to be from his perspective, until it seemed large enough to allow his body to pass despite still being only a small mirror held by Neo.

The room on the other side was the one that he had seen through the mirror. It was a fancy, elaborately decorated room, full of antique furniture and dusty old decorations which were older and worth more money than any aesthetic value that they offered. Torchwick wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“Ugh, and people call me a criminal,” he grumbled, puffing on his cigar, but only after checking to make sure that there weren’t any smoke detectors. It wouldn’t do to break into a high security area only to get caught by something so stupid. Neo would never let him live it down.

After adjusting his gloves he lazily strolled down the hall, swinging his cane as he went. Everything screamed of class, money, and stuffy taste, but despite the value of some of the pieces he kept his greedy hands to himself. He was only after one thing, and no matter how sticky his fingers were, he knew everything in the manor would be too hard to fence to be worth the trouble of stealing.

It took much longer than he would like, but fortunately the owner was old enough to be a heavy sleeper, and outdated enough to not bother with any kind of internal security. When he finally found the small stone statue of a crouching Beowolf he grinned. “Finally! I thought I’d never find it. Really should’ve paid more attention when I was casing the place...”

Torchwick studied it for a moment, concentrating his aura to his eyes to make sure that it was the real thing, as well as to verify that there weren’t any magical protections on it. Sure enough, it was a deep, black hole of dark magic to his mage sight, full of the residue of generations of the sick, sticky
dark mana that it was designed to contain and channel.

After he grabbed it he only needed to make a quick trip back to where he started. The large mirror looked strangely foggy, but not so much so that someone would be sure magic was involved if they glanced at it. After taking one last look around he climbed in, grumbling slightly as he emerged from the hand mirror Neo held, almost tripping as he found his feet.

“Here we go, Neo, one hideous old magic knick knack,” he said triumphantly, showing her the crude statuette.

She grinning viciously, opening a pouch to place it in.

“Alright, that’s another one down, and just a few more to go,” he said cheerfully. “Hey, why don’t we try to track down two at once, see if we can get several in one go next time?”

Chapter End Notes

That concludes the second episode, and like all of the interludes it included material from non-Weiss points of view, including our first actual White Rose, although it’s still only one sided. Still, hang onto your seats for the next case, as Ruby and Weiss try to track down Roman Torchwick.
Weiss panted, sweat streaming down her face as she stared down her opponent, not daring to break her stance long enough to wipe it away. She had been pushed to the very edge of her endurance, but her enemy still refused to fall, taunting her with a stupid grin. Finally Weiss couldn’t stand the mockery any longer, lunging forward as fast as she could.

It wasn’t nearly fast enough. Even if she wasn’t exhausted, her opponent still had reaction times far faster than any human opponent that Weiss had ever faced. Given her other abilities, the possibility of inhumanity being responsible for that crossed Weiss’ mind for a moment, before she was forced to push it away in favor of the dance of battle.

Blade met weapon shaft as they slashed, thrust, parried and dodged. Weiss’ weapon was light and quick, occasionally sneaking in to land glancing blows, but never anything substantial, her opponent’s reach advantage and speed keeping her at bay. Weiss backed off half a step, before darting forward again, this time not simply making a single attack, but rather initiating a sequence.

High thrust, blocked. Slash towards the neck, deflected. High thrust, dodged. Over and over again Weiss worked her opponent’s focus high, each strike slowly but surely dragging up her opponent’s heavy weapon up as she struggled to block them all. Finally, when the weapon was suitably pulled from position, Weiss stabbed again, this time going straight for the belly.

Just inches before her sword would’ve struck home, her opponent’s weapon twirled around, the high hold, which she had previously assumed was out of position, simply allowed her to accelerate the swing with the aid of gravity. The heavy weapon pushed aside Weiss’ sword before continuing forward to slam into her stomach.

The air was blasted from her lungs with a loud grunt as she was thrown backwards, her sword leaving her suddenly numb hand. When she hit the mat her vision tunneled to almost nothing as she grappled with consciousness, not even feeling her subsequent bounce before she was finally able to get air back into her lungs.

“Are you okay!” Ruby shouted, dropping her practice scythe and running over to her partner, going to her knees beside her. “I didn’t mean to hit you that hard!”

Weiss struggled to find enough air to speak, with each moment that she was incapacitated adding to her burning shame. Countless years of fencing training, and she was taken down by her dunce of a partner, who had only spent a single summer learning from Pyrrha how to actually use a stupid farm implement to fight. Her face burned, not simply with heat from overexertion, but from mortification as well.

She was pathetic. Ruby didn’t bother to take her seriously, grinning and enjoying herself the entire time they sparred, while she had barely been able to keep up with the bundle of energy. Two months before when they had started sparred together regularly she had easily been able to best her inexperienced partner, but she suddenly found herself flat on her back, defeated in front of everyone training hand to hand at Beacon that day.

It was utterly humiliating.

“I’m... fine...” Weiss gasped, trying to find some way to recover faster with her aura. She was sure that there was some method, but all that she knew how to do was channel some to her stomach to deal with the pain of the heavy hit she’d taken.
“Oh, good,” Ruby sighed with relief.

Weiss finally caught her breath, sitting up and looking around. As she had feared, while most of the officers in the room were busy training, several were simply watching, and the battle between a sword and a scythe was far more interesting for the audience to focus on than the basic grappling or boxing skills being employed by the rest of the room. Her humiliating defeat burned even more painfully with every pair of eyes that had seen it.

Finally she looked back over to her partner, who had that same infuriating grin on her face. She was also squirming, obviously wanting to say something, but for some reason holding back until Weiss had recovered. No doubt a desire to brag about her victory while Weiss was fully able to absorb it, she thought bitterly.

“What?” Weiss finally barked, wanting to just get it over with.

“You were amazing!” Ruby finally gushed.

Weiss blinked, completely confused. She looked at Ruby like she’d grown a second head. The other detective sounded serious, despite the absurdity of the remark. “I lost,” Weiss spat.

It was Ruby’s turn to look confused. “Huh? You got me, like, fifty times. Even that last set of attacks you’d’ve cut my arms up if you’d had a real weapon. Besides, the only reason it didn’t work is I saw you do the same thing to Pyrrha the other day. I thought up a way to use my scythe to break it up if you tried it on me, and I guess I got lucky that I hit you first.”

As Weiss stared at her, she found herself ashamed for a different reason. Instead of mocking, Ruby’s grin suddenly seemed happy, joyful at spending time sparring with her partner. Instead of humiliation at her eventually being hit by Ruby, Weiss suddenly remembered that they’d been sparring for the better part of an hour, and that she’d dominated most of the match, with Ruby’s improving skills still having a ways to go against Weiss’ experience. Everything negative about Ruby had been her own feelings projected onto her, and Weiss was suddenly glad that she hadn’t been able to talk immediately after her defeat.

“Well... you’ve been improving quite a bit,” Weiss said. “You might’ve seen through my pattern because you’d seen it before, but that still means you absorbed it and found a counter without actually facing it yourself. Considering the only hand to hand training you’ve had before this summer was some academy self defense and a few tricks your brute of a sister showed you, you should be very proud of your improvement.”

They sat in silence for a minute, before Weiss sighed. “I suppose you won, however. That means that you won our... bet.”

Ruby grinned, bouncing in place, all of her energy somehow restored with that one statement. “Alright!”

Weiss grimaced, slowly standing to face her fate on her feet. “Alright. You get to select an... activity that we have to do. What is it?”

Ruby smiled at her, chuckling a little nervously while blushing. “Weiss... if you’re really that upset about it, we don’t have to do anything.”

Weiss shook her head. “A Schnee always keeps their word. What activity are we doing?”

Ruby looked down shyly. “Well, I thought you could come over to my apartment and we could watch a movie together.”
Weiss breathed a sigh of relief. While she was nervous at the idea of going over to another person’s home, even if it was her only friend’s, she was glad that it wasn’t too onerous of an activity. She didn’t watch many movies, but sitting still for a few hours and pretending to watch something wasn’t too bad. “Alright. Why did you choose to bet this time?”

Ruby chuckled. “Um... I noticed something when I was practicing with my aura last night. If I push it right, I start moving faster. It was kinda weird at first, and I only used it a little bit, but that’s how I was able to swing faster than you could stab me...”

“Do you think it’s another spell inherent to your nature?” Weiss asked curiously.

“Maybe?” Ruby offered. “I haven’t had a chance to really work with it much, yet. I’m not even sure what all I can do...”

Weiss smiled at her. “Then we should work on that the next time that we train your magic.”

Weiss had begun to teaching Ruby to use her aura and the basics of magic theory after closing the Dagon case. Weiss wasn’t the most patient teacher, and Ruby wasn’t the most attentive student, but she’d managed to get a firm grasp of basic aura tricks, like seeing magical emanations, as well as calling up her scythe quickly and reliably. She had yet to learn how to perform any actual spells, however.

After hitting the showers and getting dressed in normal clothing they grabbed a quick lunch before returning to their cubicle. Ruby began flipping through some paperwork, while Weiss finished filling out the reports about a recent Grimm they had hunted down. The demons had been appearing more often, and while they were easy to deal with it was a little concerning.

“Ladies,” Sergeant Port said, coming up beside their desks. “You are working hard! Why in my day, I, a handsome, young, daring officer-”

Weiss zoned out for a while, considering Ruby’s magical training. If she had found a new spell, especially one as powerful as magic that sped her up, it would be quite significant. They would need to work hard to get a handle on it during their next few training sessions.

“-and that, is how I used a stapler to defeat a pesky Grimm. Ha ha!”

Weiss blinked, paying attention to Port again as he finished his story. “Did you have a new case for us, sir?”

Sergeant Port blinked, before clearing his throat. “Of course! The regular detectives have spent all morning trying to figure things out, and now they’ve come to us. Ladies, prepare yourselves... for a locked door mystery!”

Weiss frowned, taking the folder and starting to look through it. “Locked door mystery?”

“Come on,” Ruby said, jumping up and carrying her folder with her. We don’t want to leave them waiting!”

Weiss took advantage of the car ride to skim through the file, a frown on her face as she considered what she was reading. Eventually Ruby cleared her throat, gaining her attention. “So... what’s the
“Dunce,” Weiss said fondly while rolling her eyes. “You just wanted to drive here so that you didn’t have to read.”

Ruby pouted. “It’s efficient.”


“So someone broke in,” Ruby said, shrugging. “Did they steal something?”

“I said it was a burglary.”

“Burglary just means breaking into a building with the intent to commit a crime,” Ruby said with the inflection of someone quoting something. “You don’t have to steal to be a burglar.”

Weiss blushed and fiddled with the folder to cover her embarrassment. It was easy to forget that her dolt of a partner was actually fairly intelligent, and had experience as a police officer. “Right. Yes, something was stolen.”

“So why’d they call us?” Ruby asked.

“The victim, Bran Infuscate, is a magic user, and his home was professionally warded,” Weiss explained. “He’s tied into the wards and was home last night, but wasn’t awakened by them when someone broke in and stole a statue he owned.”

“So... whoever did it got around the wards somehow?” Ruby asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said. “It isn’t easy penetrating wards even with brute force, and getting around them without triggering them is even harder, especially if you are intending to commit a crime. If the ward inspection listed here was correct, then a theft like this shouldn’t have been possible.”

“So you said a statue was stolen?” Ruby asked. “Was it valuable? And was anything else taken?”

Weiss skimmed through the folder again. “Yes, the statue is very old and was appraised for quite a bit of money. Nothing else was taken.”

“So not a normal robbery then,” Ruby said. “Why would someone go to the trouble of getting past really good security and then not take everything worth money?”

“The money must not matter,” Weiss said.

“So if they weren’t after money, what were they after? Revenge? The statue? Does it do anything?”

“The report doesn’t say,” Weiss said.

A few minutes later they pulled to a stop and Weiss took a good look at their destination. It was in the nice part of town, not terribly far from Schnee Manor, and in fact was resting on one of the same ley lines. The building was large for a private home, but was certainly no mansion. It was a two story, six bedroom affair, and it was surrounded by only a modest lawn with a hedge fencing it.

There weren’t many police left on guard, just a pair at the door, and while Ruby approached and spoke with them Weiss pushed her aura into her eyes and examined the wards. They were modest but well constructed, designed to keep out hostile magics and extra planar entities, as well as warn about anyone crossing the edge of them. She focused on that aspect in particular while she slowly walked around the building, but she didn’t see any gaps in its coverage.
“Find anything?” Ruby asked when she reached the front again.

Weiss sighed and shook her head. “The wards are fairly basic, but I saw no sign of them being breached, or any obvious way past them without alerting the person tied into the wards.”

“If you’d like, uh, the owner’s tied to them, and you can, uh, speak to him ma’am,” one of the police said.

Weiss nodded. “Is there anyone else here?”

“Nope, uh, forensics finished up already,” the policeman said. “Didn’t find nothin’.”

Weiss then swept past him into the house, letting Ruby make nice with the police while she did so. The inside was nicely decorated, in an old fashioned kind of way. Some areas of Schnee Manor were similar, with victorian sensibilities and busts of famous writers, mages, and philosophers as decorations scattered about.

An old man with a stooped back and tired eyes walked into the room, eyeing her and Ruby cautiously. “I’m Bran Infuscate, owner of this house. May I ask who you ladies are?”

“I’m Detective Weiss Schnee.”

“Um, Detective Ruby Rose! How are you?”

“I am as well as can be expected of a man who’s home has been violated,” he drawled. “You are with Supernatural Affairs, then?”

“Yes,” Weiss said with a nod.

Bran gave her a thin smile. “It is an honor to have you investigating, Miss Schnee. I hope that you can get to the bottom of this swiftly.”

Weiss eyed him for a moment to determine his seriousness, and then nodded, giving him a thin smile. “Of course. What can you tell me about the statue?”

“It is an ugly thing, but very, very old,” Bran said. “Older than written history, and in the form of a Beowulf. It seems to serve as some form of crude mana battery, but the traces within are so terribly tainted with darkness that I did not feel it wise to play with it.”

“Dark magic?” Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow. “Why did you have this statue?”

“I am an antiquarian and a wizard of some small skill,” he said with a shrug. “One of my colleagues found it on a dig, oh, forty years back? I helped him learn as much about it as I could, and eventually he gave it to me in his will. I’ve had it for almost ten years myself.”

“Has anyone expressed an interest in it?” Weiss asked.

“People do from time to time,” he said. “I have the occasional student of the occult visit – I am skilled at identifying unusual relics, and I like to give them tours of my collection, and it rests in a place of honor amongst them. After all, it is by far the most expensive possession I own.”

“Any unusual interest?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “As I said, I get a few offers now and then, but I don’t need the money.”
“Was anything else taken?” Ruby asked.

“No,” he said, shaking his head again. “I checked everything thoroughly. Nothing seems out of place.”

“Your wards didn’t indicate any problems, either?” Weiss asked.

“No,” he said. “I would’ve awakened if someone so much as played with a window. I do not know how they managed to steal it.”

“Thank you,” Ruby said. “Which way was the statue kept?”

“I will show you,” he said, gesturing for them to follow.

The rest of the house followed the same decorating sensibilities as the entrance room. They passed through a drawing room and down a long hallway to a large room at the center of the house. It was obviously his personal collection, with a great many strange and mystical objects scattered about.

Ruby looked around in awe, while Weiss activated her aura sight and gave the objects on display a cursory examination. Some pieces she recognized as being simply artistic, or of historical interest, but most were enchanted to one degree or another. A few items, like a gemstone sitting proudly on a podium, were worth a considerable sum whether sold to a mage or a mundane fence. Other items, like a ceremonial mask on the wall, bore incredibly strong enchantments.

“As you can see, my collection has some small value,” Bran said modestly, gesturing around the room. “If this was an ordinary theft, why did they only take one thing?”

Weiss and Ruby approached the stand at the center of the room. It had a velvet pillow on top, and had obviously served to display the heart of the collection. Weiss noticed a lack of protective warding on anything in the room, including nothing to protect the missing statue.

“Do you smoke?” Ruby asked from where she was crouched in front of the stand.

“No, miss,” he said. “I do not allow anyone to smoke in here. Some pieces of my collection could be damaged by it, after all.”

“It looks like someone didn’t listen to you,” Ruby said, pointing to a small amount of ash on the floor.
Third Case: Family

Weiss fumed silently while examining another section of wards. Like all of the rest she found nothing of relevance. However the criminal entered, she was quite certain they didn’t interfere with them in any way.

It had been almost an hour since Ruby had seen the few specs of ash and ran off, saying that she would be back soon with absolutely no explanation, leaving Weiss alone with Bran. She had asked him a series of follow up questions, but had learned nothing of interest. After a short period of awkward standing around she had gone to inspect the wards in greater detail.

When the door finally slammed open and Ruby came bounding in she was met by Weiss’ coldest glare. “Where have you been?!”

“Sorry Weiss,” Ruby said, grinning sheepishly. “But I got a great idea! It just took a little longer than I hoped to get him.”

“What are you talking...” Weiss started only to stop, staring in confusion at what entered.

It was a black and white corgi. It came trundling in on its tiny little legs and strolled right up to Weiss, stopping in front of her and barking innocently.

“This is Zwei,” Ruby said nervously at Weiss’ blank expression.

“Why would you bring this mangy... drooling... mutt... who should always come to every crime scene with us, yes he should, yes he should!” Weiss said, her sentence ending in cutesy baby talk as she crouched over the dog, staring at it with sparkling eyes. She wanted to pet it more than anything in the world, but she restrained herself. Unlike some dogs, it barked in a friendly way without actually trying to touch her, making her smile widen to the biggest grin that Ruby had ever seen from her.

“Wow, Weiss, I didn’t know you liked dogs,” Ruby said. “Or could smile like that... it’s a little creepy...”

Weiss straightened up, blushing and clearing her throat. “I’ve never actually been around one before. I couldn’t... anyway. Zwei, was it? He seems very well behaved. Yes he does... yes he does!”

Zwei barked, and Ruby cleared her throat. “Anyway, um, I brought him because I found that ash, and he can see if he can find a trail.”

Weiss raised an eyebrow. “So you brought your dog from home? Don’t they have police dogs for that sort of thing? And I’m pretty sure they don’t use cute little dogs like this one.”

“Zwei is a police dog!” Ruby objected. “He’s the best police dog, too! Dad trained him.”

“Your father?” Weiss asked.

Ruby nodded. “Yeah, he used to be part of Supernatural Affairs, but he retired when I was little and started training police dogs. He trained Zwei to be the best police dog in the world!”

“Really?” Weiss asked.

“Yup,” Ruby said. “He’s even really good at supernatural stuff, too. He’s part foo dog.”
“Foo dog?” Weiss asked. “He doesn’t look like a temple guardian.”

Ruby grinned sheepishly. “He’s pretty far removed from that side of his breeding, but... he acts like a foo dog sometimes. I guess the traits... except size and looks... came through.”

“Sounds like this cute little guy won the genetic lottery,” Weiss cooed. “Yes he did, yes he did!”

A bemused Ruby led the way back to the collection room, and when she did she pointed at the ground where the ash was. “Zwei! Find the trail.”

Zwei barked and walked over, sniffing at the ash. He then turned around in a circle, sniffing the ground, before trotting out of the room, both detectives on his tail. He walked in and out of several rooms, following a winding path before finally stopping in a guest room in front of a tall free standing mirror. He walked up to it and barked again before turning to face Ruby with his tongue lolling out.

“What was that all about?” Weiss asked. “Why did he go all over the place and then just stop at a mirror?”

“Well, maybe the person who broke in was looking around?” Ruby offered. “You know, trying to find the statue? That’d explain why he went into every room in the hallway.”

“I suppose,” Weiss said. “That still doesn’t explain stopping here.”

Ruby frowned. “I’m not too sure about that part, either. Why did you stop here, Zwei?”

He barked at them, before turning to the mirror and poking it with his nose and barking again. Weiss frowned and activated her aura sight, causing her to gasp. The mirror glowed slightly, and she leaned closer to try and study it.

“What is it?” Ruby asked.

“Use your aura sight,” Weiss said. “What do you see?”

“Whoa!” Ruby said. “The mirror’s kinda glowing. Is it supposed to do that?”

“No,” Weiss said. “What else do you notice?”

Ruby studied it for a moment, before pointing at a faint strand of violet light that emerged from the center of the mirror and stretched into the distance. It was so thin and dim that they could only see it when they focused very hard on it. “What’s that?”

“Very good,” Weiss said, making Ruby preen at the praise. “That is a mystical link between the mirror and some other object. Someone enchanted the mirror, connecting it with something elsewhere.”

“It’s moving!” Ruby shouted, pointing at the line which was shifting slightly.

Weiss frowned as she studied it. “You’re right. So whatever object the mirror is connected to is mobile, possibly something hand held.”

“So what’s the connection?” Ruby asked. “Is it how the burglar got in?”

“It is,” Weiss agreed. “That bright purple shade? That means that the magic is a form of dimensional anchor. Specifically, I suspect that the criminal passed through some form of sub dimension, and used this mirror as his target for where to come out.”
“Right,” Ruby said, nodding sagely.

Weiss stared at her for a long moment. “You didn’t understand any of that, did you?”

Ruby blushed, rubbing the back of her head sheepishly. “Sorry.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Dunce. I know you haven’t received a proper magical education. Basically... remember that portal to a different plane of existence? You know, from the Dagon case?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “Big magical hole in the air in the middle of the warehouse.”

“Exactly. That’s what’s required to open a path to an entirely separate plane of existence. Well, it took more than usual since they were trying to bring a demon lord through, but a portal is needed for planar travel regardless. Our plane, however, has a number of what are called sub dimensions. Basically... it’s the difference in taking a flight to a different country, and driving to a different city. They are much closer, so it’s much easier to travel to one.”

Okay,” Ruby said. “So... what does that have to do with the mirror?”

“Some people have found ways to travel through sub dimensions to reach distant places in our world. Or... otherwise guarded places.”

“Oh!” Ruby said, eyes widening. “So he went through this sub dimension so he could get past the wards!”

“Exactly,” Weiss praised. “Since he wasn’t in our dimension, he didn’t pass through them.”

Ruby furrowed her brow again. “So if stuff like that is possible, why was everyone so confused that the wards hadn’t been set off?”

“Because the magic to do so is not only rare, but it has one big limitation,” Weiss explained. “You can enter and leave the sub dimension without too much difficulty, but navigation is nearly impossible. You could open a path to one, walk twenty feet, then open a return passage and find yourself on the other side of the planet.”

“So the mirror...”

Weiss nodded. “The burglar enchanted it so that it would let him find his way out where he wanted to be. Specifically, right here, inside of the wards. Generally, ward schemes don’t bother to ward against dimensional transit, and instead rely upon intruders not having the chance to create an anchor inside the ward in the first place.”

“So can we follow the magic thread?” Ruby asked.

“Unfortunately, no. It attenuates rapidly the further we get from the anchor point, and the wards make it even more difficult. Wards generally don’t block this kind of sympathetic magic – if they did, it wouldn’t be possible to use it with how many buildings are warded, and there are too many positive uses for magical connections between things to allow them to be prevented, but they do make it harder to follow them. No, the connection is worthless for tracking the intruder.”

“So what good does it do us?”

“Well, most sub dimensions share certain limitations,” Weiss said. “I suspect that the only way the intruder has of traveling through them will involve anchored mirrors like this. They probably have to bring an object, most likely another mirror, to the mirror they want to make an anchor, touch them to
each other, and perform a spell to make the connection. Then they can open a passage at their
leisure.”

“So... we’re looking for someone carrying around an enchanted compact?” Ruby asked.

Weiss sniffed disdainfully. “It’s possible, but while the magic to open sub dimensions requires less
effort than portals, it is still quite a bit more skill than most have. Someone able to enchant a device
themselves to do so wouldn’t need to resort to theft – they could make millions crafting each such
device. Most likely our thief simply found an enchanted mirror and is just using it.”

“Right... so a compact or some old fancy antique mirror,” Ruby suggested. “Is there anything we can
do?”

“There is one thing,” Weiss said, pulling out her own makeup mirror. She pressed it against the glass
and concentrated. It wasn’t easy, but after a few long minutes she managed to move the enchantment
to her own mirror. “There! Now, we can keep this locked away somewhere, and if the burglar tries
to return they’ll be in for a rude surprise.”

With that they didn’t have anything further to do at the crime scene, so they drove back to Beacon.
While Ruby cared for Zwei, Weiss spent several minutes explaining the situation with her compact to
Captain Goodwitch, who then had it put into a secure room with cameras observing it. After she was
sure that it was safe in the subbasement Weiss received a key to the room that it was in in case she
ever needed to access it, and then she headed back to the squad room.

When she reached her cubicle she found Ruby standing up and talking to her sister, Yang. Weiss
cought Yang’s eyes flicking briefly in her direction as she approached, but she otherwise ignored her
completely.

“I think it’s a good idea,” Yang said. “You might find something.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “I’ll just need to convince Weiss-”

“Convince me of what?” Weiss interjected sharply, giving Yang a cold look.

“Our Uncle Qrow is the Captain of Supernatural Affairs, Intelligence Division,” Ruby explained
proudly. “Yang thinks he might have an idea about how to find our thief.”

“When in doubt, follow the money,” Yang drawled. “If you’re trying to catch a thief, the money
comes from a fence. That’s someone who buys stolen goods-”

“I know what a fence is,” Weiss snapped coldly, ratcheting up her glare.

“Just making sure,” Yang said with a casual shrug. “I guess the Schnee family would know about
criminal stuff...”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean, you brute!”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Ruby shouted, waving her arms as she stood between the two. “Weiss, why
don’t we get going? We want to try to catch this guy, right?”

“Right,” Weiss agreed, throwing one last glare at Yang. “The atmosphere here leaves something to
be desired, anyway.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Yang snarled.
“Exactly what it sounds like,” Weiss answered.

“It sounds like you ate a dictionary,” Yang said threateningly. “If you’d like, I can help you do it again.”

“I didn’t know you even knew what a dictionary was,” Weiss said, feigning surprise. “Maybe you should try reading one sometime.”

“Okay, time out!” Ruby interjected. “Weiss... you’re my friend and partner, and Yang... you’re my sister. I don’t want to choose sides here, and both of you were being mean, anyway. Can’t you guys just try to get along? You’re both really cool people when you get to, um, know you.”

Both crossed their arms and looked away from each other, clearly annoyed. Ruby sighed and started walking to the car. “Come on, Weiss. Let’s go see if Uncle Qrow can help us on our case.”

Weiss followed, and it wasn’t until they’d been driving for a little while that the uncomfortable silence started bothering her. Normally Weiss didn’t mind quiet moments, but something about Ruby not rambling in her usual fashion bothered Weiss. She smiled thinly for a moment, remembering how pleased she was when her partner was actually quiet when they first became detectives.

“She was being condescending to me,” Weiss eventually said. Ruby didn’t reply, and after a while she tried again. “I didn’t want to start a fight in front of you, but the brute was just so rude! Fine... maybe I was a bit cold, but I’m usually cold, and we’ve never gotten along...”

“I know I’m pretty friendly, but I actually have a hard time making friends,” Ruby eventually said. “I’m pretty awkward, especially around strangers, and it wasn’t always easy being in the shadow of Yang. I mean, she always looked out for me, and let me hang around her and her friends growing up, but it was hard, having this amazing, super popular older sister hanging over me.”

“I know what that’s like,” Weiss said, looking down at her gloved hands. “Well, I’m not sure about the popular part... Winter never liked people, and I was never around many. She’s amazing, though...”

Ruby nodded. “I love my sister a lot, you know? She’s often been all I’ve had. I usually make friends after a while, but... I usually lose track of them, you know? I post on Facebook with my school friends every once in a while, that kinda thing, but even living in the same city, I almost never see them. I guess... you mean a lot to me Weiss. You’re... you’re kinda my best friend. And I hate it when you fight with my sister.”

Weiss bit her lip, stewing in the feelings of guilt. “I’ve never had a real friend. I used to have my mother, but after she... was killed... Father didn’t let me spend time away from the manor. I just had tutors, and maids... and Winter was gone so much, first with school, then with the police. The closest thing I’ve ever had to a friend is our butler, Klein... you’re my only friend, Ruby. I... I don’t know how to be around people. I know I can be difficult, and hard to put up with...”

“No!” Ruby interjected. “You’re not hard to put up with! You’re amazing. Yeah, you can be kinda... um... prickly. But deep down you’re really nice, I can tell. Like a hedgehog!”

Weiss smiled slightly. “A hedgehog?”

“Yup! Prickly on the outside, all soft fur on the belly... er, inside.”

“Well if I’m a hedgehog, you’re like a puppy,” Weiss said. “Excited and excitable, and you don’t hide any of it. And you do the eye thing entirely too well.”
Ruby grinned, while Zwei barked happily in back seat, making a sound for the first time since they started driving. “Alright! Well, BFF-”

“Don’t use that term,” Weiss said, wincing. “What are you, twelve?”

“Flip that frown and those number upside down... er... backwards? For the numbers? Since I’m twenty-one... anyway, you’re my BFF whether you like it or not BFF!”

“Ugh,” Weiss groaned despite feeling warm inside at what Ruby was saying. “What have I done?”

Ruby laughed, and Weiss smiled as the atmosphere warmed up. Soon Ruby was chatting away like usual, and the rest of the trip went far faster. Eventually they pulled to a stop and got out, with Ruby letting Zwei join her.

“The Crow Bar?” Weiss asked. “Why are we at some... dive.”

“It’s not that bad,” Ruby said, rolling her eyes. “Uncle Qrow comes here, like... all the time.”

Weiss checked her watch. “It’s only ten after three... shouldn’t he still be at work?”

Ruby winced. “Um... anyway, let’s go see him! Uncle Qrow knows so much. He taught me everything I know about investigative... stuff.”

The inside was actually nicer than Weiss had expected. From the name that appeared to imply criminality, to the plain brick exterior she had expected a place full of bikers with sticky floors that would’ve led to her burning her boots later. Instead it was actually clean and well kept, if simply furnished. A mustachioed bartender was serving a single patron, who was taking a long drink from a glass of whiskey when they entered.

The man drinking was obviously a shiftless alcoholic. He was wearing a gray jacket and black dress pants, with a somewhat stained red tie hanging loosely around his neck. He was scruffy looking, unshaven, and reeked like a brewery even from several feet away. Weiss curled her lip into a sneer of disgust while she looked around for the Captain of the Intelligence Division.

“Uncle Qrow!” Ruby shouted, running up to the slovenly drunk, a happily barking Zwei following on her heels.

Qrow turned around on the bar stool, eyes lighting up as a sly grin crossed his face. “Well, looky here. Are you old enough to come in here, Ruby?”

“Qrow, I’m twenty-one, and a detective! I’m way old enough to be in here. I could even drink if I wanted to!”

“Don’t even think about it,” Weiss snapped, pulled from her shock at the person they were meeting. “We’re still on duty.”

“And who’s this?” Qrow demanded, his bloodshot eyes fixing on Weiss with uncomfortable focus.

“This is my partner, Weiss Schnee,” Ruby said excitedly.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Ice Queen, Junior.”
“Wh-what did you call me?” Weiss stammered, completely shocked.

“What, she stammers, too?” Qrow asked Ruby. “Who’d you piss off to get stuck with her as your partner?”

“You- you- you scruffy, intoxicated, shiftless... rapscallion!” Weiss shrieked.

“Yup, definitely a chip off Winter’s uptight ice-block.” Qrow grunted. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, Schnee.”

“Is this... this... this... jumped up vagrant riffraff really a Captain?” Weiss growled.

“Wow, Weiss, and I thought dolt was a weird insult,” Ruby said, sounding almost impressed.

“Yeah, that’s the way these icy Schnees are,” Qrow said in a faux wise voice. “They think the weirder the word is the worse the insult.”

Weiss felt a vein on her forehead begin to throb. “First your sister... then your uncle... I’m starting to see why you were such a dunce growing up surrounded by these barbarians.”

Ruby giggled and had the audacity to grin at Weiss. “Come on, they’re not so bad! Besides, you hated me at first, and now we’re BFFs! I’m sure they’ll grow on you just like I did.”

“Like a fungus,” Weiss grumbled.

Qrow chuckled. “As much fun as it is watching you and your partner flirt, why’d you hunt me down?”

Ruby blushed and stammered for a second while Weiss was struck speechless at the baseless accusation. There wasn’t anything wrong with being a lesbian, Weiss conceded, no matter how her father would likely feel about the subject. She simply didn’t feel any real attraction to anyone, much less her partner.

Weiss looked over at the other detective, who had started wrestling with her uncle when she couldn’t figure out the proper words to protest with. She was so incredibly childish, although she could be serious when she needed to be, and she was actually very hard working, when she wasn’t wasting time sneaking cookies and junk food. It had taken Weiss a long time to warm up to the well meaning dolt, but Weiss was no longer hesitant to admit, to herself at least, that Ruby was the best friend that she could have ever hoped for.

The implications of flirting, however, were of something beyond friendship, which was not only wholly inappropriate, it was entirely silly. As Weiss scanned her partner, she found herself surprised that, when she wasn’t focused on Ruby’s childishness, the other detective really was a beautiful young woman. Short, thin, but with a surprising amount of toned muscle made for an aesthetically pleasing form. Her face was cute, with her unique silver eyes catching her gaze, despite the shaggy wolf cut red and black hair trying to hide her soft features. Weiss found herself feeling curiously warm as she pondered just how beautiful Ruby really was, something that had never really occurred to her before.

A strange tingle began in her stomach, a sensation that Weiss had little experience with. Her frown deepened as she tried to place the strangely pleasant feeling, until finally she realized that Ruby was...
trying to get her attention. “What?” she demanded, blushing brightly.

“You were staring off into space,” Ruby said. “Are you okay?”

“I- I’m fine,” Weiss said, clearing her throat as she banished the peculiar sensations to think about some other day. “I was merely lost in thought. Pay it no mind.”

“Right, lost in something anyway,” Qrow mumbled. “So, you said you needed info for a case?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, widening her eyes as she focused on her uncle again. “We’re trying to catch a thief, but we don’t have enough leads. We were hoping you’d know someone who’d buy stolen magical… stuff.”

“Magical ‘stuff’ huh,” Qrow repeated. “You sure you don’t need to talk to vice?”

Ruby just looked confused while Weiss decided to ignore the no doubt inappropriate joke. “It was a prehistoric statue of a Beowolf designed to function as a mana battery for dark magic. Very rare, and very expensive.”

Qrow frowned thoughtfully, finally focusing on the job. “Hmm. That doesn’t sound like something just any fence would be able to move. I can set you girls up with a couple of my people – they keep an eye on that kind of thing. I’ll text you their address tomorrow when I get to work.”

“You didn’t bother bringing your work information home with you, did you,” Weiss deadpanned.

Qrow raised his shot glass, taking a sip while Weiss fumed. “Unbelievable,” she muttered.

“Come on, Weiss, let’s get out of here,” Ruby said. “It’s almost quitting time anyway, and we can go to my apartment!”

“What?” Weiss objected. “But by the time we get back we could spend at least half an hour working on our paperwork…”

Qrow snorted. “Actually, I think you might be worse than big sis. As a captain in Supernatural Affairs, I order the two of you to call it quits for the day.”

Weiss put her hands on her hips and looked at him disapprovingly. “That’s very irresponsible.”

“Unclench a bit,” Qrow said. “Besides, didn’t my niece say you were going over to her apartment? What are you two getting up to?”

“N-nothing weird!” Ruby blurted immediately, making all three other people in the room give her a flat look while she blushed.

Eventually Weiss huffed and answered, looking away. “She wanted to watch a film together.”

“Nice,” Qrow said, giving his niece a high five. “You’ve got your work cut out for you with this one, though. Trust me on that.”

“I- I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Ruby stammered, blushing even redder.

Weiss huffed, finally tiring of Qrow’s irresponsible implications. “I’ll be outside.”

“Wait, Weiss!” Ruby called, trotting after her. “Bye Uncle Qrow!”

“Have fun girls,” he called turning back to the bar to get another drink. “Don’t do anything I
wouldn’t do...”

Weiss scoffed as they stepped outside. “I can’t believe that you’re related to that... that... hooligan.”

“That’s just the way he is,” Ruby said, grinning as she all but skipped to the car. “Now let’s go watch a movie!”

“Fine,” Weiss sighed.

Ruby chatted away as usual, but Weiss found herself growing increasingly uncomfortable as the trip continued. She had never been to anyone’s home before, except for the occasional formal business related party. She doubted that Ruby had access to a ballroom, however.

Ruby eventually parked at a six story apartment building in a modest neighborhood. While a far cry from the rundown parts of town that they often found themselves in to chase Grimm and other mystical dangers, it was equally far from the wealthy area that Weiss lived in.

Ruby quickly let them in, and before long they had climbed several flights of stairs and walked down a hallway to stop in front of her apartment door. Ruby hesitated for a moment, turning to face her partner. “Sorry if it’s a little messy... I didn’t know you’d be here, so I didn’t clean up. I mean... it’s not too gross! We don’t have roaches or anything, but I know its not as clean as you’re probably used to, and-”

“It’ll be fine,” Weiss said. “Just open the door.”

“R-right,” Ruby said, unlocking it and stepping inside.

The first room of the apartment was the largest, with a kitchen area along the left hand wall, and a living area in the middle. The kitchen area had dishes in the sink, and its small dining table was covered in the detritus of daily life. The living area had a large, somewhat threadbare couch facing a television, which had a cable box and several video game systems hooked up to it. The wall beside it had the only bookshelf in the living area, and it was packed with movies and video games.

“So... this is our apartment,” Ruby said nervously. “Like I said... it’s not much. There’s also two bedrooms, one for me and one for Yang, and a bathroom and a kitchen of course... but that’s it. Um... that completes the tour...”

Weiss smiled slightly. “Thank you. I... suppose we sit on the couch?”

“Yup,” Ruby said, leading the way. “It’s kinda old, but it’s actually pretty comfy.”

Weiss sat delicately at one end of the couch. The old sofa gave significantly, and she found it quite difficult to sit properly when she sank so deeply into the seat. After a moment she gave up and leaned back, sighing slightly as she relaxed. It wasn’t something that she did very often, but the old couch required a slumped posture.

“Okay, so... what do you want to watch?” Ruby asked as she examined her movie shelf.

“It doesn’t matter to me,” Weiss said.

“You’re the guest!” Ruby protested. “What movies do you like?”

Weiss shrugged. “I don’t watch many movies.”

Ruby stared at her in horror. “No movies?”
Weiss sniffed disdainfully. “I prefer to spend my time reading, or practicing my various skills and hobbies.”


“I don’t have a television,” Weiss said. There was a crash as Ruby dropped the DVDs she was looking at to the floor. “Are you alright?”

Ruby staggered over, collapsing next to Weiss on the couch, making her uncomfortable under the horrified stare. “No TV?”

“Like I said, I prefer to spend my time with other endeavors rather than staring at some moving images on a screen.”

Ruby just shook her head. “Wow. Okay, before you invite me over to your place, you’ve gotta get a TV. How can you live without a TV?”

“Why would I invite you over to my apartment?” Weiss asked, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow.

Ruby grinned brightly. “Because we’re BFFs! It’s part of the BFF code. Now... since you don’t know about movies I guess I’ll have to pick.”

“That’s fine,” Weiss said.

Ruby bounded over to the shelf, looking through it for a minute before grinning and grabbing one. “So you never watched movies as a kid, either?”

“No,” Weiss said quietly. “I was expected to study and master various hobbies by my father in my free time.”

Ruby hummed. “Then I guess I’ll start by introducing you to the wonderful things that all kids should’ve enjoyed... animated movies!”

“Aren’t we too old for children’s movies?”

“I didn’t say children’s movies, I said animated movies,” Ruby said, before pointing at her partner dramatically. “You are never too old for animation!”

“Right...” Weiss said.

Ruby stuck the movie in and sat on the other end of the couch, Zwei curling up beside her, and soon the movie began to play. Weiss was disdainful at first, finding the entire idea of movie watching a waste of time, and something obviously aimed at children even worse. Before long, however, she was completely engrossed, and she had to avert her face from Ruby to keep her from noticing the tears glistening in her eyes as the final song played and the credits began to roll.

“See, wasn’t that great!”

“It... it was fine,” Weiss muttered.

“Are you crying?” Ruby asked, leaning uncomfortably close.

“No, you idiot!” Weiss objected thickly. “I’m fine!”

Ruby just giggled and put away the movie. “Well, I guess if you’d like we can watch another one.”
“It’s your house,” Weiss said loftily. “I can’t control what you do.”

“Hmm... I guess we don’t have to watch another one...” Ruby teased.

“Ruby,” Weiss growled.

Ruby laughed happily. “Fine. Let me grab some snacks and then I’ll stick it in. Hey, you want to order a pizza?”

Weiss’ nose wrinkled. “Pizza isn’t very good for you.”

“It’s great for my taste buds, though,” Ruby said. “Come on, live a little. You enjoyed the movie, didn’t you? And that diner we still go to, like, all the time.”

Weiss frowned. “There’s nothing wrong with liking the things that I do.”

“Of course not,” Ruby said, furrowing her brow.

“Then why do you always try to change things?” Weiss demanded. “Whenever I express a preference, you always try to get me to change what I like.”

“I’m sorry,” Ruby said. “I don’t mean it like that... if you’ve tried something and you don’t like it then okay. You don’t like it. But if you’ve never really done something, how do you know you’ve got a preference for it?”

Weiss shifted uncomfortably for a moment. “You don’t need to apologize. I just... my life seems to be changing so much. I never did... anything like I do before now.”

“Change is scary,” Ruby agreed. “But, have things been good?”

Weiss sighed, slumping further into the couch and closing her eyes. “Things have been good.”

“I’m glad,” Ruby said. “I’m not kidding when I say you’re my friend... my best friend. I care about you a lot, Weiss...”

Weiss swallowed hard as she felt a strange, fluttering sensation in her chest. It... everything felt so strange, but like Ruby had said... it wasn’t bad. It was just new, and confusing. “Okay. We can get pizza.”

Ruby giggled. “We really don’t have to. I’d like to have it with you, ‘cause I like it and I hope you will too, but if you really don’t want to do something, just tell me. I want you to enjoy doing stuff. You know, together. Wait... not together, together. Just... together... I’ll go order dinner now.”

Weiss shook her head, watching her friend go to place the call. When she came back a still blushing Ruby put in another movie, and Weiss was completely into it by the time the pizza guy arrived and had to be buzzed up. Weiss went to the kitchen area while Ruby waited at the door with the money.

“Where do you keep your plates?”

“Why?” Ruby asked.

“So we can have something to eat on, dunce.”

“Oh... well... you can get one if you want,” Ruby said. “Most people just eat it out of the box.”

“Oh.”
“Hey, why don’t you get us drinks?” Ruby said. “I’ll take a can of soda from the fridge.”

Weiss poured herself a glass of water and got a can of soda for Ruby. A few minutes later the pizza was sitting on the middle cushion of the couch, and Weiss found herself staring at the cheesy abomination sitting in front of her. Ruby immediately dug in, grabbing a slice with her bare hands and taking a huge bite.

“S goodf,” Ruby mumbled around a mouthful of grease and cheese.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Weiss lectured. She carefully removed one glove, and delicately picked up a slice of pizza. She spent a long moment staring at it like it would be her death, before taking a small bite.

“How is it?” Ruby asked, thankfully having swallowed.

“It’s fine,” Weiss said as she finished her first slice and grabbed a second. It was delicious, but there was no way that she was going to admit that.

Eventually they managed to finish the pizza, with Ruby eating well more than half of it, and she had just stuck in a third movie when the door burst open. Weiss jumped in surprise, before her eyes narrowed when she saw Yang and Blake in the doorway.

Any questions about the nature of Yang and Blake’s relationship flew out the window as Weiss saw the two of them slobbering all over each other as they tried to drunkenly stumble through the doorway without ceasing groping one another. Weiss turned bright red at the display, tugging her gloves to make sure that they were on correctly for lack of anything else to do.

“Yang!” Ruby shouted. “Not in the living room!”

“Hey Rubes!” Yang called cheerfully before her face fell as she took in the scene. “What is she doing here?”

“She’s my friend,” Ruby said. “We were just watching some movies.”

“The Little Mermaid?” Yang laughed. “You were seriously watching this?”

Weiss felt embarrassment sweep through her, and as she often did when faced with that kind of feeling she settled on glaring at the source of it. “Yes, you neanderthal. Not all of us consider intoxicated slobbering in other people’s mouths to be the proper way to spend an evening.”

“Others, or just ‘changelings’?” Blake asked pointedly, eyes burning into Weiss.

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” Weiss snapped.

“I don’t need to,” Blake said. “You put plenty of filth there yourself.”

“I think you’ll find that I’m not the one bar hopping and making out with drunken brutes,” Weiss countered.

“Hah, who the hell would make out with a bitch like you?” Yang laughed. “When was the last time you got down and dirty, princess?”

“Yang...” Ruby said, hurt, although it was drowned out by Weiss’ reply.

“How dare you!” Weiss shouted, jumping to her feet. “I would never behave in such an uncivilized manner!”
“Maybe if you did you wouldn’t act like such a frigid bitch,” Yang said. “It’s no wonder you don’t have any friends at Beacon – who would want to be around someone like you.”

“Oh, and is ‘getting down and dirty’ how you became so popular?” Weiss drawled, her voice thick with insinuation.

“You spoiled little-” Blake started, as Yang stepped forward, reaching out and grabbing Weiss by the front of her bolero jacket.

“Don’t touch me!” Weiss shrieked, anger mixing with fear as she tried to get away without actually touching Yang. “Get away from me you brute!”

Zwei began to bark, and then Ruby shoved Yang, pushing her away from Weiss. “Stop! Stop it, all of you!”

The living room became silent, as Yang gaped at her sister, who was standing between her and Weiss. “Ruby, she-”

“No!” Ruby yelled. “I don’t care who started it. I don’t care who said what!”

“Ruby,” Weiss said quietly. “I think I’ll go home, now.”

Ruby looked at her for a long moment and sighed. “Let me get my keys.”

“That’s alright,” Weiss said. “I can call my driver. Thank you for the lovely evening.”

“Goodnight, Weiss,” Ruby said sadly.

“Goodnight,” Weiss replied, walking past the other two detectives and closing the front door behind her. She sighed, pulling out her phone as shouting began once again inside of the apartment. Ignoring the sick, sinking feeling in her stomach Weiss headed home.
Third Case: Friendly

Weiss shifted uncomfortably in the passenger seat the next morning, unable to look at Ruby, but with nothing of interest to look at outside of the window, either. Ruby had received the address for Qrow’s people before work that day, and so they were headed there first rather than going to Beacon. The trip had taken them across town, unsurprisingly towards one of the rougher areas.

“I would like to formally apologize for yesterday,” Weiss said eventually.

Ruby looked over at her, smiling sadly. “Okay. It wasn’t just your fault, but thanks. Why do you and my sister fight whenever you see each other, anyway?”

“That brute... the way she speaks to me... looks at me...” Weiss growled.

Ruby hummed thoughtfully. “Okay, I guess that’s part of it, but it isn’t everything, is it?”.

Weiss crossed her arms, annoyed. Not just that Ruby didn’t believe her, but that Ruby was correct. Somehow the complete dolt had learned to read her better than almost anyone else in her life, and it was galling. Not so long ago Ruby had been a complete stranger, and somehow her claims of being Weiss’ ‘BFF’ no longer seemed so ridiculous, naming conventions aside.

The longer that passed without Ruby interrupting her the more annoying and yet endearing Weiss found it. Somehow Ruby had figured out how to get her to talk, and it was going to work as well. She hated being handled. Even those close to her, like her butler, Klein, or her sister, Winter, would’ve angered Weiss with such an obvious understanding of how to get her to do what they wanted, but instead of that Weiss felt strangely... warm. It was like nothing she’d felt in so long that it took her an embarrassingly long time to recognize it as a form of happiness.

With a sigh Weiss looked at her partner again. While Ruby had obviously known how to get her to talk, she was obviously suffering in her own way, nearly vibrating in her seat and biting her lip to keep from compromising the silence. With a roll of her eyes Weiss finally gave in. “Her partner.”

“Blake?” Ruby asked. “You don’t get along with Yang because of her?”

“In a way,” Weiss said. “And it’s not because she’s a faunus. She’s a detective, someone dedicated to making this city a better place. I was a little wary of her at first, but from my observations, I’m certain that she’s a dedicated, professional guardian of the city and its people, and not a White Fang sympathizer or other villainous person.”

“Then... why?”

Weiss looked out the window, unable to look at her partner while admitting the truth. “Our meeting wasn’t the best... she leveled accusations against me and my family the first moments we met! I had just collided with you and was on edge... I had never spent time around a faunus since I was a child... no... there’s not an excuse...”

Weiss sighed before taking a deep breath. “I behaved in an awful manner to her. She may have deserved some of my ire, but I called her a... well, you remember. It was terrible for me to say such things, but there’s nothing that I can do to unsay them.”

“Maybe not, but you could apologize!” Ruby offered. “Blake’s great! I’m sure you’d get along great if you gave each other a chance.”
“I doubt that,” Weiss said. “Her and Yang have both made it obvious how greatly they detest me, and I’m not overly fond of them, either. Yang in particular is... is...”

“A brute?” Ruby offered grinning. “A barbarian. Um... a lout? Is that a thing she could be?”

“Yes Ruby,” Weiss agreed, rolling her eyes. “She could be a lout.”

Ruby giggled before becoming serious again. “Maybe they don’t like you, but apologizing is still the right thing to do. Besides, clearing the air might make things easier.”

“Ruby...” Weiss sighed. “I don’t... maybe I’m everything they accuse me of. Perhaps I am a terrible person... the thought of debasing myself before them, only for them to laugh at my humiliation-”

“Whoa, whoa... who said anything about debasing? Or- or humiliating?”

“Isn’t that what an apology is?” Weiss said. “Showing that you were wrong... that you were weak and failed.”

“No!” Ruby barked. “How can you... how can... that’s not what an apology is about at all! I mean... you apologized to me just a few minutes ago about how things went last night.”

Weiss looked down at her tightly clasped hands. “You’ve come to mean very much to me...”

“I would never, ever, ever, ever, ever to the millionth billionth whateverillionths power think bad about you apologizing! It makes me think even better of you!”

“How?”

Ruby frowned. “It means you care. Only someone who doesn’t care about other people can do something that hurts someone and not feel bad about it. An apology means that you feel bad about what you did, and it means the other person has a chance to tell you it's okay! It makes the apologized to person feel better, ’cause the person who hurt them is sorry, and it lets the apologizer feel better too, ’cause the other person can let them know they’re forgiven!

“Besides... it takes a strong person to admit they’re wrong. If you can admit it to me, can’t you admit it to them?”

Weiss looked out the window again. She’d never thought about an apology that way. Her father had taught her that apologies were for the weak. They were something he forced her to do when she failed, and standing in front of him and anyone else that he decreed to humble herself to for every tiny imperfection had burned. She hated apologizing.

But saying sorry to Ruby didn’t feel like that. Ruby was right about one thing – apologizing to her partner made her feel better, not worse. Would the same apply to clearing the air with Blake and Yang? Or would the faunus detective simply judge her and find her wanting the way her father always had.

Before Weiss could reach a conclusion Ruby parallel parked them in front of a small apartment building. It was definitely in worse shape than Ruby’s, with graffiti on the side and potholes in the street, but it wasn’t a complete slum.

“I’m sorry, too,” Ruby said, turning to face her partner. “I invited you over to my place, and things didn’t go very well.”

“It’s not your fault,” Weiss said. “Things went very well until your sister came home.”
“Yeah, but... I know you and her fight at work sometimes... okay, all the time, but I never thought it’d be that bad if she ran into you at home...”

“Like you said, you didn’t know,” Weiss interrupted. “Next time we’ll just have to go to my apartment.”

Ruby grinned happily, and Weiss smiled back at her. She was surprised again at just how beautiful Ruby was when she smiled. Her heart began to beat faster, until finally she shook it off, looking back up at the apartment building. “Come on, we’ve got work to do.”

“Sure thing, partner,” Ruby said happily, hopping out of the car.

Their destination was a second floor apartment, and it didn’t take them very long to reach it. Ruby knocked loudly, and after a long moment the door cracked open slightly, revealing a chain and part of a blue eye.

“What is it?” the man answering the door asked.

“Hey, we’re um, my Uncle Qrow sent us,” Ruby said quietly. “We’re detectives. With Supernatural Affairs.”

“Oh,” the man said, closing the door. He worked the chain, before opening it wide. “Come on in.”

The man was fairly short but muscular, with an open, white, buttoned shirt that showed off his chiseled physique. He had spiky blonde hair, blue eyes, a ready smile, and a monkey tail sticking out of the base of his blue jeans. “I’m Sun.”

“Hey, Sun!” Ruby said cheerfully. “I’m Ruby, and this is Weiss.”

The apartment wasn’t messy, but actually reasonably well kept. Like Ruby’s, there was a couch sitting in front of a television stocked with video game systems that seemed to be the centerpiece of the home. Through a doorway at the far end of the apartment entered another man, who Sun introduced with a wave. “Oh yea, this is my partner Neptune.”

“Hey,” The man said, giving a cocky grin. He had extensively styled blue hair, yellow sunglasses resting on his forehead, and an expensive looking red jacket over his shirt and tie. It was a very elaborate look to be sported by someone in their own apartment, making Weiss wonder if he was just visiting like they were.

“Hey, Neptune!” Ruby said cheerfully, while Weiss gave him a stiff nod.

“Hey,” he repeated himself, striking a cocky pose. “Neptune Vasilias, Supernatural Affairs, Intelligence Division.”

There was a long moment of silence, before Ruby turned to face Sun. “So... my uncle said you could help us.”

“Yeah, Qrow sent us a message a little while ago saying he’d be sending his niece over. He didn’t mention you were a detective, though, or that you’d be bringing your partner with you.”

Ruby sighed. “I love my uncle, but...”

Sun chuckled. “Trust me, I know how he is. I’ve been working for him for a couple years now, and he’s just as annoying as ever. No one does a better job, though.”
Neptune had used the conversation to approach Weiss, striking another pose when he came close. She wasn’t sure what to make of the behavior, but after Yang’s comments about not having any friends, she decided not to point out how strange he was. The man was apparently a fellow member of Supernatural Affairs, and befriending Ruby had worked out, after all. Perhaps she could try... being friendly. For her, anyway.

“So, your name’s Weiss?” he asked after listening to Sun and Ruby chat for a bit about her uncle.

“Yes,” Weiss answered. “Neptune, was it?”

“Yeah,” he answered, grinning. “So, you’re a detective?”

“Yes. Ruby and I joined Supernatural Affairs some months ago, and were made partners.”

“That’s great,” he said. “Sun and I are partners as well. We actually moved into this apartment together not long ago.”

“Oh,” Weiss said, nodding. She was definitely surprised about wearing such elaborate clothing inside his own home, but she supposed everyone had their own quirks. “Thank you for helping us with our case.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it, snow angel. You can count on Sun and I to get the job done!”

“S-snow angel?” Weiss repeated.

“I hope I don’t offend you by saying it, but you’re a very beautiful woman,” he said charmingly.

Weiss blinked before giving him a plastic smile. “I’m not used to being called something like ‘snow angel’ but thank you for the compliment all the same.”

“It’s only true, of course,” he said. “Hey, maybe later-”

Ruby cleared her throat suddenly, stepping a little closer to Weiss. “Hey, we really should work on our case, right?”

“Right,” Weiss said, giving Neptune a stiff smile before facing her partner.

“Alright, so Qrow said you needed information, but he didn’t say about what,” Sun said.

“Stolen magic stuff,” Ruby said. “Really old, expensive magic stuff.”

“Specifically, a statuette of a Beowolf that had served as a mana battery for dark magic,” Weiss said. “It was recently stolen, and being a prehistoric statue of mystical significance, it’s worth millions.”

Neptune and Sun exchanged a look. “Well...” Sun started. “Nothing exactly like that has shown up. No one’s fenced it anywhere in the city, or even floated word they have it.”

“But?” Ruby asked.

“But it’s not the first time I’ve heard about this sorta thing,” Sun said. “Some people’ve been looking for statues like that, but not that exact one. Just any statues of Grimm that are really, really old.”

“Who, and have they found any?” Weiss asked.

“Sorry, it’s not always easy to figure out who’s asking around on the black market for things,” Sun
apologized. “If we’d known to keep an eye out...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ruby said. “So someone’s definitely been looking for them, but you don’t know who?”

“Nope,” Sun said.

“Which means,” Neptune added, leaning a little closer to Weiss and flashing her a smile stolen from a toothpaste commercial. “Whoever stole it probably didn’t need to visit a fence. I’d suspect theft for hire from whoever was looking.”

Weiss nodded thoughtfully. She was about to leave, but hesitated. “Thank you.”

“Any time, snow angel,” Neptune said, grinning.

“Sure,” Sun said, smiling as well. “Give us your number and we’ll let you know if we hear anything else.”

Ruby gave Sun her number, when Neptune struck another pose. “And can I have your number? Just in case I hear anything... or if you’d like me to take you to dinner?”

“Come on, Weiss!” Ruby called suddenly. “We need to get back to Beacon.”

Weiss gave them both one more smile, relieved at the interruption. It was exhausting being so polite to someone she didn’t know. She could barely imagine how friendly people managed. “She’s my ride. Thank you both.”

“Sure,” Sun said.

“Oh... right,” Neptune said, deflating slightly. “See you around.”

When they reached the hallway it was obvious that something was bothering Ruby, but Weiss didn’t say anything as her partner stomped down the stairs ahead of her. Eventually they reached the car, and Weiss looked over at Ruby for a moment after buckling in.

“What’s wrong?” Weiss asked. “Did Sun say something while I was talking to Neptune?”

“No,” Ruby said. “Why do you ask?”

“You seem upset,” Weiss said with a shrug. “I’m not sure what else could’ve happened that would’ve bothered you.”

“What was with you and Neptune?”

“What about us?” Weiss asked, furrowing her brow.

“You were being all.. all.. friendly.”

“Don’t you want me to be friendly?”

Ruby hesitated for a second. “I want you to be Weiss.”

Weiss smiled, blushing slightly. “I just thought... Yang was right about something last night. I have a fine business relationship with Pyrrha, and you’re my... my friend. But otherwise... I just thought that I should try to be friendlier. Was it not... good?”
Ruby finally looked at her, a smile on her face. “I’m sorry. I was just being silly – he was flirting with you, and you were being all responsive, so I was confused and-”

“Wait, flirting?” Weiss asked. “What are you talking about?”

Ruby gave her a deadpan look. “I’m not great with relationship stuff, but even I know he was flirting with you. He even asked you out on a date.”

“He did?”

Ruby gigged. “Yeah. Remember, he asked for your number, and said he could take you out for dinner sometime.”

“But Sun asked for your number, too?” Weiss said questioningly.

“Yeah, but the important part was how he said it, and the whole dinner part,” Ruby said. “Hasn’t anyone ever asked you on a date before?”

“No,” Weiss said. “I’ve never been interested, and the only times I’ve ever been around people my own age has been at the occasional business dinner or formal work related gathering my father insisted that I attend. I generally spent them avoiding everyone and glaring at people that tried to speak with me.”

Ruby giggled. “Sorry! Just... I mean, you’re so beautiful, and even if it was really annoying, I’d’ve thought being from a rich, famous family would’ve meant you’d have gold diggers trying to ask you out.”

Weiss shrugged. “I can be somewhat... off putting.”

Ruby grinned. “Maybe, but you can be Weiss, too. Get it?”

“No,” Weiss said. “Just... no.”

“Spoil sport,” Ruby sighed. “Really, though, if you want to be friendlier, then more power to you. The world is a nicer place when everyone is, um, nicer to each other, you know? But just be yourself... you know?”

“Those two things seem mutually exclusive,” Weiss said.

“Nope.”

“Nope?”

“Nope,” Ruby repeated, starting the car. “You can be a bit of a grumpkins-”

“That’s not a word, and I’m offended by having anything to do with it,” Weiss said.

“-but deep down I can tell you’re a nice person.”

Weiss blushed again and searched for something to say that wasn’t so uncomfortable to listen to. “I thought Neptune and Sun were together.”

“Huh?” Ruby asked.

“Two young people sharing an apartment,” Weiss explained. “Also, for people in their own home they were well dressed, especially Neptune. Who wears a jacket in their home? I just assumed he
was dressing up to look nice for his ‘partner’.”

Ruby chuckled. “Yeah, I think he just tries way too hard to look good. Did you find him attractive at all?”

“No,” Weiss said. “I don’t think I even understand what being attractive is supposed to mean. I mean, you for example have an extremely aesthetically pleasing form, even dressed to fight and work. I- watch out!”

Ruby had to slam the breaks to keep from hitting the car in front of them. She was bright red and staring at Weiss with wide eyes.

“What was that, you dolt!” Weiss shouted.

“S-sorry,” Ruby said. “Um... what were you saying?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I was just saying you’re a very beautiful young woman, so I’m not sure why Neptune would find me more attractive than you, or Sun or anyone else.”

“Um... I guess it’s just the way people are wired,” Ruby said hesitantly. “I mean, I’m just me. I can totally understand Neptune finding you attractive, though. I mean, wow, you’re really beautiful... ugh, stop babbling, mouth....”

Weiss blushed, feeling strangely pleased by Ruby’s comment, however incoherent. She’d been called beautiful before, by more than a few people, but for some reason Ruby saying it made it mean something. Probably because she was a friend, Weiss decided. “Thank you.”

“Did you have a problem with the thought of Sun and Neptune together?”

“No,” Weiss said. “I don’t care who people love. It isn’t any of my business.”

Ruby beamed at her and Weiss smiled back. “You know, I’m starting to get a little hungry. How ‘bout we get lunch, on me?”

Weiss agreed with a smile, just happy to have her partner be happy again, even if she wasn’t sure why she had been so upset in the first place, or what had changed.
“Slowly spin a thin layer of aura clockwise around your body,” Weiss commanded. “Then, below that, spin a layer counter-clockwise around your body.

It took several tries, but with advice from Weiss, Ruby eventually managed to get her entire aura spinning in the required manners. It was exhausting, both mentally and surprisingly physically, leaving Ruby sweating and red faced as she struggled to maintain both aura motions.

“Good,” Weiss said. “Now, keep it up for another thirty seconds.”

Ruby grunted, her concentration almost lapsing, but a sharp rebuke from Weiss helped her find her center again and she didn’t lose control. Ruby had never been good at meditation, and even months of practice hadn’t helped her keep her focus as well as she needed.

Just when Weiss was about to declare the exercise over the door to the meditation room slammed open, making them both look up in surprise, causing Ruby’s aura to wobble and then spin completely out of control, reverting to it’s natural motions as she was no longer able to maintain the proper meditative state with the distraction.

Standing in the doorway was Lt. Oobleck, his green hair windswept as always while he sipped at his coffee mug. “I apologize for the interruption, but there’s a case we need you for. Meeting room seven!”

With that he dashed from the room, not even pausing to close the door. Weiss contemplated his likely inhumanity for a moment, as a detective that dressed in a stuffy, buttoned up shirt and tie with slacks didn’t strike her as the type to keep their hair dyed so vibrantly. Shaking it off she looked back at Ruby and sighed. “Don’t forget, until you can manipulate your aura even when distracted, it won’t be a useful tool in combat.”

“Right,” Ruby said, blushing.

Weiss gave her an encouraging smile. “You really are improving. When we started this you could barely meditate.”

Ruby chuckled and stood, and Weiss followed a moment later. The meditation rooms were near the gym, and it didn’t take long for them to reach the meeting rooms, which were on the main floor of the building. Like the rest, meeting room seven had a large oval table with chairs all around it, and a projector hanging from the ceiling for presentations. Two of the walls were covered with whiteboards, but otherwise the room was plain and unadorned.

Sitting inside at the head of the table fiddling with a laptop was Lt. Oobleck. On the far side of the table were Yang and Blake, who were casually chatting when they entered. Weiss hesitated at the door from the hostile looks she received, before raising her chin proudly as she ignored them and took a seat beside Ruby at the opposite side of the table, focusing solely on Oobleck.

“Ladies,” he said, taking a quick sip from his mug before activating the projector to show a crude stone statue. It vaguely resembled a Beowolf, and Weiss recognized it from the insurance reports from the recent theft.

“That is one fugly piece of rock,” Yang said, leaning back in her chair.

“This statue is over eight thousand years old, stretching back long before any form of written
record,” Oobleck answered, his words fast and clipped. “It has been used in magical rituals on many occasions since, and is a very impressive mana battery, particularly so since the knowledge to create similar items was only rediscovered in the seventeen hundreds when the Schnee family mastered the use of dust to create modern magical items.”

“So I guess it’s worth some money, then,” Yang said, looking uninterested.

“Two point four million dollars,” Weiss answered sharply.

“Indeed, Detective Schnee,” Oobleck agreed. “Unfortunately it was stolen several days ago. Have you found any leads?”

“Nothing since our initial report,” Weiss said, face flushing at Yang’s snort. She glared angrily for a moment before continuing. “The criminal most likely used a magical object to travel through a sub dimension, emerging from a mirror in the victim’s home.”

“Um... someone was looking for statues like it, but Intelligence doesn’t know who they were, but they’re keeping an eye out now,” Ruby said. “Since no one’s tried to sell it yet, and with the asking around and all, and the only thing stolen was the statue when there was a bunch of other valuable stuff, well... they think the theft wasn’t just for money.”

“So why’d they take it?” Yang asked. “If they can just buy mana batteries from the corner store, why steal this one?”

Weiss ground her teeth for a moment, glaring angrily at the laid back blonde. “Magic rituals can have many subtle factors. If someone is going to the trouble to track down a specific rare magical statue, it most likely is to perform some great working of magic. Considering that the mana stored in the Beowolf statue is tainted, it means they intend to perform dark magic.”

Yang rolled her eyes, but before she could derail things further with a smart remark Ruby interrupted. “I’ve been meaning to ask, what exactly is dark magic?”

Weiss pursed her lips for a moment before answering. “Mana can be affected by many factors, and the emotion and intent of the person channeling it is one of the largest. Magic performed out of hatred, rage, despair... any strong, negative emotion can taint the magic. Normally this isn’t a large problem; dark magic can be felt and leaves a residue, but there isn't any harm in it per se... but if the magic is long lasting and powerful, it can... stagnate. When it does it can begin to twist and corrupt everything around it.”

“So what, people get bad vibes?” Yang asked, waving her hands in mocking, faux spooky motions.

Weiss looked at her for a moment. “With relatively weak dark magic, yes. It can also cause hauntings, spontaneous reanimation of the dead, inadvertent curses of all kinds, the attraction of demons, thaumogenesis of new demonic entities, corruption of natural life forms into tainted forms of existence, shortened lifespans, mystical diseases, certain kinds of cancerous growths—”

“So dark magic is bad,” Yang interrupted, raising her hands in surrender.

“Yes,” Weiss answered, speaking as though to a particularly slow child. “Dark magic is bad.”


Weiss felt herself pale, and then turn red as she snarled at Yang, who looked incredibly pleased with herself. “You-”
“Ladies!” Oobleck barked. “We are getting off track! This is why I called you here today.”

He advanced the projector to show another statue, which was almost identical to the first, except that it crudely depicted a bear-like Ursa Grimm. A press of a button changed the picture to a statue of a bird-like Nevermore Grimm. “These statues were both stolen last night! Initial investigations by normal detectives have revealed no method of entry.”

“So the same thief or thieves, most likely,” Weiss said.

“Indeed Detective Schnee,” Oobleck said after taking another sip from his mug. “And of course, stealing one tainted mana battery is concerning, but three in a short period of time? That indeed has all of the hallmarks of a ritual!”

“Which means we need to put a stop to it soon,” Ruby said. “I mean, what if it’s another demon lord summoning ritual thingy like with Dagon! I really, really don’t want to go through that again.”

“Don’t worry,” Weiss said. “The chances of that are astronomical. Attempts to summon a demon lord don’t even happen once a century. I’m sure this is something a little less apocalyptic.”

“Regardless, these cases are now being taken very seriously,” Oobleck said. “All four of you are now on the case – it doesn’t matter how you tackle this, but we need results. This is your top priority – I don’t care what personal issues you have, they had better not get in the way of your investigation!”

With that Oobleck left the room, leaving the four eyeing each other warily.

“Well, why don’t we split up?” Ruby suggested. “We can take one crime scene, you can take the other?”

“Sounds good to me, sis,” Yang said. She grabbed one of the two folder’s Oobleck had left behind, flipping it open. “Looks like we’ve got an Ursa statue some rich asshole owned. Relative of yours, ice queen?”

“Yang...” Ruby said, her voice disappointed.

Yang sent Ruby an apologetic look, before strolling to the door. “See you in the squad room when we’re done.”

“That- that- that lout,” Weiss growled.

Ruby sighed. “This is going to be a long, long case.”

With that they headed to the car, Weiss flipping through the folder as she walked. “Bold,” she said.

“What?” Ruby asked.

“This theft was from a safe deposit box at the Bank of Vale,” Weiss said.

“Whoa,” Ruby said. “That doesn’t sound easy to rob. Did they take anything else?”

“No,” Weiss said. “I don’t care how professional a thief is, how much must they be getting paid to break into a bank and not steal so much as a penny?”

The bank was a large, imposing marble and glass structure that showed off the wealth of the bank in a rather vulgar way. Despite having been robbed the night before it appeared to be operating normally, without any police presence or other signs of disturbance. Weiss led the way in, taking in
the cavernous main room before walking towards the manager’s office.

“Excuse me,” a guard said, interposing himself in front of her before she could walk down the side hallway. “Do you have an appointment, ma’am?”

“No,” Weiss answered.

“Then you’ll have to make one if you wish to speak with any of the executives, ma’am.”

“Do you know who I am?” Weiss asked.

The guard hesitated for a moment. “Weiss Schnee.”

“Do you know that my family does a significant amount of our banking through your institution?”

There was a longer pause, as the guard started looking paler. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Would it look very good on your resume if I was forced to inform the bank’s president that that was no longer the case?” Weiss demanded, her voice ice cold.

“No, ma’am,” the guard said. “Just a moment, I’ll tell the manager that you’re here.”

“You do that,” Weiss said. She turned her head when the guard left, blinking at the dumbfounded look on Ruby’s face. “What?”

“’What?’” Ruby parroted. “What was that?”

Weiss shrugged. “The fastest way to get things done. The people who run the Bank of Vale make my family look soft-hearted. If we’re going to actually get a chance to look for evidence we’re going to have to strong arm them.”

“Why wouldn’t they want us investigating?”

Weiss snorted. “Pride. They won’t want to admit how badly they failed. They did the minimum diligence required to get their insurance company to pay out, and that only required normal detectives to investigate. Now that they’ll be getting their money, they’re going to want to forget this ever happened.”

“But- but then it could happen again!” Ruby objected.

“And if it does, they would call the police, get a report from a detective, and file another insurance claim. It’s all numbers to them, and having Supernatural Affairs poking around is more trouble than it’s worth from that perspective.”

The guard returned. “Mr. Coquelicot will see you now, Ms. Schnee,” he said nervously. “I can escort you-”

“I know the way,” Weiss said, strolling past him. He hesitated just long enough for Ruby to follow, and soon they had walked down the marble hall to the manager’s office. Weiss didn’t even bother to knock, simply throwing the door open and striding inside like she owned the room. “Mr. Coquelicot.”

The man in question jumped in his seat, causing his chins to wobble comically. He was almost as wide as he was tall, with little hair but large glasses. He squinted at them for a moment, before pulling a handkerchief from his tailored suit and wiping his sweaty forehead. “Ms. Schnee. What can Bank of Vale do for you today?”
“I’m here as a detective with Supernatural Affairs,” Weiss said, pulling out her badge. “My partner and I are here to investigate the recent theft from your safe deposit boxes.”

The man’s face darkened. “That won’t be necessary, Ms. Schnee. We have already had the matter investigated to our satisfaction.”

“Then you know how the criminal infiltrated your facility?” Weiss asked.

“Well... no,” Mr. Coquelicot admitted.

“Then I would not consider your ‘investigation’ to be completed to my satisfaction,” Weiss said. “I am afraid if your bank has so little concern for the safety of what is entrusted to you, then my family, and those we know, will no longer be able to do further business with you, Mr. Coquelicot.”

His face filled with panic before he quickly answered, stumbling over his words. “I- I’m sure that won’t be necessary! You and your partner can investigate! After all, if a Schnee can’t catch the thief, then surely it isn’t our fault?”

“That is acceptable, Mr. Coquelicot,” Weiss said with a nod, ignoring the way he mopped more sweat from his brow. “I assume the resources I will need to investigate will be made available to me?”

“Of- of course,” he said.

With a nod Weiss stalked out of the room, Ruby giving the man an awkward smile before scrambling after her. They were some distance down the hall when Ruby finally worked up the courage to break the silence. “You’re scary, Weiss.”

Weiss smirked. “It’s good of you to finally acknowledge that.”

Ruby grinned. “Don’t worry, I was only scared of you for about three seconds when you started yelling at me on the first day, but then I got over it. Besides, besties don’t fear besties.”

Weiss rolled her eyes but still smiled slightly as they tracked down the security room. It took a few glares, some sharp words, and a quick phone call to the manager by the head of security, but soon Weiss and Ruby were sitting in front of the video surveillance system. Ruby happily took control, fiddling with it for a moment before she figured out how to find what she was looking for.

“Two AM,” she said, reading the time stamp when she spotted someone, before going back a few minutes. They had to follow several cameras, but they eventually lost track of the intruder.

“They really need better camera coverage,” Weiss scowled. “If we had anything more than money tied up in this bank my family would definitely be withdrawing it after this incompetence.”

Ruby gulped slightly, glancing over at the angry looks from the security staff that Weiss was ignoring before finally finding the oldest time they had for the man on the tape. “So... one fifty-seven in the morning he’s already in the building. It looks like he comes from the right side of the lobby. Any idea what’s over there?”

“We’ll look,” Weiss said. “Does he go directly to the deposit area?”

“Looks like it,” Ruby confirmed.

The man on the video was wearing a white coat with a black bowler hat worn at an angle, just covering his red hair. He had a cane in one hand despite not needing it to walk, and a cigar in his
“Wait, I’ve seen him before!” Ruby said excitedly. “The case that made me a detective! It was this guy and his gang stealing dust, and I managed to drive him off, but I wasn’t able to catch him. He shot this fireball at me from his cane somehow! I don’t know how it worked, but it was pretty amazing. He managed to escape before I could catch up to him after.”

Ruby paused the camera, rewinding to freeze it on a shot of the intruder’s face. He had a long nose, crossed eyes, buck teeth, and vapid, drooling grin on his face.

“They let you join supernatural affairs when you didn’t manage to catch him?” Weiss asked. “I suppose appearances can be deceiving, but he doesn’t look as though he came from a particularly deep gene pool.”

“I guess I was wrong,” Ruby said, disappointed. “He was dressed the same, and he had the cane and the same hair color, but... the guy I tried to arrest didn’t look like... that.”

“Some form of gang colors?” Weiss posited. “Or a relative?”

“Maybe,” Ruby grumbled, restarting the video.

The criminal calmly crossed the lobby, before entering the hall where the safe deposit boxes were kept. When he reached it he looked around thoroughly, before pulling out a can of spray paint and covering each of the cameras that faced that area. Ruby returned the camera view to the lobby and waited, and twenty-seven minutes after covering the cameras the criminal reappeared.

“Hey, look at that,” Ruby said, reversing the camera and watching him cross the lobby again. “Did you see that?”

“He seems to be carrying something in a bag,” Weiss said. “Probably the statue...”

“No, look at his face,” Ruby said.

Weiss frowned as she watched Ruby replay the feed, eventually shrugging. “He doesn’t show it.”

“Exactly!” Ruby said excitedly. “He was fine showing his face before, but now he’s being really careful to avoid the cameras. He’s even got his hat at that weird angle to keep his face hidden from one of them.”

Weiss studied the feed for another play through before nodding. “You’re right. Something to consider.”

“I guess we should copy these, but otherwise I don’t think we can learn anything else here,” Ruby said. “Wanna check out the deposit room next?”

“Alright.”
The entrance to the safe deposit room was a heavy door covered in wards. While not an actual vault, it was solid enough to discourage physical assailment, well locked, and its magical protections would keep out most mystical attempts to bypass the physical defenses, as well as harm anyone with nefarious intent who interacted with the door.

Weiss spent several long minutes studying the defenses, but in the end they weren’t up to the standards of a Schnee. She could see how the thief had disabled the wards, and she suspected that the physical defenses had their own measure of sloppiness. She definitely wasn’t going to keep anything in the ‘safe deposit’ at the Bank of Vale after seeing how weak the security really was.

Weiss turned to her partner, only to pause as she noticed Ruby studying the wards intently. Weiss found herself smiling slightly as she watched her friend concentrate on the intellectual pursuit, using everything that she had taught her to study the defenses. The warm feeling from earlier returned, and Weiss jolted slightly as she realized just how happy she felt just looking at Ruby. It was strange, but strangely pleasant.

Any further introspection was interrupted by Ruby turning from the door with a serious expression on her face. “I have no idea what I’m looking at,” she said proudly.

And just like that Weiss’ esteem for the new, serious Ruby Rose shattered like glass. Weiss slapped a gloved hand to her face and sighed, knowing that it was her own fault for getting her hopes up. After all, she’d been the one teaching Ruby about her aura and magic, and she hadn’t gotten around to wards yet. Of course Ruby wouldn’t have any idea what she was looking at.

Weiss slowly lowered her fingers from where they had been covering her eyes, peering over at her partner who had a proud grin on her face at having provoked so much exasperation from Weiss. “If you’re so interested in the subject, I suppose we can add ward interpretation to your studies. It’s complex, so I was intending to wait, but...”

Just like that Ruby’s expression fell to one of panic. “N-no, that’s not necessary, Weiss. Really!”

Weiss grinned evilly. Ruby was incredibly cute when flustered...

Wait, she thought. Cute?

Shaking that off Weiss turned back to the door, smirking slightly at Ruby’s sigh of relief as she focused on the job again. “The door is quite heavily warded, although it has several flaws. They haven’t brought in their ‘expert’ yet to fix the damage, so I can see how the thief overcame them.”

“Um, anything that we can use?” Ruby asked.

“Maybe,” Weiss said. “I’ll spare you the specifics of the way he created a positive feedback loop to overpower the wards-”

“Thank you.”

“-but there are three important take aways from his efforts,” Weiss finished. “First, his attack on the wards was made using three magical objects. The objects acted using a brute force approach, so no real magical ability was required, other than enough aura sight to know see to place the devices, and the knowledge to know where to put them. It also means that he had to have access to a large quantity of dust to empower the magic items.”
“He didn’t have to be skilled, but does that mean he wasn’t?” Ruby asked.

Weiss hummed thoughtfully. “Breaking in this way has all of the style and subtlety of using a crowbar to break into his target, and has the disadvantage of using tens of thousands of dollars in dust. Either he lacks the skill to break in otherwise, or he doesn’t care.”

“You’d think a thief just breaking in like that wouldn’t, you know, not take everything valuable.”

Weiss nodded. “I suspect that you are correct, although... if he has enough wealth that that much dust doesn’t mean anything to him, then he might not care to steal.”

“Okay, so, probably not a master wizard making his own mirror travel thingee,” Ruby said. “But he’s got a lot of magical stuff, since he’s using so many in his crimes. Maybe he is a rich magic jerk.”

“He has even more than the mirror and ward breakers, actually,” Weiss said. “The door’s lock was picked with a magical tool. Not as expensive or difficult to acquire as the ward breaker, but probably worth noting that he didn’t steal the keys or use a more traditional lock pick.”

“That is a lot of magic,” Ruby agreed. “How much did this robbery cost?”

“Just tonight’s effort?” Weiss asked. “If he already had access to the magical tools, probably thirty thousand dollars worth of dust. The door opening tool would’ve cost somewhere around eighty thousand, the ward breakers more than a million, and the mirror... tens of millions.”

Ruby whistled. “So not quite the same as a smash and grab with a crowbar.’

“Not quite,” Weiss agreed.

Ruby’s brow furrowed for a moment. “You said three things.”

“Right,” Weiss said, facing the door again. She studied the wards carefully to check her results and then nodded. “The doors wards were compromised, but there is a second, independent ward inside of the door wards, and that is fully intact.”

“Why wouldn’t he have gotten around that one?” Ruby asked.

“It’s another sign of his lack of true skill with binding magic,” Weiss said with a shrug. “Only a truly skilled binder like myself would’ve seen it from this short of an observation, and he probably didn’t check to see if anything was still intact after his ward breaker finished, when it became more noticeable without the main wards as obviously interfering. He most likely walked right into it.”

“So what did the inner ward do?” Ruby asked.

“It was designed to strip away magical disguises from anyone passing through it,” Weiss said. “I suspect that at some point in the past someone infiltrated this room using a disguise, and they hired a binder to add the second ward to prevent it from happening again. If it was part of the original ward plan it would’ve been stronger, but it must’ve been cheaper to add it inside later rather than reworking everything.”

“Disguises?” Ruby asked. “So... he was covering his face in the video because he lost a disguise!”

“Almost certainly,” Weiss said with an approving nod. “You thought you recognized the man other than his face, correct?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “He was robbing a dust shop with a few thugs. He managed to get away, but a
few of his men got arrested. They didn’t even know his name, though; he’d just hired them for the job last minute.”

“Stealing dust,” Weiss hummed. “Did he steal a few tens of thousands of dollars worth?”

Ruby nodded slowly. “So that’s how he’s been doing all of... this.”

“Probably,” Weiss agreed. “He seems to be very fond of enchanted objects.”

“Like his cane!” Ruby offered. “With the fire, and the explosions, and the letting him get away thing.”

With that the two had security open the door, and they entered the safe deposit area itself. The room was filled with rows of metal boxes, each locked to prevent easy entry. Unfortunately the main security measure was its presence in the heart of the bank itself, as the room didn’t even have cameras to record what happened within. With aura sight Weiss could see that a great many enchanted objects were present, but there was no dedicated security. When she found the safe deposit box itself she could feel the same magics had been used to unlock it that had been used at the door.

“Nothing interesting here,” Ruby said after carefully examining the room looking for anything that the normal detectives had missed.

“He used the same method to unlock the case as was used at the door. From his use of ward breakers he obviously possesses aura sight, but he didn’t even take the time to steal any of the enchanted objects in the room, despite some of them having very strong magic within them.”

“Did the detectives find anything in here?” Ruby asked.

Weiss flipped through the folder for a few moments before shaking her head. “No. No finger prints, no anomalous hair, not even any ash from that cigar he had unlit in his mouth… good to see they’re paying more attention to their work now. He seems to have spent most of the time he was off camera dealing with the door, then he was simply in and out of here. I suppose he wouldn’t have wanted to waste time, with the possibility of some kind of night security noticing his presence.”

“Did the detectives speak to them?” Ruby asked.

Weiss snorted. “One security guard, and he fell asleep. They checked the cameras, and he apparently gets a solid eight hours every night while on ‘duty’.”

Ruby rolled her eyes as well. “Wow. Remind me if I ever need an easy job after this where I can apply.”

“You’d get bored and start running laps around the lobby in an hour.”

They retraced the intruder’s steps, crossing the lobby to the area where he disappeared from the cameras. It didn’t take them long to realize that the place where the surveillance didn’t cover was the restrooms. “Classy,” Weiss said flatly, crossing her arms.

“You said he had to do a thing to the mirror he used so he could come out of it,” Ruby offered. “I guess a public bathroom is a place he could reach a mirror in the building.”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Weiss grumbled.

The women’s room had no useful evidence, and with a put upon expression Weiss followed Ruby
into the men’s room. Fortunately it wasn’t peak banking hours, so no one was inside, and the facility was at least relatively clean. Wrinkling her nose in disdain Weiss carefully examined the mirrors, before approaching the one at the far end.

“It’s the same,” Weiss said. She examined the thin thread of magic as it shifted slightly. “It’s almost certainly tied to the same mirror. Now let’s get out of here.”

Ruby ignored the strange looks they got from a few customers in the lobby for walking out of the men’s room while Weiss looked away, trying not to blush. “Ready to go?”

“I suppose,” Weiss said. “We learned a few things about his methods and resources, but until we can figure out who the criminal you almost stopped was I’m not sure how we’re going to solve this case.”

“It’s not like I tried to let him get away,” Ruby grumbled.

Weiss raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure you won’t let the bad guys get away next time, Ruby. I’ll be there, after all.”

Weiss smirked as Ruby pouted all the way to the car. Before long she was chattering away as usual, and Weiss half paid attention while thinking about the case. She had half of her initial report written in her mind by the time they arrived at Beacon, and the minute she reached her desk she started committing it to paper.

“Hey Yang, Blake!” Ruby called, breaking Weiss’ work flow.

“Sis, ice queen,” Yang said. “You guys find anything? Our crime scene was more of a bust than I’ve got.”

“The intruder used the same mirror enchantment from the previous crime scene,” Blake said. “The owner had thrown a fundraiser a few days ago, and anyone could’ve enchanted it.”

“You can recognize the enchantment?” Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow. She was somewhat impressed that the other detective could be so certain after only presumably reading her written reports about the case. It was only after she said it that she realized that it sounded quite condescending. She started to open her mouth to clarify what she meant when she was interrupted.

“Yes, I am able to read your reports quite well,” Blake said with a slight edge.

“Yeah, I’m not sure how, though,” Yang drawled. “You write like you tried to deep throat the entire Oxford English, and you’re gagging up the long words all over the place.”

Weiss wasn’t one hundred percent certain what she meant, but from her expression and context she was certain it was a crude insult of a somewhat graphic nature. Even Blake looked briefly scandalized, and Ruby looked angry.

“Yang!” Ruby yelled.

Yang looked sheepish for a few seconds, before apparently deciding to double down on what she’d started on. “Look, I get that you like the ice bitch for some reason, but Blake’s my partner, and she’s acting like she can’t believe a faunus could figure out how to be a detective!”

“Stop speaking for me, you thuggish neanderthal!” Weiss barked. “I said no such thing!”

“You don’t have to say it for it to be heard,” Blake said flatly. “‘Changelings’ don’t need four ears to
Weiss gritted her teeth. It was obvious that attempts to mend bridges were pointless. Blake and Yang hated her, and she suspected that if it was anyone else they wouldn’t be quite so hostile. But no, as a Schnee she was the Enemy, and nothing could change that. Maybe she should show them how her father would react to that kind of disrespect?

Weiss shook her head sharply, pulled from that line of thought. She was her own person, not her father, and she would handle things in her own way. Focusing back in on the conversation, she was about to deliver her own scathing retort when someone cleared their throat nearby.

It was a young, scared looking policeman standing beside the cubicle holding a package. “Um... I’ve got an evidence bag? Someone had video delivered?”

“That’s me!” Ruby said, hopping to her feet. “I asked the bank people to send all their footage for the past week. The thief guy had to visit the mirror at some point to enchant it, right?”

Weiss frowned. “Yes, although the enchantment won’t fail very swiftly. It will last for years...”

Yang snorted. “They won’t keep surveillance that old. It costs money to keep it, something you’ve never had to worry about-”

“Yang!” Ruby interrupted. “Why don’t the two of us go over the video? Away from everyone else.” Her eyes narrowed. “Alone. You and me. In a room. Where I can yell- er- talk to you. Please.”

Yang rolled her eyes. “What about you, kitty cat?”

“We need more information about these statues,” Blake mused. “I should do some research.”

“Library?” Yang asked.

“Library,” Blake agreed.

“Hey, I know,” Ruby said. “Why don’t you and Weiss research together?”

“What?!” Weiss hissed.

Ruby came over far too close, leaning in to speak quietly to Weiss. “Look, you didn’t want to fight with them anymore, right? Why don’t you see if you can get along with her during work? She likes reading, you like boring stuff – you’ll probably get a long great!”

“You didn’t need to speak quietly, you know,” Weiss said, rolling her eyes. “She can hear you just fine.”

Ruby pulled back slightly, pouting at Weiss. Her eyes widened, resembling shimmering pools, and Weiss found herself faced with the innocent, pleading expression of a cute little puppy. She resisted for as long as humanly possible, trying not to give in to her partner.

“Fine,” she snapped less than a second later, blushing slightly. The humiliation of giving in to her like that almost seemed worth it when Ruby grinned at her happily.

Yang left with Ruby, and for a long moment Weiss and Blake stared at each other awkwardly. Eventually Weiss cleared her throat. “We should probably get started.”

“Right,” Blake said.
They walked silently through the halls to Beacon’s library, and once there they separated, looking for books that might provide leads on the case. After grabbing a few hefty tomes she made her way to a table, setting them down before opening the first one to read. A minute later Blake arrived with several more books, and without a word she started her own research.

Normally Weiss preferred silence. After her mother’s death Schnee Manor hadn’t been a very welcoming place, and her personal... difficulties had further isolated her. Only her sister and Klein spoke with her with any regularity growing up, and with her sister always busy and Klein working for her father, she had spent most of her time alone. As an adult, she had continued the tradition, living in a cold, sterile apartment which was almost always silent.

It was strange that working without any sound besides the scratching of pens and the turning of pages was suddenly so awkward to her. Perhaps it was the time that she had spent with Ruby, her chaotic but cheerful manner changing Weiss more than she had thought. Perhaps it was simply how awkward things were between her and the faunus detective.

Eventually Weiss found herself staring at the Blake. She wasn’t the monster of her childhood nightmares, the cruel, wicked faunus who murdered her mother for reasons she hadn’t understood. She was a person, as alive and real as she herself was. Blake was also looking at her.

“What?” Blake demanded.

Weiss shook her head sharply. “What are you researching?”

Blake’s eyes narrowed, obviously searching for the hidden insult. “I’ve looked at the history of the statues, and I’m trying to locate where they all are. There are thirteen of them—”

“Yes,” Weiss interrupted, ignoring the glare she received. “I’ve read the history as well, but I’ve been focusing on the occult significance. Do you need any help?”

“No,” Blake said sharply. “I’m working on tracking down the locations of the statues now.”

Weiss swallowed a sharp retort. “How much longer will you need? I doubt Ruby and her sister will take long going over the security footage.”

“I’ll be done here in a few minutes, but I’ll need to hit the records room and the internet to find where some of them are.”

“I’ll be a few more hours at the longest on my work,” Weiss said.

Blake nodded and went back to work. Weiss sighed. It wasn’t quite as awkward as before, but she found herself missing her own partner profoundly.
“There are thirteen statues of Grimm in the set,” Weiss began, cycling through different images on her projector. Most had been photographed at one point or another, although a few were black and white, and two were only depicted in woodcuts. “As best as can be determined, they were created by the same person or persons. While we know little about their culture or society, they seem to have been a nomadic hunter gatherer tribe that lived around the region that would someday become Vale.”

“Is there a point to this?” Yang interrupted. “I don’t need a history lesson to catch a thief.”

“Yang...” Ruby groaned.

Weiss gritted her teeth. “Yes there’s a point you imbecilic boor! If you would let me finish-”

“Hey, I’m not a boar!” Yang objected, pulling up the bottom of her shirt to reveal her well defined stomach muscles. “Do I look like a pig to you?”

“Weiss,” Ruby said, dropping her face into her hands. “Please, just ignore her...”

“Rubes-” Yang started.

“Don’t worry, I’ll ignore her, too,” Ruby added.

“...that’s cold, sis,” Yang grumbled. “Weiss cold.”

When Ruby didn’t reply Yang pouted a little.

Weiss smirked and continued. “All thirteen statues depict a different Creature of Grimm. What they have in common, however, is what they are and can be used for. All thirteen are powerful mana batteries, and all are tainted.”

“So they’ve all been used for a bunch of dark magic stuff?” Ruby asked. “That’s kinda weird, isn’t it?”

Weiss shook her head. “People who have spent a great deal of time examining several of the statuettes have come to a conclusion about that. Specifically, the tainting didn’t happen later. It was by design.”

“So they were made to be tainted?” Blake asked. “Why would someone want to do that?”

“The statuettes weren’t intended for use with human magics, or even magics of the natural world,” Weiss said, advancing to the next image, which included a number of complex mathematical equations, mystical power diagrams, and proposed enchanting schematics for how the statues could have been created. “They were designed specifically to channel demonic magic.”

“What exactly does that mean?” Ruby asked.

“Mana comes from the souls of living beings, or from flows of energy in the natural world,” Weiss explained. “Some entities, however, do not just produce mana, but rather are composed of it. While a wide variety of entities are referred to as being ‘demons’ in a colloquial sense, true demons are beings created by and from tainted mana. It takes a great source of dark magic to generate demons, but some planes of existence are themselves tainted, some to the point where it pools and flows like water. Those places are called Hells.”
Ruby furrowed her brow. “So demonic magic... I’m confused...”

“Magic which is capable of making demons, or which has been used by demons, is called demonic magic,” Blake said. “It is the purest, most concentrated form of dark mana. Wielding it has terrible consequences for humans... often lethal ones.”

“So the statues are supposed to hold demon mana,” Ruby said. “Why would anyone want to do that?”

“Some magics are much more effective when performed with such dark mana,” Weiss said grimly. “The most notable, of course, is the thaumogensis of new demonic entities. Many of the more profound curses require it as well – werewolves, for example, were originally made with demon magic.”

“So what does this mean?” Ruby asked.

Weiss pursed her lips. “It’s difficult to say. There may be some ritual that specifically calls for these statuettes that has faded from knowledge. Whoever wants them may have their own plans in mind. Making demons of their own? Curses? Murderous spells of a truly foul nature? I hate to say it, but attempts to summon a demon lord? There are a lot of options for why someone would want to store vast quantities of demonic mana, but none of them are good.”

Blake then took the floor, returning the presentation to the images of the various statuettes. “Of the thirteen statues in the set, eight were stolen this summer... before Supernatural Affairs became involved.”

“Wait, what?” Ruby demanded. “You mean... eleven of them were stolen?!”

“Yes,” Blake said, quickly showing various statues. “No one in the beginning realized what the statues were. Some had been in families long enough that the owners didn’t realize their true value. Others had been tied up in estate sales or in the hands of small collections. One had been used as a lawn ornament.”

“Aren’t these things worth millions?” Yang asked.

“Yes,” Blake said. “But that doesn’t mean that everyone knows it. Without the ability to feel their aura they just look like ugly demon statues. Some of the owners didn’t even realize that they were old. If they weren’t magical objects they certainly would have been lost over the years.”

“Why does being magical matter?” Ruby asked.

“Magical objects, even benign ones, have a way of looking after themselves,” Weiss explained. “No one has ever ‘lost’ a magic item... unless the item wanted to get lost.”

“You make them sound alive,” Ruby said.

Weiss nodded slightly. “Not in the traditional sense, but mana is related to the soul. Our planet is alive in some way, given the ley lines. Animals have enough spirit to have something like a soul, since even the tiniest ant has a slight aura. If something has enough magic worked into it, it begins to take on lifelike properties as well. The longer it exists, and the more powerful it is, the more lifelike the thing becomes.”

“Those statues are old, right?” Yang said.

“Older than written records,” Blake agreed.
And if miss doom and gloom isn’t exaggerating, I’m guessing they can hold a lot of magic,” Yang said. “So how... alive are these statues? Lively enough to go clubbing? Or just to play bingo all day.”

“They have a will of their own,” Weiss said grimly. “One as twisted and foul as the magic they are designed to contain.”

“So how do we destroy it?” Yang asked. “Chuck it into Mount Doom?”

Weiss looked scandalized. “They’re historical relics! The oldest known example of mana batteries!”

“Yeah, and they’re horribly evil,” Yang said. “Why wouldn’t we destroy them?”

“This isn’t some fantasy epic,” Weiss sneered. “They’re property legally owned by various private citizens around Vale. You don’t just get to destroy them because you don’t like them, you oaf.”

“They can deal with it!” Yang retorted. “What’s more important? Some rich people’s property, or the lives that’ll be lost if whoever’s stealing them does whatever he’s planning? Oh, wait. Forgot who I was talking to for a second...”

“You feckless-”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ruby inserted. “Let’s all just calm down. We’re not going in planning to destroy anything – we can seize them, and if they need to be destroyed then Inspector Ozpin or the Mayor or somebody can make that decision! But... if we interrupt them and we have to destroy one...”

Weiss sighed. “They’re made of solid stone, and unusually durable because of the magic within them, but in theory they can be destroyed like any other statuette. I wouldn’t advise doing it if they’re holding a magical charge, however. It would get... messy.”

“Define messy,” Yang said.

“A massive explosion of dark magic,” Blake drawled. “All life in the area would be immediately effected, so the survivors of the blast would mutate or get various cancers. The energy would need to go somewhere of course, so probably a large number of demons would spontaneously form-”

“Right, right, got it, don’t smash a charged statue,” Yang said, raising her hands defensively. “How can you tell the difference, anyway?”

“The same way you determine the charge on any mana battery,” Weiss said. “You have to probe it with your aura. Of course, probing them exposes you to the dark magic within, which is dangerous on its own, and being self willed, you risk the statuette realizing that you intend to destroy it and it responding with curses or the thaumogenesis of demonic guardians...”

“Fine, fine, no smashing the ugly lawn ornaments,” Yang said. “Sheesh.”

“Okay, so... where were we?” Ruby asked.

Blake cleared her throat. “Eleven of the statues have now been stolen, and since there are thirteen of them, that leaves two. One is currently in the possession of the Vale Magic Society, and the other is in the Vale Museum of History and the Occult.”

“Obviously this guy is going to go after the remaining statues, so it’s our job to stop him!” Ruby said, raising a fist cheerfully. “We might not know who or where he is, but we know where he’s gonna be!”
Blake shut down the projector and looked at her partner. “Did you and Ruby find anything on the tapes?”

“As a matter of fact we did, kitty cat,” Yang said, gesturing for her partner to scoot over and let her have the projector. She stuck a flash drive into it and fiddled around for a few moments before getting a section of video cued up. “It took a while, but eventually we spotted this guy two days before the robbery.”

The video showed the busy lobby of the bank at peak hours. Customers queued up or wandered about aimlessly, creating a symphony of controlled chaos. Strolling casually along without a care in the world was a man wearing a familiar bowler hat and coat, his cane tucked under his arm. He grinned at one of the guards, giving him a cheeky wink, before moving out of the filmed area in the direction of the restrooms.

“Is that the man you almost arrested?” Weiss asked Ruby.

Her partner pouted a little at the reminder. “That’s him. For sure.”

A few minutes later the man walked onto screen from the restroom area and back out of the bank. Yang switched to an external camera, where they could see him pulling out a cigar and lighting it up while he waited. A few minutes later a taxi arrived, and he climbed inside before it pulled away.

“Did you get anything on the taxi?” Blake asked.

Yang shook her head. “We called, and they’ve got records of a cash transaction then. The driver apparently didn’t notice anything odd about the guy, and he can’t remember where he took him. The fare was enough to put him pretty far from the bank but within Vale somewhere.”

“Did you manage to get a good picture of his face?” Weiss asked.

“Of course,” Yang said, bringing up a single still image. It was fairly distant, and the camera quality wasn’t the best, but it was a pretty good shot of the man’s face as he crossed the lobby.

“Don’t worry, I’ve already got a copy of it,” Ruby said. “I grabbed it from the photo printer right before the meeting.”

“So what’s our next move?” Weiss asked.

“I’ve got a few contacts I’d like to hit up, see if I can put a name to his face,” Yang said.

“We’ll make sure the statues are safe!” Ruby said. “We should do a stakeout!”

“We should warn the owners of the risk, first,” Weiss said. “They can take measures if they’re aware of the threat.”

“So who do we visit first?” Ruby asked excitedly.

Weiss checked the time. “It’s still a few hours before dinner. Why don’t we go visit the Magic Society first. Robbing the museum in broad daylight doesn’t seem to be the thief’s style, so we have until closing time to warn them of the threat. The Magic Society doesn’t have set hours, so they could be robbed at any time.”

“Wow, you know a lot about the Vale Magic Society, Weiss,” Ruby said, starry eyed. “Are you a member?”
“Please,” Weiss snorted. “A Schnee would never be associated with a rabble of amateurs and dabblers like that.”

“Then how do you know so much about them?”

“They spy on them,” Blake said.

“My family does not spy,” Weiss said. “We simply have a healthy appreciation for staying current on trends in the magical community.”

“That sound a lot like spying,” Yang pointed out.

Weiss glared. “Spying is an invasion of privacy. We simply ensure that we hear news about breakthroughs or other shifts that would be of interest to ourselves and our company.”

Yang frowned. “Nothing in that doesn’t sound like spying.”

“First of all, you shouldn’t use double negatives,” Weiss lectured. “Secondly, my family would never stoop so low as to spy-”

“I don’t think spying would requiring any ‘stooping’ from a Schnee,” Blake said blandly.

“Whoa-kay!” Ruby inserted, jumping to her feet and waving her arms. “That’s enough of that! Blake, Yang, good luck finding info about him. We’ll go to the magic people and meet back up at the diner for dinner, okay?”

“Fine,” Yang said, rolling her eyes. “See ya later, little sis.”

When they were gone Ruby sighed and slumped down. “Why do you guys always have to fight? I thought you didn’t want to, anymore.”

“Tell that that them,” Weiss said. “They keep insulting me, and my family... how am I supposed to keep quiet after that?”

“I dunno, trying to be the bigger person I guess?” Ruby said. “And it’s not like they always start it. Look, I don’t want to get into a fight with you about it. I think all three of you are at fault, and I don’t care how it started who starts it now or who’s mean to who. I just want to be a detective and not have to deal with this high school bull crap!”

Weiss, who had been getting annoyed, felt her lip quirk at that. “I’ll try to avoid ‘high school’, um ‘bull crap’ in the future.”

Ruby rolled her eyes at that. “Come on, let’s just get going.”

They walked to the car in silence, and when they reached it Weiss paused before entering, looking anywhere but at her as she mumbled quietly. “I’m sorry, Ruby.”

Ruby looked at her for a long moment, before giving her a small smile. “I know you are. I just wish it didn’t keep happening.”

“Me, too,” Weiss agreed, opening the door and climbing in.

Before long Ruby was practically vibrating in her seat as she drove, and after a long minute Weiss sighed. “Why are you so excited?” she asked resignedly.

“We’re off to the see the wizards!” Ruby sang off tune. “The wonderful wizards of Vale!”
“Ugh,” Weiss groaned.

“Because, because, because, because...” Ruby continued, trailing off for Weiss to finish.

She crossed her arms in disgust and spoke her answer. “Because of how bad their security is?”

“That’s not right,” Ruby sulked.

“It’s true, though,” Weiss said. “Why are you so excited about this? You work for Glynda Goodwitch, one of the most powerful and skilled witches in Vale’s history. Inspector Ozpin is... whatever he is, but he’s certainly powerful. I’m a Schnee, and considered unusually good with binding magics even for my family... and I’m a necromancer, of which only a handful exist in the entire country. Why are you so excited to see a bunch of pretentious amateur wand wavers?”

Ruby pouted. “You act like I wasn’t excited to meet Captain Goodwitch. She wouldn’t sign an autograph, you know.”

That forced a surprised bark of laughter out of Weiss. “You asked for her autograph?”

Ruby blushed. “Yeah. After Inspector Ozpin offered to let me join, he had Captain Goodwitch show me around. The first thing I did was completely fangirl out and ask for an autograph.”

Weiss laughed. “Why are you so excited about magic users, but so... underwhelmed by your own magic? I know I’m still teaching you the basics, but you have enough talent to be a spell caster if you apply yourself.”

“I dunno,” Ruby said. “I guess... well, Yang and dad used to read me a lot of fairy tales when I was little. My favorite kind were about heroes beating villains and saving the day and killing monsters and all that kinda stuff! But... I also liked the magic. It was kinda cool. I just... well, I never thought that’d be me. I could picture myself running around with a sword and cape slaying the monsters and saving the princesses, but... even knowing magic was real, it just didn’t seem like something I’d ever be able to do.”

“Ruby, you have significant talent,” Weiss began. “Even besides your ability to conjure a magical weapon that even someone like Captain Goodwitch would have trouble reproducing, you have proven to be a very capable student of the mystic arts. In another year or two you’ll most likely need to find another teacher—”

“Wait, what?” Ruby interrupted. “First of all, I don’t mind the ego building a little. I mean, it’s kinda nice hearing you say nice stuff like that about me, but I’m not really needing it, you know? I’m not feeling bad about my magic or whatever. But what do you mean I’ll need a different teacher?”

Weiss shrugged. “I don’t think you would enjoy binding magics – it’s more math than magic, and even the simplest feat takes years of study to understand. I can teach you magic theory, the use of your aura, even some cantrips, but I’ve never delved more deeply into spell casting than that.”

Ruby pouted a little. “But I don’t want a different teacher.”

Weiss blushed, feeling oddly pleased by that admission. “Regardless, you may need one someday. But we’ve gotten off topic again. Why would meeting the Vale Magic Society be so exciting for you?”

“I dunno,” Ruby said. “I guess... there’s just something magical about it. I’ve seen their advertisements, and- ooh, ooh, last years parade float! With the ring of blue fire! And all those wizards, like, wearing bright robes and waving their wands trying to keep it floating! It was
amazing.”

Weiss smacked her hand into her face, groaning slightly. “This is going to be a long, long day.”
The Vale Magic Society building was done in an over-the-top version of neoclassical style, complete with a facade of intricate carvings, and a large marble statue of a man wearing robes and a ridiculous pointy hat. It was the gaudiest, silliest looking thing Weiss had ever seen, and she’d been forced to attend some rather unfortunate parties hosted by nouveau riche businessmen during her youth.

“Wow,” Ruby gasped, eyes sparkling with joy. “It’s amazing. It’s like someone took a roman wizard place and stuck it right in the middle of Vale!”

“Actually, the romans had a very poor opinion of magic,” Weiss said, crossing her arms. “They wouldn’t have used such an obvious building. Furthermore, the classical world was quite fond of color; they wouldn’t have used so much bare, unpainted marble.”

“Just like Rome,” Ruby murmured dreamily.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Let’s just get this over with.”

They walked up the front steps, Ruby dashing ahead as Weiss concentrated her aura to her eyes to examine the building magically. The wards were... adequate, she supposed. The structure was built on a ley line, and it took advantage of that fact to empower them more than most wards. They were bright and impressive, but Weiss could make out seams and loose ends that shouldn’t have existed from a professional warding job. She sneered at the amateur work, the members of the little club obviously having raised them themselves.

Ruby grabbed the door knocker, pulling it back and bringing it down hard on the door. The sound rang like chimes, echoing through the building rather than making the sound of metal on wood that it should have. Weiss could see the enchantment on the metal that made it work, and she could see the way that it drained mana from Ruby to power the magic, and the clumsy effect actually pulled some power from the door wards as well, weakening them slightly every time someone knocked.

The door flew open theatrically, and Weiss was appalled to see that the magic that opened the door actually disabled its wards entirely to do so. It was a cheap parlor trick done in such a hamfisted manner that it compromised all security. If they had been attackers they could rush inside without even the thinnest threshold ward to repel them.

Standing inside was a man wearing a blue robe covered in twinkling stars. Her sight revealed not a scrap of magic to the outfit, and as she walked she guessed from the way they glimmered that they were made with mundane reflective material designed to look ‘impressive’ when combined with the beam of the spotlight he was standing in. He also had a long, graying beard, and a tall, pointy hat on top of his head.

“Ho there, seekers of knowledge!” he proclaimed. “I am Magister Ocatarine, and we of the Vale Magic Society welcome all the Gifted who willingly seek Knowledge of the Ars Magica!”

“Wow,” Ruby gasped.

The man smirked. “Indeed. I see that you have the Gift, and so were able to open the door to our sanctum, and in so doing, you have opened the doors to your own mind! Now, does your companion also share... the... gift... Ms. Schnee! It is an honor to make your acquaintance. Have you come to join our fair order?”

Weiss crossed her arms, giving the man an unimpressed look. “No. My partner and I are here about a
series of thefts that have been occurring around Vale.”

The man slumped slightly at the flat rejection before climbing down from the slightly raised platform he had been on, flipping a switch to turn off the spotlight as he did. “I assure you, we are workers of wonders, not thieves, no matter how trivial such things may be before the might of our magics.”

“Of course not!” Ruby insisted, waving her arms around. “It’s just, the thieves have been stealing magic items, and you have one of the set they’re after.”

“I see,” the man said, drawing back up into what he (and Ruby) obviously thought was an impressive posture. “I can assure you that our wards are strong enough to keep out any trespasser! Our people have spent decades carefully crafting and expanding them into something that is no doubt impressive even to a member of the illustrious Schnee family such as yourself.”

Weiss was about to say something scathing, but after a glance at Ruby she didn’t quite have the heart for it. It would complicate their investigation, and crushing her partner would be like kicking a puppy. “I’ve never seen anything quite like them,” Weiss said delicately. “Still, perhaps the criminal entered through the front door – he has some skill with magic as well.”

“Oh, yeah, here’s his picture!” Ruby said, pulling out the copy she’d printed out before the meeting. “Have you seen him before?”

Weiss saw the immediate flash of recognition in the man’s eyes as soon as he saw the picture, but despite that he still spent long moments studying it, before actually taking it from Ruby’s hand. He then held it to his forehead, closed his eyes, and murmured some strange sounding incantation. Weiss activated her aura sight in time to watch what he did, and found herself unsurprised to realize that he was simply reactivating the door security, which he had forgotten to do during the minutes since they had been let inside.

Finally he handed the picture back to Ruby. “Indeed, this man has been in this building before... recently in fact.”


“Yesterday,” Octarine said, crossing his arms and putting his hands into the opposite sleeves. “He came to enquire about joining our order, and we gave him a tour of the premises. He must have fooled even our most sensitive members somehow for his intentions to not be detected, but I can assure you that he will be unable to penetrate our wards to take whatever he was after.”

“Right,” Weiss said. “Still, perhaps you could show us the security around his target? For our peace of mind.”

“And anything else on the tour,” Ruby agreed.

Weiss rolled her eyes, but Octarine either didn’t notice or simply didn’t comment. She followed behind her excited partner, taking in the sights. With every room, every person she met, every display of what the members thought was worth showing off Weiss got steadily more and more disillusioned with the group, and she had started with a quite low opinion of them.

“And now, to show the piece of resistance-”

Weiss twitched at the malapropism.

“-our special collection, wherein we keep our most amazing magical artifacts!”
If there was one thing that was actually impressive about the group it was the collection of artifacts they had on display. The actual arrangement of the room was tacky at best, and they had far, far too many magical items for such a small space, but the items were certainly interesting and often quite valuable. Since she recognized more than a few of them, she suspected that, unlike the items that littered the rest of the building which were made by various members and thus didn’t do their jobs well, these were purchased, no doubt at great expense by the group’s wealthier members.

“Whoa,” Ruby gasped. “Is this where you keep the statue?”

“Statue?” he asked.

Weiss turned her eyes from studying a rare Javanese magic stone, to look at Octarine. “Yes, the target of the theft. A prehistoric statuette of a Grimm, specifically a Beringel. It was created to serve as a mana battery for demonic magic, and is thus quite tainted.”

“I see,” the man said, nodding thoughtfully. “That item is indeed quite valuable, and dangerous as well. We keep it here in our collection to ensure that it’s power is not abused by vile workers of degenerate magics.”

Weiss cast her gaze around the room, noting the lack of mystical security of any kind. “You keep it here?”

“You keep it here?” he said. “Follow me – I will show it to you.”

They followed him across the room towards the back, where Weiss began to feel a strong presence of dark magic. She pursed her lips, and kept her aura held tightly around her person to reduce the risk of contamination, and was happy to see with a glance that Ruby was doing it as well. It was nice seeing that her lessons were paying off, and even nicer to know that her partner wasn’t going to be killed by dark magic exposure any time soon. Of course, even very strong dark magic was unlikely to harm them while simply contained inactive in objects, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Octarine suddenly stopped, staring at an empty podium. “What?”

“What is it?” Ruby asked.

“It’s gone!” Octarine shouted. “The statue is gone!”

“The Grimm statue?” Ruby asked.

“Yes, it should be right here!” Octarine shouted, pointing dramatically at the empty podium.

“Do you have cameras in this room?” Weiss asked, looking around for any visible ones.

“Er... no,” Octarine said sheepishly. “We don’t have any internal security cameras. We just rely on our wards.”

“Right,” Weiss drawled, tired of holding back her commentary. “How is that working out for you?”

The next hour was spent with an increasingly annoyed Weiss snippily commenting on what was happening as the bumbling fools tried to figure out when and how the statue was taken. She checked for enchanted mirrors that the criminal could have used at any point on the tour, but didn’t find any, although that didn’t necessarily mean there wasn’t one. The Vale Magic Society was so disorganized they weren’t even sure where all of the mirrors in the building were, nor did they know the exact path the tour a day previous might have taken.
Of course, the methods employed at the Bank of Vale and Infuscate’s house wouldn’t have been necessary. The wards may have looked impressive to the poorly trained observer, but during long waits while the idiots argued with one another Weiss carefully studied them, noting more and more exploitable gaps in the mess of conflicting magical defenses.

“So, you don’t know how it was taken,” Weiss said eventually, interrupting the growing pow wow of dabbler and amateurs.

“Er... no,” one of them said sheepishly, adjusting his glasses.

Weiss stared at him while he shifted uncomfortably for a moment, before turning her gaze to Ruby.

“The how doesn’t really matter to our investigation. We need to concentrate on protecting the remaining statuette.”

“But...” Ruby began. “We didn’t find the mirror he would’ve used. What if he stole it some other way? Shouldn’t we try to figure out how?”

“No,” Weiss said harshly, the tenuous remains of her temper fully fraying. “He could’ve used a mirror that they don’t remember having, like the last three I checked after the first inspection. He could’ve waited until his guide was distracted and nabbed it right on the tour. He could’ve passed through one of the many weaknesses in the wards that I’ve noticed from the inside. It really doesn’t matter.”

“Hey now,” Octarine said, frowning. “We have very powerful wards!”

Weiss glared at him. “Oh yes, very powerful. Like a steel vault door, but with gaps around the frame, and windows without even any glass in the room it’s protecting! You’re squandering the power the ley line is giving your protections by not having an actually competent warder ensure that the defenses as a whole complement each other instead of building up destructive interference!”

“Hey, we have our best members make those wards!”

“Which should indicate just how amateurish they really are! Even if you manage to occasionally attract truly skilled people who are able to ignore the puerile theatrics that you employ, no one who knows about wards would be willing to join your group after seeing the mess that you use! Next time, don’t be cute and just hire a professional!”

Seeing the crowd getting ugly at her dressing down Weiss faced her partner, who looked crestfallen.

“Ready to go?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said sadly. “Um, thank you for the tour... we’ll, um, let you know when we find your statue.”

Ruby was quiet as they were escorted out, and before long they were back in the car driving to their usual diner. After a while she broke the silence with a quiet question. “Were they really that bad?”

Weiss searched for a delicate way to put it, but in the end she decided to just be honest. “They’re dabblers who forgot that. They’ve pretended to know everything for so long that they forgot it was just a show they put on. It’s like a hobbyist woodcarver deciding he knew enough to make a house – it might look like a house, but he just doesn’t know how to actually make it safe and stable.”

“I see,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss looked at her partner, concerned. It wasn’t like her to be so down about anything. She looked more upset than when they were prisoners about to be killed by demon worshipping cultists.
“I know it’s not what you wanted to hear,” Weiss said. “Most magic users are charlatans. Real knowledge is mostly passed down in families, or via apprenticeships. People that are open with their knowledge don’t tend to have very much. Knowledge is power, and magical knowledge even more so, and in this world people don’t usually share power.”

“The world would be a better place if they did,” Ruby said.

Weiss shrugged. “Maybe. Or maybe more bad people like the thief we’re looking for would be running around using magic. Maybe we’d have more cults popping up summoning demons. There’s a lot of dangerous things that can be accomplished with a combination of magical skill and dubious morality.”

“But there’d be more good people trying to stop them,” Ruby said.

“Even ignoring the damage those confrontations would cause, or the crimes that would already be committed before anyone tried to stop them, most people would be criminals, not heroes.”

“That’s not true at all,” Ruby objected. “Maybe the world isn’t a fairy tale, and maybe stuff doesn’t just end with a happily ever after, but not everyone is a criminal. This whole city, only a small amount of it are the bad guys. Most people are honest, caring, good people just trying to make a living.”

Weiss snorted. “People are animals. They only care about others if it’s to their advantage, and the concerns of a stranger mean nothing to them. And give them a taste of power? They’d be corrupted by it. If everyone woke up tomorrow with magic, the world would fall apart in a heartbeat.”

Ruby shook her head. “I don’t believe that. There’s so many ways someone could already do bad stuff, and most people don’t. And not everyone with power abuses it. Just look at you! You have so much power. You can do magic like a crazy awesome... magic doing person. And! And you’re super rich, and smart, and beautiful and just generally all around awesome, so... so... well, you have so much going for you. Powerful stuff. And you’re still a good person.”

Weiss blushed, turning her face towards the window at the stream of complements from Ruby. “I’m not that good of a person.”

“Nope.”

“Nope?”

“Nope,” Ruby reiterated. “If you were as bad as you claim people are you’d be using all your power to help yourself, and no one would be able to stop you, but you don’t. And most other people wouldn’t either.”

“I think we’re just going to have to agree to disagree about this,” Weiss said quietly.

“Nope,” Ruby said. “I’m not going to keep arguing with you, though. I’m just going to make sure you notice how good the world really is.”

Weiss smiled sadly. “I just hope you don’t realize the truth about the world the hard way... and I guess I’ll be here to keep you safe whenever you don’t notice how bad people really are.”

Ruby gave her a more upbeat smile. “Sure! I’ll be there to show you that not everything is so bad all the time, your grumpiness.”

They arrived at the diner, and Weiss followed her partner inside. It had become a regular fixture of
her diet, and she was thankful that they had enough healthy options that it hadn’t compromised her health. How Ruby ate the way she did and stayed so trim and fit was beyond Weiss.

Yang and Blake were already sitting in a booth, and Ruby all but skipped over, with Weiss trailing behind much more slowly. “Yang!” Ruby cheered. “Blake!”

“Hey, Rubles, ice queen,” Yang said, giving them each a nod in turn.

Weiss gritted her teeth in annoyance. “It may have slipped your memory, but my name is ‘Weiss Schnee’. Perhaps if you wrote it down? You can write, can’t you?”

“Gee, I dunno, maybe that’s something they only teach in bitch school,” Yang said.

“So Yang!” Ruby said loudly. “Did you and Blake find anything?”

“Yeah, I hit pay dirt on the first contact I visited,” Yang said.

Ruby squinted at her dubiously. “Did you visit that sleazy nightclub again?”

“Yes,” Blake said, making Yang pout. “Junior recognized the picture. His name’s Roman Torchwick. Those guys he had with him when you ran into him-”

“You know, the time you failed to arrest him?” Yang inserted, making Ruby pout. It was much more effective than Yang’s, making Weiss look away for her own sanity.

“Why does everyone keep bringing that up?” Ruby moaned.

“Those thugs were some of Junior’s men that he’d hired,” Blake continued. “Apparently he was new in town, and he only had one associate that Junior knew about – a woman named Neo. He said her eyes were two different colors, and her hair was three.”

“That’s unusual,” Weiss said. “Did he know anything about this Roman Torchwick?”

“Not really,” Blake said with a shrug. “After Ruby managed to arrest Junior’s men he washed his hands of him. Did you find anything at the Magic Society?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “The other statuette was already taken. If we don’t want Roman Torchwick to get them all, we need to protect the last one.”

“That’s right!” Ruby said excitedly. “We’ll stakeout the museum, and we’ll catch him in the act!”

“Sounds good, sis,” Yang said.

“Alright,” Ruby said. “But first... dinner!”
Third Case: The Museum

“Huh, I never knew there was so much interesting stuff here,” Ruby said as they strolled slowly through another section of exhibits.

“Yes, my family has donated quite a bit to the museum system over the years,” Weiss said. “I think I’ve visited every museum at one point or another for fundraisers, but it’s nice just browsing without idiots trying to get my attention.”

Ruby beamed as they continued into another section. “I’m glad my sister got stuck talking with the director.”

“I thought I’d need to use my connections to get us permission to stay here overnight,” Weiss said. “I’m thankful not to have to deal with him. If I recall the director of this museum was quite annoying.”

“Is that it?” Ruby asked, pointing ahead.

“Yes,” Weiss said.

The section had the oldest artifacts on display in the entire museum. They strolled past stone tools and various crude items of art before they reached the display with the final statuette. It was sitting on a podium by itself, covered in a round glass enclosure, both to keep it safe from theft or damage, and to help contain any influence the dark magic could otherwise work on visitors.

It was the first time that they’d seen one in person, and visually it wasn’t very impressive. It was made from plain gray stone, carved into the blurry shape of a two legged dragon roughly the size of a football. It had no more detail than a child’s clay sculpture, and if she didn’t know what it was she wouldn’t assume it had any value from a casual glance.

As they looked at it Weiss didn’t even have to activate her aura sight to know that the statuette was wrong. It didn’t move. Didn’t make a sound. Didn’t do anything but sit there, a solid chunk of crudely carved stone, but somehow, in the depths of her soul, Weiss knew that it was looking at her.

Ruby gasped, and Weiss saw that she was paler than usual as she stared wide eyed at the sculpture. “It- it’s like it’s looking at us. Into us.”

“It is,” Weiss said grimly. “Remember, magical objects of a certain age and power have a will of their own.”

“How can this be sitting in a museum? How can people not completely freak out whenever they walk by?”

“They don’t notice it,” Weiss said, returning her gaze to the statue. “It doesn’t have eyes, so it doesn’t ‘see’ like a normal person. It can sense auras in some fashion, so normal people are quite dim and hard to see for it, so it doesn’t bother to focus on them. More than that... it can’t only see us, but it knows that we know what it is. And it knows that we know that it knows.”

Ruby shivered. “Are you sure we can’t just destroy it?”

“We can’t,” Weiss said. “They are keeping it safely contained, and the danger posed by trying to destroy it isn’t worth the dubious rewards of doing so. No, we just need to stop Torchwick from stealing it tonight.”
“Fine,” Ruby said. She started to turn towards Weiss, but stopped, facing the statue again with another shiver. “Can we go... somewhere not here.”

“Sure,” Weiss, said. She hesitated for a moment before managing steel herself into turning around and walking back towards the museum offices. Ruby followed, slowed at first by walking backwards. “What are you doing?”

“I just... I really don’t want to turn my back on it,” Ruby said.

Weiss only nodded, understanding completely. “It doesn’t matter if you do; it’s well contained, both by treated glass and wards, but even if it wasn’t, there’s nothing facing it could do to help protect you. Curses can’t be dodged, and if it conjured a guardian it could do that in your blind spot no matter where you’re facing.”

Ruby gulped. “That’s not very reassuring.”

“No,” Weiss agreed after a moment. “I suppose it isn’t.”

The walk back to the offices was quiet, and they arrived just as Yang was leaving them. “Hey, sis, the statue still there?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, shivering.

“What’s got you spooked?” Yang asked.

“Just... didn’t expect the statue thingee to be so- so...”

“Evil?” Blake asked, stepping out of the office beside Yang. “Yeah, it’s pretty disturbing the first time you run into a dark artifact.”

“Any thing with a personality is just wrong,” Yang said. “I mean, seriously, how can they be, you know, thinking or whatever? They don’t have brains.”

“That doesn’t seem to stop some people, either,” Weiss said, looking at Yang.

“Well, I always thought people needed hearts to live, but I’ve learned otherwise,” Yang replied glibly.

“Guys, can we not do this?” Ruby begged. “Especially on the case? In public?”

“Let’s check the surveillance footage,” Blake said diplomatically.

The security office was close to the director’s office, and in a few minutes they were safely ensconced in front of a computer, Yang operating it as she skimmed through hours of footage looking for Torchwick, or at least someone wearing his distinctive clothing.

After a while Ruby started to fidget, bored at only standing and watching security footage. Weiss frowned at her, a little annoyed, but she’d long ago accepted that her partner had the attention span of a ferret on a sugar rush, although she did better when she was being more actively involved. “Yang, why don’t you let Ruby take a shift at the controls?”

Yang turned her head and glared. “Look, ice queen, I can use a computer. I’m actually really good at going over surveillance. I’m not going to miss Torchwick-”

“Stop!” Blake shouted. “Rewind – I think I saw him.”
Yang turned quickly, reversing the feed and then starting it up again. After a few moments she spotted the target as well, swiftly switching cameras to get a better view of him.

“Does he own any other clothing?” Weiss asked.

“I don’t know,” Ruby said. “He probably does. I mean, I doubt he sleeps in that.”

“He could sleep in nothing,” Yang said, grinning, only to be hit on the back of the head by Blake. “What? I’m just saying...”

Weiss covered her eyes with a hand and sighed. “That was rhetorical.”

Torchwick hadn’t bothered with any form of disguise, either clothing or magical, as he casually strolled through the museum until he reached the statue. He stared at it for a moment, before smirking and looking around. He then made his way to the nearest men’s room and went inside. A few minutes later he walked back out and exited the museum.

“Come on, Weiss, we need to make sure he enchanted the mirror,” Ruby said.

“What?” Weiss asked, making a disgusted face. “Of course he did. Why do we have to check?”

“’Cause it’s our job?” Ruby offered. “Besides, we need to figure out what the room is like if we’re gonna try to ambush him in there.”

“What, afraid to get your hands dirty?” Yang teased.

“I assure you, I won’t be touching anything in there,” Weiss said with a disdainful sniff.

The bathroom turned out to be as bad as Weiss had feared. While the men’s room at the Bank of Vale was certainly unpleasant, it was actually kept clean almost to a polish by nightly janitorial work designed to reinforce the bank’s position as an elite institution. The museum was cleaned to average public standards.

“Ugh,” Weiss groaned, covering her mouth with her hand.

“Weiss, we went into the sewers together below the docks,” Ruby said.

“I know!” Weiss whined. “And that was really gross, too. But at least when we went there we were chasing someone, not checking what we already know. Besides, this is the men’s room. Do you have any idea how bad it would look if I was caught in here?”

“Worse than a sewer?”

“Yes. Much worse.”

“Just check the mirrors,” Ruby said with a smile. “We’re lucky no one’s in here right now.”

Weiss strolled through the bathroom quickly, stopping in front of one as she studied it. “Yes, he enchanted it. He’ll be coming through here.”

“Could you move it?” Ruby asked. “Like you did with the first one?”

“Can, yes,” Weiss said. “Should, no.”

“Why?”
“He can almost certainly see what’s on the other side before he travels through it,” Weiss said. “It was dangerous to move the first, but worth the risk. He wasn’t likely to check it, and if he does he just learns that we know about his mirror enchantments. He won’t pass through the mirror if he doesn’t see it leading to here, and if he waits we’ll miss our chance to catch him.”

“Right,” Ruby said. “I guess we’ll just have to set a trap.”

“Exactly,” Weiss said, walking towards the exit. “And we can figure out the details... anywhere else.”

When they returned to the security office they found Yang still casually flipping through surveillance, while Blake was reading a book. “Find it? Yang asked.

“Yup,” Ruby said. “So, how are we doing this?”

Yang shrugged. “Wait ‘til he shows up, arrest him, go party?”

“We need a more detailed plan that that,” Weiss said, crossing her arms. “That’s an outline at best.”

Yang scoffed. “Please. Not everyone needs to fill out forms in triplicate to powder their nose, princess. This isn’t anything complicated – there’s just four of us. All we have to do is kill time ‘til the museum closes and we get into position.”

“Ruby?” Weiss demanded, staring at her partner.

“Um... I mean, I guess she’s not wrong?” Ruby offered weakly. “What else can we do?”

“Fine,” Weiss huffed, stalking across the room and sitting down, arms crossed.

The hours crawled by slowly. Weiss eventually removed a glove and spent her time filing her nails for lack of anything useful to do. She made a mental note to bring something to occupy her time when on future stakeouts. Usually Ruby was so distracting that she would’ve expected her partner to fill her spare time, but instead she was talking to her sister while sending the occasional look in her direction.

Weiss sighed. Maybe she shouldn’t have been so irritable about everything, but Yang didn’t seem to care about doing things properly, and Ruby was being dragged along by her sister’s irresponsibility. Unfortunately Weiss couldn’t think of anything that could actually be done to improve the situation, so... was she upset over nothing? Was there no point in planning when they didn’t need something more complex than ‘wait for the target to show up’?

“It’s time,” Blake said, closing her book and standing.

Weiss sighed in relief, replacing her glove and waiting for Ruby, who walked cautiously over to her. Weiss gave her a strained smile, and Ruby grinned back, practically skipping the rest of the way over. Weiss wanted to be annoyed, but for some reason she found herself relaxing as Ruby joined her.

“Alright, they’re closing up,” Yang said. “No telling how long it’ll be ‘til Torchwick shows, so we might as well get ready.”

The museum felt strange after closing. It wasn’t normally crowded, but they could always feel the presence of people, or hear the distant echo of their movements. Only minutes after closing and it already felt abandoned, like no one had been inside in years.
When they reached the men’s room Weiss spoke up. “Wait.”

“What?” Yang asked.

“He can probably see through the mirror,” she said. “We need to make sure that everyone stays out of sight.”

“We should also probably keep some people out here just in case he tries to break in some other way,” Ruby added.

Yang rolled her eyes. “You just don’t want to hang out in the men’s room.”

“Just because you have ‘fun’ in them, doesn’t mean I’m interested,” Weiss replied snottily.

Yang’s eyes flashed. “Alright, that’s it princess. I might not have any problems with being a sex bomb, but I sure as hell am not gonna put up with a prissy little bitch like you trying to slut shame me.”

“Whoa!” Ruby yelled. “Stop this, please! You guys... can’t you even pretend to get along? For the job? Or am I the only one that cares about stopping Torchwick from summoning some demon god or something?”

“She started it,” Yang mumbled.

Weiss grit her teeth, the urge to place the blame on Yang almost overwhelming, but she managed to restrain herself. As much as she wanted to insult Yang, she also refused to be made to look bad in front of her partner. “Getting involved in this argument was most indecorously of me,” she said with a haughty sniff. “You’re right, Ruby. The important thing is stopping Torchwick.’

“Thank you Weiss,” Ruby said, giving her a beaming smile, to which Weiss replied with a restrained smile of her own.

“Thank you Weiss,” Yang mouthed at Weiss while her sister’s back was turned, an expression which turned into an agreeable smile when Ruby looked at her. “Sure thing, sis. Stopping the bad guys is why we signed up for this, right Blakey?”

“Right,” the cat faunus said neutrally. “How about I wait out here – I’ll be able to hear anything that happens inside, and I can make sure Torchwick doesn’t try the direct approach while we’re distracted.”

“Fine,” Weiss said, annoyed at the plan being too good to object to. She really didn’t want to hang out in the smelly men’s room any longer, especially not with Yang.

They settled agains the wall with the door, since the main part of the restroom was visible from the mirror. Before long Weiss was leaning against the wall, reading the news on her phone, while Ruby and Yang played some kind of multiplayer video game on theirs.

She almost missed it, but at the last moment she looked up, focusing her aura on her eyes as she felt a subtle shift in the air. With a glance she could see that the mirror was active, the glass swirling with purple dimensional magics to her enhanced vision. “He’s coming,” she hissed quietly, putting away her phone and pulling out her pistol.

In moments Ruby and Yang joined her, weapons at the ready, and she cleared her vision to keep it from distracting her when things began. Several long moments passed, and Weiss was just about to activate her eyes again when the glass of the mirror rippled as fingers reached out of it, wrapping
Torchwick pulled himself out of the mirror like someone climbing through a window, but with the glass rippling around his body like a vertical pool of silver water. He flipped onto his feet as he left the mirror entirely, one hand reaching up to adjust his hat to the perfect angle, while his other lifted his cane as he stared at them, his surprise evident.

“Freeze!” Yang shouted. “Get down on the ground!”

“In the bathroom?” he demanded, completely appalled. “You can’t be serious. This is a nice coat!”

“Drop the cane,” Ruby added.

“Oh, ho, ho, what is this,” Torchwick asked with a slow grin. “If it isn’t little red. Or should I say Detective Red, now? Still trying (and failing) to catch me?”

Ruby growled, taking half a step forward. “Why does everyone mention that! I stopped your thefts and got all of your goons arrested!”

“Sounds like a consolation prize, and a pretty slim one at that,” Torchwick said, shaking his head sadly. “Did those buffoons even know who I was? I kept expecting some kind of APB out on me, but then nothing.”

Ruby blushed. “Sh-shut up! Drop the cane – I know what that thing can do!”

“Do you?” he asked casually, waving it slightly. “Zhech!”

As he said the word Weiss saw tiny, almost invisible runes on the head of his cane flare red and pulled the trigger on her gun even as the ability of the magic item took effect. Instead of shooting a fireball the guns in their hands suddenly heated up, and before the bullet even left the barrel the metal of the gun turned red hot and warped, jamming the weapon.

Ruby shouted in pain, dropping her gun, and Weiss and Yang then did the same. Weiss’ hands stung from the heat, but her gloves had protected her a little, and she was just glad that the gun hadn’t exploded in her hand from the failure that had occurred.

Torchwick turned back to the mirror in the distraction, but before he could reenter it Yang charged at him, screaming. “You’ll pay for that, asshole!”

Her hands suddenly caught on fire, and she pulled one back, ready to punch him in the head as he spun around to meet her charge. “Vliyaniye,” he said cheerfully, choking up on his cane and swinging it at her like a baseball bat. “Fore!”

The hit had been hard, as it involved quite a bit of windup, but Weiss didn’t need to see the flicker of runes on the cane to know that it had been enhanced by the weapon’s magic. With a loud crack the cane slammed into Yang’s arm, which she’d brought up to block, snapping bone and then connecting with Yang’s center of mass. She flew backwards through the air with impossible force, slamming into the wall of the restroom and not stopping.

“Yang!” Ruby screamed in horror as she stared at the hole in the wall where her sister had passed through. Before she even turned around her scythe formed in her hands. “You...”

“Me?” Torchwick asked.

Weiss drew her sword, ignoring the stinging in her palms as she took her stance beside her partner.
“This is your last warning,” she said, eyes narrowed dangerously. “Surrender, or you might not live long enough to be arrested.”

“Ooh... scary,” Torchwick said jovially. “Before we fight, one thing... do you think that swing was a home run?”

Ruby growled and charged.
“Vliyaniye,” Torchwick called as he swung his cane.

Ruby had run forward, scythe trailing behind her, focused solely on the criminal. Fortunately, even as angry as she was she wasn’t the berserker her sister was, and so she took advantage of the long reach of her weapon to swing it well ahead of her body, forcing Torchwick to give ground or block her weapon.

He chose to block, slamming his cane into the long shaft of Ruby’s scythe rather than trying to block the metal blade. The magical cane met the conjured wood with an echoing crack, the impact jerking Ruby’s arms to the side and twisting her body around sharply. The magic of her weapon couldn’t deal with that level of force, breaking in half, the bladed end instantly crumbling into a cloud of rose petals as Ruby tripped and skidded across the floor, narrowly avoiding Torchwick’s backswing.

Torchwick started to turn around to attack her again, but before he could Weiss lunged forward, Myrtenaster aimed for his chest. He slipped back, displaying quite a bit of skill as he blocked her sword with his cane. “En garde, ice queen.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes and then probed forward with her blade. He met her with an expert parry despite having a much heavier weapon, and rather than press she skipped back slightly, considering her options. Behind him Ruby was back on her feet, holding out her hands while concentrating on getting her scythe to reform.

Torchwick smirked, leaning on his cane for a moment. “Is that it? Two thrusts is all it takes to satisfy you? Believe me, I have a lot more than that in me-”

Before he could finish his lewd taunt Weiss snarled and thrust again. Once more he whipped up his cane to block, but this time she simply withdrew her weapon and thrust again, and then again, and again, never letting up her flurry of thrusts as she sought a way around his impressive guard.

“This is more like it!” he crowed. “How ‘bout this one, frosty? Vliyaniye!”

Suddenly it was Weiss giving ground, unwilling to meet the cane directly. He kept his swings quite restrained, unlike his earlier attacks against Ruby and Yang, but Weiss was unwilling to risk damaging her sword if the enormous power he’d been able to channel while using that technique required little force to be inflicted.

Suddenly Ruby charged him from behind, scythe once more at the ready, when he spun on his heel away from Weiss, swinging his cane to try and hit Ruby once more. Ruby stopped so abruptly that she slipped onto her back, bouncing on the tiled floor while sliding closer to him. He started to raise his cane for a downward finishing blow, when he had to dive out of the way as Weiss stabbed forward again, this time making slight contact.

“Ow!” Torchwick yelped as he rolled to his feet. “Ugh, that stings. Seriously, you’re going to give me an open cut in a public restroom? Are you trying to kill me over here?”

Weiss glared, flicking her sword slightly to clean the tiny amount of blood from the tip of her blade. “You’re the one who chose to come in through here!”

“Yeah,” Ruby added as she climbed to her feet. “We’re the ones who had to stake out the inside of the men’s room all night!”

Torchwick laughed, although Weiss could see that he hadn’t taken his eyes off of them despite that. “See, this right here? This is why I’m on this side of the law. I’d say I’d show my cane to someone who tried to order me to do that, but considering where we are I’d imagine you had plenty of people doing just that.”

“Huh?” Ruby asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Weiss said. “His sense of humor is licentious and vile.”

“Oh, look who has a word of the day calendar,” Torchwick said. “Of course, you can say all the bad things you want about my sense of humor, but you understood it, so what does that make you, miss hangs-out-in-the-men’s-room?”

“Hey, don’t talk about her that way!” Ruby said. “Like a- a- a mean person!”

Both Weiss and Torchwick gave her a deadpan look. “I am a mean person, little red. It’s part of being a master of crime.”

“Still,” Ruby grumbled. “Can’t you be nicer about it? What about the whole gentlemen thief thing?”

“Hah, no such thing,” Torchwick said. “What, were you hoping to be swept off your feet by a charming and rakish thief like myself?”

“N-no!” Ruby objected. “I’d never want to be with a criminal! And you really aren’t my type!”

“Oh, more a fan of the ladies?” he asked, smirking slightly when Ruby blushed. “Oh, you are! Well, that explains why you were getting all chivalrous about your partner. You two partners in more than one sense of the word?”

“Sh-shut up!” Ruby yelped, tightening her grip on her scythe. “Wait... what’s that?”

In the distance they could hear yelling, and then gunshots. Torchwick smirked. “Looks like my partner got impatient, which means anything left of that blonde and anyone with her are officially out of luck.”

“No,” Ruby snarled. “Surrender right now!”

“How about... nope,” Torchwick said. “Besides, you know what they say about action and reaction, right??”

“What-” Ruby started.

Before she could finish her sentence Torchwick raised his cane, pointing the end of it at them. “Salut,” he barked, the runes down its length rippling with orange light from head to tip until a fireball emerged from the end, hurtling towards the detectives.

Before Weiss could react she was suddenly slammed into by Ruby, who tackled her to the ground and rolled them both into one of the bathroom stalls. An instant later intense heat swept over them, but Ruby was on top, taking the brunt of the blast, although her tackle had taken them away from the heart of the flames.

It was hard to breath for a moment, but eventually Weiss was able to take a gasping breath of the hot air, and once she did she opened her eyes to reveal Ruby laying on top of her, completely still.
Weiss’s heart seized in panic, torn between shoving her off of herself and not moving her partner. Tears gathered in her eyes as her heart began to pound erratically.

“R-ruby!” she gasped. “Please, please, don’t die! I- I can’t—”

“I’m okay,” Ruby murmured, sitting up slightly, looking down at Weiss with concern in her eyes. “Just a little singed. I think I got us out of the blast, and my clothes did the rest.”

“Oh,” Weiss breathed, blinking rapidly before studying her partner, desperate to make sure that she was okay. The partner sitting on top of her.

Ruby was warm, and surprisingly soft as she straddled Weiss’ hips. Ruby shifted slightly, and the feeling made Weiss want to groan, almost overwhelmed. It had been so long since she’d been touched by anyone, and it wasn’t just anyone, it was Ruby...

Ruby was touching her...

“Get- get off of me!” Weiss suddenly gasped, tensing up as panic began to fill her once more. “Please, don’t touch me!”

Ruby scrambled back, yelping slightly as she thumped clumsily onto the ground before scrambling to her feet, face bright red. “Sorry! Sorry. I just- there was a fireball, and I forgot you don’t like to be touched, and I’m so, so sorry, and—”

“It’s okay,” Weiss said, climbing shakily onto her own feet. “It’s okay... you are okay, right? You’re not... hurt?”

“I’m okay,” Ruby said, checking herself over for a moment before giving Weiss a grin. “I’ve had worse sunburns.”

Weiss huffed. “That will give you skin cancer, dolt.”

Ruby chuckled, before looking around. “Uh, oh. Where’d Torchwick go?”

“What?” Weiss gasped. Sure enough, the criminal had disappeared, using his fireball to cover his escape. “We can’t let him get away! After him!”

They ran into the main part of the museum, and the first thing Weiss saw was the empty podium surrounded by shattered reinforced glass where the dragon statuette had once sat. “That way!” Ruby shouted. “He’s going that way!”

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Weiss followed her partner, taking a moment to glance at her back while she ran. Ruby’s clothing was definitely singed, but it was still holding together. Even her hair was in good shape, besides some ash in it. She let her gaze wander downward for a moment, almost stumbling as she realized that she was staring at Ruby’s butt rather than focusing on the chase.

Snapping her gaze away she saw what had caused Ruby to take off. Turning a corner at the end of a hall was Torchwick, his cane in one hand and the statuette tucked under his arm. Turning the corner after him, they saw him slam through the door to a maintenance area, and they followed behind seconds after.

Inside was a staircase to the roof, and they ran up after him. Slamming the final door open, Ruby stumbled to a stop on the large, flat roof, surprised that Torchwick had paused at the far end, casually leaning on his cane as he faced them.
“You’re persistent little red, I’ll give you that,” Torchwick drawled.

Ruby conjured a fresh scythe, and Weiss stepped up beside her, flourishing her sword before speaking. “Roman Torchwick. Surrender – you have nowhere to go.”

“Apparently not,” he grumbled, glaring over the edge of the roof for a second before sighing and setting down the Grimm statue. “Sorry, ladies, but Torchwick doesn’t give up that easily. Ready for round two?”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a glance, and then circled around him so that they stood on opposite sides of the criminal. Torchwick kept shifting his position, trying to keep them both in his sight, but with a subtle gesture from Ruby Weiss darted forward, weapon flicking through the air towards his head.

He reacted well, ducking slightly, before using his cane to ward off her follow up thrust. Weiss went all out, pressing him hard, trying to keep his attention while Ruby moved up behind him. Her partner tensed and lunged forward, and Weiss had just enough time to open her eyes wide in shock as Torchwick suddenly leapt out of the way, tumbling across the roof as her partner slammed into her, knocking her to the ground.

Ruby’s scythe vanished in a cloud of rose petals as her arms pinwheeled as she struggled to keep her balance. “Sorry!” she gasped as she stabilized, not noticing Torchwick, back on his feet and coming up behind her.

“Duck!” Weiss shouted, lunging forward from the ground, sword pointed directly toward her partner’s throat.

Ruby’s eyes bulged but she followed the order, hitting the ground just fast enough to avoid both Weiss’ and Torchwick’s attacks, Myrtenaster coming so close that it actually cut a few strands of her hair with its incredibly sharp blade.

“Ah!” Torchwick shouted, dropping his cane as Weiss’ sword sank into the meaty part of her upper arm, piercing all the way to the bone like a hot knife through butter. Torchwick jerked back hard, pulling he blade free, leaving a small hole in his arm. He stared at it, dumbfounded for a long moment, and then it began to bleed, hot liquid pouring to his hand. “You bitch!”

Ruby reached her feet, pulling out her phone as she glanced at the wound. “It’s not that bad, just needs a few stitches. Just keep pressure on it and we’ll take you to a hospital... at the jail.”

“You shot a fireball at us!” Ruby objected loudly.

“You had a scythe,” Torchwick said. “Frankly, I’m the victim here.”

“You- you-” Ruby sputtered.

Behind them the door opened, and Weiss half turned, keeping Torchwick in her peripheral vision while she looked at who it was. It was a woman with white, pink and brown hair, and with one brown eye and one pink eye. She was wearing clothing in shades of brown, pink, and white, with a jacket, pants, and tall boots, and she was holding a pink and white parasol in one gloved hand.

Ruby fully turned to face the newcomer and pointed a reconjured scythe in the woman’s direction. “Freeze!”
“Neo, could you help me out here?” Torchwick asked casually.

Neo smiled, and Weiss turned her back on Torchwick as well. The expression conveyed joy the way a smile should, but it was wrong. If her teeth had been razorblades it would’ve explained the jolt of shock and fear that went down Weiss’ spine at the sight, but everything looked normal.

Neo strolled forward like she was taking a walk through a park, and when she came close she raised her parasol and thrust it towards Weiss, who dodged to the side, riposting with her sword towards the woman. Neo casually sidestepped, swinging her parasol at Ruby, who blocked it with her scythe. Ruby grunted from the impact, and actually slid back a foot from the hit.

“What?!” Ruby gasped, trying to find her balance, before Neo was suddenly on her, swinging her weapon so fast that it blurred.

Weiss lunged, trying to get Neo from behind while she was distracted, only to discover that Neo hadn’t lost track of her at all. Neo twirled sideways, thrusting with her parasol before Weiss could recover, slamming the tip into her stomach with the force of a sledgehammer, sending her flying back, sword dropping from her suddenly numb hand as the air was forced from her lungs.

“Weiss!” Ruby screamed, swinging at Neo. She eschewed any form of defense, going all out as she slashed at her again and again, her weapon somehow moving faster and faster the more desperately she tried to find her way past Neo’s guard.

Weiss watched the fight unfold, panting for air as she tried to get back on her feet. Ruby kept speeding up until she was moving faster than Weiss had ever seen her in training, and then she kept getting faster still. Rose petals began to fill the air, drifting off of her body as she moved at inhuman speeds, spinning and slashing with her scythe as she tried to overwhelm Neo with constant attacks.

Somehow Neo kept pace with Ruby. Every attack was neatly blocked, deflected or dodged, and while she wasn’t as fast as her opponent, she did everything with tiny, minimal motions, and her sheer economy of movement allowed her to keep pace, although Weiss could see that Neo’s speed was starting to blur the lines of humanity as she continued to parry Ruby’s incredible speed.

Ruby kept speeding up, until eventually she began to push Neo back step by step. Despite that Neo didn’t stop smiling, and in fact began to look genuinely excited as the battle continued. When it reached the conclusion both were moving too fast for Weiss to fully see what happened, but somehow Ruby over extended, and on that tiny error Neo pounced.

It started with a snap of her parasol to Ruby’s knee, and then a quick shot to her opposite shoulder. Again and again she whipped her weapon into Ruby, not quite with enough force to break bones, but more than enough to deeply bruise. Ruby screamed in pain at the fourth blow, which slammed into her hand, knocking the scythe away, causing it to break down into rose petals.

The beating was swift but brutal, and after a handful of long seconds Ruby was on the ground, head spinning as she panted, unable to move, or even clearly see what was happening above her. Neo smiled cruelly, grabbing the shaft of her parasol and pulling the handle, revealing a long, thin blade hidden inside. She stepped forward, attention totally on Ruby as she raised the blade, about to stab her in the heart.

As the blade began to descend Weiss grabbed it with her right hand, grunting in pain as the razor sharp blade sliced her to the bone, but still she held on, stopping the weapon from moving. Neo looked at her with a bemused expression, which met Weiss’ furious stare.

“You will not touch her!” Weiss snarled, reaching out with her other hand to grab Neo’s arm.
She had taken her glove off, and she made sure to grab Neo’s wrist where the sleeve had shifted up. Immediately she began to drain Neo’s life energies, although she was shocked at what she felt. Instead of the warm flow of life she was expecting, Neo’s energies were harsh and jagged, painfully pouring into her as thick and dense as molasses, and as dark as coal.

Neo hissed, her face contorting and her eyes glowing as she began to scream. The cry was high and distorted, something entirely impossible for a human voice to create, and the sheer force of it made Weiss flinch. Neo took advantage of that motion to jerk herself free with inhuman strength, backing away from them and moving to Torchwick’s side.

Weiss fell to her knees, the fulminating energies she’d absorbed flowing through her body like burning razors as she tried to direct the power to her wounded hand. She swayed slightly as she began to process the energy, hoping she hadn’t done damage to herself with her efforts.

“Weiss?” Ruby gasped, sitting up and focusing on her partner. Weiss slowly turned her head and looked into her eyes, squinting against how dim everything suddenly was. “Your hand...”

“I’m... fine...” Weiss rasped, sweat beading on her forehead, her voice revealing herself to be anything but.

Ruby’s face contorted with worry, before twisting into rage. Before Weiss could say anything to try to stop her she was on her feet, scythe instantly forming in her hands as she faced the criminals once again.
Third Case: By Air

Weiss continued gasping, unable to get words out as her vision wavered. The life energies she had taken in were unlike anything she had ever absorbed, which meant that Neo was certainly not human. She had never tried to absorb anything extra planar before, and she found herself wishing that she had been more prepared, or perhaps less reckless with her touch.

“Ruby...” she gasped, as her partner stalked forward, scythe held low.

Torchwick was obviously still injured, with a hand still holding his bleeding arm, although he’d taken the time to retrieve his cane, which he had tucked under his other arm while he stood smugly beside his partner. Neo for her part looked a bit worse than before, the life drain having obviously harmed her, and she’d returned the bladed handle to her parasol.

Before Ruby could reach them they could hear a helicopter approaching, and Weiss looked over, hoping to see reinforcements. Instead the helicopter was unmarked, and it flew low overhead, hovering near Torchwick and Neo for a moment before it turned on bright lights.

Weiss squinted, and could barely make out the outline of two people in the helicopter. One appeared to be male and was obviously flying it, while the other had a feminine figure and was standing in the doorway. She waved her arms, and flames began to gather between her hands.

“Ruby!” Weiss screamed.

Ruby had obviously seen it as well, as she backed away from the helicopter, scythe held up defensively. It wouldn’t do her any good however as the flames continued to grow, until a massive fireball flew from the woman’s hands towards them.

Weiss tensed, unwilling to look away from her death as the flames descended on her and her partner, when she heard the door slam open behind her. Yang suddenly ran past, leaping into the air, her left hand pressed to her side and her right aflame as she hurled herself towards the fireball. She punched it, and it exploded in mid air, most of the force somehow deflected upwards rather than down, although Weiss still flinched from the incredible light and heat of the explosion. A hot wind blew over them, and then a concussion that almost knocked her onto her back and shattered every window within fifty feet.

“Yang!” Ruby shouted, leaning on her scythe, the beating she had taken from Neo catching up to her.

“Hey, sis,” Yang grunted. She was obviously pretty badly injured, with a split lip, broken nose and arm, and numerous bruises and scrapes. Despite that she was on her feet and smirking, ready to keep fighting.

“Okay, I have to admit, you girls have style,” Torchwick shouted. “But I guess we’ll have to finish this some other time!”

He and Neo had taken advantage of the distraction to move over to the helicopter, Neo having scooped up the statuette on the way. It was hovering just a few feet from the building, an impressive display of control for the difficult to pilot craft, and as he mocked them Neo hopped across the gap, climbing aboard.

“Like hell,” Yang growled. “Come on, sis, we can’t let them get away!”
“Right!” Ruby shouted, drawing herself up and moving towards the helicopter again.

The woman on board began make circling gestures with her arms, and Weiss saw motion out of the corner of her eye. Looking over, she saw that broken glass from a nearby window was skittering along the ground. It sped up, and was soon flying through the air, joined by more and more broken glass as it went.

In front of the helicopter the cloud of broken glass began to gather, swirling wildly, the pace speeding up. Torchwick jumped onboard, Neo steadying him, and all the while the glass cloud continued to grow larger and faster. Yang and Ruby backed away, and Weiss desperately tried to think of a way to stop it. She climbed unsteadily to her feet, but the only magics she knew that could stop a volley of broken glass would take far too long to draw.

The door opened again, and out stepped Blake, who had her gun in her hands. She took in the entire scene with a single glance before opening fire on the helicopter, focusing her aim on the pilot. Weiss couldn’t see if she hit him, but the gunfire caused him to jerk the plane down and to the side, nearly causing the woman preparing to kill them to fall from the helicopter. She lost control of the glass as she steadied herself, and a moment later the helicopter banked sharply and flew away.

“Damn it!” Yang screamed, pulling out her phone. “Goodwitch! They’re getting away in a helicopter with the last statue! Yes, a fucking helicopter!”

“Weiss!” Ruby called as she jogged over. “Your hand!”

“I’m fine,” Weiss said, glad that her voice wasn’t as strained as before. She carefully pulled off the glove on her cut hand and wiped the blood on her jacket before showing her palm to Ruby. “I healed it already.”

Ruby started to reach for her hand to get a better look, stopped when she saw Weiss flinch and start to retract her limb. “Sorry! But you’re really okay?”

“I should be asking you that, dolt,” Weiss said, carefully putting her gloves back on. The cut on her hand still ached, but it was healed enough to pretend that she was fine, and the energies that she’d absorbed didn’t bother her as much anymore. “You got beaten pretty badly by Neo.”

“I’m fine,” Ruby said, smiling slightly. “Just a couple... okay, a lot of bruises. I’m definitely gonna take a long, hot bath tonight. But yeah, I’m okayish.”

“Come on, let’s find somewhere we can sit and wait,” Weiss said. “I don’t think there’s anything we can still do.”

“Okay,” Ruby said quietly. “We screwed up, didn’t we?”

“Yeah,” Weiss agreed as she followed her partner. “We failed. And there’s even more of them than we knew about.”

An hour later forensics teams had arrived and were canvassing the scene, and Captain Goodwitch herself had come down to see them. It had been a very uncomfortable recounting of everything they did, her stern glare bearing down on them the entire time.

“So that’s it,” Yang said. Her voice was nasally, but she’d been patched up by paramedics and was on enough painkillers not to be too bothered by her broken bones and nose. “Blakey and me got our asses handed to us by umbrella girl, then we save Rubes and the Ice-er, Schnee from a fireball somebody in the helicopter threw before they got away.”
“Which means that they have all thirteen statuettes, and we have no idea what they intend to use them for,” Captain Goodwitch said.

“Well... we know who was stealing them at least,” Yang argued.

“No, we don’t,” Captain Goodwitch said, focusing her glare squarely on Yang. “We know about Torchwick and this ‘Neo’, but nothing about the two people in the helicopter, other than that one was a very competent spell caster and the other could fly a helicopter.”

“Neo wasn’t human,” Weiss added, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “I drained some of her life energies during the fight, and that took me out of it completely. Whatever she was... her life force was very dark and painfully abnormal.”

“Will you be alright?” Captian Goodwitch asked.

Weiss nodded tiredly. “Yes. It took a while, but I processed the energies I consumed. I’ll recover.”

Goodwitch sighed. “This case was a disaster, and I have a feeling that the consequences of it will haunt us in the end. Get some rest officers... I expect your paperwork on my desk tomorrow.”

After she left Yang groaned dramatically. “So much for getting a chance to heal up tomorrow.”

“Ugh... I was hoping to take a sick day and just... lay in bed,” Ruby moaned.

“I wouldn’t recommend it Ruby,” Blake said dryly. “Goodwitch would skin you alive. The best thing we can do is keep our heads down, do our paperwork, and she’ll forget this disaster in a few weeks.”

“A sensible attitude,” Weiss says, nodding approvingly.

Yang scoffed. “You really love following the rules, don’t you ice queen?”

“Don’t call me ice queen!” Weiss snapped. “But yes, the rules were created for a reason, and paperwork is very important. I’m glad our leader is someone on top of things like Captain Goodwitch.”

Yang stared at her for a moment, before shaking her head sadly. “You weren’t hugged enough as a child, were you?”

Weiss reeled back like she’d been slapped, somehow turning even paler than before, before flushing an angry red. “How dare you!”

“Yang...” Ruby groaned.

Weiss clenched her hands so hard that her new scar began to ache, but she couldn’t stop herself. If looks could kill Yang would be long dead, and the blonde definitely noticed that she’d touched a very sore spot. Instead of ruthlessly following up like Weiss expected she actually looked away first. “Right... sorry.”

It was Weiss’ turn to be surprised, and she took several deep breaths before relaxing slightly, looking away without saying anything else. There was a long, painful silence as Weiss refused to look at any of them as she tried to regain control of her temper. It burned inside, not just the statement, but that she’d lost so much composure that Yang cared about how upset she was. It was humiliating.

“Actually, I’ve meant to say... thanks,” Yang said, voice grudging. “You’re kind of a bitch, and I
hate your attitude, but... you saved my sister up there. She told me you grabbed a sword that was gonna stab her with your bare hand... that takes some serious ovaries, Weiss. So... thanks.”

Weiss finally looked at Yang again. The blonde met her gaze evenly, and while it had obviously been difficult to say, she saw that the other detective was being sincere. With a sigh, Weiss nodded her head. “You don’t have to thank me for that. Ruby is my parter and... my friend. I would do more than that if... well, if I had to.”

They locked gazes for a long moment, and a certain understanding passed between them. For the first time Yang decided to trust Weiss with her sister, and Weiss actually felt honored by that trust. She knew that Yang cared about Ruby as much as Winter cared about her, and to have won such a concession from so doting of a big sister was a huge thing.

“Blake,” Weiss said, looking at the faunus. The brunette looked at her, ears pointed directly at her as she gained the detective’s full attention. She took a deep breath, remembering the death of her mother, and then let it go. Those faunus weren’t Blake.

“Blake, I want to formally apologize to you for what I said to you the day that we met,” Weiss said, her tone low but earnest. “It was most indecorous of me... even as I said it I regretted using so crass a term. I like to think myself better than that kind of base bigotry, but perhaps I still have a longer way to go than I would like...”

Weiss took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a moment before starting again. “Why I said it doesn’t matter. You were a stranger, and I treated you like you were less than human because of your heritage, and for that I sincerely apologize.”

Weiss bowed formally, looking down at the ground as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat. It burned to say that, to grovel in front of others, to admit how low and pathetic she was inside. But, like lancing a boil, there was also a relief to finally getting those words out, no matter how painful the process.

“I... you don’t have to bow,” Blake said uncomfortably. “I... I accept your apology Weiss. And... I should apologize, too. I judged you for being a Schnee, and I was very rude to you, too.”

Weiss stood straight, grateful not to be forced to debase herself any longer. She had expected the faunus to enjoy her humiliation, but instead she seemed uncomfortable about it, and had even apologized to her. “You don’t have to apologize to me. Compared to what I said-”

“It doesn’t work like that,” Blake interrupted. “Yeah, you shouldn’t have said it, but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t being rude to you first. Even if you were more wrong, neither of us was right. Let’s just move on; we’re both detectives now.”

Weiss nodded. “Then yes, I accept your apology. I hope that we can work together better in the future.”

Blake smiled. “Yeah. You’re good at research.”

“As are you,” Weiss said, smiling ever so slightly back. “It must be difficult working with the brute when cases get complicated.”

“Hey,” Yang interjected with a grin. “So she gets an apology, and I’m still a brute?”

“Of course,” Weiss sniffed. “I regretted calling her what I did from the moment I said it. You are a brute.”
“And you’re a stuck up ice queen,” Yang retorted, still smiling. “Still, I guess we are what we are, and no matter how much you’ve made me want to wring your scrawny little neck, I guess we’d be worse off if you weren’t here. So... yeah, I’m not going to apologize for most of it. But I guess... yeah. Glad you’re here, or something like that.”

“The same, I suppose,” Weiss said, nodding to Yang.

“Yesssss!” Ruby suddenly shrieked, bouncing on her toes excitedly, as if she wasn’t one giant mass of painful bruises. “You guys finally made up! I’m so, so, so glad! Oh, this is great! We’re gonna be besties for life, I guarantee it.”

Weiss found herself smiling, heart soaring to see her partner so happy. Not only that, but her apology hadn’t been used to denigrate her, but instead to clear the air and allow things to work more smoothly between herself and the others. Perhaps... perhaps she had been wrong all along about apologies.

“Alright, alright, I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to hit the sack,” Yang said. “Let’s get out of here before we have to be at work.”

“Oh, right,” Ruby said, deflating slightly as her own tiredness caught up with her. “I’ll see you at home in a little while, sis.”

“You too,” Yang said. “Come on, Blakey, let’s get out of here.”

“Night Ruby... ‘night Weiss,” Blake said.

“Goodnight,” Weiss replied.

“‘Night!” Ruby called, still bouncing on her toes slightly.

“You’re still hurt, you know,” Weiss scolded her lightly. “You should be resting, not acting like a five year old with a sugar rush.”

“Sorry, I’m just too happy,” Ruby said. “My bestie and my sister and her bestie slash something just made up! This almost makes up for us getting our bottoms handed to us by Neo and Torchwick and hiding-in-the-shadows helicopter fireball girl.”

Weiss shook her head. “You were right... I actually do feel better for having admitted that I was wrong.”

“Yup,” Ruby agreed.

“I was certain that she would rub it in,” Weiss said. “Yang as well.”

Ruby shook her head. “Yang can tease a lot, and she’s got a temper, so she can take it too far sometimes, but she’s not a bad person. And Blake’s great! You two are gonna be great friends before you know it. Just... just not best friends. ‘Cause we’re besties, got it?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Right. Don’t worry, no one could ever take your place.”

Ruby blushed. “Anyway, let’s get back home. I still want to soak in the tub before I go to sleep, and tomorrow is coming way too soon.”

Ruby chatted about everything that came to mind on the drive to Weiss’ apartment, and both smiled the entire time. When they reached it Weiss surprised herself by not wanting to leave. After taking a long breath to steel herself she gave her partner one last smile. “Goodnight, Ruby. I’ll see you in the
morning.”

“You too!” Ruby said.

Weiss gave the doorman a nod, crossing the high ceilinged lobby quickly and stepping into the elevator. The ride was fast despite going all the way to the top, and after a short walk she unlocked the door to her penthouse apartment. She sighed once she was inside, looking around the room.

It was cold as always, in both temperature and homeyness. It had been decorated to Schnee standards by a highly paid firm, which meant that the entire apartment was a study in white and silver, with tasteful touches of blue here and there. Everything was perfectly organized, with not a spec of dust left by her cleaning service.

Weiss crossed the living room and walked down a hallway, passing through her equally unpersonalized master bedroom before reaching the bathroom. She sighed in relief as she peeled off her bloodied clothing, until finally she climbed into her shower and turned it on as hot as it would go.

As she slowly began to scrub herself, Weiss thought about everything that had happened that day, from losing Torchwick and the statuette, to apologizing to Blake. It had been an emotional roller coaster, and she just felt drained from it all, although the hot water began to ease the tension from her tired muscles, letting her relax.

She almost tensed up again as she thought about Ruby. Her dolt of a partner had become her best friend over the months they’d been assigned to each other, but recently her feelings had been more complicated than that. The fluttering in her chest, the heat in her core, the way her eyes drifted to certain parts of the woman’s anatomy...

Weiss was no fool, and she knew that lying to herself was foolish. She knew what the symptoms she was describing should mean, but she’d never felt that way about anyone before. She had always assumed that she was asexual, and had frankly been glad that that had seemed to be the case.

Weiss closed her eyes, tilting her face up into the water pouring from above as she thought about Ruby. Her childish ways, her warm heart, her belief that Weiss was a good person, her care for others, her impressive talents... her smooth skin, her tight body, her athletic bottom and firm breasts...

Weiss moaned, her thighs clenching as her hands left streaks of fire where ever they touched. It was only when she squeezed her breasts and suddenly felt weak in the knees that she came back to herself. She had never done something so... lewd before, and all that it had taken was thoughts of her partner. Any doubts in her mind about her attraction to Ruby flew away as she contemplated taking her explorations further.

A glance at her hand made her frown, pulling her from the distracting state of mind. The scar on her hand looked odd, and she washed it carefully, wincing slightly at the still persistent ache as she did. The line on he hand was shockingly red, much brighter than any scar she’d ever seen, and her arousal faded as she contemplated the dangerous energies she’d used to heal it. She was relieved that the only apparent consequences of her dangerous choice was the color of the scarring, but she would need to visit her private doctor soon to make sure that there was nothing else wrong with her.

Weiss finally turned off the water and stepped out of the shower, toweling herself off thoroughly before looking at herself in the floor length mirror, a frown crossing her face as she did. She was short, especially without her heels, and very thin, so much so that naked she could almost make out the outlines of her ribs. Her breasts were small, and when she wasn't pink from the excessively hot shower she was shockingly pale, with faint blue veins visible through her nearly translucent skin.
She raised her eyes to study her face. Her bones were sharply defined, and her long white hair looked strange, almost inhuman. The main focus of her gaze as always was the scar across her eye. It dominated her appearance, and for the first time in her life she was bothered by how ugly it was. Many people had called her beautiful, including her partner, but she'd never really cared much about her own appearance, other than being taught ways to use it as a tool in social situations.

With a sigh she dressed in her usual long nightgown, but instead of going to bed she found herself in her living room again, staring out the one way window to the always busy streets below. “I’m attracted to Ruby Rose.”

It felt good to admit it out loud... but she shifted the focus of her eyes, latching once more onto her scar. Even if she wasn’t... everything about her, there was no way that Ruby would actually want to be with her. It was foolish to hope, and she did her best to ignore the pain in her chest as she looked away, trying to take her attention from her thoughts.

Sitting on the table was vase with a single white rose sitting in it. With a shaking hand Weiss reached over, picking up the flower, and inhaled the sweet scent. Slowly the rose turned gray, the green fading quickly as it wilted in her hand, until it turned into a black, ashy dust.

She didn’t fall asleep for a very long time.
No matter how long he studied them, there was always something fascinating about the intricate system of gears that made up the top of Beacon. Each piece represented part of a powerful ward created with binding magic, and the perturbations that so many enchantments moving had on the ley line nexus were almost unimaginably complex. Despite that, the designers had managed to make them hum in perfect harmony so that they amplified one another rather than harming the overall ward scheme.

It was a truly impressive accomplishment, and one that made Ozpin wish that he could study the inner workings of the Schnee manor wards, as they were even stronger. Still, he wasn’t an expert at binding magic, and even if he was he knew how the family felt about him. Even Detective Weiss Schnee would balk at inviting him inside their defenses.

The door opened and he turned his chair to see Captain Glynda Goodwitch standing in the doorway, looking unusually frazzled. “Glynda,” he said mildly. “Would you like some tea?”

“No, Ozpin,” she spat as she stormed in. “Do you know where I’ve been this evening?”

“I presume wherever the last of the Grimm statues was,” he said mildly, taking a sip of coffee.

“Yes, exactly there,” she said. “Whoever this Torchwick was working for has them all, now.”

He sighed. “I had feared as much. They had gathered so many before we noticed anything was wrong. I’m not surprised that our detectives failed to stop the final cases.”

Glynda deflated, sighing and collapsing into a chair. “Do you know what they plan to do with them?”

Ozpin shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. Other than the preliminary reports Detective Schnee and Detective Belladonna wrote, I’m not actually familiar with the items.”

Glynda looked surprised for a moment, and Ozpin hid his smile by taking another small sip of coffee. It always amused him how everyone, even his closest allies, assumed that he knew everything. Just one of the side effects of success, he supposed.

“What do we do next, then?”

“We wait for our last guest to arrive,” Ozpin said mildly. “He will be here in just a moment.”

Glynda sighed and leaned back into the chair, but once again declined the offer of tea. Ozpin went back to observing the fascinating warding system for a few minutes, until eventually the door opened and Qrow Branwen stepped through, pausing briefly to sip at his hip flask.

“Qrow,” Glynda spat. “Do you think you could stay out of the bottle for five minutes? This is serious.”

“Hey, things going this wrong?” he said, staggering over to Ozpin’s desk and leaning against it unsteadily. “I can’t think of a better reason to get drunk.”

“Do you need a reason?” she demanded.

Qrow looked thoughtful for a moment, before taking another long pull at his flask. “Nope.”
Ozpin sighed. “Can we get to business?”

“Sure thing, Oz,” Qrow said.

“Have your contacts heard anything?” Glynda asked.

“All kinds of things,” Qrow said. “Too much to trust any of it. The whole underground is teeming with rumors about what’s happening… even some real apocalyptic stuff.”

“Anything that you do trust?” Ozpin asked.

“One thing for sure… I don’t know if She is mixed up in what happened tonight, but I’ve confirmed she’s got a whole set of pawns again. And they’re saying her new left hand isn’t exactly human.”

“Detective Schnee said that the woman named ‘Neo’ wasn’t human,” Glynda said. “Could she be the one?”

“Naw, I don’t think so,” Qrow said. “She seems to work for Torchwick, and for someone to claw their way to the top under Her… there’s no way they’d play second fiddle to him like that. No, my money’s on the spell slinger in the helicopter.”

“Did you find anything about her?” Ozpin asked.

“No, she’s a total ghost,” Qrow said. “Not a peep about her. That’s why I bet it’s her; anyone that powerful should’ve made a name for themselves by now if they were from this plane. Of course, it doesn’t help that we don’t even know what she looks like; she kept away from cameras and with enough lights in their eyes none of ours got a good look.”

“Do you know anything about this Roman Torchwick?” Glynda asked.

“I spent my day digging into him,” Qrow said with a shrug. “He’s good with magic items, and he’s been working with a freaky mute woman for a bit. He just never caught our attention ‘cause he never did anything big before this… and he didn’t have nearly this amount of tools. That cane… whatever the trick he used to pass through mirrors... all recent additions. He’s being bankrolled by someone with deep pockets.”

“Did you find anything else?” Ozpin asked.

“Yeah, I swiped a copy of the surveillance from the roof of that museum on my way over,” he said, holding up a thumb drive. Ozpin took it and plugged it in, and then turned his computer screen so that they could all see it.

“Heh, Schnee’s got guts,” Qrow said, taking a sip from his flask when Weiss saved Ruby by grabbing the sword. “Bet her big sis would be pissed she did it that way, though.”

“That was extremely dangerous, and she nearly killed herself trying to drain Neo’s life energies,” Glynda sniffed. “Do you know anything about Detective Rose’s abilities? Her speed is incredible.”

“No, Tai wouldn’t tell me anything about how he met Summer,” Qrow grumbled. “I’m pretty damn sure she wasn’t human, and seeing what her daughter can do I’m even more sure of it. Ruby’s damn sloppy with that oversized gardening tool, though. Wastes all the advantages her speed should offer her.”

“Are you going to work with her?” Glynda asked.
“Suppose I need to,” Qrow said.

They watched the conclusion of the fight, Glynda narrowing her eyes thoughtfully as she studied the magic being used. The camera angle prevented her from seeing anything about the woman in the helicopter, and unfortunately the quality of the film prevented her from learning much.

“She a witch?” Qrow asked.

Glynda scoffed. “If I could tell, so could you.”

“I’m not the witch, though,” Qrow said, waving his hand vaguely while taking another sip from his flask. “Isn’t there some... witchy way to tell?”

Glynda glared at him. “Not from some grainy security footage; I can’t even see her. The only thing we know is that she can quickly cast a very large fireball, and she has some magic that lets her manipulate glass.”

Qrow grunted. “And I guess you don’t know anyone that can do that?”

“I could do that,” Glynda said. “I know a fair number of others as well. Would do that? Even besides the moral considerations, I’m not aware of anyone who would choose those exact spells. Glass manipulation is pretty unusual.”

“Frankly, magic is pretty unusual,” Qrow grumbled.

Ozpin simply sat, staring at the screen, a small frown on his face as he replayed the video over and over again, even long after his two captains had left, his thoughts on the strange woman who controlled a pack of Beowolves months before.

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“Ugh, this place is totally gross.”

The building in question screamed crackhouse, which was fair, since it was a crackhouse. Or heroin den. Or both.

It had once been a normal if small home in the heart of the city, but years of neglect had cause the paint to almost entirely peel off, with the color of what remained impossible to distinguish. The front door showed signs of being kicked in on several occasions, with nothing being done to repair the damage, causing it to list crookedly in its frame. The windows were all boarded up, with gaps showing the dim and dingy interior everywhere.

Standing in front of this building was a dark skinned woman with green hair and a disgusted look on her face. She was wearing a tiny top that revealed her entire muscular midriff, along with low pants that revealed two handguns openly carried at her back. Over one shoulder was a heavy bag which clinked slightly when she shifted it.

After hesitating for a moment she walked to the door, pushing it open with her shoe before carefully stepping inside. The inside looked even worse than the outside, with stains covering the cheap carpet, and furniture that had obviously entirely been picked up from street corners.

“Hello?” she called. “Anyone home?”
A moment later a large, muscular man walked into the room. He had a broad, heavy build, and dark, floppy ears on top of his head. He glared at her for a moment, before grunting. “Whattaya want?”

“I’m here to talk to your boss,” she said.

“What for?”

“A business opportunity,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “And I sure as hell aren’t here to sell girl scout cookies.”

The faunus glared at her for a moment before grunting and gesturing the way he came. Without saying a word he led her down a hall and into another large room, this one even more foul than the entrance had been.

The furniture in the back room mostly consisted of stained mattresses on the floor, on which a variety of unkempt and overly thin people were collapsed. One even had a needle still sticking out of his arm, and vomit covered several of them.

The only real furniture was a stained, half collapsed love seat, and sitting on it was the man she was looking for. He was dirty and unshaven, but unlike most of the people in the room he didn’t show the rot of long term addiction beyond some track marks on his arms. He was, however, slouched insouciantly in the his seat without any pants on while a desperately thin, topless woman crouched in front of him, obviously hoping for some kind of discount.

The man locked eyes with her, leering in a way that made her skin crawl. “Well, hello there. The name’s Persimon. And what would yours be, sweet thing?”

“Emerald,” she said flatly. “I’m here to do a little business.”

“Really, now,” he said, his eyes roaming over her body. “The first hits free, and as you can see, I’m always open to... special discounts.”

“I’d rather die,” Emerald said flatly. “I’m here to sell, not buy.”

“Sell?” Persimon asked, raising an eyebrow. “I’ve got my own hookups, and I doubt you can offer me product much cheaper.”

“Oh, I’m not just a runner for some drug gang,” Emerald said. “I’m here to offer you something special... my employer has something new.”

“Some new designer drug?” he asked curiously. “Sorry, my market isn’t quite so upscale for that kinda shit. You might want to hit some of the clubs.”

Emerald chuckled. “I can’t imagine why you’d say that... but no, my employer wants to make sure this goes further than the club crowd, and I’m going to be hitting them up soon, anyway. He wants to make sure everyone gets a taste.”

“So what is it?” he asked.

Emerald smiled. “It’s better than coke, better than heroin... it’s something special, something... magic.”

“That’s what every dealer says about every high.”

“Yeah, but in this case, I’m being literal,” she said, pulling out a jar of shimmering red syrup. “This
stuff is straight from the Forever Fall Forest in Faerie, and it offers a high like nothing a mortal has ever experienced. It's called Red Sap...”
Jaune grunted, his sword knocked to the side as he tried desperately to block his opponent’s blows. No matter how quickly he moved the weapon, or how strongly he pushed back, the mace knocked it completely out of position, sending him staggering backwards, unable to further defend himself. Finally, with one last powerful blow his weapon was sent flying to side, and before he could come to terms with his disarmament he was kicked in the stomach and sent to the ground, the air completely knocked from his lungs.

“You’ve got a long way to go, Jauney boy,” his opponent said as he stood over him, arms crossed. The man was tall and muscular, with short, heavily gelled red hair and indigo eyes. He was moderately handsome, in a stereotypical jock sort of way, although his smug smirk did his appearance no favors. He was wearing black trousers and a black shirt with red trim, and over it was a gray bulletproof vest.

“If that wasn’t just a training sword I’m pretty sure it would be useless after that,” Weiss observed blandly.

She was leaning against the wall of the gym, standing beside Ruby and Pyrrha, who sighed sadly in agreement. “Yes, I am afraid that no matter how many times I try to teach him not to, as soon as he is in a difficult situation he keeps trying to block attacks with the edge of his sword. I admit to being somewhat afraid to lend him a real weapon in the field.”

“Well, at least we don’t usually need swords against people, right?” Ruby offered. “I mean, I guess blocking Grimm claws with the edge isn’t too good, either, you know, with the bone plates and how strong they are, and... um... what was my point?”

Weiss smiled slightly. “Who knows?”

Ruby pouted, making Weiss’ smile grow at how cute the expression was. Blushing slightly, she looked away, watching Jaune try to recover his breath while his training opponent, Cardin Winchester, strutted off towards the entrance to the gym. When he was most of the way there someone else came into the room.

She was very pretty, with long brown hair and large brown eyes. On top of her head stood a pair of very long brown rabbit ears, revealing her to be a faunus. She was dressed in simple brown shirt and pants, with a darker brown vest over it. She walked a little ways into the gym and then paused, looking around for someone.

She wasn’t looking for Cardin, although he certainly noticed her, but instead of altering his course to avoid her he walked right into her, purposely shoulder checking her hard enough to send her stumbling backwards. Weiss couldn’t hear what he said to her, but she could guess it wasn’t very kind as Velvet looked hurt as she scrambled away from him, face turned to the ground. Cardin sneered for a moment before strolling away, leaving the gym entirely.

Weiss pursed her lips, surprised at just how much what she had just seen bothered her. She disliked bullying, but part of her had thought that she wouldn’t be so upset seeing a faunus being treated that way. She was quite relieved that that wasn’t the case.

“Despicable,” Pyrrha said angrily.

“How can Cardin do stuff like that?” Ruby asked. “I mean, we’re all on the same side! How can you
Pyrrha sighed. “Most of supernatural affairs is better than that, but in the wider police force there are far more bigots that you would assume.”

“How shameful,” Weiss said.

“Indeed,” Pyrrha agreed, giving Weiss an approving look, before sighing as she saw that Jaune had finally managed to sit up, although he was still breathing heavily where he was slumped on the floor. “I need to check on Jaune. See you both later.”

“Bye, Pyrrha!” Ruby said, regaining some of her usual cheer.

“Goodbye,” Weiss said, nodding to her before turning her attention to her own partner. “Ready for a spar?”

“Of course!” Ruby said cheerfully. “Just wait until I show you what my uncle just taught me!”

“As long as it isn’t how to drink like him, or be otherwise so vulgar,” Weiss grumbled.

Ruby giggled slightly, grabbing the practice scythe that was leaning against the wall behind her. “Before you know it I’m going to be a better fighter than you, Weiss!”

Weiss’ eyes narrowed and she felt herself filling with competitive spirit. “I’m not going to lose to you.”

“Wanna bet?” Ruby offered, grinning.

As always Weiss smirked as she took the bait. Usually Weiss was able to scrape together wins, although it was becoming much more difficult as Ruby continued to learn to fight at a staggering pace, with Ruby stealing more than a few victories from her. Most of the time their bets were about ways to spend their free time together, with Weiss mostly struggling to make her partner more cultured, choosing to go to ballets, orchestral performances, and museums, while Ruby dragged Weiss out to more mainstream activities, like movie watching, sporting events, and gaming arcades.

“Um, Detective Schnee?” the rabbit faunus said timidly, having come up beside them while they were distracted with each other.

“Hey Velvet!” Ruby said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, Ruby,” the faunus, Velvet, said, giving her a shy smile. “Sorry, but I need to ask your partner for help with a case.”

“Of course!” Ruby agreed, giving Weiss a smile. “Can I come along?”

“Um, it’s up to Detective Schnee...” Velvet said, trailing off.

Weiss knew that she would much rather have her partner along while dealing with strangers, especially a faunus. She vaguely recognized the woman as being another detective in supernatural affairs, although she hadn’t spoken to her before. Seeing that Ruby was on friendly terms with her made Weiss give the woman a stiff smile. “Of course... and call me Weiss. If my partner is on a first name basis with you, then I should be as well.”

Velvet beamed at her, her long ears perking up as she did. “Then call me Velvet! Um, I’m Velvet Scarlatina.”
“Yes,” Weiss said stiffly, nodding to her. “I’ve seen you around. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“You too,” Velvet said, smiling happily. “Oh, um, my partner and I, we, um, we need your help. If you’re available.”

Weiss glanced at Ruby for a moment before nodding. “I am.”

“Thank you,” Velvet said. “We, um, we’re going to the morgue.”

A few minutes later Ruby and Weiss had put away their training gear and grabbed their equipment, before joining Velvet in the garage. Ruby and Weiss sat in the front, and Velvet joined them in the backseat as they drove.

“So, um, Weiss, are you enjoying being a part of Supernatural Affairs?” Velvet asked after a few moments of awkwardly silent driving.

“It’s fine,” Weiss said before looking in the mirror at Velvet, who looked disappointed at the short reply.

Weiss had made up with Blake after they failed to catch Torchwick several months before, but they hadn’t really spoken much, simply content to avoid each other and no longer be snippy. She realized that this was the first time that a faunus had tried to make small talk with her, and that thought spurred her to try to speak a little more than she normally would.

“I... Ruby and I are good friends, which wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t joined,” Weiss said. “I also have a chance to do real good, which I never really did before. Yes... I’m glad that I joined.”

“That’s great,” Velvet said happily. “I wanted to say ‘hi’ to you earlier, but, well, you’re kinda intimidating. Sorry.”

Velvet’s ears dropped a little at that. “It’s fine,” Weiss said. “I know I can be... difficult. It’s just the way that I am.”

“Yeah, but when you really get to know her she’s great!” Ruby said. “Like some kinda hard candy with, like, a hard and kinda bitter outer shell, but if you get to the gooey center she tastes delicious... wait... that didn’t come out right...”

“Ruby!” Weiss barked, bright red.

“Sorry, Weiss!” Ruby shouted, even redder than her partner. “That sentence just got away from me!”

“Your brain got away from you, you mean,” Weiss huffed. “Honestly, it’s moments like this that I can believe that brute is your sister.”

“Aw... Weiss...”

Ruby’s whining was cut off by sudden peals of clear, bright laughter from the backseat. Weiss looked back, having actually forgotten Velvet for a moment, and the rabbit faunus looked as surprised that she was at laughing so merrily. After a few moments Ruby joined in, until finally Weiss rolled her eyes and couldn’t help adding a small chuckle of her own to the contagious laughter.

“You guys are great together,” Velvet said happily.
“Wait, we’re not together, together!” Ruby objected. “Not that there’d be anything wrong with that! I mean, Weiss is amazing, and anyone would be lucky to be dating her, I wish I was dating her... no, wait, I mean, um, that is...”

“We’re best friends,” Weiss said distantly, looking out the window.

“Okay,” Velvet agreed.

“Really!” Ruby shouted. “BFFs!”

“Don’t call us that,” Weiss groaned. “Wait... isn’t that the morgue?”

“Oops!” Ruby yelped, looking for a place to turn around while Velvet started laughing again.

A few minutes later they found a place to park under the beautiful red leaves of the fall trees. Weiss adjusted her white peacoat for a moment, making sure that it rested well over her skirt and blouse, before following Ruby, who still wore the same red hoody she always wore, no matter the weather. Velvet gave them both a smile when Ruby held the door open for them, before leading the way through the building with practiced ease.

Weiss reflected on Velvet as they walked, surprised at how friendly she had been. Blake had given her what she had expected from a faunus, open hostility, but Velvet had gone from being harassed by Cardin to kind to her, a Schnee, with no time in between. It was stunning, and for just a moment Weiss found herself smiling, feeling lighter than she had in a long time.

She became serious as they reached their destination, Velvet opening the door for them to enter. At the center of the room was a metal examination table on which a naked man’s body rested. He was extremely thin, with a number of track marks on his arms, although she couldn’t see any obvious cause of death.

Standing next to the body was a woman wearing a very stylish brown and black coat, along with fashionable black pants, high heeled boots, and partially fingerless gloves. She had a beret on her head, and despite being indoors during the fall, a pair of aviator sunglasses on her face. She also had a pistol on her belt and a purse attached to her other hip.

“Hey Velvet,” she called, before lowering her sunglasses to examine Ruby, then glaring at Weiss. “She didn’t give you any trouble?”

“No!” Velvet objected. “She was-”

“Look, I know you Velvs, and you won’t even say anything when Cardin is an ass to you, and he’s just a nobody with a badge,” she said. “You don’t have to cover up for the Schnee if she said anything.”

“Hey!” Ruby yelled angrily, while Weiss just grit her teeth, saying nothing.

“Coco!” Velvet shouted, looking angry for the first time. “You can’t treat Weiss like that! She wasn’t just not mean, she was actually really nice! You need to apologize right now!”

Coco pushed her sunglasses back up. “Velvs...”

“Don’t you ‘Velvs’ me,” Velvet said. “If you don’t... if you don’t I won’t make carrot cake for you ever again!”

“There’s no way you’ll be able to avoid making your favorite dessert,” Coco said flatly.
Velvet’s eyes narrowed and she put her hands on her hips. “I’ll still make it... I’ll just give your pieces to Weiss. No – don't give me that look, Coco. Weiss was really nice! You're the one being a big meany!”

Weiss blinked in confusion at the discussion, but found herself strangely warmed by Velvet's defense of her. It wasn't very often that she was accused of being 'nice', and for a faunus to fight her friend and partner over Weiss being such… it was unexpected to say the least.

Eventually Coco sighed, crossing her arms and looking away. “Fine.”

Velvet crossed her own arms and continued staring at her partner. “And?”

Weiss frowned, looking over at the body on the table. “Why don't we get to work? I assume I was called for him?”

“No, Weiss,” Velvet said, turning to look at her. “She needs to apologize to you!”

“It's fine,” Weiss said flatly. “Your friendliness is more unusual, anyway. I don't need a forced apology from a stranger.”

“Fine,” Velvet grumbled. “But I'm not happy.”

“This is Reg Falu,” Coco said, gesturing to the body. “He's the latest in a series of deaths, presumably by OD. Vice thinks this looks like the start of a drug epidemic, but there's one problem with that; all of the bodies have had clean toxicology reports… at least as far as cause of death is concerned.”

“So... is it not drugs?” Ruby asked as they walked up to the body.

“I'm a spell caster,” Velvet said. “When we were called in to see what we could figure out, I checked the body, and there's traces of magic, but I can't place it. We asked them to hold the autopsy and called you here.”

“Can you figure anything out from the corpse?” Coco asked bluntly. “That's what you do, right?”

“Coco...” Velvet groaned.

Weiss decided to ignore the byplay, not wanting to get into a fight with the rude detective in front of her partner and Velvet. She approached the body slowly, examining it for a moment as she took off her gloves. Reg had lived rough during his short years, and by appearance it seemed his drug habit had finally caught up with him. Using her aura sight, she saw faint traces of some sort of red magic still in his system, but she couldn't place it either.

Closing her eyes, Weiss gently laid her hands on his chest and let her consciousness fade away. She pushed her aura into the body, willing it to lie still as it began to stir, before reaching deeper, extending her senses through the body into what lay beyond. Time passed quickly, before finally she was able to follow the thin threads still connecting the body to the soul. With gentle effort she coaxed it to return, until finally she opened her eyes with a gasp, panting a little as she stood back.

“Did you get anything?” Coco demanded.

“Where... where am I?” the body asked, the voice raspy. Glowing eyes surveyed the room, although he didn't otherwise move. “What happened to me?”

“You died,” Coco said bluntly, staring at the body with a tense jaw. “What killed you?”
“I'm dead?” he rasped. “Why can't I move! Why can't I move!”

Weiss glared at Coco for a moment before leaning over the body and looking into his eyes. “It's alright. I brought you back to answer a few questions, and then you can find peace. I promise, you'll be able to rest soon. Just please, can you tell us what happened to you?”

Reg had calmed down at her soothing words, finally focusing on her and ignoring the others. “I don't remember dying. The last thing I remember was getting high.”

“What drug did you use?” Weiss asked.

“Red Sap,” he said. “Usually we smoke it, but I wanted more, so I took some and used my old needles to shoot up. It was amazing… like nothing I've ever had before… but I guess it finished me. I'm… I'm really dead, aren't I?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “But it's okay. Everyone dies, but not everyone has a chance to do good before they do. Please, tell me… what is Red Sap? Who gave it to you? More people could die if they aren't stopped.”

“It's a new drug,” Reg said. “It gives the most wonderful dreams… I've smoked weed, done pills, drank, tried shrooms and meth and I couldn't get enough dope… but nothing, nothing was like Red Sap. It made everything a wonderful dream… we all kept going back over and over again, but at least Persimon always had more. And we always needed more. After a while, the world without Red Sap… that's why I shot it up. I wanted to feel that high forever. I guess… I guess it's the last high I'll ever feel.”

“Who's Persimon?” Coco asked.

His eyes moved to her. “Persimon Fallow. He has a drug den on Salmon Road. He used to have everything, but all we wanted was Red Sap… even the addicts all switched drugs to Red Sap.”

“Anything else?” Weiss asked after a moment of silence.

The only one who answered her question was Reg. “I'm… I'm scared…”

Weiss' expression softened, and she placed a hand gently on his cold, dead cheek. “It's okay, Reg. Dying isn't scary. You just kind of fade away… all of your problems go away, and before you know it you are on the other side, and then… death finds you, and she takes you to what lies beyond. Just rest, Reg.”

“Thank you,” he breathed as Weiss gently released his soul, allowing it to cross back over as she ceased animating his corpse.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as Weiss went to the sink and washed her hands before putting her gloves back on. When she returned Coco glanced at her and Ruby. “Thank you for the help. You can go back to your cases now.”

“Wait a minute!” Ruby objected. “You can't just call us down here like that and then get rid of us! We're a part of this case now!”

“Her job was to bring him back to answer questions,” Coco said bluntly. “You just tagged along with your partner. We've got this.”

“Coco,” Velvet said, arms once again akimbo.
After a long stare down Coco scoffed and looked away. “Fine. Just don’t slow us down.”
Fourth Case: Interrogations

The building was run down to the point of nearly falling apart. Even if she hadn't already known that it was a drug den, Weiss would've suspected something of the sort from the outside. Even in a poor neighborhood, it looked much worse than any of the other houses, and that wasn't even taking into account the condition of cars parked in front of it.

Ruby looked a little wary herself, and the two of them let Coco and Velvet lead the way into the house. The inside was even worse than the outside, with a pervasive stench in the air, and cockroaches crawling around in the piles of refuse scattered about. Weiss wanted to burn her shoes when she left, and she certainly didn't want to touch anything even with her gloves.

In the back room they found a set of filthy mattresses covered with vomit and bodily fluids. Between each pair was a filthy, multi pipe hookah, and collapsed on the beds were drugged people, most barely breathing, none of them moving. The only person in the room still active was a filthy man slumped in a chair, smoking a hookah of his own.

He was skin and bones, with glazed eyes and red smoke escaping his mouth with every exhale. He didn't even notice them come in, and Coco waving a hand in front of his face barely drew his attention. Finally she rolled her eyes and pulled the hose from his mouth before slapping him, hard.

“Hey… ow…” he grumbled, blinking at them with bloodshot eyes. “Oh, hey… I don't recognize you. You here for a good time? I've got the best new shit… you gotta try it, babe…”

“Is this Red Sap?” she asked.

“Of course,” he said with a giggle. “It's the best high ever… I don't even carry anything else anymore. First hit's free… gotta charge after that, though. Can't keep any in stock if I didn't charge…”

“Velvet?” Coco asked.

“On it,” the faunus detective said, pulling out her phone.

While the other detectives called the police to arrange something for the many addicts scattered around the room, Weiss focused her mana into her eyes and looked around. Each hookah glowed with crimson energies, and she saw a similar glow coming from behind the dealer's chair. She walked past the others, crouching in front of a small trunk before carefully opening it with her gloved hands.

Inside were mason jars filled with a bright red syrup, which was the source of the red magic. She carefully reached in and pulled one out, holding it up to see better in the light spilling through the broken window beside her. Ruby came up behind her while she looked at it, standing over her shoulder and looking into the trunk. “Is that the drug?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “I don't recognize it, but it's obviously magical.”

“Did you find something?” Velvet asked, coming around the chair to look.

“Hey, man, don't touch the stash,” the man slurred. “That's my Red Sap.”

“His 'stash',” Weiss said. “It's definitely magical, but I'd like to perform a few tests on some.”

“Sure,” Velvet said. “Just be careful.”
Weiss scoffed. “Of course.”

Velvet gave her an apologetic smile. “Coco and I are going to wait for the police, then we'll take the dealer back for questioning when he sobers up a little. If you and Ruby want to get started on your analysis you can meet us in the interrogation rooms. It might be awhile before we can get much out of him.”

Weiss glanced at Ruby briefly before nodding. “Alright. It'll take a while to analyze the sample, so if you finish before I do I'll be in the alchemical labs.”

“We'll do what we can,” Velvet said with a smile.

Weiss followed Ruby out of the drug den, happy to be away from it and its stench as she sat down next to her friend in the car. “Well, that was horrible,” she said.

“Yeah,” Ruby replied quietly. “It's sad. I mean, how bad must your life be that going into a place like that seems like a good idea?”

Weiss shuddered. “I'd rather die than become the slave of some drug, and by extension whoever could provide it to me.”

The trip back was relatively quiet and introspective, and when they reached Beacon Weiss grabbed some paperwork for the evidence she had taken before going to the alchemical labs. Beacon included a large amount of scientific and supernatural forensics equipment, and while she was sure that others would spend time analyzing the other samples, she wanted to figure out a few things about the Red Sap before they continued the case.

The alchemy lab resembled a normal science lab strongly, but in addition to beakers of chemicals, the walls were covered in containers with strange powders, fragments of bone, chunks of crystal and assorted minerals and metals. The main lab bench was clear for work, but the secondary bench beside it was covered in runic circles designed to contain any mystical reactions.

Weiss set down the jar of Red Sap and pulled off her gloves, before pulling on a pair of rubber ones and a long white lab coat. Over that she pulled on several sashes covered in protective runes, before putting on a pair of safety goggles. She then glanced back at Ruby, who was hovering nervously in the doorway.

“Are you going to come in?” Weiss asked, putting one hand on her hip.

“Can I?” Ruby asked eagerly.

“Of course,” Weiss said. “It might be helpful for you to at least know the basics of how to do this.”

Ruby eagerly pulled on her own safety gear, although Weiss had to show her how to properly wear the magical protections. Weiss had to suppress a smile at just how cute her partner looked dressed up to work in the lab. She pushed that thought away, turning her attention to the jar she'd placed on the lab bench.

“I'm going to run a few basic tests,” Weiss explained to Ruby. “First, we need to determine where this substance came from. Is it from this plane of existence, or is it extraplanar?”

For the next two hours Weiss ran a series of tests on the drug, guiding Ruby through the process. Her partner made for a better lab assistant than she would have expected, as long as her directions were thorough and not overly technical. Eventually they finished and cleaned up the lab station before changing out of their safety equipment.
“So… what did we learn?” Ruby asked.

Weiss sighed, stretching a little before grabbing the jar of Red Sap and sealing it. “First, it was made on this plane. It appears to be some form of naturally occurring tree sap, although it is full of magic in a way that's very unusual. I suspect the tree it came from was either magically modified or is an extraplanar tree that was grown here.”

“So if it was local… we can find them?” Ruby asked.

“Yes,” Weiss agreed. “Unless they have magic to speed up the process, it's probably taken years for the trees to get big enough to harvest, and if a small time dealer had so much supply, then they must have many, many trees to produce it all.”

“So, a big grow operation,” Ruby said.

“Precisely,” Weiss agreed. “I was also able to find a few things about how the drug interacts with the body. It's actually quite unusual; as far as I can tell without testing it on people, it manipulates a person's aura to put them into a dreamlike state. People with strong auras would need more to be affected, but they would also experience the drug even more profoundly when they were.”

After turning in the Red Sap to the evidence room, they wandered upstairs to the interrogation rooms. It didn't take them long to find the one with Velvet standing outside looking through the one way glass.

“Hey,” she said quietly. “Did you learn anything?”

Weiss took a moment to look inside before answering. The drug dealer was twitchy and nervous looking, obviously going through some form of withdrawal, while Coco was sitting across from him, staring him down with her arms crossed, unmoving. After taking in the scene Weiss explained everything that she had discovered.

“So we need to find where they're growing it if we want to stop this,” Velvet said with a frown.

“Hey, come on, when can I get more?” the dealer said nervously. “I need some more Red Sap.”

Coco raised one eyebrow behind her sunglasses. “Oh?”

“Please, I need it,” he said, a tic on his face starting. “You don't know what it's like!”

“I don't care either,” Coco snarled. “Tell us who your contact is! You've got a rap sheet as long as my arm, and now one of your junkies is dead. You're going away for a long, long time Persimon. Tell me what you know if you want to ever see the light of day again!”

“Please!” he shouted. “I didn't kill anybody!”

“That's my cue,” Velvet said, walking over to the door as Coco jumped to her feet, starting to shout at the man. “Coco, that's enough! You can't say that kind of thing to him.”


After she'd stormed out Velvet walked over to the man. “Hey, sorry about that, my partner takes her job a little too personally sometimes. Would you like something to drink?”

“Please, I need some Red Sap,” he sobbed. “I'm going to jail… can't I get a little more? I need to feel it again.”
Coco joined them, casually sipping some coffee. “I think she's going to break him this time. Velvs makes a great 'good cop'.”

“I'm sorry, Persimon,” she said regretfully. “All of the Red Sap has already been taken by evidence, and there's no way I could get more. I'm not senior enough to take any out.”

“No,” he moaned. “I need it… you don't know what it's like. When you're on the sap… it's like everything's a wonderful dream… and everything you could ever want but never have… that's the stuff it gives you… all of it's right in reach… I need that… I need it.”

“Well… if I can't get your Red Sap… where do you get yours from?” Velvet asked innocently.

He perked up, eyes hopeful for a moment. “Her… the woman… she came, gave it to me a while back. She had… she had green hair, and dark skin… she was a hot thing, too. Said… said it came from Faerie… she came by a week later with a trunk full of it… I gave her all my money, everything to buy it… I've sold nothin' but since…”

“What was her name?”

“It was… it was some kinda stone… Emerald! It was an Emerald! Her name's Emerald! Come on, can you find her! I need more Red Sap… please… please…”

“Well, I doubt we'll get much more from him,” Coco said. “This 'Emerald' woman isn't much to go on.”

“Well, if she's the contact person for his drugs, maybe she does stuff like that for all the drug sales,” Ruby said. “Maybe she gave something away to someone if we ask around.”

“Maybe,” Coco agreed. “Velvet will need a little longer to finish up; she needs to get him to confess to something that we can hold him for since no one's made Red Sap illegal yet.”

“Really?” Ruby asked.

Coco shrugged. “It's apparently naturally occurring, and no one even knew to ban it. I guess we can go after whoever is importing it if it's from Faerie.”

“The samples we seized weren't,” Weiss said. “Maybe it's from a tree native to Faerie, but the Red Sap was grown on this plane.”

After Weiss explained her findings for the third time Coco nodded. “Alright, even more reason to get this dealt with. You said it would have an even stronger effect on those with strong auras?”

Weiss nodded. “They would be resistant, but the magic would hit them harder when it did take effect. It would also be much, much harder for someone with a strong aura to withdraw from the drug, and after seeing how he's reacting…”

Coco made a face. “We need to put a lid on this before we have a magically trained addict problem to deal with.”

“I've got a contact,” Ruby said proudly. “He might know something!”

“Alright,” Coco said. “It won't take long for Velvet and me to finish up, then we'll hit Vice for a list of known dealers and start asking some questions.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “Meet you back in the squad room in the morning, figure out what we've
learned?"

“Sounds like a plan,” Coco said.

Ruby led the way towards the car, and once they were out of earshot of Coco Weiss voiced the obvious question. “Since when do you have a contact?”

“I know people,” Ruby objected.

“Yeah, your uncle,” Weiss dismissed. “You were a beat cop before we met, which doesn't exactly fill your social calendar with useful informants.”

Ruby pouted for a bit, before giving in. “Okay, okay. He's not really my contact. He's kinda… Yang's contact.”

“That makes more sense,” Weiss said, nodding.

Ruby pouted. “I could have a contact, you know….”

“I'm sure you could,” Weiss said indulgently, which just made Ruby pout harder. The expression was completely adorable, and just seeing it made Weiss feel a happy fluttering sensation in her chest. With a blush she looked away.

Before visiting the contact they stopped for dinner at Signal, and then before long Ruby was parking the car. Getting out, Weiss guessed that their destination was the plain looking nightclub called 'Junior's' they were close to. A man in a black suit with red sunglasses stood guard in front of it, slowly letting a line of people inside the building.

Ruby and Weiss joined the end of the line, since it was short enough not to bother with trying to force their way past. Eventually the reached the bouncer, who took one look at them and crossed his arms. “Is that a sword?”

“Doesn't it go with my outfit?” Weiss asked, crossing her arms.

“No weapons,” the man said sternly.

“Do you know who I am?”

“No.”

Weiss huffed angrily. “I am Weiss Schnee. I can assure you, letting me into your pathetic little club will be very good for its reputation.”

“Look, girlie, I don't care who you are, no weapons,” the man repeated.

“Oh, I'm sorry Weiss,” Ruby said. “I guess we'll just have to go to my apartment and tell my sister Yang that the bouncer wouldn't let us in.”

“D-did you say… Yang?” the man repeated, looking much paler suddenly. “As in… Yang Xiao Long?”

“Yup,” Ruby said, popping the 'p'. “She's gonna be pretty upset to hear that her baby sister was turned away, too…”

The man gulped. “Fine! Fine, you can come in! Just… just don't tell your sister.”
The inside of the club was much nicer than the outside. It featured a huge white and black dance floor at the center, which even at the early hour had quite a few occupants dancing to the loud but trendy music. Scattered around were more thugs wearing the same uniform as the man outside, making Weiss suspect that the place was involved in organized crime in some way, which wasn't terribly surprising for a place with a criminal contact.

“What was that with your sister?” Weiss shouted over the music.

“Huh?” Ruby asked. “Oh! Oh, yeah. My sister trashed this place the first time she visited. The owner tells her anything she wants to know just to make sure she doesn't do it again.”

“Is he really going to tell us anything, then?”

Ruby smirked. “You underestimate how scared he is.”

They made their way through the crowd towards the long bar at the far end of the room. Weiss' skin crawled as she did everything she could to avoid touching any of the people in the crowd, and she still jumped out of her skin anytime someone so much as brushed against her. She was twitchy and frustrated by the time they finally reached the bar, sitting down gratefully near the end beside her partner.

After a few moments a tall, muscular man with a neatly trimmed beard wearing formal clothing approached them. “What'll you have?” he asked in a very deep voice.

“A glass of red wine,” Weiss said, needing it to steady her nerves for the trip back out of the club. “Preferably a good vintage.”

“And I'll take information,” Ruby said, trying to sound tough. “Oh, and can I get a virgin strawberry daiquiri?”

The man raised an eyebrow as he prepared their drinks. Weiss sipped her's delicately, giving him a nod at the good quality. After slurping her own Ruby stared the man down, her attempts at being menacing undermined by the slight mustache of sweet, nonalcoholic drink staining her upper lip. “Are you Junior?”

“I am,” he said. “This is my club, Junior's.”

“I'm Ruby Rose,” she said. “And this is my partner, Weiss Schnee.”

The man gave Weiss a respectful nod. “I'm sorry, ma'am, I didn't recognize you. Would you and your date like to use the VIP room?”

“VIP room?” Ruby asked excitedly.

Weiss, meanwhile, turned bright red. “It-it's not a date,” she stammered.

Junior smirked. “Right. Anyway, if you didn't want to use the VIP room, what do you want?”

“I'm here for information!” Ruby said.

The two looked at her for a moment before Junior focused on Weiss again. “It's an honor to have you visit the club. Let me know if there's anything I can get you to improve your experience this evening.”

Weiss smirked. “Actually, as much as it pains me to admit it sometimes, the dolt is correct. We're
with Supernatural Affairs, and she said you might have some info about our new case.”

Junior straightened up, looking far more wary than before. “Look, this place has some supernatural guests from time to time, but if I told every junior detective about them no one would come back. You wouldn’t want me telling everyone about your evening out, would you?”

“It’s not like that!” Ruby objected. “We don’t want to know *everything*. We’re just looking for some important info! Lives are on the line.”

“Sorry, kid, but lives are always on the line at your job,” he said dismissively. “If you aren’t here to enjoy the club I suggest you go elsewhere.”

Ruby pouted. “But my sister Yang always said you know everything that happens.”

Junior froze, gulping slightly. “Yang… Xiao Long?”
“Yup, Yang's my sister,” Ruby said. She leaned forward, obviously trying to look intimidating. Somehow, Weiss just thought it looked completely adorable. “So unless you want me to call her… while she's relaxing… and drag her down here...”

“Are you okay, boss?” a woman asked.

“Yeah, need us to deal with these two?” another said.

Weiss examined the newcomers. They were identical twins, although they dressed and kept their hair completely differently. One had her hair cut short with a black feather in it, and was wearing a very short and revealing black and red dress along with matching thigh-high high-heeled boots. Her sister had her hair very long with a white flower in it, and was wearing an equally small and revealing white and blue dress, with thigh-high white stockings and white stiletto heels.

As she looked at them, Weiss felt something strange come over her. It was a vaguely warm sensation pooling in the pit of her stomach, which made her turn her gaze away from the newcomers and look at Ruby. Her partner was looking at the two women with a bland sort of curiosity, before she looked over at Weiss with a small smile when she saw her looking. Weiss forced her eyes away from her partner to look back at the twins.

Something about the way she felt was very strange, and with a frown she concentrated on her aura. Sure enough, something was manipulating it, seeking to compromise her self of self. With an almost contemptuous shove she easily forced the foreign mana away from her aura, freeing herself from the faint sensation. She wasn't actually sure what it was supposed to accomplish, since it mostly made her think about her partner in that way, and even then it wasn't a very powerful effect.

“Ugh, can you believe this Militia?” the white dressed girl scoffed. “Our auras didn't work on either of them.”

“I know, Melanie,” the other agreed. “Just our luck they're in love with each other or something, probably.”

Weiss blushed, and a glance told her that Ruby was as well. “W-what!!” her partner stuttered.

“We're part succubi,” Militia said, putting her hand on a hip which she thrust out. “Our mom could seduce men and women with just a glance, and we've got a little of her magic.”

Her sister replicated the move, although with the opposite hip. “Usually we can pick up anyone we want, and people fall all over us. It doesn't work on people who are in love, though. Ugh, so gross.”

Weiss kept blushing, unable to meet anyone's eyes as she cleared her throat. “Um, anyway, we came for information.”

“Right!” Ruby, as red as her name, said as she perked up, although she kept shooting Weiss tiny glances. “Come on, Yang said you could tell us stuff!”

“Yang?” Militia asked.

“As in, Yang Xiao Long?” Melanie repeated.

“Er… yeah, she's my sister,” Ruby said.
The two part succubi sighed, dreamy expressions crossing their faces. “Ohh… now I really wish our magic worked on you, little red. If you're anything like your sister...”

The two sighed again in unison before the other picked up the thought. “It was worth the club being destroyed to meet her. She can 'interrogate us' any time she wants.”

“Um… which one of you?” Ruby asked slowly.

The two shared a look and leaned against each other, the pose far too sexual for sisters for Weiss' peace of mind. “We never make our dates choose… and in her case she was more than enough for both of us, right Melanie?”

“Oh, yes, Militia. We were sore for days after… she's so strong… and rough…”

“And the things she can do with her tongue… mmmm…”

“Ugh...” Ruby choked, looking green. “That's my sister…”

“So?” the two hummed, lost in their own world still.

Ruby looked even greener. “Dang it, Yang… I did not need to know that… it's bad enough she forgets I'm home with Blake sometimes...”

“Who's Blake?” Melanie demanded.

“Yeah, is that why she hasn't come around when we've been here lately?” Militia asked.

“Um… I guess,” Ruby said. “She's her partner, and, um, they're kinda… together… now. Yang doesn't usually talk about stuff like that with me… which I'm really, really happy about… please don't tell me any more...”

“Ugh,” Melanie grunted, stomping one heeled foot. “So that's why! How rude.”

“Like, I know,” her sister complained. “How are we supposed to go cold turkey without our Yang?”

Ruby shuddered before speaking loudly. “Speaking of cold turkey! We're looking for a drug dealer!”

Junior, who had been very amused during the entire exchange, spoke up for the first time in a while. “You're looking for a dealer? I thought you were Supernatural Affairs, not Narcotics?”

“We are,” Weiss said. “It's a magical drug called Red Sap. If people with magical abilities, like your bodyguards here, used it they'd find it very addicting. Whoever is the supplier would be able to suborn then in no time at all.”

Junior sighed. “Fine, fine. I was offered some of this Red Sap stuff, but something about that Emerald woman rubbed me the wrong way… besides, I might look the other way if someone is dealing a little E or coke in here, but I'm not going to sell drugs myself, especially something I've never heard of.”

“Emerald!” Ruby said, finally losing her sickly appearance. “That's the name we've heard, too!”

“Right,” Junior said. He eyed them a for a moment before sighing. “Alright, I'll tell you what I've heard, just make sure you don't tell the world you heard it from me.”

“Of course,” Ruby agreed seriously, undermining it with her loud slurp from her virgin daiquiri.
Junior stared at her with a long suffering expression before sighing again and speaking. “A while back some new player arrived in town. He kept a low profile, but he had his agent, some girl named Emerald, check in with all the other players offering some new drug he had called Red Sap. Most of us turned him down, but we've heard he sent her to peddle the stuff directly to the street dealers instead.”

“What was his name?” Weiss asked.

Junior shrugged. “No one knows for sure. Apparently he decided to be a comic book villain and call himself 'The Prince'.

Weiss scoffed. “What, does he think he's following Machiavelli's style?”

Junior shrugged again. “All he's accomplished so far is to send out Emerald to peddle his Red Sap all over the city. Like I said, the big players don't want anything to do with him, and most of the rest of us have too much sense to sell drugs directly. He's mostly just suborned a bunch of street level dealers so far.”

“Do you know where to find him?” Ruby asked.

Junior shook his head. “No, I've tried to steer clear of him, and working through an agent like he does makes it difficult, anyway. That's all I know.”

Weiss sighed. “Well, I didn't expect this to be easy.”

“It might not be too bad,” Ruby said encouragingly. “Organized Crime Control usually knows what's what. I bet they know where this Prince guy is setup.”

“None of my business,” Junior said with a shrug. “Now, if you'd like to use the VIP room it's still available Ms. Schnee, or you can stay here in the main club area. Either way, I've got my own business to attend to.”

“Thanks!” Ruby chirped, while Weiss just nodded to him.

“So, any interest in joining us?” Melanie asked. “You two are cute, and we're always down for a foursome.”

“Especially if you're anything like your big sis,” Militia said, biting her lip with a dreamy expression on her face. “She's so primal and raw, like a stevedore.”

“Mmm...” Melanie moaned.

“No!” Ruby yelped. “I really don't want to hear this!”

Melanie chuckled. “Ah, look at them turn red. I just want to take them right here just to see how red they get. Come on, come with us to the VIP room. I guarantee we'll be the best you've ever had.”

“We'll rock both your worlds until you pass out, then wake you up for round seven,” Militia agreed.

Ruby hopped to her feet. “Come on Weiss, let's get out of here!”

“Oh, going back to a more private love nest?” Melanie asked. “Have fun you two... and when you see your sister, tell her to swing by with Blake!”

“We'll show them what they've been missing!” Militia agreed.
“Eep!” Ruby objected. “Don't want to hear this!”

With that she finally had enough, all but running out of the club to the mocking laughter of the twins, who then turned to Weiss, eying her up and down like a side of beef. “You though, I can taste the virgin from you…”

“Why wait for little miss red, when you can have both of us?” Militia finished for her sister.

“We promise, it'll be better than you've ever imagined…” Melanie finished, running a seductive hand down her sister's side to her hip.

Weiss sneered, flustered but angry at them driving Ruby off, and more than aware of why she'd never been with anyone. “Try it and you won't just get a little death from me.”

“How rude.”

“I know, Militia. Let's find someone who wouldn't be a disappointment in bed.”

Weiss picked her way through the crowd, eager to reach her partner, but even distressed and confused about everything that had just happened she frantically tried to avoid touching anyone. The press of the crowd made that impossible, however, and the flashing lights and pounding music seemed to make everything so much worse. Alone in the sea of gyrating humanity, it was all Weiss could do to keep her focus on the door as her vision grayed slightly in response to her pounding heart.

With a desperate gasp for fresh air Weiss pushed her way out of the building, hands shaking and eyes wild. She almost jumped out of her skin when a nearby voice spoke. “Weiss? You okay?”

“R-Ruby?” she gasped, flinching away from the instinctively offered hand from her partner.

“I'm here… are you okay? What happened? Did they do something to you?!”

“No- I- I… just… the crowds…”

“Oh, Weiss, I'm so, so sorry… I shouldn't have abandoned you!” Ruby said, covering her mouth with her hands. “I'm sorry! Is there anything I can do? Come on, come over here and sit down on the curb.”

Weiss shakily followed her partner, almost collapsing onto the concrete she was directed to. She wrapped her arms around her legs and pressed her head to her knees, breathing heavily for a moment as she tried to get her heart rate back under control. For long minutes she heard little besides the rapid pounding of her own heart in her head, until finally she heard her partner's soothing voice.

“Hey, it's alright, it's going to be alright,” Ruby murmured, sitting beside her. Weiss looked up, surprised to see so much concern and care in her big silver eyes. “Hey, there you are! Feeling better?”

“Y-yeah,” Weiss said, taking a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“Hey, you've got nothing to be sorry for, I'm sorry!” Ruby said. “I shouldn't have left you in there.”

“No, it was my fault,” Weiss said. “I didn't even tell you how much crowds bother me, although it's never been this bad…”

“You didn't have to tell me,” Ruby said. “I guessed you'd react bad, and I still left you in there. I was
just so flustered, and, well..."

“How about we just move on,” Weiss said with a smile.

Ruby grinned. “Sure. Ugh, I really don't want to go home and look at my sister yet...”

Weiss smiled slightly. “Want to do something else then?”

“Like what?” Ruby asked.

Weiss looked around. “Aren't we close to Vytal Park?”

“Yes, it’s about two blocks that way,” Ruby said, gesturing down the street.

Weiss smiled. “Then how about we take a stroll in the park. It's been a very long time since I've been there.”

Ruby perked up. “Really? That sounds great!”

Weiss stood, and she and her partner walked along the sidewalk, not saying much until they reached the entrance of the park. It wasn't the largest park in the city, but it was famous for the late spring festival that took place there every year.

While it lacked the vibrancy of spring, the riotous color of the leaves in fall gave the park a beauty of its own. Weiss found herself smiling happily while she walked, enraptured by the sights, sounds, and even smells of the park at night. She looked over at her partner, who had an equally bright smile on her face.

Ruby was so beautiful in the soft evening light that it almost hurt to look at her. Weiss knew that her partner felt the same as she did, which was part of what made it so painful to be close to her, knowing that they couldn't really be together. Just thinking about it made tears well up in Weiss' eyes for a moment, and she quickly looked away, blinking to try to hide them.

Not fast enough apparently. “What's wrong?”

“N-nothing,” Weiss said. “I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?” Ruby asked. “You can tell me anything.”

Weiss gave her a gentle smile. It had been so long since she'd really believed that, but with Ruby, she actually did. It had been since...

“The last time I went to the Vytal Festival, it was with my mother,” Weiss said, looking back up at the sky, wishing that the city lights let her see the stars. “She died... when I was young.”

“I'm sorry,” Ruby said. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

“Not really, but... maybe I should,” Weiss said. “Sometimes I feel it eating away at me, even after all this time...”

“We were riding in the car... actually, we were coming back from the Vytal Festival,” Weiss said slowly. “There was a bang... and the car flipped over. We were seat belted in, and I remember... hanging upside down. I was in a lot of pain, and my mother... she wasn't moving.

“Someone came to the window, and I asked for help. They just looked at me, and that's when I saw that they were a faunus. They... they pulled out a gun, and shot my mother... then me.”
“I'm so, so sorry, Weiss,” Ruby said softly when she didn't speak for a bit. “Is that why you… had difficulties with faunus?”

Weiss smiled at her thinly. “I wouldn't necessarily say 'had'. I try not to, but… it's hard to trust a faunus. I know it isn't fair, but… Anyway, I woke up, kind of… in the hospital…”

“Kind of?”

“I remember my mother hovering over me, and a strange woman, and… and she was Death,” Weiss said quietly. “My mother begged for me to live, but Death said that I was already in her realm. Eventually… mother persuaded Death to let her guide me back. I didn't understand anything that was happening at the time, but… I spent a very long time researching everything when I grew older.

“My mother used her soul to guide me back from being in the afterlife. That time spent there… it's the connection that makes me a necromancer. I wasn't just injured… I was dead in every way that matters. My heart was kept beating by machines, but I was no longer home. And then my mother accepted oblivion to make me live again.”

They were silent for a while. “My mother's gone, too.”

Weiss looked over at her. “I'm sorry.”

Ruby gave her a sad smile. “I was really young… sometimes it's hard to remember her. My mom… she was the best. She baked cookies, and always took care of me and Yang… and she had some kind of important job. Dad always said she was saving the world, but I don't know what she really did. Then one day, she was just… gone.

“Dad said… she was in the afterlife. That she wished she could stay with us forever, but that she had to leave. I still don't know what happened to her… I don't know much about her at all. Dad was just so broken up about her that I couldn't even ask him. For a long time it was practically just me and Yang, with Uncle Qrow checking in on us when dad couldn't even get off the couch.”

They were silent again, until Ruby chuckled. “Wow, we really suck at this, don't we? We came to the park to enjoy ourselves and this is what happens.”

Weiss smiled. “Maybe, but… I actually feel a bit better, talking about it. I haven't spoken of my mother since… I can't even remember when.”

They reached the entrance to the park again, and Ruby sighed. “Well, I guess I have to face Yang sometime…”

“You could… you could come to my place for a little bit,” Weiss said, cursing herself internally for the offer. As wonderful as it sounded, having Ruby so close was almost torture.

“Really?” Ruby asked, perking up happily. “I've never been inside before!”

Weiss smiled, unable to say no. “Sure. Come on, I'll give you the tour.”

When they arrived Ruby looked around in awe at the fancy building, loudly saying 'hi' to the doorman and looking at every fancy thing in the lobby like a puppy sniffing around a new place. She oohed and ahhed as Weiss pushed the elevator button for the penthouse, and almost vibrated with excitement while Weiss unlocked the door.

“It isn't much, but… welcome to my apartment,” Weiss said, turning on the lights.
“Isn’t much… Weiss, this place looks amazing!” Ruby shouted, eagerly looking around. “Wow, that’s a big TV. I thought you said you didn’t have one?”

“Yes, well…” Weiss trailed off, blushing and looking away. “You said I should get one if you were going to come over, right? I also bought a few movies you said you liked.”

“Weiss, you’re the best!” Ruby shouted, looking at the very full DVD shelf. “You really didn't have to do all this!”

Weiss shrugged. “It wasn't very much, and I actually just had my personal shopper pick most of it up. Honestly, I've never even turned it on.”

“Alright, give me the grand tour, and then we're totally watching this one!” Ruby said, holding up a DVD with cartoon princesses on the cover.

Weiss smiled. Somehow, her sterile apartment felt more like a home than any time since she'd moved in all those months ago.
Weiss stood in front of the mirror, carefully smoothing her outfit, making sure that it laid just right over her figure. She was wearing a long dress that started as a dark blue near the top, and slowly faded to a light, shimmery blue at the bottom, with an angled slit running all the way to her thigh, to reveal a second, white skirt underneath, which was slit up her leg in the opposite direction, revealing the white silk stocking on one leg from the knee down.

The dress would've revealed her arms and shoulders, but on top of it she wore a dark gray shrug with a high collar that closed at the neck. Below the shrug but above her cleavage was a large silver necklace with an enormous sapphire, which matched the ones in the dangling earrings she wore. Her hair was carefully arranged in its usual style, with a spiky silver tiara around the base of her high pony tail.

After taking a few more moments to make sure that everything looked perfect, she grabbed a pair of white gloves and carefully pulled them on, making sure that the only skin she revealed was the top of her chest between her dress' sweetheart neckline and the collar of her shrug, as well as her pale face. She posed for a moment longer, making sure that the gloves didn't detract from her appearance, before walking across the room to grab a pair of dark gray stiletto heels. Normally she preferred her heels to have platforms for better stability, but the point was to be beautiful, and fashion dictated the skinnier heel with her current outfit.

A moment later there was a knock at the door, and she smiled briefly at the perfect timing, before strolling over to answer it. Standing outside were Ruby, Coco and Velvet. Coco and Velvet were dressed fashionably as always, but had made few changes to their appearance. Ruby, on the other hand, looked like a whole new person.

She was wearing a short, red sleeveless dress, with the top vertically slit and closed with black lacings. Underneath that material was a translucent black gauzy fabric which joined with a black choker collar. Around her waist was a wide black sash, and her legs were covered by black stockings. While obviously loose and flowing enough to be comfortable, the only practical part of the entire outfit were her flat black calf boots.

For just a moment after seeing her Weiss' jaw dropped in shock, and she couldn't stop herself from pausing to drink Ruby in, looking at her from the bottom of her shoes to her red highlighted hair and back again several times. Fortunately Ruby appeared to be equally distracted by her appearance, which just made her feel warm and tingly in an excited way.

The moment was broken when Coco chuckled loudly. “Okay, lovebirds, I get that you haven't seen each other dressed up before, but we're on the clock tonight.”

Ruby and Weiss both blushed, looking away from everyone, and Weiss distracted herself by crossing the room to grab her small gray clutch, checking to make sure that it held her essentials, including her badge. Closing it, she also grabbed Myrtenaster before strolling out the door, head held high in spite of Coco's continued amusement.

When they reached the street she carefully climbed into the back of their car, watching with a soft smile as Ruby awkwardly did the same, obviously not used to wearing such a short dress. Once she was properly arranged Coco cleared her throat, drawing everyone's attention. “Are you ready to go in? You won't be able to have your weapons on you, and this could get very dangerous if anything goes wrong.
“Of course,” Weiss said with a disdainful sniff. “Our most dangerous weapons can't be taken away from us, anyway.”

“Alright,” Coco said. “Remember, we'll be blending into the crowd, but if things look like they're going wrong I'll have our weapons in my purse.”

Weiss raised an eyebrow at that, but at Coco's urging she handed Myrtenaster and her gun to the other detective. Coco opened her small purse and simply placed the sword inside, followed by her's and Ruby's guns. Ruby gasped in shock, while Weiss raised an eyebrow at the display, studying the magic briefly. It appeared to be some form of dimensional magic, folding space to make a much larger bag internally than externally.

As Ruby excitedly asked questions about it Weiss thought back over the last twenty four hours. After watching a few movies with Ruby, her partner had made awkward small talk at her door before finally going home, leaving Weiss feeling more alone than ever before in her empty apartment. If it had been a movie that was the moment where Weiss would've kissed Ruby and asked her to stay, but she pushed that thought aside.

In the morning they had met back up with Coco and Velvet, who had spent the previous day following up every lead they could find about Red Sap. For the most part they had only located more street level dealers, but the drug appeared to be taking off, appearing all over the city in the past few weeks. If they didn't put a stop to it soon it would become an epidemic.

Fortunately Major Crime's Organized Crime Control Task Force kept a close eye on anyone interacting with the established crime bosses in the city, and Emerald's visits to all of them over the past three months had certainly attracted plenty of attention. While they knew nothing about the new crime lord calling himself 'The Prince', they did know where he kept his base of operations.

It was a new, very upscale nightclub in the wealthy part of town called The Court, and even Weiss, despite loathing those sort of places had heard of it. Unfortunately little was known about The Prince, and if they wanted to put a stop to his burgeoning drug empire they would need to find out more. Eventually they decided to use Weiss' status to try to gain access to the upper echelons of the club, which is what led to their current circumstances.

Weiss had originally planned to simply dress well, but after getting home early her eyes had landed on the latest dress that had been added to her wardrobe, and after only a little hesitation she had decided to go all out. She knew that her choice to do so had been driven by the hopes of provoking the exact reaction that she had from her partner, but thinking about that led to a sudden surge of guilt. She wasn't being fair to Ruby, not when she knew that they could never actually be together.

Weiss looked down for a moment, feeling guilty at leading her partner on. Or was it all in her head? She had little actual experience with other people, and Ruby had always been a very friendly and open person with her. Maybe she was reading her own feelings into Ruby's actions.

She looked back at her partner again, only to find Ruby nervously fiddling with the hem of her dress. “I'm not used to wearing dresses like this. And I tried to borrow some of Yang's lady stilts, but… how do you even walk in those things? And fight in them?”

Weiss smiled. “Long practice.”

“Well, I don't have any practice, and if we're going into danger I don't want to walk like a baby deer.”

“Understandable,” Weiss said. She hesitated, and then said what she really wanted to. “It's okay.
You still look very beautiful.”

Ruby turned bright red, fiddling with her dress again. “Y-you look beautiful, too.”

Weiss blushed as well, looking out the window to try to hide it. “Thank you.”

“You two are adorable,” Coco drawled, drawing a glare from Weiss.

“Coco!” Velvet objected, smacking her partner's arm. “Don't tease.”

“Hey, don't beat up the driver,” Coco laughed. “Besides, I'm not the tease.”

A few awkward minutes later they arrived at their destination. The Court was the hottest, most lavish nightclub in the city, and even early in the evening the line outside was incredibly long. After Coco parked she turned to look at Weiss and Ruby in the back. “Okay, this place isn't going to be easy to get into, but we're all hot young women, so we've got a chance.”

“I'm going in as myself, so Ruby and I should be able to talk our way past the bouncer,” Weiss said. “Do you think you'll be able to get in without me?”

Coco smirked, lowering her ever present shades for a moment. “Do not underestimate the power of this much fashionable hotness. We'll get in.”

“Alright,” Ruby said cheerfully. “We'll take a look around while we wait for you, then!”

“Right,” Coco said. “Remember, try to blend in and act natural. Tonight's about collecting enough intel to start building a case. We need a lot more to bring to a judge to get a warrant, but if we can show they're moving Red Sap out of here the moment it gets criminalized we'll be good to go.”

“When do you think they will make it illegal?” Weiss asked.

Coco shrugged. “Sometime this week I think. Inspector Ozpin is sending someone to the next city council meeting, and he's supposed to meet with the governor about it today.”

“Alright, are you ready Weiss?” Ruby asked. The question seemed casual, but Weiss could see the real concern in her partner's eyes.

“I am,” Weiss said, taking a deep breath to steel herself. “Let's go.”

While she was nervous about being in a packed nightclub run by criminals for the second night in a row, Weiss knew better than to show it, and she had years of experience putting the face her father wanted to see forward. When she approached the club she walked like the ground knew she already owned it before every step of her intimidatingly high heels. No one said a word as she strolled down the entire length of the line, many even snapping pictures of her with their cellphones as she passed them.

The bouncer was a tall, heavyset man with sharp eyes and an earpiece in. He looked them both over professionally as Weiss stopped right in front of him, one hand on her hip. When he didn't say anything for a moment she raised an imperious eyebrow and waited.

The bouncer caved first. “Can I help you, ma'am?”

“That is your job,” Weiss agreed. “Do you know who I am?”

“You're Weiss Schnee,” he said.
“Then why haven't you opened the door for me and my friend?”

The man shifted his gaze from her to Ruby, who had been trying to imitate Weiss' poise, but ended up squirming a little under his searching gaze. She all but wilted in relief when he returned his attention to Weiss. “Of course, ma'am. Have a good evening.”

Weiss finally gave him a plastic smile. “Of course.”

While Junior's had been entirely about the large dance floor, The Court's dance floor was recessed, with a ring of tables and booths all around the outside of the room. Against the far wall was a long, curved bar, with several bartenders serving drinks. The right side of the room was at the same level as the entrance and the bar, but the left side was five feet higher, with another large bouncer standing guard over the stairs up.

Weiss was relieved to not be dumped into another dense crowd, and immediately led Ruby over to the staircase. The bouncer took one look at her and gave her a nod, letting them both walk up the stairs and pick out their own spot in the VIP area. Weiss quickly settled on a small booth that offered a great view of the entire club, including the front door and the bar, along with the door to what she assumed were the private VIP rooms.

The booth's seating wrapped around the small alcove it was carved from, and it was made from butter soft black leather. At the center of the area was a low glass table for setting down drinks, and the ceiling was actually mirrored, although it wasn't easy to see anything with the dim lighting.

Weiss was impressed at how clean the booth was, and by the time they had settled into their seats a young woman wearing a short black skirt and white button up shirt, open enough to reveal impressive cleavage, approached the them. “Can I get you ladies anything from the bar?”

“Um, I'll have a virgin strawberry daiquiri,” Ruby said.

“I'll have a cosmopolitan,” Weiss said. Once the waitress had left she looked over at her partner. “You really like virgin daiquiri's don't you?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said with a blush. “I'm not a big drinker, and alcohol tastes gross. But I love strawberries.”

Weiss smiled slightly. “You can be such a child sometimes.”

“Well… well you can be such an… um… old person sometimes,” Ruby countered.

Weiss just raised an unimpressed eyebrow, causing Ruby to wilt slightly. Before she could think of anything else to say their waiter returned. “Here you go, one virgin strawberry daiquiri, and one cosmopolitan. Anything else?”

“No thank you,” Weiss said, lightly sipping her drink. It was very well made, and she smiled at Ruby, who was happily slurping her sugary mixture. “Well, this is pleasant.”

“Yeah,” Ruby agreed, looking around the room again. “My sister dragged me to a few clubs over the years, but we never got to go somewhere like this.”

Weiss nodded. “From time to time my father expected me to make appearances socially. They were almost entirely more staid occasions, but my sister dragged me to a fancy bar when I turned twenty-one to celebrate, and then again on each of my birthdays since. I usually sit in a booth like this and people watch.”
Ruby smiled. “Yeah, I'm really awkward at dancing, so I usually just kinda… sway back and forth while my sister laughs at me. She's tried teaching me, but I'm just kinda awkward at that stuff.”

“To older sisters,” Weiss said. “They may be evil, but they love us.”

“Cheers!” Ruby agreed, clinking her glass against Weiss'.

“Excuse me ladies,” the waitress said upon returning. “The owner of the club would like to speak with you, if you'd like.”

Weiss glanced at Ruby before answering. “Of course. We'd be honored to see him.”

Weiss let her gaze sweep towards the entrance and pan across the crowd quickly while they stood, but she didn't see Coco or Velvet anywhere, and there weren't enough rabbit faunus in the room to make her difficult to spot. Unfortunately, despite the danger of going alone they couldn't pass up the opportunity to get more intel.

They followed the waitress through the door at the far end of the room. Beyond was a well lit hallway, and a short distance down it she opened a door. Weiss stepped inside before letting her gaze sweep the room.

It was one of the most conspicuously fancy places she had ever seen in her life. The floor had a lush red carpet, and everywhere she looked she could see golden objects, or gold trimmed objects made from expensive materials like mahogany. The room offended her sense of taste quite strongly, but she didn't show anything as she examined the man on the plush leather sofa.

He was tall and thin, and Weiss acknowledged, from a purely aesthetic point of view, that he was incredibly handsome. The way he slouched insouciantly on the couch implied that he knew it, too, making her want to wrinkle her nose in disgust. He was dressed in a fashionable tailored suit that probably cost more than Ruby's entire wardrobe, and a huge Rolex watch was on his wrist. Weiss couldn't help but notice that everything about his clothing, and around the room as well, was both incredibly expensive and brand new.

“We greet you, Ms. Schnee,” he drawled, his accent cultured, but not one that she could exactly place. “You honor us with your presence.”

“We?” Ruby asked, as the three of them were alone in the room.

Weiss quickly continued before the man could take notice of her question. “It's an honor to meet you, Mr…?”

The man smiled. “We're not overly fond of names, Ms. Schnee. Just call us… Prince.”

Weiss blinked at the boldness of that remark. “You have a lovely club, Prince. My friend and I have had a lovely evening thus far.”

“Excellent,” the Prince said. “We had not heard that you went to these places very often, or we would have sent you an invitation directly.”

“That's not necessary,” Weiss said with a plastic smile. “My friend wanted to come, and I saw no reason not to indulge her.”

“Er, yeah,” Ruby said. “It's um, it's great.”

“Excellent. Please, let us know if there is anything that could improve your evening, ladies.”
“Actually,” Ruby started, hesitating slightly. “Maybe you could… c-could…”

Ruby trailed off for a moment, surprised at who suddenly came in through the door and walked over
to the Prince. While they had never seen her before, Weiss suspected that the green haired woman
was in fact the one that had been described to them. She gave them each a probing look before
turning to her boss. “I didn't think you were seeing anyone tonight, boss.”

“We were simply greeting Ms. Schnee and her companion, Emerald,” the Prince said. “When we
heard that one of the Schnees had made an appearance at our club, we could not help but see her.”

“I see,” Emerald said. “What were you going to ask for, red?”

“Oh,” Ruby said, blushing. “I was just… um… hoping to enjoy my evening. You know, relax and
have some real fun.”

Weiss shut her eyes for a moment, suddenly suspecting that Ruby had never done any undercover
work before. Weiss hadn't either, but she was used to wearing a facade and playing verbal games.
Ruby sounded like something from a bad D.A.R.E. video as she baldly probed for drugs for sale.

Emerald looked bemused for a moment, before glancing at her employer who nodded to her. “If
you're looking for an out of this world time, follow me.”

Weiss hesitated, but she didn't want to completely blow their attempts to gather any information, and
if they did more people were likely to die. She soon followed Emerald out of room and down the
hallway. “This way, ladies. This seems like the kind of party plans best made in private, so I'm taking
you to one of the VIP rooms.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said.

The room ended up being similar to the one the Prince was in, although it was smaller and had quite
a bit less gold and other forms of conspicuous ornamentation. “I'll be back in a minute, ladies. Please
relax until then.”

Once she was gone Weiss turned to her partner, crossing her arms and raising an eyebrow. Ruby
crumbled almost immediately. “Sorry… I'm not really good at this whole undercover thing.”

“Obviously,” Weiss said.

“But hey, it worked, right?” Ruby said. “We're in.”

The door reopened, and walking through were Emerald accompanied by three tall, imposing faunus
men. One had goat horns, another had long, canine ears, and the third a fox tail. All four people had
handguns out, and Weiss and Ruby both had two guns pointed at each of them.

“Or not,” Ruby mumbled.
Ruby started to tense up, focusing her aura, when Emerald spoke. “Don't. I've got my aura sight active, and if you try anything I'll shoot your partner first, red. I can't tell what spell that was, but I doubt you can save her from getting killed.”

After a second of hesitation Ruby relaxed, releasing the magic. “Fine. And my name's Ruby. Why does everyone just call me red?”

Emerald raised an eyebrow. “Gee, I dunno, maybe 'cause you're wearing red, have red highlights in your hair, and your name means something red anyway. Honestly, the details aren't really worth remembering.”

Ruby glared with all the viciousness of a wronged puppy. Before she could say anything else Weiss spoke up. “Why are you doing this? Do you want ransom? I assure you, while my family can pay, we're more trouble than it's worth.”

Emerald smiled. “Oh, drop the act. Do you think we're stupid? Maybe if you were both still green we wouldn't know about you, but the two of you helped stop a demon lord from entering the city. When the scion of one of the greatest magical families joins the cops people like me take notice.”

Weiss pursed her lips. “I was given to understand that the details of that case were kept from the public.”

“Maybe from the sheep, but the wolves always know,” Emerald said.

“Whoa, you're a werewolf!” Ruby gasped.

Emerald gave her blank look, and at Weiss' long suffering sigh she shifted her gaze to Weiss, smirking slightly. “How did she make detective?”

Weiss' eyes narrowed into a fierce glare. “She might be a dolt, but she's a great detective.”

“Ooh, maybe you two were just out clubbing, wrong place, wrong time,” Emerald said, waggling her eyebrows. “Was this a hot date? Planning to hook up in one of these VIP rooms?”

As Weiss and Ruby turned red one of the faunus, the one with a fox tail, spoke up impatiently. “We gonna do this or not, Em?”

“Fine, spoil my fun,” Emerald pouted before turning serious again. “We'll start with the idiot. Tie them both up, though. And use gags… make it harder for them to cast anything.”

They both tensed, but with the guns pointed squarely at them they could do little as two of the faunus stepped forward and grabbed Ruby, handcuffing her and stuffing a ball gag in her mouth, before pulling out a featureless black leather mask to pull over her face. Ruby whined as it was pulled on, cutting off her sight and muffling her hearing, as well as hiding her identity and her expressions from anyone who might see her in the halls.

Once they were done one of the faunus pulled out a second pair of handcuffs, grinning at Weiss toothily. He was the one with the goat horns, and he was going heavily gray, but for some reason he looked vaguely familiar to Weiss as he walked towards her. “Well, well, little girl. I never thought I'd get to meet you.”
“Why would we ever meet?” Weiss asked, stepping back slowly until she was pressed against the wall.

“You met my cousin,” he said. “You cost him everything, bitch.”

Weiss sneered. “I've heard plenty of faunus say that. What, did he miss TV too much while mining in Faerie? Sorry, it's a little far for transmission.”

The man shook his head. “You are as much of a spoiled bitch as I imagined. You wouldn't believe how good it felt to know my cousin was the one who shot you and your bitch mother. Best day of my damn life. Too bad you lived.”

Weiss felt like the world went still as memories of that day replayed in her head. When another horned man changed her entire existence with a bullet to her own chest. The monster of her childhood, who filled her with fear of every faunus she met, even after so long. Her skin was suddenly ice cold and tingling, except her cheeks felt hot as her entire existence narrowed down to just him and the memory of his cousin.

The man smiled nastily. “Oh, that's a good look. I think you hate me almost as much as I hate you. Good. I'm stuck as dumb muscle for some new crime boss because the Fang won't touch me after the heat my cousin brought. No one else wanted to take the risk you Schnees would still be paying people to stalk me.”

He stepped forward again, and Weiss reacted, kicking him as hard as she could right between the legs. He howled, dropping like a puppet with its strings cut while Ruby began to struggle against the faunus holding her. The man holding her quickly grew annoyed and punched her in the masked face hard enough to lay her out on the ground.

Weiss saw red, stepping forward to attack him, but the man she'd kicked recovered enough to grab her ankle, almost tripping her. She felt a surge of warmth through her skin as she drained his life, and he yelped in pain, letting go of her like she was hot metal that had scalded him. She almost reached Ruby's attacker when suddenly Emerald was there, slamming the butt of her pistol into Weiss' temple hard enough to make her vision swim and everything go murky for a little bit.

When Weiss recovered she was already handcuffed, the furious goat horned faunus and the foxtailed one standing over her, the latter holding a ball gag. “Open your mouth,” he growled.

Weiss glared up at him, before her attention was drawn by Emerald clearing her throat. The remaining faunus was propping Ruby up while Emerald held a gun to her masked head. With one last glare at everyone in the room Weiss opened her mouth and let herself be gagged.

“Good,” Emerald said. “That was a fucking mess. I'm going to take red here down to see the Prince. Just make sure the princess over there doesn't escape before he's ready to interrogate her.”

“Right,” the goat horned faunus growled. Once they left the room he grinned down at her again. “I don't know what you did to me when I grabbed you, but after the mess you caused no one will object to what I'm going to do to you.”

“Wait, we're not supposed to kill her,” the fox faunus said nervously.

“Oh, this probably won't kill her,” the goat faunus said. “Schnee's are always so far above us common folk, looking down their noses and sneering. I think it's time for one to crawl for a bit. Find out what it's like down in the dirt.”

With that he pulled out a syringe full of glimmering red liquid. Weiss shouted through her gag, the
sound muffled into unintelligibility when she saw the needle. He chuckled, pressing a knee into her
stomach hard enough to drive the air from her lungs as he held her still to pull up the sleeve of her
shrug, looking for a vein.

“That much Red Sap...” the fox faunus objected.

“She's a Schnee. They're all full of too much damn magic... probably part of the inbreeding. She's
gonna get real fucked up, but she'll probably live. Maybe. But this much Red Sap? You're gonna be
hooked, Schnee. I wonder what you'll stoop to to get your fix? This stuff is worse to get off of than
heroin, and a pampered little princess like you? Welcome to hell, little girl.”

Despite her best attempts to struggle she couldn't do anything as he drove the needle painfully into
her arm and pushed the syringe. It burned like liquid fire going in, and for a moment she felt a
sensation like a million ants crawling through her veins as she thrashed wildly, the motions
transforming into a full seizure as the world disappeared.

Eventually the blurriness resolved, and when it did Weiss was a bird. She soared through the air,
skimming just above a broad rainbow, reveling in the feeling of wind over her feathers. She felt so
free, like nothing held her back, and she could do anything that she wanted. She shifted her wings,
diving into the beautiful rainbow below, only to scream as she bounced off of it, slamming into the
light like it was solid metal without any give.

As she bounced off she tried to wave her wings, only to find that they were arms and legs. She was
human, but naked as the day she was born, suspended thousands of feet in the air beside the
strangely hard rainbow. She tried to scream again, but only bird-like squawks emerged from her lips.

She flailed about in the midair, the wind whipping past her, but instead of falling down she fell up.
Slowly her frantic motions came to a stop, and she relaxed as the wind whipped through her hair as
she tumbled upwards into the sky.

Eventually she began to shiver, the air getting colder and colder on her naked skin, and she wrapped
her arms tightly around herself, trying to keep warm. Before she knew it frost began to form on her
skin, and within minutes she was trapped in a ball of ice, hurtling out of the atmosphere and into
space.

Through the stellar blackness strange, squamous things slithered, and great fishlike shapes propelled
themselves by undulating through the airless void. Some paused, whispering secrets she could barely
understand, but just knowing about sent her mind reeling into near madness. It was with great relief
that mere minutes later she felt herself falling, this time as she hurtled towards the sun.

The heat was intense, swiftly melting the ice, and then her body after. She stared in horror at her
limbs as they liquefied, then began to boil, and when she opened her mouth to scream steam came
pouring out along with a loud, painful whistle. She closed her eyes, wishing the sound would stop,
but unable to make any move, not even closing her mouth.

Suddenly she felt herself being picked up by the top of her head, and when she opened her eyes she
saw a huge table, many times larger than herself, with a full tea service laid out on it. At the center of
the table was a huge chess board, each piece recognizable as people or other creatures, many of
which she knew. Most of the white pieces were her coworkers at Supernatural Affairs, while the
black included Torchwick and Neo, along with a few other people. Many of the black pieces were
actually Grimm, and a few were other demons or monsters of various descriptions.

Weiss felt herself being tilted, and hot, steaming liquid gushed from the top of her head, filling up a
teacup. It was then that she realized that she was a teapot, and after filling two cups she was set back
down on the tray, which afforded her a good view of the people at the tea party.

Two of the figures were difficult to make out. One was a tall but thin person made of blinding light, and the other a bloated form of absolute darkness. Sitting in front of the glowing figure was inspector Ozpin, casually sipping the tea painfully poured from Weiss' head. Opposite him was a woman with porcelain skin covered in strange red etchings. Her eyes had black sclera but red irises, and she had a black gem in the center of her forehead.

“There will be no victory in strength,” the woman said firmly, sipping her own tea.

Ozpin picked up one of the chess pieces. It was a tiny Ruby, and it squirmed, bound and gagged, in his hands as he examined it thoughtfully. “But perhaps victory is in the simpler things that you've long forgotten.”

The two stared each other down, and slowly the scene began to swim, colors twisting and distorting, until Weiss felt herself falling through the table, which had taken on the appearance and texture of wet paint, piled thickly into the shapes of objects. Everything began to run and melt, but even as everything blurred into a muddy, oozy mess Weiss could clearly hear one more sentence from the strange woman.

“This is the beginning of the end, Ozpin. And I can't wait to see you burn.”

After that Weiss felt herself begin to drown in paint, thrashing and gasping, unable to breath, until finally she was able to throw the blankets smothering her off of her face. She sat up, gasping for breath, only find find herself in her bedroom at Schnee Manor. For a moment she was confused, the weird dream fading until she could barely remember any of it as she sought to remember why she would be in the room she hadn't lived in since she'd joined the police.

Standing slowly, Weiss was confused to see that she was wearing a full, elaborate white wedding dress, complete with train so long that it covered her bed. She walked over to the mirror, gasping in awe at how beautiful it all looked. She hadn't thought about getting married since she was a small child. Since before her mother's death.

That thought broke the happy feelings, and she decided to find answers. Not even bothering to change clothing she hurried over to the door, throwing it open and stalking through the halls of Schnee Manor until she could hear voices in the distance. She tracked them to the drawing room, and without hesitating for a moment she hustled inside, only to stop dead at what she saw.

Her mother was sitting in her favorite chair, sipping tea from a strangely familiar tea service. Weiss felt her eyes tearing up, but before she could breakdown completely her mother looked up and noticed her. “Oh, Weiss! You look so beautiful.”

The rest of her family was in the room as well, and her father actually smiled when he saw her, his eyes lighting up in a way she could never remember seeing before. “Indeed, dear. I must say, she looks even lovelier in that dress than you did.”

“Oh, you,” her mother said, smiling at her father lovingly.

“Are you excited, sister?” her brother Whitley asked.

“Excited?” Weiss repeated.

He chuckled. “About your big day silly! You came down already dressed for the wedding.”

“I-” Weiss trailed off. This was all so strange. Why would she be getting married? And why was
everyone in her family acting so nice?

Winter walked over to her, smiling cheerfully, and pulled Weiss into a hug. Weiss stiffened up at first, not used to being touched, sure that there was a reason why she shouldn't be. Eventually she leaned into it, relaxing completely. Winter was so warm, and her strong arms felt so safe.

Eventually Winter pulled back, smiling down at her tearfully. “There's your smile. I was afraid for a second there you weren't going to show it to us.”

Weiss blinked back happy tears. She wasn't sure what was happening, and everything felt wrong… but at the same time everything was so wonderful. She eventually decided to just go with it, walking over to a comfortable chair next to her mother while Klein carried in her favorite breakfast.

Conversation while she ate was light and happy, with no one mentioning work. While polite, it was much livelier than she could ever remember, and it was hard to recognize the men in the family with smiles on their faces. Despite so many incongruities it was one of the happiest moments that she could ever remember.

Eventually Klein returned. “Someone is here to see you, Ms. Schnee.”

Her father chuckled. “Someone? I suspect our new family to be has finally arrived.”

Klein smiled. “As you say, sir.”

Weiss felt a sudden return of tension, as apparently her spouse to be was outside. That thought made her feel sick, but before she had a chance to stew it over Ruby came through the door wearing a beautiful wedding dress of her own. It wasn't as long and fancy as Weiss', but it was lovely all the same, and suited her well.

“Weiss!” Ruby called, grinning at her. “Or is it Mrs. Rose now?”

Her father snorted. “I think not, Mrs. Schnee.”

Ruby grinned at that. “Fine, fine. I'll be Mrs. Schnee.”

“Ruby?” Weiss asked faintly, her heart pounding in her chest.

“You?” Weiss asked faintly, her heart pounding in her chest.

“Of course,” Ruby said, walking over and suddenly plopping onto her lap, making Weiss squeak to the happy laughter of her family. Ruby wrapped her arms around her back, and slowly Weiss returned the gesture, her heart pounding at the warm contact.

Ruby smiled dreamily at her for a moment, before leaning down to whisper in her ear. “I love you, Weiss.”

“R-Ruby,” Weiss gasped, only to be interrupted by Ruby pressing their lips together.

The gesture was shocking, and Weiss was sure that it was wrong. That she couldn't be doing this. That everything, everything was a lie. After a moment she gave in, pressing harder against Ruby's warm lips. She wasn't sure what to do, but Ruby didn't complain until finally they parted, smiling happily.

“Ugh, gross!” Whitley complained melodramatically, not bothering to hide his smile.

Ruby stuck her tongue out at him. “Come on, Weiss, let's go walk for a bit.”

Weiss hesitated, looking at her loving family, not wanting to leave them. Her mother smiled at her
expression. “We'll be right here, honey. Just go and enjoy your walk while we finish preparing your wedding.”

Ruby climbed off of her lap, grabbing Weiss' hand as she stood. It was warm and strong, and the feeling of incongruity grew as she was pulled from the room, looking longingly back at her happy family the entire way.

“Come on, I still don't know this huge place very well,” Ruby said. “If we're going to live here, shouldn't you show me your favorite spots?”

Weiss looked at Ruby, and then down at the warm hand clasped in her own. It was all so wonderful. So impossibly wonderful. “Ruby...”

Without saying anything else Ruby leaned in and captured her lips again. Weiss still had no idea how to react, wasn't even sure what was happening really, but knowing that Ruby was kissing her was wonderful all the same. “I love you, Weiss.”

Weiss studied her beautiful face for moment. She was smiling so happily, the expression lighting up her silver eyes, and Weiss couldn't help but return the expression. Today was the happiest day that she could ever remember, and suddenly all of her concerns faded away. Who cared if it was strange? If being kissed didn't seem real? She was happy. Truly, truly happy.

Ruby pulled her along, and Weiss pointed out different rooms that had happy memories. It felt odd that a place filled with so many loving people had so few happy memories in it, but Ruby eagerly listened to every story, holding her hand and smiling at her the whole way, and once again Weiss decided not to worry about it.

“Come on, let's look at the gardens!” Ruby said, pulling her towards the door. “I think they're setting up the wedding in the back, but out front should be fine.”

“Okay,” Weiss said. “Mother used to have such a lovely rose garden... I guess... oh...”

Outside the rose garden was still in full bloom. Weiss had thought that it had been removed for some reason, which wouldn't have made any sense. Why would mother have her favorite place taken away?

It was as beautiful as ever, full of roses of every color, all vividly beautiful. Weiss stopped and plucked a white rose, smiling down at it for a moment.

“Oh!” Ruby gasped. “You cut yourself! Don't get blood on your nice dress.”

Weiss blinked, surprised that she hadn't felt any pain from the thorn, but before she could worry about it Ruby began fussing over her, carefully cleaning and bandaging it with supplies she pulled from somewhere. When she was done her hand was perfectly cared for, and Ruby pressed a kiss against the thick bandage.

“There!” Ruby said cheerfully. “Gotta take care of my wife.”

“And I need to take care of mine,” Weiss said, carefully tucking the rose behind Ruby's ear.

The sun had somehow set, and Weiss was surprised that she had gotten up so late, and even more so that the wedding was going to be at night. Still, she didn't worry about it. She had Ruby, and soon she'd be with her family again.

“Oh!” Ruby said. “Looks like they're ready for us.”
Weiss was finding it difficult to see anything, but when she looked she saw a figure wearing a white hood and holding a scythe standing at the end of the garden. For some reason seeing her filled Weiss with trepidation, but Ruby pulled on her hand, smiling brightly. “Come on, Weiss, time to get married!”

Weiss hesitated, but after a moment smiled. She and Ruby were going to be together, forever. She let herself be lead towards the waiting figure as the sky continued to darken, until she could see nothing except the woman in the white hood, and could feel nothing but Ruby's warm hand holding her own.

Then, suddenly, she felt something pulling her back. Like an invisible bungee cord attached to her spine, she suddenly began to accelerate backwards, away from the strange woman… and away from the woman she loved. “Ruby!”

“Weiss!” Ruby shouted. “Come back!”

“Ruby!” Weiss screamed struggling with all her might, but she had nothing to hold onto. As she was pulled away she felt tingling warmth filling her being as the world began to light up again, before suddenly everything she saw began to twist and distort.

Reality broke down into a maddening kaleidoscope of bright colors, blurring and mixing together to form new, equally brilliant hues. The warmth that she had been feeling suddenly turned into heat, until pain began to spread, starting from a point in her arm, until it felt as though her blood was boiling in her veins. She began to scream as everything went black.
Fourth Case: Awakenings

Weiss didn't want to wake up. Every inch she was pulled closer to true consciousness was an inch closer to pain, and an inch further from Ruby. They were together. Happy. Holding hands. Going to see her loving family. She knew it wasn't real. It was impossible. But she wanted it more than anything.

Her body was pain. She was burning up, her skin too tight and itching terribly, her entire existence hating every moment that wasn't sleep. She needed to go back. She needed it.

But something kept pulling, forcing her mind to return. It took a long time, but finally she was unable to fight any longer, and she slowly returned to consciousness. When she was able to open her bleary eyes she looked up and saw Velvet leaning over her, a desperately concerned expression on her face. Standing guard over the two of them was Coco, who had an actual submachine gun in her hands, pointed at the door.

Weiss slowly moved her eyes around the room. She was still in the same VIP room where she'd been taken by Emerald, with only one other person present. It was the fox tailed faunus, who was currently handcuffed in the corner.

Weiss slowly turned her eyes back to Velvet, and only then did she realize that Velvet was touching her. She had a hand on her arm, and Weiss groaned, thrashing weakly, trying to get away from her.

"Shh, shh, calm down, Weiss," Velvet said. "I'm not touching your skin, okay? I promise, I'm okay."

"You- you…" Weiss rasped, unable to properly speak.

"You were unconscious, Weiss," Coco said, her expression hard as she glanced back. "Velvet uncuffed you and pulled off your gag, but something happened when she touched your face."

Weiss studied Velvet for a moment, who gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry… I only touched your for a second, and when I felt… whatever that was I stopped. I'm okay. You didn't hurt me."

Weiss swallowed, and tried to speak, coughing slightly. Velvet finally released her arm, and Weiss realized that she had been using healing magic on the site of the injection. It was no doubt what pulled her back to consciousness, away from her wonderful dreams…

"Here," Velvet said, offering her a bottle of water.

Weiss barely managed to sit up with her help, cringing slightly at the touch on her clothing, and once she was up Velvet had to help her drink it. The cool water felt heavenly, and after several long draws Weiss felt stronger and more coherent.

"Now, what the hell was that?" Coco demanded. "What did you do to Velvet?"

"I'm sorry," Weiss said, unable to look at either of them.

"Hey, hey, calm down," Velvet said. "It's not your fault, okay? You were unconscious. They used Red Sap, didn't they?"

"Yes," Weiss said.

"You ODed," Velvet said when Weiss didn't say anything else. "It took a lot of my magic, but I was
able to stabilize you. Much longer and you'd have died.”

Weiss thought about that for a moment, and compared to… everything… no. She shook the thought off, sitting up a little straighter. She focused on Velvet instead, trying not to think about that. “Thank you.”

“Don't worry about it,” Velvet said with a smile. “I'm glad you're okay.”

“So what did you do to Velvet?” Coco asked again.

“Coco…” Velvet murmured reproachfully.

“Don't Coco me, Velvs-” Coco started, only to be interrupted by Weiss.

“What I did to Velvet… I drained the life from her,” Weiss explained, unable to look at either of them while she did. “It's something all necromancers can do. I can touch someone's skin, and if they are a living, mortal thing, I can drain the life from them, healing myself with the energy. Even a brief contact… I'm sorry, Velvet. Even if you only touched me a little while, you lost at least a few hours from your lifespan. Long enough to really effect you would've taken more… until you would've died.”

“Why did it happen while you were out cold?” Coco asked.

Weiss swallowed hard. “I… as far as my research can determine, I'm the youngest person to ever become a necromancer. Maybe that's why, or maybe… I don't know. Maybe I'm just broken. But I can't control it. The ability… it's always on. Has always been active, ever since I was a child. Anyone… anyone who ever touches me withers and dies.”

Weiss finally looked up. Velvet looked horrified, with tears in her eyes. Coco for the first time since they'd met didn't have any distrust in her expression, although the pity she now saw cut even deeper.

“You- you can't touch anyone?” Velvet whispered.

“No,” Weiss said. “If they touch my skin… it's why I can't risk anyone coming close. It's why… I can't let Ruby… Ruby… where's Ruby?”

Velvet and Coco exchanged a look. “We don't know. We found you passed out, gagged, hooded, and cuffed with this guy standing over you. We knocked him out and cuffed him before Velvet started helping you, so we haven't kept searching.”

“We have to find her,” Weiss said, struggling to stand. Velvet started to reach for her, but stopped when Weiss flinched away from the gesture hard enough to collapse completely onto the floor again. She took a few gasping breaths before speaking again. “Emerald took her to see the Prince.”

“Well, we already looked in the room where he's supposed to be, and we didn't see anything,” Coco said. “They must've taken her deeper into the building.”

“Then what are we waiting for,” Weiss said, using the wall to pull herself to her feet. “We have to save her.”

“You aren't in any condition to be moving,” Velvet said. “Please, lay back down-”

“I can't,” Weiss snarled. “I- I can't ever be with her. I know that, but I… I can't lose her. I have to save her.”
Coco sighed. “Fine.”

“Coco...” Velvet started.

“Sorry, Velvs, but unless we cuff her again she's going to follow us,” Coco said. She studied Weiss for a moment. “She loves you, too. I haven't known you for very long, but I can tell.”

“Yeah,” Weiss said quietly.

“Does she know?”

“No.”

Coco nodded. “You need to tell her.”

“Yeah,” Weiss agreed sadly. “I will. I just... I've never really told anyone before, except Ozpin, and he guessed... but she needs to... to know it can't happen.”

Coco shook her head. “Maybe. But that's her choice.”

Weiss's face twisted into an ugly sneer. “I can't even hold her hand. We can never be together.”

“There's more to meaningful relationships than physicality, Weiss,” Velvet said. “Besides, don't you think Ruby gets a choice? You're taking away her freedom to choose by making her decisions for her.”

“I...” Weiss started, unable to find a response to that. “Maybe I'm not being fair to her, but...”

“Weiss,” Coco said, lowering her sunglasses and looking her directly in the eye. “What's the worst that could happen? If she decides she can't be with you, then that's where you are now. If she thinks it's worth it, then that's even better, right? You are choosing the worst case scenario because you're afraid of the worst case scenario being true.”

Weiss swallowed, looking away. After a moment she straightened up, moving away from the wall that she was leaning on. “We don't have time for this. We need to save Ruby.”

“Right,” Coco said, opening her small purse and impossibly pulling out Myrtenaster and Weiss' gun belt. “Here. You ready for this?”

Weiss carefully secured them to her waist. “Ready enough.”

Coco lead the way, peeking out into the hallway to make sure it was clear before proceeding deeper into the building. They paused to check each door they passed, but each simply revealed another VIP room. Some were occupied, although most inside were too taken by drugs or sex to notice the door cracking open.

When they reached the end of the hall the final door was locked. “Velvs?”

Velvet switched places with Coco, placing her hands on the door as she concentrated. “Dardar-ma.”

Blue light swept from her hands, until it created a blue outline all around the door. The outline swung open, and with a click the lock came undone. She stepped back, nodding to Coco, who carefully opened the door, looking through. “Stairs down,” she said.

The others nodded, and quietly followed Coco down the stairs. Weiss had to lean heavily on the railing, her hands shaking from the strain and sweat pouring down her face. More than once Velvet
looked back at her in concern, but Weiss refused to slow them down, pushing herself farther than she should to keep up with the group.

There was a door at the bottom of the stairs, and after cracking it open and peering through Coco closed the door and moved back, gathering the group into a huddle. “There are six of them. All armed. Probably the Prince's muscle.”

“We can't wait,” Weiss said, before hesitating for a moment. “Did you call for backup?”

“Of course,” Velvet said. “Right after we found you. They're on the way, but…”

“Like you said,” Coco finished. “We can't wait. I'm going to kick the door in and order them to surrender. They've already tried to kill one detective, and we're not going to give them a chance to do anything else. If they don't stand down we put them down. Ready?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, pulling her gloves off and tucking them into her belt.

“Yeah,” Velvet agreed.

“Then we go on three,” Coco said, placing a hand on the doorknob with the other tightening on the grip of her SMG. “One, two…”

The door slammed open and Coco stepped into the room, raising her gun and pointing it at a cluster of three men on the left. “Freeze! Down on the ground!”

The men did not freeze, instead going for their guns immediately, and before they cleared their holsters Coco opened fire. The automatic weapon sprayed into the group she was aiming at, screams filling the air as they went down hard, before she paused her fire to open up on the others.

Unfortunately the remaining thugs had taken the time to find cover, diving behind thick couches or flipping over heavy wooden tables. Velvet stepped into the room after Coco, grabbing a table of her own, flipping it over and crouching behind it, before placing her hands on the wood and murmuring another spell quietly. The table became outlined in blue lines, and when one of the criminals opened fire on it the bullet bounced off like the wood had become harder than steel.

Coco crouched beside Velvet, firing occasionally to keep the criminal's heads down, while Weiss began to crawl around the edge of the room. Everyone was so distracted by the magic and the automatic fire that they didn't notice her as she made her way around to her target.

The goat horned fuanus locked eyes with her as she crawled around the table he was hiding behind. She was slowed too much by her physical condition, and while she managed to launch herself at him, he actually fired two bullets first, one missing, while the other caught her low in the stomach. Before he could do any more she grabbed both of his hands in her's, pointing the gun away and holding on tightly.

“Get off of me- get off!” he shouted as his legs went weak and he collapsed onto the ground, Weiss on top of him.

Weiss sneered down at him. “Go to hell.”

For the first time in her life Weiss didn't let go of the person she was draining. When she first discovered her curse she had accidentally hurt the nurse checking on her after waking up from her coma. After that she had only rarely touched anything alive, usually using plants to try to gain control over life draining. When she'd had to use her ability to defend herself she had stopped when her foe had been incapacitated.
With a combination of vicious satisfaction and horrified apprehension Weiss watched as the faunus withered away, aging before her eyes, before shrinking into himself. After almost a minute of draining him he expired, and in moments he was reduced to nothing but a fine black dust.

Weiss leaned back, panting for breath, unable to believe what she had just done. Part of her felt vindicated after what he did to her. Part of her was sickened by how she had done it. She hadn't just killed him, she'd completely drained his life away. Most of her, however, was still caught up in how good it felt. There was a intense, visceral pleasure in draining life, one that she tried to avoid in part so as to never become attached to the sensation. In its own way it was as enticing as the Red Sap's dream had been.

“You okay?” Coco asked.

Weiss looked up in surprise. Velvet started to step forward, pulling out a small medical kit, but stopped when Weiss stood, brushing dust off of herself, frowning at the holes and bloodstains on the front and back of her nice dress. The bullet had gone all the way through, but the life she'd drained had healed her, although she was still sore.

“Is that...” Velvet trailed off, staring down at the dust Weiss was still kneeling in.

Weiss looked down at it as well, swallowing. It had felt like retribution, and between being drugged and shot she needed the life energies if she wanted to be well enough to find Ruby, but... standing in all that remained of a once living if terrible person, Weiss felt sick. What would Ruby think of her if she knew?

“Well, it saves the court some time,” Coco said. “It's not like he was going to get off after attempting to kill a cop. And these are certainly exigent circumstances.”

“Right,” Velvet said quietly. “Um, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Weiss said, looking around the room. “I'll live.”

The battle was over, and all of the guards were down. Velvet spent a minute checking each of them, but most had taken multiple bullets, and with Coco's surprising accuracy with the weapon they weren't going to be getting back up again.

“So, first room of the basement and it's this guarded,” Coco said. “I wonder if this is where they process the Red Sap?”

Weiss frowned thoughtfully. “I don't think they actually do anything to it. They've got a grove of faerie trees somewhere and they just tap them for syrup.”

Coco shrugged and walked over to the only door in the room. The staircase down had been at the far end of the surprisingly long building that was used for the nightclub, and if the basement took up the same square footage then they had a large amount of space to search.

Coco opened the door, her jaw dropping at what was on the other side. Weiss moved up to see as well, gripping her sword hilt as she did. She was equally shocked at the improbable sight.

The vast majority of the basement of the building was the single, sprawling room in front of them. It looked as though someone had transported an entire forest underground, with the tall ceiling barely able to contain the twenty foot tall trees. The ground was covered in black loam and piles of red leaves which had fallen from the beautiful deciduous grove.

Weiss studied the trees for a moment. She wasn't an expert at botany, but she didn't recognize them,
and when she saw a number of taps stuck into them she knew exactly what they were. “I guess we won't have to track down their Red Sap grove.”

“You mean...” Velvet trailed off.

“Yes,” Weiss said. “This is where Red Sap comes from.”

They slowly walked into the room, letting the door close behind them as they looked around. Weiss could see complex irrigation systems everywhere, along with bright sunlamps in the ceiling, making the entire room one giant greenhouse for the alien trees. The lack of insects, animals, or wind made the forested area eerily still, with only the muffled, pounding music and dancing from the club above breaking up the utter silence.

A single path wove through the trees, and as they started down it Weiss noticed that the forest had been divided into separate sections, the trees kept in place by wrought iron fences. The trees grew away from the fencing without even touching it, which proved to her that they were certainly faerie trees, as nothing from the plane of Faerie could stand the touch of iron.

At the center of the room the trail widened into a clearing, and standing in the middle of the clearing was a beautiful and exotic woman. She was nude, with a perfect figure and luscious, bright red hair, which made for a lovely contrast with her inhuman green skin. Coco and Velvet hesitated at the sight, so Weiss stepped forward, taking the lead.

“Did you see a woman be lead by here tonight?” she asked. “She would've been handcuffed, and was probably wearing a hood over her head.”

“Yes,” the woman said in a melodic voice. “The person you seek was escorted past me to visit the Prince in his lair.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said.

She started to step forward, only to stop when the woman spoke again. “Unfortunately, the Prince does not like intruders, so I'm afraid I cannot let you pass.”

Weiss' eyes narrowed as she placed her hand on her pistol. “She's my partner. I'm going to go to her.”

“And I've already said that I cannot let you pass,” the woman said.

Coco stepped up beside Weiss, raising her SMG. “This is your only chance. Let us pass or we will use force.”

The woman smiled. “You may try.”

Coco started to walk forward, gun still trained on the woman, who raised her arms above her head. The trees around the clearing stirred, and one suddenly lashed out, swinging at Coco, forcing her to duck and scramble backwards to avoid being brained by the heavy limb.

The three exchanged a look, before Coco opened fire. She emptied dozens of bullets into the still form of the woman, who simply stood, arms wide, inviting the attack. When Coco stopped to change magazines the dozens of holes, which had been leaking a thick green sap, suddenly expelled the bullets still inside of her, before sealing back up. In moments it was like she hadn't been harmed at all.

“I will say this once again,” the woman said. “You cannot pass.”
Fourth Case: Become Death

“What the hell is she?” Coco asked, sliding the bolt on her submachine gun after replacing the magazine.

“A dryad,” Weiss said, gripping her pistol tighter. It felt odd, as she’d never really used a gun barehanded before.

The woman smiled. “That is correct.”

“So what do we do about dryads?” Coco asked.

“They come from Faerie,” Weiss explained. “They tend groves of trees deep in the wilderness, and are connected to them on a basic, mystical level. As long as their trees survive, so do they.”

“So we have to get rid of the trees?” Coco verified. At Weiss’ nod, she looked at her partner.

“Velvet?”

The rabbit faunus concentrated for a moment before holding out one hand. With her magic words, “Berda-yi”, a small ball of flame coalesced in the palm of her hand, growing in power until a swirling, spherical vortex of fire sat in her palm, emitting normal flames like a torch above her hand. She then pulled her arm back and threw it to the side, catching one of the red trees alight, before repeating the process three more times, spreading fire around as evenly as she could.

The sprinklers on the ceiling suddenly kicked in, dousing the flames in moments, although a number of the red-leaved trees were still scorched and withered. The dryad simply smiled and raised her arms again, and before their eyes they saw the trees healing and regenerating completely. In the same time it took Velvet to set the trees ablaze they were completely restored down to every red leaf, as though they had done nothing at all.

“Fire is an effective weapon in the hands of man, but the sprinklers keep my trees safe, and as long as I live, I can always restore my grove,” the dryad said. “In this place I am immortal, and so are my trees. Depart back to whence you came, or I will be forced to use your corpses as fertilizer.”

Weiss stepped forward, looking at the trees. The smell of the smoke had been sickly sweet, and she felt the very edges of the incredible intoxication that being injected with the drug had provided.

“These trees… they're the source of Red Sap, aren't they?”

“Yes,” the dryad said with a smile. “In Faerie there is a vast forest named the Forever Fall. The entire region is bound to autumn, and so it is that season for all time. In the deepest, most wild parts of the Forever Fall, places where no human has ever set foot, stand groves of trees different from everywhere else in that realm. This is one of those groves, transplanted here to your world, and even far from its home I can ensure that they produce fine Red Sap in endless quantities.”

“How?” Velvet asked. “We're not far from a ley line, but we aren't close, either.”

The dryad smiled, gesturing above her head. “That endless parade of humanity, dancing, lusting… an endless revel of sex, drugs, and even occasional love. All of that energy pours from them, and the Prince ensures that it flows here, nourishing this grove and improving the quality of the Red Sap. Dust brought from Faerie and laced into the soil does the rest.”

“Do you know what the Sap is used for?” Velvet asked. “It's causing misery and death for countless people!”
The dryad sneered. “People… your species has caused unimaginable misery for the plants of this realm, and you expect me to pity your own? I can feel, distant and strained, the agony of forests slashed and burned, of vast farms pitilessly plucking plants from the ground, trees trimmed and left to suffer the loss of limbs and leaves… your people deserve every painful death Red Sap offers, and a million fold more.”

“Well, this isn't getting us anywhere,” Coco said. “Any ideas?”

Weiss pressed her lips together. “I do have one. I can't use it with you two here, though. We're going to have to distract her long enough to let you past, and I'll make sure that she doesn't pursue.”

“Are you sure?” Velvet asked.

“I'm sure,” Weiss said. “She's just as immortal outside of her grove, but pursuing you would leave it vulnerable to me if she let me stay behind. If you flee through the exit she won't have a choice except to stay here and face me.”

Coco nodded. “Alright. Don't get yourself killed; Ruby would kill me if I let you die.”

Weiss smiled coldly. “Don't worry. I won't be the one to die today.”

“Oh, I presume you mean that I will be?” the dryad asked. “Your plan sounds intriguing, if improbable, but as curious as I am about how you could possibly kill me, I have no need to let you past at all.”

“Well, she's got good hearing,” Velvet complained.

The trees began to move, flexing slowly at first, and then steadily more quickly. All three had to hit the dirt to avoid being killed by the swinging branches, and even that was insufficient, as Weiss saw the tree above her winding up to swing straight down again.

“Berda-yi!” Velvet shouted, flames erupting once again, catching several trees alight. The trees didn't stop, now being flaming weapons lashing out at them, forcing Weiss to stumble even further to get away from the attacks.

Coco opened fire at the same time as the sprinklers came on, filling the air with lead as well as artificial rain, narcotic smoke, intense heat, lashing branches and superheated steam. The dryad shrieked in outrage as it was shot repeatedly by the SMG as its grove was tormented by Velvet.

Weiss found a clear spot and pulled out her gun, fumbling in the pouring water to change the magazine from normal bullets to fire dust incendiary rounds. Once she had a round in the chamber she stood, facing the angry dryad, which while regenerating was already full of bullet holes, and began firing her own rounds into her.

The flaming, dust infused magic bullets did more than simply outrage the dryad, setting sections of her body painfully on fire and forcing her stumble away from the clearing to get a chance for the sprinklers to put her out. “Go! Weiss shouted.

Velvet threw several more fireballs as she ran, and soon both her and Coco had made it across the room, slamming through the far door without looking back, leaving Weiss alone with the enraged dryad. Without the constant barrage of flame from Velvet the sprinklers did a good job getting everything under control, and soon the trees regenerated, the damage fixing once again as though nothing at all had happened.

Weiss was suddenly slammed from behind by a large branch, knocking her to the ground, her gun
bouncing away from her. She fumbled for it, but before she could grab it a thin branch wrapped around her waist, lifting her off of the ground. Several more grabbed her with bruising force, leaving her suspended in mid air, unable to move.

The dryad stepped into the open, glaring up at her. “Pointless. My Prince will deal with your companions personally. All that you've accomplished is angering me.”

Weiss smiled coldly. “Don't underestimate us.”

“Foolish,” the dryad snarled. “Your blood will nurture these trees.”

Weiss shifted her hand slightly, grunting painfully at straining against the tight bonds, but she was able to shift her fingers just enough to touch the branch holding her arm. The plant immediately began to wither, and she freed her hand, pressing against the branch holding her other arm and doing the same. With both arms freed, she swiftly released herself, crashing painfully onto the loamy floor below.

“What- what did you do!” the dryad demanded. She strained, arms above her head, but managed to regenerate the trees like she had done before. “What was that?”

“I am a necromancer,” Weiss said, still kneeling on the ground, her gloveless hands supporting her as she glared up at the angry dryad. “Do you know what that means?”

“What you do with people living or dead does not concern me,” the dryad said.

“It should,” Weiss disagreed. “Being a necromancer means that I died. I was just a child, but I died, and was dead for a long time, my body supported by machines and magic. Eventually I crossed over to the land of death, but before my soul reached its final fate I was returned, but not unchanged.

“My passage through death opened a door deep within my soul, one that still connects to what lies beyond. Normally that door is barely open a crack, but it's still enough to do what I just did, or to raise the dead, or anything else I need. But that door can also be opened wider. Do you know what that means?”

The dryad stared into her eyes, fear slowly percolating past her anger. “No matter what you do, I can regenerate it.”

“Not this,” she said.

Weiss reached deep inside, widening the connection to the afterlife that was the source of her necromancy. Power pouring into her, burning cold and freezing hot, and after a moment to acclimate to the pleasant agony she pushed it into the ground.

Some materials absorbed magic differently than others. Man made things, like worked metal and concrete was extremely difficult to force magic into. The fresh, well kept, dust saturated loam of the dryad's artificial forest was the exact opposite, and the ground soaked up the energies like a sponge, no matter how much Weiss channeled.

They could both feel it. The spot where Weiss was touching died, and that patch spread outward. When it touched the first of the trees they withered away, twisting and dying as their red leaves crumbled into dust. Like a blight in fast forward the effected area grew, as foot by foot the magic spread outward.

“No!” the dryad screamed, raising her arms above her head, trying desperately to fight back. “No! Why isn't it working!”
“I’m not harming the trees,” Weiss said, her voice calm and distant. “That’s simply a side effect. I’m killing the earth beneath our feet. You can’t heal the damage, because within this area life cannot exist. Nothing, not the trees, not people, not even the smallest bacteria can be sustained by this earth.”

The dryad strained harder, before giving up and staggering towards Weiss, arms raised to strike her. Weiss didn’t move, didn’t react at all, and she saw that with every step the dryad aged and withered, until she was unable to keep walking anymore, collapsing to her knees in front of Weiss. “How… how are you doing this?”

“I am become death,” Weiss quoted, not breaking eye contact with the dryad. “When I’m finished this ground will have died. The blight I am inflicting will last eternally. In a million years, long after mankind has gone, nothing will ever grow on this spot. It is dead.”

“Weiss remembered little of the confused, drugged dreams from her exposure to Red Sap. She remembered being happy with her loving family. She remembered Ruby holding her hand, and even kissing her. Never in her life had she truly felt that kind of happiness, and after dreaming it she wished she could be with Ruby that way more than anything in the world.

It was impossible, and Weiss hated the dryad in front of her for helping offer that impossible dream. She hated her unreasonably, blindly, but even still she found her heart moving to pity as she stared into the eyes of the withering, dying creature. Ruby wouldn’t want her to do this, Weiss thought.

But the die was already cast. “Death isn’t so easy to reverse. I’ve already blighted the soil in the entire room. Even if I stopped now, the ground is already dead.”

“I don’t want to die,” the dryad whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Weiss said, surprising herself that she really meant it. “Death isn’t so terrible. There’s no pain, no fear… just peace and rest. I’ve been dead. I’ll die again someday. Death is the fate of all mortal life, even the trees… what’s your name?”

“Daphne.”

“Then be at peace Daphne,” Weiss said solemnly. “Lay down your burdens and rest.”

The trees all around Weiss began crumbling to dust, one after another, and in less than a minute all that was left of them was the ashy black dust left behind. The dryad slowly collapsed to the ground in front of her, dying and joining her beloved grove as she crumbled away.

Weiss closed her eyes, stopping as much of the flow of deathly energies as she was able to. With a sigh she stood, looking around at what she had wrought.

It was a wasteland. The ground was covered in a fine layer of ashy dust, some still floating in the air, swirled gently by the ventilation system. The only still discernible things in the room were the wrought iron fences standing here and there in neat rows, the pointed tips standing like lines of tombstones for what had been destroyed.

Weiss had never used so much necromantic magic at once. Unlike draining life channeling death was actually quite tiring, and while the end result looked similar she wasn’t energized the way she had been when she’d killed the faunus. It left her feeling hollowed out and strangely mellow. Standing in the dust of the someone’s dreams drove home how all life ends. Someday, all becomes dust.
Before she could think that through any further, she remembered why she had unleashed her powers so totally. Ruby. She was in danger, trapped beyond the far door with the crime lord called 'the Prince' and anyone still working for him.

Maybe she could never be with Ruby the way she wanted. Maybe she would die someday, cold and alone, like everyone does. But while she still lived she wasn't going to let anything happen to her dolt of a partner.

Weiss replaced her gloves and snatched up her gun from where she'd dropped it. She'd taken to carrying a spare magazine of red dust rounds, and so she switched to that, the first having run dry shooting at the dryad, before jogging across the dusty, dead ground.

The door at the far end of the room opened easily, revealing a short hallway with one door on either side. She crept forward, settling on the door on the right first. It opened silently, and she peered inside.

The room was obviously a bedroom, and was an extremely richly appointed one at that. She recognized the bed as the same model her father owned, and the various furnishings were all very fancy antiques, all worth quite a bit of money. The style was more old fashioned than she preferred, but there was a definite sense of taste to the room.

Weiss took a few moments to look around. While the confrontation was likely happening behind the other door, she decided that if she saw something useful in a quick search it might be worth the time. The Prince had too many supernatural connections to be a normal crime lord, and some opponents were easier to face with knowledge on her side.

The more she looked, the more decadent the bedroom proved to be. There was a large cabinet which contained nothing but sex toys and objects like handcuffs, gags, riding crops, and even stranger things that she didn't recognize. An entire closet was dedicated to sexy costumes for both men and women, and the largest drawer at the bedside contained nothing but drugs and condoms.

It was when she was about to depart in disgust that she noticed something interesting. The liquor cabinet near the door was well stocked, but it was the top shelf that drew her notice. That shelf contained nothing but a wide selection of Faerie wines, all of extremely high quality. The selection was incredibly expensive, some of the bottles costing more than the entire nightclub, and despite being a Schnee she didn't even recognize a number of the vineyards. Some, however, she knew were not fit for human consumption, nor would a dryad have wanted to drink all of them.

Not wanting to take anymore time away from the conflict, Weiss quickly verified that the only other door in the bedroom was a bathroom before returning to the hallway, closing the door behind her. She listened at the opposite door, but could only make out quietly murmuring voices, so she checked her gun one last time and cautiously opened it.

While the bedroom had been almost as tasteful as it was sleazy, the room in front of her was simply ostentatious. The VIP room the Prince used in the floor above had been ridiculous, but the room in front of her was arranged as an actual royal court, complete with tapestries covering the walls and an enormous golden throne. It was completely absurd, like something from a medieval court, made modern only by its cleanliness and air conditioning.

The Prince was sitting arrogantly on his throne, still dressed in his tailored suit, but with a heavy sheathed sword resting on his lap. The blade was obviously extremely well made, the design medieval and no doubt covered in runes.

Standing beside the throne was Emerald, who unlike her employer actually looked quite nervous
while holding a handgun to the head of Ruby, who was still handcuffed, although she was no longer gagged and hooded. Weiss locked gazes with her, the fear she'd been feeling receding when she saw her partner looking worried but unharmed.

“Weiss,” Coco said. “You deal with the dryad?”

She and Velvet were still standing in front of the door, both pointing guns at the Prince, although unable to do anything with Ruby held hostage. “Yes,” Weiss said, moving into the room beside them. “She's dead.”

The Prince's eyes flashed with an inhuman, unhinged rage for a moment, before narrowing calmly. “Lamentable. We will make you regret harming our subject.”

Weiss studied him for a long moment, channeling mana into her eyes as she examined him and the rest of the room. Emerald was obvious a mage of some sort, and a fairly powerful one at that, and there was a warded door hidden behind a tapestry at the far end of the room behind the throne. The Prince's sword radiated magic, obviously being heavily enchanted, and the Prince himself was a bonfire of power.

She studied him for a few more moments to confirm her suspicions before speaking. “I've regretted many things in my life, but I wouldn't be a Schnee if I backed down before a Sidhe lord.”

“Sidhe?” Coco repeated, tightening her grasp on her gun.

“The race that rules Faerie are the Sidhe, and 'the Prince' is obviously a renegade of their nobility,” Weiss said. “I wonder, given how few laws they hold themselves to, what you must've done to become an exile.”
Fourth Case: Nobility

The Prince chuckled disdainfully. “We have committed many crimes, it is true. Many lack words in your tongues, and others are more horrible than your mortal minds can comprehend. Despite that, our crimes are as a cup of water to the ocean of what the Schnees have done.”

Weiss flushed angrily. “The Schnees—”

“Are monsters,” The Prince said, before turning his attention to Velvet. “How can you, a faunus, even stand to be in the same room with a Schnee? And yet you work with one.”

“Weiss is a good person!” Vevlet objected angrily.

The Prince laughed openly, like that was the funniest thing he had ever heard, and even Emerald chuckled. Weiss felt her earlier flash of anger coalesce into something cold and hard.

“Maybe you're right, 'Prince','” Weiss said darkly, turning her focus to Emerald. “I'm not as good of a person as I should be, and I'm far less good of a person than you should wish I was. And today? I'm not feeling very good, and even less so when you're holding a gun to my partner's head.”

“Oh?” the Prince said, although Weiss kept her gaze boring into Emerald's eyes. “What relevance does your guilty conscience have on these affairs?”

“It matters, because if you don't release Ruby right now I will rip out your soul, Emerald, and I will seal it in a very small jar. And then I will spend an hour a day every day wracking it with the kind of torments only a necromancer can inflict on mortal souls. And I will ensure that torturing your screaming, immortal soul will become a family tradition.

“Maybe Schnees are bad people,” Weiss finished. “Maybe we've done terrible things with our wealth and power. But all of those atrocities will pale next to your fate.”

Emerald froze, meeting Weiss' pitiless gaze for a long time. Whatever she saw there caused her to look at her boss for a moment, before suddenly shoving Ruby towards Weiss. “Fuck this. You're on your own.”

“Emerald!” he shouted, jumping to his feet, showing his anger for the first time. Emerald didn't pause, running towards the warded door Weiss had sensed, practically diving behind the tapestry to reach it. In moments she was gone, fleeing up the stairs to whatever safety lay above.

The Prince glared angrily at Weiss, who kept her eyes on him while Velvet murmured spells quietly, outlining the lock on the handcuffs in glowing light as she unlocked them. Despite his rage the Prince seemed content to wait until Ruby was freed and had been handed her gun.

“Thanks, guys,” Ruby said.

“Did they hurt you?” Weiss demanded.

“No,” Ruby said. “He was still just kinda gloating. They'd just taken off my gag to ask me questions when Coco and Velvet showed up. Honestly, it was getting really boring.”

“We were in no hurry,” the Prince said. “We would have extracted your words and screams at our own pace. We still will, although your torture shall be as a pleasant dream compared to that suffered by our faithless servant.”
“Huh?” Ruby asked.

“He just thinks he'll win this and will get the chance to interrogate you after hunting down Emerald,” Weiss said.

“Oh,” Ruby hummed. “Hasn't he noticed it's four against one?”

“Four mortals, no matter that they dabble in the arcane arts mean nothing to us,” the Prince said. “We are a Sidhe lord, the natural rulers of all creation. Bow before us if you wish to minimize your suffering.”

Weiss pointed her gun at him, getting herself set in her firing stance. Ruby followed her example before speaking. “You're under arrest for attempted murder, and probably a bunch of other stuff we'll figure out later. You have the right to remain-”

Before she could finish the sentence he drew his sword in one smooth motion and lunged, the long, heavy blade pointed directly at Weiss, who dove backwards to avoid being impaled. As she bounced on the ground, she immediately rolled, her guess at his next move barely keeping her from being cut in half as the blade slammed into the ground, cutting through carpet and concrete like they were nothing at all.

Velvet scrambled to the side, drawing her gun, while with a single glance Ruby and Coco both moved back in the same direction and opened fire, making sure that any stray bullets hit the empty back of the room. Ruby focused on fast, precise shooting, her bullets slamming into the Prince's head one after another, while Coco simply laid down a volume of fire at his center of mass, dozens of bullets striking his midsection in seconds.

The Prince looked more annoyed that anything else at the fusillade of lead, the bullets bouncing off of him. Weiss climbed onto one knee and fired an incendiary dust round, which hit his stomach, making him grunt and move back, actually feeling it a little. He glared at her menacingly.

“You will regret that, Schnee,” he growled.

Weiss fired again and again, and the Prince simply held a hand in front of his face and stalked towards her, his posture like someone trying to walk into a heavy wind who didn't want to be hit by flying debris. When Weiss' magazine ran empty she simply dropped her gun, pulling out her sword as she tried to reach her feet.

She was too slow, the Prince speeding up into a blur when she stopped firing, his swing forcing Weiss to hurl herself backwards to avoid being decapitated. He was almost as fast as Ruby when she used her magic, and his weapon had almost as much reach. The only reason Weiss was still alive was her long practice with her parter, but she could see that he had decades, or even centuries of experience with a blade, unlike Ruby who was still learning to fight with a scythe.

Weiss scrambled backwards on the ground, scuttling like a crab to avoid getting killed by the incredibly fast swings of his huge sword, when Coco suddenly opened fire again. Unlike before she had switched to one of her own incendiary magazines, and when the burning dustammo shot from the barrel of her SMG it looked she had a flamethrower as it spat round after round at incredible speed, all slamming into the Sidhe's back.

For the first time Weiss saw real pain on the Prince's face as he hunched over, wrapping one arm around the back of his neck to protect it. When Coco's gun emptied he swiftly ripped his shirt off, tossing the flaming garment aside before turning to look at his attacker. When he did Weiss saw that his back was blistered, with some burn marks that had blackened the skin here and there, but nothing
terribly serious, although it certainly looked painful.

“You will regret that,” the Prince growled. “What is your name, mortal wretch?”

Coco casually reloaded her gun. “What's yours, drama queen?”

The Sidhe growled, charging towards Coco, who simply began shooting again, this time starting at his stomach and trailing up his chest towards his head. He was halfway to her when he pulled back, howling in pain, turning away so that he didn't get shot in the head by the incendiary rounds.

When he turned he found that Weiss had regained her feet, his motion just in time to notice her lunging towards his side, blade extended for a killing stroke. His face twisted in outrage as he barely brought his heavier blade up in time to block, backing away even as Coco finished another magazine.

“Coward!” he spat. “You seek to stab us from our flank while we are distracted?!”

Weiss sneered. “A drug dealer lecturing a detective on fair play? Absurd.”

The Prince's eyes darkened, and Weiss suddenly regretted provoking him as he began swinging at her again. Weiss' training and instincts kept her away from his blade for just long enough for Coco to reload, forcing him to pause his assault to protect his head from the flaming dust rounds.

Weiss backed away, taking in what the others were doing. Ruby had her pistol in hand, carefully lining up a shot, and Weiss suddenly realized that several of the more painful hits, the ones that kept forcing him to cover his head and neck had actually been caused by Ruby sniping him during Coco's bursts. Velvet was standing between the two of them, a glowing blue wireframe of a sword in one hand, obviously intending to protect the two shooters if the Prince became determined to assault them.

When Coco emptied yet another magazine and paused to reload the Prince slammed the point of his sword into the ground. He was covered in superficial burns, the skin that wasn't blackened either pink or blistered, and his hair was still on fire. The air was heavy with the sharp tang of fire dust and the sickly sweet smell of burning flesh. He glared at them hatefully for a moment, before his eyes began to glow violet, and Weiss felt the mana in the room stir.

“Gaath buille,” he said, with a voice that resounded like thunder. All around him powerful gusts suddenly arose, until gale force winds pushed everything away from him, even slowly shifting his heavy gilded throne towards the far wall.

Coco opened fire, but the winds swiftly grew so intense that the bullets were unable to reach him. Everyone huddled against the walls, until they were forcefully pressed against them as the winds exceeded the force of a hurricane. Eventually all Weiss could do was cover her face with her arms, until she was unable to even move them as the pressure became so intense that breathing became impossible as she could no longer inflate her lungs.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, it was over. No longer supported by the wind, Weiss collapsed to her knees, desperately panting for air. When she finally had enough to focus again she glanced up, desperately searching for where the Prince may have gone.

She didn't need to worry. He was still standing exactly where he had been, his expression serenely confident as he surveyed the downed detectives. “That is the way that things should be; mortals should always be on their knees before their natural masters.”

Weiss snarled, but managed to struggle to her feet. “A Schnee… bends their knee to no master.”
“Neither do I,” Coco said, climbing to her feet even as she pulled another magazine from her bag.

“Yeah!” Ruby agreed as she and Velvet stood as well.

“Foolish mortals,” the Prince said, raising his arms above his head dramatically. “Your reckoning has come. Garmamai!”

The Prince briefly glowed, until he was so bright that they could no longer look at him without being completely blinded. Weiss covered her eyes, while Coco started firing. The glow faded away after she had finished her magazine, and Weiss lowered her arm to see what had changed.

The Prince was clad in silvery plate armor, which covered every inch of his body. It was articulated in incredibly complex ways, the metal plates seemingly crafted to cover every single muscle or bend of his body, providing protection more thorough than any armor made by humans. The few places where his pose revealed the slightest gaps at his joints Weiss could even see a layer of fine chainmail underneath the plate armor. At the center of the breastplate was a crest depicting a knight in heavy armor.

Coco reloaded her gun and fired again, but this time the Prince simply struck a pose, one hand holding his sword point down on the ground, while the other rested on his hip while he boomed with laughter. The helmet, which covered his entire head except for two small eye slits, concealed his expression completely, but they could all hear the mocking edge to his laughs as he simply absorbed the gunfire, the dust rounds doing nothing more than scuffing the silvery metal.

“What is that stuff made of?” Ruby asked when Coco ran out of bullets again to no effect.

“Silversteel,” Weiss answered. “A metal from Faerie. It's soft and easily worked, but when enchanted it becomes harder than our best titanium alloys. Incendiary rounds aren't going to hurt it, and normal bullets can't hurt him.”

“Indeed, weak and pathetic mortals,” the Prince intoned. “We are beyond your comprehension. Surrender, and we may yet be lenient.”

“What does work?” Coco asked.

“Magic, magic weapons, and iron can work,” Weiss said. “He's powerful enough that the first two will be difficult though.”

“Iron?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged. “He's from Faerie. It doesn't exist there, and it harms things from that plane.”

Velvet murmured something under her breath quietly while they spoke. Weiss felt the hair on the back of her neck standing on end, and a glance showed that all of Velvet's hair was standing as straight as her long rabbit ears. She had both hands in front of her body as she chanted, and tiny sparks began running down her arms, until a line of crackling electricity started to arc between her slightly parted hands.

“Mirtingilin,” Velvet shouted, hands pointing directly at the Prince. A great crack rent the air, and there was a blinding flash as a bolt of lightning extended from Velvet, striking the Prince at the center of his body.

The Prince howled and writhed for a moment, barely keeping his feet as his body seized up. After a moment he straightened, arms shaking as he lifted his sword from the ground, smoke drifting from the seams of his armor. “You will burn for that, witch.”
Weiss raised her own sword, loosening her muscles so that she could react faster when the Sidhe finally made his move. She didn't have to wait long, as he suddenly charged at Velvet, his two handed sword raised high above his head, ready to cleave her in half. Weiss saw a small gap under his raised arm and pointed her rapier's tip at it, lunging a heartbeat before he would've reached the faunus.

The Prince stopped instantly, bringing his sword around in a low arc, and Weiss felt her life flash before her eyes at the unanticipated move. The huge sword was coming in at waist height, and her own weapon was destined to pointlessly impact his upper breastplate. She had too much of her own momentum tied up in her lunge, and she didn't have any time to try and change her thrust's location, much less avoid the sword coming in to bisect her.

Then a streak of red passed her by, trailing rose petals behind it. Ruby's scythe followed right behind her as she all but flew past them, the length of the blade catching him across the stomach with the force of a cannon, dragging him backwards as his armor barely held up to the force of the blow.

The Prince rolled away from the scythe and to his feet, and when he did Weiss could see a large dent all across the plating segments that covered his stomach, and she could even see a small amount of blood dripping between the seams. Ruby's scythe wasn't able to cut through the thick breastplate, but it was able to dent it, which was almost as effective.

Before the Prince could fully straighten up from his roll Coco was there, swinging her bag at him. “Lourd,” she said just before it made contact with a sound like a car crash. The Prince was sent flying backwards again, the plate damaged by Ruby buckling from the incredible force of the impact. Coco almost fell over herself until she quickly spoke another command, “Plume,” allowing her to hold up her now light bag again.

The Prince hit the wall hard enough to crack it through the tapestry, and Weiss charged, committing fully to a lunge, squatting as she thrust Myrtenaster towards the damaged plating on his stomach. Her aim was true, and he was too disoriented to dodge, so her rapier pierced home, driving all the way through his stomach until it hit his armor's backplate.

“Ah!” he shouted. He leaned forward faster than a striking snake as she started to withdraw, grabbing her by the forearm. “You will suffer for that, wench!”

The Prince stepped away from the wall, picking Weiss up solely by her arm. She held onto her sword despite the motion, causing the blade the scrape around messily inside of his body, but he ignored that entirely as he bodily threw her across the room, the awkward motion of the inhuman throw sending her tumbling erratically through the air with a shrill scream.

Weiss was nearly blinded by the pain of being flung by her arm, curling up as best she could with one arm not wanting to move correctly. She slammed hard into the wall near the entrance to the room, the air bursting from her lungs as her entire back felt like it was on fire, although she at least avoided hitting her head. She screamed again as she dropped flat onto the ground, only luck keeping her from cutting herself open on her sword.

“Weiss!” Ruby screamed, running over to her.

“No!” Weiss forced out. “He's weakened!”

Ruby hesitated, but turned and charged at him, scythe at the ready. Unfortunately Weiss underestimated his hardiness, and instead of landing a clean hit Ruby found herself engaged in a lightning fast duel with the Sidhe. Weiss tried to stand to go help her, only to yelp and collapse when she tried to use her left arm.
“Let me see it,” Velvet ordered as she crouched beside her, reaching out to touch her arm. Weiss flinched away, making the faunus give an exasperated huff. “I know about your issue, but I'm a medic and I need to check your arm.”

“I'll be fine,” Weiss gasped, trying to resist despite the debilitating pain.

Velvet huffed. “You are so stubborn. Look, either you let me check it or Coco holds you down and then I check it. Which one of those doesn't leave your partner fighting alone?’

Weiss hesitated but gave in after a moment. “You should be helping them fight.”

“I am,” Velvet said. “They will fight much better when you are on your feet. It looks like he dislocated your arm when he threw you, so this is going to hurt.”

“What is… ouch! Damn it!”

“Getting your arm back in the socket,” Velvet explained cheerfully as she placed her hands on the tender shoulder. “You're going to need to see a doctor after this, but I'll get you fighting again. Lit-bu-ni.”

The warmth that flooded into Weiss at the touch felt incredibly good, and despite her anxiousness at being touched, even through her clothing, Weiss couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief. After a few moments she started watching the battle again while letting Velvet work.

Ruby was definitely faster than the Sidhe lord, and his injury was slowing him down even more. The skill gap was enormous, however, and his armor meant that he could simply take the occasional blow in order to try to hit back, something that Ruby couldn't survive, forcing her to use her speed to avoid as many hits as it gave her opportunities to attack.

Just as Velvet started to pull back Ruby hooked the tip of her scythe under the hilt of his sword, then twisted with her entire body and pulled, jerking the heavy blade out of his hands. Coco then swung, her bag transitioning from near weightless to incomparably heavy in an instant at her command, and this time dust actually drifted down from the ceiling as he was slammed back into the wall, shaking the entire room.

“Enough!” he roared, backhanding Coco as she moved to strike him again. He was still weakened by the massive hit that had further buckled the bottom of his segmented plackart, making his hit send Coco stumbling back rather than killing her like his full strength would’ve. “Gaoth buille.”

The blast of wind lifted Coco off of her feet, but then Ruby swooped in, grabbing her and dashing back to the far side of the room, setting her down next to Velvet. The wind soon died down, and Weiss climbed to her feet as Coco removed her cracked sunglasses and Ruby reformed her scythe.

“You… you filthy mortals...” the Prince growled, staggering away from the wall. “You- you… you will all perish, cursing your weakness! Die in vain!”

With that he raised both hands, and the power he suddenly radiated made Weiss instinctively flinch away. A purple nimbus of energy surrounded the Sidhe lord, and for the first time Weiss could truly feel how powerful he really was.
The four detectives stood side by side near the wall, looking distinctly ruffled by the battle. Coco's glasses were missing, and a large bruise on her face showed their fate. Ruby's beautiful red dress was torn in various places, obviously unable to hold up to the strain of high speed combat. Weiss' own dress was in somewhat better condition, as she had had it tailored specifically to allow her to fight if attacked, but she herself had taken a beating, including a recently fixed dislocated arm. Only Velvet still looked relatively normal, although she had expended a huge amount of magic over the past hour, leaving her shaking slightly and sweating.

The Prince's power was almost overwhelming as he truly focused all of it for the first time. As a lord of the Sidhe he was an incredibly powerful magical being, able to produce and control more mana than a human ever could. Weiss' family had focused on binding magics so long ago in part because that was an area where they could gain an edge over the powerful leaders of Faerie, who had at the time been in open conflict with the Schnees.

The power that the Prince had been radiating gathered between his hands, which he held in front of him, pointing directly at them. So much air was being pulled towards him that the everything loose on the ground was picked up into a miniature, horizontal tornado, which swirled ever more violently as it compressed down into the space between his cupped hands.

Velvet stretched her own hands out, spreading them widely in front of her with her palms out, like she was pressing against an invisible glass wall. “Mirda.”

A glowing blue wireframe outline of a sphere gathered around the four detectives, before a filmy blue light filled in the bubble. Velvet had her eyes closed as she forced more mana than she had to spare from her aura into the construct, desperately trying to defend against the incredible attack that the Sidhe lord was gathering.

After a long moment of hesitation Weiss carefully placed a gloved hand on Velvet's shoulder, slowly offering her own aura to the faunus, who carefully began to absorb it. Weiss was actually quite surprised for a moment that her aid had been accepted, as absorbing aura from another the way Velvet did was extremely risky if the person intended harm. Weiss smiled faintly for a moment, happy that Velvet really did trust her.

With Weiss' considerable power added to the construct the bubble became stronger and more opaque, gaining a faint white tinge. Coco joined in as well, adding a muddy brown note to everything, and then even Ruby pitched in, despite Weiss having never shown her how. Fortunately Ruby figured it out on her own, as the bubble gained a reddish tint.

The Prince gestured towards them, calling out his spell as the ball of swirling, energetic air began to move. “Gunna aeir.”

While it had started slow the ball swiftly gained speed, until it streaked across the room like a cannonball before striking the shield and exploding. The compressed air burst outward like a bomb, tearing the entire room apart despite almost all of the force being directed forward, towards them. If Velvet hadn't created her shield they would have been torn to pieces, as nowhere within the room was safe from the powerful blast, so no amount of dodging would've sufficed.

They all felt the world shift as the air blasted into the forcefield, until it was lifted off of the ground like a soap bubble and thrown fully against the back wall. Despite the mana of four people being channeled into it, the bubble actually warped, compressing into a pancake, with cracks forming.
across the surface as it began to break. Weiss began to actively push her mana into Velvet, who
groaned from the strain, blood starting to leak from her nostrils as she struggled to keep them alive.

Suddenly they were all thrown about, tumbling madly around the inside of the bubble as the wall
behind them gave way, spitting them into the former grove room beyond like a watermelon seed.
They flew madly through the air before hitting the ground, bouncing and rolling through the ashen
dust before finally stopping when they slammed into one of the wrought iron fences that divided the
room into sections.

The forcefield finally popped leaving the four women in a tangle of limbs on the ground from where
they'd been thrown about by their impromptu flight. Weiss desperately struggled free, finally
managing to get away from the rest before staggering to her feet, ignoring the searing pain in her
aggravated shoulder as she adjusted her clothing to cover her skin once again.

Through some incredible good luck neither Weiss' sword nor her skin had managed to hurt the other
detectives, and while they recovered and climbed back to their feet, Weiss took in the damage that
had been wrought. It was simply stunning.

The far room looked as though a car bomb had been set off. The grove room was littered with
bits of twisted metal and scattered planks of wood, and she could even see beyond that the ceiling
had collapsed inside the throne room. The music above had cut off, but they could hear screaming as
people desperately fled the building. Weiss couldn't see any bodies that might have fallen down into
the basement from the blast, but even if no one had been hurt directly, she knew that people were
certain to be trampled in the panicked evacuation.

“Holy shit,” Coco mumbled as she took in what happened. “What was that?”

“An explosion is just gas expanding really really fast,” Ruby said, making a vague gesture for a
moment. “All that air he gathered… it was just a mini bomb.”

“He just blew up his own room,” Velvet said shakily. She was obviously having trouble even
standing, and a glance revealed blood dripping from both nostrils and all four ears. “With him still in
it...”

“Is he dead?” Ruby asked.

“No,” Weiss said, adjusting her grip on her sword. “Most of the blast was directed towards us, so he
only caught the backwash, and his armor and magic should've been enough to protect him from
that.”

A moment later the Prince proved her right by stalking out of his shattered throne room. He paused,
looking around the devastated grove room, and began to shake with fury. “What have you done?”

“Your operation is over,” Weiss called. “You're under arrest.”

“You murder our dryad and claim to have an authority over us, Schnee witch?” the Prince growled.
“I will make your suffering a thing of legends.”

“Yeah, Weiss makes much scarier threats,” Ruby said. “And we're not like Emerald.”

The Prince's only answer was a sharp gesture and some magic words. “Scian aer.”

They scattered, avoiding an almost invisible ripple that projected from the Sidhe's hand. Weiss
followed the path, eyes widening at the results behind them. The air of the attack had punched a
perfect, clean hole through the wall like a giant blade, and Weiss suspected that they wouldn't have
stood up to the hit any better than the plasterboard had.

The four detectives spread out, Ruby dashing quickly along the edges of the room, weaving around fencing in order to get behind him, while Coco and Weiss approached his front from widely separated angles. Velvet also moved towards him, but she lagged behind, obviously still recovering from her recent magic.

When they began to close in he gestured again, firing several air blades at first Weiss, then Coco. Fortunately, while they were very fast for magical attacks, they were still slower to fire than a conventional weapon, giving them plenty of time to dodge as long as they didn't get close.

Ruby suddenly charged, scythe at the ready, but the Prince had obviously been waiting for that, ignoring her in order to lure her into attacking. He spun around, spitting another spell while making a wide, whipping gesture with his arm. “Fuip aer.”

A slightly opaque stream of air flowed behind his hand, and only the nature of Ruby's weapon saved her. Recognizing his use of magic, she instantly spun her scythe around, digging the blade into the soil to provide an anchor to help her dive back and away. The attack flew just above her head, before striking the ground in a long line, slicing through the soil and kicking up a vast cloud of black dust.

Unlike his previous spells, this one didn't end with a single stroke. With a flick of his wrist he raised what appeared to be a nearly invisible whip into the air, before bringing it down again, lashing out with shocking speed.

Ruby dived and rolled to the side, before hopping to avoid a long, low swing of the air whip. Dust kicked up behind her in rich, dark clouds, as she was kept well at bay by his rapid attacks.

Weiss hesitated, casting about desperately for anything to help. There were no dead bodies to animate, no way to touch him past his armor, and even Myrtenaster had trouble finding weak spots that would actually hurt him. Stymied for ideas, she just waited for an opening, hoping that Ruby would be okay.

Eventually Ruby decided to block the attack, thankfully experimenting with the blade of her weapon intercepting the air whip well away from her body. Rose petals instantly filled the air as the whip sheared through the red metal without slowing down at all.

Ruby hesitated slightly, stunned that her weapon was destroyed so easily, and he moved instantly to take advantage of it, increasing the pace of his attacks ten fold, filling the air with a loud shriek as lines were cut in the floor, ceiling, and fences in front of him as he lashed out again and again.

Weiss charged his back, aiming for a slight crease at his lower back as he shifted his torso to keep attacking Ruby, who had let her scythe disappear entirely to concentrate on nothing except dodging. Just as he was cornering Ruby near the side wall, the whip cutting through concrete as easily as anything else it touched, Weiss sank her weapon deep into his back.

He screamed, the air whip dissipating as his concentration lapsed. He forgot all about Ruby for a moment, spinning quickly enough to grab Weiss by the throat, the movement ripping Myrtenaster out of his body in a gout a blood. Ignoring what would be a lethal wound in a human he lifted her off of the ground, squeezing just hard enough to keep her from breathing.

“You… you have stuck us twice, Schnee,” he growled. “We will enjoy seeing the light fade from your wretched eyes.”

She tried to stab him in the throat, but he contemptuously smacked her blade away with his gauntlet,
squeezing harder. She could see the malevolent amusement in his gaze as he slowly compressed her windpipe, until her eyes bulged and she turned blue.

Then she was falling, although still unable to breath for a moment, until the Prince's hand fell from her throat and into her lap with a splash of hot blood. Looking up, Weiss gaped as her nearly blackened vision finally returned to sharp focus to a shocking sight.

Ruby had reformed her scythe, and she had taken advantage of the Prince's distraction to build up momentum, running full speed blade first into his arm. The slightly curved armor covering his forearm did nothing but channel the high velocity blade of the scythe to his wrist where the armor was weaker, cutting through the silversteel chainmail at the joint and cleanly chopping off his hand.

Ruby halted herself as best she could, turning around to attack him again, but despite his missing hand he reacted well, kicking her just as she started to swing at him. Ruby lifted off of the ground and flew backwards through the air, bouncing several times, stirring up clouds of black dust that made her cough and hack as she tried to regain the air he'd forced from her lungs.

Before he could attack either breathless detective Coco was suddenly there, swinging her bag with a full bodied motion. “Lourd.”

With a great bang he flew back, digging a divot all the way to the concrete on the floor before he came to a stop halfway across the room. He slowly climbed to his feet, the faint glow outlining his body increasing at his evident fury as the four detectives regrouped.

“Well, this is going well,” Weiss said, breathing heavily.

Coco grunted. “How are we supposed to stop him? He just shrugs off everything we do.”

“The Sidhe are all very powerful, and Sidhe lords… they're even stronger,” Weiss said. “My family eventually cut deals with them, not all of them favorable just so we wouldn't have to fight them every time we dealt with Faerie. I… I don't know.”

“I've got an idea,” Ruby said suddenly.

“Alright,” Coco said. “What is it?”

“Well, first… whoa!” Ruby yelped as all four dived out of the way as he sent another volley of sharpened air at them.

“You will pay for hurting us!” the Prince shrieked, his voice completely unhinged. “You will all pay! You will all pay! I hate you, red one! I hate you! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! Hate! HATE YOU!”

Ruby ran to the side, keeping his attention mostly focused on her as she shouted directions to the others. “Velvet, can you do something to make it harder for him to see us?!?”

Velvet made a series of gestures like her arms were doing the breaststroke, palms pushing outward against the air over and over again. “Gogort,” she said, and in her hands coalesced wispy strands of vapor, which began to fill the air more thickly every time she repeated the gesture. After half a minute a dense fog filled the room, reducing visibility to only a few feet.

“Do you think that you can hide from us!??!” the Prince raved. “You will suffer a thousand deaths before I end you!”

Ruby returned to the group as they heard the heavily armored Sidhe lord stalk about in his heavy armor, the rattle and scrape of metal on metal letting them know exactly where he was as he blindly...
searched the room. “Awesome, Velvet! Now, step two, Weiss, can you get him to the right spot in the room?”

“What spot?” Weiss asked. “I'm not sure I'd be able to tell with all this fog.”

Ruby frowned. “Oh… oops. Um… oh, I'll mark it on the floor. Just lead him towards the middle of the room until you get him right on top of the big 'X' I'll draw. When he's there… um, Velvet? Can you make the fog go away when we're ready?”

“Yes,” Velvet said. “It takes a few seconds, but if I stop keeping it here it'll go away.”

“Alright, so when he's in position shout, okay Weiss?” Ruby said.

“Okay,” Weiss agreed dubiously. “What then?”

“Then Velvet drops the fog, and that's where Coco comes in,” Ruby said. “Hit him again, really hard just like before. Do you think you can hit a target?”

“Well, he's not a baseball, but probably,” Coco said.

“Alright, then I'm going to get things ready,” Ruby said. “Let's go!”

Weiss followed her partner into the fog after a few moments, heading towards the Sidhe lord, hoping that he stayed too enraged to think to clear the mist away with another burst of wind. When she came close enough to make out his blurry form in the fog he ran towards her instantly. She could see a strange swirling distortion of the fog in front of his remaining hand as he ran, and just before he reached her he swung that arm.

She raised her blade instinctively, and with a loud shriek like an angle grinder on steel her enchanted blade met one made of air. He pressed their weapons against one another for a moment, but Myrtenaster wasn't easily damaged, and he wasn't able to exert any really pressure against her through the air blade, which meant that he couldn't simply overpower her guard with brute strength.

Weiss smirked and shifted her blade, letting his weapon slide off with a tortured shriek from her sword, and when he overextended slightly she lashed out at his face, seeking to put her sword into his eyes. She missed her target by a few millimeters, and the tiny slits on his helmet were small enough that she wasn't sure if she could actually fit the blade in at all, but he reacted instinctively to protect himself, putting him further off balance.

Weiss pressed her assault, going all out from the start as she began driving him in the direction her partner had gone. She wasn't really seeking to inflict serious injury, but instead struck at places that would make him flinch and keep him off balance. After a short but intense exchange he finally blocked her sword with his forearm and took back the offensive, lashing out with his invisible blade again.

Weiss glided back from his counter, and when he followed up, still blinded by rage, she simply continued withdrawing, using her sword to deflect his attacks whenever he was too fast for her to dodge as she slowly spiraled back, keeping an eye on the floor for the mark Ruby had mentioned. If he had been thinking rationally she would've died long before, but he was so enraged and confused that he lashed out like a wild animal, completely without skill or finesse, both of which Weiss used to lead him around the room by the nose.

Eventually she saw the large 'X' drawn on the ground, and she shifted her position slightly to put him directly on top of it. “Now!”
The fog immediately began to fade, letting her see more and more of the room. Despite the change he was still so focused that he didn't notice Coco running up beside him, bag held in both hands as she twisted her entire body to swing it as hard as she possibly could. “Lourd!”

There was an awful bang as he was lifted off the ground, spinning and tumbling through the air like he’d been fired from a cannon. Weiss followed his rapid trajectory, jaw dropping as she saw him slam into one of the fences, which Ruby had apparently bent to an angle while Weiss had been keeping him distracted.

The silversteel armor, which had prevented him from being seriously harmed by any of their weapons gave like the thinnest cloth to the simple iron points, and he was impaled completely by three spikes, which entered his back and emerged from his stomach red with blood. His screams rose in pitch as he began to thrash, the motions transforming into a full seizure as sickly green flames erupted from his body where it touched the iron.

In less than a minute the Prince had been reduced to a charred, smoldering heap of molten metal and blackened bone dangling from the bent section of wrought iron fence.
Fourth Case: Confessions

Weiss slowly collapsed onto the dusty ground, first onto her knees, then sliding down further into a barely sitting slump. She was exhausted beyond anything she could remember, with the recent drugging, pushing her necromancy farther than normal, and of course, the protracted sword fight with a superhumanly fast and strong opponent. She had reached and exceeded her limits long before, and it was finally catching up to her.

With the fog clearing Weiss shifted her gaze from the still smoldering bones of the Prince, to her partner, who was standing behind the fence he was impaled upon. Ruby's dress was, in addition to being tattered by the fighting, now damp from the fog that Velvet had conjured. The red and black material clung to her athletic but still curvy body, and for a moment Weiss let her thoughts fade away as she stared, her body growing hot.

“What happened?” Coco asked.

Weiss finally blinked, blushing at where her mind had been, and the way her body had been reacting to her distraction. “He was a Sidhe, and like almost everything from Faerie, he was vulnerable to iron.”

“I know they are, but…” Coco said, gesturing vaguely at the remains of the crime lord.

“Vulnerable is perhaps an understatement,” Weiss acknowledged. “Even brief contact with the skin causes burns in Sidhe, and protracted contact is… well… incendiary.”

Weiss shifted her gaze to look at her partner's face, and she frowned a little at the look of horror in her eyes. Ruby had figured out to use the iron fences, put in place to contain the growth of the Forever Fall trees, as a weapon against the Prince, but she obviously had no idea exactly how effective of a weapon that would be. Eventually Ruby closed her eyes, and looked away, taking several deep breaths before looking for Weiss, who gave her a small smile.

Ruby let her scythe fade into petals before jogging over to her, crouching beside her and looking at every inch of her body carefully, making Weiss' blush intensify. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“Making sure you're okay!” Ruby said. “I couldn't see anything with all the fog, so I just had to hear you fighting him and fighting him… I shouldn't have forced you to fight him alone. He could've-”

“I'm fine,” Weiss interrupted. “Thank you for trusting me with the job. And it worked. That was a good plan, Ruby.”

Ruby blushed, looking at the ground. “Th-thanks, Weiss. It wasn't that big a deal...”

“It was,” Weiss refuted. “You remembered what I said about iron, and you figured out a way to use it against him. If you hadn't we would've been in a lot of trouble.”

“I didn't realize it would do… that,” Ruby said, stealing a glance at the body before looking quickly back at Weiss. “That was... was...”

“I'm going to go check on Velvet,” Coco suddenly said. “I'll let the two of you... talk. We'll wait upstairs for the paramedics. Velvet's not looking too good.”

“Oh no,” Ruby said, jumping up and looking at the faunus, who was lying on the ground panting and gasping for air. “What's wrong!?”
“She used too much magic,” Weiss said, studying her for a moment with her normal vision, before using her aura sight to look closer. “It can be very dangerous, but I don't see any signs of… permanent complications.”

“Yeah,” Coco said as she walked over to her partner. She gently knelt beside her and began performing first aid, checking her symptoms with a very professional manner. “She really shouldn't push herself so hard, though.”

“I- I'll- I'll be… fine...” Velvet stuttered between heavy breaths.

Coco glared at her partner. “You are not fine. And you are going to be stuck in a hospital for days because of it. No! I don't want to hear it, Velvs. You are going on the first ambulance, and I'm going to carry you upstairs to wait for one.”

“You- you don't… have to.”

Coco just shook her head. “You'd think you'd learn not to argue with me. You're almost as bad with your health as you were with your wardrobe before I was partnered with you.”

Weiss and Ruby watched Coco gently lift Velvet into her arms, cradling her like the most precious thing in the world before walking across the room and up the stairs. Only after they left did the two look at each other again.

Ruby finally broke the silence. “Are you okay?”

Weiss smiled tightly. “Yeah… just a little worn out. I'll be fine.”

Ruby shook her head. “I don't just… I don't just mean from the fighting, and you know, that stuff. I mean… that guy… did… did he hurt you?”

Weiss stared at Ruby. She had almost forgotten that her partner had been taken away before… before what had happened. She could actually feel an itch in her arm where she'd been injected, and the memories of the strange dream, what little of it she could recall, make her look down at Ruby's lips.

“Yes,” Weiss whispered.

Ruby bit her lip. “What happened?”

Weiss thought for a long moment before answering. She didn't want it to have happened, and she didn't want anyone, even… especially Ruby to know. It was only when the stray thought that if she had some more Red Sap she wouldn't have to worry about Ruby being upset that she found the strength to speak. “When you left, he… he injected me. With Red Sap.”

Ruby's eyes widened. “Oh god, Weiss…”

“It… it gave me dreams,” Weiss said, her breath hitching. “Dreams that can't ever come true. But that I want. Want more than anything. And now I… I want them again. I want… I want it again. Ruby… I… it frightens me..”

“Let me help you,” Ruby said instantly. “We'll get through this.”

Weiss blinked back tears. “I'm sorry.”

“Why?” Ruby asked.
“I know I'm hard to deal with, and now… I feel like a burden,” Weiss said, looking down.

“You could never be burden!” Ruby objected. “And even if you were, which you can't be, cause you never could be, I wouldn't care!”

Weiss blinked a few times, so bewildered by the rambling statement that it actually pulled her from her self pity. She shook her head. “You are very weird.”

Ruby grinned. “But I made you smile!”

Weiss suddenly realized that she was smiling, and while she was tempted to stop it, she decided to let her partner have her victory. She needed something to make her happy before they continued.

Ruby was actually the one whose face fell into a serious expression first. “How do you really feel?”

Weiss considered the question. “Sore. Tired. And… scared.”

“Maybe it won't be so bad,” Ruby comforted. “I mean, even if you take heroine or something that doesn't mean you have to be addicted the first time, right? Maybe you're already okay.”

“I don't know,” Weiss said. “But sitting here… I want those dreams again. I hate that I want them, but I do.”

“Then make them come true!” Ruby encouraged.

“What part of 'impossible dreams' don't you understand?”

“The part where anything isn't possible,” Ruby said. “This year I've learned to do some magic stuff, and you keep telling me I can learn spells and do cool stuff like you and Velvet can. After all that, not much seems impossible.”

Weiss looked at her, glancing at her soft looking lips again before looking down at her lap. “Some things are.”

“E-even if they are,” Ruby said, biting her lip. “Even if you can't do those things, that doesn't mean there aren't better things. I want you to be here, happy, more than anything in the world. I can't go with you into your dreams.”

“I don't want to want to use it again,” Weiss said. “I... I hate the idea that I want to. I hate the idea that I could be so... weak. I... I won't let this beat me... let it define me.”

They sat in silence for some time, Weiss firming her resolve as best she could. Eventually Ruby spoke again, looking entirely serious. “Weiss, I... I want to tell you something. Something that I've felt for a while now, and I don't want to hide it anymore. Maybe this is the wrong time, but...”

“Ruby...”

“Weiss, I- I love you,” Ruby said.

Weiss gasped. She had known how Ruby felt. Had even started thinking about ways to let her down gently without having to have a heartbreaking confrontation. Still, it was the first time she'd been told that by someone besides her mother, who had died a very long time ago, or very rarely her sister, who wasn't very demonstrative. 'Love' sounded like a strange, foreign word, one that she wasn't even entirely sure that she knew the meaning of.

In response to her stunned look Ruby began to babble. “I'm not trying to force anything! I know
you've never said that you like anyone, at all, and even if you liked women I'm not sure why you'd want to be with me. I mean, I'm not some fancy rich girl or something like you're used to. And I hope that I don't make this weird. I'm fine with you not feeling the same. I don't want to lose my partner because I couldn't shut up and thought I should say something and now I just keep talking and I—"

“Ruby,” Weiss said, her voice shaking slightly. “No matter what, I want to be your partner.”

Ruby smiled at her. “And… and friend?”

“You're the best friend I've ever had,” Weiss said. “No matter what, I want to be your friend.”

“Th-that's good,” Ruby said, wiping tears from her eyes. “I hope I'm not making you uncomfortable. And—”

Listening to Ruby painfully putting herself out there finally made Weiss steel herself. “Ruby… my dreams. The ones that… the ones that can't happen…”

“Yes?” Ruby said, still blushing but focused again.

“Part of it… part of it was about my family, but… then… then you came… and kissed me,” Weiss said. “I… I have, um, I have feelings. For you. I have… I have feelings for you, too.”

Ruby just looked shocked for a long moment, jaw hanging open, before slowly understanding began to fill her stunned eyes. Like the sun peeking over the horizon she began to slowly light up, until she was beaming more happily that Weiss had ever seen. It broke her heart knowing that as happy as she was making her partner that it could never work out.

“Then it can happen!” Ruby shouted. “I mean, um, if you're ready. I want to. Kiss you. And- and be with you… Weiss, I-”

“It can't,” Weiss said. “It can't happen. I'm… I'm sorry.”

Ruby's brow scrunched in confusion. “What do you mean? If we like each other, why can't we kiss? Be together?”

Weiss looked down at her gloved hands, which were tightly clenched. She carefully loosened them, flexing her sore fingers as she tried to find the words to explain the truth to Ruby. “I'm a necromancer. But… I can do a lot of things with it, but my control over part of it… I can't… I can't turn it off.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember… do you remember what I did to that woman with Torchwick?” Weiss asked.

Ruby looked down frowning. “No… wait, didn't you drain her energy or something?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Necromancers can drain the life from things. I- I can't control it. It's why I wear gloves. Why I don't want to be touched. I don't want to hurt people like that. But anyone I touch… anyone who touches me… they wither and die.”

Ruby was silent for a long moment. “I don't… I don't understand.”

“Maybe I was too young when I became a necromancer,” Weiss explained. “Maybe its the trauma of how I became one. Maybe there's just something wrong with me. But any living thing that touches
my skin withers and dies and turns into black ashy dust.”

Ruby was silent, so eventually Weiss pressed on. “So we can't be together. I can’t… you need to be with someone who can hold your hand… someone who can kiss you… someone who can… who can be with you. I can’t, Ruby. I'm so, so sorry.”

Ruby slowly reached out a hand, which made Weiss flinch away from her instinctively. Ruby didn't try to touch her, just offering her hand to her partner. Weiss just stared at it, not moving an inch, not sure what to say or do.

“It's safe if I just touch your glove, right?” Ruby whispered. When Weiss didn't say anything she began to move her hand incredibly slowly, an inch at a time, until finally it was hovering above Weiss' own. Then, after giving her a long time to react, Ruby lowered her hand on top of her partner's.

Weiss was frozen, overwhelmed by what was happening. Ruby's hand was solid but gentle, and even through the glove so warm that for a moment she was afraid she was draining her life after all. Then Ruby shifted her grip so they were actually holding hands, and somehow that was even better.

“Thank you for letting me hold your hand,” Ruby said.

Weiss suddenly sobbed, the noise erupting from her throat before she could stop it. Tears poured from her eyes, and she turned her head away, covering her face with her free arm despite the burn in her shoulder as Ruby squeezed her hand reassuringly and began to hum something almost tuneless.

Eventually Weiss stopped crying, pausing briefly to wipe her face before glancing at Ruby, who instead of looking at her with pity or disgust had the most open, caring expression on her face. “I'm sorry,” Weiss whispered.

Ruby smiled. “Don't be. Do you feel better?”

Weiss thought about it for a moment. “Yes, but… I don't even know why I was crying.”

“That's okay,” Ruby said. “I want you to know… I wish that I could hold you, and kiss you, and all that other stuff, but... I don't need to. Just this? Holding your hand… being close to you. I love you, Weiss. This is enough.”

“It shouldn't be,” Weiss objected. “You should be with someone who can give you everything.”

Ruby smiled. “But that means I need to be with you. You're everything I want.”

Weiss felt her eyes tear up again. “Y-you dolt!” she objected through half contained sobs. “That was so cheesy.”

“Yeah, but now I'm your dolt,” Ruby said.

“I haven't said yes,” Weiss mumbled.

“I guess I haven't really asked,” Ruby said. “Weiss… will you be my girlfriend?”

Weiss made the mistake of looking over at Ruby's painfully earnest, loving expression. “Fine! I'll date you.”

Ruby grinned and bounced in place. “Thank you, Weiss! You won't regret this!”

Weiss groaned. “I already do.”
Ruby giggled. “I know you don't mean that. You don't have to be all grumpy to me all the time. I know you’re actually a big ol’ softy.”

“I regret everything.”

“Softy.”

They sat in happy silence for a bit longer, and eventually the far door opened, with a few police entering to secure the area. They passed Weiss by with a brief nasty look which she ignored, although it made Ruby frown.

“What was that about?” Ruby asked.

“What?”

“The look,” Ruby clarified. “They had a not nice look.”

“Oh,” Weiss said, glancing at the police. “I hadn't noticed. People look at me like that all the time.”

“That isn't right.”

“Well, I am a Schnee, and a necromancer, and I'm… difficult,” Weiss said. “I've gotten used to it.”

“You shouldn't be,” Ruby grumbled. “You think you deserve it, don't you?”

Weiss hesitated. “Well…"

“You don't,” Ruby said seriously. “We've talked about this before… you need to stop thinking you're a bad person. I heard what you said to the Prince, and you really think that stuff, don't you? That you're not a good person.”

Weiss just shrugged, and when she didn't say anything Ruby's face became determined. “Well, as your girlfriend, it's my job to make sure you don't think that anymore. You are a good person, and you need to start believing it.”

Before Weiss could find a response the paramedics came down, and both detectives were checked out. After admitting to being injected with Red Sap Weiss was taken to an ambulance, with Ruby insisting on riding along. Weiss found her presence on the ride reassuring, although she took a long breath of relief when the doctors insisted on her waiting outside during her exam.

Weiss was incredibly happy, and scared, and confused, and just plain exhausted. That Ruby actually wanted to be with her despite her affliction was so shocking that it was almost as unbelievable as her drug induced dreams. When no one was looking she carefully pinched herself, hard, just to see if she would wake up.

Eventually Ruby was let back into the private recovery room Weiss was placed in, beaming at her as she sat down next to her bed and carefully reclaimed her gloved hand. “I still can't believe you want to be with me when I can't even… do anything.”

“And I'll be right here until you do,” Ruby said, before frowning slightly. “Err… and after, too. You know. 'Cause I'm not going to leave you as soon as you believe I'm not leaving you. That would be dumb.”

“Dolt,” Weiss sighed, closing her eyes sightly as she relaxed. “Are you… are you going to stay?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I'm not going anywhere.”
“The doctors think… they think I'm going to have withdrawals,” Weiss said. “Serious ones. It might get… bad. You don't have to-”

“Weiss!” Ruby interrupted. “I'd stay even if you were just my partner. There's no way I'm leaving my girlfriend in the hospital!”

“Fine,” Weiss grumbled, although she squeezed Ruby's hand harder. “If I do anything… mean…”

“You're just being prickly porcupine Weiss?”

“No!” Weiss said. “I'm not… look. I'm just saying, I hope, if I act out while I'm… withdrawing, then-”

“Hey, I've seen a lot of very special episodes,” Ruby said. “I can take it.”

Weiss gave her a dubious look. “Right.”

Despite her expectations, Weiss found the situation surprisingly soothing, and before long Ruby's rambling conversations had her feeling very drowsy. She tried to stay awake, not wanting the incredible feeling of holding Ruby's hand to end, but soon she found herself slipping into pleasant, natural dreams.
Ruby had the television on, but she wasn't actually watching it. Instead she was slumped on the couch, arms behind her head, completely lost in thought. She didn't even notice her sister come in, and Yang wasn't exactly quiet about anything.

“Hey, sis!” she called. “Whatcha watchin’?”

Ruby blinked a couple of times and opened her mouth to answer, only to be interrupted by a spontaneous yawn.

“That good, huh?” Yang drawled as she plopped beside Ruby on the couch. “*When Koalas Go Bad?* Rubes, I'm having serious concerns about your taste in television.”

“I wasn't even paying attention,” Ruby said, blinking as her sister snatched the remote from her hand and began channel surfing, eventually settling on some reality show. “I just kinda zoned out.”

“I noticed,” Yang said. “You haven't been around much this week. Actually, I think this is the first time you've made it back to the apartment before midnight since, well...”

“Yeah, Winter came to visit Weiss, and they ganged up on me and made me go home,” Ruby pouted, crossing her arms petulantly. Winter still wasn't aware of the changes between them, as Weiss had been nervous about telling her, and Ruby hadn't exactly been in a hurry to put herself in the crosshairs of the strict SWAT captain. Being Weiss' partner made Winter suspicious enough about her suitability.

Yang chuckled. “Good. You've been doing nothing but hang around Weiss' hospital bed since she got drugged. I mean, I get that you're worried, but there's such a thing as above and beyond.”

Ruby shrugged. “It's not been so bad. I mean, she had a few rough days. Apparently Red Sap leaving the body makes you hallucinate, and not, you know, nice things. Like, apparently the dreams from taking it are super duper awesome, and then not having any gives you really bad nightmares while awake.”

Yang grunted. “Damn, that's rough. You said she's getting better?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “They're letting her go home tomorrow, and we'll be back at work Monday with a clean bill of health.”

“It's nice of Goodwitch to let the both of you take a week off work like this,” Yang said. “But seriously, I don't get how you can spend an entire free holiday in a hospital room.”

“You'd do the same for Blake.”

“Yeah, but I'm dating Blake,” Yang said. There was a long moment of silence, which made Yang look at her sister, who was blushing. “Um... I was expecting some kind of agreement.”

“Actually, um... me and Weiss...er...” Ruby fumbled for a moment, making a vague, meaningless gesture.

“You and the ice queen... are dating?” Yang said incredulously.

“Don't call her that,” Ruby said with a glare. “Besides, I thought you were getting along with her
Yang just shook her head. “There's getting along with my coworker, and then there's cool with
dating my baby sister. Not the same thing at all.”

“I'm not a baby, Yang,” Ruby grumbled. “And don't do anything to Weiss. If you do...”

“You'll what?” Yang asked, raising a challenging eyebrow.

Ruby narrowed her eyes menacingly. “I'll put Nair in your shampoo.”

Yang grabbed her long, golden hair, stroking it lovingly for a second while staring in horror at her
sister. “That's evil.”


“You've definitely been hanging out with Weissicle too much,” Yang said, shaking her head sadly.
“All I wanna do is give her the big sis speech.”

“You mean the speech that drove off both people I tried dating while you were in high school with
me?” Ruby asked.

“Hey, if they were worthy of dating my little sis they'd have cared about you enough to take the
risk.”

Ruby just shook her head. “The only reason I was able to ever date anybody is because I stopped
telling you about my love life. Besides, Weiss has enough difficulties without you adding to them.”

“Fine, fine, no threatening the ice queen,” Yang reluctantly agreed. “You know, I thought you'd be
more excited about all this. I mean, you've had a thing for your partner for months. I'd've thought
you'd be bouncing off the walls like that time you found out you can buy pre-made cookie dough.”

“I am,” Ruby said, smiling slightly. “I'm super duper happy. I'm looking forward to a real date; no
matter how hard you try, you just can't make a hospital room feel romantic. Especially after they took
away my candles.”

“Hmm… candle light dinner over hospital food,” Yang said.

“Well, I mean, I picked up food,” Ruby said. “I waited 'til she stopped puking up everything she ate,
and after all that she really liked having her favorites delivered. She wouldn't stop smiling.”

“I bet she was pretty grateful, huh sis,” Yang said, wagging her eyebrows. Ruby was silent for a
long moment. Too long. “Um, Ruby?”

“Can you… can you keep a secret?” she asked.

“Of course,” Yang said instantly.

“I mean it,” Ruby said. “Super duper secret, not even tell Blake kinda secret.”

Yang sat up, turning off the TV so that Ruby had her complete attention. “I've never told anyone
about the time you wet your pants during that play in fifth grade.”

Ruby's eyes bulged. “Don't remind me!”

Yang chuckled. “Seriously, Rubles. What's wrong?”
“You know how Weiss is a necromancer?”

“Um, yeah,” Yang said. “Just as long as she's not a necrophiliac, though, right? That's not where you're going with this… right?”

Ruby shot her a glare. “She can't touch anyone.”

“Huh?”

“If she touches someone… or something… they die,” Ruby said. “That's why she wears gloves and stuff all the time. And why she freaks so bad whenever anyone tries to touch her. She doesn't want to accidentally hurt someone.”

“So you can't touch her?” Yang repeated. “At all?”

“When she's wearing her gloves we can hold hands,” Ruby said. “And I can touch her clothes if I'm careful, but she panics if she doesn't know it's coming, so mostly I just hold her hand.”

“That's… that's fucked up,” Yang said. “Damn. I never thought I'd feel sorry for the ice queen. I kinda get why she's such a bitch all the time now… I guess her parents really didn't hug her enough…”

“Yang!”

“What, I'm being serious,” Yang said. “That really sucks. I can't imagine not being able to touch anyone.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said sadly.

“Whoa, you really love her don't you?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, blushing crimson. “I do.”

Yang shook her head. “I can't imagine being with someone and not being able to, you know, get physical.”

“Th-that stuff isn't everything,” Ruby said. “I mean, I have, um, other ways of making myself happy.

“Aww, been expanding your toy collection,” Yang asked, waggling her eyebrows. “Hey, I know, maybe you can use some on Weiss. Plus, you know latex gloves and dental dams are a thing you should be using anyway… this gives a whole new dimension to risky sex.”

“You act like you aren't crazy about Blake, but I've seen the way you and her are when you're together,” Ruby said. “And- and when you aren't with her for a bit you pine. There's definite pining.”

“Oh, I'll admit it, I've got some serious feelings for my kitty cat,” Yang agreed. “It definitely makes the sex even hotter. And on the subject of hot sex, which apparently you aren't planning on having any of, Blake and I got together in the first place 'cause we couldn't keep our hands off each other. Like, and don't repeat this 'cause she'd skin me alive, but it's like we're in heat when we're around each other. Like, damn, whew…”

Ruby was bright red as Yang gave her a shit eating grin. “So, I heard something interesting during the last case.”

“What's that?” Yang asked, still grinning like an idiot.
“Melanie and Militia said for you and Blake to visit, so they could show you what you've been missing,” Ruby said.

For once Yang actually blushed herself. Ruby wished she had a camera, as the last time she'd seen her sister actually embarrassed had been when she was in high school. She felt smug, smirking victoriously as the blonde jumped to her feet and headed to the door.

“Great talk sis, let's… not continue this, bye!” Yang called over her shoulder.

Ruby smiled, chuckling as she got up to get ready for bed. Her smile soon faded as she thought about her partner, stuck in the hospital, still suffering from what had happened to her. Ruby didn't care if she couldn't ever kiss her or make love to her like they were other couples. They would be them, and she just wanted to make her girlfriend happy, and as soon as Weiss was feeling better, she was going to do everything she could to make her smile.

With that thought she fell asleep with a smile of her own.

The building looked like all of the others on the block, except it was even more rundown. While the street had obviously gone to rot long ago, some of the buildings were actually still in good shape. The one in front of her looked like it was about to collapse at the slightest excuse.

Cinder smirked, somewhat impressed despite herself. She walked to the doorway, pausing just before she reached it. She felt the disturbance in the mana flows, and rather than simply walking through it she studied it for a moment before raising a hand. “Nochtann tine.”

Orange and red flames slowly grew in the palm of her hand, and when she held it up in front of her the light cast by the torch-like fire revealed a very different view of the building. The door wasn't listing in its frame, barely intact, and the walls weren't full of holes. Everything revealed by the glow of the fire showed that the warehouse, rather than being the worst on the block, was actually in the best shape.

After studying the door for a moment Cinder let her light die before strolling inside, looking around the room. The warehouse appeared to be a rat's nest on the verge of complete collapse, but even without looking it was obvious that that wasn't the truth.

She raised her arms above her head and concentrated for a moment before casting another spell. “Caitheann tine.”

The flames that came forth burned incredibly bright and hot, and they spread across the room faster than fire burning a trail of kerosine. Instead of damaging the room it was like the fire was restoring it, as the illusion covering everything was swiftly consumed, revealing the true state of the warehouse.

Everything was clean and in fine condition. Rather than being empty, a small camp was setup on one side of the room. There was a sleeping bag, a camp chair, and a small hotplate with a pot of soup warming up on it. Staring up at her in front of her dinner with terror in her eyes was a dark skinned woman with green hair.

“Hello… Emerald, was it?”

Emerald jumped to her feet, pulling out a gun and pointing it at her. “Who the hell are you?”
“My name is Cinder Fall, and I've come to offer you a deal.”

“Wait… Cinder Fall… I've heard of you,” Emerald said. “Aren't you, like, Assistant Mayor or something?”

Cinder's grin widened. “Very good! You keep up with local politics. That could be quite handy.”

“Look, I just lost my last boss, and even if he was kind of an asshole I'm not ready to jump on board with a new team yet, legit or not,” Emerald said. “Besides, shouldn't you be having me arrested by now? They've got an APB for attempted murder out for me.”

Cinder chuckled. “If a little something like murder bothered me, I wouldn't be where I am today. I’ve heard about your recent difficulties, and even before I saw just how skilled you were with illusions I was planning to offer you a job. Now, I'm willing to offer you so much more.”

“What do you mean?” Emerald asked warily.

Cinder looked into her eyes as she spoke, the cinnamon brown slowly smoldering into burning orange coals. “You have skills that I can make great use of. Tell me, what do you want most in the world? If you could have anything.”

Emerald looked thoughtful for a long moment before finally speaking. “Anything? If I could have anything, it's power. Not just magic, or money, or working for some thug. I mean real power. I'm tired of getting kicked around. My last boss was some high up Lord of the Sidhe, and he got taken out by a few badges. I want to be the one standing over people for once.”

“A practical woman,” Cinder said with an amused chuckle. “I can offer all of that and more. When this is finished, all of reality will be rewritten to fulfill our every desire. You'll have power beyond your slightest comprehension. All you need is the will to reach out and grasp it.”

Cinder offered her a hand, and after taking one more look around her warehouse camp Emerald stood and took it. Cinder noticed that her new employee tried to steal a glance down her cleavage while she thought she wasn't looking, amusing her greatly. It had been a while since she'd had more than a disposable pet for a lover, and Emerald was fairly attractive. Besides, sex made people easier to control, and if she would enjoy it anyway, why not go for it?

Cinder leaned forward, making sure to draw attention to figure, before gently sliding her hand up Emerald's arm to rest on her shoulder, making the illusionist shudder slightly. “Oh, yes. We're going to get everything we want.”

“G-good,” Emerald stuttered, eyes wide as Cinder gently stroked the back of her neck with her long, slender fingers.

“Now then, I'll introduce you to Mercury, another special case I recently recruited,” Cinder said as she lead the woman to the door. “And then we've got some planning to do. I need dust for my plan to work, more dust than my pawn was able to steal for me.”

“Dust is tightly controlled, and even the shops don't keep much in stock,” Emerald said. “How are you going to get it?”

“I'm going to go right to the source,” Cinder said. “But first, I'm going to need the perfect pawns to do the boring work for me. Tell me, have you heard of a man named Adam Taurus?”

“No, doesn't ring any bells,” Emerald said.
“He’s a very disaffected leader in the White Fang,” Cinder explained as they reached her limo. They climbed in, the tinted windows providing protection for her new pet without needing illusions to hide her suddenly infamous face. “He doesn't think they're violent enough.”

Emerald shuddered as Cinder lounged against her, her eyes glazing over as she was barely able to concentrate on anything else. “U-um, he doesn't sound like he'd help us.”

“Not willingly, no, not at first,” Cinder agreed. “That's why we're going to have to be… convincing. You'll find, little gem, that I always get what I want in the end.”
Fifth Case: Flooding

Despite nicknames like 'ice queen' or 'snow angel', Weiss really didn't like the cold. She was very thin, which meant that she didn't have much insulation, and so she always felt the cold quite keenly. It was even worse on days where it wasn't snowing, and the bitter cold served no purpose other than to make her feel miserable.

She was dressed for the season as best she could, with a heavy white coat, knee high white boots, and thick, warm white stockings under her heavy gray dress. On top of that she had thick white gloves over her usual gloves, and a blue scarf wrapped around her face. It still left her shivering, but it was best combination of practical and fashionable that she could put together.

When she entered Beacon she sighed in relief. For all of its faults, the building was well heated, and she unwound her scarf and removed her outer gloves by the time she reached the squad room. Once she arrived she paused at the doorway, looking for Ruby.

Ruby was standing in their cubicle. She was wearing practical jeans tucked into low, heavy soled black boots, and a black sweatshirt under her usual red hoody. Weiss knew that she also had a large, heavy red coat that she wore over the hoody, along with a scarf and gloves, all of which were no doubt sloppily hanging from the back of her chair.

Ruby was smiling brightly while chatting with Blake and Yang, who were also standing in the next cubicle. As she watched Ruby Weiss felt an ache in her chest. Ruby was so warm and happy, and sometimes Weiss wondered if she was just making life more difficult for her girlfriend.

They had been dating for nearly two months, and in all of that time Ruby had been the perfect romantic partner. Weiss’ only experience with such had been when her father had insisted Winter be escorted to certain events at the manor, and she had watched, unaccompanied, while her sister did everything she could to politely avoid them all evening.

Dating Ruby had been nothing like the miserable stories Winter would share with her later. She was light hearted and spontaneous, sometimes turning normal occasions into exciting outings, and usually dragging her to some common activities that she would never have attempted otherwise. They had gone roller skating, attended various movies and even a local rock concert, gone to a fall festival, and even been able to ignore the cold to enjoy a long walk in the park.

All of Ruby's efforts, while they involved things that would have annoyed her father (which certainly wasn't a mark against them in her mind), had made her incredibly happy. At the same time, however, they also reminded her constantly of what she couldn't offer her girlfriend. They had to be careful even holding hands, and only once had she allowed herself to be hugged, the foreign sensation almost leading to a panic attack as she constantly kept track of any risk to Ruby.

Watching her happy and smiling with her sister and friend reminded Weiss once again of all that she couldn't do. Ruby always claimed to be happy with their relationship, but she knew that she was holding back her partner. If she was with anyone else Ruby would be even happier, and it felt like the most selfish she had ever been, and that was saying quite a bit to be honest with herself, that she never insisted that Ruby be with someone else. Someone who was able to show affection the way she deserved to be shown it.

Blake said something, nodding towards the door, and Ruby looked over at Weiss. Her face, which had already had a large smile on it, suddenly glowed with an enormous, toothy grin, her eyes beaming. Weiss found herself blushing, and after a moment she strolled across the room, chin held
high like she hadn't just spent the past five minutes staring at her girlfriend and brooding.

“Morning, Weiss!” Ruby chirped, offering a hand.

Weiss as usual hesitated briefly, before checking her glove to make sure that she hadn't displaced it when she’d removed her outer pair. Once she was sure that it would be safe she gently took Ruby’s hand in her's, warmth filling her as Ruby squeezed it happily. “Good morning, Ruby.”

“Ugh, you two are awful,” Yang said. “I had no idea that hand holding could be so gross, but you guys manage it.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you,” Weiss said, narrowing her eyes dangerously.

“At least it isn't as embarrassing as the way she pines over Ruby, even when she's right there,” Blake drawled.

“Huh?” Ruby asked.

Weiss looked away, harrumphing in disdain as Blake grinned. “Oh, you didn't notice? Your girlfriend was hanging around the doorway, staring at you longingly for the last ten minutes.”

“It wasn't ten minutes!” Weiss objected, before pausing to glare at Blake. “And I do not stare longingly at anything!”

Even Ruby laughed at her, making Weiss pout and struggle halfheartedly to free her hand. She knew if she really pulled Ruby would let her go, as she had in the past when things became uncomfortable for her, but she was glad that Ruby knew when she didn’t actually want her to let go.

“Of course not,” Blake said. “You don't stare 'longingly'."

“Thank you,” Weiss said, narrowing her eyes, distrustful of the other detective's knowing tone.

“You just yearn,” Blake finished.

“Hmph,” Weiss grunted, putting her nose in the air as she finally extracted her hand from Ruby’s to stroll fully into their cubicle. Once she did she paused, staring at the new addition to their small area.

“What is that.”

“Huh?” Ruby asked, following her in. “Oh, yeah. Merry Christmas, Weiss!”

Weiss was speechless for a moment. “Christmas isn't until this weekend.”

“I know, but now our desks are nice and Christmasy,” Ruby said. “Isn't it great!”

The object in question was a small fake Christmas tree sitting beside their desk. It was only three feet tall and appeared to be made from plastic, the integrated lights one of the ugliest eyesores that she had ever seen. Frankly, she was embarrassed about everything about the unseemly display.

“Why… is there a plastic tree in our cubicle?” Weiss asked flatly.

Ruby's smile faded a little, although it was still there. “Because it's a week from Christmas.”

Weiss struggled for something to say. The pathetic fake tree was simply hideous, and she wasn't interested in some gaudy monument to a holiday in the middle of her nice, half clean office. On the other hand, she could see that the ugly thing made Ruby happy, and she didn't want to be an even worse girlfriend to Ruby than she already was.
“We don’t have to have-” Ruby started quietly, looking away.

“No!” Weiss interrupted, a smile as plastic as the fake tree on her face. “It just… caught me by surprise. I'm, um, it's a very nice, uh, seasonal decoration.”

Ruby frowned, looking at her. “If you really don't like it, we don't-”

“It's fine,” Weiss said. “Merry Christmas, Ruby.”

At Ruby's continued downtrodden look Weiss walked over to the tree and carefully patted it. The pointy fake branches and rough plastic needles felt unpleasant on her hand even through her gloves, and the entire thing wobbled and threatened to fall over. “It's, um, a good fake tree thing?”

She ignored the snickering coming from Yang, who was still watching from her cubicle as she walked to her desk and began setting down her outer wear. She cast about for a moment for a change of subject when her desk phone rang. She eagerly grabbed it and spoke. “Detective Schnee. How may I help you?”

She listened for just a moment before hanging up and turning to her partner, who still looked a little down. “Who was that?”

“Captain Goodwitch wants to see us,” she said, leading the way to the office.

“Bye sis, Blake!” Ruby called as she trotted after Weiss. Once they were away from the others she gave Weiss a serious look. “If you don't like the tree-”

“It's fine,” Weiss interrupted again. “Look, it took me by surprise, but it's fine. It's your cubicle, too, and if it makes you happy then I'm happy. I don't really care about the tree.”

“It's your cubicle, too, too,” Ruby said. “If you don't like it, then we don't have to have it. I just thought it'd be nice to have something Christmasy, you know?”

Weiss shrugged. “I just don't like change, and I always thought of plastic trees as being very, very tacky. But it doesn't really matter to me.”

“I just thought-”

“Ruby,” Weiss said, looking her in the eye until she was sure she had her girlfriend's complete attention. “Let’s just drop it. I Don't. Care. You do. So we can keep it. That's all there is to it.”

“I don't want you to be uncomfortable,” Ruby mumbled.

Weiss sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “All of this worrying about it is making me uncomfortable. Can we please just drop this? I don't know how many times I can say that I don't care.”

“Sorry,” Ruby muttered, making Weiss sigh again.

Weiss strolled briskly the rest of the way to Goodwitch's office, making Ruby trot a bit to keep up. When she reached it she saw that the captain was on her phone, and she glanced up at them, gesturing for them to wait outside. Weiss sighed and stood to the side, annoyed at being called only to be kept waiting.

Ruby moved slightly, drawing her attention. Her partner slowly reached out, giving her time to move away, before gently taking her hand. A smile came unbidden to her face as they linked hands,
warmth filling her heart at the gesture.

“I love you,” Ruby whispered.

“I… you too, you dolt,” Weiss muttered, face red.

Ruby chuckled. “So you're really okay with the tree?”

Weiss scoffed and looked away. “How many times can I possibly say yes? I'm going to get really annoyed soon if you don't. Drop. It.”

“Sorry,” Ruby said, leaning towards her. Weiss looked over, eyes wide, worried at what her girlfriend might do. She was met with a toothy grin, before Ruby gently pressed a kiss to her shoulder. Despite the thick shrug covering her shoulders she gasped at the gesture.

“What was that?”

Ruby grinned like an idiot. “Just kissing my girlfriend.”

“D-dolt,” Weiss said, looking around, hoping that none of the other detectives noticed. From the poorly hidden smirks she knew that it was a lost cause. As she turned bright red she felt a strong urge to let go of Ruby's hand.

“Alright, come in,” Goodwitch called before she could make up her mind, making her gently release Ruby's hand with a nervous smile before going into the office.

“What'd you want to see us for?” Ruby asked happily. “Ooh, is there a new case?”

“Of course, Detective Rose,” Goodwitch said, fixing her with a stern look. “A very serious case. Intel has been reporting a flood of unregistered dust on the streets. We've asked several people at the SDC, and none of them claim to know anything about it.”

Weiss frowned. “This is the first that I've heard about this.”

“I should say so, Detective Schnee,” Goodwitch said. “If you were aware of this and hadn't reported it you wouldn't have been worthy of that badge. Now then, I want the two of you to track down the source of the dust, and if possible put a stop to it. This will be your top priority, and is one of the top priorities for all of Supernatural Affairs. If you need further resources or additional detectives to investigate this fully then come back to me and I will arrange it. I trust that I don't need to say how important this is?”

“No, ma'am,” Weiss said, with a sharp nod.

“Um, why-” Ruby started, only to be interrupted as Weiss carefully grabbed her elbow and began pulling her from the room.

“Come on,” Weiss said, blushing slightly at the way she was manhandling her parter. It was so strange reaching out and touching someone, even on the arm through two layers of clothing, but it made her happy to actually interact with someone the way that she'd seen others do over years. “We've got work to do.”

When they reached their desks Weiss sat down and logged into her computer, preparing to check some records. Before she could get very far Ruby spoke up. “Um, Weiss?”

“Yes?”
“Why’s it such a big deal that dust is getting stolen? I mean, I know dust is used for some magic stuff, like making incendiary rounds, but...”

Weiss gave her an incredulous look. “You really didn't know anything about magic before I started teaching you, did you?”

“Well, I mean, I thought it was super cool and everything, but more in a 'whoa, that's cool!' kinda way, not so much a 'how does that work?' kinda way, you know?”

“I… suppose,” Weiss said. “Still, with a sister with some sort of trained magical ability, I would've thought that you would know a little more than you do.”

“Well, Yang's magic isn't really like the stuff you've been teaching me,” Ruby said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well… the fiery hand stuff isn't something she had to learn to do, it's more like something she had to learn not to do,” Ruby explained. “Her mother's family was cursed a long time ago with some kinda berserker magic. It makes the women get really, really angry, and then kinda get set on fire when they do.”

“Wait, her mother?”

“Oh, yeah, we had different moms, but the same dad,” Ruby explained. “So anyway, her mom's family had this thing where they tried to not have emotions, that way they can't get angry and destroy stuff. And her mom kinda just… left one day. Uncle Qrow told me she cares for Yang, but not… not very well. She really doesn't feel much of anything most of the time.”

“That doesn't sound like Yang at all, though,” Weiss said. “Other than the temper part, but she never set me on fire...”

“Yeah, that was dad,” Ruby said with a smile. “His father's family was from China, and he spent a lot of time there when he was younger. He picked up some weird mystic thing called Internal Alchemy. I don't know how it all works, but apparently you meditate and take herbs and do martial arts or something and it changes the way your body works. So like, he never gets sick or anything.”

“You never learned to do that?” Weiss asked.

Ruby blushed. “Well, he tried to teach me, but… I wasn't very good at sitting still. I kinda have some problems focusing, but not as bad as when I was little. Really, the only reason you've been able to teach me any magic at all is all the years he tried to teach me to meditate. I mean, I'm still kinda bad at it, but at least you didn't have to teach me from scratch!”

Weiss gave her an incredulous look for a moment, before shaking her head with a sigh. She’d thought that her partner, given her slow progress at mastering her meditation was starting from scratch, but somehow she wasn't shocked at the revelation. “So I take it he had more success with Yang?”

“Not at first,” Ruby acknowledged. “But she kept throwing tantrums and setting stuff on fire, and when she almost hurt me she started taking his lessons seriously. I don't know how it all works, but he managed to change the curse so she can use the fire, but it doesn't, you know, make her Hulk out and destroy everything around her… unless she wants to. Most of the time.”

“Fascinating,” Weiss said. “I'm not very familiar with eastern magical traditions. It would be interesting to speak with him sometime.”
Ruby blushed. “Well, someday you'll get a chance to meet him. I mean, we are dating, so…”

Weiss blushed and quickly changed the subject. “R-right. Um, so you wanted to know about dust?”

“Well, at its heart dust is mana that has crystalized, becoming a solid, physical object. Each grain of dust represents a large amount of mana. The dust rounds we use only employ a few grains of alchemically treated dust, and they manage to burn far more intensely than any chemical incendiary science has ever produced.

“In addition, dust can be refined to absorb mana from the environment. Instead of just serving as fuel, it actually channels energy, vastly increasing the power of binding magics. Wards use a large amount of dust, for example, to increase the power available. Even a building on a nexus of ley lines like this one needs vast amounts of dust worked into the ward anchors to provide the level of magical protection this building has.

“Magical items use dust similarly. It's why a magic item like Torchwick’s cane, or Coco's bag work the same anywhere, whether or not there's a significant amount of ambient mana in the environment. The dust in the creation of the item allows it to absorb mana from the environment to replenish itself.”

Ruby tried to follow the lecture, but Weiss noticed her eyes getting a little glazed by the end. “So… it's both a battery and fuel for magic?”

“Very good,” Weiss praised with a confirming nod. “Stolen dust means that someone want to perform incredible feats of magic beyond what they could do normally. Criminals could ward their headquarters so that we couldn't easily find them or get in to stop them, or make magical tools like the sort Torchwick uses, or even make magical bombs.”

“Oh!” Ruby said. “That's really bad.”

Weiss nodded in agreement. “Right. Even worse, enough dust could be used to weaken the Great Barrier.”

“What's that?”

“You know how so many old myths and historical accounts talk about the vast number of demons and monsters that used to roam the earth,” Weiss said.

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “There used to be tons of groups of knights and huntsmen and inquisitors and stuff that hunted demons. Kinda like we do, I guess.”

Weiss nodded. “The Great Barrier is a ward that was crafted centuries ago. My family, along with a number of other famous magic users and societies at the time banded together to create a single ward that covered the entire planet. It used more dust than has ever been used at once before or since, and a lot of the people casting it died trying to do their parts. But it worked… mostly.”

“But there's still monsters and stuff,” Ruby pointed out. “I mean, every couple weeks we have to kill some Grimm, and that's just here in one city. And it's even worse out in the country.”

“That's the 'mostly' part,” Weiss agreed. “The Great Barrier is stronger where more people live. And it isn't perfect. It's just too big and tries to do too much to be totally successful. But according to scholars, it keeps out more than ninety nine percent of all demons. Now most are either created here via thaumogenesis, or are summoned by magicians. The only reason we were able to industrialize
and accomplish all that we have as a people is the Great Barrier.”

“So dust is important,” Ruby said.

“Very important,” Weiss agreed. “So let's figure out where the illegal dust is coming from and shut it down.”
Fifth Case: Home Again

It had been a long day spent researching on her computer. Weiss had initially split up the police records between herself and Ruby, but in the end she had taken over almost all of the work. Ruby was a fantastic partner, superb at almost everything except paperwork, and that included research.

The first time that day she caught her partner asleep at the keyboard she'd almost lost it, except Ruby looked shockingly cute drooling on her desk. It had actually distracted Weiss for several minutes, and she even imagined what it would be like to be able to fall asleep beside her girlfriend. Eventually Yang's loud laughter at something Nora did woke Ruby, and Weiss managed to return to working before she was caught staring.

Ruby at least seemed to understand that she wasn't very good at research, as she took it upon herself to help Weiss as much as possible in other ways. Whenever her coffee ran out Ruby immediately refilled it, lunch was provided before she even noticed that she was hungry, and when she needed to see a few physical documents her partner was quick to dash off to the records room to find them. All of her efforts almost made up for the times she would catch Ruby playing some game on her phone rather than working.

When she'd finished looking through all of the police records Weiss had logged into the SDC's network via VPN and had begun looking for information there as well. Unfortunately she hadn't found much at first, as there was no sign of theft. The SDC was very thorough with its records, with every miner's haul recorded each day, the total shipped from the mine tabulated, and the amount received at each point in the distribution chain tracked. If she wanted to she could follow every grain of dust from who, where, and when it was dug up, to every person responsible for moving it until it was used or sold.

Just before she decided to quit Weiss had a sudden hunch, and began going over the records of several of the mines in more detail. She compared the timeframe of when the dust started hitting the streets to the production of the mines, and found that one of the mines, the Green Hill Mine, had seen a small but noticeable dip in output shortly before the illegal sales began. It could've been a coincidence, but it was interesting.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when she felt hands on her shoulders. “Shh, it's alright,” Ruby said.

“Wh-what are you doing?!” Weiss objected, looking back at her partner. It felt… good to have Ruby touching her, but at the same time it made her feel queasy, both at her lack of experience with such and her concern that Ruby would slip and touch her skin.

Ruby gave her an apologetic smile. “Sorry. I tried to get your attention, but you were really into what you were looking at. It's quitting time, by the way.”

“O-ooh,” Weiss said, looking at the screen again. “I'll just be a few more minutes; I might have found something, but I want to double check a few things.”

“Sure,” Ruby said. “Take your time.”

Weiss hesitated before starting to look more closely into the Green Hill Mine, and she froze as she felt something strange. “Wh-what are you doing?”

“Giving you a massage,” Ruby said. “I know you've been working really hard all day, and I haven't
really done much, so… I bet you're tired. And wow! You're so stiff. When was the last time someone gave you a massage…”

“Y-you don't have to… ugh…” Weiss groaned as Ruby began working her thumbs against a spot on her back. It was quite painful, and Weiss opened her mouth to object when all that came out was a groan of a relief as suddenly Ruby worked a sore muscle into quiescence.

“You're all knots,” Ruby said. “Hey, stop squirming!”

“It hurts,” Weiss grumbled, before moaning in pleasure and slumping slightly as she felt more tension being forcibly removed from her shoulders.

“Don't be a baby, you're acting like you've never had a massage before…” Ruby said, trailing off as she had a realization. “Wait, you haven't have you?”

Weiss blushed, embarrassed and a little overwhelmed by the contact. “Before you… I've not really been… been touched by anyone since I was little.”

“I'm sorry,” Ruby murmured. “I thought maybe… someone with gloves… I'm going to have to work twice as hard making up for lost time, huh? Just relax and take deep breaths. We're going to get all this tension out of your shoulders, and before you know it you're going to feel much better.”

Weiss wanted to offer some kind of objection, but instead she found herself melting into a puddle in her chair at the sensations. She found herself feeling more relaxed than she could ever remember as Ruby continued working on her, and soon she found herself drifting away, lost in a pleasant haze.

“There,” Ruby said, carefully wrapping her arms around Weiss and pulling her back into a gentle hug. Weiss could feel her partner's warm, soft body against her own, making her turn bright red.

“Be careful,” Weiss whispered.

“I am,” Ruby said, placing a soft kiss onto the top of her shoulder. “I won't let you hurt me, okay? Just relax and let me hug you.”

“O-okay,” Weiss breathed.

They sat like that for long minutes. Weiss didn't know what to do with herself, so in the end she simply sat still, relaxing even further into the warm comfort of her girlfriend. That ease began to fade with time, however, as she contemplated the two lumps pressing against her back, and the location of Ruby's hands, which could easily shift just a few inches and rub against her own breasts. Weiss felt her heart rate picking up again as she drifted away into daydreams about what else Ruby could massage for her.

Eventually Ruby pulled away, filling Weiss with both relief and regret. “You going to be much longer?”

“Just another couple minutes,” Weiss said, clearing her throat when she realized just how husky she sounded. “You make it really hard to stay mad at you, you know?”

“Good,” Ruby said smugly, heading back to her own desk and grabbing her phone again, starting up another game. Weiss just rolled her eyes and focused on the mine records.

After a few more minutes Weiss sighed and leaned back in her chair. Unlike most days the stiffness in her neck and back were absent, and she almost moaned in relief at how much better she felt.

“Alright, I'm finished here.”
“So, what'd ya find?”

“Oh, so now you care about the research,” Weiss grumbled.

“Sorry,” Ruby said. “I tried to help, but… I'm just not good at this stuff I guess.”

Weiss sighed. “Well, I didn't find a smoking gun, but there was some… suggestive information in reports from one of the SDC mines. A little before the dust started hitting the streets it started producing less than before. It could be a coincidence, but…”

“It could be someone skimming off the top!” Ruby chimed in.

“Exactly,” Weiss agreed. “Something worth looking into, but first… I think we should look into how it's getting distributed.”

“How are we going to figure that out?” Ruby asked. “Did you find anything?”

“Not really,” Weiss said, standing up and starting to put on her coat and other winter gear. “But since the dust is almost certainly coming from Faerie, especially if it's getting skimmed from one of the SDC's mines, it shouldn't be too hard to find out more.”

“How do we do that?” Ruby asked as she too began to get dressed for the weather.

Weiss shrugged. “I just need to check something back at Schnee manor. I can get my own ride if you want to go home.”

“What, no way!” Ruby objected. “I've never seen where you grew up! I mean, unless you don't want me to go?”

“It's fine,” Weiss said after a long pause.

“You sure?” Ruby asked.

“I'm sure,” Weiss said with a decisive nod.

“Okay,” Ruby said, grinning and gently taking Weiss' gloved hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze before walking out of the building with her.

The sun was already low on the horizon by the time they reached the car, and with a few simple directions Ruby drove them to Schnee manor. Ruby babbled nervously the entire drive, until finally Weiss reached over and placed a gentle hand on her girlfriend's knee. They both blushed a little, as it was the most forward that Weiss had ever been, but the gesture helped calm Ruby down.

Weiss had to speak to the guards controlling the gate, but they were soon let inside. They drove along the still well maintained lawn for a bit until the sprawling mansion came into view. Ruby almost hit the breaks in her shock, but in the end she drove the rest of the way to the building and parked where Weiss directed.

“Whoa,” Ruby said when she climbed out of the car. “You grew up here?”

“Yes,” Weiss agreed, staring up at the mansion with something like dread mixed with nostalgia. “I rarely left after my mother died. My father hired the best tutors, and even hosted the majority of social events I was expected to attend.”

Ruby walked around the car and took her girlfriend's hand again. “Do you want me to wait out here?”
“It's cold,” Weiss said.

“I can keep the heater on,” Ruby said. “If you want to go in alone...”

“No,” Weiss said, squeezing her hand. “I'm an adult, and I'm dating you. You can come inside.”

The walk from the parking area to the front door took a bit, leaving Weiss shivering by the time they climbed the steps. Weiss let them inside, and she sighed a bit at the relative warmth of the foyer. While kept cooler than most homes, the large mansion was at least heated compared to the winter weather.

“Wow,” Ruby said. “It's so... big. And fancy. I think I'm underdressed.”

Weiss smirked. “Perhaps. Just remember that I grew up here, so as a young child I ran through most of this house in nothing but a nightgown at one point.”

Ruby smiled. “So you were a trouble maker?”

“Quite the troublemaker, indeed,” a male voice interrupted, making Ruby jump.

“Hello, Klein,” Weiss said, smiling at him.

“Hello, miss,” he greeted, his eyes focusing first on the hand Weiss was holding, then on the owner of the hand. “It's a pleasure to greet you as well, miss...”

“Me?” Ruby asked. “Oh, I'm Ruby Rose! I'm Weiss' partner.”

His gaze dipped briefly to the linked hands before speaking again. “I see. I am Klein Sieben, the Schnee family butler. It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Rose.”

“Nice to meet you too!” Ruby said, smiling brightly.

“Klein practically raised me,” Weiss said, making the butler blush slightly.

“I'm not sure that I would go that far, miss, but I hope that I had a positive hand in your upbringing.”

“I need to make use of one of the ritual chambers, as well as our storage,” Weiss said.

“Of course,” Klein said. “Would you and your partner care for dinner as well?”

“That won't be-” Weiss started to say, only to be interrupted by Ruby's stomach growling.

“I am a little hungry,” Ruby said sheepishly, red faced.

“It won't take but a few minutes to have something suitable prepared for you both,” Klein said. “Pardon my saying this, but you're looking a little thin, Weiss.”

“I've been trying to get her to eat more since we became partners, but she only ever wants salads and stuff,” Ruby complained.

Klein gave her a conspiratorial smile. “Perhaps you just haven't figured out her favorites, yet. I can show you a few things that-”

“Fine!” Weiss interrupted. “We can eat.”

“Very good, miss,” Klein said.
“Is anyone else home?” Weiss asked.

“No, miss,” Klein said. “Your brother is skiing, and your sister isn't home, of course. Mr. Schnee is away at a business meeting.”

“We'll eat in the small dining room, then,” Weiss said.

“Very good, miss,” Klein said. “I will have it ready shortly.”

“I didn't know you had a brother,” Ruby said.

Weiss nodded sharply. “Whitely. We… don't get along most of the time.”

“Oh,” Ruby said sadly.

Weiss cast about for a second, trying to think of something to say. “Do you… want to see my old room?”

“Sure!” Ruby said happily.

They walked through large, empty halls and up a grand staircase before finally reached the double doors to her room. “I haven't been in here since I moved into my apartment, so...”

Ruby grinned. “Got embarrassing stuff sitting around?”

Weiss shrugged and opened the door, letting Ruby into the room. Like her own apartment it was decorated in quite an austere manner, and was full of large, open spaces. There was a large bed, racks of fencing equipment, bookshelves covering the walls, and even a small row of stuffed animals on a high shelf.

“It's… um… it's nice…” Ruby said, struggling for words.

“You can tell me the truth,” Weiss said, bracing herself slightly.

“It looks lonely,” Ruby said after a moment, walking across the room to look out the window. The view was of the empty grounds, which looked particularly somber on a snowless winter morning.

“I suppose it was,” Weiss agreed. “After my mother died, and I could no longer touch anyone, I spent most of my life in this room. I ran around the manor when I was younger, but after that… the entire estate was in mourning. I'm not sure it ever stopped, really. And Winter was more and more busy, until finally she moved out for work… it was very lonely.”

“You don't have to be lonely anymore,” Ruby said, walking over to her and carefully taking both of her gloved hands in her own. “You've got all of us at work, and we all care about you!”

Weiss gave her a small smile. “It… it does feel nice.”

After a long moment Ruby looked over at the row of stuffed animals. “So, you play with those a lot?”

Weiss blushed, freeing her hands so that she could turn her back to hide her face. “Ugh… when I was little. Like I said, it was lonely. All of my friends were imaginary.”

“Did you have tea parties with them?”

“Can we move on to anything else?” Weiss asked desperately.
Ruby giggled. “Okay, okay. But they're nice. I still have all my old stuffed animals at my dad's. You don't need to be embarrassed. I haven't even seen any baby pictures yet.”

Weiss groaned. “I never thought I'd be glad to have an always absent father.”

“So, when do you guys decorate for Christmas here?” Ruby asked.

“We don’t.”

“What?” Ruby objected loudly. “Why not!? I would've thought you'd hire some kind of professional Christmas decorator to put up some giant awesome super Christmas tree or something!”

“We never really celebrate holidays, especially after mother died,” Weiss said. “Klein, and when I was younger some of the maids would wish me a Merry Christmas, or sometimes give me a card or a stuffed animal, but beyond that? Not really.”

“That's terrible!” Ruby shouted. “You mean you didn't get a bunch of presents?!”

Weiss shrugged. “When mother was alive we did, but after that… no, we didn't do Christmas. Besides, why would I need presents? I had access to my trust fund, so if I desired something I could buy it for myself.”

“It's not the present that matters, it's the thought that counts,” Ruby insisted. “Okay, that's it, this year you're coming to my dad's place and celebrating Christmas with us!”

“I wouldn't want to impose,” Weiss said. She was flattered by the invitation, but she wasn't really interested in doing anything for the holiday, and the thought of meeting her girlfriend's father was quite intimidating.

“You aren't imposing, I'm imposing on you!” Ruby said. “You have no choice – you are spending Christmas with your girlfriend.”

“That sounds like a lovely idea, Ms. Rose,” Klein said from the doorway.

“Klein!” Weiss shouted, blushing fiercely.

“I must say, I haven't seen her so lively in many years,” Klein said to Ruby. “It does this old heart good to see her so happy with you.”

Ruby grinned. “I try! I get the feeling that she needs people prodding her or she'd be all sulky and dramatically grumpy all the time.”

“Hey!”

“You are all too, right, Ms. Rose,” Klein said, shaking his head sadly. “I'm afraid she's always been a bit melodramatic. When she first read *Jane Eyre* she tried to move into the attic for weeks.”

“So this is what hell is like,” Weiss mused.

“Really!” Ruby asked, grinning widely. “Tell me, do you have any baby pictures?”

“Why yes, indeed I do!” Klein said. “I have a feeling we're going to be the best of friends, Ms. Rose.”

“I think you're right,” Ruby agreed. “And please, call me Ruby.”
They soon followed Klein to the small family dining room, to which he had come to direct them. The entire way Klein regaled Ruby with many embarrassing stories from Weiss' younger years, many of which she herself had forgotten, or at least tried to forget. By the time they sat down at the table to eat she was bright red and muttering to herself.

Ruby grinned at her, reaching over to take her hand, but still letting her have time to react before taking it gently in her own. “I love you, Weiss. You don't have to get all pouty.”

“I'm not pouting,” Weiss pouted.

“Right,” Ruby said indulgently, squeezing her hand reassuringly.

Despite everything, Weiss had trouble staying actually annoyed at either of the two. While she had no idea the horrors it would unleash, she had wanted Klein and Ruby to get along. Seeing them both enjoying themselves, and Klein's obvious approval of her girlfriend, made Weiss very happy.

“So, this is the 'small dinning room'?” Ruby asked.

The room was quite large, with a table able to seat a dozen people with plenty of elbow room. It was richly appointed in the same stark, understated style as the rest of the mansion, and in any other context would've been grand enough for a feast. “Yes,” Weiss said as servants delivered a delicious looking meal for the two of them. “The main dining hall is mostly used when father wants to intimidate business partners, or if we are hosting a large event.”

“If we'd known that you were coming we could've put together a more elaborate repast,” Klein apologized. “Still, I hope that you enjoy your meal, ladies.”

“Thank you, Klein,” Weiss said, smiling at him.

“Yeah, thanks!” Ruby agreed digging in. “Mmm! I don't know what I'm eating, but it tastes good.”

“It's squab,” Weiss said. “It's a kind of pigeon.”

“Pigeon?” Ruby asked, staring down at her meal in horror.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “They raise them for eating. It's perfectly safe.”

Ruby started eating again, but a little slower than before. “So, what are you going to do to find stuff here? Check some paper records?”

“No,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “I'm going to perform a summoning.”
“So what is summoning?” Ruby asked.

The two had finished their dinner, and were making their way through the vast mansion. “Summoning is transporting an entity to you, often for a limited period of time. There are two kinds of summons. Object bound summons, where you need a physical object associated with the being you are summoning, and personal bound summons, where you use your blood to make a connection with the being in question.”

“Ouch,” Ruby said. “So, um, what does that all mean?”

Weiss smirked slightly. “I'm going to summon a creature from Faerie that should know about the dust trafficking.”

“Oh!” Ruby said. “So, some kinda magic informant.”

“Exactly,” Weiss agreed, nodding. “My family has a vast collection of objects connected to various extraplanar beings, so I need to retrieve the one I'm looking for from our secure storage before we can begin.”

Weiss stopped in front of a heavy steel door and concentrated for a moment, placing her hand on it as she carefully manipulated the wards keeping it closed with her aura. After a moment there was a click, and she was able to push the door open with ease.

“Whoa...” Ruby gasped as she stared into the room beyond.

It wasn't packed as densely as some of the collections of magical objects that Ruby had seen during their investigations. It was, however, an extremely large room, bigger than most houses, with carefully arranged shelves containing well labeled items. Some were simple, ordinary objects, while others were quite strange.

“Don't touch anything,” Weiss warned sharply. “These are all relatively safe objects, but they could still be dangerous if mishandled.”

“Wait, you mean you have more?” Ruby gasped.

Weiss nodded. “Yes, this is just the secure storage. We also have our high security storage, and several private vaults. Most of these articles are either objects for summoning low level entities, magic items that are relatively common, or magic items that have no real value to the family.”

“Is that a magic wand?”

Weiss glanced over at it. “Yes. Specifically that wand leaves a trail of glowing light when you run aura through it, letting you write in the air. It fades eventually, with the duration varying depending upon the amount of aura used.”


The object in question was a strange, abstract sculpture of an obese frog with human like hands sitting in a pose like a Buddha. “That lets us summon a member of a species of toad-like creatures from a different plane. In exchange for a supply of meal worms they make a very nice green tea we serve guests at some important business functions.”
“I have the coolest girlfriend,” Ruby said, nodding decisively.

“D-dolt,” Weiss stuttered, blushing. “Come on, the summons I want to perform is best done in the early evening, so we don't have all night.”

“Ahh...” Ruby moaned as she followed Weiss past shelf after shelf of strange, cool looking objects. “Oh, that one looks awesome… please Weiss?”

Weiss rolled her eyes before following Ruby's line of sight. The object in question was a yellow metal arm, carefully articulated to allow it to move like a real arm in every way. It was covered in very fine runes and mystical etchings, all carefully arranged to look like a work of art. It was truly lovely piece, worthy of any museum, and that was without the ability to sense the almost overwhelming mystical aura it had.

“Good eye,” Weiss said, leading Ruby over to it. “Centuries ago my family was approached by the Cult of Hephaestus. Apparently their god desired a special variety of dust in large quantities, and even though we hadn't opened our mines yet, we were already famous for trading in dust. In exchange for providing a large shipment of the rare dust, Hephaestus crafted this for us.”

“A god made this?”

Weiss smiled at the disbelief in her voice. “Assuming you believe him to actually be a god, yes. A prosthetic arm, made from pure orichalcum, perfectly articulated and enchanted beyond anything we've ever made. The only reason why it's in this room rather than somewhere more secure is that it doesn't seem to do anything.”

“What do you mean?” Ruby asked, unable to take her eyes off of it.

“My great uncle lost his arm in a mining accident, so he tried it on,” Weiss said. “When he attached it he started screaming, and when it was pulled off his upper arm was badly burned and had to be further amputated. We haven't found any use for it since, and my great grandfather was so incensed he almost threw it away. It was eventually stuck in this storage room to keep it out of the way.”

“So it doesn't work?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged and started walking again. “It didn't work for him at least. A seer from the Cult of Hephaestus said that a Schnee would have need of the arm one day, but I'd have to be pretty desperate to try it after what happened the last time.”

“So what are we looking for?” Ruby asked as she kept her eyes roving everywhere like a kid in a candy store.

“This,” Weiss said, picking up a small, plain brass button.

“What does it do?” Ruby asked, bouncing eagerly on her toes.

Weiss shrugged. “You can use it to hold your shirt closed if you know how to sew.”

Ruby pouted. “Weiss...”

“It comes from the waistcoat of a brownie named Dugh,” Weiss explained. “Faerie clothing is tied strongly into their magic, so even something this simple can be used to summon one. He gave it to my family in exchange for a service we rendered him about fifty years ago, and he's proven to be a very good source of information ever since.”
“So he'll know about the dust?”

“Most likely,” Weiss said. She opened a cabinet near the exit, pulling out a labeled tube of dust, before leaving the room, waiting for Ruby to follow before closing the door and carefully locking the wards with her aura. “If he doesn't know then I might have to try a different approach.”

“What approach is that?” Ruby asked.

Weiss was silent for a while as they walked away from secure storage. “I'm sure I would think of something.”

Ruby smirked slightly but didn't say anything.

The ritual chamber was quite close to the secure storage room, so it was a short walk. The door to the room was like a bank vault, an enormous, reinforced steel object far too heavy for her to move on her own. Weiss placed her hands on it for a moment, unlocking the wards with her aura, before picking up a controller from a wall panel and pressing a button, which caused hidden motors to slowly swing the door open.

The inside of the ritual chamber was heavily reinforced, with every visible surface being made of perfectly smooth poured concrete. At the center of the room was an enormous mithril-plated containment circle, surrounding a flat section of concrete. The only other interruptions to the otherwise blank room were several stark lights placed on the ceiling to provide bright lighting for everything in the room.


Weiss lead the way inside, pressing the button on the controller to close the doors again before resealing the wards with a touch and an application of aura. “I'm summoning a relatively harmless creature from Faerie today. Nothing is likely to go wrong, and even if something did, I could easily contain the problem.

“These rooms were made for any kind of ritual required by the family, and we've had to summon things that weren't so safe before. Remember the Prince? We've had to summon and bargain with Sidhe Lords in the past to secure certain dust rights. This room would ensure that even a being stronger than that couldn't escape if something went wrong.”

Ruby shook her head. “So… has anything like that ever gone wrong?”

Weiss paused. “Yes. This is the second primary ritual chamber on the estate. The first had to be… sealed after an incident with an uncle. He summoned… some kind of demon. We aren't actually sure of the full story. But it killed him and tried to escape. Since we don't know what it is, we don't know of a safe way to eliminate it, so…”

“So?”

Weiss shrugged, walking over to the empty spot in the center of the protective circle. “My grandfather eventually had concrete poured over the doors. Whatever is in there has been sealed in an airtight chamber for almost twenty years.”

“But it's dead, right?”

Weiss looked up at Ruby, a blank expression on her face. “No. No, it isn't. We have seismographic sensors hooked up to the walls of these rooms, and they still detect footsteps. Whatever he summoned, it's still moving around in there. According to the scientists we had examine the room, a
conservative estimate is that weathering won't compromise it for hundreds of thousands of years after we stop maintaining it. Whatever is in there will still be waiting to get out long after humanity has faded away from the earth.”

Ruby shivered at the hard, cold look in Weiss’ eyes, unable to look away until she returned her attention to the blank spot in the ritual chamber. She pulled out a piece of chalk and began carefully drawing a summoning circle. It was like any other kind of binding magic, although a fairly complex application, and she didn't want to make any mistakes. She didn't step back to survey her work until almost an hour later.

Ruby by then was obviously bored out of her mind. In addition to being nearly indestructible, the ritual chambers were soundproof faraday cages, preventing any transmission from making it inside. Ruby was left without even internet access to pass the time, leaving her with nothing to do except watch her partner work.

“Almost done?” Ruby asked hopefully.

Weiss smiled. “Yes. I'm almost done. Another advantage of our ritual chambers are these set protective circles simplify the summoning circle needed.”

“That's the simple version?!”

Weiss chuckled slightly, looking down at the elaborate work she had done, proud to have accomplished it from memory. “Oh yes, this is quite basic. I'm going to verify before I actually use it of course, but something of this level I can do from memory.”

Weiss pulled out her cellphone and checked the images she had saved on it, quickly finding the summoning circle she needed. She spent another fifteen minutes verifying the details twice before finally tucking her phone and the piece of chalk away. “Perfect.”

“Now are you done?” Ruby asked.

“With the drawing,” Weiss agreed. “I just need to add dust, and I can summon him.”

“So summoning needs dust?” Ruby asked.

“Oh yes, quite a bit of dust,” Weiss said as she began to pour a line of dust around the outside of the summoning circle, and then piles at various spots within it as well. “Remember how much magic is required to open a portal to another plane? This brings something from another plane, and also allows it to be banished back to that plane at will.”

Ruby's brow furrowed. “But didn't the cultists take tons and tons of work to open a portal for Dagon?”

Weiss nodded. “They did, although if you recall all of their work didn't include any dust. It was an antiquated ritual from before it was discovered by humans. Still, the difference in summoning one fairy, and summoning a demon lord is many orders of magnitude. Also, when you summon something, unless things go wrong you have the upper hand and can banish the summons at will. Dagon was trying to come through free and clear of such… limitations.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “So I guess summoning isn't very practical.”

“It depends on what you mean by practical,” Weiss said. “Flying to Australia isn't very practical, but if you need to speak to someone in Sydney in person you don't have many other options. It actually takes quite a bit less effort to summon something blood bound, however.”
“Why?”

Weiss shrugged. “A personally bound summons always has a connection to you. Bringing it here is more like bringing something from a subdimension than dragging it from an entirely separate plane of existence, and there’s no need to be as careful. A personally bound summon has great difficult acting against its summoner, and there's rarely a need to negotiate payment.”

Weiss carefully leaned over the circle, placing the brass button in a clear spot on the left side of it, leaving only one more clear area, at the very center. Everything else was filled with chalk symbols or dust. With that she stepped back and started to prepare herself for the summons, before pausing and looking at her partner. “Ruby?”

“Yeah?” Ruby asked. She had stood up and moved a little closer, although at least she had the good sense to stay well clear of the outer protective circle.

Weiss pointed at her dramatically. “Summoning is very dangerous, and entering deals with summoned creatures can be extremely risky. You can accidentally give a summoned creature something that you didn’t even realize that you could give away without meaning to. I'm going against normal protocols by letting you be in here while I'm doing this, so please follow safety procedures.”

“I won't let you down, Weiss!” Ruby said firmly. “Err… what are the safety procedures?”

“Don't cross the outer circle,” Weiss lectured. “Don't do anything that could interrupt the outer circle. Really don't do anything that could interrupt the inner circle. Don't touch the summoned entity. Don't stare at the summoned entity. Don't speak to the summoned entity. Don't taunt the summoned entity-”

“How can I taunt it if I'm already not going to say anything to it?” Ruby asked.

Weiss just glared. “Don't make gestures towards the entity. Don't ignore the entity. Don't agree to anything, at all, at any point. Don't use magic at any point. Don't distract me. Just… please. This is really important, Ruby. Don't let the entity get to you. If you get emotional, you make mistakes, and mistakes can cost you your soul when summoning.”

Ruby gulped. “R-right. Are you going to be okay?”

“Weiss smiled at her girlfriend, warmed inside at the thought of how much she cared. “I won't. I would never do something reckless like, I don't know, demon summoning, so you don't have to worry. Oh… one last thing… don't say our names. Ever.”

“How?”

“Names have power, especially in the summoning process,” Weiss explained. “Some beings can do terrible things to you if they know your true name, especially if they hear it spoken from your own lips. A brownie can't really do much with your name, but… I'm summoning an information broker. It would certainly remember it, and it would sell that name to other beings given the chance.”
“Okay,” Ruby said. “I’ll just… um… I’ll just not say anything.”

Weiss hesitated. “Just don’t be rude. He’ll probably focus mostly on me, but… he might talk to you, and ignoring him could offend him, and we don’t want to make him demand more repayment. Just be polite if you have to talk, and don’t say our names or promise anything. That includes accepting gifts. Never accept a gift from a faerie. Nothing, nothing is free on Faerie.”

When Weiss was sure that Ruby was taking this seriously she closed her eyes and slowly put herself in the proper mental state. Summoning was one of the most difficult forms of magic in existence, as it combined the circle based binding magics that held everything together, with invocation magic via the object to reach out and use the other plane to help draw the entity into the world. It was powerful, mentally exhausting, and incredibly dangerous.


A thin wisp of brown smoke rose from the central clear area of the summoning circle. In moments it grew thicker, until it filled the entire space. Weiss held her focus, pouring more of her own mana into the process than was used in other forms of binding magic, until finally she felt the moment of transition, and then the smoke cleared away.

Standing in the center of the circle was a tiny man. He was only a foot tall, and he was dressed in a formal, three piece suit made of brown silk. On top of his head was a tall, conical brown hat, and his shoes were made of polished, shiny brown leather. He looked quite old, with a wrinkled face, but his eyes twinkled merrily as he took in the room. After a moment he focused on Weiss, running his eyes up and down her body in a frankly revolting manner.

“Well, hello nurse!” he said, his voice far too deep and gravelly for his tiny size. “Are the Schnee's offering conjugal visits to their best informants now, or are you just my present?”

Weiss wasn't able to conceal her brief revolted expression, although she mentally kicked herself when she saw the flash of triumph in his eyes. He was mostly just trying to put her off of her game, and he had already succeeded with his opening remarks. She hated summoning magic. “I have summoned you for information.”

“Well, hello toots, information is dangerous,” he drawled. “You sure you can handle it? Wouldn't want to give a pretty little dame like you wrinkles.”

Weiss gritted her teeth for a moment. “I had assumed that you would be interested in a deal, but I'm starting to think you must have better things to do.”

“Oh yes, I can think of plenty of things we could do instead, toots,” the brownie said, his gaze roving up and down her body again in a way that made her want a shower. “Love the skirt, by the way. Think you could get one a few inches shorter? I’m almost at the right angle…”

It was when Ruby made an inadvertent sound at that that Weiss finally remembered her situation. She had just delivered a lengthy batch of warnings to her partner about the dangers of summoning, and already she was losing her temper. She took a deep breath before she spoke. “I see. Well, obviously I’m not going to learn anything today, Dugh. Goodbye.”

Weiss turned and walked away, taking great care not to do anything to disrupt the integrity of either circle. Ruby looked furious and confused at what was happening, but she looked plenty eager to leave the brownie behind. It was only when Weiss was most of the way to the door that Dugh spoke up. “Hey, aren't you forgetting something, toots?”
“Hmm… no, I don't think so,” Weiss drawled. “Of course, details sometimes fly right over my
delicate female head. I think I'll go lay down on a fainting couch until I can recover..."

“So you're just going to leave me here!?”

Weiss smiled, keeping her back to him as she reached the door. “Why yes, I suppose I am. Since you
have no interest in helping me, I see no need to help you, and frankly, now that you're here it's more
trouble to send you back than to leave you there.”

“Damn Schnees,” Dugh muttered. “Fine, fine! We can deal. I try to have a little fun with the new
summoner, and you turn out to be more an ice queen than your big sis. The things I put up with...”

Weiss turned around and looked at him again. He was no longer looking at her like a slab of meat,
but instead taking her seriously. She nodded sharply. “Fine. I need information.”

“What kind, toots?”

“There's dust hitting the streets in large quantities, and my family isn't selling it,” Weiss said. “What
do you know?”

The brownie reached into his coat and pulled out a cigar, taking the time to light up and take a few
puffs before answering. “Well, that's not too hard. I don't even have to poke around to answer that
one for you, but it might piss off some bad people, and I really don't need to be stuffed and mounted,
and not in any fun kinda way.”

“I'm prepared to offer you our standard family deal for good information,” Weiss said.

Dugh nodded. “That's a good start, but I need you to sweeten the pot a bit.”

Weiss started to turn back to the door, and he spoke quickly. “Whoa! Whoa, no need for the hard
sell. I mean it, though. I've got sprites on my back, you want that I should keep offering good info to
the family, I need a little something more...”

“Such as?” Weiss asked, crossing her arms, and raising an eyebrow at him.

“I need a tun of honey,” he said.

“A ton!?” Ruby gasped. “That's so much!”

Weiss and Dugh both shot her a look like she was an idiot. “Not a 'ton', a 'tun',” Weiss said.

“What?”

“Jeez, what, you datin' this broad?” Dugh asked. “Certainly aren't for the brains, that's for sure.”

“Do not insult her, Dugh,” Weiss said, putting a very hard and precise emphasis on his name, saying
it exactly the right way with just a hint of mana infusing her voice.

He shuddered, holding up his hands. “Whoa, whoa, I'll lay off your main squeeze, no need to go
aggro. So, box of cubans and a tun of honey for the info. You in or you out?”

Weiss huffed. “Fine. But only so that I don't have to put up with you any longer. You have a deal –
now tell me about the dust.”
“So… where are we going?” Ruby asked as she drove though the late evening streets.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “You were there. The dust is being funneled through the Traveling Market.”

“Right,” Ruby said slowly. “And… what's the Traveling Market?”

Weiss opened her mouth to reply, before stopping and thinking better of it. Finally with a smirk she looked over at her partner. “I think it'll be easier to explain when we get there.”

Ruby pouted. “But I wanna know now…”

“I just hope that the information was worth the price,” Weiss mused.

“I still don't know what a tun is,” Ruby said. “That was a really big barrel, though.”

“A tun is four hogsheads,” Weiss answered unhelpfully.

“You killed pigs to put honey in?!”

Weiss groaned, putting her head in her hand. “They're liquid measures, like quart and cup.”

“Ohh,” Ruby said. “So what is a tun?”

“Two hundred and fifty-two gallons,” Weiss said.

“That's a lot of a honey,” Ruby said contemplatively.

“Even with the deal we have with a local apiary a tun of honey is well over five thousand dollars,” Weiss said.

“You gave him five thousand dollars in honey?! Wait, why would he even want honey in the first place?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “He said he had debts to pay some sprites, remember? Sprites love mortal honey. Honestly, that much honey in Faerie is worth a fortune; we've used tuns of honey to bribe entire swarms of sprites before, so he must've been deeply in debt.”

Ruby parked the car and turned to her partner. “Do you ever just stop and think: 'our job is really, really weird.' 'Cause it's kinda weird.”

Weiss shrugged. “I'm used to this. My tutors began teaching me about the relative value of earth goods in Faerie and a few other important planes when I was, hmm, five I think? Our family makes quite a bit of money on interplanar arbitrage.”

“Sounds arbitrary.”

Weiss looked over at Ruby, who looked proud of her attempted pun. “No. Just no.”

“Ahh.”

“You don't even know what arbitrage means, do you?”

“Um… uh… crap, I can't even think of a good random answer,” Ruby said after a moment. “That's a
really weird word.”

“Come on, let's just go to the Traveling Market,” Weiss said rolling her eyes.

“So, maybe it was just me, but I was expecting something… I dunno… not an empty park?” Ruby said, looking around.

They were at one of the smaller parks near the edge of the city. It was well tended, with clean grounds and well cared for trees. It was more wooded than most of the city parks, but despite that they could see the entire thing, and there was nothing of interest anywhere. Weiss focused on her mystical senses for a moment before climbing out of the car, shivering at the sudden cold. “Come on.”

Ruby followed, until Weiss stopped behind the first line of trees. “Here we are. Ready?”

“For what?”

Weiss just smirked and took another step forward, passing through the wards that surrounded the site. Suddenly the view was entirely different, revealing a wild, disorganized cluster of tents scattered all around the center of the park. She could see dozens of people moving in and out of the tents, enjoying various strange entertainments, or purchasing unusual goods. It was like a carnival mixed with a renaissance fair as seen through a strange opium dream.

“Whoa,” Ruby said, taking in the sight.

“Welcome to the Traveling Market,” Weiss said, reaching over and carefully taking her hand. “It's an underground market, popping up every night without a full or new moon somewhere in Vale. Some are locals, looking to sell mystical goods without the trouble of opening a legal storefront. Many are from other planes, especially Faerie, hoping to trade for things that they cannot easily get back home… like mortal honey.”

“But isn't it hard to travel to other planes?” Ruby asked.

“It is… for us,” Weiss said. “Our family has been debating for centuries whether they have some kind of powerful patron underwriting the shipping costs for their own purposes, or if they know a secret way to reach Faerie without the vast amounts of dust we have to use.”

“Can't you get them to ship your dust?” Ruby asked. “That would save a lot of money, wouldn't it?”

Weiss shook her head. “We tried, but we didn't like the price the manager insisted on.”

“What was it?”

Weiss pursed her lips. “Every first born child of the Schnee family for each generation that the shipping deal applies to.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “That's… that's…”

Weiss nodded. “Since we couldn't make a deal, we use almost an eighth of all dust we mine on transportation related to dust mining. Now, let's start asking around. Oh, and be careful of what you say; we're going to be dealing with beings from Faerie, so don't say your full name, don't accept any gifts, and don't buy anything. If you aren't careful you'll end up losing things that you can't afford.”

“Like the Rose family's firstborn children?” Ruby offered.
“Exactly like that,” Weiss agreed.

“How is this place legal?” Ruby asked. “I mean, they tried to setup human trafficking, and well, you know, I doubt they have licenses for these stores, and there's no way the park is zoned for this.”

Weiss shrugged. “It's not legal, but it's so hard to shut down that the government's mostly just given up on stopping it. As long as no one innocent is effected, Supernatural Affairs just lets things be.”

“How are kids not innocent?”

“Well, that offer was made when human trafficking was still legal in America,” Weiss said. “Vale might not have been in a slave state, but it was the law of the land at the time.”

“How come there isn't more illegal dust for sale?” Ruby asked after a moment's thought. “I mean, if they're selling it now, how come they weren't before?”

Weiss shook her head. “They aren't selling it. My family reached an agreement with the Traveling Market about a century ago. Basically, we hired a large force of mercenaries, and we made sure that operations were disrupted. In exchange for no longer buying or selling dust, we agreed to stop burning the market down every time our people found it.”

“That sounds even less legal than the market,” Ruby pointed out.

Weiss was quiet for a long moment. “My family… we haven't always worried about legal. Or moral.”

“You aren't your family,” Ruby said quietly, squeezing her hand.

“I don't know why you have so much faith in me,” Weiss said just as softly.

“Because I know you're a good person,” Ruby said simply. “Now, come on. We've got work to do! And we can call this a date.”

“You want to call the Traveling Market a date?”

Ruby shrugged, smiling happily. “Why not? It's a, well, a bit cold tonight, but I'm holding your hand, and we're wandering around a park looking at booths. It's like a fair, but we can file for overtime!”

Weiss blushed and rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Ruby dragged Weiss into the first tent, which turned out to be selling various dubiously magical trinkets. None of them were powerful enough to deserve the name ‘magical object’, but they were all at least a little mystical. “Hello,” the owner, a tall, dour looking man said, nodding to them. “Can I help you with anything?”

“Do you know anyone shipping a bunch through the market the past few months?” Ruby asked, taking her eyes away from the chipped and battered product he was selling.

“I try to avoid paying attention to details,” the man said.

“That would explain your stock,” Weiss said snidely, leading Ruby back outside.

“Weiss!” Ruby objected. “Sorry, mister!”

Weiss snorted. “Really, even you weren't interested in that junk.”
“Well… no, but you were really rude.”

The next tent was a pet store, and even Weiss had to admit, privately, that it was interesting. There were talking ravens, two tailed cats, strange ferret-like creatures with frilled noses, jewel shelled turtles, and many, many more supernatural animals. Ruby immediately ran over to a large case full of puppies, all bouncing and excited to see her, with several teleporting around the cage to get closer to her.

“There are magic puppies!” Ruby shouted.

Weiss smirked and followed her, looking down into the enclosure full of adorable, squirming cuteness. “Ahh, you are so cute, yes you are, yes you are!”

“Are you interested in purchasing a blink dog pup?” the merchant hissed. It was a scaled creature, with a mouth full of sharp teeth, and three arms, the third protruding from the center of its chest.

Weiss blushed at her display and cleared her throat. “Actually, I wanted to ask, have you seen anyone receiving an unusual amount of packages through the market for the past couple of months?”

“I can’t say that I have,” the creature answered after a moment’s thought. “My wares keep me rather busy.”

“Come on Ruby, we need to keep looking,” Weiss said, grabbing and tugging on her hand.

“B-but look at the puppies, Weiss,” Ruby whimpered as she was pulled away.

Weiss just shook her head. “Blink dogs require a diet full of very mana rich foods. You couldn’t afford to keep one, and I’m not going to pay for it. Besides, how would Zwei take it?”

Ruby pouted all the way to the next tent, but soon she lost herself in examining the many strange goods and services on offer, and the even stranger beings doing the offering. There were fortune tellers, sellers of magic items, alien foods, commissionable artists, professional spellcasters, and even stranger goods and services on display. It was bewildering, but far more interesting than any normal market in the world.

“I’ve heard you ask a question quite a few times,” a deep, rumbling voice spoke to them while they were looking at a collection of glowing hard candy.

Weiss turned to see a strange creature. It resembled an enormous slug, but the front of the body was quite vertical, with two humanlike arms, and it was in fact wearing a bright purple frock coat. One of the slug’s eyestalks actually had a monocle with a long chain attached to it that it held in place… somehow.

“We have been asking around,” Weiss said neutrally. “Can I help you…”

“Ollen,” the slug said. “And it is I who can help you. I make it my business to know things that happen in the market, and I thought perhaps we could make a deal.”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a look before Weiss nodded. “Do you have a tent?”

“Right this way,” the slug said, turning and slowly moving towards a very large tent at the far end of the market. Weiss adjusted her sword slightly in its sheath as they reached it, the area being full of vice dens of various sorts, such as magical drugs and nonhuman prostitutes.

The inside of the tent was divided into many smaller sections, separated by hanging silk sheets.
Weiss saw that they contained gambling of many varieties. People played cards, rolled dice, pulled slot machine levers, played pachinko, dominos, and many other games, some she didn't recognize. The people running the games were all beautiful men and women wearing skimpy outfits, and she turned bright red as she saw several performing intimate favors in exchange for tips from some of the winning patrons. She and Ruby were both blushing fiercely by the time their slow moving guide reached the back tented area, which had a curtained entrance that allowed privacy.

Ollen climbed its way on top of a pile of cushions and lit a large, elaborate water pipe, taking several long pulls from it, blowing out shimmering rings of iridescent smoke once he did. Finally he focused on the two of them again.

“Sit, sit, let us speak,” he said, gesturing towards a pair of cushions in front of him. Weiss and Ruby exchanged one last nervous look before carefully sitting down on the plush cushions. “Good, very good. I am a businessman, and I keep a close eye on all of the comings and goings in the market. It isn't often that Schnees visits.”

Weiss considered a moment, before shrugging. “It isn't often that the streets are flooded by dust moving through the Traveling Market.”

Ollen nodded thoughtfully. “I see. Yes, the dust trade has always been the true concern of the Schnees. If that is what is being moved so often, I can see why you would come.”

“So who is moving the dust?” Weiss asked.

Ollen chuckled. “Ah, I cannot just tell you. After all, I am, as I said, a businessman first and foremost. I need to receive some proper recompense for the information.”

“And what do you want?” Weiss asked neutrally.

“There are certain… concessions that the Schnee family has been unwilling to allow the market,” Ollen said.

“You expect me, in exchange for stopping illegal dust trafficking, to allow you to sell dust?” Weiss asked, actually amused by his boldness.

“If you are concerned about dust hitting the streets, then in this way you can ensure that you know who is profiting,” Ollen argued. “I can even offer you… profit sharing.”

“You think you can bribe me?” Weiss asked, shaking her head at the slug man. “Since we're discussing historical dust policy, I have a counter proposal. My family can… insist on the stoppage of the dust trafficking in the same manner we did before. How about I don't call my father to arrange for that to happen in exchange for the identities of those responsible?”

There was a long, tense silence between them, as Weiss stared levelly into Ollen's eyestalks. The slug man took a deep inhale from his hookah, before blowing another ring of glowing smoke.

“Perhaps we could come to another arrangement?”

“Mercenary armies are expensive,” Weiss offered. “Perhaps we can come to a more cost effective solution.”

The two spent the next fifteen minutes negotiating, with Ruby sitting lost on the sidelines, eventually becoming quite amused as they argued about every single penny's worth of value. In the end Weiss bought the information for mortal trade goods totaling a few thousand dollars.

“Done,” Ollen said. “When can you arrange shipment?”
“Tonight,” Weiss said with a shrug. “Who is responsible?”

“I am taking a risk by selling the information to you,” Ollen said. “I would feel more comfortable if you made the arrangements first.”

“A Schnee is always good for their word,” Weiss said stiffly.

“Nevertheless, the people I am speaking of are dangerous, and would not be cowed by your name,” Ollen said. “I would like to make sure you live to provide me my price.”

Weiss glared at him for a moment before picking up her phone and placing her order with Klein. Once she was finished Ollen stood. “Good. I will go arrange to receive it. You may wait here.”

Weiss stewed in her annoyance, until Ruby reached over and took her gloved hand, giving it a squeeze. “Well, that was a thing.”

Weiss shrugged. “Arranging a bribe isn't that complicated, not when you're dealing with a merchant like that.”


“Don't forget the crate of wine coolers,” Weiss pointed out. “Faerie lacks any kind of industrialization, so things like modern toys and prepackaged foods are expensive novelties there.”

“And the hamsters?”

Weiss shrugged. “Like honey, some of the natives have developed a taste for agriculture that doesn't exist on that plane.”

“Oh,” Ruby said, before her eyes widened. “Wait, a taste?! They… they're gonna eat cute little hamsters?”

Weiss grimaced. “I try not to think about it.”

The silk divider along one of the walls slid open slightly, and a very short man with huge yellow eyes and a pointed cap on his head stood on the other side, sizing them up. “Message from Ollen.”

“What is it?” Weiss asked.

“He sold the information that people were looking into the dust shipments to the people picking up a shipment tonight,” the man said. “He hopes you both enjoy what you purchased.”

“What!” Weiss demanded, jumping to her feet.

The curtain they had entered through opened, revealing three men wearing white kevlar vests over black clothing, along with metal masks with red lines on them over their faces. Weiss could see that two of them had obvious faunus features, small horns for one and cat ears for the other. All three had guns on one hip and machetes on the other, and they all reached for a weapon the moment they saw who was in the tent.

Weiss instinctively pulled Myrtenaster, and Ruby took a step back, drawing her pistol. Two of the White Fang terrorists charged them, machetes out and ready, screaming incoherent war cries as they did.

Ruby opened fire on the one pulling his gun before he had been able to do more than clear the
holster. Her first bullets did little, as the white vests were bullet proof, but upon seeing that she raised her aim, hitting him in the throat, where he went down choking on his own blood. Weiss focused on defense, rapier weaving about with incredible speed as she kept the other two away from both herself and her partner.

The two White Fang hesitated for a second, before one turned and ran while the other lunged at Weiss, blade raised over his head. Weiss saw her opening and thrust, her enchanted sword easily punching through the bulletproof vest and finding his heart while Ruby ran past, chasing after the escapee. Weiss pulled out her sword and quickly checked to make sure both White Fang were dead before taking off after her partner.

The outer tent was in chaos, panicked employees and customers, many of them partially or fully nude, ran about in fear at the gunfire. They slowed Weiss' movements as she hesitated at the thought of physically pushing through the crowd, even with her covering clothing. Eventually she made it outside by sliding along a line of slot machines being used by gamblers who didn't even care about the battle happening around them.

Ruby was standing just outside of the tent, a horrified expression on her face. Weiss grimaced as she saw what remained of the third White Fang agent as a huge, hulking, gray skinned ogre finished stuffing his torso into its mouth and messily bit down, blood spraying everywhere.

“What happened?”

Ruby swallowed hard and gestured vaguely at the grisly display. “The third perp tried to force his way through the crowd with his sword. The big… whatever didn't want to move, so he took a swing.”

The ogre, which stood twelve feet tall, had a bleeding gash on its enormous belly. The wound was large enough to be lethal to a human, but on a creature as big and tough as an ogre it wouldn't even need medical attention. She grimaced as the ogre finished swallowing the faunus, letting out a contented belch when it did.
Fifth Case: Gathering

Ruby was very pale as she stared at the obese ogre belching and picking its teeth. “Um… what do we do?”

Weiss sighed. “I don't really want to arrest it; the ogre acted in self defense, and frankly, we don't have the tools to restrain it. We'd need to call down SWAT, and I suspect more than a few people would be killed in the attempt.”

“So we just… let it eat people?”

“Well, not normally, but… if an ogre causes trouble with Schnee property, the protocol is to offer it a chance to surrender, then attack with overwhelming force when it refuses,” Weiss explained. “Since there's no way a murder charge would stick, we'd end up killing it for defending itself.”

“And the cannibalism!” Ruby objected.

“Well… ogres aren't human so it isn't really cannibalism,” Weiss pointed out. “Do you want to tell it it's under arrest?”

“No,” Ruby grumbled. “I don't like this, though. He didn't have to go that far to defend himself.”

“I know, I don't like it either,” Weiss said. “Look, how about after we interrogate the other two White Fang members you call this in and ask what they want us to do. We'll need to report a shooting incident and get the coroner down here, anyway. Maybe someone will want to do… something about the ogre.”

“Wait, we have someone to interrogate?” Ruby asked, looking pained and a little sick as she thought about the recent firefight. “I thought, um, I thought we killed them both.”

“We did,” Weiss agreed, heading back into the tent with Ruby on her heels. The two White Fang members were exactly as they had left them, lying dead on the floor of the tent with slowly spreading blood stains around them.

Weiss crouched next to the one that she had killed, removing his mask. Under it he looked like a normal person in his early twenties, someone she could pass on the street without realizing it. She had never really thought about the White Fang other than being a faceless horde of monsters trying to kill her family, and she couldn't help staring at him for a moment.

“What's wrong?” Ruby asked.

“He's just… normal,” Weiss said. “It's silly, but… I always thought of the White Fang as monsters, but they don't look like it, do they?”

“They're terrorists, but they're still people,” Ruby said, placing a careful hand on Weiss' shoulder.

Weiss enjoyed the warmth of the contact for a moment before clearing her throat and pulling off one of her gloves. She then leaned forward and touched his face, and immediately the body stirred. She pushed her aura into the fresh zombie, ordering it to be still before using the corpse as a conduit to seek out his soul. After a long moment the zombie's eyes opened, revealing a green glow as it sneered hatefully at her.

“Schnee… I'm going to kill you.”
Weiss smirked slightly as she leaned back. “No, you won’t.”

After a moment the snarl on his face was replaced with confusion. “What happened… why can't I move...”

“You're dead,” Weiss said bluntly. “I killed you, and now I've brought your soul back to answer my questions.”

“I won't tell you anything,” he snarled.

Weiss closed her eyes for a moment, concentrating on the soul that she had recalled. With a subtle twist of mana she began channeling more power from the afterlife, a chill spreading through her own body as she opened the door within her soul wider. Once she had enough power she focused it on the faunus' soul, binding it with mystical chains.

“I order you, shade, to tell the truth,” Weiss intoned. “I order you, shade, to tell the whole truth. I order you, shade, to tell nothing but the truth. I order you, shade, to answer all questions put to you.”

Weiss slowly relaxed, ceasing to channel quite as much necromantic energies. Even just that brief action had left her head spinning and her brow soaked with sweat. While necromancy allowed her to control the souls of the dead, it was very difficult, especially when the target struggled against her. Even worse, as a faunus the man had a strong aura of his own, which required much more mana to overcome than a normal human civilian.

Weiss opened her eyes and looked at the hatefully glaring zombie. “What is your name?”

“Nick Carmine,” the zombie said.

“What was that all about?” Ruby asked.

“I do not know,” Nick said.

Weiss looked up at her partner. “The dead don't lie, but... that doesn't mean they can't dissemble. Whenever I've done this in the past it was to ask the victims questions, and they wanted their killer to be found. I bound the soul so that it has to follow those commands I issued. I could... program it to do anything that I desired given enough time and effort.”

“That... that doesn't seem okay,” Ruby said.

“I agree,” Weiss said. “I've never done this before, but in my research into my abilities I discovered I could do it. Anyway, I'd rather not force him to remain any longer than I have to.”

“Okay,” Ruby said, still frowning.

“Nick Carmine, how many were in your cell of the White Fang?”

“There were three of us.”

“What were the names of the other two?” Weiss asked.

“Roy Gainsboro and Barney Amaranth.”

“Who was the leader?” Ruby asked.

“Barney Amaranth,” he said, turning his hateful gaze on Ruby for a moment.
“Which one of you was Barney?” Weiss asked.

“He escaped.”

Ruby and Weiss exchanged a look before Weiss sighed. “Ugh. That's going to make this much harder.”

“Why?” Ruby asked.

“He was the leader because he had been a member for longer,” Nick said. “He survived as long as he did because he was a coward, and he proved that again today.”

Weiss ignored the zombie's response to a question being asked in its presence. “The White Fang have a cell structure, where only the leader of the cell knows anything about other groups. We can ask both of them, but most likely they've never seen any other members without their masks on, and they probably don't even know any names besides some of the famous ones Intel already knows about.”

“Maybe he knows where they were taking the dust,” Ruby said, looking at Nick while he didn't say anything. “What is this, Jeopardy? Where were you taking the dust?”

“I don't know,” Nick said, glaring smugly up at her. “We would take it to a different warehouse each week, and only Barney knew which one.”

“What happened when you made a delivery?” Weiss asked.

“We would arrive at the warehouse, and Barney would unlock the door,” Nick said angrily. “We would use dollies to move the crates of dust into the warehouse. It was always empty, with nothing in it and no one around. The warehouses looked abandoned. We'd drop off the crates, lock them again, and go home.”

They tried several more questions, but they weren't able to get anything useful out of him. Eventually Weiss sighed. “Well, this is a waste. With the amount of effort my family and the police have put into finding the White Fang over the years it's not surprising that they're this cautious, but it still makes our job much more difficult.”

“Nick, why did you join the White Fang?” Ruby asked.

“My father worked for the SDC,” he said, glaring fiercely at Weiss. “He signed a five year contract when I was ten. He never came home.”

“Mining is dangerous,” Weiss said tightly.

“We didn't get anything besides a letter once a month,” Nick growled. “My mother didn't let me read them, but when he went missing she ended up killing herself, and I found them after the funeral when I was packing to go live with my aunt. He hated his job. Hated everything about it. And he couldn't leave. The Schnees wouldn't let him”

“He signed a contract,” Weiss said. “It was magically binding. Letting him go would've had unpleasant consequences for everyone involved, including both him and my family.”

“Wait, your family uses magically binding work contracts?” Ruby objected, blinking as she remembered that being mentioned before. “How can that be legal?”

“It normally isn't,” Weiss acknowledged, not looking at her partner as she spoke. “We received a
special exemption because of necessity. It's dangerous even for faunus to stay in Faerie for prolonged periods, but our family has the ability to extend protections and aids to our employees, but in order for it to work fully the workers have to be magically bound to the family. That's why we use them."

“It means they can't ever quit, or break the rules!” Nick shouted. “They have to follow the contract no matter what, and that means they have to mine everyday. No vacations. No sick days. No rest. Mining all day, seven days a week, for five years. Living in tiny barracks shared by dozens of other miners, trapped in some freaky hellhole of another plane! And they can't even quit!”

Weiss finally glared at him. “My family does not hide any of this. The work contract itself states that the contract is magically binding.”

“My father isn't a lawyer!” Nick shouted. “How was he supposed to know! The contract was almost as big as a book, in fine print, and all in legalese! All he knew was that he had to take care of his child, and that nowhere else was willing to pay a faunus enough to support a whole family!”

“What, are you blaming my family now for the state of the world?” Weiss demanded. “If we didn't offer jobs to faunus, do you think things would be better for your people? Would his life have been better if he'd starved in the streets? Turned to crime like you did? We offer jobs that pay a fair rate, and we let the workers live for free at our mines. The people that work hard and do their jobs for the five year contract walk away with swollen bank accounts! It's unfortunate that your father died, but our accident rate isn't any higher than deep mining operations on this plane.”

“You make me sick,” Nick growled. “One day the White Fang will kill every last Schnee, and we'll all dance on your graves.”

“You won't,” Weiss snarled, releasing his soul and stopping the animation of his corpse. He slumped limply, eyes going dark again.

All was quiet for a long time as Weiss regained control of her temper before finally moving over to the other body. “Weiss?” Ruby tried tentatively.

“I just need to verify that the other one doesn't know anything,” Weiss said sharply.

“O-oh, okay,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss didn't look at her partner the entire time she interrogated Roy Gainsboro, and in the end she didn't learn anything else useful. If anything, Roy was less observant than his partner, and knew even less about the White Fang. Finally she released him as well, and she sent a quick text message to Klein to inform the people dropping off her payment to the slug man to express her family's displeasure about the way she was given her information while Ruby called the police about what had happened.

There was a long period of silence when Ruby finished her call, until finally she broke it. “Um, Weiss?”

“Yes, Ruby?”

“Are you… are you okay?”

Weiss finally looked over at her girlfriend, and a surge of relief filled her as she realized that she was actually concerned for her. Weiss sighed and nodded. “Yes… are you… are you okay… with all of that?”

“All of what?” Ruby asked.
Weiss gestured vaguely. “The contracts, and my family, and… and the necromancy.”

Ruby stepped closer, and Weiss had to resist the urge to take a step back. She slowly reached out her hands, taking both of Weiss' re-gloved ones, before giving them a firm squeeze. “Of course, Weiss. I've always been okay with you doing necromancy. Don't even think for a second that it bothers me, okay?”

Weiss felt herself relaxing. She hadn't done very much necromancy in front of her partner since they had started dating, and she had been worried that it would bother her. She smiled, feeling a little silly, before she realized what Ruby hadn't said. “And… my family?”

Ruby was quiet for a while. “I don't like the stuff about the contracts. But… I don't know enough about it to really say. And… and even if I think your family isn't doing the right thing, you aren't your family.”

Weiss thought about that for a moment before sighing. “Okay.”

It didn't take much longer of the police to arrive and take control of the crime scene. Many of them were obviously nervous at the supernatural nature of the Traveling Market, and the people of the Market were upset at the police presence. Within the first half hour the area was completely cleared out, although it took another two hours before Weiss and Ruby could go home.

The next morning Weiss and Ruby spent several more hours filling out paperwork and answering questions about what had happened. Supernatural Affairs had looser use of force regulations than any normal department, but killing several people, even White Fang terrorists, required a thorough investigation. It was a relief to finally return to their desks, but only a few minutes later the phone began to ring.

“Hello?” Weiss asked. After a moment of listening she nodded. “Alright. Thank you, captain.”

“Goodwitch wants to see us?” Ruby asked.

“Yes,” Weiss sighed, standing and leading the way to the captain's office. This time she was ready for them, and they walked in, taking seats in front of her desk.

“The two of you have been busy,” Goodwitch said neutrally. “Have you found anything about the dust?”

It took a while, but over the course of an hour they explained what they had found to the captain, who stayed silent except for the occasional probing question. Eventually they finished telling her everything, and Goodwitch took a few minutes to process before speaking. “So the White Fang have moved hundreds of crates of dust through the Traveling Market. What's your next move?”

“We've interrupted the shipments, but they'll just start up again,” Weiss said. “Unless we want to do something about the Traveling Market we have to shutdown the other side, not just put a halt to it here.”

Goodwitch nodded thoughtfully. “As a Schnee… do you have a safe way to investigate the Green Hill Mine, or anywhere else that might be involved in shipping the dust from Faerie?”

“I visited the original Schnee Mine as a child, and I know how to deal with Faerie. As long as the trip is short I should be safe.”

“We,” Ruby said.
“What?”

“We need to be safe,” Ruby said, her face set stubbornly. “I'm not letting you go without me.”

“It's dangerous,” Weiss said. “You've never been to another plane, and Faerie is quite hostile to non-native life.”

“I don't care,” Ruby said.

“Would her presence endanger you?” Goodwitch asked.

“No,” Weiss said after a long moment.

“Can you keep her reasonably safe?”

Weiss looked back at Ruby, who now had a pleading expression on her face. While she wanted to say no, she found it difficult to lie while her girlfriend was looking at her that way. “It's dangerous, but... not much more so than I'll be in... if she listens to my warnings.”

“Then you should take her along,” Goodwitch said decisively. “Just a moment...”

Goodwitch placed a quick phone call while Ruby leaned over to talk quietly to Weiss. “Thanks.”

“Don't think me,” Weiss grumbled. “It's really going to be dangerous... I didn't want to risk you like this.”

“I know,” Ruby said, taking her hand. “But I didn't want you going there, either, you know?”

Weiss sighed. “You need to listen to me. There are so many things that can go wrong, so you can't just be impulsive while we're there.”

“Ladies,” Goodwitch said, clearing her throat. Weiss and Ruby quickly dropped hands, blushing brightly as Yang and Blake entered the office.

“Hey, Rubles,” Yang said. “Ice queen.”

“Sis, Blake!” Ruby said brightly, smiling at them. “What are you here for?”

“I'm splitting your case,” Goodwitch said. “Weiss, Ruby, you two will be going to Faerie to find the source of the dust shipments. You have great latitude when dealing with interplanar cases, as you are outside all human jurisdiction, and it will be almost impossible to transport prisoners to face justice. Still, I expect you to behave in a manner befitting the trust given to officers of the law.”

“Understood,” Weiss said.

“Wait, you're sending them to Faerie?!” Yang objected. “Alone? That place is dangerous!”

“Why aren't you sending us along?” Blake asked. “Or instead? I'm a faunus.”

“Have you ever been to Faerie before?” Weiss asked. She'd never thought about the faunus' history, but from her hatred of the SDC, it was entirely possible that she or her family had worked for the company, although she was young to have been a miner.

“No,” Blake admitted. “I know it's more dangerous for humans to go there, though.”

“Ms. Schnee has experience with Faerie, and her SDC connections will be useful for finding the
source of the illegal dust,” Goodwitch explained. “The two of you have a different task. The group responsible for smuggling the dust is the White Fang, and they have acquired a vast stockpile already. I need the two of you to find out what you can.”

“The White Fang?” Blake repeated, paling slightly.

Yang took a step closer to her partner protectively. “Are you sure that's a good idea? The White Fang… I know Uncle Qrow's looked into them, but hasn't found many leads.”

Goodwitch nodded. “It's something of a long shot, but we have one advantage now. No matter how careful the cell structure, or how sneaky they think they're being, even the White Fang can't hide hundreds of crates of dust without some evidence of where it went. This is our highest priority, as even the White Fang wouldn't acquire that much dust without plans to use it.”

“That's a lot of dust,” Yang whistled. “You could… I don't even know what you could use that much for.”

“It's significantly less than was used to make the Great Barrier, but is more than enough to disrupt it locally,” Weiss offered. “They could also move an army though interplanar portals, which would circumvent almost any defense… or let them seize the SDC's dust mines in Faerie. Or they could make an army's worth of minor magical items or weapons. Or create a truly devastating magical explosive, or summon.”

“Okay, okay, I get the idea!” Yang interrupted. “Yeesh. Guess this isn't a case we can let sit around collecting dust.”

Weiss slapped her hand to her forehead, and Goodwitch just ignored the blonde. “This will be a long term assignment for the two of you. Hopefully Ms. Schnee and Ms. Rose can cut off the flow of dust into the White Fang's hands, but we still need to put a stop to whatever they have planned with what they've already stolen. I hope I don't need to remind you to be cautious; this case is extremely dangerous.”

“Hey, Careful is my middle name,” Yang said. “No sweat. Come on, kitty cat, we've got some bad guys to beat up.”
Weiss had expected to need help from the SDC to make the trip to Faerie, and so she was quite surprised when Captain Goodwitch lead her and Ruby into the subbasement, past the secure storage rooms, until they reached a specialized ritual chamber. Unlike the general protection circle in the ritual chamber she had used to summon Dugh, this one covered the entire floor, and with a moment of study she could see that it was designed for opening portals.

She was also surprised to see Inspector Ozpin carefully pouring dust in various parts of the circle. An enormous amount had been used, and with a closer inspection of the circle Weiss realized that it was a bit less efficient than the recent Schnee portals, which were no doubt a closely held secret.

“We'll be able to send you there, and provide dust for a return trip,” Goodwitch said. “I trust that you can get the two of you home?”

Weiss nodded, and Goodwitch went over to help Ozpin finish preparations. Ruby walked over and spoke softly. “Um… so what do I do?”

“The big rules are pretty similar to the Traveling Market,” Weiss said. “Assume that everything you meet, even if it looks like a normal plant, or animal, or even rock is some kind of sentient, amoral being that wants to gain power over you. Don't say your name, don't agree to anything, don't accept any gifts… this is going to be extremely dangerous.”

“I'll be careful,” Ruby said.

Weiss sighed. “This is the first time you've left our plane of existence, and Faerie… Faerie is unusual. It would take longer than we have to fully explain how things work there to you. It'll be easier if you see for yourself. Just… do you trust me?”

“Yes,” Ruby said, taking her hand.

“Okay,” Weiss said. “I promise, I'll do everything I can to keep you safe.”

“And you,” Ruby said. “Keep you safe, too.”

Weiss nodded, but before they could speak further Ozpin approached them. “I've prepared a package of dust for you, Ms. Schnee, and had cold iron daggers withdrawn from the armory for the both of you. Do you need anything else?”

Weiss thought for a moment, before shaking her head. “That should be enough. Will your portal take us to the Green Hill Mine?”

“Very close to it,” Ozpin said. “You should be able to see it near where you will arrive.”

“Then that should be all that we need,” Weiss said. “Are you ready, Ruby?”

Ruby took the dagger that Ozpin had gotten for them, attaching it to her belt, while Weiss grabbed her knife and a pouch of dust before adjusting her sword, getting ready to draw it if they arrived in a dangerous situation. Once they were both ready Ozpin and Goodwitch took their places and began to focus, channeling their auras into the circle to activate it.

Power built quickly as the dust began to react, static filling the air, making hair stand on end and skin prickle. A low hum built just below the range of human hearing, and then rose quickly into a high,
piercing whine before reaching a point where it simply pained the head rather than making an audible noise. Finally, with a great pop like a balloon bursting the air split open as a portal formed, revealing a view of a bright green forest clearing floating in midair.

Weiss lead the way, walking briskly so that they had time to make it through before the portal closed. She stepped through, reeling slightly from the disorientation of being on another plane. It took a moment for the wave of dizziness to wear off, and when it did she took a long look at where she had arrived.

She was in a small clearing in the middle of a vast forest. Trees towered around her, tall and proud, providing shade from the sun hanging overhead. The air was hot, the cool shade of the trees helping make it bearable, but even with them she could tell that area they were in was enjoying a hot summer day.

Weiss heard Ruby fall to the ground and immediately turned to face her. Her partner was gasping, hands around her throat as she desperately tried to breath, her lips already turning blue from lack of oxygen. “Ruby!”

Weiss crouched next to her dying partner, placing a hand on her shoulder, which she didn't react to at all. Gritting her teeth Weiss closed her eyes and reached out with her aura, pushing it into Ruby, feeling gratified as her partner accepted it easily despite her current condition. She then pushed her aura outwards into the world and spoke in a clear, firm voice, letting the meaning be carried by her aura into the plane itself.

“I claim Ruby Rose,” Weiss said clearly, her heart fluttering for a moment before she focused again. “I claim her as a guest, and grant her the hospitality of House Schnee. I offer her succor and protection as if she were of my own house.”

Ruby relaxed slightly as her desperate gasps suddenly bore fruit, her skin color slowly returning to normal. Once she was sure that Ruby was recovering Weiss carefully withdrew her aura back into herself, before squeezing her shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“No,” Ruby gasped. “What- what was that? I couldn't… couldn't feel anything… and I couldn't get any air...”

“Welcome to Faerie,” Weiss said. “I already said that things here work differently… that means everything. Do you think that's oxygen you're breathing?”

“What is this, the Matrix?”

“No, this is Faerie,” Weiss said, her brow scrunched in slight confusion. “Natural laws as we understand them don't exist here. At all.”

“What does that even mean?”

Weiss pursed her lips for a moment. “Nothing here just works because of any physical or chemical process. There are no natural processes in Faerie. The only thing that is relevant here are agreements. Breathing sustains you because the Air has agreed to do so. You can see because the Light agreed to illuminate the darkness for you. When you eat, the food will nourish you because of an agreement with it to sustain you. Nothing, nothing at all happens in Faerie without an agreement with the plane to make it happen.”

“That's… that's crazy,” Ruby said.

“Faerie is a plane of Contractual Reality,” Weiss explained. “A plane where the very nature of reality
is contractually determined and behaves by obligation. Why do you think so many Faerie creatures are famous for making deals?"

“So why are faunus safer here?” Ruby asked as she slowly climbed to her feet.

“Close your eyes and focus on your aura,” Weiss ordered. Ruby did so, and after a few moments she continued. “Do you feel that drain?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “It's weird though... it's not like when I use mana.”

“That's because it's not mana being taken from you,” Weiss said. “What's being consumed is your actual soul.”

"WHAT?!”

“Don't worry, souls regenerate,” Weiss said. “Surprisingly quickly, too.”

“Why is it draining my soul in the first place!”

Weiss looked around. “Why don't we walk while we talk? We don't want to be here any longer than necessary.”

“Okay,” Ruby said, hesitating for a moment before reaching over and taking Weiss' hand. “I don't like this.”

Weiss smiled. “There is a reason why people try to avoid going to Faerie.”

The scenery was not that reason though, as Weiss found the area to be incredibly beautiful. After a moment's thought she walked to the far side of the clearing where a faint trail could be seen arching upwards. She wasn't completely sure that it was the correct direction, but they were looking for a hill, and if it wasn't correct at least higher ground might offer a better view of the area.

“Do you know what happens to our souls when we die?” Weiss finally asked.

“Um... we go to heaven or something?”

“There are a few 'heavenly realms' that psychopomps like Nora are able to transport freshly departed souls to,” Weiss said. “But for the most part the dead instead pass beyond into something unknowable, usually moving on their own, although sometimes with the help of Death if they need the aid. What happens then is unknown, although some choose to interpret it as the eventual heavenly reward of their particular religion, or preparations for a cycle of reincarnation. A popular theory among mages posits that instead the souls become one with the universe itself, although to what end no one has advanced a convincing answer.”

Ruby frowned thoughtfully. “I don't know if that's reassuring or disturbing.”

Weiss shrugged. “It just is.”

“Okay,” Ruby said, looking down at their clasped hands and swinging them for a moment, smiling in thought before becoming serious again. “Okay… so what does that have to do with anything?”

“You asked about why our souls are being devoured,” Weiss deadpanned.

“Oh... right.”

“People in death have their soul pass beyond,” Weiss lectured. “Faerie is a more... proactive plane.
The only bargains we've ever been able to strike with the underlying reality of Faerie involve it getting to eat little pieces of our souls for every moment that it agrees to sustain us. Which is why only Faunus can stay here safely.”

“Why?”

“Because they aren't outsiders as far as the plane is concerned,” Weiss explained, before hesitating. “Do you know what the term 'changeling' refers to?”

“Um… I know it's a really bad thing to say about faunus.”

“It is, but it has a literal origin,” Weiss said. “Centuries ago people believed that creatures from Faerie would kidnap mortal children and replace them with Faerie creatures. Of course, that wasn't the truth; any children taken to Faerie is removed because of some deal or agreement, either with the child or someone with authority over the child. Which is beside the point anyway, as the children in question weren't swapped in the first place, but simply revealing their true nature. Many parents could not accept having preternatural children, blaming magical gifts or nonhuman genetics on the child being a fake.

“The myth of stolen and replaced children being changelings from Faerie became pervasive, and it did not help that faunus are actually descended partially from Faerie. A faunus child means that the family line interbred with a creature from Faerie, and the animal-like features are a direct result. Sometimes it actually took a few generations for the features to appear, but once they did they bred true resulting in a child from two ostensibly normal human parents having animal ears or horns or tails or what have you. It frightened people, and many parents thought that the children weren't there's.”

“So… Faerie doesn't treat them as outsiders?” Ruby asked, brow furrowed in concentration.

Weiss squeezed her hand and smiled at her. “That's right. Because they are descended from Faerie, even if they've never set foot here the basic agreements with the plane don't consume their souls. Other prices must be paid, but they aren't ones that harm them, so faunus can remain here indefinitely. Of course, they need to make agreements that allow them to eat and breathe and see, such as our contracts or other deals they or a patron strike for them.”

They walked in silence for a little bit until they reached the top of the rise that they had been climbing. While the cover of the trees on the hillside was quite thick, they discovered that the top was clear, and when they reached it they paused, overwhelmed by the breathtaking vista stretching out before them.

They were standing on a high crest above a vast field of green trees slowly swaying in the warm breeze. The bright summer sun hovered overhead, and everywhere danced enormous butterflies whose iridescent wings were every color of the rainbow, and many colors that did not exist on their own plane, something that they could provide no description for as it was a sight that could not normally be experienced with human vision.

Beyond the beautiful summer forest they could see a winding blue line cutting through the trees from a fast flowing river, and the far shore was an equally awe inspiring forest of trees with red leaves. “What's that?” Ruby asked.

“The Forever Fall Forest,” Weiss explained. “It's beyond the River of Tears. Green Hill Mine is supposed to be close to it.”

“I think that's it,” Ruby said, pointing at a large hill perhaps two miles away with a simple walled
structure built on top of it. Despite being the only manmade thing visible from where they were standing it blended in surprisingly well, as the harsh right angles and stone walls were obscured by a layer of moss and vines. The entirety of the hill was actually barren of trees, and instead covered in a carpet of green vines, lichen and moss.

“Come on,” Weiss said, leading the way.

Unfortunately the trip wasn't quite as simple as it had looked from their high vantage point. The game trail they had been following ended at the top of the hill, and in order to head in the correct direction they had to cut straight through the trackless forest. The only good thing was that the thick tree canopy meant that the ground was relatively clear, as there was so little light filtering down, but it also meant that they couldn't see very far ahead, making it impossible to navigate.

Relatively clear and actually clear were different things, however, and after the fourth time Weiss almost tripped on a tree root she began to pick her steps very carefully, which also made it difficult to pay attention to where she was heading. The trees also did surprisingly little for the heat, and soon they had both taken off their coats and found themselves sweating heavily. It was a long, frustrating, broiling hike through the forest, making Weiss steadily more irritable as time passed.

Finally Ruby groaned and sat down on a fallen tree. “I think we're lost.”

“We're not lost,” Weiss insisted. “We… are going to the mine, which is… this way.”

“Weiss...”

“No, wait, it's this way… I'm sure of it.”

“Weiss, please… sit down for a second, okay?”

“What?!” Weiss snapped, glaring at her girlfriend. “We need to keep moving. Who knows how long it will take to find whoever is responsible for this. We can't afford to waste time.”

“We're not,” Ruby said. “Seriously, Weiss… sit down for a sec… please?”

Weiss huffed angrily, stormed across the clearing, and sat rigidly on the log near Ruby. She muttered angrily to herself for a few minutes, until slowly she started to relax. She took a deep breath and leaned back on her hands, staring up at the tree canopy above. A strange, warbling bird was singing, and sitting down it no longer seemed quite so miserably hot.

“Feeling better?” Ruby asked, placing a hand on top of her's.

Weiss jumped slightly at the contact, before relaxing again. “Yes… I'm… I apologize for yelling at you.”

“It's fine,” Ruby said. “So… we're kinda lost, huh.”

“It was two miles,” Weiss grumbled, blushing. “How could we get lost walking two miles?”

“Well, I mean… how often have you been in a forest?”

Weiss opened her mouth, then closed it with a harrumph.

“Yeah, my dad likes hiking, so I've been a couple of times, but never away from a trail,” Ruby said. “And I think we'd need a compass here. I mean, these are some really big trees.”

“Compasses don't work in Faerie,” Weiss said.
“So how do people get around here?”

“Well… my family mostly relies on opening portals directly to where we're going,” Weiss said. “When we need to find something we usually summon something to find it for us.”

“Can we do that?”

“I… didn't remember to bring anything to use as payment,” Weiss said, blushing. “I was in a hurry!”

Ruby giggled, squeezing her hand when Weiss grunted angrily. “We'll figure something out. I mean, maybe I can climb a tree or something.”

Weiss eyed the tree in front of her speculatively. “Those branches start very high up.”

Ruby shrugged, digging through her coat pockets until finally she grinned, pulling out a small bag of cookies. “Here… chocolate makes everything better.”

Weiss took the cookie and stared at it for a moment, before looking Ruby, who was happily inhaling the rest of the bag. “Stop that, you dolt!”

“What?” Ruby asked, spitting crumbs.

“Don't waste the rest!” Weiss shouted, snatching the bag from her hand.

“My cookies…” Ruby whimpered, reaching out for the bag.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “You'll live. When we get home I'll buy you a pile of cookies, okay?”

“But you don't even like cookies that much… can't we do something besides ration the cookies?” Ruby pleaded. “Can't we try cannibalism first?”

Weiss stared at her, before shaking her head. “You know what's fond of cookies? Sprites. Sprites love cookies.”

“So… oh!” Ruby said. “I guess… I guess I can give up a cookie.”

Weiss just shook her head and pulled out her chalk, drawing a simple magic circle on the fallen tree. It wasn't the best surface to draw on, but it was actually a very simple bit of binding magic to do while on Faerie. Once it was finished she broke off a tiny piece of the chocolate chip cookie and placed it inside of the circle before hiding the rest of the bag.

It didn't take long for something to answer her call. The sprite was fairly typical for its kind, being a tiny figure the size of her thumb, with large, shimmering wings. It was quite beautiful, and actually reminded Weiss of Ruby the way that it immediately stuffed the piece of cookie she had left for it into its mouth before even noticing the two people looking at it.

“Eep!” it yelped, tensing to fly away again.

“Hello,” Weiss said. “We don't mean you any harm.”

“You don't?” it asked anxiously in a tiny, high pitched voice.

“It's adorable,” Ruby said, staring down in awe at it.

The sprite narrowed its eyes, suddenly pulling a bow and arrow from nowhere. “What'd you say to me!?”
“She didn't mean anything by it,” Weiss said, shooting Ruby a glare. “My partner hasn't been to Faerie before. Also, she's a dolt.”

The sprite sniffed, putting away the bow. “I'll say. How do you put up with her?”

Weiss smiled slightly, ignoring Ruby's pout. “You get used to her.”

The sprite looked her up and down for a moment, before examining the chalk circle. “Alright, so you got my attention. What do you need a mighty warrior like myself for, and why should I listen?”

“My partner and I managed to get a little lost,” Weiss said. “Do you think you could show us how to get to the Green Hill Mine?”

“And why should I?”

“Well...” Weiss said slowly, pulling out the cookie she'd broken off the small piece of. “Perhaps you'd like the rest of your cookie?”

“You drive a hard bargain, mortal,” the Sprite said, before diving on the cookie.
By the time they reached the base of Green Hill it was well into the afternoon, and Weiss and Ruby were both hot and sweating again. Ruby had taken off her coat and rolled up the black sleeves of her shirt, leaving her surprisingly muscled arms exposed to the air. Weiss found the sight both incredibly distracting and infuriating, as she was both enjoying the view more than she would've imagined, and wished that she could expose her skin in the same way.

“This is it!” the sprite said. It was sitting in Weiss' gloved palm, happily chewing on the remains of the chocolate chip cookie, having already eaten almost half of it. The tiny creature's stomach was swollen so much that she looked pregnant, but she still nibbled on some of the remainder as they paused to look up the side of the mossy, vine and lichen covered hill.

“Thanks!” Ruby said cheerfully, wiping her forehead. “We'd never have found it without you!”

“Yes, thank you,” Weiss said, giving the sprite a sharp nod.

She grinned up at them with chocolate stained teeth for a moment before unfurling her iridescent wings and grabbing her remaining cookie. “Goodbye! And be careful!”

“Bye!” Ruby called, waving at the tiny figure as it struggled to fly away while weighed down with so much cookie. “She was adorable.”

Weiss smirked. “Sprites aren't bad to deal with, but you need to be careful. They like to play pranks, and their idea of a prank can be very, very bad for mortals. Especially if you run into a cloud of them.”

“A cloud?”

“That's the term for a group of sprites,” Weiss explained. “When they get together in a group they start competing with each other for who can do the best prank, and humans don't usually survive their competitions.”

“Oh,” Ruby said softly, still staring after the sprite. “She seemed so nice...”

“She was,” Weiss agreed. “For a native of Faerie sprites are very nice. Now come on, we've wasted enough of the day.”

The climb of the hill was somewhat annoying. It was quite slick in places, although the vines provided plenty of handholds, and the incline was gradual enough to keep them from having too much difficulty. They were able to enjoy the breeze more easily on the exposed hillside, but at the same time the sun beat down directly onto them, and the end result left Weiss out of breath and miserable by the time they reached the gates of the mine.

“This place is… ugly,” Ruby said after they'd rested for a few moments.

“Construction isn't easy here,” Weiss said. “You can't just build things. If you can't get the stones to agree to what you want to do, two bricks won't stay on top of each other. And you don't even want to know what happens if you try to build out of wood here.”

After they caught their breath Weiss approached the gate and knocked. It took a minute, but finally the metal door opened, revealing a thin, dog eared faunus wearing dirty blue coveralls with the SDC logo on them. His eyes immediately locked on Weiss. “Can I help you, ma'am?”
“Yes, I am here to inspect the mine,” Weiss said.

“We weren’t aware of an inspection, Ms. Schnee,” he said stiffly.

“We didn’t notify you.”

There was a long pause. “I see. Can I see your identification, ma'am?”

Weiss pulled out her credentials, and after the man looked at it for a bit he handed it back to her. “Of course, Ms. Schnee. Would you like to see the foreman?”

“Yes, thank you,” Weiss said.

“No problem, ma'am,” he said, opening the gate wider. It creaked loudly, but he was able to open it, and then close it behind them once they stepped inside. “He is in the main building, ma'am. There are signs for his office.”

“Thanks!” Ruby said, offering him a smile which he didn't return.

The inside of the Green Hill Mine wasn't much to look at. The walls enclosed the peak of the hill, and there was only one structure inside of the area. It was a one story building made of heavy gray stone blocks, and it was large enough to fill nearly the entire area, although there was plenty of open courtyard near the gate for security and to provide an area for workers to spend time away from the mines, although it was currently unoccupied.

“Not much to see,” Ruby said.

Weiss shrugged. “Like I said, construction is very difficult here. The deals we've made make it easier to build a single structure rather than several. It's a consequence of deals made during the era of walled keeps.”

The building had metal doors just like the gate, although smaller and able to be opened from the outside. Weiss pulled the creaking door open, and stepped inside the building itself. They were in a long hallway, illuminated by strange blue glowing stones attached to walls at regular intervals. The only doors leading from it were also made of metal, and the floor was gray stone tile. Each door had a small plaque on it indicating what was within, but there were no other decoration.

Weiss knew where to go, and after a few moments of walking she knocked on the appropriate door before simply opening it and stepping inside. It was a small office with a metal desk covered in paperwork, with a goat-horned faunus sitting behind the desk. He was wearing the same SDC coveralls that the gate guard had been wearing, although his had the word 'Foreman' written on the chest.

“Ms. Schnee?” he asked. “What are you doing here? We didn't receive notice that anyone was coming.”

“We didn't send any notice,” Weiss said. “I'm here to investigate possible illegal Dust Trafficking.”

The foreman's eyes widened. “Dust trafficking?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Have you observed anything unusual, Mr…?”

“Taupher Thistle, ma'am,” he said. “And no, not that I can think of. As I'm sure you saw, there's nothing around for miles and miles. We don't ever leave the compound, and we certainly don't open non regulation portals from here. Not sure how dust trafficking is supposed to happen.”
“I’d like to look at your records,” Weiss said. “If you have nothing to hide then this won’t take very long.”

He hesitated for a moment before sighing. “Alright, ma’am. I’ll show you to the records room.”

The records room was next door to his office, and he unlocked the door to let them inside. They walked in to find a small, cramped room with filing cabinets filling most of the available space. Taupher hesitated at the door until Weiss turned to face him. “Thank you, Mr. Thistle. That will be all for now.”

“Are you sure that you won’t need anything?” he asked.

“No, thank you,” Weiss said a little more sharply. “We will stay out of your way and let you continue working.”

“Right,” he said. After another long moment he crumbled under Weiss’ steady gaze and left the room. They could hear through the wall the sound of his own door opening and closing as he returned to work.

“Well, I’m going to check his records to see if they match what I remember of the company records,” Weiss said. “These mines can only send paper records back to our world, and proper record keeping policy includes more details than headquarters receives.”

Ruby nodded. “I think I’m gonna take a look around, talk to the workers and stuff.”

Weiss hesitated. “Are you sure? You've never been here before.”

Ruby gave her a reassuring smile. “I'll be careful. I just wanna see if anyone has heard anything. I mean, if someone's smuggling dust out of a here, someone had to notice, right?”

“I would assume so,” Weiss said. “Please be careful. We’re still in Faerie, and…”

She trailed off, and Ruby reached out and took Weiss's gloved hand, giving it a gentle squeeze before raising it to her mouth to kiss her palm. They both blushed as Ruby gave it another squeeze.

“I'll be careful.”

“O-okay,” Weiss said.

Ruby left, and Weiss sighed, looking around the room. After another moment of hesitation she opened the first cabinet and began reading through reams of records.

Hours later she finally put away another document and stood from the floor. The small room had no accommodations, so she was forced to sit on the stone floor to look at the files, and she hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast. Her watch didn't work in Faerie, but she suspected that it was late enough her time to have already eaten dinner, which did nothing to help her mood.

Weiss left the records room and looked around. After a moment of hesitation she decided to go the cafeteria. She wasn't sure where Ruby would be, although a place with food was a reasonable starting point for a search, and she was too hungry to go anywhere else.

While she knew the basic layout for the mines, the drab, empty corridors all looked the same, and it took a while to finally find the right room. She slowly pushed the door open and was very happy at what she saw. Food was still being served, and while there were a handful of faunus workers in their coveralls, most of the long tables were empty. Even better, sitting with a few of the workers and speaking quietly was Ruby.
Weiss smiled, before walking to the front of the room and grabbing a tray. The cafeteria workers stared at her, shocked to see a Schnee most likely, but fortunately she saw no signs of them spitting into her food while she filled her tray. The offerings resembled what she had read about prison food, and smelled worse than they looked, but eventually she simply filled her plate with overcooked canned vegetables and some kind of mushy casserole before making her way over to Ruby.

Ruby had her own tray of food in front of her, although her meal was mostly eaten already. She also had one of the most serious expressions on her face that Weiss had ever seen from her as she spoke quietly to some of the workers. When they noticed her approach the faunus stood and left, which let Weiss sit across from Ruby, offering her girlfriend a smile. Ruby didn't return the gesture, making Weiss' stomach churn.

"Ruby?"

"Weiss," Ruby said flatly.

Weiss bit her lip, unable to continue looking at Ruby. She focused on her food instead, but the sudden tension robbed her of her appetite, and she found herself picking at the tray rather than eating much. Time passed with interminable slowness as she nibbled at her food, eating small amounts of the awful, overcooked mush, until finally Ruby broke the silence.

"I looked around for a while," Ruby said. "I saw the place where the faunus live… did you know they don't have rec rooms? Of any kind? And they have these big shared barracks. They cram forty workers in each room, just rows of bunk beds and little lockers for their stuff. I guess that was enough space, since they're only allowed to bring one small bag with them for five years here."

"It does cost quite a bit to ship objects through portals," Weiss said blandly without looking up at her girlfriend.

Ruby gave an unhappy grunt before continuing. "I also found my way into the mines. Wow. I mean, I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I thought, you know, some kinda modern mining of some kind or something. You know? Do you know what I found?"

"Modern machinery doesn't work in Faerie," Weiss said after a long pause. "The standard procedure is to use picks and hammers to break up the rock. Raw dust is a crystal which runs in veins in the stone, so they have to tunnel through solid rock to find it."

"Those tunnels were tiny," Ruby seethed. "I had to crouch just to move around, and the only lights were on their hard hats. The people mining were in the dark, down on their knees swinging picks against solid rock. They were dirty, and exhausted, and even injured they had to work… are you even listening to me?"

Weiss finally looked up at Ruby, her face carefully kept blank. "I always listen to you, Ruby."

"Do you listen to them," she snapped, gesturing around the room.

"Probably not as often as I should," Weiss said. "Most of my experience has been them hating me and attempting to kill me for being a Schnee."

Ruby hesitated for just a moment before narrowing her eyes. "I'm not surprised. They come here, work really long shifts everyday, then pass out on hard bunks at night just to get up and do it again the next day. Even if they had time off what could they do with it? There's nowhere to go. Nothing to do. This… they're kept like slaves in pens."

"It's in their contracts," Weiss said. "We explain everything about the conditions thoroughly in them.
Faunus workers have tried suing in the past, but everything is explicitly spelled out in the contract, including the mandatory five year terms, the amount of material they can bring, even the living conditions and amount of work they will be doing.”

“You think that makes it okay? They can't even quit because of those contracts. How can you use magic to force them to work for you!?"

“If we didn't they would die,” Weiss snapped, finally feeling her temper fraying. “Do you think my family woke up one day and decided to use faerie contracts to force them to work for us? The magic in those contracts is what keeps them alive! If they weren't magical they wouldn't be binding in Faerie, and they couldn't get the protections we paid for them to have.”

“That-

“No!” Weiss snarled, clenching her fists. “It's my turn to talk. Do you want to know the price we've paid for those contracts? What we've done to keep you safe while you and everyone else benefiting from them spit on us?

“Do you want to know why you can see? Light doesn't do anything without the agreement forged by one of my ancestors, Amaz Schnee, who gave up her and her children's ability to ever see to let us do so here. That branch of the family died out in the seventeen hundreds, but not before blinding thirty-seven people.”

She grabbed her white ponytail and pulled it in front of her, waving it angrily at Ruby. “Do you want to know why our hair is white? Our family once had dark hair, but we were able to trade the color to gain the ability for the food eaten here to nourish us. Otherwise that meal you and everyone else here ate would do nothing for you.

“Before the assassination attempt I was to be the heir to the SDC. You've met Winter, though. My older sister. Did you think she was competent?”

Ruby didn't say anything at first, but finally spoke when Weiss waited pointedly for a response. “Weiss...”

“Don't Weiss me,” she snapped. “Do you want to know why Winter couldn't be the heir?”

“Why?” Ruby finally asked.

“Do you remember how you couldn't breath when we passed through the portal? The price for the air to sustain us was the fertility of the first born Schnee in every third generation. Winter can never have children, and no matter how competent only someone who can is eligible to be heir.

“And of course, those are just the start,” Weiss continued after taking a deep breath, calming down slightly. “One particularly ruthless Schnee who was exiled from the family when he agreed to exchanged one hundred and one human children for dust mining rights. We never learned what the Sidhe Lords did with them, but they’ve always had a thing for children. Do you want to know what was demanded when we tried to improve the quality of life for the miners? Do you?”

“What was demanded?” Ruby asked somberly.

“In exchange for any improvements, we would've had to allow the Sidhe Lords to ignore the Great Barrier. Before it was created they went on regular Wild Hunts, riding through the countryside kidnapping any children who caught their fancy, which they could do because of some old agreement with a king during the dark ages. We can't form any deal to improve things that doesn't include that provision, and we refuse to allow that, so here we sit, stuck with the deals we were able
to strike before the Great Barrier.”

“But why can't they leave?” Ruby asked. “Why can't they choose how long they work? Go home sometimes?”

Weiss sighed, deflating, her anger's departure leaving her feeling hollowed out. “In the beginning we made deals which only granted our protections to our family members. Eventually we extended the deals to allow those we claim and put under our protection to be helped by them, which is how you are here. That won't work for our employees, however. The nature of a working relationship won't allow us to claim them, and so we struck another deal, which allows them to be bound by magical contract for a period of five years and five minutes. Part of the deal is that they are bound to remain in Faerie for the entire time of the contract. They literally cannot leave or it breaks.”

“What happens if it breaks?”

“The contracts punish them,” Weiss said soberly. “Whoever is responsible loses half the span of their years… they just… wither and age like I was touching them. If I let a worker go home I would be the one to suffer that fate. If they refuse to work, the magic inflicts that upon them. Slowly at first, and painfully enough that most who try to go on strike only lose a few months of their life.”

“This is… this is just wrong,” Ruby said.

Weiss shook her head. “Wrong was the time when the Sidhe rode freely through the countryside. Wrong was when demons were as common as wolves, and Grimm attack was a leading cause of death. Wrong was when humans were nothing but pawns in the machinations of gods and demon lords who cared nothing for us. The only way we can maintain the Great Barrier is with dust mining, and the only weapon we have against the monsters that slip through the cracks is dust.”

“The ends don't justify the means,” Ruby said.

“Sometimes they do,” Weiss snapped. “Sometimes the ends must be reached, and the means are the only way to reach them. The miners here suffer for five years to save the lives of millions of innocent people, and we pay them and provide all of the safety and protection the law requires. It's easy to judge us when you don't have to make the hard choices, Ruby. But just because you can be blissfully ignorant doesn't mean we all can be.”

They sat in silence for while, Weiss looking down at her food, her appetite long gone. After a bit she spoke again, this time not looking up at her girlfriend. “I've never lied to myself about what this all means, not since I was old enough to understand. Just because it has to be done doesn't mean that I'm a good person for doing it. If you can't be with me I… I will understand…”

“No!” Ruby interrupted, her sudden shout drawing Weiss' eyes. “No, I… I don't like this. I don't like this at all. And I hate that you're a part of it. And it… it shouldn't happen. But it does. And maybe it has to… maybe there's something you could do, I don't know. But… I know that you aren't this bad person you think you are, and I know that I love you. This doesn't… me being mad doesn't mean I'm just going to dump you, okay? I love you, Weiss.”

Weiss felt her heart unclench as she reached out and took Ruby's hand, squeezing gently. The rest of her anxiety faded as she felt Ruby squeeze back.
Fifth Case: First Link

After picking at her food for a little longer Weiss finally pushed the tray away and looked at her partner. She wasn't sure what to say or do. Fortunately Ruby as always was willing to fill the awkward silence.

“So... did you learn anything??

Weiss shook her head. “Not really. The numbers are the same as what corporate said; the mine's output is just down. All of the workers are bringing in less actual dust than before, and that means reduced production. This mine is one of the oldest, and I suppose it's most likely playing out.”

Ruby looked confused. “Wait, it said everyone is bringing in less than before?”

Weiss nodded. “The amount of dust each miner acquires is recorded every day. We can actually track where every crystal of dust was found, which miner extracted it from the stone, which mine cart it was loaded into, who separated the crystal from the excess rock, and which crate the dust was sealed in for shipment back home. The SDC takes its work very seriously.”

“And there's less being mined?”

“That's right.” Weiss said. “The numbers at headquarters were down, and when I checked the original records here they show the same thing. The miners are actually hauling more cartloads of raw material than before, but the loads contain more waste rock by weight. You see that when the veins of a dust mine are starting to get depleted.”

“The miners said they've been mining more than before,” Ruby said.

Weiss shook her head. “Dust weighs less than rock, so I'm not surprised that they think they're bringing out more material than before, but they're still mining less actual dust.”

“No, they said they've been bringing in more dust… a lot more dust,” Ruby said shaking her head. “They know the difference between dust and rock, Weiss. Some of them have been mining for years.”

“If there's something wrong with the paperwork we need to know about it,” Weiss said. “Do you… do you think they'll talk to me?”

“The contract doesn't force them to?” Ruby asked before pausing at Weiss' flinch. “Sorry… that was mean of me.”

“Let's just find them,” Weiss said, standing up quickly and clearing away her tray. She ignored Ruby's apologetic expression, but didn't resist when she took her hand.

Ruby led them to one of the barracks, and after knocking opened the door. Weiss followed her into the room hesitantly, taking in the sights. She had visited mines before, but her father hadn't let her stray from the tours he put together, and he had always told her that it was too dangerous for her to visit the areas where the miners congregated.

The barracks were even worse than she had pictured from the reports. The room was quite small, with row after row of closely spaced metal bunks cramming dozens of faunus workers in like sardines. One wall was clear of beds, and it contained small lockers lined up like in a public school, although none of them had locks. Several were hanging open, and she saw only a handful of
personal possessions in addition to spare coveralls filling the tiny container.

If everything had been new and clean it would've been a highly unpleasant room to live in. Instead it hadn't been maintained in decades, meaning that everything was scratched and dented, with every surfaced covered in a layer of the grime which was almost impossible to clean off after a day of hard work mining. It was a depressing room, and in that it perfectly fit its current inhabitants.

The faunus weren't the frightening murderers who killed her mother when she was a child. They weren't the angry protesters, or terrorist White Fang members. They were too exhausted and resigned to do more than toss her a brief glare when she entered the room before going back to murmuring among themselves, or more commonly, trying to nap.

“Here, this is Greene,” Ruby said, gesturing to an older faunus with a dog's tail.

Greene sent her an unpleasant look before focusing on Ruby. “What's this?”

“Can you tell my partner what you told me?”

“Why, you think it'll make a difference?” he snorted. When Ruby sent him a pleading look he rolled his eyes and focused on Weiss. “The foreman's been working us harder than ever. Last couple of months we've had to bring in more than before every day. Used to be we worked our eight hours and called it a day. Yesterday it took me fourteen hours to satisfy him, and that's only 'cause we hit that rich new vein.”

“That's against company policy,” Weiss said frowning.

Greene snorted. “You think anyone cares what happens to us faunus? All the SDC wants is dust, and they don't care what they do to us to get it. Besides, it's not like we're likely to sign on for a second time, and with how shit things are for us out there there's always more faunus lining up to work your mines. They're probably cheering how much production's up.”

Weiss studied him, looking for any sign of a lie. “Reports indicate production is down.”

Greene's eyes widened. “That's impossible. We're all working harder than ever, and we've been finding lots of dust. We should be getting overtime and then some.”

Weiss shook her head. “Are you sure the dust crystals are common in the rock you're bringing in?”

“Rock?” he asked. “Some of my carts have been half crystal. The new vein is rich.”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged looks for a moment. “Thank you, Greene,” Weiss said finally. “You've given us something to look into, and… I will look into how many hours you are working. I know you think we Schnee's are responsible for everything, but all we can do is appoint foremen and hope that they follow established procedures.”

“Like you couldn't send inspectors,” he snorted. “You certainly open portals often enough to get the dust home.”

“It's not that simple,” she said.

“Seems like it is to me,” he said, rolling over in his bunk so that his back faced them. “You just call it complicated so you don't have to do anything about it.”

Weiss grit her teeth for a moment before looking over at Ruby, who was looking at her with concern. After taking a deep breath she spoke, ignoring the worker completely. “If the miners are getting more
dust than usual, then the problem must be further up the chain. Did you speak to the people responsible for extracting crystals from raw ore?”

“No, I'm not sure who they are,” Ruby said.

“Come on, I know where they should be working,” Weiss said, heading to the exit.

“Is there anything you can do?” Ruby asked after a while.

Weiss tensed up. “Do?”

“About what's happening here,” Ruby said.

Weiss sighed, looking away. She'd had no idea things were so rough, but she suspected that, given the likely doctored records, that the foreman was responsible for the dust trafficking, and perhaps responsible for other things, too. Were the conditions in the Green Hill Mine normal, or an outlier? She was suddenly suspicious of her father's insistence that she stay away from the worker areas of the mines she had visited in the past, but that didn't necessarily mean there was a more general problem.

“I'm not the heir, anymore, although it isn't fully official,” Weiss said eventually. “Because of my... condition I won't be able to have children, so my brother Whitely will inherit control of the SDC. My ability to actually do anything is very limited.”

“So you're just going to ignore this?” Ruby asked, her voice disappointed.

Weiss stopped and looked at her girlfriend. “I'm going to find whoever is responsible for the dust trafficking. If that isn't the foreman, I'm going to talk to him as well. The extra hours he's been forcing them to do is being caused by the need to acquire more dust to make up for the loads getting smuggled away. But beyond the weight of my name I have no real power over company decisions.”

Ruby had stopped, facing Weiss in the small, dimly lit hallway. “Are you okay with this, though?”

Weiss thought about that for a long moment. “That depends on what you mean. Do I wish things were different? Yes. These are people, and they're being treated poorly. Do I think the mine should be shut down? No. It has to be done. Like I said, in this case the ends justify the means.”

“I can't accept that,” Ruby said. “There has to be a way to do the right thing.”

“I know, and that makes you naive, but a good person,” Weiss said. “You are free to feel that way because demons aren't overrunning our planet. And they aren't because of this mine and others like it. Now let's finish this job and go home before being in Faerie kills us.”

The ore processing room was busy, the sharp scent of raw dust filling the air along with the loud banging of hammers and other tools. Modern machinery didn't function in Faerie, so like the mining all of the work had to be done with manual labor. Chunks of stone sparkling with dust crystals were laid out on heavily reinforced metal tables while faunus stood around them using small picks or heavy hammers to extract the valuable material. Slowly bins full of crystals filled up, while workers transported broken gravel to be dumped elsewhere.

Ruby led the way to one worker who was putting away his tools, obviously having finished a long, tiring shift. His coveralls were heavy with sweat, and his hair was slick with it around his short horns. He eyed them warily as they approached, putting away his tools without saying a word.

“Hey!” Ruby said. “Do you, um, do you have a minute to talk? We wanted to ask a few questions.”
“Alright,” he said. “What is it?”

“Have you been getting as much dust as normal?” Ruby asked.

“More’n normal,” he grunted. “We’ve gotta process all the ore they bring us everyday, and they’ve been bringin’ up more loads than ever. I should’ve stopped an hour ago, but my shift doesn't end ’til I finish my queue.”

“What about useful output?” Weiss asked. “Have you been extracting more or less dust than before?”

“Quite a bit more,” he said, gesturing vaguely at the half full bin of crystals next to him. “This is the third today. Normally I don't fill the second, but they've been overworkin’ us so much we've been puttin’ out extra loads. Must make the bean counters in your offices happy, Ms. Schnee. Maybe you could see fit to share some of those profits with the workers?”

Weiss frowned. “I have no control over your remuneration. So you're certain that all of you are producing more dust than before?”

“I'm sure,” he scowled. “I might not be some fancy businessman, but I've got damn eyes and can count. We've been well ahead of quota for months now, not that it matters to the foreman.”

“So the foreman is aware of your increased production?” Weiss asked.

“Of course,” he said. “He even assigned some security guards to help haul the extra dust away. Too much for the normal runners to transport, I guess. Now, can I go turn in my timesheet? I need at least a little sleep before I start work again.”

“Sure,” Ruby said. “Thank you!”

“Right,” he grunted, walking away from them quickly.

“What do you think?” Ruby asked.

“I want to take a quick look at the paperwork they're filling out, but I think someone is doctoring the records, and not many people have the ability to do that,” Weiss said. “I also want to find these security guards that have been hauling the extra dust away. Security are the only ones cleared to leave the perimeter.”

She spent a few minutes examining the forms of the workers who were nearly done with their shifts. The handwriting looked familiar from her recent perusal of the other forms in the records room, although the amount of dust shown was far greater than any of the forms that she had studied earlier. When she was finished she led the way back to the foreman's office, not even bothering to knock before opening the door.

The foreman looked up sharply, mouth opening to object to her sudden entrance when Weiss abruptly cut him off. “We have a few more questions, Mr. Thistle. If you have a moment?”

“Of- of course,” he said. “Come in, Ms. Schnee.”

“We've spoken to the workers, and they claim a very different story than your records show,” Weiss said. “The documents filled out today show a vastly larger amount of actual dust being gathered for shipment, and none of them are aware of this being a greater amount than previous efforts.”

The foreman frowned. “What exactly are you saying, Ms. Schnee?”
“I’m saying that over the past several months a new, larger vein of dust has been found,” Weiss said. “Despite the increase in production this should cause, you have insisted that your employees work longer and longer hours, further increasing the amount of dust gathered. Despite this, your records, both here and at home show a decrease in dust production. At the same time, dust has been flooding the streets, being sold illegally. I am sure that you can understand what I’m implying, Mr. Thistle.”

“How is that possible?” he asked. “Very few people have access to my records, and where would they take the dust? No one but security is even allowed outside.”

“Who has access to the records room, Mr. Thistle?” Weiss asked.

“I have keys, and so does the chief of security,” he said.

“Who is the chief of security?” Weiss asked.

“Slate Icterine,” he said. “He should be in his office… he rarely leaves it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Thistle,” Weiss said, standing and heading to the door. “We’ll return shortly… don’t go anywhere.”

“Of- of course.”

When they were in the hallway Ruby looked over at her. “Why didn't you say anything about what he's making them do?”

“Our first priority is catching the ones responsible,” Weiss said. “The foreman has information we need, and furthermore, he is most likely implicated in what is going on. It's more efficient to use his resources and when he is brought down simply ensure his replacement doesn't do the same things he did.”

“Still…”

“Don't worry, we don't have long to finish this, so we won't long leave the situation unresolved.”

“Okay,” Ruby sighed.

The security chief's office wasn't far from the foreman's office, and Weiss simply opened the door and looked inside. The room was messy, with piled up forms half completed on the desk, which also had the feet of the security chief trampling them. He was reclined with his feet up, snoring heavily.

Weiss narrowed her eyes and stomped over to the desk, knocking on the metal loudly. “Mr. Icterine!”

“How… what…” he mumbled, sitting up and staring at her blearily. “Who're you?”

“I am Weiss Schnee. Why were you sleeping on the job, Mr. Icterine?”

He grunted. “Don't see why not. Nothin' ever happens here… your contracts see to that. Workers won't cause trouble, the natives don't get restless… all I'm paid to do is fill out a few forms. Might as well nap when I can.”

Weiss gritted her teeth. “How long have you worked for the SDC, Mr. Icterine?”

“Almost twenty years, ma'am,” he said. “I'm a year out from finishing my third five here at Green Hill.”
“If you intend to draw your pension, I would suggest you become more serious about your work,” she snapped. “We have evidence of dust trafficking coming from this facility, and I arrive to investigate and find the chief so incompetent he is practically complicit!”

“Hey now, I'm not doing anything wrong,” he grumbled. “Maybe I'm not the most on top of my job, but I'd find out if anyone was stealing dust. I mean, where would they go? The gate guards would notice.”

“And if they were doing it?” Ruby asked.

“That's... that's unlikely,” he said. “I make sure my best are the ones doing that. See, they're all the ones with the most experience.”

He thrust a random stack of forms at Weiss, and she frowned down at them. “You have four security who are on their second tour. Is that unusual?”

“Well... a little,” he admitted. “Most get pretty sick of being stuck here doin' nothin' all day. I've never had more than one or two come back, but after a few months off four all came back at once signing up for a second term. I wasn't about to turn 'em down, especially when they volunteered to do the outside shifts. Nothin's ever gone wrong, but who wants to stand around in bad weather all the time?”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a look. “Who has access to the records room?”

“Just me and Mr. Thistle,” he said, gesturing towards a keyring sitting on his desk. “I've got a copy of all the keys, and there's no reason for anyone else to need one there.”

“Can you make keys?” Ruby asked.

“Well, sure, but I don't usually bother,” he said with a shrug. “There's an old manual key grinder next door in the main security room. Don't think I've ever had to use it though.”

“But anyone could?” Ruby asked.

“Sure,” he said with another shrug. “They'd have to have the originals though, so they'd have to get my key ring away from me.”

“The one sitting on your desk while you were asleep with the door unlocked,” Weiss deadpanned.

“Er...” he said, frowning.

“Where are the four right now?” Weiss asked.

“Well... two are on watch topside, the other two...” he grabbed some forms and flipped through them. “Oh, here we go, they sometimes volunteer to help the miners, especially with how much they've been working lately. They should be hauling some dust to storage right now. Real go getters, those two.”

Weiss didn't even pause to say anything, simply turning and hustling out of the room. Ruby jogged after her, calling over her shoulder as she did. “Thanks! Weiss, what are you thinking?”

“I'm thinking that our four security were approached by the White Fang after their first tour of duty,” Weiss said darkly. “I think the two 'volunteering' are actually stealing dust, and if we hurry we might be able to catch them in the act.”
Fifth Case: Confrontations

Weiss and Ruby found that the closest room to the main entrance was a storage closet full of weather gear and recreational equipment. From the looks of it there was enough to allow all of the workers time off in the courtyard outside, although it was still in the original packaging.

“Why aren't they using this stuff?” Ruby asked.

“Company policy requires that we provide recreational activities for our workers,” Weiss said. “The way that recreation is performed is under the purview of the foreman, but we provide a standard package of supplies based upon terrain and climate conditions.”

“So… why isn't he giving it to them?” Ruby asked.

Weiss hesitated. “I'm not sure. It can be dangerous sometimes, which is why policy doesn't require outdoor recreation.”

“You put too much trust in your foreman,” Ruby said.

“I'm not-”

“I know,” Ruby said. “Do you know that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Whenever you talk about what the SDC does you always say 'we',” Ruby said. “I know you aren't the one doing this stuff. You said you weren't really the heir anymore, right? So you won't ever be in charge of it. So why do you keep acting like you're responsible?”

Weiss was quiet for a little while. “I'm a Schnee.”

Ruby reached over and after making sure that Weiss was looking took her hand. “You're Weiss.”

Weiss blinked back tears, and after a moment Ruby shifted to carefully give her a hug. As always Weiss froze from the contact, but after carefully making sure there was no chance she would accidentally touch her skin Weiss relaxed into the embrace. It was so warm and comforting, filling a need that had been so long denied that she hadn't even realized how much she was starving for it.

“Thank you,” Weiss whispered, steeling herself for what she wanted to say. “I- I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Ruby said happily.

Ruby smelled like roses, and Weiss wondered if it was because of the residue from her strange inherent magic, or if it was because of some perfume or shampoo that she used. Eventually Weiss pulled away and wiped her eyes, before sitting down beside the door. “We need to be quiet if we're going to stakeout the exit.”

“Okay,” Ruby agreed, sitting beside her and taking her hand again.

They sat in silence for a while. When they first met Weiss had thought it was impossible for Ruby to be silent for long, at least without being mean to her to make her feel bad. Thinking back to how she had treated her partner in the beginning, it was amazing that Ruby even wanted to be her friend, much less more. To be willing to put up with her, with the way she acted, the things her family did, her inability to even touch her…
"I love you," Ruby whispered.

Weiss looked up, blinking in surprise. "Ruby?"

Ruby smiled at her. "I know that look… it's the one where you get all lost in your head and it gives
you a real case of the grumpies. Well, I'm cutting it off at the pass."

Weiss' lip twitched. "A case of the grumpies?"

"Yup," Ruby said. "The grumpiest grumpies."

Weiss shook her head, opening her mouth to respond when they heard footsteps. The two exchanged
glances before standing, Weiss adjusting her sword on her hip when she noticed Ruby pulling out
her gun. "That won't work," she whispered.

Ruby blinked, looking down at her gun. "Huh?"

"Guns don't work," Weiss explained softly. "Nothing we've done has convinced gunpowder that it
wants to burn here. You could use it to put out fires."

Ruby gave her a look. "Why do we have them then?"

Weiss gave her a superior look while scrambling for something resembling an answer for her
oversight. "Because… because… I'll explain later. When we aren't about to confront people."

A few moments later they heard the creak of the heavy front doors opening, and then a little bit after
that the bang as they slammed closed. Ruby carefully pulled the closet door open and they slipped
out, closing it quietly behind them as they approached the door. Ruby started to open it when Weiss
stopped her, pulling out a piece of chalk.

The sigil she drew on the door didn't take more than half a minute, and once it was done she quickly
activated it before putting her chalk away and drawing her sword. At her nod Ruby opened it,
blinking in surprise at how silent it was, the binding magic preventing the metal hinges from making
a sound.

Of the six men in the courtyard, four were wearing the coveralls of miners. They recognized one of
them as the man who opened the gates for them when they first knocked, and Weiss and seen
pictures of the others in the files she had been shown by the chief of security. They all had
nightsticks on their hips, and were too busy to notice the silent opening of the door.

What was keeping them so busy was loading metal crates onto the back of large snails sitting in the
courtyard. The creatures were ten feet long from the tip of the antennae to the end of the foot, with
large purple shells that swirled in beautiful patterns above the bright blue bodies. The shells had
harnesses attached to hold cargo, and beyond the three snails equipped to hold cargo were two more
with saddles on top of the shells.

In the saddles were two more faunus, but these were wearing masks and body armor, with heavy
bladed curved swords on their hips. The two White Fang didn't notice them at first, but when they
stepped out into the courtyard they shouted and climbed down from the saddles, drawing their blades
as they did.

Ruby conjured her scythe as Weiss drew her sword and addressed the six faunus, who were all
getting ready for a fight. "That dust is the property of the SDC, and giving dust to a known terrorist
organization like the White Fang is illegal. You are under arrest."
One of the masked faunus chuckled. “Really? You're outnumbered three to one with no backup, and you want us to surrender?”

Weiss arched an imperious eyebrow. “I'm not sure who negotiated your existence here in Faerie, but I assure you four gentleman that harming me will end very, very badly for you.”

The four SDC workers hesitated, and the White Fang member who had already spoken snorted. “Don't worry about it, I'm sure they do include something in the contract that would hurt you for that. That's the kind of paranoid monsters the Schnees are. You four deal with her partner, we'll handle her.”

Ruby tensed, raising her scythe. “Um, I really don't want to hurt you, and it's kinda hard not to kill people with this thing. Are you sure you guys don't want to surrender?”

Weiss set herself in her proper stance, one foot leading, sword raised defensively. She trusted Ruby to handle the four workers, and even if they were able to overwhelm her with their numbers, she could hold them off long enough for Weiss to fight her opponents. Still, that meant that she needed to deal with them quickly and efficiently if she wanted to help Ruby.

The two were obviously competent fighters, spreading out without a word to try to flank her. They moved with the graceful steps of trained swordsmen, and they held their weapons confidently, apparently well used to using them. The White Fang trained all of their members in both modern and antiquated weaponry, and it was obvious that they had chosen those who were truly skilled at the latter for a mission into Faerie.

Before they could fully flank her Weiss darted forward, lunging towards the masked man on the right. He was the one who had spoken earlier, and when she closed she noticed that he had small round ears in his wild hair. He hesitated just for a moment in surprise at her sudden move, which cost him, as his parry only deflected her thrust from his vitals, still leaving him with a long, deep cut along one bicep. It bled freely as he grunted in pain, moving back to try to gain some distance.

Weiss didn't let up, slashing with her sword towards his neck, then twisting her weapon into a low thrust to his thigh when he brought up his weapon to block. He managed to stumble back out of reach of the move, but that was just the opening she wanted as she lunged forward again, her sword piercing his bulletproof vest with ease between the trauma plates, sinking deeply into his stomach.

Movement behind her had her diving to the side and rolling, just missing being decapitated by his partner, who had a short crocodile's tail protruding from the seat of his pants. He kept the pressure on, swinging at her even as she was rolling back to her feet, barely letting her defend herself. She was soon forced to actively block his strikes with her own sword, gripping it with both hands as she was barely strong enough to hold back his one handed swings.

Despite the tight focus she had to maintain on her opponent she didn't completely lose her situational awareness. The one she'd run through had returned to his feet, although for how long was in doubt with how heavily he was bleeding. He was staggering towards them, obviously eager to help finish off a Schnee before he collapsed. She could also hear Ruby still fighting, although she couldn't spare any attention to how that battle was going.

She needed to do something to shift things in her favor, and she didn't have long to do it. The swordsmen were far more skilled than the White Fang they had fought at the Traveling Market, skilled enough that she would be in serious trouble if the first one joined his companion, no matter how badly she had wounded him.

She decided to trust her partner, so she began to steer her retreat towards the sounds of combat.
happening nearby. When she was close she called out, “Ruby?”

A moment later there was a red blur and a scattering of rose petals, and then a spray of blood as her opponent lost a hand, the severed part still clinging to his sword as it flew by. Weiss darted forward, stabbing him under the armpit with her sword, pulling it out without pausing as she thrust into the neck of the badly wounded man she’d already stabbed earlier. He fell with a gurgle, eyes staring dead before he even hit the ground.

Weiss finally looked up, taking in wider scene. One of the three workers was down, holding his side where Ruby had inflicted a long, bleeding gash. The other three were still unwounded, although they looked to be a bit battered.

Ruby was in worse shape than most of them. She had obviously taken several hits from the nightsticks the workers carried, a black eye swiftly forming as well as obvious bruises on her exposed forearms. She was also winded, both from fending off four assailants and the burst of magic to gain the speed to disarm the White Fang for Weiss. Still, nothing looked serious, and she felt a wave of relief at that.

Weiss faced the three still up, casually flicking the blood off of her blade before pointing it at them. “One final offer to surrender, or you’ll be joining them in the afterlife.”

The three still standing looked at each other for a long, uneasy moment before dropping their nightsticks. Weiss sighed in relief, cleaning her sword off on the vest of one of the White Fang before sheathing it as Ruby came up next to her. “Thanks.”

“What for?” Ruby asked.

Weiss smiled. “I might have won, but you really helped me with him. I know it must've been difficult with your own battle happening at the same time.”

Ruby blushed, giving Weiss a huge smile. “Of course! I wasn't going to abandon my partner! Besides, they were starting to get me cornered, and I was about to use my speed against them anyway. I've got a long way to go with the scythe...”

Weiss snorted. “You fought four against one. Even if they weren't terribly skilled, and had disadvantageous weapons it was still a very impressive feat.”

“It- it wasn't that big of a deal,” Ruby said with a blush.

Weiss gave her a small smile, then walked over a pressed a kiss to her a clean spot on her clothed shoulder, blushing fiercely as she did. “Can you take them inside? I need to ask the White Fang a few questions.”

“O-okay, sure,” Ruby said. “Come on! If you don't want to, um, keep fighting then come inside. You're under arrest... and he needs a doctor.”

Weiss walked over to the first dead White Fang member, pulling off her gloves as she did. She crouched and placed a hand on him, quickly suppressing his animation when he became a zombie at her touch. Once he was again quiescent she began to search for his soul.

It was not as easy of a task as it was on earth. While it could be tiring to sweep the borders of the beyond for the recently departed, it was nothing compared to the effort of searching on Faerie. The plane greedily devoured souls, and it wanted to consume those who passed in mere moments. In the end she was barely able to wrest the White Fang member from the jaws of the afterlife and return him to his body.
She sat back with a sigh and loosened her grip on the zombie, allowing it to speak. “You Schnee bitch,” it growled. “We will destroy all of your family.”

“You are very dead,” Weiss said waspishly. “I need information, and you will give it to me.”

“Never.”

Weiss was glad that Ruby wasn’t back yet as she swiftly bound the soul of the White Fang member as she had done before. Once she was finished she glared into the green glowing eyes of the corpse. “What is your name?”

“Coby Orchid,” he snarled.

The door opened and Weiss glanced up sharply, before nodding to Ruby as she approached alone. “Who sent you here?”

“Adam Taurus,” he said.

Weiss felt a chill run up her spine. “Where is he?”

“I don't know,” Coby said smugly.

Weiss' eyes narrowed. “How did he send you on this mission?”

“Adam contacted all of the cell leaders, asked to send their best to be picked for an important mission,” Coby said. “He tested us all in a warehouse, and I was chosen.”

“What was the mission?”

“We came here to Faerie, and our job was to transport dust from this mine to our portal site,” he said. “The White Fang's best sorcerers open a portal twice a month to send what we gather through. It takes a lot of dust opening the portals, but it's nothing compared to how much we get.”

“How many of you are there?” Ruby asked.

“There are a dozen left of us,” he said, his words strained as he struggled to keep them from coming out.

“Where were you taking the dust?” Weiss asked.

He struggled even harder, but his attempt was in vain. “Ridire Castle,” he said. “It's almost a day by snail from here.”

“Are you alright?” Ruby asked, noticing Weiss' discomfort at the named location.

“I'm dead and now forced to betray my cause,” Coby snarled. “I'm far from alright.”

Weiss rolled her eyes and placed a hand on him again. “Be at peace, Coby Orchid. Find the peace in death you lacked in life.”

She leaned back with a sigh before pulling her gloves back on. “Ridire Castle is a ruin. We… my family was offered a deal by a Sidhe Lord. He would plead on our behalf with the courts, seeking to grant Schnees the ability to stay here indefinitely without our souls being consumed. My ancestors were then offered another deal by the rest of the Sidhe Lords to betray him during the battle. They chose to betray him, although he killed them before he was driven into exile. It was the last time we… my family were ever offered that advantage, and the rest of the Sidhe Lords became even more
hesitant to deal with us.”

“You recognized the name Adam Taurus, too,” Ruby said. “Who is he?”

Weiss pursed her lips. “Adam Taurus is one of the leaders of the White Fang. He's extremely militant, and is personally responsible for the death of several members of the SDC’s board. He's been one of the top most wanted men by the FBI and Interpol for the last five years. Anyway… what did you do with the prisoners?”

“The chief of security locked them up,” she said. “I'm not sure what he'll do with them.”

Weiss frowned. “Most likely they'll stay locked up until their contract ends, and then they'll be sent home for trial.”

“So they're going to be in jail for years, then go on trial to go to jail for years?”

Weiss shrugged. “The only other choice is for their contract to be broken, and that means either they or a Schnee has to lose half of their lifespan. Keeping them imprisoned is a mercy.”

Weiss stood and sighed, walking to the door. “Before we go I want to have a few words with Mr. Thistle.”

The foreman was still in his office when Weiss once again walked through his door. “Yes? Did you find anything?”

“I did,” Weiss said, staring him down. “Four of your security staff were working for the White Fang. They've been stealing dust by the crate and smuggling it to the mortal world.”

“I see,” he grunted. “How unfortunate. That means we've lost a lot of dust.”

“That's why it looked like you weren't mining much,” Ruby offered. “You don't need to work everyone so hard anymore.”

He chuckled, leaning back in his seat. “I suppose I can step back things eventually, but for now I need to make up for lost time. That decreased production looks very bad in my numbers, and I need to appease the SDC for a while. No, I'll be keeping them working extra hours for at least this budget year.”

Weiss frowned. “That's not fair to them. They weren't the ones that incompetently didn't notice tens of millions of dollars worth of theft.”

“Yes, but they're not the ones who stand to be penalized for what happened,” Mr. Thistle said sharply. “As long as I make up for lost production the bean counters won't care about the losses. I just need to come out far enough ahead on the year and my pension is secured.”

“Is that all you care about?” Ruby objected. “Money?”

The foreman shrugged. “I suppose so, yes.”

“What you're doing is against company policy,” Weiss said. “I will inform my father that you are overworking the miners and not allowing them any use of the recreational materials we provide.”

Mr. Thistle started laughing at that. Not a small chuckle, but a full, deep belly laugh. “You really think that will matter? If your father knew I increased production and made recreation facilities unnecessary he would give me a promotion and have me teach other foreman the trick, not get me in
“How can you?” Ruby asked. “They're people… your people.”

He snorted. “Please, those idiots aren't 'my people'. I might be a faunus, but I'm an SDC man through and through. They know what they sign up for, and if they're too stupid to do anything but mine dust for another man's dime then that's on them. I'll just keep getting ahead with the sweat of their labors.”

“My father-”

“Won't care,” he interrupted. “Go follow up on the thefts, Ms. Schnee. I know you aren't really the heir, and the people that actually run the company don't give a damn about the workers, human or faunus. They care about money, and my methods make them money. And everything is technically legal enough the courts won't bother with a case. Do you think I'm the only foreman that knows the score? This is normal, and it always will be.”

Weiss stared into his uncaring eyes for a long moment, before turning on her heel and storming out the door, Ruby following behind.
Snail travel was surprisingly comfortable. It left them a little higher off of the ground than a horse would've, but the saddle was more like a comfortable, padded chair that you buckled into rather than something you straddled, and Weiss didn't have to be concerned about accidentally touching the shell the same way she would've about a horse's body.

The snails had descended the steep sides of the Green Hill quickly, the foot of the blue body easily finding purchase as it moved like it was on flat ground all the way to the bottom. Weiss had checked the maps in the security office before leaving the building, but as they reached the bottom and turned to head towards the bridge over the river she realized that the creatures knew where to go without being directed, no doubt having taken the same path many, many times over the past months.

Ruby stayed silent for a while, and despite being upset about everything that had just happened Weiss began to enjoy the scenery. If one ignored just how dangerous Faerie was it was a beautiful place, with pristine forests full of strange plants and creatures the likes of which existed nowhere else.

The River of Tears was a swiftly flowing river, and beyond it the trees changed from green to bright red. Across the water was a narrow wooden bridge, obviously having been built by something nonhuman, as wooden construction wasn't possible for mortal workers in Faerie. It was a simple bridge, just planks of wood attached together with no railing or supports at all.

The moment that both snails were on the structure a figure emerged from the water near the middle of the span. It was hideously deformed, with a face like melted wax, the skin sagging so much that it completely blocked one eye. The other was huge and bloodshot, latching onto Weiss as she was the one in the lead.

“You have to pay the toll,” it growled with a voice like an avalanche.

The snails both slowly came to a halt as Weiss stared the figure down. She recognized the huge creature, which would no doubt stand well more than ten feet tall if it wasn't mostly submerged in the swiftly flowing river, as a troll. They were thick witted but very strong and tough, and if possible she would prefer to find some way to negotiate with the creature.

“Toll?” she asked calmly.

“Aye, this is my bridge,” the troll said. “You pay or you die.”

“And what is the toll?”

“I want to eat one of you,” the troll said, licking its lips.

Weiss just gave the troll a very unimpressed look. “No.”

The troll grumbled a little under its breath before speaking. “No one ever accepts eating someone as payment, anymore. And you're not bringin' anything with you. The masked men used to bring me animals to let 'em cross.”

“What about cookies?” Ruby offered.

“What are cookies?”
“You've never had a cookie?!” Ruby gasped, horrified. “They're the best food ever.”

Weiss watched, bemused, as Ruby awkwardly climbed down from the top of her snail and approached the troll, digging out a bag of cookies from her jacket pocket. She offered the troll one, which it snatched from her hand with surprisingly delicate claws. After giving it a sniff it swallowed the morsel, eye lighting up at the taste. “That is good. Not as toothsome as fresh meat, but a nice change. I'll take your bag of cookies to let you both cross.”

“All of them?” Ruby gasped.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Done. Come on, Ruby. We don't have all the time in the world.”

Ruby pouted but agreed, handing over the rest of the bag with visible reluctance. After the troll took it it disappeared back under the bridge as they began to ride again. It was good to have crossed without costing them anything important, no matter how much Ruby pouted about the lost bag.

The Forever Fall Forest was much cooler than the other side of the river had been. Weiss sighed in relief to be in weather more suiting the thick winter clothing she was wearing, although she was still somewhat warm. Ruby also looked more comfortable as she urged her snail to come up alongside Weiss.

“Just how many cookies do you have on you, anyway?” Weiss asked.

Ruby moaned mournfully. “Less, now. When Goodwitch said we were going I snuck off and grabbed a bunch from my desk… for emergency purposes.”

Weiss shook her head, smiling slightly. Ruby could be so childish, but for some reason she found it endearing rather than exasperating. She really was going soft.

“How are you doing?” Ruby asked after a while.

“I'm… alright, I suppose,” Weiss said. “It's nice to be in autumn.”


Weiss gave her a look. “Ruby, it isn't even winter everywhere on earth. Why would you think it has to be winter on a different plane of existence.”

“Um… uh…”

“Anyway, it's nice to be away from summer, finally,” Weiss said.

“How does that work?” Ruby asked. “I mean, why is it so much cooler over here, and all, you know, fall like.”

“Because it is fall,” Weiss said with a shrug. “In Faerie different regions have different climates. There are areas where it's always winter, or always spring. Green Hill was on the edge of summer territory, and we've cross over into autumn now. This is the Forever Fall Forest.”

“How does that even work?” Ruby asked. “Don't plants need seasons to grow and stuff?”

Weiss smiled. “Don't forget where you are. Plants grow here because they are obligated to, not because of the weather. The largest wheat farm in all of Faerie is in winter territory. It's supposed to look quite strange, seeing stalks of mature crops poking out of foot deep snow year round.”

Ruby shook her head. “I'm never going to get used to this place.”
“You shouldn't,” Weiss agreed. “We aren't going to be here long, and after we leave it won't be safe for you to return for many months, and even after that you would only be able to stay for a little while again.”

They rode in silence for a while after that. Despite being creatures associated with moving very slowly, the faerie snails were actually quite fast, covering almost as much ground as a horse in the same period of time, but doing an even better job of traveling over truly rough terrain.

The forest was easily the most beautiful place that Weiss had ever seen. Leaves fell from the trees above with some regularity, and looking far enough into the distance allowed her to see them descending like drifting snow. The leaves were a bright, bright red color, like nothing in the mortal world, and just looking around brought a smile to Weiss' face.

“You're really enjoying this,” Ruby said.

“Just look around, it's so beautiful,” Weiss said. “I need to see if anyone has ever painted a picture of the Forever Fall.”

“It's really weird watching you smile like that,” Ruby said with a grin.

“Oh, quiet you,” Weiss said, still smiling. “We should enjoy things while we can… this trip is going to be very dangerous. Just the two of us, without backup, potentially encountering a large number of well trained and armed terrorists. We'll need to be cautious and come up with a plan that isn't just charge in… and we might have to give up on confronting them at all if circumstances don't permit it.”

They were silent for a little while until Ruby spoke up carefully. “Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“What's there to talk about?”

“Um… the whole foreman not doing anything better thing?” Ruby offered.

Weiss sighed. “I'm planning to speak with my father, but… I'm afraid that he may be correct. I was too young to really know how he felt about them the faunus before, but after mother died… my father became very cold when he wasn't angry. When things went wrong at work he would come home furious, and those problems were often caused by White Fang attacks or more mainstream faunus protests. My father hates the faunus, and if he knows the truth about the way that Mr. Thistle treats them he's more likely to be amused than offended, as long as it doesn't hurt his bottom line.”

“Is there anyone else you can ask?”

“Not anyone better,” Weiss admitted. “The rest of the board have all lost friends or family to the White Fang, and most of them are even greedier than my father. If they have any idea what's happening, then I doubt anything I say will make him finally act on the matter… and even before things became so violent they weren't doing anything to help.”

“It's not your fault,” Ruby said firmly.

“But-”

“Nope.”

“I'm-”
“Nuh huh.”

“There's-”

“No.”

“Ruby!” Weiss objected.

Ruby grinned at her for a moment. “Really, Weiss. You aren't the SDC, remember?”

“I just… if I wasn't what I am maybe I could've inherited,” Weiss said sadly, looking down at her gloved hands. “If I was in charge, maybe I could make things better.”

Ruby hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe… but would you have known about what's happening? Would it have meant as much to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I know you felt bad about it, but you called Blake a, well, you know,” Ruby said uncomfortably. “If you'd stayed the heir, your father probably would've worked even more trying to make you believe that kinda stuff was okay. And you wouldn't have left Schnee Manor and met Blake and- and helped other faunus on cases. You wouldn't have come here and seen what things were really like. If you weren't the person you are and hadn't done the stuff that you've, um, done… would you have been a person who really cared?”

Weiss didn't say anything else, and they rode in silence for a while. Eventually Ruby spoke up again. “I'm sorry about how angry I was with you, earlier. It was just a lot to take in.”

Weiss sighed. “Yeah. Even worse, for all of the terrible things happening here, for how much I want to convince the company to change policies and treat the workers better… even if I was in charge and could set the rules and strictly enforce them, I would still have to leave most of this as it is. We need this dust mined, and we've reached an impasse at improving the conditions for the workers. Even if I was in charge things would be almost the same.”

“There has to be a better way to do things,” Ruby said.

“Does there?” Weiss asked thoughtfully, catching one of the red leaves that was falling near her and looking at it. Unlike mortal leaves that fell from trees it was velvety soft and felt more alive than many green leaves. “Nothing requires that there be a humane solution to a problem. We need the dust to save millions of lives. The only way to mine for it is what we do today. That mining causes suffering. That means we balance millions dead with hundreds suffering, and that's a calculus that anyone can solve.”

“There has to be a better way,” Ruby said quietly.

“Nothing in the planes promises that,” Weiss said. “Besides, do you know how much worse some things are in the real world? The SDC doesn't use child labor, which puts us ahead of many clothing manufacturers. We don't have to put up suicide netting around our factories to catch people trying to kill themselves unlike the people that make my cellphone. We put up with so many terrible things happening to the workers in foreign countries in order to make what we buy cheaper, and none of that is life or death.”

“All that stuff's wrong,” Ruby agreed. “This is just wrong, too.”

“I never said it wasn't wrong,” Weiss said. “I just said that it's necessarily. And the necessity justifies
even these means. It would justify even uglier things.”

Before Ruby could offer a rebuttal they both heard a scream. Weiss and Ruby looked at each other, and without a word Ruby pulled on her snail's reigns, urging it away from the direction that it wanted to go, which barely passed for a game trail, and into fresh wilderness. The main difference between the two being the depth of the fallen leaves on the ground.

“Help!” the voice screamed again.

“I love Vegemite!” another voice said.

“Help!” the first voice called.

“Lisa needs help!” another voice, this one male said.

“No, please!” another male said.

“I love Vegemite!”

“Help!”

Weiss started to slow her mount. What were they doing? It was bad enough that they were charging into the woods away from where they were planning to go, in *Faerie*, to look for a voice shouting for help. The more strange things they heard the more it occurred to her that they had leapt to do something really stupid. “Wait, Ruby-”

Before she could finish her sentence the fast moving faerie snails burst out into the open. Rather than a clearing, it was the edge of a wide, deep gorge. The cliffside was rocky, with large boulders scattered about liberally. Crouching on those boulders were four of the strangest creatures that she had ever seen.

They had bodies like large lions, but their four feet resembled the hands of a large monkey. They had long, prehensile tails, the ends of which were studded with quills like porcupines, which the creatures raised above their bodies when they entered the clearing, curving them like scorpion tails. The strangest feature, however, was that their heads, while surrounded with thick black lion's manes, were remarkably human.

One of the beasts opened its mouth, the face splitting all the way to the ears, revealing a triple row of fangs crammed tightly to fill the entire mouth. The creature then spoke, calling out the same masculine voice that they had heard earlier. “I love Vegemite!”

“Wh-what?” Ruby repeated.

“Help!” another said.

“Run!” Weiss shouted, pulling her snail's reins as hard as she could, trying to get her mount to take her away from the creatures.

She was a little too late.

One of the beasts flicked its tail, launching quills towards her. She had gotten the snail to begin to move, but she tried to dive from her mount, forgetting about the seatbelt keeping her in the saddle. She jerked in place, grunting in pain as the leather belt held her tightly as she tensed, ready to be skewered by the flying quills.
Her mount jerked and began run madly. Looking up, Weiss realized that the monster had thrown its attack at her snail rather than her. The shell protected it from most of them, but a number had sunk deeply into the creature's foot. It was obviously in great pain, however, as it ran blindly away from their attacker.

“Weiss!” Ruby called, flicking her reins hard, urging her snail to run more quickly.

“Weiss!” one of the monsters called, its voice an exact duplicate of Ruby's.

“What-” Ruby started, turning to look back.

One of the creatures grinned, flicking its tail towards her. “Lisa needs help!”

Ruby reacted more quickly than Weiss, undoing her seatbelt and diving from her saddle, a few scattered petals falling behind her as she moved faster than a normal human to get out of the line of fire. It was fortunate that she had as the second one had been less discriminating with its target, several quills passing right by where she had been. “What are they!”

“Manticores!” Weiss shouted. “We have to run! If they sting you you're dead!”

Weiss pulled at her seatbelt, trying to loosen it, but it was stuck, the brass buckle warped slightly by how vigorously she had thrown herself against it. She noticed her snail was running straight ahead rather than fleeing into the woods, its path taking her straight towards the edge of the cliff. She stopped messing with her seatbelt, pulling on the reins, but it didn't do any good.

“Weiss!” Ruby screamed.

“Weiss!” Weiss shouted as her mount ran straight off the edge of the cliff. “Just run! Get to the ruins!”

And then she was falling, the snail tumbling end over end. She could see far below a fast moving, broad river. She pulled desperately, the heavy buckle refusing to come undone, and then she hit the water.

It was cold, brutally cold. The snail's heavy shell dragged it down into the water, the land-based mollusk thrashing and twitching as the venomous stingers continued to cause agony in the large creature. The result was Weiss sinking rapidly into the cold, dark river, tumbling erratically, unable to do anything.

Weiss' vision grayed out as she hadn't taken the time to properly hold her breath. She was moments away from running out of air, desperately clawing at her seatbelt with her gloved hands, unable to free herself. Just when she was sure that she would drown she remembered where she was and took a cautious breath.

It was disturbing inhaling water, and the shockingly cold temperature burned her lungs even worse than her oxygen deprivation had. Still, the Schnee deal with the air was incredibly effective, and it didn't matter what she inhaled as the act of breathing was all that was required to sustain her life. She took several deep, calming breaths to stop panicking just as her mount reached the bottom of the river, settling on its side, twitching.

After a few more attempts to free herself Weiss dug into her gear, pulling out the short iron knife that Ozpin had given each of them. The faerie leather parted easily at the touch of the iron blade, and soon she was free, tucking it away as she swam for the surface.
The hard thing about breathing water was making the transition back to breathing air. When she stuck her head above the surface she tried to take a breath, but her lungs were full of water, not letting her properly inhale. She coughed forcefully several times, trying to clear them. She coughed, hacked and gagged, but finally she could fill her lungs with air again.

When she blinked away her tears she finally took in her position. The water was swiftly flowing through the bottom of the canyon, and there was nowhere to climb out. The water was also shockingly cold, and while she had a deal that would keep her breathing if she slipped back under, she had no way to keep herself from the hypothermia that was sure to come.

Her teeth began to chatter, and she soon found herself struggling to tread water, her clothing and equipment weighing her down as the cold drained the energy from her body. She treader water for as long as she could, but with no end to the steep canyon walls in sight she found herself slipping beneath the water, unable to keep moving.

As her consciousness began to fade away her last thoughts were of Ruby.
Fifth Case: Eye Opening

Weiss didn't expect to wake up again. She thought that her body would be left to be eaten by fish, kelpie and rusalka, but instead she was in a warm, soft bed in a well heated room. She could actually hear a crackling fire nearby, and smell something delicious cooking. It was with great effort that she forced herself to full consciousness rather than relaxing in comfort.

The room was quite small, with few furnishings and even less decorations. The floor, walls, and ceiling were all made of heavy stone blocks, without a hint of wood or metal anywhere in the construction. A large fireplace burned nearby, providing the heat for the room and the only light as well. A cauldron of stew bubbled merrily next to the flames, kept hot and providing the delicious smell. The only exit from the room was covered by a heavy curtain, which lay well enough to block any light from passing through it.

Slowly Weiss lifted the blankets and peered under them. She was still wearing her clothing, gloves and all, and however long she had been out for it had been long enough for her to become warm and dry. She felt grimy though, and if she didn't need to find Ruby, finish their mission and get home as soon as possible she would've gladly gone back to sleep and taken a long bath when she got up.

Before she could force her sore body out of bed the curtain shifted and a middle aged woman entered the room. She was thin and tired looking, with a stooped posture that made her look even older at first glance than she actually was. She also had two long rabbit ears on top of her head, revealing herself to be a faunus.

“Oh good, you're awake,” the woman said, smiling slightly.

Weiss didn't know where she was, but she was in the company of a faunus woman far from safety with no backup or aid. She swallowed the fear that sped up her heart as best she could, offering a smile that was more of a grimace than anything else. “Thank you for saving me.”

“Well, technically, it's my husband who saved you,” she said with a friendly smile. “He was fishing and caught a big one, and boy was he surprised when he pulled you out. He almost threw you back, but decided to check if your heart was still beating. It was slow but you were still with us so we brought you here.”

“Still, you nursed me back to health, so thank both of you,” Weiss said with a stiff nod.

“Well, I suppose it was a bit of trouble,” she agreed with a chuckle. “I have a way with water, and was able to convince it to leave your lungs and clothes without any hassle, but you were almost dead from the cold when we found you.”

“Yes… it was very, very cold,” Weiss agreed. She was about to say something more when her stomach growled, making her turn bright red.

The faunus woman just chuckled, bustling over to the stew pot and ladling some into a stoneware bowl, sticking a bronze spoon in before walking over and handing it to Weiss. It smelled absolutely delicious, and while she could see that it was almost entirely vegetables, there were a few small strips of meat visible as well. Weiss almost drooled, but she found herself hesitating to eat it. If the woman had wanted to hurt her she easily could've while she was unconscious, but as she was sitting there, weak and sore, the thought of trusting a strange faunus woman was almost impossible.

“Go on, dear, eat up while it's hot,” she said cheerfully. “Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Holly,
and my husband is Elec, although he's out fishing again. He'll be home this evening, though.”

“Where am I?” Weiss asked, barely able to lift her eyes from the food to look at her host.

“Oh, sorry, this is Freedom,” she said with a smile. “We're a village here in the Forever Fall Forest.”

Weiss frowned thoughtfully, but couldn't remember ever hearing of it. Before she could ask any further questions her stomach growled loudly again. “Go on, dear,” Holly said gently. “Eat up.”

Weiss slowly reached for the spoon with a shaking hand, activating her aura sight to study both the meal and the faunus offering it to her. The food showed no signs of anything magical about it, nor did anything else in sight, including the woman beyond the slight aura of a faunus petty magic user. As far as Weiss could tell, she was exactly as she appeared to be, not a shapeshifter in disguise trying to trick her into eating the food voluntarily.

Finally her hunger became too great to resist any longer, and Weiss took a small bite. The stew was very hot, burning her mouth, but it tasted delicious. She ate more and more quickly as it slowly cooled, until finally she sighed, sated and even warmer than before with a belly full of rich, hearty stew. “Thank you.”

The woman chuckled. “Of course, this is a harsh world, and we all have to work together to take care of things.”

“Still, I'm very grateful for what you've done for me,” Weiss said, slowly standing up. She was still in some pain, but the food was helping her stay on her feet, and after a few moments to steady herself she spotted her equipment sitting on the ground near the bed. She sat back down and grabbed it, slowly attaching her gun and other equipment to her belt.

“That's a very nice sword,” Holly complimented. “Did you take it from the Sidhe?”

“No,” Weiss said after a moment's pause. “I owned it before I came to Faerie.”

“I see,” she said. “How did you get here, anyway? You obviously came from another realm, and you don't look like a miner. Did a Sidhe lord kidnap you?”

Weiss blinked, staring at her in shock for a moment as it slowly occurred to her that the woman had no idea who she was. She had just assumed that any faunus she met would instantly recognize and hate a Schnee, but her ignorance probably explained why she was being treated so well. After another moment of hesitation she shook her head. “No. A friend and I came here looking for a group of criminals, but I fell in the river and we were separated.”

“I see,” Holly said. “So you hunt criminals?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “I'm with the police. A group of criminals are smuggling dust into my city, and we came here to locate and if possible stop them.”

Holly frowned. “Dust smuggling?”

“Have you… ever been to any plane besides Faerie?”

“No,” Holly said, shaking her head slowly. “My father was a dust miner who ran away, and my mother's family came from a group of humans who were taken by the Sidhe.”

“In the human world dust is very rare and valuable, and since it can be very dangerous it is a tightly controlled commodity,” Weiss explained.
“That sounds very important,” Holly said. “But shouldn't there be more of you? I mean, you said you're going after a group of criminals, right?”

Weiss smiled thinly. “Possibly, but it's difficult to travel between planes, and very dangerous to come to Faerie at all. They couldn't send many, and if something goes wrong they won't lose a group of detectives if they only send the two of us.”

Holly frowned, looking very concerned. “That sounds terrible! People aren't just… disposable!”

Weiss felt her smile become a little more natural. “Thank you, but I agree with the plan. It may be dangerous, but without Supernatural Affairs all of Vale would be in danger, so we can't risk everyone. Besides, we were just supposed to stop the smuggling, not go after all of the criminals. My partner and I may have been a bit… impulsive.”

Which was an understatement, Weiss thought. They should've used the SDC's portal room to go home after putting a stop to the dust smuggling, but after the conversation with the foreman they had immediately set off after the rest of the White Fang. It was stupid, but they had been angry and neither had stopped to discuss or even think about what they were doing.

“Still,” Holly said with a sigh.

“Thank you for your help,” Weiss said, moving towards the door. “I need to find my partner… the dolt has probably gotten herself into all kinds of trouble without me being there to keep an eye on her.”

Beyond the curtain was the rest of the village, and Weiss was surprised at how large it was. Dozens of homes were scattered about, along with a tavern and a number of businesses. A stone wall surrounded the property, and beyond it she saw a break in the trees that probably indicated a good sized farm. While it probably only housed a little over a hundred souls, it was still surprising that she had never heard of it.

“Welcome to Freedom,” Holly said, gesturing to the streets. “It isn't much, but we've carved out a home for our people right here in Faerie. I know you have an important job, but… you can stay as long as you'd like.”

“What?” Weiss asked, turning to her.

Holly smiled. “I may have been born here, but many of our people weren't. More than a few of us escaped from the Schnees… they don't often live very long after breaking their contracts, but they still get a chance to live happy lives for a time. This world… it's dangerous, but much nicer to our kind than the humans are.”

Weiss swallowed thickly. “I- I see.”

“Do the people back in your world really care about you and your partner?” Holly asked. “You said that you were expendable… If you feel like you have to finish your job then I can truly understand that. It's dangerous to break a bargain in Faerie, after all. But after… you can have a real home here. People won't spit on you, or make the only jobs terrible suffering, or leave you to rot in slums. We faunus finally have a chance to be happy and build our own lives away from the humans.”

Weiss couldn't believe what she was hearing. She felt a sick churning in her stomach as the nice woman who had fed her and cared for her talked so badly about the Schnees and the way other humans had treated the faunus. “I really need to go… we were attacked by manticores, and I can't let Ruby face them alone.”
“Manticores!” Holly gasped. “Well, remember what I said. And be careful out there… manticores even eat the bones, so if you don't find her…”

“She's strong,” Weiss said. “She won't get herself killed.”

“If you're sure…”

“Thank you… for your hospitality,” Weiss said. “I'll be on my way, though.”

“Goodbye,” Holly said with a bright smile. “Um, I never got your name…”

“Schnee,” a man said. “She's a Schnee.”

Weiss watched the blood drain from Holly's face, along with all of the warmth. “Schnee? You- you can't be serious, Mr. Carmine.”

Weiss couldn't look at her any longer, turning instead to face an older, withered man. He was glaring at her fiercely. “I remember seeing Winter Schnee, once. She came to visit my mine… she was young, but I'll never forget what a Schnee looks like. Are you here to drag us back? I already paid with my youth to break your damned contract, I'm not being your slave again.”

“No,” Weiss said. “I didn't intend to come here… I'd never even heard of this place…”

“And you aren't supposed to hear of it,” he said harshly. “Our founders bled and died to hide it from you. We won't let you take us.”

“I-” Weiss started, only to flinch as a rock hit her forehead. It barely clipped her, and it wasn't thrown that hard, but it still left her seeing stars and with a line of hot blood running down her face.

“She can't escape!” a young man screamed. “The Schnees will kill us all!”

A mob began to gather, with others grabbing rocks and starting to throw them at her. Weiss turned to run, hesitating when she saw the fearful, betrayed expression on Holly's face. She tried to think of something to say until another rock hit her shoulder hard and spurred her to flee.

The mob tried to run and throw rocks at the same time, which slowed them down sent their throws off course, which helped her reach the edge of town. The main gate lacked a door, and while there were guards they seemed confused by the sudden mob and didn't move to stop her until she had already run past. The townsfolk seemed unwilling to chase her past the gates of the town, but Weiss didn't slow down until she had left them far, far behind her, only stopping when she couldn't run anymore.

Short of breath, Weiss staggered over to a boulder under a tree and collapsed against it. She leaned back, closing her eyes, until finally she felt her breathing slow and her heart rate return to normal. When they did her thoughts turned to her situation.

She was all alone again, having been stoned and run out of the faunus village for being a Schnee. Ruby was missing, hopefully having survived her encounter with the manticores. She had no idea where she was or where the castle was. The castle had a dozen White Fang terrorists there that would love to kill her. She was in another world where she had days to live before her soul would be sucked out and consumed.

Suddenly Weiss felt even more exhausted. The numerous aches and pains that she had acquired in her trip down the river made themselves known as the adrenaline gave out, and it suddenly seemed even more futile to try to stand up. She just felt… tired.
Weiss leaned her head back, staring blankly up at the tree branches above. It wasn't until a blood red leaf slowly fell down and landed on her face that she came back to herself. She blinked several times, inhaling slightly as she reached up to grab the leaf, her hand pausing at the scent.

She hesitated so long that the leaf crumbled into black dust and she had reach up and wipe it off of her face before she could examine the clearing more closely. The trees of the Forever Fall Forest looked quite a bit alike at first glance, but in actuality they consisted of a wide variety of trees that all shared certain characteristics in common. The tree she was resting near, however, was actually familiar to her.

She didn't need to pierce the side to recognize Red Sap trees. While she had only really been exposed to the highly addictive magical drug once, the huge dose combined with her strong magical aura to make her body and soul crave the substance for weeks afterwards. She had thought that she was over the compulsion, but faced with the drug again she found herself suddenly seized by the urge to take another dose.

Weiss staggered to her feet, one hand gripping the hilt of Myrtenaster as she thought about harvesting the sap. From what she had seen a simple hole would be sufficient to extract enough to make all of her worries fade away. She wouldn't be alone, and in pain, and terrified with no plan.

Later she wouldn't be able to say how long she stood with her hand on her sword, or even what made her forcefully turn her back on the Red Sap tree and take one hard, painful step after another away from it. Eventually she found the will to reject the craving and continue her mission, her mind only on finding Ruby, seeing what could be done about the White Fang, and making it home.

Once she was some distance from the temptation she slowed down, sitting on a rock to try to figure out her next course of action. She didn't know where Ruby was, but her partner was both resourceful and possibly still had access to a faerie snail. If she did she had likely already found the castle some time before, and perhaps had already gotten into a fight with the White Fang.

At the very least Weiss trusted that her partner would make it, so she needed to get there herself. The most obvious answer was to summon something to ask for directions, but her ability to pay was severely limited. She spent a few minutes checking her pockets, hoping to find something of value to trade for being guided. She didn't find much, lacking Ruby's endless stash of cookies, even the ones that she had taken having been lost in the water, and it was only as she was looking at everything again that she realized something was missing.

Maybe it had been swept away with the cookies when she fell in the river, or perhaps the faunus had taken it from her while she was unconscious. Either way, her large supply of high quality dust that had been given to her by the department to open a way home was missing. Her only options for getting home before time ran out were to find the White Fang's supply and use that, or to crawl back to the foreman and use his facilities.

Eventually Weiss sighed and began walking again, hoping to at least find a river to follow, when she spotted something strange on the ground. Walking over to it, she found that it was part of a trail of small dead spots where nothing was growing on the loamy forest floor. With no better lead she began to follow them, one hand on her weapon while she tried to figure out what could have made the strange trail.

It wasn't until she reached a small clearing that she finally figured out what the trail was. The living grass was actually burned in the shape of the marks, the damage appearing to be similar to the effect of iron on faerie plant life. After a long moment's thought she took a deep breath, as there was only one thing that could possibly have left the trail.
“Redcaps,” she murmured quietly, gripping her sword even tighter.

She knew that nothing good could come from making contract with the monsters. They were violent creatures who colored their eponymous caps with fresh blood. Before the creation of the Great Barrier they had roamed the mortal world at will, killing travelers and any who crossed their paths, and only powerful magics, or significant physical damage could hope to slay them.

Weiss was also heavily outnumbered by the White Fang, and the crafty monsters were clever enough to be able to guide her to Ridire Castle without any problems. But would it be worth the risk? It was the only way to reach Ruby in time…

With a heavy sigh she walked to an open plot of ground and carefully drew the circle needed to get the attention of the redcaps with her sword. Once she was certain that the design was correct she placed a gloved hand on it and pushed in her aura, bringing the glyph to life.

All that she could do was wait, and hope that she could handle what came to her.
Fifth Case: The Knight

For a while Weiss had thought that her efforts had failed. She had even begun considering leaving the area and giving up on finding the redcaps that had recently passed through, but just as she was about to do so she heard a sound in the distance. Resting one hand on the hilt of her sword she waited, ready for anything.

The sounds slowly resolved into the clanking of metal, and then she saw them. Three redcaps jogged into the clearing, pausing just inside the open area, flames consuming the grass under their feet. Weiss had never actually seen a redcap before, and she took a moment to study them.

They were short, standing just over four feet tall, with thin, wiry limbs and a stooped posture. They all appeared to be old, with wrinkly skin and long, greasy white beards that tangled to their belt line. They were all carrying spears, and they had large, heavy iron boots on their feet, which was the source of the loud sound as well as the damage to the ground when they walked. The material harmed all things from Faerie, and legends said that the torment of being riveted into iron boots were the source of their foul dispositions.

On top of each of their heads was the object that gave them their names. The hats were shapeless, with uneven red coloring given to them when they dipped the material in the blood of their dead enemies. From the appearance of the caps Weiss guessed that they had all killed before, but that it had been some time since they'd had a chance to refresh their 'dye'.

“What do we have here,” the lead redcap crooned. “A little lost Schnee, away from their flock?”

“No,” Weiss said. “I summoned you for a reason.”

“And why should we listen?” he asked as the other two spread out, weapons at the ready. “We can take what we want, and you can't stop us all. I don't smell anyone else hear, and you can't take three of us.”

Weiss scoffed, narrowing her eyes. “Don't underestimate me.”

The three redcaps chuckled darkly. “Why should we care to hear you? What can you offer us that's better than killing you right here and claiming your blood and whatever you sought to bribe us with.”

“My offering isn't just the iron that you need,” Weiss said, pulling out the dagger that she had been given by Captain Goodwitch. She noticed all three eyeing the blade hungrily and smiled darkly. “Iron doesn't exist on this plane, and whoever made the ancient pacts to include it in this world did so in a strange manner. It may be the bane of all life here, but you need it anyway, don't you? Those eternally burning boots you force on others to make more of your kind don't make themselves.”

“We can kill you and take it,” the first redcap said without shifting his gaze from the blade. “It's just a small bit of iron, anyway.”

“But more than you've gotten in some time, isn't it,” Weiss said. “Since the Great Barrier was formed you haven't been able to raid my world for iron, and so you've been stuck here, forced to cannibalize your dead to create more of your kind. Even just a bit of new iron would go a long way, wouldn't it?”

“We don't fear iron, Schnee,” the lead redcap said. “Why summon us with something we can just take?”
“Because I can offer more than iron,” Weiss said. “If you killed me you'd get my knife and my blood for one of your caps, but what about the other two? What if I offered targets far more numerous than just me… and they'd be other outsiders besides. Perhaps they even have more iron for you...”

The three redcaps shared a long look, before finally the first glared at her. “What are your terms?”

“Slay the White Fang at my destination and you can claim any blood they shed and any iron they keep at their lair,” Weiss said. “Before we even depart you can have my dagger. In exchange, you don't harm me or my partner, and you don't keep us from departing when our job is done.”

“We have an accord,” the redcap grunted. “Now give me the iron.”

“We have an accord,” Weiss agreed, tossing the sheathed blade to him.

The redcap eagerly caught the weapon, pulling it out and giving it a lick, giggling as his tongue sizzled and burned. “Where's the White Fang at?” he asked, the words a little thick from his self inflicted injury.

“Ridire Castle,” Weiss said. “If you'd lead the way...”

The three set off immediately, and Weiss found herself jogging to keep up. She was tired enough that she wasn't sure how long she'd be able to maintain the fast pace, only her longer legs letting her keep up with the redcaps. She was soon gasping and panting, a painful stitch in her side and only the knowledge that Ruby was in trouble keeping her moving.

As they passed through the trees she began to fantasize about taking off her gloves and draining them dry. The life energies in them would heal her aches and help her catch her breath. They weren't people or even animals, so what would be the harm?

She stopped that line of thought and shook her head violently. Ever since the first time she'd been touched and had drained life she had known just how sinfully good it felt. She hadn't even needed to be told that the feeling could be addictive, and she'd taken great pains to never abuse it. If she was going to give in and start using her touch for petty reasons she might as well find a Red Sap tree and give up on life entirely.

Just as she was considering telling the redcaps to stop for a normal breather they slowed down and walked to the edge of a huge clearing. Sitting at the center was a ruined castle, with barely half of the original walls still standing, and even less of the keep in serviceable shape. She hoped that the White Fang hadn't established their base inside of the building, as she had her doubts about its structural integrity.

The place was very still, however. She couldn't see any signs that anyone had lived in the castle since the battle that destroyed it, and that had been long ago. Vines were creeping up its walls, and everywhere weathering was very obvious, making it difficult to make out the strangely familiar crest of a heavily armored knight decorating the building. There were no sounds coming from inside, not even any wild animals, and if she didn't know that this was the meeting point she would've assumed that it was the wrong castle. As it was she still hesitated a little.

“This is Ridire Castle, right?” she finally asked.

One of the redcaps spat on the ground in front of her. “Of course. We fought in that battle and got plenty of blood for our caps. We don't see anyone here now, though.”

Weiss pursed her lips. “They will be here.”
“For your sake you had better hope they will be, Schnee.”

Weiss didn’t say anything, simply walking through a gap in the castle walls with the three redcaps clomping behind her. The inside looked even more rundown than the outside. She could see signs of animals living a few places, and if she looked closely the weapons and even a few bones of the people who died fighting over the castle still remained.

Weiss slowly explored the courtyard, looking for any sign of outsiders. Unfortunately she wasn't a tracker, and the only trail she was likely to be successful following was the burning one left by the redcaps. The only reason she found anything was that the White Fang didn't bother to hide the dust they’d been preparing for shipment.

There were five metal crates of dust sitting with a tarp loosely covering them against one side of the keep. Weiss carefully made her way over to it, her hand on her weapon, but she saw no sign that anyone was currently present. Near the crates was a complete ritual circle designed to create a portal to the material plane, and with the amount of dust she had access to she’d be able to easily open a return path for her and Ruby.

“Is this their's?” the lead redcap grunted, poking a crate with his spear.

“Yes,” Weiss said. “That's dust they've been smuggling using this magic circle. The street value of even one crate is immense, so there's no way that they've abandoned these. They're either here in hiding or are set to return soon.”

“You'd better hope so,” he grunted, spitting on the ground again.

With nothing else to do Weiss continued her search. She couldn't see any signs of Ruby's presence, and besides the crates there was nothing to show that the White Fang had been there either. She had assumed that they would be living on their own at the castle, but the longer she looked the more she considered the possibility of them living in Freedom or a similar place. Suddenly Weiss really wished she hadn't been so honest about what she was doing to Holly.

The opposite side of the castle from where the crates had been stashed had a large, open area, and the walls surrounding it were in better shape than most. At the center of the open courtyard was an enormous statue of a knight made entirely of silversteel holding a huge sword. The craftsmanship was superb, and it was shocking that something so obviously valuable, even if melted down as scrap, had remained untouched for so long after the fall of the castle.

Without even thinking about it Weiss slowly approached the statue. With every step closer she came to appreciate the craftsmanship a little more, until finally she stood just in front of it, gazing up at it. The statue was around twenty feet tall, and even up close she couldn't see any sign that it wasn't made to be used. Every seam, every joint, every last bit of it was obviously designed to move freely, yet it stood on its own at the center of the courtyard.

After looking up at it for a moment Weiss suddenly realized that she hadn't heard the redcaps follow her across the courtyard. She slowly turned around, frowning when she saw that they had waited at the edge of the open area, watching her gleefully. She started to ask them what they were doing when instinct kicked in.

She wasn't sure whether it was the sudden excitement on the redcaps' faces, or the slight creaking noise behind her, but she dove and hit the ground rolling just in time as a massive sword slammed into the ground where she had been standing, the sharp blade cutting through the earth like paper, but the sheer size of the weapon and the force with which it had been swung still making it kick up a plume of dirt on impact.
Weiss rolled to her feet, drawing her sword as she did, only to stare slack jawed at the source of the attack. The twenty foot tall knight statue pulled its blade back out of the dirt, turning to face her as it reloaded the weapon again. She could see that it was still empty, as the seams were large enough to be seen through at her size, and yet it still moved like it contained a giant if living knight within.

The knight comfortably swung its sword again, this time in a horizontal swing low enough to the ground that Weiss had to hop over it like some kind of lethal game of jump rope. The weapon was far larger than she was, and it was swung with incredible strength by the knight. Blocking or even attempting to deflect the swings wasn't so much foolhardy as actively suicidal, and as she tried to retreat she found that the sheer reach of the giant weapon made staying away from it nearly impossible without simply running away.

After two more narrow dodges Weiss did just that, scrambling backwards and then taking off at a full sprint. Her eyes narrowed as she saw the redcaps laughing at her and angrily shouted at them as she passed them by. “What are you doing!?”

They parted, letting the knight move past them before following behind, eager to watch the show. “We promised to kill the White Fang here, and to leave you and your companion unharmed. We never agreed to fight the Knight.”

“The Knight… whoa!” Weiss barely avoided the next swing, her distraction almost costing her life. She managed to use a still standing section of wall to her advantage, ducking behind it to get out of the knight's line of sight. Unfortunately the living statue found the stone curtain wall to be little more distracting than a thin section of plasterboard, slamming shoulder first into it, weapon raised one handed to take a swing at her the moment it saw her.

Fortunately Weiss hadn't waited, not even pausing behind the wall she used for cover as she continued to run, doubling back towards the courtyard. The maneuver bought her some space, but from the loud, booming footsteps she knew that the giant armor was still right behind her, eating up the space quickly with its long strides.

Weiss tried to think. The redcaps knew about it but weren't interested in helping her. The fact that the Knight was apparently famous enough to be renowned among creatures like the redcaps really didn't bode well for her. It also appeared likely that the White Fang were using the other side of the castle in order to stay far away from it… and she had foolishly blundered right into its grasp.

It was apparently guarding part of the castle, though, and with that thought she turned a sharp corner, heading towards a gap in the wall. While much faster than her on straightaways, the Knight had poor cornering, and her sudden turn bought her some space, letting her shoot through the gap and out of the castle before it could catch her.

She thought that being beyond the walls might keep her safe, but a moment later the Knight charged through the gap, smashing several bricks that got in its way. She had started to slow down, but seeing it crash through the stone like it wasn't even there gave her a second wind as she began to sprint again. There was no way she could make it across the open area between the wall and the trees without being caught, and even if she made it to the forest there was no guarantee it wouldn't keep chasing her, and the odds of her getting lost even if she somehow escaped it seemed dangerously high.

Weiss grunted as she changed course as tightly as she could, pushing her body even harder as she ran full speed towards a smaller gap in the castle wall. It had rubble scattered about, and she had to hurdle some stones to make it inside. Once she did she slowed, moving back close to the gap but out of sight from the other side, sword at the ready.
While it was able to smash through walls, it lost a lot of speed when it did, and the moment it passed through the suddenly larger opening Weiss lunged. Myrtenaster was a dust infused weapon, crafted of the finest materials and enchanted to the best of her family's ability to produce. While she doubted her ability to force the blade through the thick silversteel of the armor, she was confident that if any weapon stuck into the gaps of the armor could hurt it, hers would be that weapon.

Unfortunately it had no effect on the Knight, who did its best to stop and turn towards her. Weiss ducked between its legs, slashing at the wide joint at the back of the knee, her sword sparking slightly at it scraped metal as well as ran deeply through the interior, neither having any actual effect on the knight, which spun on its heel, swinging its sword in a wide, angled arc at her.

Weiss had to dive and roll to avoid being chopped in half, and adrenaline helped her get right back to her feet and start running again, this time sheathing her sword to help her run faster, as it had proven to be useless against the thing. As she weaved through as many obstacles as she could find to buy time she tried to think of something, anything that could hurt a giant empty armor made of magical metal.

There were crates worth of dust. If she had five minutes she could make a magic circle powerful enough to obliterate a dozen knights with that amount of dust. She was forced to duck under a swinging sword, turning sharply to buy time and running into the keep itself through a wide gap in its walls when she saw it in front of her. Obviously any plans involving binding magic were out of the question.

For a moment she had a wild idea about using spell magic. Captain Goodwitch could use a spell to telekinetically dribble the Knight like a basketball, or even blast it into its component parts in no time at all. She frowned, reconsidering as she remembered just how resistant silversteel was to magic. Perhaps even Captain Goodwitch wouldn't be able to deal with it so easily, and she certainly couldn't.

Weiss found a staircase and ran straight up it, panting more heavily as her thighs burned despite the adrenaline pumping through her veins. She slowed once she made it up the stairs, struggling to catch her breath as she heard the Knight have to slow down as it climbed up the narrow stairs. It had to wiggle and squirm, dust and bits of stone falling from the barely standing ceiling as it scraped its way through the doorway and onto the second floor, but Weiss had already sped back up, looking for something, anything that could help.

Iron was the one weakness silversteel had. It was a substance mostly used by the Sidhe, and while it was as hard as mithril and almost as magically active, it was as strong as wet tissue paper when confronted with cold iron. Even the small dagger that Goodwitch had given her would eventually tear it apart. Unfortunately she had already given that dagger to the redcaps, and she lacked any other actual iron.

For a moment she considered making a new deal with the redcaps, but they would mostly likely jeer her, or demand things she wasn't prepared to offer even for her life. As she turned another corner she tripped over a loose brick, stumbling to find her footing as the knight clanged after her, slowed a bit by the narrow halls and fragile flooring but still right on her heels. As she began running again her frantic thoughts suddenly found the perfect solution.

"Ridire, what do you want?" she called out to the castle. "I'm prepared to make a generous offer to collapse onto the Knight without hurting me!"

She felt like an idiot, but she was in Faerie, and everything, everything was alive on some level in that plane. The only reason that the castle stood at all was that the bricks had agreed to do so. While she could attempt to negotiate with individual bricks, the castle, as represented by its keystone, would
be able to make a deal as a single entity.

Unfortunately she had another problem. Normally contractual negotiations were a drawn out process with objects in Faerie, largely because she had no way to hear it. The proper technique involved binding magics and lengthy meditations to commune with the object until she gained an impression of what it would want. That was obviously off the table, but that didn't mean she couldn't make offers and hope that it agreed.

“Would you like me to repair you?!” Weiss offered as she turned a corner. “I'm a Schnee, and I'm certain I can convince my father to restore you. No? Um… what could rock want? I can get rid of the vines climbing you? I can make a deal so no vines ever climb on you!”

Nothing. Weiss gritted her teeth, feeling like she was going mad as she kept shouting offers to a literal brick wall. What did she have that it might want? “Dust! I've got crates of dust!”

The castle shook slightly, a brick falling loose behind her. “You like that idea? How about a crate of dust? Does a crate of dust poured on your keystone work? No? Two crates… four! I can offer four crates of dust poured right on your keystone!”

Suddenly the castle shook, knocking Weiss off of her feet and sending her rolling across the floor. She ended up flat on her back, gaping behind her as with an echoing roar like an avalanche half of the castle seemed to collapse at once, all of the blocks falling directly on top of the Knight. It reached out a hand to grab her, but a heavy section of bricks all fell on the outstretched limb, pinning it in place as more fell atop it, until all that was visible under the pile of rubble the top two floors of the keep created was the head of the Knight.

Before Weiss could even sigh with relief the floor, which was already in questionable condition gave way, sending her and the knight falling into the great hall along with half of the building. She screamed, coving her head as best she could as she slammed into the stone floor below.
Weiss screamed as she fell towards the stone floor, doing her best to curl her body so she wouldn't
land on her head. Of course, falling thirty feet onto solid stone meant that her efforts were likely to be
useless, as any way she fell could easily kill her.

When she hit the ground she felt it give beneath her as she sank into the stone. It was like falling onto
a huge trampoline, and after sinking deep enough to absorb the impact she was thrown back several
feet into the air. When she hit again it was like falling onto a waterbed as the stone tiles under her
rippled as she sank in gently, until she was pushed back up to ground level and the stone became as
hard and firm as rock again.

From the nearly deafening impact of the Knight and its rock tomb hitting the ground she was the
only one who had experienced it as something soft. As she lay stunned, she suddenly realized that
her negotiation had included her not being hurt in the collapse, and so the castle had made sure that
she wasn't by changing the properties of stone into something safe to land on.

It took a long time for Weiss to stop shaking, but slowly she recovered, until finally she sat up, her
body aching but satisfied with her success. She couldn't even see the Knight anymore, as it was
buried under tons of stone. "Thank you," she murmured, patting the ground. "I'll get you your dust
right away."

Just as she climbed to her feet she could hear stone sliding, and when she looked her eyes widened
as the rubble shifted. Suddenly half of the pile moved, and a dirtied silvery hand burst from the stone.
It grabbed several of the larger pieces of rubble and pushed them aside until the Knight emerged,
battered but intact. It was all Weiss could do to stay on her feet as she realized that the silversteel
creature was much, much stronger and tougher than she had imagined possible.

When fully free of the rubble it took a few steps forward, until finally it sank down to one knee, its
sword held point down before it with its head bowed. It then held still, waiting.

"You… you yield?" Weiss asked after almost a minute of silence had passed.

The Knight nodded, before lifting its sword, holding it horizontally as if offering it to her.

"Um… I can't exactly lift that," Weiss said dubiously. The Knight shook its head. "You're not
offering it for me to take… but you are offering it to me. What does that mean?"

The Knight just waited, weapon held out as Weiss thought things through. "You're… offering your
service to me?"

The Knight nodded.

"I'm not from Faerie," Weiss said. "I won't be able to stay here much longer… if you want to serve
me you would need to be willing to bind yourself to me as a summons."

The Knight nodded again, and Weiss worked the concept through quickly in her head. She didn't
have any personal summons, always relying upon objects to call the creatures she wanted on the rare
occasions when she needed to summon something to the mortal world. Still, it wasn't that unusual for
those skilled with binding magic to negotiate to acquire their own personal summons, and while it
would take time and a lot of magic to bring something as powerful as the Knight through the Great
Barrier, it would be worth it when she mastered the process.
Weiss knew how to bind it to her, and so she cautiously approached until she stood right in front of it, actually inside the perimeter its arms and the sword established. The Knight still held still, and she partially unsheathed her own sword and removed one glove, carefully cutting her palm. She then sheathed the weapon and cupped the cut hand, letting blood slowly pool.

The sigil to bind it to her was complex, and using blood to write on metal wasn't the easiest way to draw a detailed magical symbol, but over the course of several minutes she drew the mark. When she was done she took a deep breath and laid her gloved hand on the sigil, closing her eyes and slowly filling it with her aura.

The symbol was the focal point of her efforts, but she pushed her aura until it covered every inch of the Knight, as well as mixing with every scrap of its aura. It was difficult pushing her aura into the silversteel being, but it readily accepted the connection, until finally she could feel every aspect of it. “I, Weiss Schnee, by my blood and name bind you to my service.”

There was a flash of light, and when Weiss blinked the blood drawing was gone. She concentrated, examining her soul, and after a long moment she found the link, forged with blood that connected her to her new summons. She then stepped back and gave the Knight a smile. “Thank you.”

It nodded and stood, battered but unbroken, sword held before it again, point on the ground.

“I need to pour four crates of dust on the keystone of the castle,” Weiss said. “There is a stack of them on the opposite side of the keep from where you were waiting. Can you take care of that for me? After that you can rest. I'll summon you when I need your help, sir Knight.”

The Knight nodded and left, and once it was out of sight Weiss sat straight on the ground again, taking several deep breaths. She couldn't believe that that had happened, but something she had done had impressed the creature, whatever it really was, so much that it was willing to pledge its loyalty to her. She pulled out a handkerchief and bound her still sluggishly bleeding palm before putting her glove back on and heading through the ruined castle to where the dust had been.

The Knight would help her survive the coming battle, although she'd need to find a location where she could call for it to come to her aid without tipping off the White Fang that it served her. She also had a crate of dust to work with to make things more interesting for them. She would need several handfuls to open the way home, but the rest could be used to lay traps around the battlefield. Given an hour and most of a crate of dust and she could hold off an army, so a dozen White Fang foot soldiers wouldn't be able to beat her.

It had only been a few minutes, but when she stepped outside it felt like everything had changed. The keep of the castle had almost entirely collapsed, the structure, which once had three floors each large enough for the Knight to run around in was only a single level, more a pile of rubble than an actual building. She was still examining it when she was interrupted by jeering voices.

“Survived, did you?” one of the redcaps asked. “Thought you were a goner when the Knight came strolling out.”

Weiss offered them a glare. “No thanks to you.”

They all snickered nastily. “We didn't promise to fight the Knight, so why would we? To take care of you?”

Weiss gritted her teeth, before stomping over to the stash of dust. The Knight had already taken away four of the crates, and she could hear it digging through rubble on the other side of the keep. It was a good thing that it seemed to know where the keystone was, since she doubted that she could locate it
without a lot of time and magic, and excavating it from the collapse would be even harder.

“What is the Knight?” Weiss asked.

The lead redcap grunted. “Not my concern. It was here when they built the castle, and they dedicated it to the thing. Not sure how they convinced it to stay and guard the courtyard for them, but then, I'm not sure how you convinced it to obey your commands. It's powerful and does as it pleases. What else matters?”

“Knowledge is power,” Weiss said.

The redcap shrugged. “True, but power comes with a price, and not always one worth paying. You'll come to an ugly end if you seek too much knowledge.”

“I'll take that risk,” Weiss said dryly.

“Good,” the redcap leered. “I hope I'm there to see it.”

Weiss examined the crate, trying to figure out how to open it. Like everything else produced by mortals in Faerie, since it was far easier to work metal than wood it had been made from bronze with a hinged lid covered in sealing wax. She spent a minute scraping the wax off carefully with her sword, before cleaning it against her bloodied glove and sheathing it.

“What are you going to do with that dust?” the redcap asked.

Weiss looked at it, one hand on the lid. “I'm going to make some traps. The White Fang we've fought here were unusually skilled, and they have numerical superiority. I'm going to get every advantage I can. I hired you, didn't I?”

The redcap scowled. “You're lucky to hire us. We won't need numbers to-”

Mid word Weiss saw something moving behind him, but before she could figure out what it was it struck the back of his head and emerged, bloody, from his open mouth. It was a barbed headed spear, nearly six feet long and made entirely of steel. The redcap actually looked offended more than anything as it reached up and pulled the spear out of its head, blood pouring out like milk from a dropped carton. It managed to turn around, waving the dripping weapon angrily before slowly collapsing to the ground.

From the gaps in the outer walls came the White Fang. They were dressed in their typical modern armor uniforms, with intimidating masks covering their faces as they charged. There were a full dozen of them, armed with a variety of melee weapons, including swords, axes, and stranger things, although she saw no other spears or anything intended for ranged combat.

“You bastards!” one redcap shrieked, foaming at the mouth, before it and its companion charged forward, metal boots clanking loudly as they screamed war cries. They led with their spears as they charged with shocking speed for such short people, and the first White Fang they encountered were entirely unprepared for them.

Blood spattered across the courtyard as almost simultaneously the two redcaps struck their targets, spears sinking deep into chests. They barely slowed, twisting the shafts of their weapons to lift the impaled faunus from the ground, before finally coming to a halt as they slammed them into the earth and then ripped the wickedly barbed weapons from their bodies. She could see chunks of meat and viscera attached to the spearheads, but they attacked their next targets immediately, thrusting the weapons at more of the White Fang.
Before she could watch the grisly display any further the first of the White Fang reached her. He was a burly man, standing at more than a foot taller than her own petite height, and he had a morning star gripped two handed. The weapon had a three foot long haft made of leather wrapped steel, with a large round head on one end covered in short spikes. He was obviously planning to slam the heavy weapon down on her when he reached her, and at the last moment she saw his body start to flex to do just that.

She didn't give him a chance. With a burst of motion like a spring uncoiling she lunged, his own momentum helping her sink the tip of Myrtenaster through his flak jacket and into his heart halfway to the hilt, before she whipped it back out and stepped past him. Despite the mortal wound he kept blinding running, slamming into the ruined keep hard enough to bounce off before hitting the ground, dead.

The next enemy was far more cautious. He had a strange weapon that she had never before seen outside of her ancient history studies. It had a hilt like a sword, with an initially straight section like many blades, before it suddenly curved forward, the second half of the weapon bent like a half moon, with the end then sharply angling back like a hook. It was a khopesh, and she wasn't actually sure how the weapon was supposed to be wielded, putting her immediately on the defensive.

He kept a solid stance, his right leg leading as he slashed with the weapon with surprising speed. It was nearly a foot shorter than her own rapier, and while the blade was obviously fairly heavy for a weapon of its length he wielded it like it weighed nothing. As he made several quick slashes with the weapon he kept his other hand up beside his head like he was in a boxing stance, sometimes subtly shifting it to help guard his body from any possible counterattacks as well as to help keep his balance while swinging his weapon around so vigorously.

Weiss stayed mostly defensive, using her longer weapon to keep him at bay, and after a bit more time to observe his form she began to make small, probing attacks of her own. He responded very smoothly, blocking with his sword or even slapping the flat of her blade with his hand, which was more armored than most White Fang with metal plates on his forearm and palm hidden by his gloves.

Before Weiss could figure out a good response to his style she saw his eyes flick behind her quickly. It was a very brief glance, and he could have easily been trying to distract her, but she went with it anyway, spinning sideways and slashing out with her sword in a wide cutting arc. Normally a rapier was designed for thrusting, and while the edges were very sharp it wasn't the best use of the weapon. Myrtenaster was an enchanted blade that was far stronger, and much sharper, than any normal sword, and so it was extremely deadly when combined with the speed and force of her spinning body.

The White Fang who had been sneaking up behind her was quite a bit shorter than she had been expecting and actually fully ducked under the attack. It was a woman, and she had a two and a half foot long metal pipe in her hands which she swung at Weiss' legs while she was still ducked low. Weiss was forced to hop backwards blindly to avoid it, and it was only when her feet hit the metal crate that she realized she'd been set up from the start.

Weiss tumbled back, converting her fall into a roll, but the two White Fang were on her long before she could recover. She managed to get her sword up into a block, pressing her free palm against the flat of her blade near the tip to brace the weapon against the powerful chop form the khopesh. Once again she was thankful for the best magical engineering the SDC could offer as the weapon survived a hit that would have broken much thicker steel, although the force was sufficient to reopen the cut she'd made on her palm, making her gasp with pain.

Weiss kicked out blindly and got lucky as she caught the khopesh user on the side of his knee. He
howled and stumbled back, letting the woman finish her off. Weiss saw that she had dog ears protruding above her mask, and everything seemed to slow down as she raised her steel rod high above her head, ready to bring it down in a killing blow.

Weiss raised her sword to block, but at the last instant the woman flicked her wrist, and a ball on a length of chain emerged from the hollow weapon, and all she could do was raise her arm as it sped toward her. Bone shattered with a sickening crack and Weiss screamed, vision dimming for a moment.

The woman raised her weapon again, twirling the metal ball and chain to build up momentum before swinging again. It only lasted for a few moments, and when Weiss tried to move to get away she accidentally tried to push off with her broken arm, knocking the breath from her lungs.

Just as she was about to be beaten to death by a woman wielding what she belatedly recognized as a chigiriki Weiss saw that her tumble over the crate hadn't been without its side effects. The container had tipped over, spilling dust everywhere. Mad inspiration that she would later blame on Ruby rubbing off on her made Weiss press her foot into a pile of the dust and channel her aura into it.

Activating dust was something normally done with careful, precise magic. It was effectively raw, undirected mana given physical form, and even a small amount could do very powerful things. Instead Weiss simply ignited it, letting the dust do whatever it wanted and triggering it via a wave of uncontrolled mana from her aura.

For a moment all Weiss saw was white as she flew through the air. She hit the ground on her broken arm, compounding the fracture and finally driving her briefly into unconsciousness. When she forced herself back from oblivion she wasn't sure how long had passed, although it was brief enough that the sun hadn't moved overhead. It was, however, completely silent except for a painful ringing.

Blinking, Weiss sat up, and a glance through her blurry eyes revealed that the battle was till ongoing, with one of the two remaining redcaps down, but the majority of the White Fang already out of the fight. She couldn't see it, but blood was dripping from both of her ears from ruptured ear drums, and her body was covered in scratches, bruises, burns, and hairline fractures to compliment the badly broken arm, which had bone protruding through the skin. Somehow she was still able to reach her feet, however, leaning on the sword that she had somehow kept ahold of through the explosion.

The crate had been blown to the other side of the battlefield, and Weiss had to hope that it still had enough dust to get her and Ruby home. There was a smoking, frost covered crater where she had been a second ago, and there was no sign of the White Fang woman with the chigiriki who had been standing directly on top of the dust pile that she had been at the very edge of. Unfortunately the khopesh wielder was still up, and he looked furious as he stalked towards her.

Weiss raise her weapon, the foot that she had channeled her aura through not wanting to move, and she decided that she didn't really want to look to see what was wrong with it. Maybe her boot had protected it, or maybe it was badly damaged from the uncontrolled magical explosion. Either way she barely stayed on her feet when he attacked her.

He kept his proper form, and while he had been able to press her hard before, Weiss was only on her feet through sheer willpower, and without the ability to reliably move around she barely kept him at bay with her sword. After a short but furious exchange of swings, thrusts and parries he hooked Myrtenaster with the end of his khopesh, pulling her guard wide open before swinging his raised fist into her face.

Weiss felt her nose break, and she couldn't keep a grip on her sword as he jerked his khopesh to the side, disarming her. She fell to the ground, staring up at him as he raised his weapon above his head.
He paused, probably taunting her, although between having her eardrums ruptured and his mask she would never know for sure. Just in case she snarled and spat blood at him. “Fuck you, changeling.”

He brought his khopesh down, the weapon slamming into her torso. She tried to scream but found her lungs didn't work as a gout of blood poured from her mouth as she fell limp. The pain began to fade along with her vision, and the last thing she saw was a red blur streaking over head, and rose petals slowly falling onto her face.
Fifth Case: Touch

Weiss' thoughts were scattered and sluggish. She drifted in the dark, unable to focus on anything except for the curious warmth that filled her. It was only after an unknown period that she began to feel a growing discomfort all over her body, especially radiating from her torso.

That sense of pain was what made her realize she was still alive, and it took even longer for her to remember why she thought that she should be dead. Slowly the battle, her failure, the khopesh slamming into her drifted into her ever more conscious mind, and she couldn't believe that she was still among the living.

She felt something touching her cheek. It was warm and mostly soft, but with a number of rough spots, and it seemed to be gently rubbing against her. She couldn't remember ever feeling anything like it, but it was wonderful. After a while of enjoying it she slowly opened her eyes, blinking against the late afternoon sun.

She was lying on the grass of the courtyard, in the exact same spot she had been when the White Fang's khopesh slammed into her body. While she ached all over she didn't feel the agony that she would've expected, nor did she feel drugged. She was simply warm and relaxed, like she'd overdone her workout but had taken a hot bath and was waking up from a nap after.

She turned her head slightly to better look at whatever was rubbing her face, and what she saw made her heart stop in her chest, before she gasped and tried to scramble away, clumsily flopping to the side as her body tried to adjust after who knew how long unconscious.

"It's okay!" Ruby said. She was sitting beside Weiss, covered in black, ashy dust and blood, while she had been gently caressing her face with her bare, calloused hand.

"No!" Weiss objected, flopping back as Ruby tried to move closer. "I'll hurt you!"

"Wait, please… I promise you aren't hurting me," Ruby said. "Calm down, you could still be hurt. You… you almost died."

Weiss sat up, her stomach muscles objecting to the strain, but after a moment she managed to lever herself into a mostly vertical position. Once she did she looked down at her body, poking a few of the places where she had been hurt the most badly.

She looked like a terrible mess. She was covered in blood and black dust, and her clothing was torn and tattered in quite a number of places. Her wounds were all healed, however, leaving only scars, including the huge, still red one at the center of her body. Even her almost destroyed arm was repaired, a fact that she verified by slowly bending and flexing it.

"What… what happened?"

"I'm so sorry," Ruby choked, tears in her eyes. "I came as soon as I could, but when I got close I heard this big explosion, and I came running, but I saw that guy knock you down, and I even used my magic but I was too late and I thought you were dead and you- you looked so dead. God, Weiss, I thought you were dead!"

Ruby sobbed a few times, face red, but she wiped them away and kept talking before Weiss could think of anything to say. "I killed the one who… who did it, and then I fought the rest. They killed that, um, that guy you had with you. The third one of them, I guess? I wasn't fast enough to save him at all… they chopped his head off, so he was… anyway. I knocked out the last few before they
realized I was here, and then I ran over to you. You were… you were so still…”

Weiss checked her gloves. The hand's that she hadn't cut open still looked intact, so she carefully reached over and placed it on Ruby's knee. Ruby sobbed again, slowly reaching up a hand to her cheek, but Weiss flinched away from the contact. Ruby let her hand drop and started speaking again, this time keeping her eyes locked on her girlfriend.

“You were… there was blood *gushing* out, and I freaked out, but that meant… that meant your heart was still beating,” Ruby said. “And… I love you, Weiss. I love you so much… I couldn't just let you die. So I… I put my hands on your face.”

“Ruby, no,” Weiss gasped, covering her mouth with her free hand. “How could- how could you do that? I couldn't have lived with myself if I killed you.”


“What do you mean?”

Ruby slowly reached out her hand again. When Weiss flinched, she bit her lip and looked down at the hand on her knee. She slowly placed her hand over it and spoke. “Weiss… let me touch you. I promise… it won't hurt me. I just spent two hours touching your face… it didn't hurt me at all. I promise… I can touch you.”

Weiss bit her lip. She didn't know how it was possible. She remembered the strange but wonderful sensation of being touched, but at the same time, she remembered what happened to people who touched her. How they hurt… how they died. How good it felt, and how much she wanted more right after. She looked into Ruby's eyes, a denial on her lips, but after a long, long moment she gave a shallow nod instead.

Ruby carefully pulled her gloves off, her motions so slow and gentle that it took almost a minute to remove them entirely. Then, for the first time since she was a small child, someone held her bare hand. She had thought that Ruby was warm when she was wearing her gloves, but it was nothing compared to her skin. For a moment she was terrified that the pleasant feeling of holding hands was her draining Ruby's life away, but she looked up and saw that her girlfriend was perfectly fine.

“I… this shouldn't be possible.”

“But it's happening,” Ruby said, squeezing her hand gently.

Weiss was in awe, holding the hand with a slowly growing smile on her face. She… she was touching Ruby. If she could touch her… she could really be with her. She could make her girlfriend happy and not worry about her finally realizing that Weiss couldn't give her all that she needed and left. She smiled, looking up at her girlfriend. She then hesitated, as she saw that behind Ruby's tender smile were sad, guilty eyes.

That look, which had no place on Ruby, brought Weiss back to reality. She had expected to be dead, but instead she woke up covered in dust with Ruby able to touch her. “If touching me didn't do anything… how am I alive?”

Ruby blinked back tears. “I… I had to heal you, but touching you didn't work. I thought you were too far gone, that you couldn't be healed. But I- I couldn't let you go. So I… you were right. You were right all along.”

When Ruby didn't continue Weiss nodded encouragingly. “I usually am. What was I right about this
time?"

“About the ends justifying the means,” Ruby said miserably, staring at the ground. “When you were
dying I- I did what I had to do. Since I couldn't heal you I looked around… and there were just a
bunch of injured White Fang around. Most of them were unconscious… and the ones who were
awake were too injured to move. And I thought… maybe it's just me? So I- I did what I had to do.
To save you. I… oh god, Weiss… I killed them all… I held them against you until they stopped
moving and went poof and then they were dead and you were alive and I killed them all!”

Weiss reached out and grabbed Ruby, pulling her into a hug. Without the stifling fear of draining her
life away the hug was so much better, but she put aside her own joy at the contact as she tried to
comfort Ruby. Her partner began shaking, before wrapping her arms tightly around Weiss and
starting to cry. Great, wracking sobs filled the courtyard as she shook and trembled like a leaf in
Weiss' arms. She didn't know what to do with her hands, but she did her best to hold Ruby close and
rub her back in gentle circles.

Ruby cried for a long time, but eventually she cried herself out, although she made no move to lean
back, simply staying in the warm circle of Weiss' arms with their heads resting on each other's
shoulders. As lovely as the sensation was Weiss eventually found her back starting to get sore from
the angle she was sitting at, and with a reluctant sigh she pulled back, moving her hands slowly up to
cup Ruby's tearstained cheeks. They were so soft and warm, even wet with tears, and for a moment
Weiss was lost in the sensation of just touching someone.

“I'm not sure that I was really right,” Weiss said after gathering her wits. “It's easy to do things and
say that you have to. And maybe you do. But that doesn't make it okay. I wish you'd never had to do
that to save me, and I'm glad that you did, but… you weren't completely wrong. Sometimes you
don't have a better choice, but that doesn't mean doing it was alright. You just do what you have to
sometimes, and let other people ascribe meaning to it later.”

“You kinda suck at being comforting,” Ruby said hoarsely.

“I know,” Weiss grumbled. “I wish you'd never had to do this. Make a choice like this. It's the same
kind of choice my ancestors faced when they decided that making the Great Barrier was more
important than not enslaving the faunus. Because that's what it was, really. And maybe that was a
choice they felt they had to make, and maybe it was the best choice that they could under the
circumstances. But it was still terrible.”

Ruby was quiet for a while. “I would do it again,” she confessed. “If you were dying again… I can't
let you die. Even if I have to- to do that again…”

“I'm sorry,” Weiss said. “I put you in that position.”

“No!” Ruby said. “It wasn't your fault!”

Weiss sighed. “I killed someone on purpose once to heal myself. It was when we were going after
the Red Sap. It… I had trouble sleeping for a while after that. I can't imagine how you're going to
react to this, but… I love you. I'm so, so sorry this happened, but I love you.”

Ruby leaned back in for a hug. “I'm not who I thought I was. I wanted to be this- this hero. Saving
people. Stopping the bad guys. Doing the right thing. But…”

“You're my hero,” Weiss said, rubbing her back again. “You try Ruby. In the real world fairy tale
characters don't exist. Everyone has feet of clay. The worst monsters sometimes take care of orphans
just because they care. The kindest, most charitable people sometimes make people suffer. Heroic
crusaders for civil rights are adulterers. And everyone, everyone does the wrong thing sometimes. The difference is you try.”

“You try, too,” Ruby said.

“Not like you,” Weiss said, leaning back to look Ruby in the eye again. “I'm cynical. When I look at the world, I see a terrible place where people needlessly suffer, and no one really cares. I know we save lives, but it doesn't really make a difference. People still suffer. Terrible things happen. And everywhere are bad people doing it, apathetic people enabling it, and then there's you…”

“Me?”

“You care,” Weiss said. “You really do. When you look around… you don't see what I see. You see the world we're working toward. I thought that was so foolish, but it's not. It's strength. You aren't the sheltered one. You've seen more of the world than I have. You just don't let it crush you. You keep believing that things can be better, and you're strong enough to look for the good in everyone, even someone like me.”

“You're a good person, Weiss,” Ruby said. “You always tear yourself down like that, but it's true.”

“If I'm a good person it's because you're here, showing me how to be,” Weiss said. “When I started… I didn't hate the faunus, but I didn't really care what happened to them. But this… this way that we treat them… it's wrong. The White Fang are monsters, and I'm not going to shed a tear about the deaths of a bunch of murdering terrorists today, but the things we saw here… the way the mines really are. I don't know how to fix it. I don't know if I can fix it. But I want to try. I don't want to be passively complicit in my family's actions anymore. I don't want to stand by and let the innocent suffer because it's easier. I want to try. You taught me that.”

“I love you, Weiss,” Ruby whispered.

“I love you, too.”

Ruby looked down for a moment, before taking Weiss' hands. After quietly sitting like that for a while Ruby squeezed her hands tightly and spoke. “So… do you know why I can touch you?”

“No,” Weiss said. “It… it shouldn't be possible.”

“Maybe… maybe it's true love?”

“What?” Weiss asked flatly.

“You know, like in the faerie tales… hey!” Ruby gasped sitting up straighter with a grin. Her eyes were still bloodshot from crying, but even though Weiss could already feel the headache from a stupid conversation coming on she was glad to see Ruby happy again, if only for the moment. “We're in Faerie, right?”

“Right…”

“And now we're able to touch each other,” Ruby said, squeezing hands again. “I think… we need to kiss.”

Weiss blushed. “H-how did you even get to that from… from whatever you were talking about?”

“Well, we can safely touch, and no one else can, right?” Ruby said. “So! That must mean it's true love conquering all!”
“No… just no,” Weiss said. “True love is just meaningless faerie tale idiocy. It isn't-

“But think about it!” Ruby interrupted. “We're in Faerie, so when we tell anyone about our first kiss it'll be a Faerie tale!”

Weiss just stared at the idiot she had somehow fallen in love with. She regretted every life choice that lead her to this moment. “No. Just… no.”

Ruby pouted. “But Weiss! Don't you want to have a Faerie tale romance?”

“Don't most faerie tale romances involve highly questionable consent issues?”

Ruby somehow pouted harder. “Does that mean you don't want to kiss me?”

“N-no I didn't say that...” Weiss said, suddenly swallowing as her mouth went dry. “I just… I mean, I've never… obviously, so...”

Ruby giggled. “I know.”

Weiss hesitated, her eyes drawn almost magnetically to Ruby's soft looking lips as she began to reconsider whether she was actually awake, or even actually alive. If both of her hands weren't occupied she would pinch herself. “But… what if I hurt you?”

“You won't,” Ruby said, squeezing her hands tightly for a moment. “This doesn't hurt me. You don't hurt me. Maybe it's because of true love?”

“No,” Weiss groaned. “Seriously, where does that even come from?”

Ruby pouted again. “Then why do you think we can touch?”

“I- I… I don't know,” Weiss said, speaking again before Ruby could interrupt. “But I know it's not because of 'true love'!”

“See, this is just you being cynical,” Ruby said.

“And this is you being naive,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “Maybe… maybe it has something to do with me almost dying today. Maybe it has to do with our relationship. Maybe it has to do with your magic. Or any number of other things. I don't know why I can touch you, but you can forget 'true love' as the reason.”

“Our relationship' sounds a lot like true love but in boring terms,” Ruby said.

Weiss scoffed. “Please. From what I understand the most likely cause of my draining in the first place is a psychological block. Most necromancers have the ability to do this, but others don't have it always active. It's probably because I became a necromancer at such a young age, and so traumatically which keeps me from controlling it. Maybe… maybe my feelings for you helps me to not do it?”

“But… sometimes when I… with the White Fang earlier, I touched you at the same time as them, and they drained and I didn't,” Ruby said.

“Then it probably wasn't that… I don't know.”

“Well, I say we take advantage of it,” Ruby said, looking at Weiss' lips. “I'm going to kiss you now, okay?”
“O-okay,” Weiss breathed.

Weiss felt like her heart was going to escape from her chest, while her stomach was twisting into ever tighter knots. She had dreamed about kissing Ruby. It had prominently featured in what she remembered of her Red Sap induced high. Despite that, she had never really thought that it could happen. As she watched Ruby lean closer she felt about an inch away from a panic attack.

Then Ruby was pressing her lips against her's. They were a bit chapped, but otherwise quite soft. It was a pleasant sensation, but confusing, and for a moment Weiss wasn't sure why everyone talked about kissing so much. Frankly, it was nerve wracking. Was she supposed to be doing anything? Was she doing something wrong, or not doing something, or something? Is that why she wasn't seeing the fireworks she was promised?

All of that happened in an instant, and then Ruby began to move her lips. Weiss didn't know what to do, panic gripping her, but then she tried to replicate what Ruby was doing. It seemed like it should be easy, but what if she was doing it wrong? What if Ruby laughed at her for being so useless? Why did it suddenly feel so much better?

Weiss felt her eyes drift shut as the kiss continued. It wasn't what she'd imagined, but it began to feel really good. As she relaxed and forgot about how she could screw everything up she found herself really enjoying the experience, and she followed Ruby's lead until finally her girlfriend pulled away.

“W-wow,” Weiss gasped, panting. She didn't even realize that she was short on breath but she had apparently been kissing long enough to need air. She opened her eyes, staring into Ruby's silver ones for a long moment. “That was… that was...”

Ruby grinned. “That was amazing.”

“Yeah,” Weiss said, smiling. “So it was… I did okay?”

“You did great,” Ruby said. “But...”

“But?”

“Maybe a little more practice wouldn't hurt.”

Weiss swallowed. “I think I'll need quite a bit of practice to properly master this skill.”

Ruby leaned back in, and the second kiss was better than the first. Now that she knew what to do her initial panic didn't happen, and instead Weiss simply enjoyed the intimacy. This time Ruby released her hands and wrapped them around back, pulling her close, and Weiss moaned as she suddenly became aware of just how soft and warm Ruby really was as they pressed their bodies close together. It was a long time before they separated, both panting, and then Ruby grinned and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Wow,” Ruby said, grinning like an idiot. “Hey Weiss, when we get home... wait, do you know how to get us home?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, blinking and leaning back to clear her head after what they had just been doing. She was surprised and how fuzzy her thoughts had become. “Yes, assuming the crate still has any dust left in it. A return portal is easier to make since we don't have to go through as many headaches to target it, and since we're natives coming home the Great Barrier isn't quite as resistant.”

“Then when we get home it'll be almost Christmas,” Ruby said. “Spend it with me.”
“You mean… with you and Yang and Blake?”

“And, um, and my dad,” Ruby said. “Me and Yang usually go home and spend a few days with him. I want you to come with us.”

“To meet your father?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “My dad'll love you, and I hate the idea of you not spending Christmas with anyone. Please?”

Weiss hesitated for a long moment, before finally she made the mistake at looking into Ruby's glistening, puppy dog eyes. “Okay.”
Intermission: A Home

Ruby's family home was at the very edge of the city's ward boundary. With her aura sight active, Weiss could actually see the curved protective dome as it ended only a few hundred feet past the end of the property. The house itself had very impressive wards, obviously professionally done but far more dense and powerful than was normal for a private residence in Vale, even one as near a ley line as the house was.

The building was two stories tall, with an attached garage at the end of the long driveway that pierced the huge lawn that surrounded the home. The lawn was much more spacious than would have been affordable in the city proper, with a white picket fence around it, a number of trees scattered about, and a large area beside the house that was a garden during warmer weather.

Ruby parked the car beside the garage, pulling onto a somewhat damaged section of grass that had obviously been used for guest parking on a regular basis. Ruby turned off the car and smiled at her girlfriend, reaching over and gently taking her hand, making Weiss smile back.

After a moment Ruby started to open the door, and Weiss felt a sudden flash of panic at the thought of going inside and meeting her girlfriend's father. She cast about desperately for some way to delay that, asking the first question that popped into her head. “How did you find the castle?”

“Huh?” Ruby asked, taking her hand off of the door handle.

Weiss felt a little relief, and also suddenly curious about her question. She had spent some time wondering about it the previous night while trying to fall asleep, but at the time hadn't found the energy to contact her partner and ask. “Yesterday, when… everything happened. How did you find the castle by yourself?”

“Oh!” Ruby said. “Um… well, the lion things-”

“Manticores,” Weiss interrupted.

“Right, those things, um, one of them killed poor Snaily, and I had to run away. After that I went looking for you, but then it got dark and I got tired and you would not believe how big that forest was! So I had to find somewhere to sleep, but there wasn't anywhere, so I found a clearing and tried to make a fire but it wouldn't burn for some reason, so I gave up and just huddled to try to stay warm. Nothing bad happened, but I was pretty hungry the next morning, so I ate my backup emergency cookies and went looking for the castle since that's where you were going.

“I got kinda lost though, and I had no idea where it was, but then I ran into some sprites. They wanted to kidnap me or something, but I still had my secret double emergency backup cookies-”

“Where do you keep all of these cookies?” Weiss interrupted.

“Maybe you can search and find out later,” Ruby said, her voice low and faux seductive. The fact that she was talking about cookies undermined any possible sexiness, making Weiss burst into surprised laughter, leaving Ruby pouting until she calmed down. “Anyway, I fed them the last of my cookies and they agreed to take me to the castle. There was this whole thing with a leshy I think they said it was, and some wolves, but it was mostly just running away and hoping you would be there.”

“I see,” Weiss said.

“Now, do you have any other ways to distract me, or are you ready to meet my dad?” Ruby asked.
Weiss blushed at having been caught out. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Ruby said, slowly leaning over to give her a kiss on the cheek. She grinned as Weiss blushed even harder. “I know you don’t like meeting people, and meeting your girlfriend’s father is scary, but there’s nothing to worry about.”

“What if he doesn’t like me,” she murmured. “I’m not exactly the easiest person to get along with.”

Ruby squeezed her hand. “He’s going to love you. You wanna know how I know? ’Cause I love you, so I know he will. Just be yourself, and don’t try to impress him or anything. Just… be Weiss.”

“The problem is I’m never very Weiss,” she said.

Ruby gave her a deadpan look. “You should let my sister make the puns.”

Weiss huffed. “Come on, that was a good one.”

Ruby rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything, getting out of the car and waiting for Weiss to follow. She hesitated for several more long moments, before finally climbing out of the car and joining her girlfriend, taking her hand once again. Being able to hold Ruby’s hand made everything better, and it was with only a little more hesitation that she walked to the front door.

“Thanks for coming to Christmas with me,” Ruby said when they reached the porch.

Weiss smiled at her. “Thank you for inviting me. I’ve… never really done much for Christmas before.”

Ruby leaned in and kissed her. The experience was still so strange, but strangely wonderful. Weiss’ eyes drifted shut, and she forgot all of her fears as she gently wrapped her hands around Ruby’s back. Ruby did the same, although one hand slowly drifted lower, leaving a trail of fire and goosebumps until it rested on her hip. She was half afraid that Ruby would move the hand even lower, and half eager for her to. Before she could decide which she wanted the door suddenly opened.

“Hey, Ruby!” a man's voice said cheerfully. “When are you going to come inside?”

“Dad!” Ruby yelped, pulling back, but keeping her an arm around Weiss, turning to face him.

Weiss felt like finding a rock to crawl under and die. When she finally worked up the nerve to look at him she was relieved to see that he looked amused instead of angry. Still, it was a terrible first impression, and she was going to scold Ruby until her ears fell off later when they were alone.

Ruby's father was well tanned from the sun, with scruffy blonde hair like Yang, although he kept his cut much shorter. He was wearing cargo pants and a ridiculous green, red and gold abomination of a Christmas sweater depicting a group of dogs sitting around a card table exchanging gifts. When she finally worked up the nerve to study his boyish face she saw that he had kind blue eyes and a teasing grin on his face.

“Well, I'm guessing this is the girlfriend you've been talking so much about,” he said. “Or at least, it better be or I'm going to have to lecture you no matter how pretty she is.”

“Dad!” Ruby objected, blushing.

He chuckled and turned his attention to Weiss. “Nice to meet you! I'm Taiyang Xio Long, father of this one and another pain in the butt already inside drinking cocoa.”
“Weiss Schnee, sir,” Weiss said, giving him a stiff smile.

He grinned brightly. “Ha! I'm not much of sir, just call me Tai.”

“Um, thank you, Mr. Tai,” Weiss tried.

He chuckled. “Just, Tai. Now come on in, you look like you're already half frozen out there and it hasn't even started snowing yet.”

“Is it going to snow?” Ruby asked.

“Of course!” he said cheerfully. “Didn’t you see the weather?”

“Um… we were kinda out of town for a case until yesterday, and after checking in we just went home and went to sleep,” Ruby said sheepishly.

Weiss sniffed. “Maybe you did, but I stayed up and wrote my report already.”

Ruby looked horrified. “You almost got killed yesterday, and you still wrote your report?!”

Weiss raised her chin. “Of course. Paperwork is very important.”

“Oh, Weiss,” Ruby sighed.

Tai just grinned. “Wow, you really need some vacation, don't ya? Come on, let's head to the kitchen. I've got fresh baked cookies and plenty of hot cocoa.”

“Cookies?!” Ruby shouted, releasing Weiss and running for the kitchen.

“Thank you for having me in your home Mr., um, Tai,” Weiss said formally.

He shook his head. “Come on, you're dating my daughter, so as long as you don't hurt her you're part of the family.”

“Thank you, Tai,” Weiss said with a shy smile.

He grinned. “Don't worry about it! She hasn't taken anyone home since high school, so you've gotta be pretty serious. Oh, and if you do hurt her… I'm a dog trainer for the police, and let's just say you would not return from a kennel trip in that case, got it?”

Before she could say anything there was a cute little bark and Zwei came trotting into the room. He ran right up to her and paused at her feet, looking at her, wagging his tiny stub of a tail and barking happily. The presence of the best little doggy in the world made her forget all about Tai's threat as she leaned down low and began to coo to it, Zwei bouncing and barking happily.

“Okay, I guess if Zwei likes you that much I don't have anything to worry about,” Tai chuckled.

Weiss blushed and stood, clearing her throat. “Sorry… I always wanted a dog but I… couldn't have one. And Zwei is the best little doggy!”

Zwei barked his agreement to her words, making Tai chuckle again. “Why don't we go get some hot cocoa and see how my girls are doing?”

“Alright, I should probably stop Ruby anyway unless she wants to spend Christmas with a sore stomach,” Weiss said as she followed him through the house.
The inside was warm and inviting, and so different from Schnee Manor that it might have been something from a different plane. Rather than the cold and stark but tastefully expensive environment she had been raised in, everything about Tai's home screamed family. Pictures decorated every shelf, and while small the rooms were packed with soft, comfy furniture, well worn from a lifetime of family using them, and objects that obviously had some significance to the people who had shared the home for so many years.

Each room was also decorated with tinsel and other Christmas items. He led her through the living room, which had a huge undecorated Christmas tree, with boxes of lights and ornaments sitting beside it. Past that was a dining room, which had a large table set up, with lights around the room and a wreath on the wall, and finally into the kitchen.

Sitting at the counter were Blake and Yang, both of whom were nursing cocoa while amusedly watching Ruby stuff her face from the platter of decorated sugar cookies. Ruby paused with a green pine tree cookie half in her mouth, a red star in one hand and a white snowman in the other to wave and mumble at them happily.

“Don't talk with your mouth full,” Weiss scolded her.

Ruby swallowed and grinned. “Sorry.”

“Wehaven't had dinner yet, either,” Weiss continued, crossing her arms. “You've already spoiled your appetite, but if you eat any more you won't have any room left at all.”

“Thank you,” Blake said. “It was kind of funny, but I was starting to get a little nauseous just watching her.”

Ruby finished the cookies she had in her hands and pouted. “I didn't eat that many.”

“Hey, ice queen!” Yang called. “Glad you could make it.”

“Brute,” Weiss sniffed. “You should've stopped Ruby from eating so many.”

Yang snorted. “Yeah, right. I don't think anyone's kept Ruby from stuffing her face with as many cookies as she wants since she was about five… well, except you.”

“I guess that's how you can tell it's love,” Blake drawled.

Ruby huffed. “I'm right here.”

“Oh, so you're paying attention now?” Yang asked. “When I asked how you were you just stuffed cookies in your face and mumbled at me.”

“But… but they're dad's Christmas cookies,” Ruby objected. “How could I resist?”

“Do you want some hot cocoa, or maybe some coffee?” Tai asked. “I've also got some tea if you'd like.”

“Oh, um, coffee if it isn't too much trouble,” Weiss said. “I'm not very fond of sweet things.”

“Opposites attract, huh,” he said with a grin. “So, how exactly did you two meet? Ruby never mentioned it.”

Weiss blushed, but before she could figure out some way to make it sound better Blake spoke up. “Oh, they ran into each other on the first day of work.”
“Yes, well, Ruby should watch where she's going,” Weiss grumbled.

Tai laughed. “Oh, Ruby, taking after your old man and sweeping the ladies right off their feet, huh?”

“Dad!” Ruby objected, hiding her face her in hands.

“Knocking them off their feet, you mean,” Blake said. “If it wasn't right in front of Beacon I would have assumed she was making a move when I saw them.”

“Blake!” Ruby cried, burying her head deeper in her hands.

Yang started to open her mouth when Weiss interrupted her. “No!”

“What, I didn't say anything,”

“You were going to,” Weiss said, narrowing her eyes at the blonde who tried her most innocent look. It didn't fool anyone. “Come on, Ruby. Why don't we leave these reprobates here and you can show me your home.”

“Reprobates?” Tai asked

“Sure!” Ruby said, grabbing her gloved hand and pulling her along.

“Wait, Ruby, I still need my coffee!”

Ruby didn't slow down, and Weiss sighed as she heard the laughter from the kitchen as she was pulled through the house. “So, um, let me show you my room first!”

Weiss had to admit that she was curious about how Ruby had grown up, so she didn't put up much of a fuss as she was pulled up the stairs and down a narrow hallway. Ruby paused at the door, blushing slightly before she opened it. “Um, sorry if it's messy… I only visit on holidays and stuff, so… it's pretty much how I left it when I moved in with Yang after high school.”

Weiss gave her a blank stare, and after one more deep breath Ruby opened the door. The room beyond wasn't as bad as she'd started to fear, although it was certainly much, much messier than Weiss would have accepted in her own dwelling. The room was quite small, with a moderate sized bed in the corner, a broad desk against the opposite wall, a dresser with a small television sitting on it, a door that probably led to a closet, and a bookshelf sitting between the bed and the desk.

While the furniture was pretty normal, every inch of them was covered in objects of all kinds. The desk had what appeared to be a partially deconstructed computer, along with piles of electronics parts and some tools, including a soldering iron. The shelves had books, but also tons of scrap parts, some children's toys, and a bunch of discs, some in cases, some not. The walls were covered in band posters, and Weiss recognized many of them as the bands that Ruby liked to listen to in the car sometimes.

“So… this is my room,” Ruby said, blushing. “I know it's not much, but...”

“No, it's nice,” Weiss interrupted. “It's… it's very… homey.”

Ruby beamed. “I spent a lot of time in here when I was younger. I used to take apart all kinds of stuff and then try to put it back together. Dad wouldn't let me do much mechanical stuff in here, but he didn't mind me doing stuff with electronics, so...”

“I remember you saying you like to tinker with things,” Weiss said hesitantly.
“Yeah, I love doing that stuff,” Ruby said, walking over to the desk and grabbing a breadboard with several electronic parts Weiss didn't recognize sticking out of it. “I like mechanical stuff better, but this stuff is cool, too. I like working with my hands, seeing how things work, that kinda stuff.”

Weiss smirked. “Maybe you would like binding magic more than I thought.”

“What do you mean?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged. “Spell casting is like… athletics. You have to train hard, and master yourself, and learn the skills needed, and when you get good enough you can improvise, but most of the time it's just about doing. Binding magic is the academics of the supernatural. You have to really understand what you're doing, but it lets you build and develop magical effects.”

Ruby rubbed the back of her head sheepishly. “I usually just… jump into this stuff. Don't I have to understand theory and stuff for binding magic?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I see a bunch of bookshelves in this room. You like reading quite a bit.”

“I mean, sure, I like...” she grabbed a book from the shelf and waved it at Weiss. “Fantasy novels and fairy tales and stuff, not, you know, things that put normal people to sleep to read about.”

Weiss rolled her eyes and huffed. “You're just being lazy.”

Ruby shrugged, putting the book back. “I just like doing more than learning, you know? I like reading fun books, but if I'm supposed to know something it just kinda goes in one ear and out the other. I guess that's why I didn't want to study this stuff in school. I mean, I might know all kinds of stuff about tinkering, I mean, I can build circuitboards from scratch… one time the vacuum broke and I figured out how to take the whole motor apart and what was wrong and got it working again the same day. But if I had to sit in class and try to pay attention for hours and hours about theory I think I'd explode.”

“You pay attention just fine when I'm teaching you magic,” Weiss said.

“Well, I mean, at first I wanted to impress you,” Ruby admitted with a blush. “By the time you started really teaching me stuff I already kinda had a crush on you. It was really boring at first, but when you'd smile just a little when I got stuff right it made me want to try harder.”

“But… but I started teaching you really early!” Weiss objected.

Ruby shrugged. “Yeah, Yang thought something was wrong with me since I told her I liked you even though you were being all grumpi-Weiss back then. I just could tell you were actually nice deep, deep, deep… um, real deep down.”

Weiss gave her a light glare at that. “Still… why didn't you ever say anything?”

Ruby shrugged. “I didn't think you were interested, and I didn't even know if you could ever like me. I mean, you were pretty opposed to the whole idea of love and stuff.”

“I tried to avoid thinking about… that stuff,” Weiss said. “I was convinced from a young age that I would never touch anyone, and it was less painful if I didn't have any interests or- or urges. It probably helped that I rarely interacted with anyone besides my family and a few servants whose names I rarely knew.”

Ruby stepped closer and gave her a small, chaste kiss, making Weiss blush but smile. Ruby giggled and grabbed her hand. “Come on, the house isn't that big. Let me show you the rest.”
“And this is the garage,” Ruby said, opening the door and leading the way outside.

It was a two car garage, with an old but well maintained car on one side, with a sleek yellow motorcycle sitting next to it. The other half of the garage was filled with power tools, a cluttered workbench, and a bunch of partially dismantled engines, appliances, and even a mechanical clock.

Weiss followed Ruby over to the workbench, shivering slightly from the cold. The garage was poorly insulated, making it almost as cold as outside, but she stayed close to Ruby, curious about what she wanted to show her. Before her partner could even say anything Weiss realized what she was looking at.

“Is this your work area?” she asked. “You know, for mechanical… stuff?”

Ruby smiled at her happily. “Yeah! I'd spend everyday out here after school tinkering on stuff. I actually did most of the work rebuilding dad's car after the engine died. He was stuck getting rides from Uncle Qrow for weeks until I got it done.”

Weiss looked around again, interested in the life her girlfriend had once lived. It was so different from her own upbringing, and she couldn't even imagine how her father would've reacted if she had tried to claim a corner of a dirty garage to work with power tools. She had never even set foot in the family garage before.

“Do you have a place to do this sort of thing now?”

“A little,” Ruby said. “I've got a desk where I've got some stuff I still fiddle with, but there's just not much room in my apartment.”

Weiss almost offered her own, but bit her lip before the words could escape. Did she want Ruby to live with her? Part of her screamed yes, but the rest was frightened at the thought. She'd never shared her private living area with anyone before, her room being sacrosanct besides the maids even when she was a child. She loved the idea of spending more time with Ruby, but having her move in seemed like a huge thing. Could she actually make the offer?

“Hey, you two,” Blake said, pulling her from her thoughts. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, I'm just showing Weiss my work area,” Ruby said cheerfully.

“Your work area?” Blake repeated, walking over to see it.

“Yeah, when I lived here I used to tinker with stuff all the time,” Ruby explained. “We only had one car when I started, so dad gave me half the garage. I think Yang used that to convince dad to let her get Bumblebee.” She gestured towards the motorcycle, which Weiss was unsurprised to learn was Yang's.

Blake smiled slightly. “It's hard to imagine you covered in engine grease working on this stuff.”

Ruby grinned. “Dad had to buy special soap since I had so much trouble getting clean enough to have dinner after a day out here.”

Weiss didn't want to admit it, but the mental image of Ruby spattered with engine grease, working hard on some project with her tongue poking out of her lips in concentration was completely
adorable. Even if she wasn't ready to ask her to move in she needed to find some excuse to have her work on something. Maybe she could mess up an appliance and invite her over to help?

“Speaking of dinner, that's why I came out here,” Blake said. “Tai wanted to know if you two were hungry.”

On cue Ruby's stomach growled, making her chuckle sheepishly. “I could eat.”

“Weiss?” Blake asked.

Weiss hesitated, glancing over at Ruby for a moment before nodding. “I suppose. Does he have anything… healthy?”

Blake rolled her eyes. “I’m sure it will be fine. Besides, you could use a little more meat on your bones.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!?”

Ruby came over and wrapped an arm around her, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek as well. “One day eating Christmas food won't kill you.”

“You never know,” Weiss grumbled, although it was hard to actually be mad after Ruby kissed her. “Besides, isn't Christmas tomorrow?”

“Yes, and dad'll spend all day cooking up a big fancy meal,” Ruby said. “He'll probably just throw something quick together tonight.”

“Fine.”

They walked hand in hand back inside, and Weiss was happy to be in the warm, heated house again. Ruby had been shivering as well, and if anything looked even more relieved than she did. It was a quick walk to the kitchen, where food was already sizzling on the stove. It smelled strongly of cooking beef, which wasn’t Weiss' favorite, although she resolved not to complain as long as she didn't get sick eating it.

“What's cookin'? Ruby asked, letting go of Weiss' hand to hop over and take a look.

“Burgers,” Tai said cheerfully, before looking over at Weiss. “How do you like yours?”

Weiss tried to think of an answer. She had vague memories of having a hamburger when she was young, but it wasn't something she could really recall much about. “Um… plain is fine.”

“Sure thing,” he said, and she sighed with relief at having found an acceptable answer.

Apparently hamburgers were very fast to cook, as in no time at all buns and potato chips were added to paper plates, and then one after another hamburgers were placed on the buns. Everyone else put cheese on theirs, and there was intense jockeying for access to the ketchup and pickles while Weiss and Blake hung back. Blake looked amused at the behavior, while Weiss tried to suppress a yell of horror when Yang squirted ketchup at Ruby to try to get her to hand over the mayonnaise.

Finally the three finished preparing their meals, trooping off to the living room. Blake quickly readied her own, while Weiss decided to add a little mustard to hers. She didn't know how she would like a hamburger, but she was fond of mustard. Despite that she was quite suspicious of the bright yellow 'mustard', but in the end she added it anyway.
The others had grabbed cans of soda, but Weiss opted for a glass of water before heading to the living room. Yang and Tai were sitting on the couch in front of the television, which was showing some action movie with a man crawling through vents talking on a walkie talkie. Next to the couch was a recliner with Ruby sitting on the carpet in front of it, using it as a back support.

“Over here, Weiss,” Ruby called, patting the actual seat she was leaning against.

Weiss hesitated for a moment, before finally walking over and sitting on the chair when Ruby leaned forward to give her room. She blushed as the moment she was seated Ruby leaned back again, resting her head on Weiss’ knee. It actually felt quite nice, and she subtly glanced around to see how the others reacted. Fortunately only Yang seemed to notice, and she simply smirked and tossed them a small thumbs up.

Weiss turned her attention to her food, if only to avoid paying attention to how self-conscious having Ruby so close in front of her family was making her. She decided to try the potato chip she had been given first. It was very pale, with green flecks, which would’ve made her suspicious of possible mold if the others didn’t think that it was edible. After a little more hesitation she nibbled on one, wrinkling her nose at just how salty the dry, crumbly fried potato was. Under that it had a sharp taste vaguely reminiscent of onions and something else, and while not good it wasn’t completely inedible.

Once she’d slowly eaten a potato chip she removed her gloves and carefully lifted the hamburger. She really wished that she’d also gotten a knife and fork, but she hadn’t seen them, and she didn’t want to be so rude as to look in drawers in a strange house without permission. Finally, with only a moment of additional hesitation she took a bite.

The beef was actually quite juicy and flavorful despite being over done, as no pink remained in the center of the beef patty. The bread was very bland, however, although it did a good job of soaking up the juices of the burger. The mustard was the real disappointment though, as it had far more color than flavor to it. Still, while she wasn’t in a hurry to acquire more hamburgers, she had to admit, to herself at least, that it actually tasted fairly good.

She didn’t eat many potato chips, and eventually she put her plate aside and relaxed, watching the confusing movie that the others were so focused on. She wasn’t sure exactly how a movie about a terrorist was supposed to be proper viewing on Christmas Eve, but she had to admit that she wasn’t sure what constituted proper Christmas activities or movies, so she supposed that they knew best.

Ruby eventually looked up at Weiss, her plate clear and her eyes on her girlfriend’s chips. Weiss rolled her eyes and handed over her plate, which made Ruby beam brightly and press a kiss to Weiss’ knee. She blushed as Ruby went back to happily munching, and after putting her gloves back on she carefully reached down and began to pet the top of Ruby’s head. It felt a little awkward at first, but Ruby leaned into the touch, and with a smile Weiss found herself enjoying the simple action.

Eventually the movie ended, and by then everyone had finished their food. “Ready to decorate the tree?” Tai asked.

“Yeah!” Ruby shouted, jumping up excitedly. “Can I put the star on top this year?”

“Not a chance, Rubes,” Yang chuckled. “Unless we trade this bad boy in for a shrub.”

“Meany,” Ruby pouted.

Weiss stood by awkwardly for a moment while the others began to tear open boxes and pull out strings of lights and tinsel. Without anything else to do she gathered up the plates and garbage from the meal and took them to the kitchen. When she came back Tai immediately called out to her. “Hey!
Come on over here, Weiss.”

“O-of course,” she said nervously, walking over to the boxes full of ornaments.

“You didn't have to clean things up,” he said cheerfully. “You're a guest.”

“Oh, um, please forgive my rudeness,” she said.

He rolled his eyes. “Now, now, none of that. You are the least rude guest we've ever had over.”

Blake snorted at that, Yang loudly guffawed, and even Ruby looked amused. Weiss threw all three of them a quick glare while Tai looked at them with confusion, and when he returned his attention to her she gave him an innocent smile. “I feel like I'm missing something,” he said.

Yang walked over, a smirk on her face. “Just the thought that this one- OW! You stepped on my foot!”

“Sorry,” Weiss said sweetly. “I must've missed it.”

“Why are you wearing boots with heels during the winter, anyway,” Yang grumbled. “They're bad for your feet, you know.”

“Really?” Ruby said, looking down at them. “I knew those things were evil.”

“Anyway, since you're our guest, we're going to be making this a Weiss Christmas this year,” Tai said, earning a groan from Weiss, Ruby and Blake, but a high five from Yang. “So why don't you pick an ornament to put on first.”

“Um… I'm not sure-” Weiss started. “I mean, I've never… done this before.”

“What, had servants to put up your Christmas decorations for you?” Yang teased.

“Actually, unless father was hosting a business event around this time we never did anything at all,” Weiss said.

“Wow, that's… just pick out something you like,” Yang said, gesturing towards the boxes. “We've got way more than enough to cover like, three trees, so we always leave a bunch in the box every year. Just find one you think's cool and put it up.”

“But-”

“It doesn't have to be perfect, princess,” Yang said gently. “Christmas is better when it isn't perfect. Haven't you ever watched Charlie Brown's Christmas?”

“Who?”

“Okay, Rubes-” Yang started, but she was already jogging over to a shelf.

“On it!”

A few minutes later some really cheap looking animation about a bunch of school children was playing on the television, and after another prompt from Yang Weiss looked through the boxes of ornaments while Tai tried to get the tangle of Christmas lights sorted out. Eventually Weiss found something strange. It was a small white snowflake that had obviously been crocheted by hand.

“What's this?” she asked.
It was quiet for a moment before Tai cleared his throat. “Oh, that was… Summer, Ruby's mom, she made that when Ruby was little...”

“Oh, I'm sorry, I just...” Weiss said, starting to put it back in the box.

“No!” Ruby objected. “No, I... I think it's perfect.”

Tai gave her a soft smile. “Yeah, you should put that one up.”

“Go for it, Weissicle,” Yang agreed.

Weiss sent her a small glare, but it didn't really have any heat. Instead she carefully put it on the tree at eye level, stepping back to admire the simple decoration. She wasn't sure why she had been drawn to it, but as Ruby wrapped an arm around her she smiled, happy with her choice.

“Alright, my turn!” Yang shouted.

“No way, me next!” Ruby called, releasing Weiss and running over to the boxes.

The two began to playfully push each other, and Weiss walked over to Tai, looking down at the tangle of lights he was still trying to fix. “Would you like some help?”

“Sure,” he said brightly. “I think this is four strands of lights all kind of knotted up. I guess they like togetherness for Christmas as much as we do.”

Weiss gave him a small smile and started on the other end of the lights, carefully working it loose. Decorating the tree ended up taking up most of the evening, but eventually the tree was so full of ornaments and lights that she was left wondering how it was even able to stand. Tai added the finishing touch with an angel at the top, and as soon as it was plugged in everyone gathered around it, admiring the results.

It was objectively ugly, Weiss decided. There were simply too many conflicting ornaments, and she could imagine the professional decorators her father used having a meltdown at the sheer chaos of it all. Despite that, looking at the fruit of their labors gave her a warm feeling inside. Ruby must've felt the same as she joined her, leaning in close. “Merry Christmas, Weiss.”

Weiss kissed her softly, leaning back when she heard Yang wolf whistle. “What was that, you brute?”

“I could ask you the same,” Yang said. “I thought kissing you was supposed to give her a not so little death.”

“Huh?” Ruby said.

Weiss blushed. “Wh-what?!? I... um...”

“Oh, Weiss can touch me,” Ruby said.

“Not in front of me, hopefully,” Tai said. “I like her, but there's some things a father doesn't want to see his little girl doing.”

Weiss' face felt hot enough to fry an egg, and she groaned, burying it in Ruby's shoulder. On the one hand, Tai saying he liked her was probably nicer than any unqualified statement her father had ever said to her. On the other, Ruby seemed to be digging them ever deeper with unintentional lewd implications.
“Sorry, dad,” Ruby said sheepishly. “I won't, um, I won't do anything Yang would do in front of you.”

“Hey!” Yang objected.

“Thank you,” Tai said with a relieved sigh.

Finally Weiss felt calm enough to rejoin the conversation. “Normally I can't touch people without hurting them, but for some reason that doesn't happen with Ruby.”

“It must be true love,” Ruby said happily.

Weiss groaned into her hand. “I already told you, Ruby—”

“So she doesn't take your breath away?” Yang asked.

“She always did,” Ruby said sweetly, before turning around and giving Weiss a quick kiss.

“Way to go sis!” Yang cheered.

“She's a chip off the old Xiao Long block,” Tai said proudly. “I'm gonna go get the presents now.”

“Presents?” Weiss asked once Ruby pulled away.

“You know, to put under the tree and give out tomorrow?” Yang said.

“I- I'm sorry, I...” Weiss started.

“Sorry,” Ruby said, eyes wide. “I forgot about presents. Um, don't worry about it, okay? I didn't even think to invite you until, um, last minute, so...”

“You can always make it up to us next year, Weissy,” Yang said.

“Next year?”

“Well, even if the two of you get over your disgusting honeymoon phase and break up, you'll still be her partner, right?” Yang said. “I think that makes you family enough to come for Christmas. I mean, Blake's been coming over every Christmas since I joined SA.”

Weiss blinked back tears and offered Yang a watery smile which was answered by a surprisingly gentle one. Tai then returned with an armload of boxes which he placed under the tree. “By the way, I got you a little something for tomorrow, Weiss.”

“You didn't have to, Mr. Xiao Long,” Weiss said as she took the present with shaking hands. “I- I didn't think to bring anything...”

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“We all wear Christmas sweaters tomorrow, so this way you're part of the family,” Tai said. “Now, who wants egg nog!”
“Ooh, me!” Ruby shouted, dashing for the kitchen. The others followed, while Weiss simply stared down at the sweater. After a moment she pulled it on over her nice clothing, before stepping outside to get some fresh air.

She had only been outside for a few minutes when Blake opened the door and offered her a cup of hot coffee. “Here.”

“O-oh, thank you, Blake,” she said, taking it and wiping her eyes quickly.

“So, why are you out here in the cold instead of cuddling with your girlfriend?”

“I…” Weiss looked down at the cup. “This is all so… overwhelming.”

Blake smiled. “Tai’s great. I missed my family when I moved to Vale, but… he and Yang and Ruby all welcomed me with open arms.”

“I don’t… deserve to be here,” Weiss said.

“What do you mean?”

“We went to Faerie, and the more I looked, the more time I spent there… the more I knew what my family does is wrong,” Weiss said. “I know we need dust to keep everyone safe, but… so many faunus suffer for it. I don't know what to do, but I have to try to do something. Families are trapped apart working all day today and tomorrow, while I'm here getting presents and… and being part of a family.”

Blake sighed. “It was easier to just hate you and your family before I really got to know you. You're right that something needs to be done, but that doesn't mean you need to punish yourself for things that aren't your fault.”

They were silent for a while. “Am I a bad person?”

“I think a bad person wouldn't struggle with that question,” Blake said. “You care, Weiss. That makes you a good person in my book. Now, it's cold, and I'm not wearing my ugly Christmas sweater yet, so I'm going back inside. You coming?”

“In a minute,” Weiss said.

“Sure thing,” Blake said, reaching for the doorknob. “If you aren't back in soon I'm siccing Ruby on you.”

Once she was gone Weiss pulled out her phone and began to place some calls. Maybe she couldn't fix the world, but there was something else that she'd neglected that she could do.
Ruby woke with a gasp, eyes darting about the room as she looked for the people she’d killed who had been looming over her in her dreams. She would never regret saving Weiss’ life, but she could still feel the way they squirmed in her grip, writhing and screaming, before breaking apart into dust. She doubted she would ever forget that feeling, or the terrible guilt that kept her from sleeping well.

Turning her head, she relaxed a little at what she saw next to her. Weiss had objected to sharing a bed, but she’d seen through her girlfriend's complaints and just waited patiently until she’d given in. They hadn't done anything more than share a few kisses, but falling asleep next to Weiss had let her rest far more easily than she would’ve imagined.

Weiss always looked tense and tired, and once she could really read her, so painfully lonely that it took her breath away sometimes. In sleep she was relaxed and serene, and Ruby couldn't help but lean over and press a small kiss to her cheek. Weiss deserved that peaceful rest, and that was why she had pretended that she was okay after first breaking down in Faerie. Her guilt was her own burden, and she wasn't going to make Weiss suffer through it too.

Ruby thought about cuddling with Weiss some more and trying to fall back asleep, but the call of nature wouldn't let her. With a sigh she got up and hit the bathroom, getting dressed quickly before checking on Weiss again, who was still sleeping soundly. She still thought about crawling right back into bed, but she could distantly smell breakfast cooking, and her stomach growling made her decision for her.

Her dad was wearing another goofy Christmas sweater, this one showing Santa walking out of a TARDIS with a load of presents. He looked up at her and gave a smile as she sat down at the counter. “Mornin', sweetie. Sleep well?”

“Yeah,” Ruby lied with a smile.

“Okay,” he said cautiously, obviously not believing her attempt. “Eggs and bacon?”

“You know it,” Ruby agreed, drooling a little.

“I'm a little surprised Weiss isn't joining us,” he said as he served her a plate.

Ruby shrugged. “She was still sleeping. Besides, she was too cute to wake up.”

He chuckled. “You've got it bad, don't you?”

Ruby felt herself blushing and stuffed food in her mouth, muttering something unintelligible in reply. Tai just laughed and made up his own breakfast plate, setting next to her.

“I like her,” he said eventually, making Ruby blink. “Weiss. I like her.”

Ruby's heart soared as she swallowed her food quickly to reply, almost choking on it for a second. “Really?”

“Really,” he repeated. “I wasn't too sure at first, I mean, she was a little… stiff.”

“That's just the way she is!” Ruby said defensively. “She was raised all proper-like, and she's not used to having friends or being with family or stuff, so-”
“It's okay,” Tai interrupted, smiling at her passionate defense. “She's not like the girls you dated in high school, and you never brought anyone to meet me after, so I guess I wasn't sure what to expect. But I can see that you're good for her… and she's good for you.”

“Yeah,” Ruby agreed, relaxing a little. “She makes me want to be my best.”

“That's a good way of describing love,” he agreed, making her blush again, although she was grinning. “What's that about not touching her, though?”

“Oh, right,” Ruby said, biting her lip. It felt like a betrayal to talk about it after how privately Weiss had held the truth, but at the same time she really wanted her dad to know. He was her only parent, and she had never really kept secrets from him before. “She can't, um, touch people. It drains the life from them.”

“I see,” he said. “That… sounds bad.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said with a sigh. “She freaks out so bad if anyone accidentally touches her since she doesn't want to hurt anyone. It's why she wears gloves and clothes that cover her body and everything.”

“And… you can touch her?”

“Yeah,” Ruby hummed. “I just found out a few days ago. I told her it was like a fairy tale, true love kinda thing. I mean, we were in Faerie and she was dying and it was really scary but dramatic, and-”

“Wait, you were in Faerie?” Tai interrupted. “No, never mind, I'm pretty sure I don't want to know… I'm going gray enough as it is. You said you found out you could touch her just a few days ago, though?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said quietly, remembering the terrifying, crippling fear that Weiss would die on her, which multiplied a hundred times over when she touched her and nothing happened.

“So you were dating her without being able to touch her before?”

“Well… right,” Ruby said. “I mean, I'm not exactly, well, I've dated before. And done… stuff with, you know, you gave me the birds and the bees talk and… right.”

“Right,” he agreed with a slight blush.

“But just holding her hand, even with gloves on, I mean… it was enough,” Ruby said quietly. “Knowing it was all she could give me, it didn't matter how little it was, it made me so happy. I mean, I was kinda scheming up things we could do in bed together, maybe with some toy- you know what, not going to talk about that! Um, right...”

“Right,” he said, bright red.

“But just being with her… I love her, dad,” Ruby said, trying to get her own blush under control. “She's the one.”

“You haven't been together very long,” he cautioned. “Sometimes… sometimes love doesn't last, no matter how strong it is.”

She reached over and gave him a quick hug, before pulling back and smiling at him. “I know. I never met Yang's mom, and I was young when mom... but I… I know this is real. I mean, it's hard sometimes. Even without the touch thing. Weiss can be… difficult. She's scared of being close, but
she needs to be close so bad and sometimes I feel like I'm getting pushed and pulled until I'm dizzy, but if I sit and wait and let her work it through she always lets me in. And she's so sweet, dad. When she's not being kinda snooty and a little mean, she really is a big fluffy sweetie. And she makes me want to be the best Ruby I can be, and she makes me feel like that's a great Ruby to be.”

They sat in silence for a few moments after that, finishing their food, before Tai broke it again. “So you're the only one who can touch her?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “It's some kinda necromancy thing where she can drain people but she can't turn it off for some reason.”

Tai got a strange expression on his face. “Necromancy, huh...”

“What?” Ruby asked, but her questioning was interrupted as they both heard someone staggering down the stairs. A few moments Weiss, looking tired and a little disheveled with her hair loose and clothing wrinkled stared at them blearily. She had a long robe on over her ankle length night gown, thick knee high socks, a pair of gloves, and even the Christmas sweater from yesterday, making her look somehow even more adorable than normal. “Mornin', Weiss!”

Weiss grumbled out some kind of sleepy, barely alive greeting, and with an indulgent smile Ruby guided her to a chair and then made her a cup of coffee. It was only after she'd taken several large sips that Weiss became alert enough to speak recognizable english. “Thank you,” she murmured.

Ruby grinned happily and leaned over, pressing a gentle kiss to her girlfriend's lips. They smiled at each other sappily for a moment before Tai cleared his throat and walked back over to the stove. “Eggs and bacon good?”

“O-oh, you don't have to go to so much trouble, Mr. Xia-, um Tai,” Weiss said.

He tossed her a grin. “You're my guest and probably future daughter in law. Trust me, some breakfast isn't that much to ask for.”

Weiss and Ruby both blushed at that, but soon another plate of hot food was placed in from of Weiss, who began to slowly eat it. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” he said casually, taking a sip of his own coffee.

After Weiss finished her food she carefully wiped her mouth with a napkin and then looked over at Ruby. She studied her carefully enough to make her start to get antsy under the scrutiny before finally speaking. “Did you sleep well?”

“I… I, um… I slept okay,” Ruby tried.

“Weiss...” Weiss said, crossing her arms and giving her a disapproving look.

“I liked having you there,” Ruby said, smiling when she saw how red that statement made Weiss. Her girlfriend kept staring at her, however, and eventually Ruby sighed. “I woke up with a nightmare, though. About… what happened. What I did.”

Weiss carefully reached over and took her hand. “You should've woken me up.”

Ruby shook her head. “You looked way too peaceful! I was gonna lay back down, but then I got hungry, so...”

Weiss sighed. “Fine. But next time you have a nightmare I want you to wake me up, okay? Okay?”
The second 'okay' was accompanied by a glare when Ruby didn't respond in time, making Ruby finally give in. “Okay, okay. Next time we're, um, together, I'll wake you up.”

“Good,” Weiss said.

“Sounds like you two should just move in together,” Tai observed. “You've been dating long enough for U-Hauling by now, right?”

“Dad!”

“What, I've got a pansexual daughter and a lesbian daughter, if I'm not allowed to talk about these things who can?”

“Still,” Ruby pouted.

“U-Hauling?” Weiss asked after a moment.

Before Tai could say anything the doorbell rang and Ruby jumped to her feet. “I'll get it!”

She ignored his chuckle as she ran to the door, curious about who could be there so early on Christmas. She was surprised to see several workmen carrying a large crate as well as several smaller packages. “Delivery for the Xiao Long residence,” one said.

“O-oh, okay,” Ruby said, stepping to the side.

“Oh, good, they made it,” Weiss said, walking in with Tai trailing behind.

“What is it?” Ruby asked as one of the workmen used a crowbar to pry open the crate for her. Her jaw dropped in shock at what was inside. “Cookies?!”

“I did promise you a bunch of cookies after what happened, didn't I?” Weiss said smugly. “Merry Christmas, Ruby.”

Ruby wiped tears from her eyes as she dove into Weiss' arms, almost knocking them both to the floor. “I love you Weiss!”

“What's the rest of this?” Tai asked, picking up a smaller box labelled 'Yang'.”

“Christmas presents,” Weiss said before being interrupted by kiss. When it finally broke Weiss smiled down at Ruby happily. “Merry Christmas, Ruby.”

“Merry Christmas, Weiss.”

The mall Santa, still wearing his costume, writhed against the ropes holding him bound upside down to the wall. He moaned through his gag, eyes rolling around the room in fear as he tried to see some escape, some way out.

There was none. They were alone in the mausoleum, the cemetery containing it so old that the gravestones were almost unreadable, and the grounds were untended to the point where nature was rapidly reclaiming it. The mausoleum itself had been cleared by the simple expedient of smashing all of its contents and then tossing the broken pieces, bones and all, into the corners.

A single brazier burned near the man, providing the only heat in the otherwise freezing room.
Standing on the other side of it was a tall, thin man wearing a heavy black coat and dress pants. He stared at the mall Santa with sunken eyes which glimmered in the light of the flames, and the only motion he made besides shallow breaths was the long, slow scrape of flint on the edge of a large knife.

The door to the mausoleum suddenly flew open, revealing a dark haired woman wearing a long black coat over her red dress and high heels. She looked around the room for a moment before offering the pale man a slow, wicked grin. “Liam Charleston?”

“You are interrupting my work,” he said, his voice quiet and almost entirely uninflected.

The woman hummed. “I’ve come to make you an offer. I find myself in need of your… unique services.”

Liam walked around his brazier, tucking his sharpening stone in his pocket and picking up a clay pot in his off hand. Without a word he cut the side of the Santa's throat, carefully catching the blood in his pot. Only while he was waiting for it to fill did he turn his attention to the woman.

“I am no mercenary,” he said. “I have no interest in the affairs of men or gods.”

“But men and gods have an interest in your affairs, Mr. Charleston,” she said. “And I do have something you want.”

The mall Santa slowly fell limp, and when the pot was full Liam placed it over the brazier, slowly bringing the large pot to a boil. Only when he was satisfied with his efforts did he look at the woman again. “What could you possibly have to offer me?”

She reached inside of her coat and pulled out an ancient, leather bound tome. “One of my… associates spent months tracking down and finally stealing this work.”

He studied it thoughtfully, until finally he nodded. “The *De Vermis Mysteriis*. I did not realize that any copy had gone missing.”

“Neither have the previous owners,” she said.

“You have my attention, miss...”

“Cinder,” she said. “And I have need of the services of a necromancer.”
Sixth Case: Discomfort

Ruby was incredibly beautiful.

Weiss had realized that some time ago, even before they had begun dating. She was still unprepared for how she looked once she took her shirt off, as even with a red bra and skirt on it was the least clothing she'd ever seen her girlfriend in. Her body was perfect, smooth and soft, with just a few hard earned scars here and there. Her arms were surprisingly muscular, and her core was firm and strong as Weiss slowly placed a shaking hand on her side.

It had been Weiss' turn to pick the date for the evening, and she had chosen a short chamber music concert and dinner at a restaurant that didn't have a menu. She had known Ruby was a bit bored and not that fond of the food but she hadnt complained, knowing that Weiss was enjoying herself. When it was time to drop her off she had instead invited Ruby up to her apartment for the night.

It wasn't the first time Ruby had stayed over. It had become common enough in the months since Christmas that Weiss had cleared out space in her closet and dresser for Ruby's things, and she had toiletries of her own in the bathroom as well. She had even given in and let Ruby add a box of cereal and a few packages of cookies to her pantry.

This time, however, Weiss didn't want to just make out for a little while and then go to sleep next to Ruby. She knew that Ruby had been very interested in taking their relationship to the next level, and to be honest with herself, Weiss was as well. Wanting to and actually taking that step were very different things, however.

Weiss was scared.

She had read numerous guides on the internet about lesbian sex, and had even bought a book on the subject which she had hidden away in the back of her closet after reading it. She had finally gathered up her courage and had prepared the bedroom before leaving for the date, scattering rose petals on the floor and bed, a process that had been difficult as she had desperately wanted to clean up the mess, and had set out candles around the room. Everything had to be perfect.

Of course, Ruby had giggled a little when she'd first entered the bedroom, as Weiss had probably gone a little too far, but it had at least saved her the embarrassment of trying to ask Ruby for sex. And Ruby had been incredibly patient, kissing her for a long time, while gently caressing her until she was so excited that she'd ended up dragging Ruby's shirt off so that she could get more. More heat, more contact, more everything.

Weiss sat back for a long moment, admiring Ruby's appearance and trying not to drool, until finally Ruby began to blush, obviously feeling awkward under the prolonged scrutiny. “You look beautiful,” Weiss murmured.

Ruby beamed. “Not as beautiful as you.” She stroked a hand down Weiss' side, stopping at her hip, before running it back up to the back of her neck, stopping on top of her zipper. “Can I?”

“Of- of course,” Weiss murmured.

Slowly, reverently, Ruby unzipped her, until finally the dress fell from her bare shoulders, her bolero jacket having been abandoned much earlier. Weiss shifted and contorted a bit on the bed, breathing a heavy sigh as at last they managed to remove her evening gown without having to stand up. It was only after that relief ended that she realized she was only wearing the lacy black lingerie she had put
on with the hopes of pleasing Ruby. She didn't need to look to know that her sudden blush went from the tips of her ears down to her chest, so she concentrated on her girlfriend instead.

Ruby was enraptured, jaw hanging open as she stared at Weiss. With a grin she suddenly found herself feeling playful and reached up with a trembling finger to close Ruby's mouth. Ruby blushed herself, before struggling to find words to express how she was feeling. When that failed she leaned forward and kissed Weiss again, hard.

Weiss moaned as Ruby stuck her tongue in her mouth, and she found herself falling back onto the bed, Ruby following her down as they passionately kissed. Bare skin and silken undergarments rubbed against each other, and hands began to rove. Everywhere Ruby touched her was on fire, and she felt herself coiling tighter and tighter, eager for what was coming next.

Gentle touches became impassioned caresses, and Weiss' own hands explored Ruby's back, then, before she had a chance to second guess herself, she moved one down and grasped her partner's firm bottom. She squeezed hard, loving the feel of it, which made Ruby moan loudly against her lips. In response Ruby's hands became more daring, landing on one of her breasts and squeezing, making Weiss arch her back and release a gasping moan of her own, breaking the kiss briefly as she struggled for air.

They both grew steadily more passionate, and Weiss felt her head grow more and more muddled as she was swept away in what she was doing. She did her best to copy Ruby as well as to do what the guides for lesbian sex had recommended, but soon she was unable to think, simply feeling and reacting.

Ruby's hands were everywhere, caressing her lovingly. It felt like they were pressed so closely together that they were almost one person, and somehow she wanted to be even closer. She suddenly realized that Ruby had lost more clothing, and with shock she gasped as she discovered that they were both down to only their underwear. It seemed like everywhere she touched was bare skin, and all of her body was getting loving caressed in return.

So much feeling, so much touch. More than she had ever experienced in her life. More in a few moments than she had experienced in her entire life combined. So much touch.

Too much touch.

Like a switch being flipped, what once felt wonderful was suddenly overwhelming. Passion shattered into panic, and she began to thrash with a sobbing scream on her lips as she pushed Ruby's shoulders, needing her to be away, unable to breathe.

She was numb, and her chest hurt, and as she struggled to find air she thought that she was dying. Suddenly she was terrified of not just whatever was happening to her, or even just being touched so much, but what if while she was dying she overcame whatever resistance there was to draining Ruby? What if she killed her and recovered from whatever was happening to find herself covered in black dust?

Sobbing screams were stuck in her throat, but she managed to shove Ruby away and lay there, gasping and barely conscious of what was happening around her. After an endless, maddening period something began to intrude on her consciousness. Like a lifeline to a drowning person she focused on a voice telling her to breathe.

She gasped, still hyperventilating, but slowly she began to calm down as Ruby encouraged her to relax and just breathe. With a great rattling breath she filled her lungs and managed to hold it for a long moment, exhaling slowly after.
“Good,” Ruby murmured. “Just like that. Breathe slow and deep.”

Weiss did, following Ruby’s directions for a while, until finally she felt herself relax. She shivered, cold from being nearly naked and suddenly covered with sweat, and she struggled to pull up a sheet until Ruby did that for her. She flinched away from her hands, but Ruby was very careful not to touch her.

“R-Ruby?” Weiss murmured.

“Yes, Weiss?”

“I- I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

“What for?”

“I ruined this,” Weiss said, barely containing a sob. “I’m so sorry. I know you wanted to-”

“Hey!” Ruby interrupted. “Don’t even think that at all. This wasn’t your fault. Okay? You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Weiss murmured. “I wanted to- to have sex. With you. I was enjoying it. And then that happened, and I-”

“Ssh,” Ruby hushed her. “Can I do something?”

“Anything.”

“Can I kiss you?” Ruby said. “Just once, I promise.”

Weiss hesitated. She hadn’t been touched since she’d pushed Ruby away, and on some level she was afraid that she really would hurt Ruby if she did. That Ruby’s immunity was some temporary thing, or even all in her head. Ruby waited patiently, until finally Weiss gave her a little nod.

The kiss was short and gentle, and when she pulled back Ruby gave her a loving smile. “When we started dating I was sure I’d never ever get to do that, and I was still okay, you know? I’m super happy with what you can give me, and nothing is going to change that.”

Weiss felt herself tear up. “I’m sorry.”

“I already told you there’s nothing to be sorry for, okay?” Ruby insisted as Weiss started to cry. She wasn’t loud, but her face contorted and her nose ran as she gave great, forceful sobs. “Can I hold you? Please?”

Weiss was crying too hard to respond verbally, but she made the first move, wrapping her arms around Ruby and crying into her bare shoulder. It took a long time for her to quiet down, but Ruby kept murmuring reassuring things in her ear and rubbing gentle circles on her back. More than anything the feeling of holding Ruby in her arms, of being able to touch another human being calmed her down. She couldn’t help but consider how strange that was when moments before being touched was what caused her episode.

“Thank you,” Weiss murmured when she finally stopped crying.

“Anytime,” Ruby said, placing a kiss on her shoulder. “Have you had panic attacks like that before? I mean, you freaked out at that club a while back but not... not like this.”

Weiss shook her head. “Is that what that was? A panic attack?”
“Yeah,” Ruby said. “Pretty sure.”

Weiss lay in silence for a while, enjoying the warm contact and thinking about her panic attack. She'd never seen anyone have one before, and losing all control of herself that way had been horrifying. She would need to do some research about what caused them and ways to prevent them, especially if something like that was going to happen again in bed. She'd been enjoying what was happening immensely, and she was sure Ruby had been, too.

“Do you- do you want to try again?”

Ruby shook her head. “I think that killed the mood.”

Weiss nodded. “Okay.”

“Don't get me wrong, I really want to,” Ruby said. “I mean, even before when we couldn't touch I was figuring out ways to do stuff without, you know, touch. I even bought these remote control v- never mind. What I mean is I want to, but not right now. Another time, when you're ready.”

“I was ready,” Weiss said.

“Maybe,” Ruby said. “But… I mean, you did the flower petals and the candles and the fancy underwear and all that stuff… are you sure you didn't put too much pressure on this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well…” Ruby trailed off. “Maybe you weren't as ready as you thought you were, and all this stuff just… made you not want to back down. We aren't in a hurry, okay? We'll make this work on our time… okay?”

“Okay,” Weiss agreed.

They sat in silence for a while, before Ruby pulled away. “Come on, why don't we get you a shower and into your night stuff and we'll go to sleep.”

An hour later they had both showered separately. Weiss had thought about suggesting sharing, as even just in practical terms her shower was enormous and could easily fit four people without becoming too awkward. In the end she chickened out, however, although she was a little glad that she did as Ruby had taken that time to clean up the room and change her sheets.

Once they were both ready they climbed into bed together, curling up next to each other as usual. Weiss bit her lip, and after a long hesitation she made the first move, scooting closer to Ruby and wrapping her arms around her. She could barely make out Ruby's smile in the dark as she reciprocated, and soon they were snuggled in close. Part of her was worried that she'd panic again, but instead she found herself drifting into blissful slumber.

Weiss ended up waking up several times during the night, dreams of awakening to nothing but dust in her bed making her fearfully check on her girlfriend throughout the night. Ruby somehow managed to sleep through it all without difficulty, which made Weiss happy. While she no longer had nightmares every night, Ruby often had troubled sleep after she had saved Weiss by sacrificing a group of White Fang in Faerie.

When morning came Weiss ignored the alarm, content to sleep through it, until finally she was awakened by Ruby struggling to get out of bed. Her first reaction was to squeeze tighter, not wanting to let go of her bundle of soft warmth, but that just made Ruby wriggle harder.
“Weiss… I've gotta pee,” Ruby grunted. “I never thought you'd be this much of a cuddler. You're like an octopus… but clingier.”

“Ssh,” Weiss murmured, snuggling closer. “Sleep time.”

“Weiss… it's time to get up, Weiss,” Ruby called, before grunting when her girlfriend squeezed harder. “Oh! If you do that again I won't make it to the bathroom!”

With a sigh Weiss finally let her go, rolling over and curling herself into a blanket burrito. “Fine…”

An hour later they were both dressed and finishing breakfast. Weiss sat primly at the table, eating toasted bread with jam, fruit, and yogurt. Across from her Ruby slouched in her seat stuffing marshmallow filled cereal into her maw and chomping on it loudly. Weiss had tried scolding her about her table manners a few times, but in response Ruby had just behaved in an even more immature fashion, resulting in her accidentally spilling her sugary breakfast on herself which almost made them late to work as she had had to change. After a while Weiss gave up on her.

She also found the behavior cute, although she'd never admit it.

Once they finished eating they both bundled up in their full winter clothing. It was early February, but somehow the snow, which had stayed away for most of winter, had all decided to arrive that week. While there were enough snow plows and salt trucks at large to keep the streets drivable, it was still miserable to be out when you couldn't go somewhere pristine enough to actually enjoy the snow.

When they stepped outside Ruby reached over and took Weiss' hand. She jumped slightly, but as she squeezed back Weiss found herself relaxing for the first time since she extricated herself from her warm blankets. Despite the freezing weather she felt warm inside even before she reached the car.

The trip to Beacon was short and quiet, as Ruby had to concentrate on the road as it was cold enough for ice if the salt trucks had missed a spot, and Weiss rarely talked very much even when she wasn't in a bad mood. While cuddling with Ruby had helped her feel better, and her girlfriend still being warm and affectionate had done even more to improve her outlook, she was still brooding heavily about the previous night.

“I love snow,” Ruby said as they clomped along the sidewalk towards Beacon's front steps.

“It makes driving difficult,” Weiss complained. “And it's cold.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Well, duh. But, I mean… snow's fun, too. Oh! We need to have a snowball fight sometime. And make snow angels, and snow forts, and-”

“That just sounds childish and cold,” Weiss said.

Ruby studied her for a moment before taking her hand again. “You never did any of that stuff, did you?”

“I did!” Weiss said defensively. “A little. Winter and I snuck outside a few times, and after she left Klein played with me, but it was never the same. After a while it just wasn't worth the risk of angering father.”

“Well, I'll get you to enjoy it again,” Ruby vowed. “It's great! I mean, it can be a little cold, but it's fun when you know what you're doing, and it's so white and so, so beautiful.”

“I guess snow isn't that bad,” Weiss said, smiling slightly.
Ruby leaned over and kissed her cheek, before waggling her eyebrows. “Who says I was talking about snow?”

Weiss was confused for a moment, before blushing as she realized what she meant. “Dolt.”

“Your dolt,” Ruby countered with an idiotic grin, before letting go of her hand to open the front doors for her. “After you, m'lady!”

“Dork,” Weiss said, rolling her eyes. “Your dork!”

Weiss took a moment to stamp her feet on the mat inside, trying to get the snow off of her boots. Like all of her footwear it had a several inch heel as she refused to look as short as she actually was, although like all of her favorites it had a platform so that the bottom was flat to the ground, and the tread actually was designed for walking through snow.

Weiss took Ruby's hand again and they started to walk towards the stairs down when Weiss felt Ruby stiffen up beside her. She looked around, and immediately noticed the source her partner's reaction. All of the police were staring at them, and many had hostile or at least very coldly professional looks on their faces.

Weiss considered their expressions for a moment while she gave her girlfriend's hand a reassuring squeeze. She had often been on the receiving end of less than friendly looks from her fellow police, although she had usually done something to make them look at her that way. By the time they reached the squad room Weiss had decided that it was probably because they were holding hands. The police weren't a very progressive organization, and they were probably annoyed at the obvious signs of homosexuality.

When they entered the squad room Ruby let go of her hand. “I need to talk to Jaune about something.”

Weiss wrinkled her nose in distaste. Jaune still annoyed her immensely, but he was finally shaping up into being a detective that at least didn't drag Pyrrha down. Weiss still didn't want to spent unnecessary time with him, so she went to her desk and sat down, staring blankly at her paperwork after taking off her winter gear.

“Did that form offend you somehow?” Blake asked.

Weiss looked up to see the faunus detective leaning against the entrance of her cubicle. She was looking tired, as she was still putting in long hours tracking down the White Fang after they were discovered dust trafficking late the previous year. “Form?”

Blake smiled for a moment before looking serious. “Something bothering you?”

“I… it's nothing.”

“'Weiss… I know we had a rocky start, but I'd like to think we've become… better since then,” Blake said. “If you need to talk...”

Weiss hesitated, before finally nodding. “Okay. I… I think I need some advice.”
Sixth Case: The Hungry Dead

“I…” Weiss hesitated for a moment before squaring her shoulders and sitting up straight, raising her chin proudly. She didn't know how long she would have until Ruby finished talking to Jaune, but she couldn't imagine he would be interesting enough to keep her distracted for long, so she needed to stop dithering and just talk about her problem, no matter how embarrassing it was. “Last night Ruby and I attempted to- to have sexual intercourse.”

Blake blinked and raised an eyebrow. “And?”

Weiss blushed but pressed on. “It was our first attempt to do so.”

“You've been together this long and you haven't… at all?”

“N-no,” Weiss said. “It's not quite been two months since I learned that I- I could touch her.”

“Still, she's been staying at your apartment quite a bit,” Blake pointed out.

“We've only been spending time together,” Weiss said. “Can we please get back on topic?”

Blake held up her hands. “Fine, fine. So what happened?”

“We were almost, um, almost naked and about to proceed with intercourse—"

“Weiss, just say you were about to have sex,” Blake interrupted. “We're not taking a deposition here.”

Weiss huffed and continued. “When we were about to actually… have sex… I suddenly… panicked.”

“Panicked?”

Weiss bit her lip and grabbed her pen to fiddle with. “I had a panic attack.”

Blake walked over and sat down in Ruby's chair, actually looking concerned for the first time. “It sounds like you weren't ready.”

“You were the one surprised that we hadn't already done it,” Weiss pointed out.

Blake looked sheepish for a moment. “I'm sorry for being so flippant. Having sex… it can be amazing, or it can be traumatizing. It sounds like you weren't ready, and your almost first time was more in the traumatizing camp.”

“I'm ready!” Weiss objected. “I… I never thought I could do any of this, but now that I can I want to. I want to- to make love with Ruby.”

“You say that, but then you had a panic attack,” Blake observed.

Weiss looked down at her pen, playing with it again. “But I was enjoying it until it happened… and I know Ruby was. She… she wants to have sex with me.”

“So?” Blake said. “You being ready has nothing to do with what Ruby wants.”

“I just… I waited so long. To do so many things with her. I know I'm… difficult. And she even put
up with dating me, for months without believing we could even touch each other, much less have, um, have sex. I just… she's been so good to me, and I want to do this for her, and… and I just want her to be happy.”

“And you call Ruby a dolt,” Blake said, shaking her head. “Weiss… do you think Ruby enjoyed your panic attack? Or was she terrified?” When Weiss didn't respond Blake continued. “Trying to force yourself to do something you weren't ready for is what caused your problem. Do you really want my advice?”

“Yes,” Weiss said.

“Then take a deep breath and relax,” Blake said. “Maybe you'll be ready soon, or maybe it'll take a long time. Don't assume either way. I know Ruby wants to be with you, but she wants you both to be happy. If she thought you were forcing yourself to make her happy she'd be horrified.”

“It's not… I do want to do it,” Weiss said.

“Okay,” Blake said. “But her readiness shouldn't even be mentioned when we're discussing your readiness. If you really want to do it then you can do some things to make yourself more comfortable.”

“Like what?”

“You aren't used to being touched,” Blake pointed out. “So touch Ruby whenever you can. Get used to the feeling and you might not be so afraid. Hmm… you also aren't comfortable with sex. So you should read about it.”

“I have!” Weiss interjected, blushing. “I read many guides, and even a book on the subject.

Blake smirked. “The amount you're blushing tells me you really aren't that comfortable. And I don't just mean guides and advice books. That stuff usually fills your head with things you shouldn't even be worrying about, anyway. The most important thing during sex is to communicate and to find out what you both like by trying things out. Everyone's different, Weiss, and no matter what you read you won't be prepared for what you both want.”

“Then why did you tell me to read about sex?”

“Because I didn't mean guides,” Blake said. “You need to get more comfortable with sex in general. Read some smut. I can recommend some good porn you can watch that's actually aimed at lesbians. Figure out where you like to be touched by spending some alone time relieving some stress.”

“Wh-what?” Weiss choked, bright red by the end of her advice.


Weiss was so red that she looked like she was about to pass out. “Blake! You've been spending far, far too much time around Yang!”

“Probably,” Blake agreed. “It does mean I don't have to spend so much time teasing the tuna taco.”

“Ugh,” Weiss said. “I need better friends.”

Blake looked surprised at the word for a moment, before smiling and apparently deciding to tease Weiss a little less. “Okay, okay. I do mean it, though. If you don't masturbate very often, you
probably don't know what feels good for you, and when Ruby touches you it probably feels a lot scarier if you don't know what to expect.”

“Maybe,” Weiss acknowledged, looking down and fiddling with her pen some more. The entire conversation was mortifying, but that didn't mean Blake was wrong.

“I'd also recommend sticking with some bambi-sexuality at first,” Blake said. At the confused and vaguely horrified look from Weiss she smirked and explained. “Kissing, caressing, touching above the belt. Even if you aren't ready to go all the way you can do a lot in bed together. The intimacy without the pressure of diving into the unknown could help you get ready.”

Weiss nodded. “That's pretty much all we'd managed to do, before, um, before I panicked.”

“But you were expecting to go farther, right?” Blake pointed out. “If you both know how far you were going to go you might not be so apprehensive.”

“I'll can see that,” Weiss agreed.

“Remember, just relax and breathe,” Blake advised. “If you're calm you probably won't panic. Also, who was on top?”

“I was laying down on the bed,” Weiss said.

“I don't just mean physically,” Blake said. “If you were taking the lead then maybe let her try so you don't have the pressure of making the first move. If she was, then maybe you need to take control next time. It might make things easier if you're the one calling the shots.”

Weiss leaned back, thinking about what happened that night, and what almost happened. The conversation with Blake had been the most embarrassing she'd ever had, but it might've been what she needed. “Thanks, Blake. I… I really appreciate this.”

“Sure thing,” Blake said, standing up. “If you want to borrow some fun reading I can lend you a copy of Ninjas of Love.”

“Ninjas of Love?” Weiss asked.

Blake smirked, but before she could say anything Ruby walked up. “Hey, Blake! What're you doing here?”

“Just talking to Weiss,” Blake said. “I'm going to go look for Yang. Remember what I said, Weiss!”

“I'm so glad you guys are getting along better now,” Ruby said cheerfully. “Ever since Christmas you guys are actually talking. I guess having you over for the holidays really helped!”

“Actually, we started talking before then, but I suppose you are right,” Weiss said as she watched Blake leave the squad room. “Being around her outside of work… I guess on some level I still believed that she was being friendly just out of professionalism before. But now we… I… she's my friend. I've never really… had friends until I came here.”

Ruby grinned and hopped out of her seat, scurrying around the desks to give Weiss a quick hug. She blushed, not sure what to do besides hug back. “Y-you dolt. What are you doing?”

“I'm just so happy,” Ruby said. “I know you said you were okay before, but friends make life worth living. I remember when I was in high school I used to not have any real friends either, but Yang made me try and suddenly everything was much, much better!”
“I'm not a kid,” Weiss grumbled. “I can make my own decisions.”

“I know,” Ruby agreed. “I'm just happy you're making good ones!”

Weiss rolled her eyes, but she found herself smiling. Not just about Ruby being silly, but that she had enjoyed the impromptu hug. Part of her always wished she was holding Ruby, but she had been afraid that after what had happened that she wouldn't be comfortable with being touched. Perhaps Blake had been right; with patience and time maybe she could get comfortable enough to have sex with Ruby.

Ruby started to walk back to her desk when she paused, staring at the door to the squad room. After a moment Weiss stood to look as well, frowning at what she saw.

Several normal police were at the door to the squad room. They all looked upset, and were speaking angrily but in low voices to Sergeant Port. She saw Pyrrha moving closer to the door, ready to intervene if something happened, and a few other detectives perked up as well. Finally with a nod Port turned and met Weiss’ gaze, filling her veins with ice water.

Weiss moved behind her desk, grabbing her gear and winter clothing as she moved to the entrance of her cubicle, Ruby doing the same a moment later. Port arrived while they were adjusting their coats and gave them both a nod. “Ladies.”

“Sergeant Port,” Weiss said, returning his nod. “Is there a problem?”

“Unfortunately so,” Port said. “It seems there's a very unpleasant crime scene, and it has the regular police quite riled up! It's been since I was a young, fresh, green detective that I had last seen-”

Weiss zoned out for a bit, considering how upset the police had been. One of them had looked directly at her before he was sent away by Port, and he'd looked angry. She was used to having a bad relationship with the normal police she worked with, having never bothered to try and bridge the gap between them, but this seemed more intense than that. Was it someone she had personally interacted with in the past? She couldn't remember.

“-and that is why I always bring a spare toothbrush with me on stakeouts!” Port finished. “Never trust a garlic bread sandwich from a strange food stand!”

“But food stands are so good!” Ruby said. “Remember that one down by the docks-”

Weiss shuddered and interrupted. “What did the police want, Sergeant Port?”

“Oh, yes, that's right,” he said, his face becoming serious. “There's been a murder most foul, and that isn't all. If the police are correct...”

“Yes?” Weiss asked when he didn't say anything.

“It appears that there is necromancy involved,” he said quietly.

Weiss froze for a moment, shocked at the revelation. She had never actually met another necromancer before. There weren't many in the world, and they either gained their abilities through freak accidents like herself, or by intentional rituals. Most of those who accidentally gained their abilities knew less than she did, as she had access to a vast collection of books, many illegal, at Schnee Manor. Those who intentionally gained necromantic abilities were often mad or at least very, very dangerous. Even at her most desperate to find a cure for her inability to touch she had never had a successful contact with another necromancer.
“Then we should get going,” Weiss said.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked.

“This case won't solve itself,” Weiss said firmly.

“Excellent!” Port boomed, looking more like himself again as he handed her the thin folder the police had given him. “If the police give you any difficulties, make sure to contact myself or Captain Goodwitch. I'll inform her of the situation and we will make sure that no one interferes with your investigation.”

“Thank you,” she said with a nod, before strolling briskly towards the door, Ruby trailing behind.

Ruby could tell she didn't want to talk, so she just took her hand and gave it a squeeze as they walked to the car. Once there she turned on music and let it fill the silence as they drove, following Weiss' terse directions while she flipped through the folder. It only had a couple of pages, not enough to actually tell her anything about what they were about to walk into.

It was obvious when they came close to their destination. It was in a very wealthy area, not the place where you would expect to see a crowd of onlookers, dozens of police cars, and several news vans. Ruby parked some distance away and looked at her partner. “Who died?”

Weiss frowned. “Raye Gamboge.”

“Oh,” Ruby said, nodding, before doing a double take. “Wait, you mean the movie star?”

“And state representative, and philanthropist,” Weiss agreed. “She was also the frontrunner for the next senate election.”

“So what happened?”

“The report is… vague,” Weiss said, putting the folder down. “I think we'll need to see for ourselves.”

Even before they reached the perimeter cameras were pointed at them, and reporters had begun screaming questions at Weiss. “Miss Schnee! Miss Schnee!”

Weiss ignored the crowd, keeping her focus solely on the home and walking briskly towards it.

Ruby was shocked for a moment at what was happening, but then looked at the ground and scurried along in her partner's wake.

“Miss Schnee, is it true that necromancy was used to kill Raye Gamboge!”

“Miss Schnee, did Raye Gamboge get in the way of your family's political ambitions!”

“Is it true that you killed Inspector Ozpin and had his zombified corpse hire you at Beacon?”

“The White Fang released a statement that you murdered their members in Faerie! Did you turn them into zombies to work the mines?”

“Miss Schnee! Miss Schnee!”

The police let them past the perimeter, although they eyed her distrustfully the entire time and made sure to carefully check her badge and ID before moving out of the way. She paused briefly for Ruby to be let in, still ignoring the many questions shouted at her by the press, until finally both of them entered the building.
“What- what was that?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged. “Bottom feeders. The real reporters are trying to find out what happened in here, but there are always people trying to get a story by asking celebrities shocking questions. Don't worry about it.”

Ruby grabbed her hand and squeezed it for a second, making Weiss jump as she hadn't been expecting the sudden contact. “Of course I'm going to worry about it.”

Weiss gave her a small smile and then followed the flashes of cameras deeper into the house. It was a very large home, full of expensive furniture and tasteful decorations. Many photographs sat on different surfaces, showing Raye Gamboge at various stages of her life posing with other famous people.

Eventually they arrived at a large library, making Weiss pause as she looked around. There were shelves everywhere, not just on every wall, but in rows in the middle of the room as well. While many of the books were normal, the majority of the collection appeared to be rare and expensive. First editions, a Gutenberg bible, hand illuminated medieval manuscripts, and even stranger things, like several scrolls in a glass case that appeared to be made of papyrus, and a number of magical tomes as well.

At the far end of the room she could see forensics crews moving about, along with a number of normal police with them, all of whom looked on edge. Weiss and Ruby exchanged one last look before moving down the row of shelves until they could finally see what had happened. Even before they were close enough to see the stench of blood and death was so heavy in the air that it almost made Weiss gag.

On the ground in a massive pool of blood was a dead body. Weiss had seen some terrible things in her life, but nothing, nothing compared to the state the body was in. The only reason that she could be recognized was that the head, which was twisted into a horrified, pained expression, hadn't been touched at all. The same could not be said for the rest of the body.

Bone was visible everywhere, and she could actually see teeth marks in a few places. Strips of stringy flesh clung to the skeleton, and the organs had been savaged, ripped and torn and left half hanging out of her savaged abdomen.

Lying on the ground near the corpse was another figure, this one riddled with bullets. It had once been a man, but its limbs were thin and spindly, and its belly was so swollen that it had actually burst open, spilling out chucks of chewed flesh all around it. Despite the massive damage it had suffered it was handcuffed and its feet bound, as it still twitched, desperately trying to reach the woman to continue devouring her.

“Oh, god,” Ruby moaned, covering her mouth.

“I don't think he was involved,” Weiss said flatly. “I'm going to see what I can learn from the bodies.”

The police kept out of her way, and she ignored their distrustful looks as she carefully approached the still struggling zombie. It was difficult to get close without stepping into the mess of chewed but undigested meat that still oozed from the burst torso whenever it twitched, but eventually she found a spot that let her crouch and carefully study it up close.

The zombie had taken a bullet to the brain, which ordinarily would kill a zombie. For it to still be moving meant that the person who had created it had imbued it with a truly excessive amount of
power. She could've done the same, but she had never had cause to do so. She closed her eyes for a moment, and brought up her aura sight, carefully studying the magic animating the corpse.

As she had suspected, it glowed like a necromantic bonfire to her mystical sight. Whoever had created it must've had an immensely powerful aura to be able to channel so much mana from beyond into the zombie. She could've replicated the feat, but it would have annoying to try. The power was so immense that it was almost blinding, and she couldn't see anything of interest about the magic with her eyes.

She carefully removed a glove and placed her bare hand on the body, looking for a spot that wasn't entirely encrusted with gore to do so. Once she did she closed her eyes and carefully began to probe the magic animating the corpse. For a moment she felt a nagging sense that she was missing something, but trying to examine the mana suffusing it started to give her a headache. After a few more moments she pushed her own power into it, taking control of the zombie and then ordering it mentally to become still. Once it did she pushed deeper, searching for the soul so that she could ask him some questions.

As she pushed her aura into the afterlife, using the body as an anchor for the search, she suddenly felt the nagging sense that she had missed something increase a hundred fold. She tried to pull back, to cancel her magic, but found herself unable to. Something was pulling her in, dragging her soul from her body and into some kind of trap.

She couldn't even scream as her body collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut.
Sixth Case: The Snare

Intellectually, Weiss knew to be terrified. She had actually experienced her current state before, even if it had been as a small child, so she knew what was happening to her.

It was difficult to panic, though, when she felt so peaceful. Without her body, Weiss’ soul felt no pain, no discomfort, none of the nagging human condition that affected people moment to moment. She also didn't breath, didn't feel her heartbeat on a subconscious level. Everything was serene.

With effort she focused, until finally she could recall the details of what had just happened to her. Somehow the zombie had been trapped with magic designed to rip out her soul and throw it into the afterlife. More than that, she felt like she was sinking deeper, falling towards the end that awaited her. Normally a soul would wait around for a while after death, with most naturally drifting on over the course of a day or so if they went unclaimed by one of the various psychopomps serving extraplanar powers. Some would be stubborn and refuse to depart, but Death would come find them before long.

Instead of simply staying near her body Weiss found herself actively propelled towards what lay beyond. It took a lot of effort, but slowly she strained, channeling an enormous amount of necromantic energy to not only stay her course, but begin to reverse it. It was only once she was no longer moving that she realized that she had no idea how to find her body again.

While she thought in terms of distance and motion, none of those terms accurately applied to her situation. There was nothing to see, nothing to feel. A soul had no sensory organs beyond the ability to detect magic, as the soul produced mana and could feel its aura being perturbed. She focused outwards with those senses, trying to find her body again… somehow.

She didn't have ears, but as she focused on the mana ‘around her’ she somehow heard something. It was a voice calling for her. Weiss paused to listen, and after a long moment she could make out the voices, which had become a chorus.

“Come… rest…,” the voices said. “You've earned peace.”

“G-grandma… grandpa?” Weiss murmured in her mind without a sound or mouth to form the words.

“Yes,” the voices said. “It's peaceful here… you can rest with us… forever. Be at peace...”

If she could've she would've cried. Her grandparents had died long ago, but she could still remember them. They had died not long after her mother, her grandfather being killed in another act of faunus violence, and her grandmother had not lived long past him. She had barely reacted at the time, still lost in the grief of her mother's death and her own inability to touch anyone.

Other voices in chorus made themselves known, and she could here the voices of aunts, uncles, family friends, servants, everyone who she had ever cared about who had passed away. It was shocking just how many there were, the price of the war with the White Fang making itself known in the lives lost at her young age.

“Weiss, please, come rest with us...”

Weiss would've gasped at the voice, but without air or lungs to be filled with it the stunning sensation went unremarked. The last voice calling loud and clear to her was her own mother.

“Join us here, Weiss, where you can rest forever at peace...”
“No,” Weiss projected. “NO!”

Her mother wasn’t just dead. She had died at the same time Weiss had as a child, but she had struck some form of deal with Death to guide her back to life. Weiss had studied that deal endlessly as a teenager, but no matter how she looked at it the process had obliterated her mother's soul. She wasn't in the after life, she was just gone. Completely and utterly.

The voices calling to her were lies, no doubt part of the trap, which was why she could sense them when she opened herself up to the surrounding mana. With a powerful shove she pushed all magic away from her aura and the voices disappeared, as well as the pull dragging her into the afterlife. Unfortunately she was still trapped beyond.

After a few long moments to think Weiss began to carefully assess her aura. She had studied what her mother and Death had done endlessly, the impact on her aura being the last gift her mother had ever given her, no matter how much she had hated that it was given. The process had marked her aura as powerfully as a natural spell embedded into it like Ruby had. She’d never had any reason to test it, but she knew it was there, and had found and felt it long ago.

Slowly she began to feed her aura into it, and as she did Weiss felt what she could only describe in human language as her soul moving again. Slowly she fed more mana into the spell, and as she did she felt an icy warmth spread over her body, and then pain. Terrible, sweet, vicious, living pain.

Her lungs burned, her chest felt like it had been beaten by a hammer, and her head used as a gong. And then she felt the hands on her chest, moving, and a moment later, lips. Lips pressing against her own.

Weiss tried to gasp, inhaling air being blown directly into her lungs as she tried to thrash and push whoever was kissing her away. It was only as they pulled back and she took a shaky breath that she realized that they were performing mouth to mouth. She struggled to open her eyes, blinking against the too bright room until finally she could focus on who was sitting over her.

“Weiss!” Ruby sobbed. She looked rough, her face streaked with tears and her eyes bloodshot. 
“Weiss, are you okay?”


“You- you died,” Ruby sobbed, leaning down to kiss Weiss’ forehead, grabbing both of her hands. “You pushed your aura into the zombie, and then you just fell. You fell and your weren’t breathing… and- and your heart Weiss. Your heart stopped. You were dead.”

Despite the pain she was in Weiss wrapped her arms around Ruby. She winced as Ruby instinctively leaned into her, slowly rubbing circle into her girlfriend’s back as she cried. “Hey, it’s okay,” Weiss murmured. “I'm okay. I'm not dead.”

“You- you can't keep doing this,” Ruby sobbed. “You died… you died again. I thought… I thought you were gone… you died Weiss… you died.”

It took a while for Ruby to calm down even with Weiss doing her best to be reassuring. She felt like such a failure as her girlfriend continued to cry, and Weiss decided that she really needed to get a book about comforting people. She couldn't be the only person who was a complete failure at it, right? She was sure that someone had to have written a book.

When Ruby finally began to calm down a group of paramedics came into the room. “Over here,” Ruby said. “She… she needs to be checked out.'
“I’m fine,” Weiss insisted, her voice weaker than she’d like.

“You died Weiss,” Ruby said, eyes wide and teary.

Weiss gritted her teeth, before looking away. “If you insist you can check my vitals, but I can assure you I will be fine. Just… just don’t touch me.”

“We can’t check your condition without touching you, ma’am,” the first paramedic said.

Weiss sighed, giving a suddenly sheepish Ruby an arch look. “I have a condition that makes physical contact with strangers unwise. Just… wear gloves and make this brief. I am fine, though.”

Weiss watched the paramedics like hawks, and after a little while they finished all of the tests she was willing to put up with. It was a small nightmare, as having strangers touch her was unpleasant under the best of circumstances, and she wasn’t feeling her best. The pain in chest and general ache of her body made part of her want to touch others, want to drain some life energy from the annoying strangers, and the urge was incredibly strong to give in and make herself feel better.

She had always known that her life draining could be addictive. Anything that felt that good wasn’t safe, especially when it was so dangerous to the people around her. She had made it through her entire life to that point without giving in to the urge to drain people just to make herself feel better, and she wasn’t going to give in then. It wasn’t even as tempting as Red Sap, and she had managed to avoid ever taking that again after her first dose, so she wasn’t going to fall off the life drain wagon just because she was injured.

“Good job performing CPR, Ms. Rose,” one of the paramedics eventually said. “We can’t find the cause of her heart failure, but she seems to be all right now. We’d like to run some more tests, however.”

“No,” Weiss said sharply.

“Is fine,” Weiss said. “My heart was stopped by magic, and I’m fine now. I don’t need any further testing.”

“You should at least receive some X-rays for your ribs,” the paramedic said. “It’s very common for CPR to break them, and you are in quite a bit of pain.”

Weiss just shook her head. “I can heal myself, and if I need more treatment I will see my own doctor, thank you.”

“Ms. Schnee—”

“No,” Weiss said much, much sharper. “I’ve put up with this for long enough. In case you didn’t notice there’s a dead woman who was eaten alive by a zombie mere feet away, and the longer we delay for this farce the colder the evidence gets.”

“ Weiss—” Ruby tried.

“No,” Weiss snapped, looking away when her girlfriend’s expression dropped. She sighed and gingerly stood, her face twisting in pain as her ribs burned as she climbed to her feet. “I’m fine, but Ms. Gamboge is not, and my job it to find out why.”

Weiss ignored everyone as she walked back over to the zombie, carefully crouching next to it. She
took several long moments to shallowly breath once she was in position, until finally she could concentrate fully on her job. Ruby came over, hovering nervously as she examined the body more carefully.

“Weiss… are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Weiss said with a shallow sigh. “Look, Ruby, I'm in some pain, but I can deal with it. Eventually the evidence will fade and we might not be able to catch whoever is doing this, and I won't let that happen.”

“Okay,” Ruby said softly. “I'm sorry.”

“There's nothing to be sorry for,” Weiss said, offering her a tight smile. “If you were hurt I'd be the one freaking out.”

“Not just that,” Ruby said. “I- I hurt your ribs.”

“Oh,” Weiss said. “I… I won't lie and say that I feel fine, but you kept my body alive while I was out, so I won't complain about what you did.”

“Out?”

Weiss nodded slowly. “I don't know why or how the criminal did it, but… whoever animated this zombie trapped it so that if I tried to locate its soul mine would be ripped out and thrown into the afterlife.”

“What?!”

Weiss sighed again, wincing slightly as she did. “I was literally out of my body when I was laying there, and if I hadn't recognized what was happening and known how to find my body again I would've permanently died.”

Ruby placed a shaking hand on her shoulder, squeezing tightly, and Weiss managed to contain her reaction to the way the move jostled her ribs. She was in a lot of pain, and even if she didn't break them her ribs were badly bruised. When they made it back to Beacon she was going to find a meditation room and spend hours using her mana to speed up the healing process, but she needed to finish checking the crime scene first.

After looking at the zombie for a long time she carefully reached out and touched it again. She probed its aura very carefully, trying to avoid falling into any more traps. Eventually she sighed and pulled her hand away.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked worriedly.

“I'm fine,” she insisted again. “The soul is already gone. The only magic used on the body was necromantic; we'll need to get a coroner to find the cause of death if possible, but magic wasn't used to kill him.”

With careful, deliberate motions Weiss stood and walked over to the other body, crouching beside it as well. Once she'd recovered from the move she carefully examined it, first visually then with her aura sight. From what she could tell the death was caused by the zombie's bites, and she doubted that it had been quick. She was feeling somewhat distant and disconnected after everything that had happened, and that was probably keeping her from becoming sick to see just how bad the death had been.
Under her aura sight she saw evidence of more necromantic magic, and she studied it for a long time before slowly reaching out a hand and placing it on the body. When she probed the corpse she did it with the utmost care and caution, and after far longer than she would've like she sighed and withdrew her aura.

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked immediately.

Weiss wasn't able to keep from rolling her eyes. “Yes, Ruby. I'm still fine.”

Ruby frowned at her harshly. It was less reprimanding than adorable, but that actually made it more effective at making Weiss feel bad. She was used to harsh looks from her father or Winter when she screwed up. Ruby's open worry hit her in ways she wasn't prepared to deal with. “I'm okay, Ruby, really.”

Ruby just shook her head. “Did you learn anything?”

Weiss nodded as she slowly stood. “Ms. Gamboge had necromancy performed on her as well. The necromancer laid another trap for me, but I found it this time rather than stumbling into it. Her soul has also departed, which shouldn't be possible, and I suspect the trap has something to do with it.”

“Where is her soul then?” Ruby asked.

Weiss hesitated for a moment. “Most likely passed on. There are magics that can destroy souls and there are magics to trap souls, but both are very rare and I don't see evidence of either of them. Most likely the necromancer simply encouraged the soul to depart quickly so that I couldn't interrogate them if I overcame the trap. Or perhaps… I need to research some of what I'm seeing.”

After that there was little more they could do. Ruby ensured that the forensics people and officers would send them anything they found while keeping an eye on Weiss, who was keeping very still and breathing shallowly. When they made it outside the crowd had actually grown, but Weiss managed to avoid showing how sore she was as she strolled past the reporters and onlookers, and before long they reached the car and drove swiftly to Beacon.

Weiss wanted to dig into everything she could find, both about the necromancy used as well as the victims, but Ruby swiftly began to corral her towards the meditation rooms. “You need to spend some time healing.”

“Ruby...” Weiss said with a frown, although she did follow her partner. “We need to find this necromancer and stop them.”

“You need to heal your ribs,” Ruby insisted. “I... I hurt you, Weiss.”

“You saved my life,” Weiss insisted. “You didn't do anything wrong... it's normal to hurt people doing CPR.”

“Which is why you should've gone to the hospital for an X-ray!”

With a shallow sigh Weiss gave in. She wasn't actually sure why she was fighting so hard, as the pain she was feeling would have made it extremely difficult to get any work done. She actually found herself sweating a bit as she walked, and not from the temperature. By the time she reached the meditation room she could barely keep moving and had stopped complaining.

Weiss had spent some time researching using her aura to heal herself since she had first needed to do so on the job while investigating the cult trying to summon Dagon. She still didn't consider herself an expert, but between the significant experience she'd gained since as well as her improved
understanding of the art, she was much better at it than she used to be. She had just settled into a good rhythm with it when something pulled her from the trance.

“Weiss?”

Weiss blinked. “Ruby? What is it… I was just getting started… Velvet?”

“Hello, Weiss,” Velvet said with a smile and an awkward wave. “Sorry to interrupt you.”

“It's alright,” Weiss said, giving the other detective a smile. They had actually talked on a few occasions since they'd worked together on the Red Sap case, and Weiss privately thought of the rabbit faunus as something of a friend. “Did you need something?”

“No, I'm actually here to help you,” Velvet said. “Ruby said you were hurt and wouldn't see a doctor.”

Weiss threw her girlfriend a sharp look. “I'm not that hurt. I just checked myself and my ribs aren't even broken. Well… two are a little cracked, but it's mostly just bruises. I'll be fine.”

“Still,” Velvet said, walking over and kneeling beside her while Ruby sat across from them. “I'll help fix you up and you'll be right as rain before you know it.”

“You really don't have to-” Weiss started, only to be cut off.

“It's fine,” Velvet said, slowly placing a hand on Weiss' clothed side. Weiss flinched both from being touched at all, as well as the pain of her deep bruises being prodded however gently. “Coco can cover for me. She still hasn't apologized for being so mean to you when you first met, so she can do this instead.”

Weiss rolled her eyes but couldn't ignore how warm their concern made her feel. “Fine,” she said, closing her eyes and focusing on healing herself. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” Velvet said cheerfully as they began to work together to fix both the damage the CPR had caused, as well as damage from being briefly soulless.
Weiss walked into her apartment, Ruby trailing behind so closely that she was almost bumped into when she paused to close her door. “Why don't you lay down for a bit?” Ruby suggested.

Weiss rolled her eyes. Her girlfriend's hovering was understandable, and it was actually pretty cute at first, but after an hour of healing by Velvet, and several more meditating she was fine. Her once bone deep bruises and cracked ribs were reduced to slight tenderness, and she wasn't impaired any longer. Ruby's babying her was something she wasn't used to at all, and it was starting to get very, very annoying.

“I'm fine,” Weiss said. “I want to do some research now that I'm home.”

“But-”

“Ruby,” Weiss interrupted, taking a deep breath to contain her temper before turning to face her. “I know you're worried about me, but I'm okay. I don't need you infantilizing me. I just want to do a little research.”

“You died, Weiss,” Ruby said.

“I know, Ruby,” Weiss said with a sigh. “But I'm fine now. You twisted Velvet's arm into using up most of her mana healing me, and then I meditated as well. I feel better than I usually do, and nothing's wrong with me. How would you feel if every time you got hurt I wrapped you up in bubble wrap and kept you tied to the couch?”

Ruby blushed and looked at the ground. “You weren't just hurt.”

Weiss hesitated for a moment, before walking over and wrapping her arms around her girlfriend. Ruby didn't react at first, but eventually she returned the hug. Weiss held it long past the point it was feeling awkward for her, until finally Ruby pulled away.

“I'm really okay, Ruby.”

Ruby closed her eyes for a moment before looking at her again. “Okay. Okay, Weiss.”

Weiss smiled. “Now, I'm going to grab some books and do some research.”

“I'll help!” Ruby said.

Weiss lead the way to her bedroom's walk in closet. Inside on one wall was a safe door, and she carefully entered a long code into it. Ruby became more and more excited as she watched, until finally she couldn't help but comment. “What do you keep in your safe? Gold? Jewels? Cool magic items? Ooh! Ooh! Do you have cool magic items covered in jewels and gold?”

Weiss smirked as she finally opened it, revealing a variety of folders filled with her important documents, her passport, and a selection of heavy, leather bound books. She chuckled slightly at the way that Ruby deflated. “If you want to see my gold and jewels just check my jewelry box. I keep the valuable things in here.”

“Books?” Ruby grumbled as she was handed several large, heavy, leather bound tomes to carry. “Don't you have bookshelves full of these? Why are they in your safe?”
Weiss hesitated for a moment. “These books are very rare, monetarily valuable, and… they're valuable to me. I… when I first tried to learn about necromancy I read a lot of books. Unfortunately not very many books have been written on the subject, and many of those that have been are illegal.”

“Why are they illegal?”

“Historically necromancy was banned in Europe,” Weiss explained. “Most necromancers acquire their abilities intentionally, and doing so was a crime. The sort of people that would try to learn necromancy were… usually unsavory, and they often did many other unpleasant things. Most books on the subject of necromancy are full of dark rituals, and most of the material would be very dangerous in the wrong hands… which is to say almost any hands.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “Wait, are these books illegal?”

Weiss hesitated. “Yes. I- I hope that you won't tell anyone. I know I'm putting you in a difficult position, but—”

Ruby cut her off with a kiss. “Of course I won't turn you in. Now, lets find a nice comfortable spot on the couch and do some research, okay?”

“Sure,” Weiss said with a smirk. They placed the heavy books on the coffee table and sat next to each other, Weiss grabbing a copy of *De Masticatione Mortorum in Tumulis*, while Ruby picked up an ancient greek annotated version of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. Weiss watched as her partner flipped through it for a moment before putting it down and trying *De Vermis Mysteriis* before returning it to the pile and looking as several others.

“Um, Weiss?”

“Yes, Ruby?”

“…none of these are in english, are they?”

“No,” Weiss said with a disdainful sniff. “I prefer to avoid translations when I can help it. They miss most of the context.”

Ruby pouted. “How am I supposed to help you research stuff?”

Weiss chuckled. “Ruby, when have you ever actually been helpful during research?”

Ruby opened and closed her mouth before slumping on the couch. “Meany.”

“Just watch some TV or play one of those video game things,” Weiss said. “Just keep the volume down.”

“Fine,” Ruby sighed, getting up to turn on one of the video games she'd moved into the apartment after Christmas. Weiss had yet to try the thing, but she'd watched Ruby play it while reading sometimes. Everything Ruby did on it was confusing, but it made her girlfriend happy, which was enough.

Hours passed, and Weiss was getting quite tired when she finally found what she was looking for. Ruby was still involved in her video game, which seemed to involve a pointy eared young man riding around on a horse. She sat back and watched him for a little bit, until Ruby noticed her attention and looked over at her.

“Finished?”
“Mmmhmm,” Weiss hummed.

“Did you find anything?

“Yes,” Weiss said. She hesitated for a moment, before leaning closer to her girlfriend and resting her head on her shoulder. She smiled when Ruby kissed her head and went back to playing her game. After a little while she spoke again. “Apparently there's a way to send a soul to the afterlife so quickly that it leaves a void that you can fill with magic as a trap. It takes some setup, but once you’re ready all you have to do is brand a person with a magic rod and use few grains of dust and it works. You don't even have to be a necromancer to use it.”

“So the guy who did this stuff might not be a necromancer?” Weiss snorted. “They also made a zombie. *That* can't be done with a magical object.”

“So… did they find the thing or did they make it?” Ruby asked.

“Difficult to say,” Weiss said thoughtfully. “I would say 'found' since making magical items is difficult, expensive, time consuming, and requires a very large amount of dust, but necromantic magic items tend to be rare. Most necromancy requires a living person to perform it, so it's unusual to find some aspect of it that can be made into an object, and there are so few necromancers in the world to do it… on the other hand, if he made it himself then that means he has access to significant resources, including a large amount of dust, and the knowledge to make it.”

“Couldn't he have the same book?” Ruby asked.

Weiss watched her shooting a bow and arrow at some pig men in her game while she thought about it. “Maybe… *De Vermis Mysteriis* is very rare, very expensive, and quite illegal.”

“Hmm...” Ruby hummed, before frowning as she got herself killed. She shut off the game and leaned against Weiss. “Well, I dunno about the book, but they could've gotten a bunch of dust from the White Fang before we shut down their smuggling, so maybe they made it.”

“Maybe,” Weiss murmured as she slowly relaxed. She was feeling very drowsy, and Ruby was so warm. She wanted to be closer to her, but at the same time she was a little terrified by both the feeling and the act itself. She was a mess, she decided with a sigh.

“Come on,” Ruby said. “Let's go to bed.”

Weiss got ready first, changing into her nightgown after washing her face before she climbed into bed, nervously pulling the sheets up to her chin. She wasn't sure what Ruby expected of her that night. After her failure the previous night would Ruby want her to try again? She wanted her girlfriend to be happy, but she could feel her heart rate already speeding up. Would she lose it again? Would Ruby-

Ruby walked in wearing her pajamas and gave her a smile, climbing into bed beside her and leaning over for a kiss. Weiss barely returned the gesture, but Ruby didn't seem bothered, turning the light off and laying down beside her They both laid still for a long, long time after that.

“R-Ruby,” Weiss stammered, before clearing her throat and speaking as firmly as she could. “Ruby?”

“Yes, Weiss?”

“Do you- do you want to- to, um-”
“I'd like to cuddle,” Ruby said.

“Cuddle?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “It's been a really long day, and I just want to hold you and know you're okay and not, um, not not okay.”

“You shouldn't use double negatives,” Weiss lectured, before pausing. “So you don't want to, um, want to have sex?”

Weiss wasn't sure if she wanted the answer to be yes or no. She didn't want to, and she didn't want to disappoint Ruby again, but if Ruby didn't want to, did that mean she didn't want to be with her that way anymore after what had happened? Was she undesirable? Or was she just worrying herself into some kind of neurotic breakdown?

“Not right now,” Ruby said. “I'm tired, and after last time… I think we need to take our time and not rush things.”

“Oh,” Weiss said before sighing and scooting closer. Ruby waited for her to make the first move, but as soon as Weiss wrapped her arms around her girlfriend she reciprocated by pulling her close. Weiss smiled and squeezed Ruby tighter, then tangled their legs with each other.

“Ruby?”

“Hmm?”

“Why didn't you just ask to cuddle?”

“What do you mean?”

Weiss hesitated. “You always let me move first, which I'm happy about. I mean, I know you must get tired of waiting for me sometimes—”

“Never,” Ruby inserted, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “Don't push yourself, Weiss.”

Weiss smiled but continued. “What I mean is… I'm not really talking about rushing me I guess. And you never grab me or anything when I'm not ready, and that means so much to me… but I… why don't you ask for things?”

“What do you mean?”

“You wanted to cuddle,” Weiss said. “If you just, um, grabbed me I'd feel uncomfortable, but I can say no. I mean, um, if you want something you should ask. If I really don't want to I can always say no.”

Ruby was quiet for a long time. “I guess… I'm not good for asking for stuff.”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess… if I needed something I could ask for it,” Ruby said slowly. “Dad would've done anything for me and Yang, and Yang… after mom died she was like big sis and mom and best friend all in one for a long, long time. It was hard sometimes, but they both did everything they could to take care of me.”

“But?”
Ruby huffed out an almost laugh. “You said butt. Ouch! Pinching is rude, Weiss.”

Weiss pressed a kiss to her cheek. “You were saying?”

“Ooh,” Ruby said, before falling silent for a while. “I guess… they tried to hide it, but Yang was really young, and dad… he was depressed after mom died. He used to have trouble even getting off the couch. But they still tried to take care of me like I was the only one who mattered. And I just… if I asked for things it made it harder on them, you know? After a while I just… it was easier not to ask.”


“I know,” Ruby said. “Maybe… it's hard to find words for it. I just… I don't want to force people to do stuff for me. And I think… I dunno, for a long time I guess I just… I mean, I was a weird kid. All the girls in my classes played with dolls and talked about boys and did stuff with their parents, and I'd go home and take apart the vacuum cleaner and make it run better and I realized pretty young I liked girls, so… I just never really fit in. And then when I got to high school my sister noticed I didn't really have friends so suddenly all of her friends were my friends too, but they weren't…”

“Your friends?”

“Yeah,” Ruby sighed. “They'd do stuff with me, but it wasn't… it was just 'cause I was Yang's little sister. And I didn't want to complain, because they were going out of their way to include this weird freshman girl who usually had grease stains all over her band shirts… but I just… I felt like a burden.”

Weiss gave her a kiss on the lips. “Ruby?”

“Yeah?”

“You could never be a burden,” Weiss said firmly.

“Weiss-”


“Yes, ma'am,” Ruby said.

“Good,” Weiss hummed, before kissing her again. “Now I want to cuddle, too. And when we're ready I want to, um, to try sex again. And I want you to always tell me when you want something. No more keeping quiet and not trying to be a problem, okay?”

“Okay,” Ruby agreed. “But the same goes for you.”

“What do you mean?”

“You never want to tell me when you're having a problem, either,” Ruby pointed out.

Weiss thought about it for a while. “I guess… I don't. I'm not used to complaining leading to getting what I really want. I mean, I could tell the servants anything and they'd rush to do it, but… other than Klein and my sister no one ever really cared about me. Father was indifferent or angry, mother was dead, Whitely… he was being raised to be the new heir and had no time or interest for me. And what I wanted wasn't things. I just… wanted someone to care.”
Ruby kissed her softly. “I care.”

“I know,” Weiss said, blinking back tears. “I just forget that sometimes. Sometimes when we're together, I just… I want to make you happy. So you don't… I… you put up with so much from me.”

“I don't have to 'put up' with you, Weiss,” Ruby said with a small smile. “You make me happy.”

Weiss relaxed and tried to wriggle even closer into the cuddle. “I know I'm difficult to get along with, though. I'm snappy, and grumpy, and I can be very mean… and my family has done so many terrible things that I just ignored. And there's my… issues with touch. You dated me when we thought you could never touch me, and now we can, and I still freak out when you try.”

“This sounds a lot like the 'you think you're a bad person' speech again,” Ruby said. “I think I've pointed out about a gazillion times that you're not. And you being grumpy is always kinda cute. I mean, I don't like it when you get mean, and it hurts a little when you do it to me, but I know you really care.

“And the touch thing? It's not a problem at all. I mean, I've read a bunch of stuff online since we started dating. About people with problems being touched and how to deal with it, or about dating asexual people. Not that you're asexual, but when I thought we couldn't ever touch each other I thought reading about them might help. Then I thought about toys and wearing clothes while doing stuff to each other, and I found this store that sold all these latex clothes, and-”

“I think you're off topic,” Weiss mumbled, turning bright red.

Ruby chuckled nervously. “Right. Um… what I'm saying is, I'm okay with your problems. We'll work through all the ones we can together, and the ones we can't we'll figure out ways to work around them together. I'm not going to get mad 'cause you aren't ready, or you have a problem or something.”

Weiss nodded. “Okay… I think… sometimes I do stuff I'm not really ready for because I don't want to lose you.”

“You won't,” Ruby said.

“Okay,” Weiss murmured. “Okay. I'll… I'll try to accept that. If you promise to tell me what you need.”

“I don't want to push you,” Ruby hesitated. “If I say I'd like to have sex with you, wouldn't you feel like you should even if you're not ready?”

Weiss thought about it a bit. “Maybe… but that's my problem, and- and I'll try harder about it, okay?”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “I'll try, too.”

They were both quiet for a very long time after that, long enough that Weiss wasn't sure if Ruby was still awake. “Ruby?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to have sex? Right now?”

“What would you do if I said yes?”
Weiss was quiet again as she thought about it. Was she interested in sex just then? Part of her was, but she was still nervous. She thought about what Blake had said about pushing herself, and she took a deep breath and tried to relax before answering. “I don't think I'm ready tonight.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “I don't want to either, tonight.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I do want to make love to you when you're ready, but right now I just want to cuddle.”

“Okay,” Weiss said. “I do want to, um, to make love to you, too.”

“Good,” Ruby said.

“I think I'll be ready soon,” Weiss added. “I think I am ready, just, you know, mostly. Just… I think it all took me by surprise. Maybe it wasn't that I wasn't ready, and more… I needed to take things slower that night?”

“Sorry,” Ruby said.

“It's not your fault,” Weiss said. “I moved fast too. I wanted it, but I guess I wasn't really prepared for everything that was happening.”

They were quiet for a long time, until Weiss felt Ruby's breaths even out. “Goodnight, Ruby. I love you.”
Sixth Case: Shelter

Ruby's hamburger was large enough that it shouldn't have been possible for her to actually eat it, and yet somehow more and more kept disappearing into her maw. Weiss was torn between disgusted and appalled, and grudgingly impressed, but somehow the overall effect was disturbingly endearing. She should not have found the way that ketchup was keeping a piece of lettuce stuck to her cheek cute, but it was. Perhaps she had sustained some form of brain damage when she'd been legally dead for a little while the day before.

“Aren't you gonna eat?” Ruby asked after she swallowed.

Weiss smiled slightly and grabbed a napkin, carefully wiping Ruby's cheek clean. She was glad that at least she'd mostly broken Ruby of the habit of talking with her mouth full back when she still had the will to viciously scold her despite how disturbingly effective her puppy dog eyes were. “Lunch isn't going anywhere. You don't need to eat so fast.”

“Well… lunch will go sometime, and you've barely started,” Ruby pointed out. “Aren't you hungry? You didn't eat much for breakfast.”

Weiss blushed slightly and took a delicate bite of her salad. A few minutes later Ruby finished most of her food and was just munching on fries. “So… did you finish reading those reports yet?”

Weiss rolled her eyes and set her fork down, leaning back in the booth. In a little under a year Signal had become a place she ate at several times a week, and she'd long since given up on even pro forma complaints about the small diner. It might've been the sort of place that would've panicked a younger Weiss to visit, but the food was excellent, the servers friendly, and the cleaning was at least up to acceptable standards if not quite at the usual 'Schnee' level.

“Yes, and you really should read more crime scene reports yourself,” Weiss scolded lightly.

“I do!” Ruby objected. “Sometimes. They're just so long and boring… and my sister wanted to talk about something.”

“When doesn't Yang want to talk about something,” Weiss grumbled.

“Well… maybe, but I haven't seen her much lately,” Ruby said. “She's been super duper busy with Blake on the White Fang case, and I've been over at your apartment a lot since Christmas… I've barely talked to her in weeks.”

“You see her almost every day at work,” Weiss said, deadpan. “Her cubicle is next to ours.”

“Well… okay, I see her but I don't see her see her,” Ruby said. “I just… see her.”

Weiss just stared at her until Ruby cleared her throat. “Um… so what did that report say?”

Weiss rolled her eyes again but decided to let it go. “The final medical exam isn't finished, but preliminary reports found brands on both bodies, and pictures match the ones from the book, so the necromancer probably has access to De Vermis Mysteriïs.

“The zombie's unidentified and his prints aren't on file,” Weiss continued. “The coroner is having trouble placing the time of death, but based on putrefaction he was probably dead for no more than a few days.”
“Why is he having so much trouble figuring it out?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged. “The coroner’s initial report indicates he died of exposure, and the cold weather helps preserve the body. Quite a bit of time of death calculations are based on core body temperature, and obviously that’s useless here.”

“So the necromancer just found him already dead?” Ruby asked.

Weiss hesitated, then shook her head. “No. The trap he left… the brand only works on a living subject. Once the person is dead their soul can’t be sent forcefully enough into the afterlife to leave the void for the mana.”

“So… he died of exposure after he was branded?” Ruby asked. “How long does the brand trap thing work for? Does the user have to be there when the person dies?”

“It lasts for a year and a day,” Weiss said. “The coroner report indicates no evidence of healing, though, so the brand was inflicted shortly pre-mortem.”

“So he found someone, branded them, then left them to die from the cold, then came back and turned them into a zombie?” Ruby asked.

“That… seems to be the case, yes,” Weiss said.

“It’s not much to go on,” Ruby said after some thought. “Do they know anything else about the John Doe?”

“The coroner thought he might’ve been homeless, or at least recently living rough,” Weiss offered.

“Well… the homeless are common victims,” Ruby said. “People usually ignore them, and even police sometimes don’t pay attention like they should. And a lot of homeless have drug or mental issues, so they don’t make great witnesses.”

“I… probably everything I know about the homeless is very suspect,” Weiss offered after a moment. “I doubt my father was a very objective source of information, and Oliver Twist is probably a bit dated.”

“Probably,” Ruby agreed with a smirk. “What about the crime scene?”

Weiss grabbed the folder she’d brought in with her having expected to discuss things over lunch. It had become something of a tradition to talk about cases at the diner, and no matter how many times Weiss complained about Ruby never reading anything it helped her think things through to repeat the information to her partner.

“Ms. Gamboge entertained guests regularly, so there are too many fingerprints to be useful, although they’re running all of them anyway,” Weiss said. “She was rich, famous, and politically connected, so apparently that takes enough priority to push every other forensics case to the back burner while they go over every detail.”

“Was anything missing?” Ruby asked.

“Nothing apparent,” Weiss said. “Her jewelry and other obvious valuables were all on record with her insurance company, she has a safe that hadn’t been compromised, and her office door was locked and doesn’t appear to have been broken into. She had a very extensive rare book collection and they’re still going over the records of it, but nothing appears missing.”
“Rare books?” Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded. “I glanced at the list. Some of them are very expensive, and there are more than a few with significant occult or arcane value. A handful weren't legal to own and the police are quietly confiscating them, but nothing that jumps out at me as important to a necromancer, and I called the team to verify the most impressive tomes, but none of them were missing.”

“Well… if some of her books are illegal, she probably didn't have everything listed,” Ruby offered.

Weiss shook her head. “Maybe, but… the illegal ones we know about now were on the list.”

“Um…”

Weiss shrugged. “If she wasn't dead no one would've done anything about it. In this country the police usually just use possession of proscribed tomes to increase the duration of a criminal's sentence, or as a catch all if they can't make normal charges stick. At most they will be confiscated, and that's easy to avoid if you have the right connections.”

“So did people know she collected books like this?” Ruby asked.

Weiss frowned. “I'm not sure. I've never paid attention to celebrity culture.”

“I'll check,” Ruby said, pulling out her phone and starting to flip through it. Weiss took advantage of that to eat a little more of her salad. A few minutes later Ruby put her phone down. “Well… she's talked about it in interviews. She's never said she collects anything illegal, but TMZ had an article accusing her of it a few weeks ago…”

“That's quite the coincidence,” Weiss said. “Perhaps the necromancer wanted to find more books, and after hearing about that decided to pay her a visit?”

“I mean… maybe it was just an obsessed stalker who happens to be a necromancer,” Ruby pointed out. “I think we're getting pretty far out right now.”

“Then what do we follow up on?” Weiss asked. “I think the rare books angle is worth looking into. I had people visit almost every shop or dealer in the city while tracking down additional books to help with my necromancy, and it's possible our suspect did similar, just with more desperation, and less morals and money to aid the search.”

“I think we should look into the zombie,” Ruby said. “I mean, if he was homeless then some of the homeless might know him.”

“If he was homeless” Weiss pointed out. “Besides, how would we find things out from the homeless?”

“I did talk with them sometimes when I was still a beat cop,” Ruby said. “I know some places we could start.”

Weiss looked out the window. “What do the homeless do right now? I mean… it started snowing this morning and it hasn't really let up.”

Ruby followed her gaze, her natural smile at the sight of the snow falling as she thought about the homeless out in the weather. “Some go to shelters, and some make their own shelter. Some… don't make it. I guess… I guess people don't care enough to do anything about it.”

Weiss saw her getting lost in her own head. Ruby had been far more introspective since Faerie, and
had started to brood about things she once would've ignored or done her best to fix. It worried Weiss when she did, so she reached over and took her hand, giving it a firm squeeze, which soon had her smiling again. “Do you really think asking the homeless will help?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said after some thought. “I think it's a good idea.”

Weiss sighed. “Fine. I just want you to know that I hold you responsible for anything that happens after a day spent in the cold.”

Ruby gave her a flirty smile. “I can warm you up again if you want. Um… not that you have to. I mean, I know that you might not be ready, and I don’t want to pressure you. That was just flirting, so—”

Weiss leaned over and gave her a small kiss. “Come on. We've got a killer to find.”

It had been a cold winter, but there had been almost no snow. That had finally changed, and the snow wasn't showing any sign of letting up. The streets were salted and well plowed, but it was cold enough and snowing hard enough for some to be on them anyway, even in the middle of the day. The sidewalks were starting to pile up, and overnight the city promised to turn into a winter wasteland.

Ruby had to check her phone, which made Weiss very nervous as she was driving in inclement weather, but before long they arrived at the first homeless shelter she wanted to visit. Weiss had images in her head of some kind of nightmarish place, but from the outside it actually looked pretty normal, just a simple cinderblock building that looked like an unremarkable community center. The only thing that stood out about it was that the alleys around it were full of carts, beaten up luggage, and trash bags no doubt left by owners when they went in.

The inside of the building matched the outside. It was plain and utilitarian, with stark fluorescent lights and the strong smell of industrial cleaners liberally employed. It was obvious that the staff worked hard to keep the building habitable, but nothing about it looked particularly welcoming.

There was a glass wall protecting the desks where the workers were, and quite a crowd of people waiting to be let past the inner door. It was at least a warm wait for the people in line, most of whom actually looked… normal. Weiss had expected them to be covered in filth, and while some no doubt were, most looked little different from a typical city dweller.

Ruby had moved towards the glass, and after a moment of hesitation Weiss followed her. She waited while her partner did the talking, as Ruby seemed to know one of the people, and after a short talk they were let past the barrier.

Ruby lead the way to a large, cavernous room, which was packed with cafeteria tables. Many people sat around munching on sandwiches, although there were a few empty spots here and there. The room strongly resembled the cafeteria at the Green Hill Mine, although it was much larger, and actually kept cleaner, although with an even more limited food selection. To her shame Weiss noticed that the people actually looked less downtrodden than the Schnee workers.

“Who do we talk to?” Weiss asked.

Ruby looked around then shrugged. “Whoever we can, I guess. Do you wanna split up?”

Weiss hesitated. “Why don't we start together.”

“Ohay,” Ruby said. Without further delay she walked over to a table with only a couple of people eating and sat down, offering them a smile.
“Foods up front,” one of the men said. “You never use a cafeteria before?”

“Thanks, but I'm not here to eat,” Ruby said, pulling out her badge, waving calmly when everyone tensed up. “Don't worry, I'm not looking for anyone here. I'm actually trying to catch somebody that might be causing trouble for you guys.”

They all looked at their food, obviously uninterested in talking to a police officer. Ruby tried several more gentle questions, before giving up and moving on to another table. Things were much the same there as well, and after seeing how much of an uphill climb it was going to be Weiss finally decided to separate from her partner and try her own luck at it.

“Hello,” Weiss said as she sat down at a table with several people. “I was hoping to ask you a few questions.”

“I've got nothing to say to a Schnee,” one of them, a faunus, said hatefully.

Weiss froze for a moment, before pulling out her badge to show them. “I promise, this has nothing to do with my family, this-”

“No, I already gave five fucking years to you monsters, and then I come back and can't find other work I can still do and end up on the streets,” he growled. You can go straight to hell.”

Things didn't exactly improve after that, even when she went out of her way to avoid approaching the faunus, who had been almost universally hostile to her. She was feeling quite dispirited and annoyed at the plan to approach the homeless when she finally gave up and walked over to her girlfriend.

“Oh, um, would you mind repeating that for my partner?” Ruby asked when she saw Weiss, gesturing for her to sit down.

“Your partner?” the woman she was talking to asked suspiciously.

“This is Weiss,” Ruby said with a smile. “She's my partner, and she wants to help, too. I promise.”

“Is she...” the woman trailed off.

Ruby smiled and placed a hand on Weiss' shoulder. She stiffed at first from the contact, before finally relaxing. The homeless woman, who looked tired and thin, with clothing that was a bit too large for her frame, like she'd recently lost weight, finally nodded.

“Oh, um, would you mind repeating that for my partner?” Ruby asked when she saw Weiss, gesturing for her to sit down.

“Your partner?” the woman she was talking to asked suspiciously.

“This is Weiss,” Ruby said with a smile. “She's my partner, and she wants to help, too. I promise.”

“Is she...” the woman trailed off.

Ruby smiled and placed a hand on Weiss' shoulder. She stiffed at first from the contact, before finally relaxing. The homeless woman, who looked tired and thin, with clothing that was a bit too large for her frame, like she'd recently lost weight, finally nodded.

“Okay,” she said. “I'm Lisa. Things have been… rough lately, and I've been sleeping on the streets for the past few months, or the shelters when I can get in. Especially the shelters lately.”

“Did something happen recently to make you seek out the shelters?” Weiss asked.

The woman hesitated before nodding. “Yeah. I mean, it's always been rough out there, but I didn't exactly come with a silver spoon in my mouth, you know? I knew what it's like even before I lost my job and ended up out here, so I didn't get into too much trouble. Stayed away from the bad people, found places to sleep, made some friends to watch my back.

“Then one of my friends disappeared,” she said, pausing and looking down. “That happens sometimes, you know. People just there one day, gone the next. Probably hurt or dead, but maybe they just moved on to somewhere else, chasing something better. Who knows? But it wasn't just once.”
“People have been disappearing?” Ruby prodded.

“Yeah,” Lisa said. “Not just a few of us… I've asked around, and it's been at least a few people a week since… well, at least December sometime. Maybe earlier, who knows. It's not like anyone pays any attention when we go missing.”

“We're paying attention,” Weiss said.

Lisa looked at her for a moment before nodding. “Yeah, okay. Okay.”

“Are there any witnesses?” Ruby asked. “Anyone that saw what happened to these people?”

“Maybe,” Lisa said. “There was another woman, Terra. She's not… he's not all there. She can see stuff, and I don't just mean, you know, normal stuff. She can see things that aren't really there, but which, um, which are there.”

“What do you mean?” Ruby asked.

Lisa looked like she was struggling for words, so Weiss spoke up. “She's some sort of seer.”

“Maybe,” Lisa said. “She can't really control it though, and they gave her some medicine to try to block it out but it never really worked for her, so she started using drugs to try to help. Tried all kinds of things, then got hooked on Red Sap… ended up losing everything, got stuck half crazy on the street. Anyway, she said she saw what happened, but who knows if it's real or just what she thought she saw, you know?”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a long look. Weiss knew what Red Sap could do to you, and whether or not the woman actually saw anything useful, without proper training even basic aura sight could show confusing things. If she didn't know much about magic there was no way that she could understand what she was seeing.

“So this Terra…” Weiss asked eventually.

“She said she saw a man and men who… weren't men,” she said. “She warned me to get off of the streets before something happened to me.”

“Do you know where she is now?” Weiss asked.

Lisa thought about it for a moment, before nodding. “Yes, well, shortly. She's probably out pan handling or, well, staring at people, but she likes to come to this shelter around lunch. If you wait until too late they fill up in the winter and you’ve got to find somewhere else to stay.”

“So she should be here soon?” Weiss said, looking around the room.

“Yeah, any time now,” Lisa said. “Assuming, um assuming nothing happened to her.”

They waited with the woman for a while, Ruby making idle small talk, until eventually Lisa perked up and pointed at the door. “That's her.”

Weiss studied the woman. She was old and wrinkled, with mostly white hair and tired, drooping eyes. From her appearance Weiss' would've placed her in her sixties at least, although she could've been younger if she'd been on the streets for a while, as rough living aged people quickly.

Ruby lead the way over, and the woman locked eyes with Weiss when they were only halfway across the room. The gaze was feverish, and she felt a chill run up spine at the sheer intensity of the
woman's expression. She wasn't sure if the gaze held madness or magic, but there was a disturbing weight to it either way.

The woman watched them while eating her bologna sandwich, and she didn't react beyond a stiff, formal nod as they sat across from her.

After a long moment Ruby cleared her throat. “Um… hello. Terra?”

“Yes,” the woman said. “You are ignorant but seek enlightenment.”

“Um… does that mean you know we have questions?” Ruby asked after a long pause.

“All those living have questions,” Terra said. “Only the truly dead lack them.”

“Uh...” Ruby trailed off, looking at her partner.

Weiss studied the woman with her magic sight. She could see that she had a strong aura, but it lacked the refinement of a trained magic user. It was wild and unpredictable, fluctuating in a way a healthy mind wouldn't have allowed even without training. She began to consider the possibility that she was both insane and a seer.

“You saw someone get taken recently,” Weiss said finally.

“Yes,” Terra said.

After a long moment Weiss continued. “Can you… elaborate.”

“Not such that you would believe,” Terra said. “The man who takes us and the not men who serve him walk the streets, harvesting the living, meddling in things he does not understand, driven by questions that must not be answered.”

“We'll stop him,” Ruby said. “So please, anything you can tell us might help.”

Terra looked at Ruby for a long, intense moment, and then flicked her gaze to Weiss. “What I could speak of them would not help you. His acts indirectly serve a mistress beyond his petty comprehension, and She will bring about ruin to this world if left unchecked. I will not move against her agents, even the unwitting ones. She knows what pieces move on the chessboard.”

“If things are so dangerous, then we need to stop her,” Ruby insisted.

Terra was silent for a while, her gaze not leaving them as she slowly chewed her sandwich. “You will find answers you did not know you seek soon enough. Show your picture of the dead to those who will not seek shelter. One will know what you wish to find within a short walk of here.”

“Um...” Ruby trailed off again.

“Thank you,” Weiss said finally, standing. “We won't bother you further then.”

“Wait, scion of the Schnee,” Terra said, her eyes burning but expression blank. “Are you prepared for what's to come?”

Weiss considered her answer. “I'll simply have to be.”

“Death will walk the earth again,” Terra said slowly. “This will be the final sign before the stars are right and She comes, bearing claw and hate to burn the world. You stand upon a precipice, and soon you will have no choice but to leap, seeking aid from dark places you have sworn to yourself to
never go or you will lose everything while She laughs.

“Now leave me… my sandwich will not eat itself.”
Sixth Case: More Questions

“So… what do you think about that stuff?” Ruby asked.

Weiss looked at her girlfriend. Their breath was visible on every exhale, and snow was falling steadily around them. Perfect white snowflakes were collecting on Ruby's red hoodie and the shoulders of her heavy winter coat, and her nose and cheeks had transformed to match her color scheme. Weiss wanted to kiss her, but restrained herself. They were on duty, after all. “You mean the cryptic prophesy she was spouting?”

“Yeah.”

Weiss hummed thoughtfully. “Prophecy is real, but it's very rare and usually useless. Even if it's the truth what can we do about it?”

“She said something about the dead walking-”

“No,” Weiss interrupted. “It was Death walking.”

Ruby paused. “What does that mean? How can death walk?”

“Well, Death is an actual being, although it doesn't normally enter our plane,” Weiss said. “Sometimes you hear about attempts to summon her, but I have no idea if they're actually possible. Records tend to be sketchy about them, but I get the feeling that survivors of the attempts are rare.”

Ruby shuddered. “Why would anyone want to summon Death? That just sounds like a really, really bad idea.”

“No god or mortal has ever offered proof about what happens when a soul fully passes on into the afterlife,” Weiss said, her eyes distant. “I went far into that realm as a child, and I touch the edges whenever I seek out a soul with my necromancy, and I can feel the peace and… comfort of it. But once a soul has passed on there's no way to contact it, and no way to know for sure its final fate. Death is the only being with the answers.”

“What about the rest of her words, the part about hate and claws and stuff,” Ruby asked.

“None of it seems useful,” Weiss said. “The only thing that she implied was actionable was that I'd need to seek aid in 'dark places' I've sworn to never go… which is useless. I'm not going to visit a hell dimension or summon demons or seek out dark cabals just because of a prophesy. That's the kind of action that leads to self fulfilling negative outcomes.”

“So you aren't going to do anything?”

“No,” Weiss said after a long moment of thought. “It all sounded very impressive, but unless we can do something about it there's no point in worrying. After you study the history of prophesy for a while you either turn into an obsessive true believer or you give up on the field as entirely useless.”

“Hey, I think I see someone!” Ruby interrupted, dragging Weiss towards a man picking through a dumpster.

They had been wandering the surrounding area asking everyone they encountered about the zombie, with Weiss even showing a cleaned up photograph of his face from the autopsy to people that looked like they might actually know something. They hadn't learned anything yet, other than that the local
homeless were unusually frightened, which supported what they'd heard.

“Hello, sir?” Ruby said. “Can we ask you a few questions?”

“Why should I answer 'em,” he said. He was a heavyset man with a greasy beard wearing layers and layers of cheap winter clothing, most heavily stained and possibly liberated from dumpsters like the one he was poking through. Weiss wrinkled her nose, trying her best to ignore the powerful smell coming from him and the dumpster in almost equal measure.

Ruby pulled out her badge. “We're looking for someone that's been taking people off of the streets and killing them. Please, we're trying to help.”

He looked at the badge dubiously for a moment before grunting. “I did see something, don't know if I think it's worth wasting breath telling you. Since when do cops give a shit about us?”

“I care,” Ruby said, her voice and face so sincere it almost choked Weiss up. Sometimes she would forget just how good Ruby really was. It'd been a while since she'd seen her partner so certain as well.

The man sighed. ‘Fine. Look, I was in an alley like this one 'round Christmas time, and I was takin' a load off. It was pretty late in the day, and I wanted to rest up before I looked for somewhere warm to spend the night. Anyway, another guy I know, Percy, he comes into the alley. He started pokin' 'round in the dumpster, didn't know I'd already cleaned it out 'cause he couldn't see me what with all the trash and stuff. I was pretty hidden.

“I was just about to call out to Percy when this big white panel van parks at the end of the alley. Out gets this tall, thin white guy all in black, and he goes walkin' up to Percy. Tries to tell him he had a place he could stay outta the cold, even a job he was hirin' for.

“I've seen some real pieces of work. People that like to hurt people like us, people that like to use us... I've never seen someone that bothered me like he did. He was tellin' the kinda story people use to try to lure us into all kinds o' bad shit, but he wasn't really tryin'. He was talkin' like it was all very dull, like he was readin' a script and didn't really care, you know? Just cold…”

He trailed off at that, and Ruby and Weiss exchanged a long look. Eventually Ruby pulled him from his reverie. “What happened then?”

“Percy might not've been on the streets as long as I have, but even a child woulda been freaked out by this guy, so he said no. The man just goes 'that's a pity' and pulls out a damn taser and shocks Percy out. I thought about doin' somethin', but the van's backdoor opened and a few more guys came stumblin' out. They didn't move well… and they stank.”

“Stank?” Weiss asked, unable to believe that the man in front of her would mention that detail about anything.

“Yeah, like… like roadkill when it gets left out too long,” he said after a bit. “Like death and rot. Anyway, the two of them don't say a word, just lift up Percy and carried him into the van, and the guy gets back in the driver's seat and takes off. Never saw Percy again.”

“Is this Percy?” Weiss asked, pulling the photograph of the zombie from her pocket and showing it to him.

He sighed as soon as he saw it. “Yes… that's Percy. Dunno his last name. I guess they killed him then.”
“They did,” Weiss said. “Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“No, I just… hid,” he said. “I've heard others've gone missing too, don't know anything about it though. I just… they're gone. Probably the same way. It looked like he'd done it before.”

“Could you speak to a sketch artist?” Ruby asked. “It would-”

“No!” he barked, making them both jump.

“It would only-”

“No,” he repeated, quietly but just as vehement. “I'm not goin' anywhere. I won't let you take me!”

“We're not trying to take you,” Weiss said carefully. “We're trying to prevent others like yourself from being taken.”

“No, I know how this works,” he said. “You take me downtown, have me do the sketch artist thing, then you find an excuse to hold me. Well I won't let you! Get away from me!”

“Please calm-” Ruby started.

“No!” he shouted again, backing further into the alley. “Don’t come near me!”

Ruby and Weiss exchanged a long look. “He's our only witness,” Weiss said.

“If we brought him in like this I doubt we'd get anything,” Ruby said. “He's too freaked out to help us.”

Weiss sighed. “Alright… I'd rather not try to force him, anyway. But we need something to go on or we're never going to get anywhere.”

“You're right, but… I mean, we can take him but that just seems like a mess waiting to happen,” Ruby said. “Maybe we can try asking around some more, and if we have to we can look for him again? He might calm down later.”

“Alright,” Weiss said after thinking about it for a minute. “We probably shouldn't stay out here too much longer, though.”

“They will be,” Ruby said, looking back at the man as they left the alley.

Weiss sighed. “The shelter still had room. If they wanted to be inside they could be tonight. It isn't ideal, but we aren't social workers. We also can't magically fix whatever is keeping them on the streets, and we have our own job to do.”

“I know,” Ruby said a little peevishly, making Weiss tense up, ready for a fight. Ruby then sighed. “I know… I just wish we could do more to help.”

“We do what we do, and others do what they do,” Weiss said. “We can't fix every problem even if they're right in front of us.”

They looked some more for possible witnesses, but no one they found claimed any knowledge, and the streets were clearing of people as the sun set and it got even colder. Eventually Weiss grabbed Ruby's hand and began to lead her back to the car.

She slowed down when they got close, dropping her hand so that she could more easily reach her gun as she saw someone leaning against the unmarked police car. He was wearing a heavy coat, and
while it looked like it was warm and well made, it was also patched and stained enough to be owned by someone who had been living rough for a while. The man lowered a red scarf to take a long swig from a flask, making Weiss wrinkle her nose at the stereotypical behavior. While they needed to be careful, perhaps the homeless man was attempting to approach them with useful information-

“Uncle Qrow?” Ruby called, jogging up to him. “Uncle Qrow!”

-or it could be the slovenly head of Supernatural Affairs Intelligence Division.

“Hey, kid,” Qrow drawled as he tucked his flask away. “Ice queen junior.”

“We spent the day interviewing the homeless, and you're the first one that appears to truly fit the stereotypes,” Weiss said, crossing her arms. “Is that why you're in front of a shelter tonight? Or did they not let you in?”

“Weiss!” Ruby whined as she gave Qrow a quick hug. “Be nice.”

Weiss huffed but was ignored as Qrow looked down at his niece. “What are you doing here, squirt? It's a little cold out, isn't it?”

“Crime never sleeps,” Ruby said. “Or, um, gets too cold I guess. Uh… we're looking for a serial killer necromancer guy.”

“A necromancer?” he asked casting a glance a Weiss. “Gotta be careful around those.”

“Hey!” Ruby objected, elbowing him in the ribs hard enough to make him flinch. “Don't be mean, either.”

“So he's been taking the homeless,” Qrow said as he looked up at the shelter they were parked near. “Find any leads?”

“Not much,” Ruby said. “Apparently he's tall, thin and white, and he drives a white panel van and carries a taser.”

“Well, the taser probably means he's not an expert at spell magic at least,” Qrow said. “Is this case related to the murder of that rich woman?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “He had a zombie with him when he killed her, so we were looking for where it came from.”

“And he was homeless?” Qrow said. “I wonder how many people he's been killing.”

“Why are you here?” Weiss asked.

“Why are any of us here?” Qrow countered.

Weiss gritted her teeth for a moment. “I mean, why are you here, right now, waiting for us. Did something happen?”

“I was checking my own sources on the streets and got word a pair of tiny detectives were asking the homeless some questions,” Qrow said. “Thought I'd check what my niece was up to.”

“You're working on a case?” Ruby asked. “Is it big?”

“Just checking a few things,” Qrow deflected casually.
“Is it why you missed Christmas?” Ruby asked. “You usually at least visit, and normally you pass out drunk on dad's couch at New Years, but you didn't show up at all.”

“Work's been busy lately,” he said. “So, if you're not finding much here on the streets, what's your next lead?”

Ruby narrowed her eyes but allowed the subject change. “We know the necromancer guy has some rare books, and the woman he killed was a rare book collector.”

“Might be nothing, might be worth following up,” Qrow said with a shrug. “You get any other leads?”

“Not really,” Weiss said. “As a public figure it will take time to go through her history and correspondence looking for other connections.”

“Well, it can't hurt to look for books that shouldn't be out in public, anyway,” Qrow said. “I'm sure a Schnee knows where to look… besides your own library.”

“Uncle Qrow…” Ruby said reproachfully.

Weiss' eyes narrowed. “What exactly are you doing out here? If you're trying to practice going undercover as one of the homeless you're overselling the look… and smell.”

“And if you're trying to pass as a bitch you-”

“Hey!” Ruby interrupted. “Don't talk about my girlfriend that way.”

Qrow paused for a long moment, staring a them both wide eyed, before pulling out his flask and taking a long swig. “What was that?”

Weiss smirked as Ruby moved beside her and took her hand. “We're dating,” Ruby confirmed.

“You and...”

“Me and Weiss.”

“Weiss and I,” she corrected casually.

Qrow took another swig of alcohol. “I thought you couldn't touch people?”

Weiss froze. “How did you know about that?”

Qrow shrugged. “I'm a captain of SA. I got told same as Glynda.”

Weiss looked ready for a rant, but was cut off when Ruby leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “I can touch her for some reason. Do you… do you know why?”

Qrow examined them thoughtfully for a moment. “I know something wasn't normal about Summer, but Tai never liked to talk about it, and Summer wouldn't say a thing. After... well, Tai was a mess, so I dropped it. If anyone has answers it's him.”

“I asked at Christmas but he didn't tell me anything,” Ruby said with a frown.

They were silent for a bit before Qrow shook his head again. “Does your sister know?”

“Yang?” Ruby asked, surprised. “Of course. I told her when we first started dating.”
“No,” Qrow said. “I meant Winter.”

“How do you know my sister?” Weiss asked.

Qrow just smirked and took another pull from his flask. When he didn't say anything for a while she eventually huffed. “I… have mentioned that I'm… close to my partner, but we haven't really discussed it in detail.”

“Mentioned that, huh,” Qrow drawled. “How detailed was this mention?”

“Wh-why would I tell you, you, you cretinous tosspot,” Weiss snapped.

He smirked victoriously before looking at his niece. “Sorry I haven't been giving you any training sessions lately. You still been practicing with that garden tool of yours?”

“Yup!” Ruby chirped. “You'd be really impressed. I've been sparring with Pyrrha a ton, and Weiss, and sometimes others, too!”

“Good, keep working hard and you'll get a handle on it eventually,” he said. “Anyway, I've got some more work to do, and I'm already running out of booze.”

Weiss scoffed as Ruby said her goodbyes, walking stiffly to the car and sitting down while Ruby hummed happily. “Your uncle is a disgrace.”

“Sure,” Ruby agreed.

“And a shabbaroon,” she seethed.

“Now I know you're just making words up,” Ruby said.

Weiss harrumphed, crossing her arms and looking out the window. She then froze, snapping her head around to look in a different direction as she focused on a sudden nagging sting in the back of her mind. She reached out with her aura and examined the threads of sympathetic magic she had bound to herself, tracing the message being passed to her by her wards.

“What is it?” Ruby asked after a moment.

“Something's attacking my wards,” Weiss said. “Can you get to my apartment faster?”

“Sure,” Ruby said. “Hold on to something.”

It was still fairly early, but the sun had set while they walked back to the car, and if anything the snow had begun to fall faster and lay more thickly. Most people were avoiding being out in the weather if they could help it, and that meant that fewer cars blocked Ruby's path as she sped up and began to exceed the speed limit. Despite that, Weiss felt like she was having one long heart attack as she watched Ruby weave through traffic that barely appeared through the inclement weather, every patch of snow a risk of losing all control of the vehicle.

Finally they pulled to a stop, and it as all that Weiss could do to unbuckle her seatbelt with her shaking hands. She wanted to yell at Ruby for the insanely dangerous trip, but before she could she felt her wards send out yet another distress signal and instead hopped out of the car, sliding slightly on the slushy ice before finding her footing.

“Should we call back up?” Ruby asked as she followed behind her partner, slipping and sliding a little as well on the icy patches.
“I want to see what we're dealing with first,” Weiss said.

The doorman was standing outside the same as ever, and he gave her a nod as she approached. “Have you seen anything unusual tonight?” Weiss asked.

“No, Ms. Schnee,” he said. “Is something the matter?”

Weiss just shook her head and walked past him, Ruby dashing to catch up after she thanked him. The lobby didn't look at all unusual, but despite that she pulled her gun from her holster, holding it in her pocket so that it wouldn't be as obvious as she hurried to the elevator.

“Nothing seems wrong,” Ruby said.

Weiss nodded. “The SDC warding team added additional protections to my apartment. It's one of the most warded homes in the city, and it's still signaling a break in attempt. Whoever's doing it is still here.”

“Right,” Ruby said, pulling out her own gun.

The elevator doors finally opened, and she could see two men wearing heavy winter clothing standing in front of her apartment. One was repeatedly ramming his shoulder into the door, obviously trying to break it down.

“Freeze!” Ruby shouted.

The two men turned to face her, and Weiss gasped when she saw their pale skin and blank, dead eyes. “Wait,” she told Ruby, pulling off both layers of gloves.

“Weiss… what are you doing?” Ruby asked, her voice tense as she stared at the exposed hand.

Weiss paused, before flexing her fingers and stepping forward. “They're zombies.”

“Oh.”

Weiss let them come to her, and when they did she lunged, touching each for a few moments to channel necromantic energies into them. The other necromancer had obviously imbued them with a tremendous amount of mana as it took more work than she would've expected to cancel their animation, but after a few moments both were dead once again.

While Ruby called it in Weiss examined the bodies. Under the nice clothing they looked unwashed and overly thin, and they both had very fresh brands of the magical symbol on them. She examined everything else she could before sighing and standing again.

“Did you find anything?” Ruby asked.

“I think he took some nice clothing and put it on more homeless people so they could make it through the lobby unchallenged,” Weiss said. “I'm going to have words with the manager about the doorman not questioning people who wouldn't talk before letting them inside, but if you walk with enough purpose people tend to ignore you.”

“So just the zombies?” Ruby asked. “Why would he send them alone?”

Weiss shrugged. “Most wards are based on intent, and the dead have none. They could've walked through the magical security around most private dwellings like it wasn't even there.”

“Not you'r's though.”
“Of course not,” Weiss said with a superior sniff. “Now come on, let's go inside while we wait. It's going to be a long night.”
You never really answered my question this morning,” Weiss said.

They were sitting in the car, traveling to yet another bookstore. They had actually spent the entire morning visiting rare book dealers, collectors and shops, checking first those most likely to actually be able to provide illegal grimoires, then slowly moving to those less likely to. No one they had spoken to admitted to being approached, although whether that was because they were police, the general secrecy of the illegal business, or because they really hadn't Weiss couldn't be sure.

It was early afternoon, and Weiss finally decided to broach a topic that Ruby had avoided that morning over breakfast. She was glad that Ruby had stayed over several nights in a row, as otherwise she wouldn't have known anything was wrong.

“You had a nightmare last night… a bad one,” Weiss said.

“It was nothing,” Ruby said.

“Ruby-”

“Hey, I don't force you to talk when you don't want to,” Ruby snapped.

Weiss flinched, before looking out the window. The drive was incredibly awkward after that, as no one said anything for long minutes. Weiss wanted badly to lay into her girlfriend for being short with her, but it didn't seem fair to. Ruby was right, after all; she didn't force her to speak, she just stayed quiet and waited for Weiss to break on her own. And Weiss certainly didn't have a leg to stand on complaining about Ruby being short tempered with her.

“I'm sorry,” Ruby said after a while.

“Don't worry about it,” Weiss said, her tone clipped.

“You're mad,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss refused to look at her, knowing that her partner's hangdog expression would make her apologize and end any chance of getting information out of her girlfriend about what was bothering her. She was slowly learning how to deal with dating someone with the cutest expressions in the world, but the key was to not look at her when she was trying to remain objective. “I'm not angry.”

“You… sound angry.”

“Why would I be angry?” Weiss asked. “Is there something to be angry about?”

“Sorry,” Ruby said after a while.

“Why would you be sorry?” Weiss asked. “Do you have something to be sorry for?”

“You're really good at being passive aggressive,” Ruby muttered. When Weiss didn't take the bait she sighed. A few moments later she parked the car just down the street from their next target. Neither moved.

“I dreamed about… what I did,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss reached over and took Ruby's hand, giving it a gentle, encouraging squeeze.
“I don't want to bother you with this,” Ruby grumbled.

Weiss finally looked at her, leaning over to press a small kiss to her cheek, which still made her blush. “Am I bothering you when I talk about things that bother me? I mean, if talking about nightmares is considered bothering your girlfriend I guess I don't have to talk about the things that keep me from sleeping…”

“No,” Ruby pouted.

“The only thing that bothers me is that you don't think you can talk to me about your problems.”

“Th-that's not it at all!” Ruby objected.

“I know I haven't always been the most understanding, but I thought I'd been doing better,” Weiss said sadly, laying it on thick. She might not be able to get her girlfriend to talk with patient silence and cute pouts, but she had her own weapons at her disposal.

“No!” Ruby objected. “It's not that at all!”

“Then why won't my own girlfriend talk to me?”

Ruby sighed. “Fine… I just didn't want to be a bother…”

“You being a bother is when you ate cookies in my bed,” Weiss grumbled, expression dark as she remembered the crumbs.

Ruby shuddered slightly as she remembered cookie-gate. “A-anyway, um, sometimes I- after Faerie… after what I did.”

“When I drained those people,” Weiss said, filling in the blanks.

“When I made you drain them,” Ruby said. “I still remember, they… they struggled, and then they died. It was… I never thought I could do something like that.”

“I've killed with my touch before,” Weiss said quietly. “It's not something that I'm proud of… that I ever want to repeat. I'm sorry that you experienced it.”

“It's not your fault,” Ruby said.

“It is, though,” Weiss said. “I was the one who went chasing after the White Fang instead of calling it a day after we stopped the smuggling. I was the one that went charging into their meeting place. I was the one who almost died…”

“I was right there with you,” Ruby said. “I didn't even think about not, you know, finishing the case.”

Weiss smiled. “The case wasn't to go after an entire platoon of the White Fang's best troops. It was to stop the dust smuggling, and we did that when we shut down the people working with them at the mine.”

“Still,” Ruby said. “It doesn't matter why we were there… I still did it.”

“I know,” Weiss said. “You never really know who you are, what you will do until you find yourself forced into difficult situations. You didn't think you could ever do something like that, and it wasn't a pleasant revelation that you could.”
“No, it wasn't.”

“This isn't a storybook,” Weiss said after some thought. “The bad guys don't always twirl their mustaches and wear black hats and tie ladies to railroad tracks, and the good guys don't always do the right thing. And maybe there isn't always a right thing to do. I won't complain about you saving my life, even though I know killing people is wrong. And even if you hadn't killed them that way I'm not sure what we would've done with them. I don't know if we would've had enough dust to open a portal to take all of them home, and I don't know what would've happened if we'd sent them to the mine, or left them in Faerie.”

Ruby sighed. “It doesn't matter why I did it, or what would've happened. You're right. I guess I did think of this like some exciting story, but it's... ugly. And hard. And... and then I get up the next day and it happens again..”

“Yeah,” Weiss said, before leaning over and giving her gentle, slow kiss on the lips. “But there's good things, too.”

Ruby smiled, really smiled for the first time all day. She had acted normal, and had done a surprisingly good job of pretending to be okay, but the shine had been missing from her silver eyes. “Yeah. There's some things worth anything.”

They sat in contented silence for a while before Ruby hummed thoughtfully. “That was pretty cheesy wasn't it?”

“Very,” Weiss agreed.

Ruby smiled and gave Weiss a quick kiss. “Come on, let's find no more leads for the millionth time today.”

Weiss rolled her eyes as she climbed out of the car. It was still snowing a little, but not as badly as the day before, although the city was still covered in thick white snow wherever it hadn't been scraped clean. “This hasn't been any worse than 'let's go ask random homeless people' the plan. And it's been cleaner. And less smelly… although most of that was your uncle.”

“But we've gotten less leads,” Ruby pointed out.

“If we'd gotten any useful leads we wouldn't have abandoned the homeless plan,” Weiss said.

Ruby shrugged and grabbed her hand, making sure to keep the motion slow and obvious enough that Weiss didn't flinch from the contact. It was the little things like that that warmed her heart, letting her know how much her girlfriend really cared. She wasn't sure if there was anything she could do to help with her nightmares, but she wanted to try all over again.

The bookshop was very unassuming, just a simple brick structure with large windows revealing rows of books. Above the door was a sign reading 'Tukson's' and below that 'Used-New-Rare Books'. Weiss had never actually been there before, but she knew that her personal shoppers had included it on the list of places that they had been while making purchases for her.

The door had a bell that rang when they opened it, summoning a large, muscular man wearing a thick cardigan from the back. He locked eyes distrustfully with Weiss for a moment before looking at her partner. “Anything I can do for you?”

Weiss glanced around the shop briefly before approaching him. It was packed with books, although the contents of the shelves looked to be the normal used and new books that she was expecting, along with a large manga and comics section near the front, which drew Ruby's eye for a moment.
"We're with Supernatural Affairs," Weiss said, pulling out her badge. "We'd like to ask you a few questions."

He tensed slightly before relaxing. "I run a legitimate business. I'm not sure why you would need to visit my shop."

Ruby smiled at him. "It's not because of anything you did! We're looking for someone, and we think he might be trying to collect illegal books. He's even killed people over it, so we thought he might have visited some places that sell rare books looking for them."

"I see," he said. "People contact me from time to time looking for books no one carries. I'm not sure there's anything in particular I can offer on the subject."

"He's a white man, thin, cold demeanor," Weiss said, partially guessing from the loose description provided by the homeless man. "He would've been looking for books on necromancy."

Tukson paused. "Actually… I have encountered someone like that. A few months back someone came looking for a copy of a few books on necromancy. De Vermis Mysteriis and Cultes de Ghoules. He didn't want to take 'no' for an answer."

Weiss raised her eyebrows. "Did you get a name… or any way to contact him?"

"Let me check my records," he said before heading into the back room.

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a look. Ruby then began to shift her weight impatiently, glancing over at the comics section from time to time until Weiss rolled her eyes. "Just go look at them."

"Huh?" Ruby asked.

"The comics or whatever," Weiss said. "I can tell you want to, and I can talk to him just fine."

Ruby gave her a grin and a quick kiss before dashing over, grabbing a trade paperback and flipping through it eagerly. Weiss just shook her head and waited until the man returned.

"I wrote it down since he insisted I look for it, and something about him made me uncomfortable," he said as he reentered the room. "I never actually looked for his books, but when he came back a few times having records made him think I was searching."

"What do you have on him?" Weiss asked, pulling out a small notebook.

"He called himself Liam Charleston," he said, looking at his record book. "I don't know if that's his real name or not, and he refused to give an address or phone number. He just revisited a few times having records made him think I was searching."

"Anything else?" Weiss asked.

"He first visited six months ago, and he used to ask for both books each time," he said. "He's only been back once this year, and he only wanted to know about Cultes de Ghoules."

Weiss nodded. She suspected that he had read De Vermis Mysteriis given his use of the branding trap magic from it, so his no longer asking about it probably meant that he had acquired a copy during the intervening period, which meant that he was probably only still seeking Cultes de Ghoules.

"Could you come down to the station and speak with a sketch artist?" Weiss asked. "He is wanted for multiple murders, and the sooner we find him the safer the city will be."
The man hesitated before nodding. “I'm the only person in this afternoon, but I can go down to Beacon after closing time if that's alright.”

Weiss smiled. “Thank you, that will work very nicely. I'll inform the desk sergeant to tell you where to go, Mr….”

“Tukson,” he said. “This is my shop.”

“Mr. Tukson,” Weiss said. “Thank you for your aid, and we won't waste any more of your time.”

Weiss started to head to the exit, pausing to cross her arms when she saw Ruby still engrossed in her comic. After a moment she cleared her throat, making her partner jump. “Oh! Hey Weiss… finished?”

Weiss sighed. “Yes, you dolt. Now come on, it's time to go.”

Ruby hesitated, looking down at the book, before giving Weiss puppy dog eyes. “Fine… buy the book and let's get out of here.”

Ruby grinned and jogged to the front, getting her comics purchased before following Weiss out of the building and back into the cold. She shivered, holding the book to her chest while Weiss just shook her head. “What?” Ruby asked.


“It's not just a comic book, it's a graphic novel!” Ruby objected. “Besides, what's wrong with that?”

“I thought for a moment you were a child, but I suppose I was mistaken,” Weiss said, smirking slightly when Ruby perked up at that. “Only a nerd would call it something like graphic novel.”

“Sh-shut up,” Ruby said with a blush. “Besides, I'm a geek, not a nerd. And there's got to be some superhero you like!”

Weiss wrinkled her nose disdainfully. “Must there be?”

“Yeah, 'cause they're awesome! Who doesn't want to believe in heroes? People who give it their all trying to make the world a better place?”

Weiss grabbed her hand and looked away, already blushing as she tried to work up the courage to say the line that popped into her head. She hesitated just long enough that she almost missed her chance, before forcing it out a little too fast. “Why would I need a fictional hero when I have you?”

Ruby turned even redder than Weiss and leaned over, pressing a quick kiss to her cheek. “Aww, that was adorable!”

“I- I'm not adorable.”

“You're totes adorbs.”

Weiss stopped walking and stared incredulously at her girlfriend. “Never say that again. Ever.”

Ruby pouted, but didn't say anything as she tugged on her hand to lead her towards the car. After a moment she broke the silence. “So… he stopped looking for one book and was still looking for the other, if it's him.”

Weiss nodded. “The soul trap he's been using was from De Vermis Mysteriis, so he must've received
it before his last visit, and now has switched to only looking for *Cultes de Ghoules.*"

“Some Christmas present,” Ruby said as she let go of Weiss' hand to climb into the car. “So what does cult ghous do?”

“*Cultes de Ghoules,*” Weiss said with a sigh as she pulled on her seatbelt. “It’s a book about necromancy of course, although it specifically covers some of the vilest, most foul uses of the art.”

“That doesn't sound good,” Ruby said.

“It isn't,” Weiss agreed. “I'll have to recheck my copy, but as I remember it the book was created by a cannibalistic cult of necromancers and their followers.”

“Cannibalistic necromancers?” Ruby asked, looking sick as she pulled the car into the street and started driving away. “That's just… I thought my comic books weren't very subtle. Did they kick puppies, too?”

“There's a reason people don't trust necromancers,” Weiss said. “Even besides the general disquiet people feel around those who meddle with the dead, most of the prominent ones have done terrible things.”

“They just haven't met you,” Ruby said. “So… did the book have anything interesting about it?”

“As I remember it the book was half religious screed, half grimoire of ritualistic necromancy,” Weiss said thoughtfully. “They sought ways to conquer Death, and I believe they even created a ritual to summon her directly, although I think that was the end of the cult.”

“As in…”

“As in, either the ritual failed spectacularly, or she didn't take kindly to being summoned,” Weiss said.

“Oh,” Ruby said. “Um… that probably wasn't, uh, good for them.”

Weiss frowned thoughtfully. “Well… they died, although whether it was better for them to be a cannibal cult or deceased is probably an open question.”

Ruby frowned thoughtfully while she drove. “So... we're kinda running low on dealers and stuff aren't we.”

Weiss checked her notes, before nodding. “I have a few more we can check, but… yes.”

“Well, we know what we're looking for now though, right?” Ruby said.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, he found the vermin book—"

*De Vermis Mysteriis.*

“-but he hasn't found the ghoul one, so… we could check places that might have the ghoul book. I mean, he tried to send zombies to your apartment, and he killed Ms. Gamboge, so… I doubt he'd mind breaking in somewhere that might have it.”

“Isn't that what we're doing now?” Weiss said. “The book is illegal, so it's not like it would be easy to find.”
“So there aren't any copies publicly out there?”

Weiss hesitated. “Well… it's not common knowledge, but there are exceptions to the bans. Researchers are allowed to study them under controlled conditions. It isn't easy to get permission though, and they tend to keep it all under lock and key.”

“Who would know about research like that?” Ruby asked.

“They don't make the records public, but they aren't exactly secret either,” Weiss said with a shrug. “I'm pretty sure if anyone in Vale is doing research like that it would be on record in the mayor's office, and the governor's as well.”

Ruby hummed thoughtfully. “So… why don't we check and see if there are any, just in case? I mean, it might be kinda a long shot, but if he's heard about someone we could at least warn them, you know?”

“I suppose,” Weiss said as she glanced at her list of rare book dealers one more time. “None of these are very promising, anyway. Alright, I suppose we can at least check the mayor's office.”
Sixth Case: Dead Ends

Weiss had never actually had a reason to visit city hall before. While Vale was one of the richest and most powerful cities in the world, its city hall was somewhat underwhelming to look at. It had been built in the early nineteenth century, and it had been modified numerous times as technology and society had shifted, resulting in an over-renovated mess of a building.

The inside was nicer, as some past mayors had ensured an excessive amount of the city budget had been spent making sure that they had a nice place to work in. The floors were solid marble, with thick red carpets on the places where the mayor was most likely to walk. Weiss spent a moment to take it all in, before following Ruby over to the visitor's desk.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asked.

“Um, we need to check, uh,” Ruby started, before looking back at her partner.

Weiss stepped up and pulled out her badge. “We need to check the Department of Supernatural Services records.”

The receptionist carefully studied the badge before nodding. “Take the hall on the right, then take the first left and down the stairs. Take a left and it'll be the third right.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said, turning and walking down the directed hall.

“This place is pretty fancy,” Ruby said after a moment as they walked, looking at a series of oil paintings of past mayors on the walls.

Weiss shrugged. “It's not uncommon for those in charge to waste money on frivolous things for themselves, and the city has had two centuries for mayors to decorate the building.”

Weiss wasn't paying attention to the other people around them as she was mostly focused on following the somewhat complicated directions that they had been given while absently talking to Ruby. It wasn't until someone said her name that she looked at them.

She was a tall woman, almost six feet in her high heels, wearing a very expensive dark red skirt suit. She was quite beautiful, with pale skin, long black hair, and bright orange eyes. “Hello, Ms. Schnee,” she said.

“Hello, Ms.....”

“Cinder Fall, Assistant Mayor,” she said.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Fall,” Weiss said with a stiff nod and a practiced raising of the corners of her lips that more strongly implied a smile than actually was one.

“The pleasure's all mine,” she said. “I take it this is your partner, Ruby Rose?”

“Oh, uh, hello!” Ruby said, furrowing her brow slightly as she studied the woman. “How did you know who I am?”

“As I said, I'm the Assistant Mayor,” Ms. Fall said with a lazy shrug. “I try to keep myself apprised of all reports that pass through my office, especially those as... interesting as you and your partner's case files have been. You've done a remarkable job for the city, detectives.”
“Oh, thanks,” Ruby said, blushing and rubbing the back of her head.

While Ruby was obviously taken in by the politician, Weiss had learned long ago not to take anything said by anyone in politics as actually having meaning. Still, there was no reason to be impolite, so she gave a gracious nod. “Thank you, but we were simply doing our job.”

“Modest, too?” Ms. Fall said with a chuckle. “You're a credit to your office, detectives. But why are you here in city hall? Is there anything I can do to help you both?”

“We're here to—” Ruby started.

“Sorry,” Weiss interrupted her, elbowing her partner sharply. “We can't talk about ongoing cases.”

Ms. Fall's eyes had dropped to follow the elbow, although they returned to Weiss when she spoke again, offering another polite smile. “Of course. I'll simply have to read about it when you finish things, then. Good luck on your case, detectives.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said with a polite nod.

“Thanks!” Ruby said cheerfully. They continued until they reached the stairs down, and once they were on the staircase she spoke again. “She seemed kinda familiar.”

“Well, she's the Assistant Mayor,” Weiss pointed out. “You probably saw her during the last election, or on the news since—although I've never really noticed her before. She doesn't exactly have the name recognition the Mayor does.”

“Maybe…” Ruby said thoughtfully before shrugging. “You're probably right.”

“I usually am,” Weiss agreed.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “And you're so modest, too.”

“Modesty is valued by people who don't have anything worth bragging about,” Weiss sniffed, before smirking at her girlfriend when she rolled her eyes.

The records room they had been directed to turned out to be a large area where sensitive records were stored for any department that lacked its own facilities. They had to show their IDs and badges again, and then they had to sign in. Weiss studied the paper for a moment before either her or her partner could touch it, and only signed when she was sure that it wasn't enchanted in any way.

The records room was large and so cramped that Weiss was pleased that she and her partner both had such petite statures. They spent far too long navigating the records, which no one had ever bothered to computerize, and after almost an hour they found what they were looking for. Weiss pulled out the forms and flipped through them, before finally looking over at Ruby, who was browsing a filing cabinet with all of the zest of a condemned prisoner awaiting execution.

“I found it,” she said.

“Really,” Ruby perked up. “You mean we can leave?”

Weiss smirked. “We can leave.”

“Anything useful?” Ruby asked eagerly.

Weiss nodded. “Yes, it appears that there's only one copy in the city. A professor Cho Wei is studying it at the moment.”
“Well I guess we'd better warn him… her… them?”

Weiss shrugged at the implied question. “Doctor on the forms.”

They didn't have any more encounters on the way out of the building, and the weather had cleared up by the time they reached the car, although it was bitterly cold outside. Vale University was on the far side of the city, and the late afternoon traffic was busy enough to make it nearly dark by the time they reached it.

“Do you think they'll still be in?” Ruby asked as she found a place to park.

“Hopefully,” Weiss said as she adjusted both layers of gloves, hoping to keep her hands warm once she left the heated car.

Vale University was quite old, having been built on a hill outside of Vale during the eighteenth century, although it had been absorbed into the city itself during the passing years. The need for more buildings, both to cater to more students and to allow for more modern majors had caused it to fill every inch of space on the original hill, and to spill over into the surrounding streets as well, slowly absorbing available space until purchasing land became too expensive, at which point old buildings began to be torn down to allow for newer, taller replacements.

Most of the buildings were of simple red brick, the majority standing four or more stories tall, often expanded with additional, sometimes taller wings when there hadn't been enough budget to completely start over. It looked like someone had dumped a random assortment of red building blocks on the ground in a confined space, and decided that that was the perfect layout for the university.

After leaving their car they walked onto the campus proper and stopped briefly at a map station until Weiss located the College of Occult Studies, which was tucked into the heart of campus, as it still occupied its original building, the wards having been too powerful (and expensive) to replace if the structure was torn down and rebuilt.

“Ohave you ever been here before?” Ruby asked.

“No, although I have corresponded with a few professors here, and even had some as tutors from time to time,” Weiss said.

“Did you ever attend college?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shook her head. “No, I continued to receive tutoring until I moved out to take this job, but I spent the majority of my time working on my magic.”

The outer parts of campus had powerful, unpredictable winds blowing through the buildings, the canyons created by the unplanned, haphazard construction causing bizarre localized effects. They were pelted by snow and ice blown with incredible force from time to time, and they were cold and miserable by the time they managed to navigate the labyrinth of buildings to reach the Pinetti Building where the College of Occult Studies was located.

It was smaller than most of the surrounding buildings, with a peaked roof and faded brick construction. The windows were tiny portholes, and it was late enough that almost all of them were dark. Weiss studied the wards for a moment before approaching the door, impressed despite herself at their quality and age, although they were extremely limited in effect.

“That's a lot of wards,” Ruby said, having paused when she noticed Weiss doing so. “Yours kept him from showing up so he just, you know, sent zombies. Do you think he'd do it the same way
Weiss shook her head. “These wards are powerful, but this is a very public building. Intent based wards are difficult to erect in a place like this.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well… they work based upon the intent of the person trying to cross them. Imagine if a student thought of learning as taking something from the professors to keep for himself. That intent would trigger most antitheft wards.”

“Does that really happen?” Ruby asked skeptically.

“It does,” Weiss said with a nod. “Wards aren't really intelligent, and only the very oldest and strongest gain anything resembling sentience, and those are usually even worse at guessing human motivations. Even a place like Beacon can't use very fine intent based wards. I mean, what if you set up a ward to keep people out who are trying to free someone being held inside? That might keep out accomplices, but it would also prevent the suspect's lawyer from entering.”

“Then how come yours don't trigger?” Ruby asked. “I mean, what if I wanted to take something like my spare shirt I stuck in your drawer… wouldn't that set off your theft wards?”

“I keyed you and myself into them,” Weiss said. “I can feel when you cross my wards, but otherwise you aren’t effected by them. My cleaning service would trigger them if they crossed with the wrong intention, and I actually had to get involved once when my wards triggered when someone tried to take out my garbage…”

“So what do these wards do… and we can talk about it inside, right?”

“Right,” Weiss agreed, opening the door and entering the building. The door was unlocked and the hallway lights were on, but most importantly it was well heated, making them both breathe sighs of relief. “The wards here are designed to contain magic and magical entities. If they have access to a book like *Cultes de Ghoules* they probably have even more things contained here for study that would be very dangerous if let loose.”

After walking down the hall they saw a few students moving about, and Ruby approached the first that didn't look too busy. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah?” he asked, pausing to look at them impatiently.

“Do you know where Dr. Cho Wei's office is?”

“Second floor, end of the hall,” he said, walking again.

“Thanks!”

It didn't take long to find the cramped staircase up to the second floor, and eventually they found the office they were looking for at the end of the hallway. Ruby knocked, but the door swung open when she did, having been slightly cracked, revealing an empty office with the lights off.

“I suppose we'll need to return tomorrow,” Weiss sighed, starting to leave.

“Wait,” Ruby said, fumbling for a light switch. “Gotcha!”

“What are you doing?” Weiss asked as her partner found the light and turned it on before stepping
“Maybe he just forgot to close his door all the way, but don't you think it's a little weird?” Ruby asked. “I just wanna make sure everything's okay in here.”

The office was a mess, more than could be explained by simple disorder. They exchanged glances and looked around, before Ruby called sharply. “Weiss!”

Weiss noticed her girlfriend had turned very pale, and moved swiftly to her side. On the ground behind the desk was a thick patch of black dust of a sort that was very familiar to them both. They exchanged a long look before Ruby started to run to the door.

“Wait!” Weiss said. “We don't know when this happened or where he's going.”

“Wouldn't he be taking the book and leaving?”

“Oh going to where it's stored,” Weiss said. “It's probably in a secure room somewhere.”

“We don't have time to—”

“The basement,” Weiss said. “I can feel a second set of wards down there if I really concentrate, and secure rooms mean extra warding.”

“Right!” Ruby said jogging for the stairs with Weiss running behind her trying to keep up. Ruby had gained more and more control over the super speed magic she'd discovered in her aura, and she edged slightly into it as her motions blurred a little despite her easy, stamina preserving jog, forcing Weiss to run full out to keep up.

The stairs they had taken also lead down to the basement, and they slammed through the lower door when they reached it. It was a dimly lit, bunker-like passage with heavy wooden doors scattered down its length. Weiss focused mana to her eyes for a moment, looking around as she continued running, trying to guess which room might hold the book.

“Stop right there!” Ruby shouted.

Weiss glanced up and saw a tall, thin man at the other staircase at the opposite end of the building. She could see his aura was strong with the heavy mana of necromancy in the brief glimpse she had as he slammed the door open and ran up the stairs.

Ruby shot forward in a blur, rose petals falling behind her while Weiss did her best to sprint after her partner. Just as Ruby reached the door an alarm went off above, and she hesitated a moment, glancing back at Weiss before opening it and running through. Weiss gritted her teeth and sped up as much as she could, reaching the door after it had closed and bursting through to the stairwell.

Weiss climbed the steps at a jog, and on the first floor there was an emergency exit door with an 'Alarm Will Sound' sign on it. She pushed the door open, and the cold air hit her like a wall of bricks, which for a moment actually felt good after running full out in her heavy winter clothing. She glanced around, desperate to find her partner, and she saw a door close on the next building over.

That building was much more modern than the Occult Studies building, and there were confused and frightened students in the hallway. Weiss looked at one group and panted out a quick question, slowing down but not completely stopping as she did. “Which way… did they go?”

One of the students pointed down the hall and Weiss took off running again. She was about to ask another person a question when she heard her partner yell “freeze!”.
Weiss slowed down and entered the room the shout came from, pulling her gun as she did. Ruby was standing near the door, gun pointed at a tall, thin man wearing a long black winter coat and silver rimmed glasses. He had a heavy, leather bound book tucked under one arm, and he was standing near a door at the far end of the room, facing them calmly.

The room was a biology lab, with long lab benches and shelves full of specimens in jars. It was somewhat disturbing to look around and see animals and body parts, some human, floating in formaldehyde, and she quickly returned her attention to the man as she tried to regain her breath.

“You are under arrest for the murders of Raye Gamboge and Cho Wei, along with a bunch of other people we'll charge you with when we figure out who they were,” Ruby said. “You have the right to remain silent-”

“Enough,” he said flatly. “I am not surrendering, and you will not take me. I merely stopped here to try to convince you to end this charade.”

“Charade?” Ruby snapped. “Charade?! You're killing people… innocent people. You need to go to prison for a really, really long time!”

He didn't react, simply waiting for her to finish. “I will not let you interfere with my research. If I must I will be forced to end you both.”

“I think… you will find… that isn't... so easy...” Weiss panted, annoyed that both the criminal and her partner didn't seem to be out of breath. She really needed to work on her endurance, perhaps by jogging when the weather warmed up. Maybe Ruby would be interested in joining her.

“Yeah!” Ruby chirped. “I mean, we've got guns and stuff, and I'm really fast. You can't cast anything without us shooting you first.”

“And if I don't have to?” he said, raising an eyebrow, which was the first facial expression that he had made the entire time.

“Why would-” Ruby started.

She was interrupted by a burst of motion all over the room, making them both jump. It took Weiss a moment to realize that every preserved animal in the room had begun to move at once, all animated by necromancy before either entered the building, all waiting for a signal by him to attack.

Glass shattered as jars jumped off of the shelves, and then with loud bangs large plastic tubs flipped over, and from within bags of preservative came a wave of squealing, writhing fetal pigs, skinless minks, small cats and large frogs, all bursting from their individual wrappings and charging to attack the two detectives.

Ruby fired twice before a frog managed to jump, landing on her pistol and sending it pointing to the side. Weiss kicked a hissing preserved zombie cat away from her as it tried to attack, looking up briefly to see the far door closing as the necromancer fled through it.

Ruby hesitated for a few seconds before charging through the room, ignoring the small animals as best she could, flinching whenever one of the larger zombies took a swing at her with their claws, or when she stepped on one and almost slipped and fell. It was complete pandemonium, but the tile floor would make it hard to channel enough mana in one go to stop them all, so instead Weiss concentrated and gathered a layer of mana around her aura before running across the room, re-killing any zombie that touched her or her clothing and ignoring the rest.

When she reached Ruby she took the lead, clearing a path though the zombified dissection
specimens until she reached the far door and slammed through it. In the hallway she immediately saw a heavy blood trail from Ruby's earlier bullets, and she ran after it, Ruby catching up and passing her quickly.

Around the first corner they found the man's first victim. She was a college student, slumped on the ground unmoving, although when she slowed Weiss could see her shallowly breathing. She looked exhausted, with deep bags under her eyes, and generally worn down like she'd experienced a hard life. Weiss recognized the signs of a brief life drain, although he had obviously not stopped long enough to drain her to ash before running again.

They soon found more knocked out students, some with terrified friends trying to help them. She saw some calling for ambulances or police on their cell phones, and other were crying loudly as people they loved weren't moving. Weiss gritted her teeth and pushed herself to run harder.

The blood trail ran out, and around another corner she could see a door with an exit sign and a bloody handprint on it. Ruby reached it well ahead of her, running outside and looking around frantically. Weiss slammed out after her, trying to locate the criminal, but like Ruby all she saw were empty sidewalks covered in ice and dark shadows.

“We lost him,” Ruby said.
Sixth Case: Attempt

Weiss slowly ate her pasta. She had originally turned her nose up at the suggestion of trying something so plebeian as spaghetti, and she also had objected to the sheer amount of carbs the dish no doubt involved. Ruby had talked her into it, however, and after almost a year of nothing but chicken salads from Signal she finally gave in and tried something else.

“Is it good?” Ruby asked after swallowing a bite of fried chicken tenders.

“Yes Ruby, ‘it good’,” Weiss mocked.

Ruby rolled her eyes and took another bite of food, but a moment later Weiss jumped as she felt something unexpected press against her foot. She looked under the table to see Ruby's heavy boot rubbing against her own platform heeled boots. She hesitated, worried for a moment about them getting scuffed, but something about the secret public contract was thrilling.

“So,” she said, clearing her throat as she pressed her foot against Ruby's. “Have you heard anything from your uncle?”

“Nope,” Ruby said, shaking her head. “Which isn't weird. I mean, I guess he'd send me something if he actually found a lead, but otherwise...”

“Right,” Weiss hummed.

“Did forensics find anything interesting?” Ruby asked.

Weiss grabbed the folder of documents she had with her and flipped through it. “A few things. The zombies that attacked my apartment were almost certainly recently deceased homeless. The original crime scene, Raye Gamboge's home, turned up nothing of real use, but they cross checked fingerprints from the zombie's clothing and personal effects, and they think they have the necromancer's fingerprints. No matches, though.”

“What about the crime scene last night?”

Weiss flipped to another page, pausing to eat a little more pasta while gathering her thoughts. “The copy of Cultes de Ghoulès was missing, so he probably interrogated the professor, drained their life away, then took the key to the secure lab in the basement and stole it right before we arrived. They're still checking, but it doesn't look like he killed anyone besides the professor, although some of those students he drained lost years from their lives.”

Ruby reached over and took her hand. They both squeezed, sharing a long look. Eventually Ruby broke the silence. “I asked around while you were putting down the dissection zombies… ugh, anyway, a few people saw him in the science building that morning.”

Weiss nodded. “He probably spent several hours animating all of those zombie animals to cover his escape if something went wrong. It was a lot of effort for an emergency escape plan, though.”

“Well… it didn't cost him anything,” Ruby pointed out. “He probably got there kinda early and wanted to wait until less people were around before we went for it. I mean, what if a student came in while he was asking Dr. Cho questions?”

“Maybe,” Weiss said.
“Can you do anything with the blood?” Ruby asked. “You know, some kinda track him with it thing? Ooh, ooh! What about some kinda freaky voodoo curse?”

Weiss smirked. “Tracking magic is actually much more difficult than you would think. Three hundred years ago only the very wealthy or powerful could afford a ward worth the name, but today almost every home has at least basic magical security, and the sympathetic connection between your spell and the target gets very muddled by all of those wards. It could take weeks to find someone with a normal tracking spell, even one with blood helping, and cursing someone from a distance is illegal and difficult. It isn't a viable option, anyway.”

“Why not?” Ruby asked, obviously disappointed.

“His blood was entirely necrotized.”

“Necro-whated?”

“Necrotized,” Weiss said. “He used his necromancy to wrap himself in a field that caused every part of his body outside of his person to die the moment it left the area of his aura. They can't even blood type it, much less run DNA or use it magically.”

“Do you do that?” Ruby asked curiously.

Weiss shrugged. “I can… it's not a terribly complicated trick, mostly just involving keeping a thin layer of necromantic mana on the outside of your aura. For the most part my family relies upon our connections to make it difficult to acquire our blood, and the wards around Schnee Manor are strong enough to break that level of sympathetic magic. It would take something that truly mystically marks you body or soul to persist after crossing the family ward line. As for us… the police forensics teams are trained to clean up and dispose of any usable materials when we call them in.”

“So what do we know?” Ruby asked after some thought.

Weiss leaned back, pushing her mostly empty plate away. “Well, a necromancer, Liam Charleston, if that's his real name, was looking for copies of the books *De Vermis Mysteriis* and *Cultes de Ghoules*. Sometime in the past few months he found *De Vermis Mysteriis* and constructed the magical branding iron that lets him turn people into soul traps when they die.

“After that he continued his search for the other book, eventually visiting Raye Gamboge with a zombie, torturing her for information—”

“Why didn't he just kill her and then ask her soul like you do?” Ruby interrupted.

Weiss frowned. “The branding trap process has to be done to the living. If he knew about me being with the police he would've either needed to take the body with him, thoroughly dispose of it, or trap it, otherwise I would've been privy to the information he was seeking. I'm surprised he went to the trouble of making the branding iron, but if he had it then it was a convenient way to both cover his trail and to potentially kill one of his pursuers. After all, it wouldn't take a genius to guess they'd send a necromancer to find a necromancer.”

Ruby nodded. “So he didn't find anything at her house, so he sent zombies to check your's but your wards stopped him.”

“I'm not sure whether he was actually checking for the book and just trying to set up an ambush,” Weiss said thoughtfully. “It's hard for a zombie to kill a necromancer, and two would've been insulting to try. He put a lot of magic into them, enough to be able to search for a book as well… maybe. Even powerful zombies aren't very intelligent.”
“Hmm,” Ruby hummed. “Maybe both? He seems to like contingencies.”

Weiss thought about it for a moment before continuing with a nod. “He also found out… somehow… that there was a copy at the university.”

“Somehow?” Ruby asked. “Is that a lead? How could he find out?”

Weiss bit her lip, running scenarios through in her head. “We should do some research, see if word hit the internet; it’s possible someone talked. He might also have some kind of connection to academia or the students on campus. He could also have a connection at city hall, since he wouldn’t be able to just walk in and check the records the way we did.”

“Maybe we should ask, see if the clerk saw him go in,” Ruby said. “He might’ve had some excuse.”

“Alright,” Weiss agreed. “We should ask around campus as well. Anyway, when he found out he went onto the campus and animated that lab, then interrogated and killed Dr. Cho and stole the book.”

“So what else do we know?”

“He drives a white panel van and uses a taser to knock out homeless people,” Weiss said. “He then brands them and leaves them to die of exposure before animating them.”

“I looked into estimations of homeless people disappearing,” Ruby said. “Um… it’s not very accurate, ’cause no one really tracks homeless people that close, and with the winter being bad it’s even worse, but… um… they’re estimating more than a hundred homeless people have gone missing in the past few months. That’s… that’s a lot of people.”

Weiss raised her eyebrows. “What would he need that many zombies for?”

“I dunno,” Ruby said. “All undead football team?”

Weiss rolled her eyes at the joke, leaving a tip on the table and sliding out of the booth. “Somehow I doubt that.”

“That’s cuz it’s a joke,” Ruby pouted.

“You spend too much time around your sister,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “She was bound to rub off before Xiao Long... get it?”

Ruby just gave her an unimpressed look but took her girlfriend's hand anyway. “I think it might’ve been better when you two were fighting like Blake and Zwei.”

Weiss blinked a few times before she made the connection. “Does Blake know you say things like that?”

“Yang made the joke first, but it's kinda true,” Ruby said. “She doesn't like him at all.”

When they made it outside they both shivered, adjusting their coats before walking quickly to the car. The weather had worsened again, with snow falling all day and piling up on the streets, although by then the snow plows were working very efficiently. Weiss still slipped a few times, once again contemplating ditching the vanity of tall boots for the practicality of better balance and traction.

Ruby started the car, and a few moments later Weiss hummed in contentment as the heat blasted over her. They drove for a few moments before Weiss noticed Ruby tensing up beside her.

“What is- WHAT!” Weiss shouted as the car jerked erratically. “What are you doing?!”

“There's something wrong with the brakes!” Ruby shouted as she pumped her leg repeatedly to no effect as she drove around cars, trying to avoid an accident as the vehicle wouldn't slow down. Fortunately the streets weren't packed with cars, but they weren't empty, either.

Their luck ran out when they saw a red light ahead with cars stopped in both lanes, and plenty of cross traffic as it was a larger road. Weiss held on to her seat, desperately trying to think of something, anything she could do to prevent a collision, when Ruby suddenly jerked the wheel, running the car onto the sidewalk.

“Ruby?!!”

“Hold on!” Ruby shouted as she intentionally scraped against the brick wall of the building beside them. Weiss was thrown painfully about in her seat for a moment, but the plan worked as they pulled to a relatively safe stop just before the intersection. Ruby breathing a deep sigh of relief as she turned off the car and looked over at her partner.

“You okay?”

“Yeah… Ruby?”

“Yes?”

“The necromancer… he drove a white panel van, right?”

“Right.”

Behind her partner Weiss watched a large white panel van pull to a stop beside their car. The back doors opened, and from it a dozen people emerged. They moved with the stiff, staggering gate of a Hollywood zombie as they lurched towards the car.

Even besides the way they moved it only took a glance to tell what they were. Unlike all of those she had seen the necromancer use before, these were obviously very dead, with papery skin and sunken flesh. They were surprisingly well dressed as well, most of them wearing nice if unfashionable suits.

Ruby climbed out of the car, pulling out her gun as she did, while Weiss found her exit delayed. Her door was pinned against the building, and when she tried to climb across she forgot to remove her seatbelt, making her grunt as it kept her confined to her seat. She spent several seconds clawing at the buckle blindly while she watched her girlfriend draw her gun and move towards the van, although it immediately drove forward, putting some distance between them.

Ruby turned to face the zombies, shooting one carefully in the head. It staggered but didn't drop, and she hesitated before firing again and again. When they still kept coming for her she started to back up before looking over at Weiss, who was still trying to climb out of the car. She put away her gun and conjured her scythe, unwilling to leave her.

Weiss finally managed to crawl across the car's front seat and stand, but she found herself surprisingly shaky when she did, the near wreck having effected her more than she would have expected. She caught her breath for a moment and pulled both layers of gloves off while she watched Ruby take on the first zombie.
Ruby darted forward, swinging her scythe in a tight motion that cleanly removed the head of the closest zombie. Instead of collapsing the way that she had expected the headless corpse continued forward, swinging an arm blindly at her making Ruby yelp and stumble back.

“Why isn’t it working!” Ruby shouted as she chopped the arm off a zombie trying to attack her. “They won’t stay down!”

“It’s about effort,” Weiss said. “When I’ve animated zombies it’s been on the spot to either interrogate or fight right at that moment. He prepares his zombies in advance, and spends as much time pouring mana into them as he desires. They are much, much harder to kill.”

“So what do we do?” Ruby asked while warding off several more, before yelping and stumbling as the arm she chopped off grabbed her by the ankle. “Ah! Get off me!”

“Keep them away from me for a bit, and don’t let them bite you,” Weiss said, closing her eyes and placing her hands on the asphalt.

“Bite me?” Ruby asked. “Will I turn into a zombie too?”

“Of course not,” Weiss scoffed. “It’s just unsanitary.”

Ruby moved back until she was right in front of Weiss and began to use the reach of her weapon to keep the zombies away. They pressed in, moving to surround them, although Weiss was crouched close enough to the car to keep them from attacking from that side, meaning Ruby only had to fend off attacks from an unstoppable, undying horde of monsters from every other direction at once. She kept her weapon in constant motion, rose petals trailing in her wake as her body blurred trying to keep them at bay.

Weiss closed her eyes and opened the inner flow of necromantic energies as widely as she could. She knew what she was doing was risky, but so was trying to individually deal with every zombie that attacked. After taking one more deep breath she began to pour mana into the asphalt of the street.

Modern materials resisted magic, but she kept pushing, forcing her power into the ground. Slowly she extended her aura outward, transforming it into a series of tendrils which probed the street, making connections with every zombie or zombie-part in the area. Fortunately they were pressing in close to try to kill them, which meant that she didn't have to extend her aura very far. Once she was ready she began to push necromantic energies through the street as hard as she could.

Unlike her efforts to kill the ground at the Prince's nightclub, she didn't infuse the ground with her power, but rather let it flow along her extended aura, until finally it began to flood into the zombies. They were so full of Liam's power that it was hard to overcome them, and as she strained it felt like she was trying to lift a heavy weight with only her fingertips. She strained more and more, blood beginning to drip from her nostrils, until finally she crossed the necessary threshold, making all of the zombies collapse simultaneously like puppets with their strings cut.

She opened her eyes, panting and collapsing more fully onto the ground, her hands shaking and face pale. Ruby had been in mid swing when the zombies collapsed and she stumbled for a moment before letting her scythe dissipate as she immediately drew her gun and looked at the van, which was already accelerating away. She started to run after it before glancing back at Weiss, who was still quite out of it.

After a few seconds of thought she aimed and fired, emptying most of her magazine into the rear tires of the van, which began to swerve erratically on the slushy streets as they burst, although it kept driving and turned a corner on a red light, ignoring the loud horns as it cut off traffic and almost
caused several accidents.

“Weiss,” Ruby said, kneeling in front of her. “Are you okay?”

Weiss nodded. “Yeah… just… hard to push that much mana into asphalt.”

“Here,” Ruby said gently, grabbing both layers of her gloves. “Let me get these on you… you’ll get frostbite.”

“You should chase after the van… I’ll be fine,” Weiss murmured.

Ruby shook her head. “You’ve got way too many enemies for me to leave you sitting here out of it in the street. What if some White Fang person, or somebody we helped arrest, or just a mean guy with a knife came along?”

“Mean guy with a knife?” Weiss asked, although she didn’t put up a fight as Ruby gently put her gloves on, even when she accidentally tried to do the wrong hand at first. Once they were in place Ruby pulled out a handkerchief and carefully wiped the blood from her face before placing a kiss on her forehead. “Come on, let’s get you back in the car… it’ll be warmer and not, you know, slushy blacktop.”

By the time Ruby had Weiss settled into the backseat of the car police sirens were loudly approaching, and a few moments later the first one pulled to a halt just outside of the dead bodies. The police inside opened their doors and used them as cover as they stood up, guns pointing at Ruby. “Hands in the air! Get on the ground!”

Ruby immediately complied, putting her hands above her head and then kneeling on the cold, snowy street. When the police began to approach she finally spoke. “I’m a detective. I’m going to reach very slowly for my badge, alright?”

“Don’t move!” the policeman shouted.

Weiss rolled her eyes but stayed quiet as Ruby patiently walked the twitchy policemen through identifying her, until finally she was allowed to stand again, brushing off the snow from her body. “Okay, I need you to set up a perimeter and get people down here to transport these bodies to the medical examiner. I also need you to put out an APB on a white panel van… I kinda shot out both of its back tires but it still kept driving. Um… I’ve got the license plate number—”

Weiss leaned comfortably back into her seat, a small smile crossing her face as she watched Ruby take charge of the crime scene, delivering orders to the steadily growing crowd of officers, as more quickly arrived from Beacon which was only a few blocks away. For some reason it made Weiss feel warm and somewhat excited watching her girlfriend behave that way.

She was actually a little disappointed when things were fully under control and Ruby got them both a ride back to Beacon.
Sixth Case: Detective Work

“Huh, that's weird,” Ruby said.

Weiss was sitting at her desk, carefully reading through the preliminary medical examinations of the zombies that had been used to attack them after their brake lines were cut. The results were very different from what she had been expecting, and she was working through them to try to figure out why. She was so distracted that she ignored what her partner was saying, simply humming slightly.

“Weiss?” Ruby said, leaning over and looking at her. “Weiss… hey, hey Weiss… Weiss?”

Weiss felt her eyebrow twitch as her partner continued calling her name, until finally she looked up with an annoyed glare. “What?”

Ruby grinned sheepishly for a moment before becoming serious. “I found something weird.”

“Did you look in a mirror?” she asked.


Weiss smirked, looking down at the documents again. A minute later she felt something hit her forehead, making her jump, before the object fell to her desk. She blinked at the small triangular piece of heavily folded paper, picking it up in complete confusion while rubbing her forehead with her other hand.

“What?”

Ruby, meanwhile, was laughing hysterically. “You should see your face!”

Weiss glared. “Keep this up and it'll be all you ever see of me.”

Ruby bit her lip, trying to get herself under control, although she was still snickering a little. “Wow… we haven’t even, you know… done it and you're already threatening me with the couch?”

Weiss grit her teeth, blushing despite her best attempts to glare her annoying partner into submission. Finally she sighed and put the documents she was reading down. “Why are you doing this? We ate lunch not very long ago.”

“I'm not trying to be annoying!” Ruby objected. “I found something!”

“Found something?”

“Yeah, I'm a detective too, you know! I can find… stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah… stuff. Important stuff!”

“Oh, well, if it's important stuff…”

Ruby sighed. “You are such a butt sometimes, Weiss.”

Weiss raised an eyebrow, considering keeping up the teasing before finally taking pity on her pouting girlfriend. “What did you find?”
Ruby eyed her suspiciously for a moment, before finally explaining. “Um… I thought I’d look into the necromancer guy's name or alias or whatever. Try to see if I could find anything about him.”

“Did you? Find anything, I mean,” Weiss asked curiously. Her partner wasn't the best at research, and she rarely tried for very long, but that didn't mean she was stupid. Far from it. She just rarely applied herself outside of fieldwork or her hobbies.

“Maybe… it's kinda weird,” Ruby said. “I didn't find him in any of the normal places. I mean, Liam Charleston isn't that weird a name so I found a few here and there, and that was just in the in state databases, but nothing seemed to be him. I checked the national stuff too and didn't find much, but… I kept digging. And I found something… weird.”

“Which is?”

“Well… I kinda expanded my search for his name,” Ruby said. “Then I got bored, and started looking for him on google just in case. I mean, maybe he has a facebook page or something. That wouldn't be that weird would it? Anyway, I was googling him, and then I saw a picture and I thought, hey! You found something! But then it was weird and I kept looking and started googling more and did a reverse image search and then I-”

“Ruby,” Weiss interrupted. “What did you find?”

Ruby bit her lip. “I found a picture of a Liam Charleston from the 1800s and it looks just like him.”

Weiss blinked. “Say that again?”

“I found a picture in an archive of old west photos,” Ruby said, turning her screen around to show her partner. Sure enough, just as she had said there was an old grainy picture that looked just like the necromancer. “It's labeled Liam Charleston, 1881, and it says he was the undertaker for a town called Coyote's Hallow.”

Weiss frowned thoughtfully, working that through in her mind for a moment. “Could it be a relative?”

“Maybe, but… it's weird, isn't it? I mean, it can't be him, right?”

Weiss was silent for a little while, studying the picture and thinking. “It's… possible.”

“Huh? How?”

“When a necromancer drains life from someone, the first thing that it does is repair any injuries or illnesses they have and refresh their stamina if they're tired,” Weiss said after a long hesitation. “If they are in perfect health though… draining life can extend their lifespan. It's not very efficient; an entire life drained away adds far less than a year. If he's really the same Liam Charleston from the nineteenth century… he must've killed more than a thousand people with his touch, all while perfectly healthy. And that assumes that he isn't even older.”

Ruby looked down for a moment. “What… what about when I, um, in Faerie.”

“I doubt that had any effect,” Weiss said gently. “I was dying, and even after I was still quite sore. You probably didn't change my lifespan any.”

Ruby was quiet after that, and Weiss decided to keep her talking rather than let her brood about what had happened. “The initial forensics information is interesting as well.”
“Oh?” Ruby asked as she turned her screen back around.

“It'll take a while for the full report, but… it looks like all of those zombies that he used to attack us yesterday… they weren't homeless people.”

“Huh?” Ruby said, scrunching her brows. “Then who were they?”

“They appear to have been long dead,” Weiss said. “The bodies had experienced significant decomposition, but expensive, high quality coffins, relatively dry soil, and proper embalming meant that the bodies were still in very good shape even decades after death.”

“Decades?” Ruby said. “You can make zombies from bodies that old?”

Weiss nodded. “You can even animate a skeleton, although it takes far more mana to keep something that fragile intact and active. The lack of musculature and sinews is expensive to compensate for as well.”

“So why would he attack homeless people?” Ruby asked. “Isn't that just calling attention to himself?”

“Did you notice that they were zombies at first glance?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah.”

“That's why,” Weiss said. “The more… damaged the corpse the less lifelike the zombie, and even remarkably well preserved corpses like these have significant putrefaction. They looked dead, and even with extensive mana investment they didn't move fluidly or act intelligently. By killing people and immediately animating them when he needs zombies he makes sure that they are in optimum condition so that they can pass as human or perform complex tasks. If he'd sent these to my apartment the doorman would've called the police and backup would've arrived before they could figure out how to push the right floor on the elevator.”

“I guess he's been killing a lot of people, too, so… maybe he's been draining some of them and we're just not finding any bodies,” Ruby said. “If he's really been alive so long, I mean. But I guess he needed a lot bodies fast for an ambush so he couldn't be too picky.”

“Did you find anything else?” Weiss asked.

Ruby shrugged. “I checked our car and his van. He cut our brake lines which is why I couldn't stop.”

“Did he do anything to the airbags?”

“No, why?”

“Well…” Weiss said, looking down at the reports and fiddling with them for a moment. “We crashed and they didn't deploy.”

Ruby was silent, and when Weiss finally peeked up she saw her girlfriend walking around their desks. She tensed, not sure what she was up to as Ruby crouched in front of her, taking her hands carefully. “Weiss? What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong…”

“Weiss,” Ruby scolded gently. “You don't like it when I don't tell you stuff that's bothering me, and something's bothering you. Your makeup… did you sleep okay last night? Is that why you didn't ask
me to stay over? What's wrong?"

“Noth- fine...” Weiss sighed, deflating. “You don't have to pout, you know. I just… my mother died in an intentional car wreck, and what happened… brought things back.”

Ruby moved up in a half crouch to give her a gentle kiss before wrapping her arms around her in a hug. It was so soft and warm, and after a long moment Weiss relaxed and hugged her back. It felt so good having her in her arms, and being held in return was so reassuring.

“I'm sorry,” Ruby murmured. “I didn't even think...”

“It's not your fault,” Weiss said. “You couldn't have known about the sabotage.”

“That's not what I meant,” Ruby said. “I should've known you'd be bothered by a car accident. You told me what happened and I never even thought about it... is that why you don't know how to drive?”

“I know how to drive!” Weiss objected, although she couldn't bring herself to break the hug. “I just... don't like to do it.”

“It's okay, princess,” Ruby murmured. “You don't have to pretend to be able to drive with me.”

Weiss' eyes narrowed, but she could hear the humor in her girlfriend's voice and knew she was being teased. “I'll have you know that I have my license and have since I was nineteen.”

“Nineteen?” Ruby interjected. “Most people get them at sixteen. What, couldn't afford a car to learn on?”

Weiss smirked. “My monthly allowance could've bought a better car than whatever hunk of junk you probably learned on.”

“Probably,” Ruby agreed cheerfully. “Hey, if you had that much money... what's the dumbest thing you ever spent it on?”

“Why would I waste money on something silly?” Weiss asked.

“You can't tell me teen Weiss was that much of a stick in the mud,” Ruby cajoled. “Come on, you had to have bought a pony, or backstage passes to a boy band concert, or a solid gold toothbrush or something.”

“Is that really all that you can think of for the wealthy to spend money on?” Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well... I mean, what can you waste money on?” Ruby asked. “If I had a bunch of money I'd get a ton of cool stuff but none of it would be, you know, expensive.”

“Good to know you're not just dating me for my money.”

Ruby pulled back and gave her a look so honestly adoring that it made Weiss' heart skip a beat. “Never.”

Weiss leaned forward and gave Ruby a long, gentle kiss. She started to deepen it, tightening her arms around her partner when she heard someone clear their throat. Turning bright red she jerked back, staring wide eyed at the obviously embarrassed young man standing awkwardly in front of their cubicle. “Um... documents for Detectives Schnee and Rose?”
“Here,” Weiss said, standing so quickly she accidentally knocked Ruby onto the ground. She stepped over her grumbling partner and grabbed the folder, burying her face in the papers inside before the man even had a chance to run away.

“Thank you!” Ruby called after him before looking at Weiss. “What is it?”

“The first report about the van,” Weiss said, clearing her throat as they both took their seats.

The white panel van had been found abandoned several blocks away. Given his elaborate preparations with the biology lab zombies, he had probably prepared a back up escape method in advance, most likely another vehicle of some kind. Investigating the van hadn’t revealed much, as it had apparently been purchased using cash months earlier and was never properly registered by the new owner.

“They found frozen dirt in the tires,” Weiss said thoughtfully.

“What kind of dirt?” Ruby asked.

“Soft soil,” Weiss said. “Nothing from the city or even country roads. He would’ve had to drive into a park or similar green space very recently for it to be there.”

“Hmm...” Ruby hummed. “You said the bodies were long dead, right? How long dead?”

“Based upon dental work, medical procedures and clothing... they're estimating between fifty and eighty years,” Weiss said. “They'll try to trace them, but it will take time to get more than that.”

“What about graveyards?” Ruby asked.

“There are a great many around the city,” Weiss said. “He almost certainly visited one to get the bodies, which is probably where the dirt came from.”

“Right, but newer bodies are better, right?” Ruby said, starting to get excited. “But if you didn't want to get caught, you'd want them from somewhere no one visits. So what about closed graveyards. Are there any that shut down fifty years ago?”

“Not just one that shut down fifty years ago, but one that had many fairly wealthy patrons, and it needs to have a high water table or decomposition would’ve been much worse,” Weiss said, opening up her computer. It didn't take long to narrow down the possibilities, but even with that much information, assuming it was all correct, they still had three options. “Well, that leaves three possibilities.”

“Hmm... what would he need to do this?” Ruby asked.

“Time... and a shovel,” Weiss said.

“So he’d need to be somewhere pretty isolated,” Ruby pointed out. “If there are neighbors or anything then they'd notice someone making zombies.”

“Good point,” Weiss said. Ruby stood up and moved behind her, leaning over her shoulder to look at the computer screen with her. Weiss froze for a moment, the new, casual contact by her girlfriend, including warm breath on the back of her neck almost overwhelming her.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked when she didn't move.

Weiss cleared her throat and immediately began typing, her motions so frantic that she had to retype
things several times. Ruby placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder, but that just made it even worse. Fortunately they both became enraptured looking at the information about the three closed graveyards.

“I think that's the one, Summer Hills Cemetery,” Ruby said eventually.

Weiss nodded. “Yes… it's at the edge of the city ward boundary, and it's pretty isolated.”

Ruby moved back to her seat, disappointing Weiss at first as she was finally getting used to the new form of contact. She suddenly felt a little embarrassed to be so effected by her when they had almost had sex just days before. She didn't notice at first that Ruby was putting on her winter clothing until she was almost finished, and then she had to scramble for her own coat and second set of gloves.

“You seem a little out of it… are you okay?” Ruby asked as she offered her hand.

Weiss took it and squeezed. “I'm fine. Just… anyway. Let's go see if he left any useful evidence behind when he animated his little army.”

The new car was almost identical to the last one they had been using, although part of Weiss was sad to see the vehicle they had driven together for so long taken out of circulation, but it would take quite a bit of time and money to fully repair the car. The many, many marks left by the near crash would be very recognizable, which was the opposite of what was desired in an unmarked police car.

When they had been on the road for a few minutes Weiss spoke. “I was thinking about telling Winter about us.”

“Oh?” Ruby asked nervously.

“She's the only family that really matters to me,” Weiss said. “She was busy with her career, but she always did everything she could to make me feel better about… everything. Father tried to keep us separated after my condition began, but she still did what she could.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I think… I think he was afraid of losing Winter, too,” Weiss said. “Father was always a cold man, but he wasn’t… he wasn’t a monster when I was young. Mother's death, and the White Fang stepping up the violence in the years after… he never really recovered. I think he was afraid I would accidentally hurt or- or worse my sister.”

“I'm sorry,” Ruby said.

Weiss put her hand on her girlfriend's thigh and gave it a reassuring squeeze. It was exciting to be able to do that, to be so close to someone after a lifetime without. “So Winter is… she's my sister. I know you told Yang about us.”

“Yeah, the first week,” Ruby said with a smirk.

“See, there you go,” Weiss said. “We've been together for… months. I still talk to her every couple of weeks, and I even had two dinners with her in that time. It feels like I'm lying to her at this point.”

“Well, of course you should tell her!” Ruby said. “Even if you just kinda wanted to you should've told her. Just, um… do you think she's gonna be super overprotective? Cause I had to stick around you a bunch at first to keep my sister from threatening you, and your's seems… strict.”

“Well… I don't know,” Weiss said. “I've obviously never dated anyone, but… she didn't take it
badly when we were friends, right? That was a first, too.”

Snow was still lightly falling, and while the city had been scraped clear for the most part, they soon left it behind and drove down smaller and smaller roads, leaving the suburbs behind for a wooded area. Weiss would've been able to see the far end of the city wards if her aura sight was active when they finally pulled onto the narrow, tree lined road leading to the cemetery.

They couldn't see any tire marks on the snow covering the road, but it showed signs of having been plowed that day, so it wasn't too surprising. Ruby had to drive slow to avoid losing control of the car, and conversation stopped entirely as she was forced to focus on her driving to the exclusion of all else.

The ground began to rise, and up ahead through the trees Weiss could barely make out the stone wall surrounding the cemetery, which was constructed on a series of large hills. Ahead they could see that the cemetery didn't actually have a gate, and the road inside was as cleared of snow as the road up to it had been.

Suddenly two figure stood up, one on either side of the road, emerging from snow drifts holding a heavy chain. The pulled on it, raising the metal until it was several inches off of the ground, and as the snow fell away they could see that it had sharp metal fragments worked into the links.

Ruby tried to hit the brakes, but the car went into a skid, and there was nothing she could do as they slammed into the chain, tearing first the front tires and then the rear to shreds. The car spun out, completely out of control, drawing a scream of Weiss' lips as memories of another crash were dragged once again to the forefront of her mind.

The car flew off of the road and slammed into the trees headfirst. With a bang the airbags deployed, and as Weiss fell into hers everything went dark.
Sixth Case: Death Walks

Weiss slowly woke up, her head pounding and body stiff. She started to move, but realized that she was actually sitting up, and something was keeping her from moving her arms. After a few seconds she slowly opened her eyes.

She was tied up with a heavy rope, and leaning against a concrete wall. At the center of the room an immensely complex magic circle had been drawn with chalk, with several large pots scattered about it, as well as piles of dust and a single burning brazier. The corners of the room had broken and smashed coffins and skeletons, obviously having been tossed into the corners when a space was cleared.

The left wall of the room held Weiss' attention, however. Ruby was dangling upside down, bound to the wall by thick ropes that made it almost impossible for her to move at all. She was awake but gagged, and she was staring at Weiss with a somewhat glazed look in her eyes, although they sharpened when they met gazes.

Before Weiss could do anything the only door in the room opened, revealing an overgrown, snow covered cemetery. Walking through the door was Liam Charleston and two more zombies. One was wearing a bloodstained mall Santa costume, and the other was a short man in a heavily patched coat. They both appeared to have been dead for some time, although a significant amount of magic had obviously been used to animate them.

“Good, you're awake,” Liam said in a flat, uninflected voice as he closed the door again.

“Yes,” Weiss said as she subtly tested her bonds, but unfortunately they seemed quite sturdy.

“Then you may be of value to me after all,” he said.

“What are you attempting to do?” Weiss asked as she tried to study the circle without being obvious about it. It appeared to be some form of a summoning circle, but it was different from any she had seen before, and she had a sinking suspicion that she knew what it was.

“I am summoning Death,” he said as he walked to a corner of the room, picking up the book that he had stolen from the university and showing it to her. “With the ritual in this book I will finally be able to bring her before me.”

“The last time this was attempted it didn't end well for the necromancers,” Weiss said.

“I am aware,” he said. “I have a way to control Death, but I needed a way to bring her into this world. With this book I will be able to complete my plan.”

“That doesn't make any sense,” Weiss said. “If you know how to manipulate a summoned being with binding magics, then you should be able to summon that being. What you claim to know is more complex than the summoning. Why would you need the book at all?”

He studied her for a moment before speaking, his face still blank and inflection flat. “How did you become a necromancer?”

Weiss considered not answering him, but speaking would buy time for them to think of a way to escape. She suddenly found herself wishing that they’d told someone that they were checking out the cemetery, but they had assumed at best that he’d visited it for his zombie attack, not that he was squatting there and performing rituals in a mausoleum.
“I was nearly murdered as a child, but magic and medicine kept me alive, even if my soul had departed,” Weiss said eventually. “My mother sacrificed her soul to send me back to my body, and my time partially dead created my connection.”

“I chose to become a necromancer,” he said. “I was born here in Vale, but my family decided to travel west for better opportunities. We rescued a group of magic users, and one of them chose to teach me her arts as thanks. When she died from a disease she passed on to me all of her books and materials. Among them was a handwritten folio, a record kept by a distant ancestor who was a member of the Ghoul Cult that tried to summon Death.

“From that volume I learned the ritual to make myself a necromancer, and it contained his ideas for a better way to control Death than what his cult was planning to attempt. It is only now, so long after I first saw it that I have the chance to put his plan into motion.”

“So that picture from the 1800s… that was you,” Weiss said.

He nodded. “You did your research I see. Yes, I spent decades as an undertaker, perfecting my art on the corpses brought to me. While the folio had the ritual to become a necromancer, it contained little information on how to use the powers. It took me lifetimes to master the arts through little more than experimentation, and in over a century I've only found a handful of tomes to expand my knowledge further.”

“Then take the advice of someone who is widely read on the occult,” Weiss said after a moment. “Don't try this. I don't know what the binding plan entails, but I'm certain that it won't work. Death is a fundamental part of our reality. She's not some god or demon, but something ineffable and supernal. This won't work.”

“I didn't gain what I have without effort or risk,” Liam said. “I worked and sacrificed for my knowledge and power, and I will not be lectured to by a spoiled child.”

Weiss was silent for a moment. “Why are we here? Why didn't you just kill us?”

“I still need a little fresh blood for the ritual, but before I could acquire it the two of you fell into my hands,” he said. “Further, the magic to summon Death will be truly draining, and then to bind her will also be a challenge. But with you here I can divide those tasks.”

Weiss' eyes narrowed. “I won't help you.”

“I simply need blood from your partner,” he said. “She doesn't need to survive the extraction process, nor does it need to be clean. For example… I can have my zombies chew her veins open.”

The zombies immediately grabbed Ruby to hold her steady as she tried to struggle, and the one dressed like a mall Santa bent down, rancid breath blowing in Ruby's face as it opened its rotting jaws wide to bite her throat out.

“No!” Weiss screamed. She sent out a pulse of magic through the concrete floor, not even trying to be careful with her aura, simply flinging as much mana as she could towards the two zombies, desperate to countermand the order even if she lacked the focus to stop their animation. She saw them pause just as Liam thrust his taser into her stomach and turned it on.

Weiss screamed and seized up for a moment, before he released it and she went limp, lying on her side, having tipped over while she was being shocked. She tried to look up to see if Ruby was still okay when he used the taser again, making her scream and drool as she shook painfully on the concrete.
After one more agonizing shock he stepped back, looking down at her with nothing in his expression as she tried to recover. “Do not attempt that again. You and your partner simply saved me a trip into town for another sacrifice and increase the chances of my success by aiding in the ritual. You are not, nor have you ever been, necessary to my plans.”

Weiss finally noticed that the zombies were merely holding Ruby in place, and other than her face being red from hanging upside down and some tears that had leaked from her eyes while Weiss was being repeatedly tased she looked unharmed. After a long, relieved sigh Weiss awkwardly sat up and looked at Liam again. “Why are you doing this?”

“I am going to bind Death to my will.”

“Why, though?” Weiss asked. “You’re already immortal, what do you want that you think only Death can get you?”

“Knowledge,” he said. “Angels care nothing for the mortal world, demons, from the weakest imp to the truly ancient and terrible lords like Dagon or Salem, want nothing more than to destroy what we are and to remake this world in their image, and the various faeries, eidolons, asuras, youma, spirits… anything else knows far too little to be worth the effort. I intend to know everything that may be known, and only Death has absolute knowledge.”

“All of this… these deaths, so much effort… just for knowledge?” Weiss asked.

“I saw far too many people die from curable diseases, or counterable curses, or lose struggles that more knowledge might overcome,” Liam said. “If there’s anything that I’ve learned in nearly two centuries of life, it is that knowledge isn't just power. It's the only thing that truly matters. People die. Things leave or break. Knowledge is forever. I will know everything, and I will pay any price for it, no matter how great it may be.

“Now, will you aid me, or will you be sacrificed?”

Weiss thought through her options quickly. She had been disarmed, and while she always had her touch, she was fairly certain that he would be immune to it as a necromancer himself, although she'd never actually tried it on one before, and he was staying well out of her reach even when she was tied up. She could try to command the zombies again, or subtly animate her own, but he not only could countermand her attempts, but he had no way to know who would come out on top of such a struggle, and he would most likely simply disrupt such an attempt by tasing her again.

She couldn't think of any way out, except to move forward and wait for an opportunity to do… something. “What if it doesn't work?”

“The summoning?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, nodding towards the book. “I've never heard of anyone actually trying that ritual besides the original cult, and even if we assume the version in the book is what they used, they had dozens of people who all died in the attempt. What if the ritual is wrong, or you made a mistake preparing the circle, or I'm not strong enough to-”

“Then you will fix it and try again accompanied by the screams of your partner as the zombies devour her alive,” he interrupted blandly. “If that attempt fails, I will let her devour you just as slowly. It may be difficult to do so to another necromancer, but I am willing to expend the effort.”

Weiss frantically tried to think of options, before finally looking at her partner again. Ruby shook her head, unwilling to give him what he wanted no matter the cost to herself. She was so selfless that
I'll do it,” Weiss said quietly.

“I'm glad to see that you are sensible about this,” he said. “Try anything and you know your fate.”

Weiss nodded, and Liam moved to the far side of the room, taking a spot in the outer part of the large ritual circle on the floor. One of the zombies then crossed the room, picking up a knife and a clay pot from among the rubble and walking over to Weiss. She held very still as the stinking corpse cut the ropes binding her, and then stepped back, letting her climb shakily to her feet. It then offered her the knife and pot.

“What is this for?” Weiss asked slowly as she took them, her fingers tingling and shaky from the returning blood flow. The blade was quite sharp, but it wasn't balanced for combat, and she doubted that she could throw it well enough to seriously hurt Liam.

“More blood is needed,” he said. “Fill up the pot from your partner and place it in the empty place in the circle.

Weiss felt her blood run cold. “What?”

“Blood is needed, hot and fresh,” Liam said. “Bleed her or my zombies will.”

“Blood… for a summoning?” Weiss asked, her mind flashing through the implications. A blood based binding should use the summoner's own blood, and it wasn't something easily forced on the summoned. “Shouldn't you use your blood since you want to bind Death?”

“No,” he said flatly. “The ritual simply calls for blood, and hers will do.”

Weiss frantically thought through the implications. Would Death be bound by Ruby? More likely it would simply increase the certainty of failure. Her blood would be a better bet to actually work, since she was performing the summoning, but if he was trying to bind Death it should be his. There were too many things to think though and no time to do it in, but most of all she really didn't want to bleed Ruby.

“Can't we use my blood?” Weiss asked shakily after a long moment of thought.

“No,” he said. “You'll need your strength to summon Death. As you pointed out, last time this was attempted an entire cult was involved.”

Weiss felt her feet carry her over to her partner almost against her will, her hands trembling slightly as she paused in front Ruby. They locked gazes, and Weiss swallowed hard. She couldn't do it. She couldn't hurt Ruby.

One of the zombies clicked its teeth and started to bend down, obviously preparing to rip Ruby's throat out. “No! I...”

Ruby sighed through her nose, and then nodded slowly, relaxing as the zombie stood back up. With one last long look into her eyes Weiss carefully grabbed Ruby's arm, adjusting her coat and sleeve to reveal her pale, unmarred skin. She leaned forward and placed a soft, feather light kiss to her arm, before raising the knife to it.

She took one more deep breath, and then cut. She could feel Ruby flinch away from the pain and had to choke back a sob as she raised the pot to her arm and let the blood trickle into it. Weiss stood there for what felt like an eternity, just watching the lifeblood of the woman she loved leave her body.
until finally the small pot was full enough for any ritual, and she set it on the floor, slicing a large section of cloth from the bottom of her skirt without even pausing to think about modesty or the price of the clothing, using it to bind Ruby's arm.

“I'm, so, so sorry,” Weiss whispered, barely able to speak past the lump in her throat. “Please be okay, I'm so, so sorry.”

“The blood must still be hot, and the room is cool,” Liam said. “If you don't want to cut her again I suggest you get started. Leave the knife on the floor.”

Weiss picked up the pot, unable to make eye contact with Ruby despite her mumbled moans trying to get her attention. It was only a few days before that they had tried to make love, and now she was slicing into her and draining her blood like some kind of monster.

The magical circle on the floor was actually two separate circles, one outside of the other. The inner was incredibly intricate, designed to summon Death itself, and she'd never studied such a thing, having only skimmed over that section of Cultes de Ghoules. She had no idea how it would work, or how much power she would need to channel into it for it to function, as Death wouldn't need to pass through the Great Barrier, but she would no doubt be difficult to bring into the living world all the same.

With only a little hesitation Weiss found the place where the pot of blood needed to be placed, and after doing so she moved to the clear spot where she needed to be to perform the summoning. When she reached it she stood, looking around the circle, surprised at just how much work he had obviously done to prepare. There were so many places where he could've made a small mistake, and failure wasn't an option, although she didn't truly want to succeed either.

“I'm ready; begin the summons,” he said.

“How?” Weiss asked. “Can I see the book?”

“No,” he said. “Simply channel mana into the sigil like you were activating any magic circle, but use your necromancy. My preparations will do the rest.”

Weiss tried to think of something, anything that she could do to stop the summoning, but she had committed herself the moment she sliced into Ruby's arm. She had to summon Death, and if she survived the experience then maybe she could find a way to save Ruby and herself. The circle was too complex for her to try to modify without being seen, and he weapons and even chalk had been confiscated.

She removed her gloves and kneeled on the concrete, noticing two smaller circles where she was obviously supposed to put her hands. If the circle was the same used by the original cult then it looked as though only one person could perform the summoning at a time, so either she would be sufficient, or it was originally performed in shifts. Hoping it was the former she placed her hands in their positions, took a deep breath, and opened her connection to the afterlife as wide as it could go.

Necromantic mana flowed through her body and out of her hands, filling the circle all around her. She channeled as smoothly as she could, not pushing herself so hard that she burned out, but using as much as possible in case the ritual needed a high rate of power flow. Despite what Liam thought, even activating a prepared circle the way she was had many subtleties, and she was forced to simply guess the correct answers and adjust herself as she went based upon the feel of the magic building all around her.

If it was Weiss' idea to perform a ritual as complex as this, she would've spent weeks or even months
breaking down every aspect of it on paper, arithmentically working out every little thing so that she understood what was happening on every level to ensure the best chance of success. Working blind, she simply tried to keep things in balance as the chalk circle began to glow a dull, sickly green color and the brazier's coals began to produce flickering green flame.

The power continued to build as Weiss poured more and more mana into the sigil. If she had been using her own natural mana she would've exhausted it, as they were far enough from a ley line that she couldn't rely solely upon guiding the mana of the world into the circle like most forms of significant binding magic. But it took some of her own mana to control and channel the necromantic energies, and as the minutes passed she found herself growing more and more worn out. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep going, but the thought of Ruby being eaten alive the way that Raye Gamboge had been kept her pushing long past the point she should've stopped.

The air grew heavy, and a steady hum began to build. They all felt a sensation like ants crawling all over their bodies as the magic began to reach its peak. Weiss' vision started to gray out, and she had trouble breathing as blood dripped from first her nostrils, and then her ears and even eyes as blood vessels burst from the strain she was putting her body through. Just as she was nearing the point of terminal mana exhaustion the summoning circle was fully filled with power.

Unlike other summons the arrival of Death was heralded not by a display of power, but rather by its sudden absence. In a moment the circle was completely discharged, the brazier's green flames snuffing out, the piles of dust and pots of blood disappearing between one struggling heartbeat and the next as the brightly glowing inner circle fading away to plain concrete. The hum that had filled the air stopped, and everything was still.

Standing in the center of the circle was a familiar figure. Death was fairly short, with a slender build and a long white cloak with the hood pulled up. She was wearing a simple black and white dress under the cloak, and Weiss could see a small amount of brunette hair peaking out from the hood, although her features were otherwise hidden.

With a gentle voice she spoke. “Why have you summoned Death?”
Sixth Case: Truths

Weiss stared wide eyed at Death. She had seen her as a child while nearly dead, and in sometimes in her dreams and nightmares since. The most shocking thing about Death was how normal she seemed. Weiss was too burned out to even try to activate her aura sight, but she sensed no magical presence, and nothing visually stood out about her. Except for her hooded cloak she could've been any normal person on the street.

Weiss opened her mouth, trying to respond, but all that came out was a pained croak. She tried to raise a hand to reach out to Death, although she wasn't even sure what the gesture was supposed to mean, but she fell to the ground, unable to support herself without both arms helping.

There was another surge of power and a flash of green light as the outer circle, which had still been intact, activated. Weiss was within its area of effect, and could feel something pass through her as the binding magics ignored her. She wasn't their target.

“I have bound you, Death,” Liam said, his voice still completely without affect.

“Why have I been brought here?” Death asked, looking at him.

“You will answer my questions,” he said.

“What questions?” Death asked as she slowly started to walk towards him.

“Every question,” Liam said. “All knowledge. Absolute knowledge.”

“I see,” Death said. “I can provide that, although I'm not sure that you will appreciate it as much as you believe that you will.”

She slowly walked up to him, easily walking through the green glowing outer circle. From the way he stumbled back it was obvious that he didn't think that she could do so, which meant that his attempts to bind her were almost certainly a failure. Death didn't appear to move any faster, but she somehow reached him before he could move away, and calmly placed a hand on his chest.

Liam fell to the floor, dead without a sound, snuffing out the outer magic circle with him.

“Why?” Weiss asked, her voice weak.

Death turned and looked at her. “Only the dead have no questions.”

Weiss had pushed herself deep into magical exhaustion, far enough that she needed treatment at a hospital to ensure that she would recover without complications. When Death turned and began to move towards Ruby, however, adrenaline and desperation gave her the energy she needed to try to use her magic again.

It was a simple attempt at a banishment, something that she might or might not have pulled off with a normal summons in the state that she was in. She didn't even know if the summoning she had performed allowed for her to banish Death, or if the use of Ruby's blood would've affected it. All her efforts did was make Death turn her head and look at her.

“Do not mistake me for some common imp,” she said. “I am Death, a fundamental entity to this universe. I am not so easily banished.”
Weiss dragged herself along the ground, trying desperately to reach Ruby before Death, although she wasn't sure what she would do if she succeeded. What was Death doing? Was she in some way bound to Ruby? Impossible, she thought. The binding had failed, and Ruby wasn't involved in the process outside of her blood. Weiss tried to move faster, but she didn't even have the energy to properly crawl. “Please!”

“What?”

“Please, please don't hurt her!” Weiss begged. “Please!”

“Why?” Death asked.

“It wasn't her fault that you were summoned,” Weiss said. “I brought you here, she's innocent. Please, don't hurt her! Take me instead.”

“Take you?” Death repeated.

“Please don't hurt her,” Weiss repeated. “Do whatever you want to me, but don't hurt Ruby!”

“Why are you so determined to protect her?”

“I love her!” Weiss sobbed, tears pouring from her eyes. “Please don't hurt her!”

Weiss flinched but was too exhausted to move very much when she felt a hand on her face. It was soft and gentle, and it carefully wiped away her tears and blood. Weiss could only stare as she was finally close enough to see under Death's hood.

Death was beautiful, but the only thing that would've stood out in a crowd about her was her eyes, which were bright silver. She had a gentle, kind smile on her face as she took a moment to comfort Weiss, and without intending to she found herself relaxing at the warm, soothing touch.

“Weiss don't cry,” Death said. “I could feel that you summoned me to protect Ruby, and I have no intention of harming her. Just relax.”

Death then stood and walked over to Ruby, who was staring wide eyed at Death the entire time. Death bent down and grabbed the bloody knife from the floor, and with a few deft motions she cut Ruby free, grabbing her carefully and setting her upright on the ground against the wall.

Ruby took a few moments to recover from so long spent hanging upside down, but the moment she could she ripped the gag from her mouth and spoke. “M-mom?”

Weiss could only watch in shock as Death pulled back her hood and reached down, wrapping Ruby in a desperate hug. Ruby returned the gesture, and after a few moment's she began to sob as Death carded her fingers through her hair. Weiss briefly considered that she was actually dead, or perhaps she'd slipped into a coma and was experiencing stranger dreams than the Red Sap had offered.

Once she was past the absolute shock of Ruby's words, Weiss began to catalog what she was seeing. Death and Ruby did have the kind of resemblance you would expect to see in mother and child, with similar builds and faces that strongly resembled one another. They also both had silver eyes, and they both frequently wielded scythes. It if wasn't completely ridiculous it would make perfect sense.

Eventually Ruby got herself back under control, and once she did she pulled back, wiping her face and looking at Death again. “How... how is... any of this?”

Death reached up and gently stroked her cheek. “I've been Death since before the rise of man,
although I was quite different then. In time I changed, and as I did I eventually decided to take this form, becoming like the people I guided into my realm.

“The more humanlike I made myself, the more fascinated by humanity I became,” Death said thoughtfully. “Eventually I figured out a way to enter the world of the living for a little while. I first managed it during the height of the Egyptian kingdoms, and again a few times since.”

“But why...” Ruby interrupted, although she didn't seem to know what she was even trying to ask.

Death smiled sadly. “This world… the people living here… it's so different from my realm. The dead have no questions… no heartbeat… no joy. They aren't alive. I wanted to see life, experience it.”

Weiss had managed to sit up, although she was still shaky and weak. “How are you able to stay in the mortal world? I would've thought that if you were living here the effect would be similar to when Sisyphus bound Thanatos with chains in the myths.”

“Huh?” Ruby asked.

Death made a face. “That... actually happened, although it was far more complicated than the myth... we're getting off topic. My existence serves as a kind of a... gravitational pull. While I exist in my realm souls separated from their bodies are naturally pulled towards me. I have to appear to those that fight this, but those are relatively few, even out of a population as large as this, and I'm fast enough that it's rarely a problem.”

“Does that mean people aren't dying right right now?” Ruby asked.

“Well, they aren't going to the afterlife at the moment,” Death said. “Obviously that would be too dangerous to leave for long, so in order to come here intentionally I figured out a way to separate myself from my power. The power is what draws the souls to it, meaning that my role in creation is still carried out, while at the same time leaving me more like the mortals that I wished to walk among.”

“So... how did... why are you, I mean, if you're so important... how can you be my mom?” Ruby asked.

“I decided to take a break, and so as usual I separated myself from my power and made a physical body for myself,” she said. “It had only been a day when I ran into this cocky young detective named Tai Xiao Long. It wasn't exactly love at first sight... he was tracking a vampire, and unfortunately I met her description. It was a little... awkward, but when I was finally free to go he had the nerve to ask me on a date.”

“He asked a former suspect out on a date?” Weiss asked incredulously.

Death giggled. “He did. He thought himself to be quite the ladies man, and of course I turned him down. I wasn't planning on staying for long, so in order to come here intentionally I figured out a way to separate myself from my power. The power is what draws the souls to it, meaning that my role in creation is still carried out, while at the same time leaving me more like the mortals that I wished to walk among.”

“Did he know what you were?” Weiss asked.

“I told him before we made love the first time,” she said with a nod. “He was... a bit surprised, but felt quite vindicated about suspecting me to be the living dead when we first met. There were...
“Why did you leave?” Ruby asked.

Death put a hand on her cheek. “I didn't want to. I wanted to stay with you and Tai and Yang more than anything in the world… but I can't stay separated from my power for long. In the past I waited a few days before returning. I stayed with you for years… too long, in fact. I was dying when I finally had to leave.”

“No!” Ruby objected, hugging Death to her desperately. “You… you're Death. You can't die!”

“Everything can die,” Death said. “In strange aeons, even I will be fated to, although that shouldn't be for a very long time.”

“So can you… can you come back now?” Ruby asked.

“I'm sorry,” Death said. “I wish more than anything that I could, but if I tried to separate myself from my power again I would perish… it will be centuries before I heal from so long a separation. And I cannot stay here for more than a few hours without causing great damage. I can't stay, my little flower petal. No matter how much I wish to.”

“I love you, mom,” Ruby murmured.

“I love you, too,” Death said. “More than anything in any world. Even though I couldn't be there for you, I made sure to watch over you every day… and I have to say, I am so, so proud of the wonderful, caring, strong woman you've become without me.”

Weiss turned bright red as she thought about Ruby's mother watching them. “You- you watch us?”

Death smirked as Ruby caught on and turned her namesake color. “Oh yes, every day. I have to move pretty fast to do my work and still find time to watch over you both, but as I'm sure you've seen from Ruby's gifts, speed comes naturally to me.”

“You always watch us?” Ruby squeaked.

Death chuckled. “Well… there are things I don't need to know about my daughter. When you spend 'private time' in your room I leave you alone, and I don't watch over the two of you in bed, but I try to be there when I can.”

“Do you know… what I did in Faerie?”

Death looked serious, her teasing smile fading at those words. “I do. I'm so sorry that you found yourself in that position.”

“I- killed people,” Ruby said shakily. “Helpless people… and I didn't have to. I chose to. I- I did that.”

“I know,” Death said. “I know. But I want you to know… I will always love you. I know you think you're a monster for doing it, but you aren't. You're still broken up about this even so long after you did it to save Weiss, and that means you will never be as bad as your nightmares tell you. And… I know this is one of those things you want to speak to me as just Summer Rose for, but… as Death I have a pretty unique perspective on killing, and I'm not going to condemn you for what you did.”

“Mom… I still did it,” Ruby said. “I always wanted to be a hero. To save people, not kill them. To make lives better, not take them away. I should be in jail, but… that's not how the laws work. But I
still killed people. They… they struggled and I still held them still 'til they died.”

“Ruby,” Weiss murmured, scooting close and placing a hand on her back. She swallowed when Death glanced at her for a moment before returning her attention to her daughter.

“Ruby,” Death said. “I've existed for a very, very long time. I've seen great heroes and terrible villains, and they always have more in common than you could ever imagine. No one is the perfect hero of a fairy tale. You live in reality, and you will always make bad choices. Remember when you were nine and you forgot to study for that history test but you could see your neighbor's answers?”

Ruby's eyes bulged. “You saw that!”

“I watched as often as I could… even a certain fifth grade play,” Death said teasingly, making Ruby turn bright red. “Ruby, you will make mistakes, bad choices, the right thing that turns out wrong, and a hundred other things that are part of being human. You need to learn to forgive yourself. If you believe what you did was so terrible, then in the future learn from that. You'll only fail yourself if you try to cling to an unachievable pedestal.”

“You sound like Weiss,” Ruby said, leaning back and wiping her eyes. She looked more at ease than Weiss had seen her since they had returned from Faerie.

“Then it sounds to me like Weiss is a pretty smart person. But Ruby… don't give up. I can tell you a hundred thousand stories about the evil in the world, but there's good, too. There's a reason I come here to see it over and over again. And Ruby… never give up believing in that good world. The world you see… it's the one that I want to visit, and if you give up on it then it will truly be a sadder place for it.”

“Oh, um, mom, this is my girlfriend, Weiss,” Ruby said after a quiet moment, scooting back a little so that she was sitting beside Weiss and wrapping an arm around her shoulders. Weiss flinched slightly at the contact, but then she relaxed and gave Death an uneasy smile.

“Hello, ma'am,” she said formally. “It is an honor to meet you. I'm courting your daughter.”

Death chuckled. “Now, now, no need to be so formal. We've met before after all, and I've watched over you as well. It only seemed right to after the sacrifice your mother made.”

Weiss swallowed and looked at the ground. “Yes. I remember.”

“I'm very sorry that you had to go through that,” Death said gently. “She wanted you to grow up and live a full, happy life, instead of dying so young. I had left Ruby not long before, and I knew that I would have done anything for her, so in the end I couldn't refuse another mother's request. I'm glad to see that I did.”

Weiss nodded. “Thank you. ma'am. For a very long time I was upset with everything that happened, but I'm happy to be alive today.”

“I'm very glad to hear that,” she said. “Please, call me Summer. If you're my future daughter in law, we shouldn't stand on ceremony, and that was the name I used when I was last in this world.”

“Summer,” Weiss said while blushing. “We aren't quite ready to- to exchange any vows or similar.”

“I know,” Summer said with a smile as both young women blushed brightly. “You've been very good for my daughter, though, and she's been good for you. I give you both my blessing for when you are ready to propose.”
“Thank you,” Weiss said, blinking back tears. Her mother was gone, and her father would never approve of anything she chose for herself. It meant more to her than she could've imagined to hear that kind of validation from someone. It suddenly occurred to her that she needed to stop hesitating about telling Winter about her relationship.

“You cannot fully control your necromancy, though,” Summer said. “It's caused you a lot of pain, hasn't it?”

Weiss looked down. “Yes.”

“I had been afraid of complications caused by your time in my realm, and what you experienced was even worse than I had expected. You need to learn to close the connection to the power properly.”

“I've tried,” Weiss said. “I've tried ever since I found out what happens when I touch someone. I've never been able to do it.”

“It's a mental block,” Summer said. “Your exhaustion from summoning me does have its advantages, however. It will make it easier for you to feel this.”

“Feel what?” Weiss asked.

In response Summer poked her in the forehead. There was an internal pop, and suddenly a shift in her soul like a particularly persistent kink had been worked by a masseuse. She gasped from the sheer strangeness of the sudden sensation, then almost collapsed in relief. Something that had worn at her for most of her life was suddenly better, and she had been so used to it that the absence felt like euphoria.

“What… what happened?” she asked as she leaned against Ruby for support.

Summer smiled. “I closed the connection. That's what it's supposed to feel like to not be drawing upon necromantic mana. Your inability to touch was caused by your body being full of that power, which drew the life into you, draining them away. Now, reach inside and open the connection the way you do when you try to call upon more power.”

Weiss hesitated, not wanting to risk things staying open again, but she didn't want to disappoint Summer, either. She closed her eyes and tried to call for more power, but found it not wanting to come. She frowned and tried again, and then with a sudden gasp she felt the connection open once again.

“Good, now send the mana back through your connection and close it yourself.”

Weiss returned the mana that she had drawn, and with an effort she reduced the connection, until finally, by concentrating on what it had felt like when Summer did it for her, she closed it entirely. For the first time in her life, she had ceased channeling necromancy on her own.

“I- I did it.”

“Very good,” Summer said with a smile. “Now you no longer need to fear touching others.”

Weiss stared at her hands, tears pouring down her cheeks. “I- thank you… thank you so much. I can't… words can't… thank you.”
Sixth Case: Living

Weiss sat in stunned silence for a long time, so overwhelmed by what had just happened that she couldn't concentrate on anything else. She was... normal. Safe. She could be around people, she could hug her sister and she no longer had to be afraid that something would go wrong while she was touching Ruby, accidentally killing her.

It was life changing.

Literally and completely.

Eventually she stopped being lost in her own world long enough to start listening to Death... Summer and Ruby talk. They both looked a little teary, and it was probably for the best that she gave them some alone time. If she wasn't nearly dead from mana exhaustion she would probably go outside to give them some privacy, but the cold and snow felt like they could finish her off as weak as she was.

“Ruby, show me your scythe,” Summer said

Ruby blinked, before smiling and bringing the weapon out. She had come a long way with it, and was now able to conjure it with barely a thought.

“I've watched you practice with it, and I'm happy that you've been making good use of it,” Summer said. “Pyrrha and Qrow have done a wonderful job finding a style that works for you.”

“Are you going to show me how to fight with it?” Ruby asked excitedly.

Summer smiled. “I have no idea how to fight, Ruby.”

“But... I mean, it's your weapon too, right?” Ruby asked, pouting slightly.

Summer smiled and stood, conjuring her own scythe. It was also large and red, and looked very, very similar to her daughter's. “Why would I need to know how to fight? While in my realm nothing exists that would stand against me, and here in this world dying would simply return me to the rest of myself. I've never had to fight anyone or anything.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “So... what did you want to show me?”

“I've noticed that you often have trouble cutting through things,” Summer said. “The scythe you wield is the same as this one... the tool of the grim reaper. It represents the harvesting of souls, and can be used to end all things. Why do you think it has so much trouble ending those things?”

“Um... I dunno,” Ruby said. “I mean... it isn't that pointy. And a scythe really isn't the best weapon shape.”

“It's a construct of pure mana,” Summer explained. “You simply conjure it, and then swing it around.”

“Right,” Ruby said, nodding happily.

“Wrong,” Summer said, giving a thumbs down.

“Huh?”
“Your scythe is only as strong as the mana it contains,” Summer explained. “Try to cut the floor without putting any force into it.”

Ruby did so, leaving a small scratch on the floor.

Summer did the same thing, leaving an almost identical scratch. “That… the way you've been wielding it, is the most basic form of the weapon. Now, observe.”

Summer simply held the weapon loosely in her hand with the point resting on the concrete, and a moment later the blade sank as if she were trying to rest it on water. “This is what happens when you channel mana into it. Why don't you try.”

It took Ruby a few moments to get started, but it was a simple trick to perform. The scythe was already composed of her aura, and so pushing mana into it was no more difficult than the basic aura control exercises that Weiss had taught her when she was first learning about her magic. Once she did the weapon sank into the concrete just like her mother's had. “Whoa…”

“Whoa' indeed,” Summer said proudly. “The only things that will resist your scythe are magical objects and magically resistant materials, and with enough mana it can and will cut through anything.”

“Is there anything else I can do?” Ruby asked excitedly as she let her weapon fade away into rose petals.

Death's scythe disappeared in a cloud of cherry blossoms. “Well, you know about your speed.”

“Why can I do that, anyway?” Ruby asked. “I mean, I never thought of the grim reaper as being a sprinter.”

“Well, I had to catch Flo-Jo,” Summer joked, but rolled her eyes at Ruby's confused expression. “I guess that was a long time from being topical... remember the job I have to do, Ruby. If someone on one side of the planet needs to be convinced to pass on, then immediately the same is true on the other side of the world I can't take an airplane. Nothing can outrun Death, and with enough mana nothing can outrun you.”

“Why does all your stuff need a ton of mana?” Ruby grumbled.

Summer smiled. “Because I have an endless amount. You just had the misfortune of inheriting the abilities of a fundamental entity while still being human.”

“So what about deathly… stuff,” Ruby asked after a moment. “Can I do anything cool like that?”

“I'm not sure what 'that' is, but I've never had a child before so I can't tell you with certainty what you can do,” Summer said. “All I know is the things that you've demonstrated already.”

“Oh,” Ruby pouted a little. “So… what else does, um, does being your daughter mean for me? I mean, am I gonna be your heir or something?”

“Well… most likely, no,” Summer said. “There can only be one Death at a time, but you do have the ability to become Death. I would either need to have already died, or you would kill me in the process.”

“No!” Ruby yelped, jumping forward and hugging Summer. “No way.”

“I know,” Summer murmured, rubbing her back. “Someday you will need to make certain choices…”
you're effectively a demigod, and there are ways that that can set you apart from humanity. You have to choose to take up that mantle more fully, however, and it isn't without cost.”

“What cost?”

“If you are no longer human… you won't be human, anymore,” Summer said. “Immortality is both a gift and curse, and you would see and understand things beyond what a human ever could. It would change you forever.”

“I… when does that…”

“If you ever choose to truly take up the burdens of godhood then you will find yourself slowly changing,” Summer said. “That doesn't mean you have to make that choice. Many demigods never do.”

“So it has to be a choice, not just ‘oops, I didn't mean to be a god' kinda thing?” Ruby asked nervously.

Summer rolled her eyes. “You would know.”

“Right...”

She looked over at Weiss, but before she could ask she received her answer. “I have books discussing apotheosis. I'll explain it to her, later... when we have a lot of free time to go over it.”

Summer smiled. “Thank you, Weiss.”

Weiss blushed and looked down, a small smile on her own face. It felt amazing to be approved of by her girlfriend's mother that way. 'Of- of course.'

“There's one more thing I need to explain,” Summer said, stepping back and carefully examining the bloody improvised bandage on Ruby's arm. “Your blood… you should be careful with it.”

“Why?” Ruby asked, looking down at her arm as well.

“You are my child… my flesh and blood,” Summer said. “As Death, I do not just represent the end of mortal life. I am the end of all things. The Omega. That power is in your blood.”

“What does that… what does that mean?” Ruby asked.

“When magically activated it can be used to end anything if given enough power,” Summer said. “You don't know enough about magic to make use of it yet, but keep it in mind all the same.”

Summer was talking to her daughter, but Weiss suddenly felt as though she was really speaking for her benefit, a thought all but confirmed as Summer glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. Weiss didn't know why she was being told that, but she suddenly knew that it would eventually be important.

“Okay, mom,” Ruby said, obviously confused.

“Ruby… you've grown into a fine young woman, and I hope that you won't be appearing before me for a long time to come,” Summer said. “Know that I will always love you.”

She then leaned in and gave Ruby a kiss on the forehead. Ruby began to sob, clinging to her mother for a moment and murmuring her own words of love, although her voice was too distorted by tears for Weiss to make out what she was saying. Summer eventually pulled away as her daughter began
to calm down and turned to Weiss.

“Take good care of my daughter, Weiss,” she said, leaning in giving her a gentle kiss on her forehead. Weiss was moved to tears as well, and seeing that Summer gave her a hug. Weiss didn't know where to put her hands or what to do, but the maternal gesture was so comforting she didn't even manage to work herself into a meltdown. “You are an amazing person, and I know your mother would be so, so proud of you.”

Summer then stepped back and smiled at them as they both reached over and took each other's hand for comfort. “I'm very glad that we had a chance to meet, but... I must leave. I love you Ruby.”

“I love you too, mom,” Ruby said.

Summer turned around, and then paused, looking back at both of them over her shoulder, her silver eyes hard. “Be careful. Events are moving swiftly, and I can feel the inevitable pull of Fate. I know that soon I will have far, far more work than normal. Something comes swiftly, and all the world is in grave if hidden peril.”

“What does that mean?” Weiss asked.

Summer shook her head. “I'm not sure of the details. I simply know when I may be getting more work than normal, and that that time is swiftly approaching. Before Autumn you will have faced whatever it is... and it will not be stopped without cost.”

“We'll be ready,” Ruby said confidently.

Summer gave them one last smile and then walked away, becoming more insubstantial with every step she took until she was gone completely. When she was both Ruby and Weiss slumped, injuries and exhaustion no longer hidden.

“So you... you can touch anyone now?” Ruby asked after several long minutes without either moving.

A slow smile grew on Weiss' face. “Yes. I... I can.”

Ruby gave her a smile back, before her face fell and she bit her lip. “That means... you don't have to be with me.”

“Huh?” Weiss asked, blinking in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I'm the only one you could, you know, be with,” Ruby said nervously. “You can kiss and touch and- and other things anyone in the world now. You don't have to stay with me if you don't want to.”

“I could already kiss the only one in the world that I wanted to,” Weiss said, leaning forward and giving her soft, chaste kiss on the lips. “I don't see why that would change now that I can with anyone else.”

Ruby blinked back tears, her face quivering with a flood of emotions that changed so quickly that Weiss was lost to follow them all, before settling on a look full of happiness and love that made her heart beat faster as Ruby leaned forward and kissed her again, much harder. Weiss moaned and kissed back, raising a hand to her shoulder before sliding it to her back.

It was when she started to move her arm lower to wrap around her girlfriend that she brushed against the bandaged arm, making Ruby grunt in pain and flinch away. Weiss pulled back and bit her lip,
blushing from both what they were doing and the way that she'd accidentally hurt her partner. “S-
sorry.”

“It's okay,” Ruby said. “I think we should probably stop anyway, though. It's kinda weird making
out in a cemetery… with a dead guy ten feet away… just after talking to my mom… while we both
should be in the hospital.”

“Well, if you're going to put it like that,” Weiss said. “Come on, let's see if we can find our phones…
or at least his phone.”

Ruby bit her lip. “Um… why don't I look?”

Weiss narrowed her eyes at her partner. “I can help. Besides, you're the one who's… who's hurt.
You should be resting.”

Ruby leaned over and gave her a quick kiss. “I forgive you. If you hadn't cut me I'd've been a
zombie chew toy, so I'd be dead and, um, what was it? Oh yeah. I'd be dead and unsanitary, which
is probably worse or something.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I am sorry… I… I hated to hurt you.”

“I know,” Ruby said, giving her a hug. “I think it was more traumatic to you than me… I mean, I
think my nightmares are gonna be about the zombies trying to eat me, not you, uh… taking a blood
sample.”

“That was more than a blood sample, you dolt,” Weiss said. “I cut you. Badly.”

“Well, it's a good thing knife play is a hard limit for me since you're so opposed,” Ruby said lightly.

“Huh?” Weiss asked, scrunching her brow up in confusion.

Ruby blushed. “Never mind. But really, I'm feeling pretty good. Maybe it's the whole ‘I met my I
thought she was dead and gone mother’ thing but I'm not in too much pain. You look like you're a
stiff breeze from my mom having to come back.”

“I'm… okay,” Weiss said, giving in as she slumped, abandoning on any effort to retain a proper
posture. “I'm really not feeling very well.”

“I love you,” Ruby said. “Just rest… the ambulances will be here before you know it.”

“Don't strain yourself looking,” Weiss insisted. “And be careful with your arm. And… if I'm not
with you, make sure you get a tetanus shot and some blood tests… I mean, the knife looked clean,
but-”

Ruby cut her off with a kiss before standing and leaving to look for their things. “Yes, dear.”

Weiss rolled her eyes, but eventually laid down on the hard, cold concrete floor. It was very
uncomfortable, and it was getting even colder since the brazier had gone out. Before long she found
herself dozing slightly, not able to deeply sleep as she started to shiver, but too exhausted to really
stay awake.

“Hey, you okay?” Ruby asked, her voice getting more and more desperate as she spoke. “Weiss?
Weiss! WEISS!”

“Huh?” Weiss asked, opening her eyes blearily. “Ruby? What's wrong?”
Ruby sniffled before laying down beside Weiss and cuddling into her. Weiss frowned, stiffening up at first at the contact, but gradually relaxing. Even if they weren't in love and cuddling a few times a week when Ruby stayed at her apartment, it would've made sense to share warmth now that she wasn't a biohazard.

“I called for an ambulance and more police, but I- I called for you and you didn't answer, and… and I thought…” Ruby said, her voice wavering.

Weiss leaned over and gave her a kiss, missing and only making contact with the corner of her mouth. She frowned for a moment, but was too tired to keep trying. “Just tired. I was asleep.”

“Ohkay.”

“I'm not dying on you.”

“You… already did this case,” Ruby said. “And almost just before Christmas. And when you were a kid.”

“Hmm,” Weiss hummed. “See, that just shows I'm right. Now I've got experience at not dying, so I have an advantage at staying alive.”

“That makes no sense,” Ruby said.

“What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?” Weiss offered questioningly.

Ruby squeezed her tighter. “You're the strongest person I know… stop being an over achiever.”

Weiss smiled. “Okay. I'll try to lay off the dying thing for a while. Besides… I'd have to face your mom and tell her I left you. I'll pass on that.”

“Good,” Ruby hummed.

It took a while for police and ambulances to arrive, and Weiss drifted in and out of consciousness the entire time. It was a relief to not panic about possibly hurting everyone trying to help her at the hospital, although she still flinched whenever she was touched. Eventually she was checked over and given an IV filled with a dust infused serum designed to help people recover from magical exhaustion and allowed to sleep.

The next afternoon she was bored out of her mind, and she smiled when she saw her partner come through the door. “Ruby! I mean, um, I'm happy to see you.”

Ruby rolled her eyes but didn't say anything, giving her a quick kiss and sitting at her bedside. “How are you feeling?”

“Bored out of my mind,” Weiss said. “They'll be letting me go soon.”

“Don't they normally keep people for a few days for this?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shrugged. “I can convalesce better at home. I'm past the point of needing IV treatments, so they're mostly just monitoring me and giving me medicine.”

“You should follow the doctor's advice, Weiss,” Ruby said worriedly.

“I will… just at home,” Weiss said. “How's your arm?”

“The same as this morning,” Ruby said. “It's just a bit sore. I've been trying the whole aura healing
thing but... it's not working too good.”

“Well,” Weiss corrected. “It is hard to learn. I'm far from a master myself, but just keep trying.”

“I will,” Ruby agreed. “I finished talking to the crime scene people.”

“What did they find?” Weiss asked, eager for something besides hospital walls to think about.

“Well, apparently he'd been living in the next mausoleum over. Had a camp bed and stuff setup. They found our weapons and phones and things, so I'll give your stuff back when you get out of here. They took the necromancy books and sent 'em to be taken care of by... whoever takes illegal books. He had some dust and stuff too, and a bunch of ritual tools and notes and things, but... no branding iron.”

Weiss frowned. “That's odd.”

“Yeah, I dunno if they just couldn't find it or what,” Ruby said. “I mean, we know he had one at some point in the last few days. I doubt he just... lost a big magic hunk of metal or whatever.”

They continued to talk about the case, and then other things, until eventually when the doctor came back to check on her Weiss insisted on checking out and going home. She sighed in relief when she passed through her front doors and collapsed on the couch, Ruby sitting down beside her.

“It's good to be home,” Weiss said. “I hate hospitals.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I think everyone hates hospitals.”

Weiss turned and looked at her partner, a small smile growing on her face. She was so beautiful, and for the first time since they'd begun dating she knew that it was safe to touch her. Not only was she truly immune to having her life drained, but Weiss had finally been taught how to control her touch. It was safe. She was safe.

Weiss leaned forward impulsively, kissing Ruby hard. Ruby squeaked for a moment, surprised at the sudden ardor, but she soon got into it. Weiss became lost in the rising passion, a coil of warmth tightening in her belly as she placed a hand on one of Ruby's breasts and began to squeeze it. Ruby moaned and arched her back, finally pulling away from the kiss.

“Aren't... aren't you supposed to be resting?” Ruby panted.

Weiss looked at her through her lashes. “I guess we should go to bed then.”

Ruby swallowed hard, before grinning and scooping Weiss up in her arms.

“Wh-what are you doing you dolt!” Weiss yelped, clinging to her neck.

Ruby grinned. “Just making sure my princess doesn't strain herself.”

“Hmph,” Weiss grunted, before taking advantage of her position to lean over and kiss her girlfriend's neck.

Ruby squeaked and almost tripped at the sudden move, nearly dropping Weiss before she recovered. She glared down at Weiss, who gave her a smug grin. Ruby huffed and carried her to the bed, dropping her on it and shaking her head.

Weiss scooted over and patted the spot next to her.
“Weiss… are you sure?” Ruby asked hesitantly. “I mean, I- I don't want you to push yourself if you aren't ready.”

“Ruby,” Weiss said seriously. “I'm not going to say I'm not nervous. I'm really nervous. And scared. But… I want to do this. I've wanted to do this for a while. If you aren't ready I'll understand, but-”

“I'm ready,” Ruby interrupted. “It's just… last time.”

“I know,” Weiss said with a sigh.

Ruby bit her lip. “Maybe… it was too much 'cause I was touching you a bunch. Maybe…”

She climbed onto the bed and laid down at the center, urging Weiss to move over slightly so she could take the spot. She then put her hands on top of her head.

“What are you doing?” Weiss asked.

“I'm going to keep my hands here,” Ruby said. “If you want me to touch something, you can tell me to and I will, but if you don't want me to I'll put them back here so you know where they are. I won't do anything you aren't ready for.”

Weiss leaned over her and gave her a long, long kiss. “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Ruby said.
Ruby couldn't keep the smile off of her face. The previous night had been amazing.

Well, if she was being honest with herself, it was actually really, really awkward. Really awkward. She'd thought her idea of keeping her hands to herself until Weiss asked for her touch was brilliant, because how long could Weiss possibly resist? The answer turned out to be a painfully long time.

Instead of jumping right into things when she was comfortable, Ruby had found herself naked and being explored for what felt like forever. Apparently Weiss' perfectionism had carried over to her approach to sex, as she wanted to know how every inch of Ruby reacted to being touched, prodded, poked and eventually kissed and then licked. She couldn't complain too much, since Weiss had found erogenous zones she hadn't even known existed. On the other hand, such thorough exploration was both embarrassing and took so long.

Weiss had also had so little idea about what to do. She had obviously read some guides and thought she was ready, but she became surprisingly clumsy when she started touching Ruby, and every time she failed to do whatever it was she was attempting, or when she tickled Ruby or rubbed something the wrong way she acted like it was the end of the world. Or, even worse, when she got things very, very right but thought the sudden sounds Ruby made were her being upset and just stopped what she was doing to apologize for no good reason…

Ruby snuck a look at her partner, who had a shockingly goofy smile on her face as well. Eventually things had progressed, and slowly Weiss had become more comfortable with what was happening, until finally she allowed Ruby to participate, and that had been special. Of course, Weiss had to be difficult by telling her to stop over and over again as she was repeatedly surprised by the sensations of, well, any kind, but eventually they were both able to reach satisfaction and fall asleep in each other's arms.

Waking up beside the woman she loved, who was as clingy in her sleep as a koala and twice as cute, had been wonderful as well, and Weiss was a lot more eager to get down to business when she finally woke up. She still took charge despite her inexperience, and Ruby was surprised that she enjoyed her girlfriend bossing her around in bed. Usually she was the one taking the lead during sex, but the way Weiss' face lit up while giving orders was kind of hot, and they were really quite pleasant orders.

She was looking forward to turning the tables soon and showing Weiss how she liked to do things, but that could wait. She would do anything to avoid triggering another panic attack from her girlfriend, and if she hated Weiss being bossy… she wouldn't be able to be her partner in either sense of the word. Besides, once Weiss was used to the idea she was sure that she'd like Ruby taking charge.

“I think your father is going to guess something is up,” Weiss said.

“Oh?” Ruby asked, glancing over at her partner again.

Weiss hummed. “You haven't stopped grinning like an idiot since you woke up.”

“You're one to talk,” Ruby said.

Weiss immediately schooled her features, although her eyes were still sparkling. “I do not grin like an idiot.”
“I dunno… that was a pretty big grin.”

“Hardly,” She sniffed. “I merely have a joyful mien.”

“Well, a mean something,” Ruby teased.

Weiss crossed her arms. “Keep this up and you can stay at your own apartment tonight.”

“No, Weiss!” Ruby whined, pouting. “Don't make me go back to my cold, lonely apartment.”

“Doesn't your sister live with you? And isn't Blake over there all the time?”

Ruby stopped being so melodramatic and really frowned. “Actually… I haven't seen much of them since Christmas. I think she's still really busy looking into White Fang activity.”

“Ugh, what an awful bunch of degenerates,” Weiss hissed. “Have they made any progress?”

“She hasn't said anything,” Ruby said with a shrug. “It can't be that hard to find that much dust hidden though, right? I mean… it's a lot of dust.”

“True, but the White Fang have managed to evade international law enforcement for years,” Weiss said. “Sienna Khan is number one on the FBI most wanted list and she still manages to send out all of those videos without being caught. And my father has spent significant resources looking for her as well. It would not surprise me if he had stooped even so low as demon summoning for information, but he hasn't been able to put a stop to them.”

Ruby sighed, the happy mood slipping away. It had been a wonderful morning and a surprisingly pleasant drive despite the slush on the roads. “Blake is really good at detective and undercover stuff, and Yang… Yang is smarter than she lets on.”

“She'd have to be,” Weiss snorted.

“Weiss…”

“Anyway, let's not worry about terrorists right now,” Weiss said. “Are you ready to talk to your father?”

“Oh course,” Ruby said. “Well, I mean, I'm not sure what to say. This whole 'mom is Death' thing is pretty crazy, and he didn't even tell me when I was super confused about you being able to touch me.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“A plan?” Ruby parroted, having no idea what her partner was talking about.

Weiss huffed and rolled her eyes. “For your conversation with your father.”

“Um…” Ruby trailed off. “Ask him?”

Weiss gave her an unimpressed look. “That's it?”

“Well, yeah, I mean, the only time I've ever tried to plan a conversation was when I got drunk at a party in high school and I tried to come up with a way for him not to notice,” Ruby said. “It really didn't work.”

“I thought you didn't like alcohol?” Weiss asked.
“I don’t,” Ruby said, making a disgusted face. “I wanted to be one of the cool kids I guess, and there was this girl I had a crush on going to the party, so I went. Big mistake. I accidentally drank the punch ‘cause I didn't know it would have a whole bottle of Everclear in it, and it was super gross but I panicked and drank it all when I tried to talk to the girl I liked and it was a huge mess ‘cause I didn't know I was drunk but I was super drunk. And that was how I came out in high school… hitting on a straight girl while so drunk I was slurring and could barely stand.”

“They just let you get drunk like that?” Weiss demanded. “That was very dangerous.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, although she felt slightly warmed at how protective her girlfriend could be. “The only damage was my pride and reputation. I mean, it wasn't the worst thing in the world, but being the openly gay kid wasn't the easiest thing in high school. Yang was there for me, though.”

Yang had beaten up so many bullies those first few weeks.

“So what are you going to say to him?” Weiss asked, bringing things back to the original topic.

“I dunno… ’so dad, I talked to mom’?” Ruby offered.

Weiss huffed, but before she could lecture Ruby about being unprepared for a talk with her dad (and Ruby worried a bit that Weiss thought it was normal to have to carefully plan a conversation with one’s parent) they arrived at his home. Ruby parked and stepped outside, leading the way to the front door. When she reached the porch Weiss suddenly leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“For luck,” she muttered, bright red and unable to look at Ruby. She was so completely adorable, Ruby decided, although she doubted that her girlfriend would appreciate the sentiment, no matter how true it was.

After she knocked her dad opened the door, looking surprised but happy to see them. “Ruby! Weiss, how are you two… come in, it's cold out there.”

“Thank you, sir,” Weiss said formally.

He rolled his eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you… call me Tai.”

“Sorry, s- um, Tai,” Weiss murmured. She seemed uncomfortable even making meaningless polite apologies, so Ruby made sure to send her a happy smile, although she didn't seem to notice.

“Did you need something?” her dad asked. “Not that you need to to stop by, but it's a bit out of your way, isn't it?”

“No,” Ruby said. “Well, kinda. I was, um, can we talk?”

“Uh oh,” he teased. “Am I in trouble?”

Ruby crossed her arms. “Did you do something to get in trouble for?”

“Always,” he said cheerfully. “I've got coffee on if you want to talk in the kitchen after you hang your coats up.”

“Sure,” she said, starting to undo her outer layers. Gloves, a scarf, and her coat were discarded and hung as he left the room, Weiss doing the same right after. Her girlfriend still wore her normal gloves under her heavy winter ones, a lifetime of experience not easily forgotten in a few days of being safe.

Before she could go to the kitchen Zwei strolled in, barking once to get her attention. Ruby grinned,
about to approach him when she noticed Weiss freeze, a strange expression on her face. “Weiss?”

Her girlfriend didn’t say anything, instead shakily removing her other gloves and placing them with her coat, her eyes never leaving the corgi-foo dog mix. She then slowly walked up to him and dropped to her knees, before, after closing her eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath, reaching out a hand and placing it on Zwei's head.

Ruby felt like her heart was going to explode as she watched the childlike joy grow on Weiss’ face as she slowly and awkwardly began to pet the dog. Weiss was actually teary eyed as the patient dog let her take her time, learning the right way to love on him with trial and error. It was absolutely the sweetest thing that she had ever seen in her life, although a little heartbreaking when she considered why it meant so much to her girlfriend.

“I'll leave you here with him, okay Weiss?”

Weiss mumbled something that might have been confirmation without looking up, so with one last smile she left the room and went to the kitchen, where her dad had set out a cup of coffee for her just the way she tolerated it. After taking a slurp of the over sweetened yet still bitter drink Ruby sat down across from him and took a deep breath.

“So, dad… I talked to mom.”

A multitude of expressions crossed Tai’s face over the next few moments, before finally he nodded. “I see.”

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“It wasn't the easiest thing to talk about… or to be believed about,” Tai said. “I intended to, but… it just got harder the older you got.”

Ruby scoffed. “I needed to know, dad. What if something went wrong? And… and… I even told you about touching Weiss and how weird that was and you didn't think I needed to know?”

He looked sheepish. “Sorry.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. She loved her dad, but he had never been the most responsible parent. She hated fighting with him or making demands, so after a few moments she sighed. “How did it happen, anyway?”

“Oh, and I even told you about touching Weiss and how weird that was and you didn't think I needed to know?”

“Okay,” her dad said. “Let me tell you about how my years long near Death experience began...”

“Ugh, I hate coming down here,” Emerald said.

“Didn't you work here just a few months ago?” Mercury drawled.

Emerald shook her head. “Yeah, but… it wasn't like this.”

The abandoned club once run by the Prince had been closed up without work done or attention paid to it since the police raid was complete. Cinder had managed to make all of the paperwork associated with the property fall through the cracks, leaving it forgotten by the city. Emerald grimaced as she walked around the bloodstains at the entrance of the basement. It hadn't even been cleaned up after
the initial forensics sweep.

The next room was the one that made her uncomfortable, however. The atmosphere had felt off the first time she'd set foot inside it, the absolutely dead, still feeling of the obliterated orchard very unnerving. There had been a lot of dark magic poured into the soil, and the orders to clean it up had been tied up in red tape as well. Even without outside interference the dark magic would've begun to fester after that long.

They both took a moment to focus their auras before opening the next door, even Mercury looking uncomfortable when they did. He wasn't a magic user, having only picked up the most basic of tricks, like protecting himself from dark magic, while he was a detective with Supernatural Affairs, but even he could feel the wrongness in the air. It was like standing in front of an open furnace, or more accurately an unshielded nuclear reactor.

And that was without mentioning the stink of rotting corpses.

The walls of the huge, open space were covered in runes and sigils of binding magic, designed to contain the mana within the room, as the growing power would've been noticed by half the state. At the center of the room was a pile of corpses, all sacrificed by the simple expedient of abandoning them to die of dehydration, the necromantic deadening of the location mixing with the sinkhole of dark magic to make it a swift and unpleasant end even for that method of death. The bodies were then left where they died, feeding the growing dark magic with their painful, ritually prepared passing.

Waiting for them was Cinder, and a wicked smile slowly grew across her beautiful face when she saw them. Emerald tried to maintain her composure, but she felt herself grow hot just from the look. Exciting evenings always followed that look.

“Mercury, Emerald, I trust your mission was a success?” Cinder drawled.

“Of course,” Mercury said, dropping the large bag he was carrying over his shoulder onto the ground with a thump. Emerald gestured, and it faded into its true form, a scared looking, handcuffed man with a tattered winter coat.

“Very good,” Cinder said. “If you could put him with the others...”

Mercury carried him over, but Emerald didn't pay any attention, instead distracted by the way Cinder walked towards her. She moved with an inhuman grace, hips swaying enticingly until suddenly she was right there, one arm around her back and the other grabbing her by the hair and pulling her in for a hard, demanding kiss. Emerald moaned and pressed against her lover, wrapping her arms around her, although she'd learned the first time not to try groping her without permission.

Emerald didn't normally date her coworkers. It was a bad idea in the criminal underworld to make yourself vulnerable, especially when your boss wasn't human. She hadn't been able to deny Cinder for long, however, and she'd found her affair to be full of the best sex she'd ever had. More than that, Cinder made her feel like she belonged. After a lifetime without a place to call her own, she'd found it in the person currently sliding a hand down her side until it squeezed her hip.

Emerald, yelped, flinching from the hard contact, although she relaxed as Cinder stroked the sore spot soothingly. The brand was painful even a week after she received it.

“Um… did you need anything else?” Mercury asked, his voice uncomfortable.

Cinder pulled back, although she didn't take her hands off of Emerald. “Yes, find Adam and tell him
that I've begun gathering the orichalcum. I'll be able to provide him with what he wants by spring…
and it'll be time to make our first moves then as well.”

“I still can't believe you convinced Adam Taurus to work with us,” Emerald murmured as he left. Mercury was a total dick, but at least he didn't stay and try to perv on them like some people she'd worked with in the past would've.

“It's all about knowing what people want,” Cinder said as she stroked the brand again. “Mercury wanted legs, that necromancer wanted knowledge, and Adam Taurus wants to hurt all the people he thinks have wronged him.”

Emerald smirked as she let Cinder lead her to her old boss' bedroom, which was still well equipped for an exciting evening despite the magical explosion that had destroyed his throne room. “It's hard to believe that necromancer gave away his magic branding iron just for the location of that french book.”

“Like I said, it's all about knowing what people want, my dear,” Cinder breathed in her ear, before biting it, making Emerald moan. “And you and I are going to get everything we want.”

Cinder pushed Emerald onto the large bed, and she lay still, giving her lover an adoring look as she examined the shelves of sex toys for something to use that evening. Before they could start she had one more thing to report. “Oh… I hit my sources today. It looks like Qrow is still looking into the homeless going missing.”

Cinder grunted and clenched her fists for a moment, before moving over to the bondage equipment. “I see. I had hoped that he'd agree with the official reports coming from Supernatural Affairs, but I guess he realized that even a necromancer as prolific as Liam wouldn't need to kill that many over the past few months.”

“We might have to look elsewhere for sacrifices if he doesn't stop,” Emerald said regretfully.

“Hmm… I suppose so,” Cinder agreed. “I'll see if the White Fang can bring us any from out of town.”

“So… do you want me to look like myself tonight?” Emerald asked, ready to use her illusions.

Cinder looked over at her for a moment, her burning orange eyes unreadable, before finally she approached and gave her a hard, possessive kiss. “No need, my little gem. I want the real you.”

Emerald melted. Unlike disposable fools like Adam and Mercury, Cinder really cared about her, and she was pretty sure that she was falling in love.

At the very least, she knew that she would do anything for her.
Seventh Case: Dinner

The restaurant was the sort of place she had always eaten at on the occasions when she actually left Schnee manor, prior to meeting Ruby. It wasn't the sort of overpriced dining experience that catered to the middle class once a year on an anniversary, but rather the very expensive and high quality establishment that only the truly wealthy visited.

For Weiss, who rarely saw the world outside her window growing up, visiting high class restaurants with her sister was an exciting break from the endless drudgery of isolation and training. Ruby quietly hated every restaurant she chose, and even though Weiss always paid for them, she was always visibly uncomfortable when a menu appeared that lacked written prices, or when there wasn't a written menu at all. Despite that she put up with eating at them occasionally on the dates Weiss picked, the same way that Weiss put up with some of Ruby's more questionable choices.

Weiss was dressed very nicely, with a lovely pale blue dress that went to her ankles with a slit to her thigh, revealing gray stockings. She wore a bolero over it, as she was still very uncomfortable with having exposed skin despite the months that had passed since her life changing encounter with Death, although, with great effort, she had managed to forgo gloves that evening. She kept thinking about them waiting for her at home, but she managed to restrain herself despite the churning in her stomach. She actually felt naked without them on.

What was really interesting about her clothing was worn underneath her dress, and wasn't for any eyes but one to see. She'd always liked pretty undergarments, but seeing Ruby's reaction to her silken underwear had made her spend evenings that Ruby didn't stay over visiting every high class lingerie store in the city to find new things to wear, although what she had on just then was special. She had actually taken the family jet the previous weekend to Paris just to visit the best designers in the world, and she shivered in anticipation of Ruby's reaction that night.

She blushed slightly, a small smile on her face as she thought about what else she had planned for the evening. It seemed like, now that she had finally started, she never wanted to do anything else besides make love, to the point where it was extremely embarrassing. She was raised to be a refined lady, and one who had always taken pride in her self control, and being above such plebeian things as sex and love. While she had been excited to make love to Ruby, on some level she had thought it would just be an interesting novelty, something they would do now and then after nice dates.

She had not been prepared for how enjoyable it all was, and how badly she wanted it. Not just while it was happening, although she had even been humiliatingly reduced to begging Ruby for more on several occasions, but she kept trying to find excuses to make love more often. It took all of her willpower to not invite Ruby to stay over every night, and even when she wasn't around she thought about such things far too often. Even sitting in a nice restaurant she found herself thinking about what they had done just a few days ago. She didn't know where Ruby acquired her toys, but just a few days before she had-

“You should pay more attention to your surroundings, Weiss,” Winter said disapprovingly as she sat down across from her. “What if I had been someone who wanted to do you harm? This is a fairly nice establishment, but it's still quite public.”

“Winter!” Weiss gasped, straightening up and turning bright red, her pale skin making her embarrassed blush far too obvious. She couldn't believe that she'd been caught by her sister while distracted by such… licentious thoughts. It was mortifying, although at least Winter would likely assume her reaction was simply from being caught so unaware.
Winter chuckled slightly, her eyes pausing for a moment on Weiss' ungloved hands, although she didn't comment, simply sitting down, stone faced. Weiss felt her stomach clench unpleasantly as she realized that her sister was in a bad mood for some reason. She hoped that it wasn't because of anything that she'd done. Was she that upset about Weiss zoning out? Or perhaps her lack of gloves? Winter had always wanted her to be careful, knowing how much it would kill her to accidentally harm someone.

"It's been a while since we've spent much time together," Winter said. "I never thought that we'd see each other less when you left the manor and joined the police, but somehow that seems to be the case."

Weiss looked down at her hands nervously. She studied the visible blue veins for a moment as it suddenly occurred to her that, in fact, she didn't know the back of her hands very well at all despite the usual saying. They actually looked strange and foreign ungloved, and being able to feel the texture of the tablecloth was even more unsettling.

"I'm sorry, Winter," Weiss said. "Things have simply been… busy."

"That's why it's important to make time for yourself," Winter scolded. "You've always focused entirely on your work. Even as a child you studied too much. I had become very concerned about you prior to your getting a job at Beacon, but now it seems that you are still spending far too much time working."

"No, I spend plenty of time doing other things!" Weiss objected.

Winter gave her an unimpressed look. "And yet, you still can't find time to contact me beyond the occasional phone call? I fear that you take after father a bit much in that regard."

Weiss actually flinched at the comparison. Her father wasn't just a workaholic. He had been almost entirely absent from their lives after their mother died, only appearing to scold or punish them for their many failings, real and imagined. Winter seemed to realize that she had gone too far as her face softened. "I'm sorry, Weiss. That was too much. I'm simply in a foul mood and I seem to be taking it out on you… I suppose we both learned terrible lessons from father."

"No, it's alright," Weiss said with a weak smile. "Is something wrong? I know I haven't been as diligent as I should be at speaking to you lately…"

"No, as I said, I was being unfair to you," Winter said. "At work I'm sometimes forced to interact with this slovenly, drunken imbecile. He even imbibes from a flask during working hours! How he still has his job I cannot say, but I was actually forced to work with him for hours today."

"That's awful," Weiss said, imagining what it would be like to work with someone like Ruby's uncle. She shuddered, glad that her sister wasn't forced to be around him at least. It was unlikely that a captain from SWAT would be coordinating with Supernatural Affairs Intel's captain on a regular basis. "Is tonight a bad night?"

"No," Winter said, giving her a small but genuine smile. "Seeing you has been the highlight of my day. Now, is there anything new with you?"

"A few things," Weiss said, thinking about Ruby, before deciding to wait until they had both eaten a little and Winter was less annoyed before bringing up her girlfriend. She really didn't want to have to outrun her sister to save Ruby. "I've actually been thinking a considerable amount about the situation with the faunus."
“Oh?”

“Both our family and the faunus community have suffered through our actions over the centuries,” Weiss said. “Many of us have died, far too many, but they have suffered immensely as well, and they lack the political power to improve their situation. I want to do something to make things better.”

Winter raised an eyebrow. “I have to say, that's rather unexpected. Ever since mother… you haven't been very positively disposed towards the faunus.”

Weiss blushed, looking down. “I know. But we do bad things to them, and they do bad things to us, so we do bad things back to them… it never ends. The only way things will get better is if someone says 'enough' and tries to fix it instead of focusing on past wrongs.”

“A very mature attitude,” Winter said approvingly. “I'm not sure father will feel the same way, however.”

Weiss grimaced. “Most likely not. I'm hoping to eventually have a plan that I can do fait accompli. Father would rather grit his teeth and be angry at me in private than acknowledge he was outmaneuvered by going back on things in public.”

“Not alone,” Winter said. “I will not allow father to hurt you.”

“He won't,” Weiss said.

“I don't just mean physically,” Winter said. “I won't let you walk into the lion's den alone.”

Weiss felt a surge of warmth and gave her sister a smile. “Thank you.”

“Have you put any thought into what you'll do?” Winter asked. “The situation seems… intractable.”

“I have considered it,” Weiss said. “I still need to do more research, but I refuse to accept defeat before I've even begun just because it seems difficult. When our ancestors tried to find a way to protect the world from outside attacks people thought that it was impossible as well, but they managed to forge the Great Barrier.”

“Not without great effort and cost.”

“True, but I've never been shy about hard work,” Weiss said.

They talked about lighter subjects after that as they were served, and Weiss very much enjoyed the tasting menu the chef had prepared that evening. She couldn't help smiling as she thought about the way that Ruby reacted the first time she'd brought her to such a meal, and while she and her sister were enjoying what was being offered, she was sure that Ruby would've hated it.

“You've been very happy this evening, especially considering the difficult task that you intend to take on,” Winter said. “I know that I complained about my work, but how has your's been? Have you made any friends?”

“Oh yes,” Weiss said with a smile. “I actually have befriended several people in the department. I even spent Christmas with my partner and her blonde oaf of a sister.”

“Good,” Winter said with an approving nod. “I was afraid that you would have difficulties with that. You've never been the most outgoing person, especially after your injury.”

Weiss looked down at her ungloved hands. “Yes, well… it wasn't easy. It still isn't easy. Sometimes
it feels exhausting knowing that I have to spend time around other people, but my partner knows to give me space even without my having to ask and that makes things easier. I actually sometimes see her running interference for me when she guesses that I need some time to myself to think.”

“I'm happy that you've found someone that you can rely upon,” Winter said. “How are things between the two of you? I assume she is one of the friends that you've been speaking of.”

Weiss bit her lip. “Actually, there's something else we need to discuss. About that.”

Winter set her current fork down and turned her full attention to her sister. “What is it?”

“Ruby and I… we aren't simply friends anymore,” Weiss said, deciding to be blunt. “We're romantically involved.”

Later she would remember Winter's expression and laugh about it, but in the moment she was too nervous to appreciate the expression of open shock on her sister's face. After a few moments Winter recovered, although she still looked bewildered. “I… I see. I had not expected that outcome.”

“Do you… disapprove?” Weiss asked hesitantly.

“I- of course not,” Winter said. “If you are happy then that is the most important thing. I just never expected you to suddenly confess to dating anyone, much less your female coworker. There isn't anything wrong, of course… although dating your colleague is against police policy.”

“Actually, that isn't a problem in Supernatural Affairs,” Weiss said. “I investigated myself, and it seems that Inspector Ozpin doesn't think it should be banned, and he has significant leeway in writing our department rules.”

“I see,” Winter said. “Still, I'm also surprised given your… condition.”

“She was willing to accept my inability to be with her in that way,” Weiss said softly. “She… she loves me. It didn't stop her for even a second.”

“That's wonderful, Weiss,” Winter said. “I'm so happy that you've been able to find someone that truly cares for you.”

Weiss smiled. “Thank you. Also… it's not necessary anymore.”

“What isn't?”

Slowly Weiss reached an ungloved hand across the table, offering it to her sister. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” Winter said, although her eyes were locked on Weiss' small, pale hand.

“Take my hand,” Weiss said.

Winter paused, and in that pause Weiss could feel every time that they hadn't been able to touch. Ever time their father had scolded them for even being near each other, unwilling to risk accidental contact. Every time she had been sent to her room and she'd been forced to talk to her sister through doors or over electronic devices.

After a long moment Winter slowly reached out and took her hand.

It was warmer than Weiss would've expected, and well calloused, both from swordplay as well as guns. Winter worked hard for every ounce of her skill, and it showed in her hands. Weiss squeezed tightly, smiling as for the first time since she was a small child she held her big sister's hand.
A sniffle drew her attention, and Weiss almost gasped when she saw Winter wiping tears from her eyes. “Winter?”

Winter stood and walked around the table, pulling Weiss into her arms and squeezing so tightly that she suddenly worried for her ribs. Weiss froze for a long moment at the sudden contact, but finally she relaxed and squeezed back, leaning into the arms of the second loved one to hug her in more than a decade.

“I can’t believe… I’m so happy for you, Weiss,” Winter said when she finally got her emotions back under control.

“I love you, Winter,” Weiss murmured as she let go and sat back down, wiping tears from her own face.

“I love you too, little sister,” Winter said. “How did this happen?”

Weiss smirked. “That is a very long story… and I’m not sure that you would believe me.”

Winter smiled. “Keep your secrets for now then, sister, but I want to know someday. And I want to meet Ruby again.”

Weiss' eyes narrowed. “Why?”

Winter smiled, her expression giving away nothing. “The last time that I saw her we were spending it at your bedside while you were hospitalized. I just want to properly get to know my sister's girlfriend. Why don't we meet up at the Vytal Festival?”

Weiss paused. “I haven't been since mother…”

“All the more reason to go,” Winter said.

Eventually Weiss agreed, and after some more conversation they left, Winter driving home and Weiss having her driver take her back to her apartment. She couldn't keep a smile from her face at how well telling her sister had gone, and she was sure that the evening was going to get even better, as she had Ruby waiting for her at home.

She unlocked her door and stepped inside, and the moment she locked it again a tiny furry figure ran up to her, barking happily. Weiss grinned and crouched, immediately petting the excited Zwei. “Oh, look at you. Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy? That's right, it's you! You're a good boy!”

Weiss absolutely loved small animals, and after a lifetime of not being able to have a pet she loved every opportunity to spend time with Zwei. She had thought about getting a pet of her own in fact, but the little corgy-foo dog mix had stolen her heart from the moment she had met him and he had been smart enough to let her coo over him without trying to touch her. It felt wrong to look for a dog of her own when Tai was so willing to let Ruby bring him over to her apartment.

“You know, I'm starting to wonder if you're really dating me or just using me to get to Zwei,” Ruby said as she came over to join them.

“It's not my fault he's so cute,” Weiss said airily, although she did stand up and look over at her girlfriend.

Ruby had on her own cute expression, her silver eyes large and lower lip quivering in an exaggerated pout. Frankly, it was much sillier and less effective than her actual pleading expression, but the fact that she tried it more than made up for the difference in adorableness. “Fine,” Weiss said,
“I guess you're kinda cute, too.”

“Not as cute as you,” Ruby said happily.

Weiss huffed. “I'm not cute.”

Ruby stared at her with a happy smile on her face. “You saying you're not just makes you even cuter… and I'm not sure how that's possible.”

Weiss rolled her eyes and decided to shut Ruby up with a quick kiss before walking over to the couch. Ruby had been watching television rather than playing her usual video games, although her taste in viewing was atrocious. Weiss was paying for her to have so many hundreds of channels, and yet she watched such awful shows.

Still, it was hard to complain when Ruby had left the book she was reading sitting out for her, and the moment she picked it up Ruby sat next to her and leaned against her side, with Zwei hopped up onto her lap. She would put up with much worse taste in entertainment for the wonder of sharing a couch with her girlfriend and the best dog in the world.

“So… how did it go?” Ruby asked after a while.

Weiss smiled and kissed her temple. “Great. Winter wants to meet you.”

Ruby froze. “Um… we've met before.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Right, but now we're dating. If we're going to be together she'll need to get to know you better.”

“R-right,” Ruby mumbled fearfully.

Weiss kissed her forehead. “It won't be that bad. She already likes you, and before you know it you'll have another big sister looking out for you.”

“When did she want to meet?” Ruby asked, slightly mollified.

“The Vytal Festival,” Weiss said. “We can make a date of it, and meet her for a while at some point.”

Ruby's eyes lit up. “That sounds fun. Just… you'll make sure I get back in one piece, right?”

“Of course,” Weiss said. “After all… I've got some new things to show you after the date.”

“What?” Ruby asked eagerly.

“Hmm…. I suppose, since you've been good, you can see the first one tonight,” Weiss said huskily. “You'll need to unwrap it first.”

“It's a present?” Ruby asked.

“Of course,” Weiss said. “You'll have to unwrap my dress to see it.”

“Oh,” Ruby said, looking down at the beautiful dress Weiss was wearing, before her eyes lit up at the meaning. “Oh. Well… we wouldn't want to have it go to waste, now would we?”

“Certainly not,” Weiss breathed as Ruby leaned down to kiss her.
“Breaking news!” the television suddenly interrupted. “A bomb has destroyed One Schnee Plaza, the primary headquarters of the Schnee Dust Company.”

“Oh, god,” Ruby said, pulling back and turning to look at the television.

A bucket of ice water poured on them both couldn't have ended the mood so quickly as they both sat up, staring at the screen in horror. The once beautiful glass and steel building was a ruin. It was still standing, but the entire front was a crumbled, burning wreck.

Before either could react to what they were seeing their phones began to ring.
Seventh Case: Tumbled Down

One Schnee Plaza hadn't been the tallest building in the city. It was actually more difficult to ward a building the taller it was, as the wards would have to distort into a tall, cylindrical bubble rather than the more natural dome shape they preferred to form, and so her grandfather had had the building made only ten stories tall and fairly squat, preferring practicality over ostentation. That was also the reason why the surrounding buildings, Two through Thirteen Schnee Plaza, were also part of the SDC campus, as one building was insufficient to house all of the employees and facilities needed by the thriving business empire.

One Schnee Plaza was the heart of the modern company, however, taking over all central administrative tasks after Schnee Manor became insufficient during the twentieth century. As it had been so important it had been layered with enough wards to make it the third most protected building in the city, although it's defenses lagged far behind Schnee Manor and Beacon. It still should've been able to survive any attempt to attack it from the outside, and a huge, professional army of security kept the interior protected.

The once proud glass and shining steel facade was shattered, the crumpled building looking like a pewter model that had been soaked in acid, leaving it shrunken and pitted. All of the lost material was scattered about the ground in a messy pile, with a shallow but wide crater where part of the parking lot used to be.

“Oh my god,” Ruby murmured as she parked the car, still a long walk from the site. The police barricade stretched for blocks in every direction, and despite the obvious dangers a massive crowd of people had gathered to watch what was unfolding. “Weiss?”

Weiss was numb. She couldn't comprehend how such an attack had happened, and she couldn't bear to think about how many people had no doubt died. It was late in the evening, but the SDC never slept, and an entire shift of workers had no doubt been in the building at the time.

Her father usually worked until very late in the evening. Her brother had even begun accompanying him from time to time.

She might truly be an orphan, and she hadn't been able to reach anyone to find out.

“Come on,” Ruby said gently.

They climbed from the car and began to walk briskly towards the ruined building, Ruby leading the way and showing her ID at several checkpoints to get by. Eventually they saw Captain Goodwitch speaking to a handsome, graying man with a stern expression and military bearing. He had on a long white trench coat over a gray suit, and Weiss recognized him immediately as Inspector James Ironwood, the man in charge of SWAT.

Standing beside him was her older sister, who was back in uniform and looking nothing like the loving sister she had been an hour before. In her place was a stern figure that could've been carved from alabaster, until their eyes met and she saw a flicker of warmth before she returned her attention to the meeting.

As they approached they could hear that things were heated, although they stopped arguing as she came near. Ironwood gave her a nod. “Detective Schnee. I wish we were meeting under better circumstances.”
“Inspector Ironwood, sister,” Weiss said with a nod before looking at Goodwitch. “Captain?”

“Good, you're here,” she said. “Normally we would bring in forensic warding specialists to figure out what happened, but the SDC would throw a fit and keep us tied up in red tape for months.”

“Glynda-” Ironwood started, only to be completely ignored as Captain Goodwitch talked over him.

“You two go find Nikos and Arc, and join them in searching the wreckage and building. Try to find any survivors, or any dangers still present. However, your primary mission is to figure out anything you can about how this happened. If we're going to catch whoever did this and keep it from happening again we need to know how it happened this time.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Ruby said.

Weiss gave Winter a single glance before following Ruby towards the building as the two leaders began to argue again. The path they took led them past the first triage area, where medical workers frantically tried to stabilize those they could, while leaving others who were too far gone in order to have the time to save the rest. Weiss stared for a moment at the field of bodies, wondering how many were people she'd met. She rarely became involved in SDC business once it became apparent she wouldn't be the heiress, but her father had frequently done business at home. Did she know any of the people dying in front of her? Was her father among them? Her brother? Had they been killed instantly instead?

The numb state that Weiss had been in since she had seen the news slowly began to fall away, and in its place she felt angry. It was so senseless. So many people dead, and for what? What would it accomplish?

A pile of supplies was available, and they took a minute to pull on heavy, reinforced gloves, breathing masks and eye protection. They weren't as good as the equipment the fire department was using, but it would at least keep them from breathing in the clouds of likely toxic particulate matter released by the explosion. As she carefully adjusted her mask it suddenly occurred to her that from the building's age it very likely could have asbestos insulation. She doubted her father would've spent money replacing it if it did.

Once they were properly geared they walked around the shallow crater, joining the large force of first responders searching through the wreckage. People moved past carrying twisted, ruined bodies, some still alive, although many were dead. Weiss couldn't take her eyes away from them.

“Weiss?” Ruby said. “I think I see Pyrrha.”

Weiss blinked and looked where Ruby pointed, and she nodded before following her partner to the other detectives. Pyrrha was holding up a heavy beam of some kind while Jaune worked to free the person trapped under it.

Ruby jogged over, moving beside her and grabbed the heavy beam, helping her to shift it a few more inches so that Jaune could carefully pull the man out. He was covered in blood, and his legs moved… wrong, obviously broken in many places. He was breathing, however, which was more than could be said of so many around them.

“Ruby, Weiss...” Jaune said, nodding them after they let the beam down and signaled for paramedics.

“Hey,” Ruby said quietly.

“Did, um, did you know anyone who might be working here right now?” Jaune asked Weiss.
“Yes,” she said stiffly, still trying to take in the devastation. The side of the building they were on was the one that had housed her father's office, and while the top floor was in slightly better shape than the lower ones, she could see a lack of walls all the way to the roof in that area. She wondered suddenly if she could've seen his body if she had looked from the right angle.

“T'm sorry,” Pyrrha said quietly. “Is there… anywhere you want us to search? SA hasn't been given any particular search zone, as many of us have special ways of finding things.”

“Up… but that might be dangerous,” Weiss said as she eyed the structure critically.

“Actually, the building itself seems surprisingly stable,” Pyrrha said as she looked up at the top floors. “I also don't think many people have been up that way. The damage looks less severe at the top as well… there could be many injured survivors up there.”

“I…. thanks,” Weiss said hesitantly.

“Sure thing,” Jaune said as he looked around for a way up. “Let us know if there's anything we can do to help.”

“Arc… Jaune… thank you,” Weiss said. Yesterday those words would've tasted like ashes in her mouth, but standing in the ruin of her family's headquarters, human ash filling the air, her annoyance at the bumbling detective felt petty.

“No problem, Snow Angel,” Jaune said.

Weiss felt her eyebrow twitch, the surge of annoyance reminding her why she found him so annoying in the first place. Still, it was the first emotion to break through her haze of shock and growing anger so she couldn't be too upset about it. “Idiot. Captain Goodwitch also wants me to try to find how this bomb… happened. The wards should've kept out even this much force.”

“Shouldn't a big public office like this have weak wards?” Ruby asked. “I mean, you said it's hard for a public building to have tight wards. And a bomb doesn't have much intent to it.”

Weiss nodded approvingly, glad that Ruby paid attention to her even when she was lecturing about esoteric magical topics. “First, this building didn't have public access. The other buildings around the plaza were used for more public business. Anyone going inside of this building required being keyed into the wards.”

“So every secretary, every janitor?” Pyrrha asked as she carefully lead them through the rubble towards the far side of the building, which was still intact. Standing on the opposite side of the building you almost wouldn't be able to tell that something had happened.

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Every worker signs Warding Contracts along with their NDAs when they come to work in this building. It keys them into the wards for a year and a day at a time, but can be broken without consequence for any violation of a long list of terms. We don't need drug screenings in this building, for instance, as we would know who violated the contract the moment they can't enter the premises.”

“And no outsiders ever come in?” Ruby asked.

“Not this building,” Weiss said. “My father… as head of the SDC he could invite anyone in under his authority, but he almost never does. He prefers making business deals at the manor.”

“If the wards prevent entrance, then how can we be searching for bodies?” Jaune asked.
Weiss pursed her lips. “They are obviously down. When we stop I'm going to study them for a bit, see if I can see anything. I… haven't examined them yet.”

Ruby made sure she saw her, before placing a hand on her shoulder and squeezing. Weiss smiled slightly, feeling warmed by both the gesture, and that Ruby was so considerate about letting her know that it was coming before offering it. She still spooked at unexpected contact, and her nerves were frayed enough by the current situation.

“As for your second observation, Ruby… a bomb may be abandoned before being detonated, but it still carries the intent of the people who made and set it,” Weiss said. “Even if it didn't… the wards on this building will… would repel anything attempting to damage it. They're strong enough to repel a tornado, and were reinforced with the best anti explosive magics developed between the world wars. Obviously nothing is going to stop a nuclear bombardment, but it should've been undamaged by bombs much stronger than this one. Weaker wards made it through the Battle of Britain.”

They reached the far side of the building, and there was a staircase in each corner. The one they reached seemed intact, and the emergency lighting was even on inside. Pyrrha carefully lead the way up, and other than water damage from the sprinklers having run at some point nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

The top floor was more intact than the bottom had been, but they could already see signs of damage. They began to search from room to room, Pyrrha easily forcing open doors that tried to prevent entry. They found signs of injured people, such as blood, but no bodies.

Eventually they reached the middle of the building, and Weiss felt her breath catch as she stared through shattered walls out into the night. Helicopters, medical, police and media, circled in the sky, and she watched them as she stood still, unable to move.


“That's where… where my father's office was,” Weiss said, her voice sounding strange in her own ears.

“Would he have been working now?” Jaune asked.

“I'm sure he was working… I don't know if he was working here,” Weiss said.

“Have you called him?” Pyrrha asked gently.

Weiss nodded her head, before schooling her face into a serious expression, trying to forget about everything that was happening. “Yes… I couldn't get through. But I can worry about all of that later; I have work to do.”

“Weiss-” Ruby started.

“This room is clear… I'm going to study the wards while you check the next few,” Weiss said.

The others reluctantly moved on, and she stayed in the hallway, knowing that they would be even more worried if she was out of their sight. She closed her eyes and used some of her meditation techniques to calm herself down. She had a job to do, and being battered by the storm of emotions her potentially dead father stirred up wouldn't help anything. She would express them later, alone in her room… or perhaps with Ruby holding her. That sounded much better, as embarrassing as it was.

She opened her eyes, activating her aura sight and looking around. What she saw was… bizarre. The wards around a building looked to magical vision like a vast, complex spiderweb covering the
structure. A home with basic magical security, enough to ward out petty imps and minor Grimm, looked like a common spider web. The security around One Schnee Plaza should've looked so thick and dense with strands that it appeared to be a veritable cocoon of flowing mana.

The wards had been shredded, torn to pieces and then left to rip apart under their own mystical weight. She had never seen anything like it, nor had she read about such a thing. Normally wards were weakened by magic flooding or draining sections of them until what remained was too weak to function. She had expected the faded, pale look of overloaded wards, but the broken, twisted remains of the magic looked like no such thing had happened to it.

For a long time she studied the wards, finally noticing a layer of the ward scheme that was relatively intact. Looking closely at it, she saw that the ward was intended to keep out domovoi. She contemplated the likelihood that a domovoi was actually involved in what had happened, but it seemed unlikely that the helpful Russian house spirits would've participated in a bombing. The more likely scenario, she decided, was that the loose, widely spaced nature of the ward made it less affected by what happened.

The more she studied the damage, the more she found that the denser, stronger wards were the ones that were down. Normally such wards resisted attempts to breach them much better than the loose, widely spaced structures of the wards like the domovoi one that were still intact, but she had already noticed that things were very different than in her past experience.

“Hey,” Ruby said quietly, the words making Weiss jump out of her skin. “Sorry! Didn't mean to startle you. Um… we finished checking this floor. Are you… are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Weiss said. “Just… trying to understand what I'm seeing.”

“Your father's office being gone?” Jaune asked. “Did he take his daughter to work very often?”

Weiss looked at him like he was an idiot. “No. I mean the state of the wards.”

“Huh, they are weird,” Ruby said. “It looks like somebody fired a bunch of birdshot into cloth.”

“What?” Weiss asked.

“You know, a bunch of little bullets tearing up the threads, making it go all frayed up like that.”

Weiss mind raced. She'd never really seen a shotgun be fired, much less the effect of tiny pellets on cloth, but her words did paint a picture of what she was seeing. If the damage to the wards was caused by something passing through them, it would explain how the wider spaced wards were still relatively intact, while the tight, densely packed wards were in shambles.

Studying the wards again, she saw a place right in front of the office where the wards were torn. If an object came from the crater below, it would've been flying at a high angle to hit the wards on the top floor. She turned around and looked up at the ceiling, trying to trace the line of effect the object would've taken.

“What are you looking for?” Pyrrha asked, turning to look at the ceiling as well.

“Ruby's right, it looks like something damaged the wards by passing through them,” Weiss explained. “If that's the case, then it likely came from the crater below, so it would be embedded in the ceiling if it was stopped… although there isn't much ceiling left. And that assumes that the object is something physical and still existing.”

“Well, if it was a physical thing and not some weird magic stuff, what about downstairs?” Jaune
asked. “The back of the building is pretty intact so shouldn't some of whatever it is be embedded in the walls in the middle of the building?”

“The back of the building is pretty intact so shouldn't some of whatever it is be embedded in the walls in the middle of the building?” Weiss agreed with a nod.

“The back of the building is pretty intact so shouldn't some of whatever it is be embedded in the walls in the middle of the building?” Weiss agreed with a nod.

“Assuming it's a mundane physical material,” Weiss agreed with a nod.

“Then let us go down a few floors,” Pyrrha said.

They went quickly, Ruby hovering near Weiss protectively, obvious concerned about how she was taking what was happening. They reached the middle floors of the building and began looking around, until finally Ruby called for everyone.

Embedded in a thick steel beam was a tiny fragment of some kind. Weiss frowned as she studied it, not sure what she was looking at, as it didn't have any presence under her aura sight. In fact, it was strangely presence-less when she looked at it magically, lacking even the ambient flows of mana that the industrial steel managed to have.

Pyrrha pulled out a heavy bronze knife and carefully worked it around the edge of the fragment, and with a deft twist of her wrist and some obvious strain she managed to break off part of it, catching it in mid air and offering it to Weiss for her perusal. Weiss accepted it in her hand and looked at it closely.

“That's... how?” Weiss murmured.

“Is it what I think it is?” Pyrrha asked quietly.

“How can this be here?” Weiss said.

“What is it?” Ruby asked.

Weiss showed her the tiny flake of jagged, golden metal. “Orichalcum. It's very rare, very expensive... and the most magically resistant material known to alchemy.”
Seventh Case: Wreckage

At some point Inspector Ozpin and Qrow had joined the gathering of leaders. Ozpin was sipping his coffee calmly, but there was something more intense about his presence than usual, as if even his usually unflappable mien couldn't quite stand up against the tragedy in front of him.

Qrow, on the other hand, was taunting the SWAT leaders. “Look, ice queen, I don't know what you think you're going to do here. Why don't you and Jimmy go find a crowd to break up with your military toys and leave the investigating to us?”

“You!” Winter snarled, making Weiss gape. She had never seen her sister so angry. “I have half a mind to-”

“That much?” Qrow interrupted. “Did you find some somewhere?”

Winter grabbed her sword hilt, hand shaking as she fought the urge to draw it and commit some serious violence against Ruby's uncle. The last time she had seen her usually composed sister so visibly upset had been when they were children.

“Qrow, now isn't the time,” Ozpin said with a tired sigh. “Besides, we have guests. Did you find anything, detectives?”

All of the gathered leaders looked at Weiss and Ruby, who exchanged a glance before approaching fully. Winter was blushing slightly, although she turned a scrutinizing gaze to Ruby, who smiled at her uncle. “Yes, I believe we determined how the wards were breached.”

“What can you tell us?” Goodwitch asked.

Weiss pulled out a small plastic bag that they had placed several of the shards of orichalcum into, offering it to her captain, who carefully examined it as she started to explain. “We found many tiny flecks of orichalcum embedded in the damaged areas. As you are no doubt aware, orichalcum is an extremely magically resistant substance, and I believe that it was responsible for the breaching of the wards.”

“How?” Winter asked. “I've never heard of orichalcum effecting wards this way before.”

“It can have strange interactions with wards, though,” Weiss said. “Also, I've never seen orichalcum thrown with enough force to embed in solid steel girders.”

“It looks like they made the bomb casing from pure orichalcum, orichalcum,” Ruby explained. “With how big a blast this must've been the fragments were moving really, really fast.”

Weiss nodded. “I don't think anyone has actually tried doing this before, or at least reported the attempt to the wider magical community. I think they've discovered a new method of ward breaching, and I'm not sure how to prevent it.”

“That is very troubling,” Ozpin said thoughtfully. “I suppose it is unlikely to be replicated very often, however.”

“Why not?” Ruby asked.

“It's not very subtle, and it's terribly expensive,” Weiss said. “Most buildings would have trouble surviving a normal bomb this large, even important government or business facilities. It also isn't a
very useful breach of the wards, since the building would be a wreck afterwards. It's only valuable for terrorism… and normally terrorist groups can't afford to do something like this.”

“How much would this have cost?” Ironwood asked.

“Orichalcum is worth just slightly less than gold per troy ounce, and is considerably rarer,” Winter said. “If it was used more widely it would be even more expensive.”

“This explosive likely used more orichalcum than goes on the market in a year, probably far more than that,” Weiss said as she looked around at the vast devastation the bomb had caused. “I don't think this could be recreated with just money. Whoever did this must've had a supplier I'm not familiar with, almost certainly extraplanar.”

“Could your family have done this?” Qrow asked.

“What are you implying?!?” Winter snapped.

He held up his hands defensively. “Not implying anything, ice queen. Just tryin' to get a feel for how much trouble setting this up might have been. It goes a long way to narrowing suspects down.”

Weiss hesitated, but decided to take him at face value. “Given enough time we could put this together, but it wouldn't be easy finding that much orichalcum. We specialize in magic, and materials that only the divine can properly enchant don't really interest us. From what Ruby guessed about the size of the explosive, it probably took more orichalcum than we could find to purchase in years, so we'd have to comb the planes looking for a better source, and that's always risky and time consuming. Even worse, the only planes that seem to have naturally mineable sources of orichalcum are hell dimensions, and only the desperate or foolish traffic with demons.”

“So definitely a group with a lot of reach or a lot of time and money on their hands,” Qrow said. “That narrows down the suspects a bit… which is good considering how many have it out for the SDC.”

“I can tell you who is responsible for this atrocity,” an approaching man said, and Weiss felt like the world stood still as she slowly turned to face him.

He was tired looking, but with well groomed white hair and a white mustache. He was wearing a pristine white suit and tie, looking immaculate as ever as he glared angrily at the ruins of the One Schnee Plaza.

Weiss felt her breath leave as her heart unclenched. Yesterday she would've thought she would feel relieved by her father being gone, his presence an obstruction to any attempts at improving the lives of the faunus being employed by the SDC. He also hadn't given her any love for more than half of her life, and she had believed that what feelings she still had for him at long withered away.

Instead his survival was an enormous weight off of her shoulders, the relief leaving her light headed for a moment. No matter what he had done and hadn't done, she realized that she really did love her father, although it would've been easier if she didn't.

“Father,” Weiss said, her voice shaking slightly.

He ignored her completely, although he turned his gaze from the building to Inspector Ironwood. “I received a message from the White Fang claiming credit for this… this atrocity.”

“The White Fang,” Ozpin said, raising his eyebrows in surprise. “They've been growing bolder of late, but this seems beyond even their resources. They are a wide ranging and powerful terrorist
group or be sure, but where could they get the money to buy this much orichalcum? At the very least I would have expected to hear something from our sources.”

“Your 'sources' are obviously not worth the trouble of letting them walk around,” he sneered.

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?” Goodwitch demanded, narrowing her eyes.

“Those animals wouldn't share there plans with outsiders, much less people,” he said. “If you have sources that can tell you about the White Fang they must be changelings who you're paying to double cross the rest of their kind. I've found a little money goes a long way to get one to betray its fellows, but that doesn't mean they're reliable.”

Weiss looked down, unable to make eye contact with anyone as her father's diatribe washed over the group. Her father spoke that way in private sometimes since her mother's death, and he hadn't had anything nice to say about the faunus before that. She hadn't heard him rant this way in public before, although she hadn't spent much time out with him so it was possible he had behaved this way in the past.

It was humiliating listening to him speak that way, and it brought back all of the things like it that he had taught her. Part of her wanted to blame him for how she had treated the faunus, how little she cared about their plight in the mines, how quickly she had thrown the 'changeling' slur at Blake on her first day at Supernatural Affairs.

At the same time, part of her was still overwhelmed with relief that her father was still alive. For all of his cruelty to the faunus and coldness to her and her siblings, he was still her father. She could even remember the softer, kinder side he used to have when her mother was still alive. As a teenager she used to try so hard to please him, hoping that if she somehow did a good enough job he would be kind to her again.

“Father,” Weiss repeated, her voice thick as she blinked back tears.

He finally deigned to notice her, and it was with barely a glance before he turned back to the building. “Contain yourself. You are a Schnee, and this is public. You are embarrassing our family more than usual with your sniveling.”

“Hey!” Ruby erupted. “Don't- don't speak that way to her!”

He turned his head to look her up and down. “And what would you know about it? How I speak to my family is family business and I would advise you to stay out of it.”


It was quiet for a long moment, and when Jacques finally turned around to fully face them again his face was a mask of icy self control. “What is being done about this… terrorism.”

“We're still searching for survivors,” Ironwood said. “Detective Schnee and her partner have determined the method used to breach the wards, but we hadn't made any further progress. You said that the White Fang had taken credit?”

“Yes, I received a letter just as I was about to come here,” he said. “My people quickly cleared it, and it claims the White Fang are responsible for this.”

“Do you have the letter?” Goodwitch asked. “It may provide some clues.”

Jacques snorted. “The White Fang learned very quickly not to leave any evidence, physical or
mystical, on anything they send to us, but you're welcome to it. Send a detective to the manor to retrieve it if you desire.”

“I will,” Goodwitch said sharply. “Was there anything else?”

“You mentioned that my daughter had determined the cause of the breach,” he said, not even glancing at Weiss. “How was this achieved?”

“We'll have a written report ready soon,” Goodwitch said with a cold smile. “You can send someone to Beacon to retrieve it if you desire.”

His eyes flashed and Ozpin sighed and spoke. “Was there anything else, Mr. Schnee? I can spare your daughter for a few moments if you'd like, and I'm sure Ironwood could do the same.”

“That is unnecessary,” he said. “The press need to be spoken to and stockholder reassured. Just catch those animals.”

“Gee, I can't imagine why the White Fang aren't fond of a progressive leader like you,” Qrow drawled.

“And if you weren't a drunken fool maybe your Intel department could've done something about this before SDC property was ruined and lives were lost,” Jacques said.

“Shouldn't your employees be first on that list?” Qrow asked.

“Shouldn't the White Fang have been worth dealing with before they killed thousands of my employees?”

With that he turned and left, heading across the SDC campus towards a mob of reporters while a team of security guards traile along behind him nervously. Before long he was holding court over the crowd like a petty king, framing events to put the SDC in the best possible light.

“Bastard,” Goodwitch spat.

“Glynda,” Ozpin chided lightly. “At the very least, try to maintain decorum in front of his daughters.”

She nodded and turned to Weiss and Winter. “I apologize, Detective Schnee, Captain Schnee.”

“No, it's alright,” Weiss said quietly. “A bastard is a kind way to describe our father. I know better than anyone what kind of man he is.”

“I'd certainly use worse,” Qrow agreed mildly, taking a sip from his flask. “He's mostly not worth the trouble, though.”

“Weiss…” Winter said quietly.

Weiss just shook her head. “What do you need us to do now?”

Goodwitch studied her for a moment, obviously trying to figure out how she was dealing with what had happened. Weiss raised her chin, trying to project strength. In reality she was still a mess, and raising her head only brought the destroyed SDC office into better perspective, which didn't help at all.

“Tonight the most important thing is trying to save lives,” she said eventually. “Remember to check your safety equipment, and take sufficient breaks. Tomorrow we’ll have an all hands meeting to
assign investigative jobs. Make sure you're ready first thing in the morning for it.”

They nodded and left, heading back towards the building. Weiss started to replace her breathing mask and goggles when her partner reached over and took her hand. “Ruby?”

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded. “I'm used to that. He often acted this way when someone from the company died… and worse if it was a family member.”

“That's not the same as okay,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss paused, looked in the direction her father had gone. She then looked around at the destroyed building, the ambulances taking people to the hospital, the dead and dying lying on the ground. She squeezed Ruby's hand tighter and looked at her again. “I'm not okay. I don't think anyone here can be okay.”

Ruby frowned and bit her lip. “Yeah. But most people don't have… him for a father.”

Weiss nodded. “But I'm alive, and I'm not dying. We can worry about me… later. Come on.”


Weiss blinked back tears and gave her a quivering smile before replacing her safety equipment. After that they returned to the building, ready to search in earnest for more survivors.

When they reached the pile of rubble Weiss carefully worked options through in her mind. If she was just searching for people like everyone else, clearing wreckage and listening for sounds she wouldn't be very useful. She wasn't very tall, and while she had wiry muscles from long hours of fencing practice, she wasn't exactly built for brute physical labor. She would likely slow down search efforts more than aid them if she tried to do things the normal way.

That left what she did bring to the table, which was her magical abilities. While she could easily retrieve all of the dead bodies, and use them as an army of labor to uncover any remaining survivors, she doubted that it would go over well for the dead to suddenly rise out of the rubble of a terrorist attack, on international television no less. It would also risk shifting the rubble as the dead forced their way out, potentially crushing rescue workers and remaining survivors alike.

Her best bet was more subtle, and she wouldn't even need to remove her gloves for it. She knelt down and placed both hands on the ground, closing her eyes as she slowly and carefully extended her aura, augmented with a touch of necromantic power, through the wreckage.

“Weiss?” Ruby asked.

“Just looking for survivors...” Weiss said.

The rubble field actually complicated the process immensely, and the flecks of orichalcum scattered throughout made it even harder. The longer she took searching for the living the more she realized that even her power, unlimited by any need for caution, couldn't easily resolve the mess. It was simply too big of a problem.

Finally she did find someone alive, however, although it terrible condition. Looking up, she carefully walked over the location. “Over here!” she called, gesturing to a group of workers shifting rubble.

They glanced at each other before walking over to her. “What is it?”
“Someone's under here,” she said. “We need to move this concrete.”

They hesitated only a moment, but before long Weiss, Ruby and the other aid workers were shifting the pile of rubble, until finally they found the person in question, who was unconscious but still alive. A small cheer went up, as it had been some minutes since the last survivor had been found.

They spent hours that way, as Weiss and other magic users searched for survivors, until finally they stopped finding any. Once they did, the grimmer prospect of retrieving the dead was all that remained, and Weiss was prepared to find them, her powers even more suited to that task, when Ruby pulled her aside.

“What is it?”

“We've been here long enough,” Ruby said quietly. “It's almost four in the morning and Goodwitch wants us rested enough to find out who did this.”

“But… it'll be easier if-”

“Nope.”

“Ruby…”

“Nope, sorry Weiss, but you need to rest,” Ruby said. “You've been using a ton of magic all night, and if you don't get some rest you're going to be in the hospital instead of the briefing tomorrow… like Velvet.”

“Velvet's in the hospital?” Weiss asked.

Ruby sighed. “She overdid it trying to help some hurt people. I mean, I can't blame her, but I think Coco was about to lose it.”

“She could really hurt herself using too much magic that way,” Weiss said.

“Yup… so no more for you,” Ruby said, grabbing her arm and pulling her to her feet.

Weiss didn't put up too much of a fight, although she looked back at the rubble, now with new shifts of workers searching for the dead. “But… I'm a Schnee. I should-”

“Nope,” Ruby said.

Weiss huffed. “That's so annoying when you do that.”


“I'll be the judge of that,” Weiss grumbled.

“I'm not cute?” Ruby pouted.

The expression was ineffective with the safety gear on. “You're no Zwei.”

“I knew you liked him better than me,” Ruby grumbled.

An hour later they were both back in her apartment, and had had quick showers. Weiss was wearing a long blue nightgown, and she was sitting at the edge of her large bed, staring down at her hands while she waited for her partner to finish up in the bathroom. She was tired with the kind of bone deep weariness that made her want to turn off her alarm and just sleep forever, but despite that she
couldn't bring herself to lie down.

Finally Ruby finished, walking into the room wearing her sleeping pants, which were decorated with little cartoon animals, and a nightshirt, which was short sleeved and had a large red heart on it. She had a tired smile on her face, and despite everything Weiss couldn't help but find her almost painfully beautiful.

“You should've gone to sleep already,” Ruby said softly as she turned out the light and padded over to the bed.

“I- I was waiting for you,” Weiss mumbled.

“You didn't have to,” Ruby said softly.

Weiss waited until Ruby was laying down, and then she climbed under the sheets, sliding next to her girlfriend and wrapping her arms and then legs so tightly around her partner that it was hard to tell where one of them ended and the other began. She thought it probably wasn't very comfortable to be on the receiving end of that, but Ruby didn't complain, simply wrapping her own limbs around Weiss and holding her in her strong arms.

Finally Weiss closed her eyes and accepted sleep.
The room was filled with rows of desks and chairs, all arranged facing a podium. It actually resembled a public school classroom, or so Weiss assumed from the media she had consumed as she had never set foot in one. After a moment to take in the room she followed Ruby to a seat near the back, lips pursing in annoyance at the uncomfortable plastic seat when she sat down.

“This is so cool,” Ruby said. “We've never had a full briefing like this before!”

Weiss rolled her eyes, but she privately had to admit that she was interested in what was happening as well, despite how tired and emotionally wrung out she was still feeling. After only a few hours of sleep they had had to return to work for an all hands meeting of the Supernatural Affairs Investigative Division.

“Hey Ruby!” Nora shouted, plopping down into the chair beside her.

“Hey!” Ruby beamed. “Oh, hey Ren!”

Ren merely nodded to Ruby and Weiss before sitting beside his partner.

“So this whole thing is terrible,” Nora said. “I spent all last night trying to save people, but that bomb really did some damage. And none of them were the sort I'd've chosen when I was still working as a valkyrie, either.”

“How does that all work?” Ruby asked. “I mean, I thought people died and just passed on, or Death helped them. How do valkyries and stuff play into it?”

Nora shrugged. “That's what normally happens to souls, but they can go to other planes instead. My job was to take souls that were committed to the norse gods and who deserved to go there instead of whatever normally happens and get them to go with me. Just… not many people are norse worshippers anymore, you know? And not much in the way of 'glorious battle' either. So after I met my Renny here one day I decided to skip all that and just do something better with my time! So here I am.”

“So… are there other things that did that kinda stuff besides valkyrie?” Ruby asked.

“Oh yeah, there used to be tons of psychopomps,” Nora said. “It was a big selling point for religions, not having to go through whatever happened normally when you died. You could sign up and be devout and BOOM… free afterlife of your choice. It got less popular when people figured out you could just claim whatever you wanted about the normal afterlife since you couldn't prove it either way. Plus, you didn't have to convince some deity that you deserved to be in their afterlife if you couldn't know what happened when you died.”

Before Ruby could say anything else Goodwitch entered the room, taking her place at the podium. Every detective in Supernatural Affairs had arrived by then, with the exception of Velvet, who was apparently still in the hospital after overusing her magic saving lives the previous night. Weiss could see Coco fidgeting anxiously with an empty seat beside her, no doubt eager to return to her partner after hearing what the captain had to say.

“Quiet!” Captain Goodwitch called, and the room instantly silenced, even Nora and Ruby who had been getting a bit loud in their chatter. “It's been some time since we've had a full meeting like this, but obviously what has happened is enough to warrant it.”
“Do we know who did it?” Yang asked. She and Blake had arrived at the last moment and were sitting together near the front of the room. Despite being professional police rather than lazy students, the room had still filled up from the back to the front.

Goodwitch nodded. “We received a message from the White Fang taking credit for the bombing.”

“What?” Blake cried, although it was almost lost in the loud murmur of conversation around the room.

“Quiet!” Goodwitch shouted. “There has been no official word either way from Sienna Khan, but the message seems to be legitimate, so for now we will treat it like the White Fang is indeed responsible. This is the worst terrorist attack on our nation in more than a decade, and we need to have an effective response to it. This cannot go unpunished. We also have normal police work to do as well, so some of you will be assigned to those tasks.

“First, Ms. Xiao Long, Ms. Belladonna, we will need you to continue your investigation,” Goodwitch said. “Have you made further progress?”

“Yes,” Yang said. “We didn't hear anything about this, though...”

Goodwitch nodded. “I'm certain they were playing it close to the vest. Have you made progress on locating the stolen dust?”

“Yes,” Blake said.

Alright, then as I said, continue your work,” Goodwitch said. “The forensics teams are still checking the blast site, but we have no evidence of dust being used in the bomb, so whatever they are planning to use it for is still unknown. Given this escalation, it's safe to say that they need to be stopped before they can put their plans into action.”

The two stood and left, Yang waving bye to the crowd and giving Ruby and Weiss a nod as well. Once they were gone Goodwitch continued, assigning various detectives to different tasks. Most of them were sent to try to find who was responsible for the bombing, tracking the orichalcum, the fuel oil and fertilizer used in the bomb itself, trying to figure out where the truck that had held the bomb came from, or what happened to the person who had planted it.

Some people received more mundane tasks however, such as Velvet and Coco being assigned to look for a vampire preying on club goers, and Winchester and Thrush checking into problems at a local werewolf pack. It wasn't until the very end, when no one else was left, that Goodwitch turned her attention to Weiss and Ruby.

“Finally, Ms. Schnee, Ms. Rose, there was an armed robbery of a dust store this morning,” Goodwitch said. “The paperwork is on its way to your desk.”

“What?!?” Weiss objected, jumping to her feet. “We're being assigned to a robbery?”

“That is correct,” Goodwitch said, glaring at her. “Is there a problem?”

“Yes, there's a problem,” Weiss spat. “Why aren't we part of the investigation into the bombing?”

“As I'm sure you are aware, dust robbery is an incredibly important crime,” Goodwitch said sharply. “You pursued criminals in a dust trafficking case to Faerie, and this, while smaller scale, still includes many crates of dust going missing. This case is of vital importance.”

“That may be, but why are we looking into it?” Weiss demanded. “My family was targeted-”
“Exactly, Ms. Schnee,” Goodwitch interrupted. “You are far too close to the other case.”

“That didn't seem to matter last night!”

“Last night was an emergency, and we used everyone who showed up,” Goodwitch said. “Now, unless you want to be reassigned to parking enforcement for the day to fill out tickets, I would advise you to be quiet and track down the thieves. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

Weiss opened her mouth and then closed it, a hundred scathing replies on the tip of her tongue, but at Goodwitch's look she kept them to herself. She doubted that the woman made idle threats, and she had no interest in playing meter maid. “Understood, ma'am.”

“Then get to work.”

Weiss turned on her heel and stalked from the room, a scowl on her face while Ruby trotted behind her. She knew that if she turned around she would find her partner looking at her worriedly, ready to offer comfort, but she wasn't ready to calm down. She was angry, and it felt good to be angry. Better than thinking about so many people, some that she'd met, dying last night simply because of their connection to her family.

The squad room was nearly empty, as almost everyone else was already in the field for their assignments, and she sat down forcefully, annoyed that the cushioned rolling chair was both fairly comfortable and impossible to sit on dramatically. After fuming silently for a moment she grabbed the folder on top of her inbox and started flipping through it, although it took a second look before she really absorbed anything.

“Weiss?”

“What?!” Weiss snapped, glaring up at her partner.

Ruby bit her lip. “Are you… okay?”

“Of course, I always want to look into shoplifting while people are dying.”

“Um… I think it's a bit more than shoplifting,” Ruby said picking up her own copy of the police reports. “I mean, it looks like they stole a whole truck's worth, so… that's a lot, right? I mean, it's not as much the White Fang took, but it's still a lot of dust…”

Weiss snarled at the mention of the White Fang. “And blowing up half a building is a lot more than that.”

“I know, but… I mean, I think Goodwitch wasn't, um, wasn't exactly, uh…”

“Spit it out.”

“She wasn't really wrong,” Ruby said. “I mean, you're kinda… worked up about this.”

“What, you think I can't be objective?” Weiss snapped.

Ruby recoiled. “Um…”

“I'm not a child,” Weiss said. “I'm not the one who sits around eating cookies instead of reading police reports and filling out paperwork. Maybe you don't understand things like this, but this was an attack on my family. On the people I'm supposed to protect. So if you don't have anything useful to say then you should just be quiet!”
Ruby opened her mouth to say something, then closed it, looking down. “Excuse me.”

With that she got up and left, ignoring Weiss when she called her name. After a long moment Weiss put her head down in her hands and blew out a long breath. Seeing Ruby leave took the wind from her sails, and suddenly she couldn't think about anything but what she'd said to her girlfriend, who really hadn't done anything wrong. Winter's words about how she was like her father suddenly hit her, and she found herself holding back tears.

“Well, whatever happened didn't go very well, did it?” Coco said, leaning against the entrance to her cubicle.

Weiss looked up, then away as she blinked away the tears she hadn't quite shed. “What?”

“Just thought I'd check in,” Coco said. “It's not often I see Ruby running out on you looking upset. Trying to push everyone away today?”

Weiss sighed. “What do you want?”

Coco shrugged. “Believe it or not I've got a soft spot for you, Weiss. Sure, you can be uptight as hell, and a snotty rich girl besides, but you've got a good heart. Wanna tell me what's bothering you?”

“And people say I suck at being comforting.”

“You do,” Coco agreed. “I, on the other hand, am great at it… I just don't think you need it from me. I'm sure any minute now Ruby will come back and you'll make up and be absolutely disgusting, and then sometime you'll do it again because she's head over heels for your crabby ass. So it's my job to be honest and call you out on your shit instead.”

“Shouldn't you be playing vampire bait?” Weiss asked.

“Actually, I'm due at the hospital, but I'm leaving Velvet hanging just to see you, so appreciate it.”

Weiss sighed and leaned back in her chair. “I shouldn't have snapped at Ruby, but… I'm upset that we're not assigned to the bombing case, and she agreed with Goodwitch.”

“Of course you shouldn't be on it,” Coco said with a shrug. At Weiss sour look she continued. “Look, even if you were totally level headed right now, you've got a conflict of interest investigating an attack on your family company.”

“No one cared about conflict of interest when we were sent to Faerie after people robbing SDC mines,” Weiss said.

“True, but they didn't expect that case to go to court, and they didn't have a better option. This time they'll be bringing people in if they catch them, and frankly, you don't know shit about bombs. It'll save a lot of legal headaches if you stay on the sidelines and let people as or more qualified take care of things.”


Coco shrugged. “It happens. The closer you are to someone, the more often you get mad at them even if it isn't their fault.”

“She left,” Weiss said. “What if… what if I drive her away? My father… he has a bad temper, and whenever the White Fang killed someone, or destroyed something… we were always the people he took it out on. Now I'm doing the same thing.”
Coco lowered her sunglasses to give her a look, and then dramatically rolled her eyes. “This sounds like something you should tell her, but I know your partner wouldn't leave you over a few angry words. From what I remember a year ago you had plenty of nasty things to say to her and she not only stuck around but she fell for your prickly ass.”

Before Weiss could figure out something to say Ruby returned. “Hey, Coco! Need something?”

“I'm good,” Coco said. “Just passing through before checking on Velvet.”

“She okay?” Ruby asked.

Coco nodded. “She'll be fine. She just needs to stop doing this before she does hurt herself. Anyway, see you both around.”

With that she left, leaving Weiss alone with Ruby, who was holding two cups of coffee. “Coffee?” she offered.

“Thank you,” Weiss said quietly, taking the cup. She took a small sip, and as always it was just the way she liked it, which just made her feel more guilty. Ruby was always so thoughtful, and then what did she do? “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” Ruby said, slurping her own highly sugared coffee. “I can be pretty childish, and I don't do as much paperwork as I should. It's kinda funny though, that you call me out on not doing it right when I actually did read it.”

“It wasn't about you,” Weiss said. “I was angry and I took it out on you… that wasn't okay.”

“I'm not really upset-”

“You should be,” Weiss said. “I know how frustrating it is when… when people you love do that to you. It isn't right.”

Ruby set her cup down and stood, walking around until she reached her partner, taking her cup from her hand and setting it down as well. She then sat sideways on Weiss' lap, making her grunt slightly at the weight suddenly sitting on her. Weiss found herself blushing, half annoyed and half pleased by the unexpected closeness.

Ruby hugged her and Weiss hugged her back, and they sat like that in silence for a minute before Ruby spoke. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She was silent for a while, just enjoying the embrace. “Why are you so good to me?”

“I don't do anything special,” Ruby said. “I love you… why wouldn't I see if you're okay?”

“My father… after mother died, he became very distant,” Weiss said. “He wasn't the warmest man, but after she passed… eventually, it was a relief that he was never around. When he did come home, if anything bad had happened with the White Fang he would be furious. When someone died, or something was stolen… he took it out on us. My sister left, and my brother knew how to avoid him, but I usually stayed in my room or where I was being tutored, and when he would come in… he would take out his anger on me.

“He didn't hurt me… he never touched me at all. But every assassination, every theft… he made sure I knew about all of them,” Weiss finished. “And now here I am, behaving like him.”

“No!” Ruby objected.
“I am,” Weiss said. “I… when I became upset I lashed out at you, just like he would’ve. Even my sister said I take after our father.”

“Then I'm going to have words with her next time I see her,” Ruby said. “I don't care how scary she is, I won't let her say things like that to you!”

“But it's true.”

Ruby grunted disagreement. “Look, you might think what you did was super bad, but I mean… people get annoyed sometimes. And they often say stuff they shouldn't… and it was true anyway. I mean, if you really were mad at me for leaving you to do so much work I couldn't really complain 'cause I kinda do, you know? But still… nobody's perfect, Weiss.”

“But it wasn't about that,” Weiss said. “I used to be annoyed about how… lackadaisical you could be about the more staid side of our profession, but I realized a long time ago that I would just worry more if I didn't have control of that stuff anyway… and I like doing it. It's relaxing.”

“Only you would enjoy paperwork that much,” Ruby said, giving her a quick kiss.

Weiss rolled her eyes, turning slightly red at how public they were being, even if they were hidden in a cubicle in an otherwise empty room. “I took my bad mood out on you. If we're going to work as a couple I shouldn't treat you like that.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “I didn't like it when you yelled at me… I mean, I knew why you were being extra grumpy, but it still didn't feel good, which is why I walked away and got you something to try to help you feel better. But I'm not going to get super mad about it or anything. I knew you were grumpy from the first day we met and you started screeching at me for bumping into you.”

“I do not screech!” Weiss screeched. “And… and I was worried that I might've hurt you. No one had touched me in… years.”

Ruby leaned into her, squeezing her tightly in an almost painful embrace. “I know that… now. You know, whenever you're feeling upset you should let me know and I'll give you an extra big hug. It'll help.”

Weiss rolled her eyes but didn't object. She just leaned into the embrace, closed her eyes and relaxed, doing her best to let go of the anger she was feeling, as well as the guilt that had begun to replace it. With Ruby in her arms she felt like she could do anything.

“Ready to catch some bad guys?” Ruby whispered after a long time.

“Alright,” Weiss said, releasing her partner, who stood with a groan.

“You're kinda bony,” Ruby objected as she stretched, the motion showing off her strong, athletic body very enticingly. “You should eat more besides salad, Weiss.”

“Excuse me!” Weiss objected. “I'm the one who's legs fell asleep because of someone sitting in my lap! Maybe you should eat less cookies.”

“Noooooo!”
Seventh Case: Intersecting Cases

Weiss didn't think much of the building when they arrived. Despite the incredible value of dust, most businesses that sold it to the general public were pretty underwhelming to look at, focusing more on being sturdy, reinforced buildings with few entrances and exits than on being pleasing to the eye. 'From Dust Till Dawn' was no exception, as its design resembled a concrete bunker more than a store.

“I've been here before,” Ruby said.

Weiss blinked and side eyed her partner. “When have you bought dust?”

“I haven't,” Ruby said with a shrug. “This is the place I caught Torchwick and his goons trying to rob. It's how I was made detective.”

Weiss examined the building again. The front door was made from heavy, reinforced steel, and fire codes required a back door as well, although it most likely had no external handle, and was probably alarmed. Standard policy also required a loading dock for SDC armored cars to easily drop off shipments, but there was likely no other entrance and exit besides those. Like many dust shops, it didn't even have any windows.

She pushed aura into her eyes, activating her magical sight, and studied the wards for a bit. They were well made, tightly woven stands of magic that showed no signs of obvious weaknesses, and no damage to indicate any brute force intrusion methods had been attempted. It was obviously a professional warding job, and from the looks of it it was up to date and had cost a considerable sum of money.

“I think this place would be harder to break into than the bank,” Weiss said thoughtfully. “Obviously it's a public storefront, so it lacks strong intention based warding, but these wards are still very well made.”

Ruby shrugged. “He just kinda… walked through the front door with a bunch of goons with guns.”

“That's… bold,” Weiss said. “Most of these places have rather stiff physical security. SDC regulations require any store we sell dust to to have a secure, warded vault for any product not likely to be sold that day… and that vault would have intent wards.”

“Well… I'm not sure what he was planning to do,” Ruby said. “I was walking along and just kinda… saw some suspicious people outside and jumped in.”

“You just… jumped in?”

“Well, I mean, I didn't jump in with guns everywhere,” Ruby said. “I called it in, then arrested the get away driver and then the guy guarding the front door. I kinda stuck my head in to check what was going on, and only one guy was watching the owner, so I grabbed him so the owner could escape, then I just guarded the door 'til backup got here. Well, I was gonna try to do something more but Torchwick spotted me and shot at me with that cane thing and we argued for a minute or two. He ended up running out the back before anyone else could show up, but we got all of his people. I think he told them to guard the front while he checked something and just didn't come back, and none of them knew about the back door, so…”

“I guess you can't expect much in the way of brains from anyone willing to follow Torchwick,” Weiss muttered.
He managed to steal all of those statues even with four of us trying to stop him,” Ruby pointed out. “And Intel has been looking for him ever since but hasn’t found anything.”

Weiss grumbled under her breath for a moment, but declined to properly respond, choosing to head into the building instead. The inside wasn’t any more appealing than the outside, with heavy concrete walls painted a plain white color, and equally bland floor and ceiling tiles. The room was quite small, with a solid counter taking up most of the room, and a heavy steel door behind it. The man standing behind the counter was an older, bald man, with a fringe of gray hair and bushy gray eyebrows. He was wearing a green shirt, and he squinted at them as they entered.

“Oh!” he murmured. “I didn't expect you!”

Weiss trotted out her professional smile, ready to put on her best face to greet the owner. She had never met with any dust shop owners, but she wasn't surprised that she would be known to them. Her family was responsible for selling him his only stock, after all.

“Thank you, Officer Rose… Detective Rose now, I guess,” he said, looking at Ruby. “You saved me once before. If you had been here… I'm sure my assistant wouldn't have…”

Weiss hung back and watched, bemused, as Ruby smiled and approached him, shaking his hand. “You don't have to thank me. I was just doing my job, trying to keep the streets safe. I do the same thing now, just without the polyester blue uniform.”

He chuckled. “I'm glad to see you moving up in the world. You were a very brave, devoted policewoman, and I'm sure that you do even more good now as a detective. Is this your partner?”

“Oh!” Ruby said, grinning brightly. “Yes, this is Weiss Schnee. We're with Supernatural Affairs.”

“Ms. Schnee,” he said, giving her a respectful nod. “I take it you're here to catch the scum who did this?”

“Yup!” Ruby agreed. “What can you tell us?”

“Well, this morning was supposed to be a dust delivery,” he said with a sigh. “I sent my assistant back to deal with it… I'm not good at moving crates around these days, and he's been with me for years so I trusted him with it. He met the truck in the alley out back and got the loading doors open. That's when I heard gunshots. I called the police and checked the cameras, but there wasn't anything I could do. They killed my assistant and the drivers and just drove off with the armored car. Left the bodies in the alley like… like garbage.”

Ruby put a hand on his shoulder, and they shared a commiserating glance. After a bit Weiss cleared her throat and spoke. “Did you see or hear anything else? Anyone express or show interest in your delivery schedule?”

“No, not that I can think of,” he said with a sigh. “I'm still not sure how this all happened. It was just… so sudden.”

“What about the security cameras?” Weiss asked.

He shook his head again. “Last night somebody came along and spray painted over the one in the alley. They were young, thought they were just some punk kid… I had someone scheduled to come out and replace the lens today, but…”

“Can we get a copy of that footage as well?” Ruby asked.
“Of course,” he said with a nod. “Is there… anything else?”

They exchanged a quick look, before Ruby shook her head, a sympathetic smile on her face. “Not at this time. Thank you for, um, for speaking with us.”

“Of course,” he said, nodding. “Just… just catch these guys. Pico… my assistant… he was a good kid. I thought about leaving the shop to him when I retired. Now…”

Ruby spent a few more minutes quietly comforting the man while Weiss hung around awkwardly, not sure what to do with herself. As much as she sometimes felt exasperated by her partner’s uselessness at parts of the job, like doing paperwork, she could never do some of the things Ruby did. She just didn't have it in her to comfort complete strangers.

Eventually they left, an old school videotape of the security camera footage in hand. When they sat down in the car Weiss leaned over and kissed Ruby's cheek, before sitting back in her seat and carefully putting on her seatbelt, a blush on her face.

“What was that for?” Ruby asked. “Not that I’m complaining! I really liked it. Just… you don't usually do that sorta stuff.”

Weiss frowned. “Maybe I should. I guess… I guess seeing that reminded me of all of the things you do for us that I can’t.”

“You can do anything you put your mind to,” Ruby said supportively.

Weiss rolled her eyes, although she couldn't ignore the warmth the hyperbolic support gave her. “I know my limits, dolt. I can’t… I don't know how to be kind like you. I could never be as good at talking to strangers like that.”

Ruby leaned over and gave her a quick kiss on the forehead. “Ah! You're so cute. But really, you could if you wanted to. I know you have a hard time showing it, but you've got the biggest, kindest heart. I've seen it. So… I know you still think you aren't a very good person, but I know you are. You just don't show it in the same ways most people do.”

“Why don't we go to the morgue?” Weiss suggested, disagreeing internally but not wanting to rehash an old argument.

“See!” Ruby said as she started the car. “That's how you show you care, by trying to make things better. Maybe you don't pat the survivors' arms and dry their tears and tell them it'll all be okay somehow, but you go out and work yourself half to death trying to catch the bad guys so they can have peace of mind and no one has to live through it again. It's like… like Batman.”

Weiss gave her an unimpressed look. “Batman?”

“Yeah, think about it!”

“I'm trying not to,” Weiss grumbled.

“See that's such a Batman thing to say,” Ruby said excitedly. “Your super duper rich and amazingly awesome, and you've got a tragic past, and you spend all your time solving crimes and helping people while being super duper broody!”

“'Broody' is not a word,” Weiss said. “Nor is 'duper'. Besides, what does that make you? Um… Robin?”
“So you do know Batman!” Ruby said excitedly.

“I've heard of him,” Weiss said. “I'm not sure how I could've avoided hearing of him.”

“Well, Robin is his sidekick, but I think I'm pretty cool on my own,” Ruby said. “Maybe I'm like Superman. I mean, I am super fast… maybe not faster than a speeding bullet, but still. And that red cape is awesome. I wish I could wear something like that without getting thrown in a mental institution.”

Weiss eyed her partner's red hoody, which she seemed to wear year round regardless of the weather. “What does Superman have to do with Batman?”

Ruby gasped. “They're like… super besties! They work together to stop bad guys and save the world, and they're the only one the other trusts completely. Well, Superman probably trusts more people, but he's the only one Batman really trusts. Plus, if you look them up on Tumblr everyone writes them banging each other.”

Weiss stared slack jawed at her partner for a moment before finally shaking her head. “What exactly do you spend your time on the internet doing?”

Ruby turned bright red. “Oh look! There's the morgue!”

“I think that's the most excited a person has ever sounded while saying that phrase,” Weiss said, smirking while letting her blushing partner off the hook.

The morgue was the same as always, although Weiss appreciated not having to ask to see the bodies. While she didn't do it all the time, she had come to see the dead often enough that the coroners and attendants simply let her through without any fuss. In a matter of minutes she had looked up the victims she was interested in and was soon pulling them out of the drawers.

The SDC employees were fairly typical, and they didn't know anything. The first had died before even realizing anything was wrong, and the other was killed moments later. Both had died from a single close range pistol bullet to the head, one in the back, and the other in the side of the head as he was starting to turn to face the attackers, who must've snuck up on them in the narrow alley. Fortunately the rounds were low caliber enough to leave the head intact, or she wouldn't have been able to so easily question them.

When they then pulled out the assistant Weiss felt surprised, and then guilty about her surprise. He was fairly young, with a round face and chubby build, although he obviously had quite a bit of muscle as well despite his short height. On top of his head were a pair of prominent, round bear ears, marking him as a faunus.

Weiss placed a hand on him, animating his body and then mentally ordering the zombie to be still, before checking the corpse for any traps. Once she was satisfied that it was safe, she called his soul to her, although doing three in a row left her a little tired. She sighed and wiped her forehead with her sleeve once he opened his glowing eyes, taking in the room.

“Oh,” he murmured. “I- I'm dead, aren't I?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, her voice gentle. “I'm sorry, but you are.”

He looked around for a moment longer, then focused on her again. “Then… what am I doing here? What's going on? This doesn't seem like heaven. Did I… did I go to the bad place?”

“No,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “Your soul hadn't departed yet. I recalled you here to answer
some questions."

"You want to catch the people who did this," he said, nodding slightly.

"Yes," Weiss said. "Can you… can you tell me your name?"

"Pico Kobicha," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "I'm… I'm Weiss, and this is my partner, Ruby."

"Hey," Ruby said, smiling awkwardly. "Um… I'm sorry this happened to you, but we'll do our very best to catch the people who did it!"

"What can you tell us about them?" Weiss asked.

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "They were… they wore masks. Ski masks, black ones. I was just about to come outside to greet the delivery people when I heard the gunshots. They were loud… just big bangs echoing in the alley, and the bodies just slumping over dead. Just… dead.

"I wasn't sure what to do, but then I heard one guy start berating the rest. Said they didn't need to shoot them, that it would just mean it'd be harder to do the rest of the robberies. Then one of the others told him that the White Fang wasn't going to let SDC scum live—"

"The White Fang?!" Weiss choked.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "I- I kinda gasped too, and one of them heard me. They stepped inside and grabbed me, pulled me into the alley. I started begging… I knew I was going to die. The guy who spoke before asked if they were going to kill me too, since I was one of them—"

"The guy who pulled the trigger said… the last thing I heard… he said 'he's not White Fang, Torchwick,' and shot me in the heart."

Weiss and Ruby looked at each other, both wide eyed. "Torchwick… working with the White Fang?" Weiss said.

"All I know is what I heard," Pico said. "What, um, what happens now?"

Weiss focused back on him, offering a smile. "Don't worry. I'm going to release you now, and you can return to your rest. Before you know it your soul will pass on to the other side, and you can finally be at peace."

"Yeah, and um, don't worry about Torchwick and the White Fang and stuff," Ruby interjected. "We'll deal with things here… you just, uh, relax. Death is really nice, and if you're feeling down she gives the best hugs!"

The zombie looked at her like she was completely insane. "Right…"

"Rest well, Pico Kobicha," Weiss said, laying a hand on his forehead as she released the magic keeping him animate and his soul present. She then gave Ruby a look.

"Sorry," Ruby mumbled. "She does give the best hugs… and if I was dead I'd want a hug, you know?"

Weiss just shook her head, not saying anything as she washed her hands and pulled her gloves back on. They stayed quiet while they left the building, but when they sat in the car Ruby made no move to start it, simply sitting in silence for a few minutes.
“So… what do we do?” she finally asked.

“We need to catch Torchwick, of course,” Weiss said. “We know he's involved in some pretty big crimes, and this is the second time he's tried to rob this exact dust shop. And he was talking about robbing more, right? He has to be stopped. This case is definitely a top priority.”

Ruby gave her a searching look. “And him working with the White Fang?”

“It just goes to show how dangerous he really is,” Weiss said. “I wonder if the robbery was planned for today because they knew the police would be busy dealing with what happened at One Schnee Plaza…”

“Goodwitch didn't want us on the White Fang case,” Ruby pointed out.

“And we aren't,” Weiss said. “The White Fang is being handled by the rest of the department. We're searching for Torchwick.”

“Who is working with the White Fang.”

Weiss shrugged. “As she pointed out, dust theft is an extremely high priority. We need to follow this case wherever it may lead. Besides, don't you want to stop Torchwick? Or are you going to let him slip away from you for the third time.”

“I know what you're doing,” Ruby grumbled. “Fine, I want to catch Torchwick, but how? He didn't exactly leave a trail of clues here. I guess maybe ballistics will find something, or that video tape from the alley, or if they find the armored car…”

“I wonder how he fell in with the White Fang,” Weiss mused. “They hate humans, and they almost never work with anyone who hasn't been part of the organization. It's strange that they would change that policy over Torchwick of all people. I wonder if there are any in the White Fang who are upset about him working with them.”

“What good would that do us?” Ruby asked.

“Well, it seems to me that your sister and her partner have been investigating the White Fang for some time,” Weiss said. “They might be able to find something out.”

Ruby narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “That sounds a lot like investigating the White Fang, again.”

“Did you forget that Torchwick got away from them, too?” Weiss asked. “Don't you think your sister would want another shot at Torchwick?”

“Fine. I'll call her… it's almost lunchtime anyway,” Ruby said, before smiling. “Is that enough to tell people it's not our fault we ended up investigating the White Fang?”

Weiss chuckled as her partner made the call. She might not be allowed to investigate the bombing, but she would find a way to make the White Fang pay for what they'd done.
Signal never changed. It had been a diner popular with the police since before Weiss was born, and she suspected that it would still be so long after she retired. Sometimes she wondered whether the dirt accumulated in the corners had been there just as long, but despite her many initial reservations about the diner, the food was top notch, and Ruby had even convinced her to branch out from her usual salad from time to time.

Usually they sat across from each other, often with piles of documents brought along to ostensibly make it a working lunch. After they had begun dating it became common for Weiss to not actually make use of the documents, although she still liked having an excuse to linger for so long with her partner.

Weiss and Ruby were actually sitting side by side that day, waiting for Blake and Yang to arrive. They had agreed to have lunch with them at the diner, and Weiss found herself growing steadily more impatient the longer they took to show up. Ruby kept sending her worried looks, and they both breathed a sigh of relief when the door opened and their guests finally walked in.

“Sorry we're late,” Yang said. “I tried to rush Blakey, but she didn't want to leave work. I'm pretty surprised you were up for a double date during work hours, Weisscicle. Naughty, naughty.”

Weiss glared at Yang. “This is not a double date. I would never do anything like that during work hours!”

“What about all those long, long lunches you take with Rubles already?” Yang asked. “Is it only double dates you won't go on?”

“They… they aren’t dates,” Weiss stuttered. “Look, I wanted to ask you both something, and Ruby thought this would be better than ambushing you in the office. If you want to skip lunch and go back there-”

“Stop teasing her, Yang,” Blake said. “Don't you think she's a little too easy of a target, anyway?”

“I'm not easy!” Weiss objected loudly, turning bright red when she drew looks from around the room.

“I'd hope not if you're dating my little sis,” Yang laughed.

Weiss gritted her teeth, but Ruby grabbed her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze, leaving her simmering as she sat at the table. Before she could think of anything to say the waitress arrived and they all ordered food.

“Jeez, what's with the rabbit food, Weiss?” Yang asked. “Don't you think you're skinny enough as it is?”

"I like my salad,” Weiss said. “Don't you think you should give it a try?”

“Please, with this body?” Yang said, posing. “Trust me, I've got it all going on over here. Maybe you sh- ow!”

Yang pouted at Blake, who simply ignored her as she looked at Weiss. “So, what did you want to talk about?”
“I wanted to see if you could offer any insights into our investigation,” Weiss said. “We were assigned to look into a very bold dust theft that just occurred. The SDC drivers were both killed, along with the assistant at the dust shop, and the criminals drove off with the armored car.”

“Well… that sucks,” Yang said. “But why are you telling us? You might not have noticed, but we've kinda got our hands full with our own case.”

“Because they're connected you brute!” Weiss snapped, before taking a deep breath. “The White Fang and Roman Torchwick worked together to rob the dust shop.”

“What?!” Blake objected. For a change her usual bored expression broke to show her shock, and Weiss would've found it quite funny in other circumstances. “That's impossible.”

Weiss crossed her arms. “I brought the witness' soul back. I'm quite certain that I'm correct about what happened. I theorize that they chose that day in the hopes that the bombing would distract the police. In fact, our department and every other is apt to be distracted for some time to come, so further crimes seem likely.”

“But the White Fang already stockpiled so much dust, what could they need more for?” Blake asked. “They even stole so much that they sold some. It doesn't make sense to start such a risky method of dust theft after gathering so much.”

“Unless they have a need for a truly staggering amount of dust,” Weiss said. “Given the large scale attack they just initiated, I don't even want to think about what they would want to use that dust for… assuming they didn't just barter all of their ill gotten gains to some inter planar trader for the orichalcum.”

“Look, even if they would steal dust, why would they work with someone like Torchwick,” Blake objected. “He's everything they hate about humans, and they wouldn't work with a human at all if they could help it, especially not a criminal like him.”

“A criminal like them you mean,” Weiss scoffed. “Look, maybe they're branching out. Given how much of their resources they had to put into make that bomb they might have decided to make use of anyone they can.”

“It's more likely that the person you interviewed was wrong,” Blake said. “Just because the criminals were faunus-”

“The witness was a faunus,” Weiss snapped. “They killed him because it was more convenient for them. I guess they weren't expecting me to work this case or they would've had to work harder to keep him from talking. They don't care who they kill or what they do as long as they can hurt innocent people.”

Blake's eyes narrowed. “That isn't what the White Fang are about. When I was growing up they were all the faunus community had. They'd make sure the faunus were fed, and they protected everyone from people attacking them. The White Fang were defenders of the faunus people, but somewhere along the way things escalated.”

“Escalated,” Weiss mocked. “That's a funny way of describing theft, arson… murder. The White Fang are a terrorist organization. Sienna Khan is at the top of the most wanted list for virtually every civilized country on the planet!”

“It got them results,” Blake said. “Before they became violent no one cared if people discriminated against faunus, hurt faunus. No one still does anything about the SDC, but things were even worse
ten years ago.”

“And that makes things like yesterday okay?!”

“Of course not!” Blake said. “There's a reason I've been doing everything I can to track them down since we discovered the dust thefts. Anything they can do with those kind of resources is obviously a problem, and they have to be stopped. That doesn't mean we can't look at things objectively.”

“Objectively they're mass murdering, psychopathic-” Weiss started.

“Meals here, ladies,” the waitress said. “Mind keeping it down?"

Weiss shut her mouth and glared at Blake, although she was hungry enough to start eating once her grilled chicken salad had been set down in front of her. She aggressively speared bites with her fork, shifting her angry glare to her food.

“Mmm… I love Signal,” Yang said, breaking the awkward silence that had fallen over the table. “You ever try their pulled pork, Weiss?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No thank you. I'm perfectly content with my meal.”

“She's tried a few things,” Ruby said. “It just takes a lot to get her to try new stuff.”

“Boring,” Yang said. “Hope that doesn't apply in bed.”

Ruby and Weiss both turned red. “She's great! We do fun stuff all the time! Just a few days ago we-”

“Ruby!” Weiss hissed, her blush deepening.

“I mean, we didn't do anything we'll tell you about!” Ruby said. “Nothing weird at all!”

“Right,” Yang drawled. “Is that why you were asking about handcuffs the other day?”

“Ruby?!” Weiss snarled.

“I didn't ask you about the handcuffs, I looked it up online myself!” Ruby objected. Yang just looked at her smugly while Weiss glared harshly. “I mean… I didn't look up handcuffs or ask anyone because we definitely didn't try out using handcuffs in bed at all. Or a violet wand.”


“Okay,” Ruby whimpered.

While most of Weiss wanted to crawl under a rock and die, even she had to admit that things felt much smoother without the awkward, angry tension that had been growing between herself and Blake during the argument about the White Fang. She just couldn't imagine how Blake could defend an organization in any way that had been responsible for such a horrific incident while they were still searching for the bodies. The White Fang were every bit monsters the same as any demon, and she would make sure that they all paid for what they had done.

The entire meal was spent with Yang trying to wheedle more details about their love life from her little sister, although fortunately Ruby managed to avoid saying anything else too embarrassing. Once they finished eating Blake stood, gathering up her things and leaving money on the table.

“Wait!” Weiss said. “We didn't finish talking.”
“I think we did,” Blake said calmly. “Look, if we find any information about Torchwick we'll let you know, but we're already looking into the White Fang's dust trafficking.”

“Why are you so opposed to this?” Weiss asked, bewildered. “Even if once upon a time the White Fang weren't as bad as today, they've been like this for a very long time. You have to know what they're capable of. The White Fang are evil.”

Blake glared. “I know better than you do what they are capable of. Look, you're not the sheltered brat who called me 'changeling' I dismissed you for when we first met, but you still have no idea what things are really like for faunus. Most of us still remember the White Fang as protectors, people who organized protests, people who made sure we had food on the table when no one could get jobs.

“You think the worst thing that happens to faunus is being in your mines? That's just the tip of the iceberg. If it was the worst thing possible, no one would work there. But what else can we do? The incarceration rates among faunus is extremely high, and many don't finish school, and even those that do… schools in faunus areas are the worst in Vale. People talk about the crime rate in faunus neighborhoods, but how else can they live? There are no jobs, no prospects, no hope…

“And that's just what your father wants.”

“What are you talking about?” Weiss demanded.

Blake shook her head, giving her a pitying look. “These things didn't just happen. Even besides disproportional police responses and juries treating faunus far more harshly than any human criminal, even besides our mistreatment at stores that discriminate against us or employers who reject faunus out of hand… so many laws are in place that reinforce this cycle of oppression. Laws that your family keeps in place, hell, they buy so many politicians with 'campaign donations' that they actually write half of these laws.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” Weiss demanded. “My father… he's come to hate the faunus, but it was only after my mother died. Before that he might not have cared overly much about their plight, but even now he rarely thinks about them. He cares more about dust and money than anything else.”

“Dust is money for him, and it takes faunus to get that dust,” Blake said. “You know what the mines are like. If there were any other jobs available do you think anyone would work in them? The SDC doesn't need slavery to be legal, they just have to make sure that we're desperate enough to sell ourselves to him. And he makes sure we stay that desperate.

“And the White Fang? He had them classified as a dangerous gang before the first killings began. After all, if the faunus helped each other they couldn't be forced to turn to him for work. That's why so many faunus still don't believe the reports about what the White Fang do, why so many are still eager to join. Most members have no idea what they're in for, and most of the leaders use them and twist them until they do things they could never have imagined. The White Fang as a whole aren't monsters, Weiss, and the ones who are were once normal, caring people. And there are still many innocents among them.”

“How can you claim that!?” Weiss objected. “Haven't they seen the deaths? The murders? The bombs?! They blew up One Schnee Plaza! Anyone who joins now, or who is still involved is supporting murder and terrorism!”

“And who tells them about it?” Blake demanded. “The news? The government? All of the people who tell them how dangerous faunus streets are, how dangerous the faunus themselves are? They look around and they don't see animals. They see friends, families, homes. So why would they
believe those people when they claim the ones who make sure they're fed, are treated with dignity, are monsters? Of course they don't believe it! Of course they get indoctrinated into the White Fang. I'm going to stop them. I'm going to bring down their leadership. But I'm not going to go along with your blind vendetta.

“Now I'm done with this. Let's go Yang.”

They left, and Weiss stewed angrily while her girlfriend fidgeted beside her. Finally Ruby leaned over and wrapped her arms around Weiss, who tensed for a moment, before relaxing and blinking in confusion. “What?”

“Just thought you could use a hug,” Ruby said, before frowning. “Actually, I think you could always use a hug, probably. I think I should hug you more often.”

Weiss sighed, rolling her eyes, although she leaned into the contact. “Dolt.”

“Your dolt.”

“My dolt,” Weiss agreed fondly. “I just don't get it.”

Ruby shrugged. “I guess growing up a faunus means she saw the White Fang differently. I mean, when you think about it, they haven't been a real terrorist organization for that long, right?”

“They were still a radical organization,” Weiss said.

Ruby nodded. “Faunus rights have always been kinda radical. I mean, a lot of people said they should just be banished, right? I mean, they're part extra planar. They used to burn them at the stake in parts of Europe.”

Weiss made a face. “They used to do worse. Still, that was a very long time ago.”

Ruby hummed thoughtfully. “She said she'd keep an eye out for anything on Torchwick. I guess if they don't know anything they don't know anything.”

“I guess,” Weiss sighed. “Come on, if we're going to do this without them we need to start digging.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “I've got the videotape. You want to look into, um…”

“I'll see if I can find anything about the armored car,” Weiss said. “They have GPS tracking, so I'm sure the SDC knows where it is by now.”

They returned to the squad room, which was still almost completely empty. In the past she would've given almost anything for that kind of silence to think, but instead she found it strangely oppressive. She had gotten used to just how lively Supernatural Affairs could be. Pushing that aside she began to make phone calls, updating her notes as she went.

For the next week Ruby and Weiss continued to run into walls with the investigation. Whoever spray painted the camera didn't show up in any known database, and no one recognized the picture when they posted wanted notices. The armored car had been found ten blocks from the scene of the crime, wiped down of all prints and without even a hair or useful magical resonance to use as evidence, and with every single crate of dust long gone.

To make matters worse, Weiss' suspicion that that one robbery wouldn't be the end of things ended up being borne out in the worst of ways. While there was no exact duplication of method, many dust shipments had been robbed that week, although no further deaths occurred. It was obvious that the
people behind the theft had spent a long time preparing, as they knew exactly when and where the
dust transports would be the most vulnerable.

“Look, I don't care what you think,” Weiss snarled into her phone. “I should hope no one cares what
you think, given your obvious lack of ability in that area. I need to know upcoming dust shipments
so that—do you really think that I, Weiss Schnee, detective with Supernatural Affairs and child of the
owner of the Schnee Dust Company am going to somehow go back in time and rob all of those dust
shipments with the manifest I'm asking you to give me? Or that I will rob the next vehicles with the
information? This is why I commented on the paucity of your thought processes!”

“Weiss?” Ruby murmured carefully.

Weiss glared at her, making her eep and raise her hands up in surrender. She then growled and
slammed her phone back onto the base. She’d never really used a landline until she’d joined the
police, and while on some level it felt a little silly to use such outdated technology, it was quite
cathartic being able to slam the phone after bad calls. “What?”

“I just wanted to see if you were okay,” Ruby said.

“Okay?” Weiss scoffed. “I’m being stymied by incompetent bureaucrats who would rather pretend
that nothing is wrong that let me do my job! Apparently their shipping records are simultaneously too
secret to risk giving to the police, and too widely known internally to pinpoint who might have
leaked them. The sheer unadulterated incompetency!”

Ruby got up and walked around their desks, eventually straddling her girlfriend. Weiss turned bright
red and glanced around, but it was well into the afternoon and everyone else seemed to be out doing
other cases, most of them searching for the White Fang responsible for the bombing. “Wh-what are
you doing?”

“Kissing you,” Ruby said, wrapping her arms around Weiss and doing just that.

Weiss grunted and refused to kiss back, but Ruby was patient, and finally the closeness became too
much for her to resist. Even with months having passed since she had first safely touched her
girlfriend, physical contact was still foreign and profound to her. She finally gave in, wrapping her
arms around Ruby and kissing her back just as hard.

Finally Ruby pulled away, smiling at her with reddened lips and flushed cheeks. “Hey.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “What?”

“Feeling better?” Ruby asked.

“No.”

Ruby giggled. “I think you are… although if you really want to feel better we should have a date
night.”

Weiss sighed. “Ruby, we've got a lot of work to do…”

“Weiss, we can't do everything in a day,” Ruby said. “We aren't storybook heroes, remember? We
can't just work twenty four hours a day after we get a case until we magically solve it.”

Weiss huffed. “Look, I'm sure we're missing something. We should go over the evidence we have
again.”
Ruby groaned. “Fine. One more time. And then we're going out and having a nice night together.”

“If we don't find anything,” Weiss offered.

“Anything real,” Ruby said, narrowing her eyes. “I'm not going to watch you burn yourself out because you made up an excuse to check a billion possible things or something. Okay?”

“Okay,” Weiss said. “Now get off of me so we can go over my notes.”

“Fine,” Ruby sighed. “But then we go to the Vytal Festival.”

“What?”

“The Vytal Festival,” Ruby repeated. “You know, the spring festival they have in Vytal Park every year? The one you told me you wanted to go to? The one that starts tonight?”

“I know what the Vytal Festival is!” Weiss objected. “I just… forgot the date.”

“You, miss glued to her calendar, forgot the date?” Ruby teased.

“What does that even mean?” Weiss huffed.

“Well… I dunno,” Ruby said. “You just always seem to know that kinda stuff. This is what I mean about you working too hard.”

“Fine,” Weiss groaned. She had a sudden nagging thought that she was forgetting something, but she couldn't remember what. Perhaps she had been working too hard on the case.

Ruby actually grabbed some paperwork and flipped through it, obviously hoping to appease her girlfriend as quickly as possible so that they could finish and leave, as it actually was very close to the end of normal working hours. “So five robberies in seven days. All SDC armored cars. After the first they didn't say anything and used tasers to disable the drivers and guards before driving away with the cars. Why didn't the SDC change something? I mean, shouldn't it have been obvious that they were vulnerable?”

Weiss sighed. “Organizational inertia. It's hard for a group as big as the SDC to change what it does, and that's when things are functioning normally. Our- their headquarters was destroyed, and many of the people that would make those kinds of decisions were either killed, or the people that would pass on word in either direction were. With the chain of command fragmented it's taking even longer than usual to make any changes.”

“Still, it's been a week!”

“And they probably are making adjustments by now,” Weiss said. Before she could say anything else her cellphone rang.

Ruby groaned. “Please don't be another robbery.”

“That would be on the landline, dolt,” Weiss said as she looked at it, sitting up straighter as she saw her sister's name. “Hello?”

“Weiss,” Winter said. “I was calling to see if you were still interested in attending the Vytal Festival with me. I know things have been busy, but I would still like to formally meet your girlfriend.”

“Of- of course!” Weiss said, shutting her eyes as she mentally scolded herself for forgetting what her sister had said. Even if it had been a very long week that was no excuse for forgetting plans,
especially plans with her sister. “What about this evening, or is that too last minute?”

“This evening will be fine,” Winter said. “How does seven o'clock sound?”

“Perfect,” Weiss said. “See you then!”

“Who was that?” Ruby asked as Weiss hung up her phone.

“My sister,” she said as she jumped up and began gathering her things. “Come on, we need to go.”

“Why, what's wrong?” Ruby asked.

“My sister wanted to get to know you, and she asked for us to be at the Vytal Festival tonight at seven!”

“Really?!” Ruby asked, face lighting up. A moment later she gulped, turning pale as she remembered exactly who they were talking about. “Really?”
“Ah, just look at this, isn't it amazing!” Weiss said, a huge smile on her face.

“Yeah, I can't wait to try all the food carts!” Ruby agreed. “And all the games! And the music and shows and things too!”

“Yes, so much organization,” Weiss said. “Just imagine all of the effort it must've taken to have so many activities and displays, all meticulously organized for optimum enjoyment! It truly is breathtaking.”

“Er…” Ruby murmured, staring at her like she'd lost her mind. “Right. Um, plus funnel cake. Ooh, I really want funnel cake! Let's get some funnel cake, Weiss!”

“Not yet,” she said with an indulgent smile. “You'll ruin your dinner. We should get some real food to eat, first.”

Ruby sighed like Weiss' demand was an onerous imposition. “Fine. Ooh! Hotdogs!”

“I said real food,” Weiss sniffed. “Come on, let's look around before we settle on something.”

The Vytal Festival was held every spring in Vytal Park, and it was intended to celebrate all of the cultures of the world. Vale, being a major coastal city had been flooded with immigrants for centuries, all bringing their own cultures and traditions. For nearly two hundred years the Vytal Festival had become a symbol of peaceful cooperation between the different groups that made up the city.

Even with her lingering anger and grief at the destruction of One Schnee Plaza, her frustration at the dust theft cases not providing useful clues, her nerves at officially introducing her girlfriend to her sister, the anniversary of her mother's death in the next few days, and her general loathing of large crowds Weiss couldn't keep a smile from her face. The festival was extremely impressive, but what made it truly wonderful was the way Ruby enjoyed every little thing.

She was just like a puppy as she bounded about, looking at the games, food carts, dancers, musicians, and stalls of all kinds and varieties, and whenever she saw something really cool she would run back to Weiss and grab her hand, dragging her to see whatever she had found. At first Weiss thought being dragged around that way was annoying, but slowly, like most of Ruby's more questionable behaviors, it had transformed into being endearing. It probably helped that Ruby did her best to guide her through the thinner parts of crowds so that she didn't risk touching anyone. Soon she was happily following along, giggling and grinning at every little thing.

“Ooh! Weiss, look at that!” Ruby said.

Weiss found herself dragged by the hand over to a game stall. It was typical carnival fair, a simple game of ring toss with various stuffed animals as prizes. Weiss wrinkled her brow in confusion, not sure how it was supposed to be different from the dozens of other carnival games they had passed between the more interesting displays of foreign cultures. “What's so special about ring toss?”

“That's not it,” Ruby said, shaking her head. “Look at that!”

One of the stuffed animals was a little corgi with a similar color pattern to Zwei. While it would never match the cuteness of the real Zwei, it was adorable all the same. “That is pretty cute,” Weiss agreed.
“I’ll take three rings!” Ruby cheerfully told the man behind the counter, handing him five dollars. “I'm gonna win that for you, Weiss!”

“You don't have to,” Weiss said, although she didn't take her eyes off of it.

“But I want to!” Ruby said, grinning at her. “That way you can have your own little Zwei even when I'm not staying over!”

Weiss leaned over and gave her a quick, chaste kiss on the lips. “For luck.”

Ruby grinned and turned to the display, carefully throwing her first ring… which missed completely. “Oops. Um.. this one will get it! Huh. Well… then this one can do it! Oh…”

“It's all in the wrist,” a voice said, making Weiss nearly jump out of her skin.

“Winter!” Weiss said, before calming herself down and offering her a more reserved smile. “I am so happy to see you, sister.”

“You as well,” Winter said. “Here, allow me to try.”

Winter bought three rings, and with little effort threw them one after another, all three easily landing on the pegs. “Which one was it that you wanted Weiss?”

“Oh, the corgi,” Weiss said, smiling as the man running the stand handed it to her. “Thank you, sister.”

“You're welcome,” Winter said to her, before looking at her girlfriend for the first time. “Ruby.”

“H-hey,” Ruby said, with a forced smile that looked more like a grimace than anything else. “You're good at that.”

“Of course,” Winter said. “Before I joined SWAT I was once assigned to investigate possible rigging of carnival games because of my hand eye coordination and talent with these sorts of activities. I can win any carnival game here.”

“Really?” Ruby asked, becoming excited again. “Any of them?”

“That is what I said, is it not?” Winter confirmed. “I would hope that you believe my words in the future, Ms. Rose.”

“I do!” Ruby said quickly. “I do! And, um, please call me Ruby.”

“Ruby,” Winter agreed, giving her a nod. “Well, then, shall we continue? We've met before, but we've never really gotten to know one another well, and this seems to be a good opportunity to do so.”

“Okay,” Ruby said with a suddenly sickly grin. “Um… what did you want to know?”

“Many things,” Winter said. “Why don't we stroll for a bit and see the sights before I interrogate you.”

“Winter...” Weiss started.

“Don't worry, sister,” Winter said. “I won't hurt her too badly.”

“Too badly?” Ruby gulped.
Weiss sighed, knowing that there was nothing she could do to convince her older sister to be gentle with Ruby. She was rarely gentle even with her, and she seemed to be the only person capable of bringing out the softer side of the elder Schnee sibling. “Why don't we get something to eat?” she offered.

“Okay,” Ruby said, perking up. “I saw a-”

“Okay,” Weiss said.

“You didn't even let me say what I saw!” Ruby objected.

“I saw you eying the fishball stand we passed,” Weiss said. “We are not eating there.”

“Why not?” Ruby asked. “The one at the docks was-”

“Just no,” Weiss said. “Why don't we try something different?”

“Wow, look at that!” Ruby said, pointing to a stand. “They're selling deep fried butter! How does that work, anyway?”

Weiss felt her stomach roil at the thought. “How about something foreign?”

“Fine,” Ruby pouted, and Weiss made sure to look away before she was convinced to try deep fried butter or something equally traumatizing. She made the mistake of looking in the direction of the food stand in question, and actually witnessed someone biting into it after dipping their abomination in the provided cup of mayonnaise. She sped up her pace, hoping to outrun the impending nausea.

They spent half an hour wandering the fair while bickering about what to eat. Everything that Weiss pointed out was too weird for Ruby, and everything Ruby came up with Weiss turned her nose up at. In all honesty Weiss was willing to try almost any of the food (as long as it wasn't fishballs or fried butter), and she was sure from the teasing glint in Ruby's eyes that she would've been able to find something at any of the places Weiss suggested. That wasn't the point, though.

Finally Winter huffed, and Weiss turned red as she realized that she'd actually forgotten that her sister was trailing along behind them. “This is… cute, but my lunch was interrupted by meetings, and I'd rather eat sometime this evening.”

“Sorry, Winter,” Weiss said contritely. “We can eat anywhere… almost. What about that, um, that pasta in a waffle cone place Ruby suggested.”

“Yeah, sorry Winter,” Ruby said. “We don't have to eat there. You're right that spaghetti and waffle cones is pretty weird. We can go to that Moroccan place. I'm… not sure what that is but it did smell pretty good…”

“We don't have to,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “I'm not really sure what they have to offer, either. You seemed fond of that hamburger stand-”

“No, you were right, we should eat something international at the Vytal Festival,” Ruby interrupted. “That's the whole point, right? So how about we go to that other one you saw… you said it was Guatemalan?”

“Well, I mean, we can go with one of yours-” Weiss started.

“We're going there,” Winter interrupted sharply, pointing at a nearby stand. “If I don't choose we'll be here all night. Now come on.”
“Yes, ma'am,” Ruby yelped.

“‘Sisister,” Weiss said.

The food stand in question turned out to be Lebanese food, and while they didn't know exactly what they were ordering by name, they soon all had delicious smelling meals. Ruby was a little hesitant to try hers, and if Weiss was being honest, she was as well. For all of her talk of trying something foreign, her own tastes were pretty limited and boring. She had eaten the same salad for lunch several days a week at Signal for nearly a year until Ruby twisted her arm to try anything else, after all. Furthermore, while her previous experience with street food had initially been delicious, the truth about the fishballs had ruined it for her.

The first bite of the kebbeh and hummus had been an exercise in bravery, but when the flavors exploded on her tongue she relaxed, happily taking another bite. She smiled, and looked over at Ruby who was cheerfully munching on a pita wrapped kafta… whatever that was.

“How is yours?” Weiss asked.

“‘S good!” Ruby said. “Here, try it.”

She stuck her wrapped food in Weiss' face, making her turn bright red for a moment. Ruby had already taken a few bites from her pita, and on some level she wanted to recoil from it. Eating after someone spread germs after all, and she could see the teeth marks where Ruby was offering for her to take a bite. On the more sane side, she realized that kissing and… other things actually involved a lot more than simply eating after her girlfriend, and with a bright blush she tried it.

“So… what do you think?”

“It is pretty good,” Weiss said. “Here, try mine.”

Ruby didn't hesitate at all, taking a huge bight of her food when she offered it. “Hey!” Weiss objected. “Don't eat all of it!”

“Sorry!”

“And don't talk with your mouth full! Ugh, the things I put up with…”

Ruby chewed and swallowed, before leaning over and giving her a quick kiss. “Sorry.”

“I-it's okay,” Weiss said, before suddenly remembering Winter. Normally Winter was the focus of her world on the occasions that they could spend time together, but suddenly she was ignoring her and doing tremendously embarrassing things as if she wasn't there at all. “S-so, Winter, how is your, um shawarma?”

“It is good,” Winter said, before narrowing her eyes playfully. “You'll have to get your own if you want to try it, however.”

“Maybe I should've got it,” Ruby thoughtfully. “If it's good enough for the Avengers…”

“Who?” Weiss asked.

Ruby gaped at her. “We have to watch that! How can you not know about the Avengers. Okay, movie night tonight!”

“So, Ruby, what are your intentions with my sister?” Winter asked suddenly.
“Winter!” Weiss objected.

Ruby looked like a deer in the headlights for a moment, before a look of determination came over her face. “We haven't really talked about things, but… I want to be with her forever, whatever way she wants that to be.”

“Ruby,” Weiss said with a blush.

“I see,” Winter said. “If you intend for that to happen then you need to discuss these things. Relationships don't work on their own. They require hard work and open communication, and if both parties aren't willing to put in enough effort they are destined to fail.”

“Winter?” Weiss asked, looking at her sister with concern. She realized that she knew nothing about Winter's romantic life, but what she had just said seemed very personal.

“Don't worry about it, Weiss,” Winter said shaking her head, before focusing on Ruby again. “So, you're going to have a movie night. Is this going to be a 'Netflix and chill'?”

“A what?” Weiss asked.

Ruby blushed. “Um… uh… hey, look! That… that stand looks interesting… I'll be back!”

Winter chuckled as Ruby desperately fled towards a stand with a large crowd gathered in front of it, obviously hoping that it would be entertaining enough to cover for her running from the question. The sisters were quiet for a moment, before Winter finally spoke. “You're different with her.”

“What do you mean?” Weiss asked.

“While the long wait for food may have been annoying, it gave me a chance to observe the two of you. In the past you have been oversensitive to criticism, and yet you enjoyed being teased and joked about by your girlfriend. I didn't expect you to ever find a relationship like that, especially given how opposed you were to the very concept of love. Actually, I find myself envious.”

“Envious?” Weiss asked, unable to imagine her older sister envying her anything.

“My romantic life has been somewhat lacking, and I'm not so young anymore,” Winter said. “I suppose it's my own fault, as I spend far too much time working and very little socializing, and the only person I met through work… didn't work out as well as you and your partner seem to have.”

“Winter...” Weiss said, not sure what to say or do.

Winter gave her a smile as Ruby came slinking back, obviously bored by whatever show was being put on. “Pay it no mind. I shouldn't be getting maudlin, not when I am here to be the big sister and meet your paramour. Now Ruby… I suppose this is when I should be asking you how you intend to contribute to the household finances, but I am already aware that you are a detective, and I took the liberty of pulling your complete file, so I know exactly how capable you are.”

“Winter!” Weiss objected. “That's… that's an invasion of privacy!”

“I don't see why she should be concerned,” Winter said. “You have very good scores at the shooting range. You could shoot competitively if you put in a little more effort. On the other hand, your high school transcript leaves something to be desired, particularly in the area of English. As a native speaker—”

Ruby by then had turned bright red and was staring wide eyed at Winter like she was an oncoming
train and she was tied to the tracks. Weiss, on the other hand, was more used to what her sister was capable of and finally brought things to an end. “Winter! That's certainly an invasion of her privacy. Besides, her mastery of the language may be… questionable at times, but she has many other positive qualities that she brings to this relationship!”

“Hey!” Ruby objected. “I guess Mrs. Amaranth saying sleeping through Shakespeare would haunt me was right after all…”

“Since I know what you do for a living, I suppose I should ask what you like to do to entertain yourself,” Winter said.

“Um, well… I like movies,” Ruby said. “And I read some and listen to music. And I play a lot of video games. I also really like to take stuff apart and fix it.”

“What kind of… 'stuff’?”

“Oh, well, just about anything,” Ruby said excitedly. “Especially mechanical stuff, though. Like engines or appliances and, uh, other stuff. I really liked working on a clock, but that was a lot of gears and pieces and things! Like, so many! I do some electronics too, but if I can't fix it with a multimeter and a soldering iron I usually get a bit lost…”

“I see,” Winter said. “That is something of an unusual hobby. Why did you pursue police work instead of becoming a mechanic or engineer?”

“Well… I mean, some of it was not wanting to spend even more time learning stuff in college,” Ruby said. “My grades were okay, but… I don't really like studying, and all the theory stuff is really boring anyway. I'd like to just… fix it, you know? Usually I can figure it out when I take it apart.

“But the main reason… the main reason is I wanted to help people. I know... now… that the world isn't simple. As a police person I can't just save the day and make everything better, but… I want to try. I want to be able to look back when I die and say 'I made a difference' even if it's only to a few people.”

“I- I see,” Winter said, obviously impressed despite herself. “That's a very matur-”

“Ooh!” Ruby interrupted. “Funnel cake! Be right back!”

Winter looked over at Weiss, who realized she was smiling without meaning to. When they had first met she would've been upset about her running off mid conversation in the pursuit of sugar, but by then she found it to be pretty cute. Her sister, on the other hand, looked completely nonplussed.

“Ruby was looking forward to the funnel cake,” Weiss said with a shrug.

“I see,” Winter said. “You know, now that you can touch people… you most likely are able to have children.”

Weiss froze, her previous smile congealing into a rictus-like expression. “I… hadn't considered that.”

Winter nodded. “Furthermore, if you are able to have a child you would be able to be the heiress of the SDC, and my research indicates that father has not formally removed you from the line of succession. You were speaking about improving things for the faunus… you could do much more as the head of the family.”

Weiss stared into space, possibilities running so quickly through her mind that her head began to spin. She hadn't really thought about being heir since she was a child, but Winter was right. The
reason she wasn't expected to inherit was simply her lack of ability to touch others. Summer helping her learn to do so changed everything.

She felt a chill run up her spine as another thought struck her. “When father finds out… he'll want me to marry someone for the company.”

“He would,” Winter agreed stoically. “He would put great pressure on you to marry the son of some important business or political figure. Someone who could improve the company with the connections his marriage would forge. What would you do about that?”

Weiss stared after Ruby for a few long moments. “I love her. I want to improve the SDC… to help the faunus. But I can't sacrifice her love for that.”

“Even though it means that father will fight against you?” Winter asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said quietly. “She's worth fighting for.”

“Good,” Winter said with a small smile. “If you wish to stay with Ruby, don't forget that there are certain rituals that allow two women to have children. I believe Captain Goodwitch has a few ancestors that reproduced that way; it was something of a fad in England when the persecution of witches was at its historical peak. Besides… I may not be able to have children, but if I want to spoil relatives I'd imagine any you have with Ruby would be less annoying than any spawn Whitley sires.”

“Winter!” Weiss said with a blush. “I'm certainly not ready for- for children.”

“Have you been sexually active with Ruby?”

Weiss turned even redder. “Winter!”

“So yes,” she said with a nod. “Don't worry, that's perfectly natural, especially with how long you've been together. She satisfies you sufficiently, does she not?”

“I have no complaints,” Weiss ground out.

“Good,” Winter said with a chuckle. “Sister… the most important thing is that she makes you happy, and I can see that she does. I know that you are your own woman now, but for however much it matters… I approve of your relationship.”

“Winter,” Weiss said, blinking back tears.

“You do?!” Ruby shouted, having returned just in time to overhear that pronouncement. “Thank you! I promise to do everything I can to make her happy!”

With those words she dove forward, wrapping her arms around Winter, one hand shaking powdered sugar everywhere as she awkwardly held onto her half eaten funnel cake. Winter froze up, looking shocked at the sudden gesture, before awkwardly patting Ruby on the back, obviously not sure what to do about the physical affection.

Weiss hung back, smiling brightly, warmth filling her as she watched the two most important people in her life hug. Winter then leaned in close and murmured something in Ruby's ear that made her turn pale and freeze up. Weiss was about to intervene when a voice interrupted her. “Hey, snow angel.”

She turned around, annoyed at the unwanted nickname, frowning when she saw Neptune and Sun, two members of the Intelligence division standing in front of her. She suddenly wondered if her
theory about them dating was correct after all, even if Ruby had been convinced that Neptune was hitting on her.

“You here for the same case?” Sun asked.

“Case?” she asked.

“Yeah, we're tailing some White Fang creeps,” Sun said. “I saw you and your partner with someone from SWAT and thought you were here to make a move if they tried anything.”

“Try anything?” Weiss asked. “Do you know what they may be-”

Her question was interrupted by explosions.
Seventh Case: Violence

Scattered explosions ripped through Vytal Park, followed by the screams of festival goers. In moments a happy evening celebrating diversity and harmony had descended into complete pandemonium as dozens were killed and more injured. The crowd began to panic and run, animal instinct to escape danger causing more to be trampled and killed by the mindless crowd.

Then the gunfire started. Here and there in the crowd figures were pulling White Fang masks from bags, along with handguns as they began shooting randomly into the fleeing civilians. The shock and horror Weiss had been feeling gave way to a simmering hatred and rage as she reached for her sword, only to realize that she had neither it nor her service pistol. The only things she had thought to fear that day were the large crowds and her sister's reaction to formally meeting Ruby, and instead she found herself in a war zone.

“Here,” Winter said, handing her a small handgun. Even with how petite her hands were she wasn't able to grip it with all of her fingers, the tiny gun simply too small to be held that way. It resembled a normal, larger gun however, and she was able to disable the safety and chamber a round with little trouble.

Looking up, she saw that Winter had her actual service pistol in her hand, the small one she had given Weiss obviously a concealed backup. Neptune and Sun had also drawn their pistols, and one of them had given Ruby a small revolver, the cylinder only large enough to hold five bullets. They all exchanged a look, and then Ruby gave them a determined grin. “Come on, let's save some lives!”

Unfortunately that was much easier said than done. Sun and Neptune split off in one direction, and the three of them went in the other, with the plan of arresting or shooting any White Fang they encountered on the way. The Vytal Festival was arranged in a large loop, so by the time they met up they should have the situation under control. Unfortunately, that meant that they had to make their way through the fleeing crowds and take down an unknown number of armed and prepared assailants with nothing more than a few handguns.

Later Weiss would never be able to give a completely coherent account of what happened. Between Ruby's constant efforts, and no longer having to be afraid of hurting people she wasn't quite so overwhelmed by crowds as she once was. She would never be fully comfortable in them, but with Ruby with her she no longer felt crippling fear when stuck in them. That did not mean that she was alright being the middle of panicked mob, however.

The hunt for White Fang members was a confusing swirl of scared faces, as people did their best to flee to safety, hampered both by the disorganized evacuation and the scattered presence of terrorists shooting anyone they came across. Weiss was so disoriented by everything that was happening that her sister and girlfriend had both shot several gunmen before she even realized that they were there, and with that realization came the stark understanding that she was nothing but a burden to them in the fighting.

She forced herself to focus, and the thinning of the crowds helped her to see another target. He was wearing a White Fang mask, and he was looking down, working on his gun, apparently trying to clear a jam so that he could keep killing. Dead and injured people were scattered randomly in the area, obviously gunned down by him in the previous minutes. She paused briefly to ensure that no one was obstructing her shot or standing behind him, ready to be hit if she missed, and then she lined up her sights and pulled the trigger. The tiny gun was loaded with powerful bullets, making it buck painfully in her grip, but she managed to get it under control and fire two more times before he hit the ground, blood blooming on his white t-shirt.
She looked over at her sister and girlfriend. Ruby gave her a grim nod before going back to scanning the crowd, while Winter was changing her gun's magazine. Behind them, rising from the ring toss game that provided the corgi toy that Weiss had thoughtlessly dropped when the explosions happened was another White Fang member. She tried to raise her gun, but it was like she was swimming through molasses as she watched him raise his own pistol, pointing it at her partner and pulling the trigger.

She wasn't the only one who noticed, however. Winter shoved Ruby out of the way, but she wasn't quite fast enough. Ruby hit the ground with a grunt, uninjured, but her sister gasped in pain as a bullet struck her in the upper arm, blood quickly staining her white jacket.

Weiss finally brought her gun up and opened fire. Unlike before she didn't have to worry about innocents, as the stall provided a backstop for her gunfire, and she didn't take the time to properly aim, relying on volume of gunfire rather than careful shots to take him down. She was impressed with just how many bullets the tiny magazine held, as she poured rounds into the man, who fell very dead behind the counter a moment later.

“Winter!” Weiss shouted, dropping the empty gun and falling to her knees next to her sister, who was already getting tended to by Ruby.

“Weiss,” Winter said through clenched teeth. “You need to work on your trigger discipline. That was very wasteful of ammunition, which is particularly egregious as we lack proper support at the moment.”

“You're shot,” Weiss said. “You're bleeding. Winter…”

She broke her scolding look and gave Weiss a reassuring smile. “I'll be fine. It hit my upper arm, but I don't believe it severed any major arteries. Your partner is doing a fine job of first aid, but you need to calm down.”

Weiss realized that she had been hyper ventilating, and she did her best to get herself under control. Eventually she reached out with a shaking hand and took Winter's uninjured one, squeezing it tightly. “I can't lose you.”

“You won't,” Winter said calmly. It struck Weiss then that she was being so useless that the gunshot victim was having to focus on reassuring her. “I need you to do something for me though, alright?”

“Anything.”

“I need you to calm down, grab my gun, and defend us,” Winter said. “I don't think anyone is nearby, because we've been completely vulnerable for almost a minute now, but just in case any more White Fang come this way I need you to stand guard. Can you do that sister?”

“Y-yes,” Weiss said, doing her best to calm down and do as she was told. She squeezed Winter's hand again, and then forced herself away from her, grabbing the gun with shaking hands as she stood and looked around. She took several long, deep breaths, trying to calm down, and while her heart still pounded so hard she could barely hear anything, her hands at least stopped shaking.

The sounds of gunfire had ended, and in the distance she could hear rapidly approaching sirens as, for the second time in a week every available emergency responder came to another massive terrorist incident caused by the White Fang. Weiss gritted teeth, anger returning as she thought about the violent animals responsible for what had just happened.

She noticed movement and looked up, but relaxed when she saw that it was Neptune and Sun
strolling over to them. “What happened?” Neptune asked.

“She was shot,” Weiss snarled.

Sun raised his hands defensively. “Sorry, he's an idiot. She gonna be okay?”

“She should be,” Ruby said. “I think I've got the bleeding under control, but the bullet's still in there, so…”

“I'll be fine,” Winter said, still as calm and seemingly unaffected as before. Weiss still couldn't understand how her sister was so nonchalant about being shot, although she knew it was probably to help keep her from freaking out again. “I take it the situation is under control?”

“Well we went the other way and reached you, so it seems like things are clear,” Sun said. “No more gunshots at least.”

“You said you were here following the White Fang,” Weiss said suddenly. “Did you know they were planning something like this?”

“No way!” Sun objected. “I mean, we were following around murdering terrorist psychopaths, so anything's possible, but if we thought they were planning on doing this we would've tried to stop them. We just thought they were going to have another meeting.”

“Another meeting?” Weiss asked.

Sun nodded. “Different groups have been coordinating more lately, probably getting ready for big moves like this and the Schnee building bombing. Oh, yeah, sorry about that… anyway, we were tailing them, hoping to identify more members. It's hard tracking them down since the cells don't usually meet up or even know each other.”

Weiss' eyes narrowed. “If they've been coordinating more then maybe someone got sloppy and learned something they shouldn't. All it takes is small mistakes to find the truth sometimes.”

“Unfortunately I don't think any of them are still alive,” Sun said. “I actually saw one shoot himself when he was just wounded so we couldn't take him in, and none of the others survived the fighting. Did you guys manage to get one alive?”

“No,” Weiss said, placing Winter's gun beside her and the pulling off her gloves. “That doesn't mean they won't talk to me, though. Keep an eye on Winter. Just because things seem calm doesn't mean none of them are waiting for a chance to kill a Schnee while they're off guard.”

She approached the White Fang she gunned down after he shot her sister, squatting beside the body, her nose wrinkling in disgust at the large pool of blood surrounding it. She had emptied her gun's magazine into the body, and it was riddled full of holes. Fortunately the head was intact, so she wouldn't have difficulty getting information from it. With only a little more hesitation she found a relatively clean spot on the corpse and touched it with her hand.

She opened the connection to the other side, calling forth the necromantic energies to fill her person. Not long ago the sensation was one she had lived with every moment of her life, until it had become simply normal for her. Closing her eyes, she channeled the power into the body, causing it to animate. She mentally ordered the zombie to be still while she scanned it, something she had learned to do after the disastrous trap left by the other necromancer.

It was a very good thing she had added that to her routine, as she quickly found a magical trap. She opened her eyes and grabbed the man's sleeve, pulling it back to expose his forearm, where she saw
the brand used by the necromancer. He was trapped just like Charleston's victims were, which meant that any attempt to recall his soul for questioning would be futile and potentially lethal.

She returned the zombie to his rest and walked briskly over to another dead White Fang member, checking it quickly. Like the last, his forearm had been branded with the magical trap, and a quick check of several other White Fang revealed the same for them as well. All of them were trapped, meaning that she couldn't interrogate any of them.

She returned to her sister, only to find paramedics preparing her for transport. Ruby, Sun and Neptune stood nearby being questioned by officers, who turned their attention to her when she approached. “That's my partner,” Ruby said. “Winter's sister.”

“Would you like to come with us to the hospital, ma'am?” one of the paramedics asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said quickly.

“Wait, we haven't checked her story,” the detective said.

Weiss gave him a cold look. “If you want 'my story' contact my captain. I'm sure Goodwitch would be eager to discuss it with you.”

He looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, but at least he stopped objecting as she started to follow her sister. She hesitated for a moment, looking back at Ruby, who waved her on with a pained smile. “Go on… I'll finish things up here and then catch up.”

Weiss followed the paramedics to the ambulance. It seemed an entire fleet of ambulances had arrived, and while those with more pressing medical needs were given first priority, it wasn't terribly long before Winter's gunshot wound saw her on her way to the hospital. Weiss hovered nearby, biting her lip nervously as the paramedics checked her sister over, ensuring that she was stable.

Before long they reached the hospital, and Weiss trailed along behind the doctors as her sister was taken for tests before they could operate on her arm. Ruby had been correct, and the bullet was still in her, the handgun round lodging in the bone and requiring surgery to be removed. Weiss felt herself becoming numb as she was filled in on the details, her sister having authorized her to hear it. She soon found herself sitting alone in a hallway, only the sound of the overly busy hospital keeping her company as she was lost in her own head, visions of her sister dying on the operating table overwhelming her.

Eventually someone sat beside her, and while it annoyed her having someone intrude on her personal space, she was so wrapped up in her own dark thoughts that she didn't react at all, simply continuing to stare into space until a cup of coffee was thrust into her line of sight.

Blinking, she glanced over, a scathing tirade dying on her tongue as she realized that the interloper was Ruby. “Thank you,” she mumbled, taking the cup and sipping the coffee. While it was obviously the cheap swill served by the hospital, Ruby knew just how she liked it, so she couldn't complain too much.

“How is she?” Ruby asked. “Have they told you anything?”

“She's in surgery,” Weiss said dully. “They're taking out the bullet.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “Do you know how much longer?”

Weiss just shook her head, before sipping her coffee. They sat in silence for a while before Ruby leaned over, wrapping an arm around her and resting her head on her shoulder. Slowly, almost
against her will Weiss felt herself start to relax, until she leaned her head against Ruby's as they waited.

Finally a doctor approached, and Weiss sat up, straightening her back and raising her chin defiantly as he looked at her. “Ms. Schnee?”

“Yes?”

“Your sister is on way to recovery,” he said. “Everything went well, and there were no complications, although she'll need to rest her arm for some time and undergo rehab. You'll be able to go see her shortly.”

Weiss slumped against Ruby, blinking back tears. “Thank you.”

He gave her a tired smile. “You're welcome.”

Before he could say anything else a nurse flagged him down, and he gave them a nod before moving off, most likely to begin another surgery on a victim of the bombing and mass shooting. She was actually a little surprised that her sister and herself had received as much attention as they had given her apparently relatively minor injury. Perhaps her name, or her sister's position had given them special treatment.

“Hey, she's okay,” Ruby said, carefully wiping Weiss' cheeks. It was only then that she realized that she was crying. She buried her head in Ruby's shoulder to hide them, hugging Ruby tightly.

She was so glad that she could actually touch her girlfriend. Weiss remembered so many painful moments without having any kind of support, and knowing that she had someone she could lean on made everything so much easier to bear. “Thank you.”

“What for?” Ruby asked.

“Just… being you,” Weiss said. “And… being here.”

Ruby kissed the top of her head. “There's nowhere I'd rather be in the whole world.”

“You'd rather be in this hospital than anywhere else?”

“It's where you are,” Ruby said.

They sat in silence, until finally Weiss sat up and wiped her face, giving her a quick kiss on the lips for being so sickeningly sweet. “You are so cheesy. I'll be back in a minute.”

She took a brief trip to the restroom to wash her face and use cold water to try to hide the signs of her recent crying. She wasn't even sure what she was crying about, except the sheer relief she felt that the only family member she was close to was going to be okay. Perhaps that was enough, although before she had met Ruby she never would've cried in public over something like that… or anything else for that matter.

Ruby was still sitting where she left her, and she sat beside her again, slumping in her seat as the exhaustion of the day finally caught up with her. “It seems Winter likes you.”

“She did save my life,” Ruby said, before grinning. “See, you didn't have to worry at all!”

Weiss scoffed. “I wasn't the only one who was worried. What did she say to you before everything happened, anyway?”
“Oh, you know...” Ruby said evasively, waving her hand vaguely. When Weiss gave her an unimpressed look she crumbled. “Just, you know, hurt you and I'll regret it. Except, um, really graphic. And painful. Uh... is there really a plane where I can be chained to a rock and have birds eat my liver forever without dying?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Prometheus was sent there by the Greek pantheon. Is that what she threatened to do to you?”

Ruby turned pale. “Um... that was the start... then it got scarier.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I'll talk to her.”

Ruby shook her head quickly. “I don't think I was supposed to tell you!”

Weiss smirked. “Fine. But if she does try to have you visit a different plane... don't.”

Ruby gulped. They sat in silence for a while before finally Weiss broke it. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. It'd take a lot more than threats of scary tortures I've never heard of to keep me away. You'd have to tell me to go... and even then I'd probably hang around in the next hallway hoping you'd want me to come back. Just, um... less stalkery.”

“I'd always want you to come back... except I'd never want you to leave in the first place,” Weiss said. She was silent for a long moment, before finally she looked away, unable to face Ruby while asking her something she'd wanted for a long time. “Move in with me.”

“What?” Ruby asked.

“I mean, you already spend so much time at my apartment, it would make sense, right?” Weiss blustered. “Th-that way you don't have to move back and forth half the week.”

“I'd love to,” Ruby said, leaning close. When Weiss finally turned her head to look at her she kissed her, before leaning back with a grin.

Weiss found herself grinning like an idiot, but for once she couldn't bring herself to care.
Seventh Case: Moving

Weiss felt like banging her head on her desk, but she already had the beginnings of a headache, and
her plans for the evening would no doubt make that even worse. Still, if she hit just hard enough,
maybe she could give herself short term memory loss and not have to remember just how infuriating
the day had been…

“Ugh, mom take me now…” Ruby groaned, putting her head down on her crossed arms.

“Hey, no napping,” Weiss said.

Ruby moaned pitifully. “Why not?”

“Because I want to go to sleep too, but I need to get some more work done before we leave,” Weiss
said.

“So why do I have to stay awake?”

“What, you're going to abandon your girlfriend, who is graciously opening her home to you, to the
evils of work alone?”

Ruby hummed thoughtfully for a second. “You invited me just so you can get snuggles. And Zwei
time. Honestly, if you got your own dog and a body pillow you wouldn't need me.”

“Well, if that's the way you feel I suppose I could look up whatever a body pillow is and have it
delivered tonight instead of having you move in with me,” Weiss said.

“Noooo…” Ruby moaned, long and drawn out, before finally sitting up. “Fine. We can go over…
stuff again. I guess my brain is only mostly fried, anyway.”

“We don't need to talk about… everything we already did today,” Weiss said.

“Oh, good,” Ruby sighed. “I don't think I can go over it again.”

The terrorist attack at the park, particularly following so closely on the heels of the bombing had
drawn an incredible amount of international attention, and the pressure to close the case was
enormous. Every three letter agency in the country was getting involved, and the commissioner, the
governor, the mayor's office, and every inspector in Vale, including Ozpin, was drowning in a
combination of red tape and territorial disputes as their underlings tried to be the first ones to track
down the local White Fang.

The end result was both Weiss and Ruby being grilled endlessly by a conga line of investigators, all
wanting to know why two off duty detectives killed White Fang with weapons they didn't own. The
end result was telling everything about what happened during the fight over and over and over again,
until somehow the madness, chaos, and horror of the mass shooting became lost in a sea of minutia.

They had finally been cleared just a short while before, and they both knew that if they wanted their
own investigation to continue un molested they would need to make progress soon. That was why
Weiss, despite feeling completely burned out, wanted to go over everything that they knew in the
hopes of making some kind of progress.

Unfortunately it was less than they would've liked. They had been thorough, and had gone over
every crime scene, interviewed every possible witness, checked every bit of physical evidence, and
had even done their best to prepare potential future targets, but so far it had been in vain. The only lead they had gotten was from the first victims, and that was because that was the only time Torchwick and the White Fang had actually killed anyone.

“Hey, did you get anything from the White Fang at the park?” Ruby asked. “I forgot to ask with all the hospital and the moving out readying and stuff.”

Weiss blinked. “I didn't tell you? I guess after those truly sisyphean interviews today I just… thought you knew somehow. I couldn't.”

“Couldn't?” Ruby asked.

Weiss pursed her lips. “They were both branded with that necromantic trap.”

“Wait… you mean the one that Charleston used?” Ruby asked, focusing on her completely. “I thought it took a necromancer to do that.”

Weiss shook her head. “It took a necromancer to make the branding iron, but using it simply requires control of one's aura. The bigger question is how did they get ahold of that branding iron.”

“Is it the same one Charleston had?” Ruby asked, jiggling her computer's mouse and then pulling up records. “Didn't we not find it?”

“It wasn't among his effects,” Weiss confirmed. “I can't be certain, although I'm sure someone over in forensics is working on it, but it looked like it could've come from the same branding iron. In which case… how did they get ahold of it? What's their connection to him? I suppose that's an angle we could look into…”

“I dunno, it seems like a dead end,” Ruby said. “I mean, we dug as much as we could into him when we were trying to track him down and he was practically a ghost. Maybe someone stole it from the crime scene?”

“You mean… a police officer?” Weiss asked. “Or someone from forensics?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, frowning. “With the amount of resources the White Fang have available they've probably got a few officers in their pocket. Even human ones. I mean, they're working with Torchwick, so working with a dirty cop doesn't seem like a stretch.”

“They've taken to branding themselves, like animals, just to make it so I can't interrogate them after death,” Weiss said. “At this point I don't think they have any limit to what they'll do to accomplish their sick goals.”

“Yeah… that is crazy,” Ruby hummed. “But don't forget… Sienna Khan put out a statement denouncing the park attack.”

Not just denounced it, but calling the Vale White Fang rogues who no longer represented the supposed 'ideals' of the White Fang. Weiss scoffed at the thought. “Only because the public is furious about them attacking a multicultural festival. If it had gone over well with her base she would've proudly claimed responsibility. Still, I'm more worried about stopping the White Fang here. The FBI and Interpol can deal with her.”

They were quiet for a minute, until Ruby suddenly hopped to her feet, beaming at Weiss, who looked at her suspiciously. “What?”

“It's the end of the work day!” Ruby said brightly.
Weiss blinked and checked her own watch. “Oh… we barely got anything done-”

“Nope.”

“We can still-”

“No way.”

“Ruby,” Weiss pouted. The look worked on her, so why shouldn't she steal a page from her girlfriend's book?

Unfortunately her attempt didn't get the desired result, as Ruby simply skipped around the table and kissed her hard, sucking on her lower lip. It felt weird, but thrilled her somehow despite that. With a sigh she gave up and stood, putting away her work. “Fine. We can go.”

“Yay!”

Weiss rolled her eyes, but gathered up her things and pulled out her phone. “I'll call a moving service-”

“You don't have to do that!” Ruby interrupted.

“How else do you expect to move?” Weiss asked. “I know quite a few of your possessions have… migrated to my apartment over the past few months, but you still have a large number of them, and I for one don't intend to carry them all. Not to mention that we lack a vehicle sufficient for moving everything.”

“That's what friends are for,” Ruby said. “Jaune has a pickup, and I already asked him if he'd help.”

Weiss groaned. “Jaune?”

“Come on, don't be like that, Jaune's a good guy,” Ruby said. “What do you have against him, anyway?”

“Have you met him?” Weiss asked rhetorically, wrinkling her nose. “Mostly it's his general aura of incompetence. Pyrrha has been doing a good job whipping him into shape I suppose, but I still can't figure out how he even qualified as a traffic cop or meter maid, much less an actual detective in an elite unit like Supernatural Affairs.”

“You're terrible,” Ruby said, shaking her head.

“I just have high standards,” Weiss sniffed.

“What about me?”

“What about you?”

“Well, I seem to remember you not liking me too well at first,” Ruby said, wrapping her arms around Weiss' waist. “Do I meet your high standards?”

“Well… I suppose,” Weiss said. “I am letting you move in with me, after all. To be fair, we did meet when you knocked me over and ended up on laying top of me unexpectedly. I was afraid my first day at work would end with me in an interrogation cell rather than outside of it.”

“Sorry about that,” Ruby said sheepishly. “Hey, if I'd touched you nothing would've happened… what would you have done?”
Weiss blinked. “I… I don't know. I can't imagine how I would've reacted. I could scarcely believe it when I found out that we could touch… and I was even more woefully unprepared for the revelation back then. I admit that I was a bit… difficult in the beginning.”

“I'll say,” Ruby muttered.

Weiss glared at her. “But I think we've both come a long way. So if you want Jaune to help then fine… I'll even provide compensation for his troubles.”

“I think pizza would probably cover it,” Ruby said. “I'll go see if him and Pyrrha are ready.”

She started to turn, but stopped when Weiss spoke again. “How did Yang take you moving out?”

“Oh…” Ruby said. “Um… we should talk to Yang, too.”

Weiss stared at her. “You haven't told your sister?”

“Well… she was out late with Blake working on her case I think… and it's only been a day,” Ruby said defensively. “I haven't seen her.”

Weiss sighed. “After you talk to Jaune we'll go find her.”

Weiss followed a distance behind Ruby, watching her chat with Jaune and Pyrrha when she found them. They had been gathering their things to leave, but they both smiled and chatted happily with Ruby for a few minutes instead. It always amazed Weiss how good Ruby was at making friends despite how awkward she could be.

Ruby soon returned, happily taking Weiss' hand. “They'll help! They both will. Jaune's going to go get his pickup truck and then meet us at my… Yang's apartment. Now we just need to find her…”

It was easy to find Yang and Blake in the end. It was well known in the department that they had been given a meeting room for use in their case, and a quick text message informed Ruby that she was there. They walked down the halls until they reached the room, and after only a moment of hesitation they went inside.

Weiss had used some of the meeting rooms before, but she hadn't seen what Yang and Blake had done to the one they had reserved. One glance around quickly showed why they had been given their own work area. It wasn't just the piles of folders and other physical documents covering the large table, or the boxes of checked out physical evidence under it. It was the massive web of images and documents sticky tacked to every square inch of wall.

She couldn't do anything but stare slack jawed at it for a while as Ruby trotted over to her sister and greeted her with a hug. The room looked like the work of a paranoid conspiracy theorist, but instead of ridiculous connections and slightly insane assumptions, every bit of it was meticulously put together to help Blake try to track down the different White Fang cells, particularly those located in Vale. Weiss suddenly had a much greater appreciation for why Blake and Yang had been working on the same case since December without making any notable arrests.

“Finally!” Yang said, giving Ruby a hug. “Not that I'm not gonna miss having you around, Rubles, but I've been waiting for Weissy to finally woman up and get a U-Haul for months.”

Weiss blinked. “Um… should I have rented one? Ruby said that Jaune could take care of things.”

“That's not what… never mind,” Yang said, shaking her head. “And what's this about Jaune?”
“He's got a pickup truck, so him and Pyrrha are gonna move us,” Ruby said. “We're just on the way to meet them, actually…”

“You really think I'm gonna let my little sis move out with just Vomit Boy helping,” Yang scoffed. “Come on, Blakey. Let's go help her move.”

“I'm busy,” Blake murmured. Weiss had barely noticed her as she hadn't reacted at all to them intruding. She just sat at one end of the conference table, flipping through piles of documents.

Yang rolled her eyes. “We'll be there… I just need to remind Blakey that the White Fang will still be there tomorrow, but you won't. Head on over to the apartment, we'll follow soon.”

“You don't have-” Ruby started.

“We'll be there,” Yang interrupted. “Now shoo… you should probably start packing stuff before the truck gets there, right? Oh, wait… one thing first… Rubes said you could do this now.”

“Do what?” she asked.

Yang walked over to Weiss, who took a nervous step back, before she was suddenly grabbed and lifted off the ground in a huge bear hug. She stiffened at first, but as Yang continued to hold on she found herself slowly relaxing in Yang's arms. The hug was too tight for her comfort, but Yang was warm and soft, and Weiss soon hugged her back as tightly as she could.

“Welcome to the family,” Yang said quietly.

“Th-thank you,” Weiss murmured, blinking back tears.

Yang just squeezed a little harder, and whispered in her ear. “Also, if you even think about hurting Ruby… I will rip out your spine and beat you to death with it, got it?”

“Got it,” Weiss forced out, at which point Yang loosened the hug from painful back to warm yet firm territory. Despite the threat Weiss was surprised to find that the hug still felt very comforting.

After a few more moments Yang set her down and then ushered them outside, and once they were gone she closed the door. Weiss could hear an argument starting between Blake and Yang, and when she saw Ruby's worried expression she grabbed her hand to drag her away, casting about for any possible conversation to distract her. “Why did Yang call Jaune 'Vomit Boy’?”

Ruby grinned. “Jaune's first month he and Pyrrha did a case with Blake and Yang. They were hunting down a Krasue… it's a, um…”

“I know what it is,” Weiss said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. She'd seen pictures of the hideous monsters and didn't feel a need for a description.

“Yeah, well, Jaune didn't, and he didn't feel brave enough to ask what it was before they ran into it… let's just say Yang will never let him live how he reacted down. Especially since his nickname was all over her. If he'd gotten any in her hair he'd be 'Dead Boy' instead.”

“Ugh,” Weiss groaned. “And he's going to be in my apartment?”

“Our apartment,” Ruby said, grabbing her hand with a happy grin.

“Our apartment,” Weiss agreed, smiling softly.

Before long Yang managed to convince a sulking Blake to accompany them, and they arrived at
Yang's apartment a little ahead of Jaune and Pyrrha, even with a detour to pick up boxes. They used that time to start packing up Ruby's possessions, and they had made quite a bit of progress by the time the truck arrived.

“Geez, I knew you'd been spending a lot of time over at the Fortress of Weissitude, but you must've moved half your clothes over there already,” Yang said as she looked in the closet.

“Well… I mean, I guess I was spending about half my nights over there,” Ruby said. “I just thought it'd be easier to go halvesies on the clothing, you know?”

“What about the toy chest?” Yang asked.

“Yang!” Ruby yelped, glaring at him.

“Toy chest?” Jaune asked from where he was packing her books into boxes with Blake's help. “Do you still have action figures and stuff?”

“I mea-” Yang started, only to be cut off by Ruby.

“Yes!” Ruby interrupted. “At home… at my dad's home. Not here. Um… I'll pack up my bedside drawer!”

With that she ran so fast to do so that she shed a few rose petals, drawing peals of laughter from Yang, a chuckle from Blake, and even a few giggles from Pyrrha. Jaune, on the other hand, just looked confused, while Weiss struggled to keep from throttling Yang despite her own curiosity about what exactly her girlfriend kept in the drawer.

The back of the pickup truck wasn't even completely full by the time they finished. In addition to so many of her things migrating to Weiss' apartment over time, Ruby also didn't need to move any of her furniture, which made the trip much easier. Ruby and Weiss made sure to arrive at her apartment building first, and a quick tip soon ensured that the doorman was apprised of the situation and didn't object to them keeping the loading zone occupied.

“Whoa, this place is nice!” Yang said as they walked through the lobby, each carrying boxes.

Weiss struggled to carry her own, grunting slightly as she almost lost her hold on it while trying to hit the elevator button. Pyrrha somehow managed to steady her load with one hand and hit the up button for her despite carrying much, much more. “Thanks, Pyrrha. Of course this building is nice… there's no way I would stay somewhere substandard.”

“What floor?” Pyrrha asked when they entered the elevator.

“The penthouse,” Weiss said, making Yang roll her eyes.

If they had been impressed before, Jaune and Yang were slack jawed when they actually entered her apartment. Weiss smiled as she looked around, happy to show off her modern dwelling. Originally it had been quite cold and starkly decorated, but slowly her time with Ruby had transformed it from a showpiece to an actual home, and she couldn't help but smile at the little personal touches her girlfriend had added.

Photographs, souvenirs from dates, even the sloppy way dishes were put away and spare shoes were left sitting by the door made it feel like a place that people actually lived, and she found herself excited at the prospect of what Ruby would do to it now that she was living with her full time. She was also a little afraid of the possibility of it degenerating into an awful mess, but she knew her well paid maid service would keep things somewhat in order no matter what Ruby did.
With the move having taken so little time everyone happily helped with the unpacking as well, with Ruby dragging some of the more private boxes to the bedroom to put away herself, and Weiss strutting around, demanding that things be put away just so rather than do much of the lifting and carrying.

“What's this?” Yang said, her voice intentionally carrying throughout the entire apartment. “How to Start a Conversation and Make Friends? The Friendship Crisis? Wait a minute... The Ultimate Kink Guide? Girl Sex 101? A Hand in the Bush? What have you and Ruby been up to?”

Weiss abandoned her job directing Jaune on how to make room for Ruby's collection of tools and half finished projects to rush into the bedroom, bright red from a combination of fury and embarrassment. Yang was digging through her closet, obviously having found the self help and sex books which she'd hidden away after reading them, too embarrassed to even show them to Ruby.

“Yang Xiao Long!” she shouted. “WHY ARE YOU DIGGING IN MY CLOSET!”

“Just finding places to put things away,” Yang said cheerfully.

“There's plenty of room in the other half of the closet!” Weiss shouted. “Ruby's half!”

“Oh,” Yang said innocently. “So there is. My mistake. You know, if you're not reading this one anymore I've never seen it before, so-”

“Get out of there!” Weiss shrieked.

“Fine, fine,” Yang said, abandoning the sex books and cheerfully walking away. “At least I don't have to worry about Rubes getting lesbian bed death after all.”

“If you don't shut up I'll show you Death!” Weiss growled, eyebrow twitching.

Weiss covered her face, counting to ten, and then trying again with a hundred count to try and keep herself from murdering Yang.

“Interesting reading,” Blake said casually from where she had been sorting the bedroom bookshelf to make room for Ruby's books. “Want me to make room for them on here?”

“No!”

Blake chuckled, but turned to face her, expression serious. “There's nothing wrong with reading books like that. You and Ruby are adults in a serious relationship. You really don't have anything to be ashamed of.”

Weiss huffed. “I don't mind... discussing these things with Ruby. I don't even mind talking about it with you a little... but Yang just- just blurted it out.”

“She has no filter,” Blake agreed.

Weiss studied the faunus. She was smiling, and she looked happier than Weiss had seen her be in weeks. She had been burning the candle at both ends for months trying to track down the White Fang, but after the bombing she had obviously been pushing even harder. Weiss had barely seen her, and looking at her now she looked exhausted, with deep bags under her eyes.

“How are you doing?” Weiss asked quietly.

Blake blinked, looking back at the bookshelf. “Um... it's coming along. You both have quite a few
books, but there's more than enough space for them all.”

“I meant… I haven't seen much of you and you look… tired,” Weiss said delicately. “How are you doing? Really?”

Blake sighed, leaning back on her haunches. “Catching the White Fang… it's like catching smoke. They've always been secretive. Did you know the FBI infiltrated them a few decades ago?”

“That's not surprising.”

“It should be,” Blake said darkly. “At the time the White Fang was a peaceful organization. I know it's hard to remember with all they've done, but… when we were teenagers and Sienna Khan took over things changed. They went from a peaceful organization to… what it is today.”

Weiss scoffed. “Peaceful? Even thirty years ago they had enforcers. In some areas they used open carry to intimidate people for as long as the White Fang has existed, and violence was used by the group since day one. Maybe they weren't assassins or using bombs, but this is only an escalation, not an aberration.”

Blakes eyes narrowed. “The White Fang only used force to defend its members. Maybe a few people went overboard, but they did good things. Important things.”

“And the people that were the victims of them going overboard?” Weiss asked sharply.

“Um… guys?” Ruby asked, poking her head in the bedroom. “Everything's here, and it's getting kinda late. Want to order pizza?”

Weiss gave her a stiff smile. “Of course. I'll pay for it… what does everyone want?”

She looked over at Blake, biting her lip nervously, and after a moment the faunus' harsh expression relaxed and she gave a small smile. “Anchovies.”

“Ugh,” Ruby said, wrinkling her nose. “That just tastes like a salt lick. Anyway, Jaune wants pineapple and mushrooms. Um… you might want to write this down…”
Seventh Case: Loose Ends

Weiss felt a little cold, so she pulled herself even closer to the heater. It was a nice, soft heater, and after realizing that she already had her arms around it she decided to entrap it with her legs, too, maximizing her warmth and comfort. Perfect.

“This is my life, now,” Ruby mumbled. “Squished every morning by a Weiss constrictor.”

“Ssh,” Weiss murmured. “Sleep time.”

“Nope,” Ruby murmured. “Work time. The alarm goes off in like… three minutes.”

“Then still sleep time,” Weiss said.

Ruby sighed but didn't object, simply hugging her back. Weiss had just started slipping into a comfortable doze when the alarm clock went off. “No…”

Ruby kissed her forehead. “You know, I never would've guessed that you'd be the sleep in type, but you really don't like getting up do you?”

“It's cold and early and sleep is nice,” Weiss grumbled.

“So's breakfast,” Ruby offered, to which Weiss didn't respond. “And a shower… a shared shower.” Weiss hummed thoughtfully, somewhat intrigued but still enjoying snuggling with her personal heater. “And coffee… just the way you like it. Remember, I finally got the hang of that french press thing.”

“Fine,” Weiss groaned, letting go and rolling onto her back.

After a very pleasant shared shower Weiss found herself sitting at her kitchen table, fully dressed and ready for the day with a cup of coffee just the way she liked it in her hands. She sighed as she sipped the ambrosia, her nose wrinkling as her peace was disrupted by Ruby loudly munching on marshmallow infested cereal. With a sigh she set down her cup and began to eat her toast, fruit and yogurt.

“So… finally awake?” Ruby asked.

“I suppose,” Weiss said, before offering a small smile. “Thank you for making coffee.”

Ruby grinned and slurped her own, which was pale with milk and probably almost grainy with added sugar. “Sure thing! I drink some too, and besides… I like doing stuff for you.”

Weiss blushed and smiled shyly, reaching over to take Ruby's hand. It was the first day of them formally living together, and she couldn't be happier. Sure, Ruby was bound to do something annoying at some point. You couldn't be in close contact with someone all the time the way they were without getting on each other's nerves from time to time. But the domesticity was still so novel, something she had never seen in real life before, and she was loving every second of it.

Her phone suddenly chirped, and she frowned at having to let go of Ruby to answer it. “Who's it from?” Ruby asked between bites of cereal. It had taken a while, but at least Ruby didn't usually talk with her mouth full anymore.

“It's Blake,” Weiss said. “She says she's got a lead on Torchwick for us.”
“Alright!” Ruby cheered.

“She wants us to meet her at an address… looks like a bookstore,” Weiss said. “Tukson’s… I think I've been there before but I can't recall when...”

“What time?” Ruby asked.

“Soon,” Weiss said. “I suppose we should get going.”

They finished breakfast and headed outside, grabbing Myrtenaster and their guns as they went. The trip was peaceful, Ruby listening to music as she drove, the metal having slightly grown on Weiss, although she would never admit it. She preferred her music classical, but enough exposure had made her appreciate the loud music, at least when no one was 'singing'.

Ruby parked half a block from the bookstore, right next to her sister's unmarked police car. A moment later her phone rang and she answered it on speakerphone. “Hey sis. What's up?”

Blake spoke, and from the quality of her voice Weiss guessed that they had Yang's phone on speakerphone as well. “I spoke to some of my contacts. The White Fang's base has been splintering. They hadn't told anyone about the planned bombing or attack at the festival, and many of their supporters are upset about them.”

“Why?” Weiss interrupted. “This seems like what the White Fang have been pushing towards all along.”

“Not every member feels that way,” Blake said heatedly. “Look, we don't have time to argue about this, but whether or not you want to acknowledge it, the White Fang hasn't always been… this. Some of their members and allies have been involved for decades and aren't happy about the way things have been changing, or sign up and slowly realize that things aren't the way they used to be. I've been in contact with some of those people, and I asked some discrete questions about Torchwick to them. One of them got back to me last night asking to meet.”

“Are they willing to meet with us?” Weiss asked doubtfully. “I somehow doubt that they'd open up to a Schnee.”

“Most likely not,” Blake acknowledged. “I'll see though, and if something goes wrong you can be backup. Most likely I'll fill you in when I get back to the cars.”

“Are you expecting trouble?” Ruby asked.

Blake was silent for a long moment. “Not from him. We're… old acquaintances, and he's not really the violent type.” At Weiss' snort Blake's voice grew angry. “Like I said, not everyone associated with the White Fang are fond of violence. He left the organization not long after Sienna Khan took over, but he still keeps in touch with them. He's passed me a little information about attacks that he heard about in advance, and it's always been useful.”

“Alright,” Weiss said. “Be careful. And… thank you.”

“Oh course,” Blake said.

Her door opened and she stepped out, strolling down the street past their car like she was a normal shopper. Yang spoke up after a few moments of silence. “So, how's the domestic life treating you two?”

“Shouldn't we be focusing on your partner?” Weiss asked pointedly.
“Oh, I am,” Yang said. “I love watching her walk… but I can talk at the same time. So really, how’s the move been?”

“Great!” Ruby said cheerfully. “It’s just like spending the night with her before, just with all my stuff there and I don’t have to worry about going home the next day.”

“Weiss still cuddle you to death?”

“Oh yeah,” Ruby said. “Like a koala with super strength”

“Hey!” Weiss objected. “You told her about our bedroom activities?”

Ruby turned red while Yang cackled. “Everything embarrassing I can weasel out of her, princess.”

“Just for that you can avoid my cuddling by sleeping on the couch tonight,” Weiss said, crossing her arms.

“Noooo!” Ruby objected. “Don’t send me away! I love my Weiss cuddles.”

Weiss harrumphed and turned her head away, blushing furiously as Yang guffawed loudly. Even Ruby looked actually embarrassed as their banter was laughed at by her sister. Weiss was searching for a change of subject when something drew her attention.

She had always been very sensitive to the presence of faunus. After murdering her mother and nearly killing her as well as a child she had had more than a few nightmares about them, and the growing violence of the White Fang did nothing to quell those fears. It wasn’t until Velvet and Blake that she tried to put that behind her and accept them as normal people.

She couldn’t control her subconscious reactions, however, and that meant that when she saw a group of faunus she immediately focused on them. There were five of them, although two could’ve been human, two had tails and one had an obvious set of rabbit ears. She almost dismissed their presence, but after a moment of observation she realized that something still bothered her about them.

It was the way they moved. They didn’t behave like normal civilians, but rather walked down the sidewalk like they were wolves among sheep. The more she looked at them the more they bothered her. “Weiss?” Ruby asked when she noticed her partner wasn’t paying attention. “Weiss? What’s wrong?”

“There’s a suspicious group walking towards the bookstore,” Weiss said after a moment.

Ruby looked around. The streets weren’t very crowded, so it didn’t take her long to find the only group heading in the direction of the bookstore. “Them?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Blake said that the owner is a disgruntled White Fang associate, correct?”

“Yeah,” Yang said.

“I think that might be a group of White Fang going in there,” Weiss said.

There was a pause, as both Weiss and Ruby checked their weapons, but then Yang spoke. “We should sit tight. Trust Blake.”

It went against everything she had not to go in, but after a deep breath Weiss relaxed. “I do. But that is a lot of very dangerous people.”

“We don’t know they’re White Fang,” Yang pointed out. “Not every faunus is a member.”
“I know!” Weiss snapped. “And I do trust Blake, but…”

Before she could finish the sound of gunfire interrupted them, and after a quick glance Weiss and Ruby scrambled from the car, and they soon found themselves running as they tried to keep up with Yang, who had apparently gone from nonchalant to panicked in a fraction of a second. Yang didn’t even pause to check what was happening inside, simply slamming into the front door so hard that it half fell off of its hinges, listing brokenly in its frame.

Weiss immediately recognized the store as one they had visited while following up on possible leads in the case with the necromancer. Four of the White Fang, now wearing their masks and holding handguns were scattered around the store, with the fifth standing in the middle facing Blake, who was half crouched behind the counter. Off to the side of the counter bleeding heavily was the owner, Tukson, who was trying to put pressure on the bleeding hole in his chest while bright red blood bubbled up at the corners of his lips.

The woman facing Blake was thin, with a wiry build and a long ponytail, and she half turned to face the door when Yang burst in. Her focus quickly slipped from the furious Yang to Weiss, her body turning bright crimson as she snarled. “Schnee!”

One of the White Fang, a burly man who's mask couldn't entirely hide his thick beard started to turn, raising his gun towards them. Yang was faster, leaping at him, her hair smoldering and eyes red as she pulled back a burning fist, slamming it into his face with such force that the mask shattered along with some of his bones, sending him unconscious, or possibly dead, to the ground.

Weiss and Ruby dove for cover just as gunfire broke out. Yang had downed one of them, but that left four. If they were fighting hand to hand Weiss would've felt more confidant, but bullets didn't care about skill. One wrong move and they were shot, possibly dead. It was a sobering thought, and despite everything she would've preferred fighting against monsters and demons. The only advantage she had, her ability to heal her injuries, wasn’t something she wanted to do, especially after helping Ruby through her nightmares after what she did in Faerie.

After only a moment of hesitation Weiss took in the store, adding what she could see to what she remembered. The store was filled with rows of closely packed shelves running the width of the room, with only an aisle down the middle and along each wall, all of them absolutely crammed with used and often rare books. The part of her that valued such things screamed on the inside as she thought about the damage that would be done to so many old, valuable tomes with careless gunfire, but she pushed those thoughts aside as she crawled some way down a narrow aisle, until finally she crouched and briefly popped up, looking around.

On the upside no one shot her in the head while she took her quick look around. Unfortunately, she didn't see any of the White Fang, as they were all trained and seasoned enough to take cover as well. Pursing her lips in annoyance, she glanced at her partner who was behind her, shaking her before scurrying to the center aisle while bent low, her gun held in both hands, safety off and finger on the trigger. After a deep breath to steady herself she stuck her head out, peering down the next row.

Once again she saw no one, so she moved to the next aisle before once again checking out the next row, her heart pounding in her chest. Seeing no one she started to move, only to almost scream when someone touched her back. Spinning she glared at Ruby, following her back into the row so her partner could lean over and whisper in her ear.

“Cover me. Then I’ll check the next shelves and cover you.”

Weiss nodded, taking a deep breath, looking up and down the aisle one more time before raising her gun, ready to fire if anyone appeared. Ruby then darted across the gap, pausing at the next set of
shelves for a moment before peeking around at the next row. After looking both ways she moved back, raised her gun, and gestured for Weiss to move with her head.

Weiss took a deep breath and then hustled as fast as she could without fully standing until she was in the next aisle past Ruby. She looked both ways, but no one had entered it since Ruby had looked. She then peeked around the next corner, looking first one way, and then the other. One side was empty, the other had a man with rabbit ears wearing a White Fang mask pointing a gun at her.

She pulled her head back just in time to avoid it being shot. Ruby scurried up beside her, checking that she was okay with a glance before murmuring. “Where… how many?”

“Just one… halfway down this aisle.”

“Right,” Ruby hummed. “Okay… let me get to the end of the aisle, then throw some books out when I gesture.”

Ruby moved off before Weiss had a chance to object, so after fuming for a moment Weiss holstered her gun and grabbed several books. Ruby hurried into position, near the far wall of the store, then gestured for Weiss to throw them.

Weiss did, and almost instantly the terrorist fired, thinking that the motion was her sticking her head back out. Before he had a chance to realize his mistake Ruby had already turned the corner, firing at his back. There was a thump in the aisle, and Ruby peeked back around, gesturing for Weiss to move.

The White Fang member was down in a slowly spreading pool of blood, two bullet holes in his back, one directly over his heart. He had died almost instantly, although Weiss took a moment to check him to make sure. She looked up to make sure that Ruby was okay, only to see her half stand and start firing directly over Weiss' head. She flinched involuntarily at the sudden gunshots, before spinning around to see another terrorist falling with a pair of bullet holes in his mask.

“Two more up,” Weiss said.

Ruby bit her lip, glancing once more at the two men she'd killed before focusing. “Yeah. We're close to the front but I don't hear any sign of Blake.”

Weiss pursed her lips. “She might've gone to the back, I'm more surprised at the lack of Yang's presence. Isn't she a berserker?”

Ruby nodded. “She doesn't like to be quiet, but she knows how to control her temper. Being on fire is a bad idea in a bookstore, so she's probably calming down before she does anything else.”

They leapfrogged past the next two aisles in the same manner as before, until they reached the counter. The proprietor, Tukson, was still bleeding, and after making sure that no other attackers were nearby they moved over to check on him.

Ruby put pressure on the wound, which made him groan and open his eyes. “Hey, don't move,” Ruby murmured.

He shook his head. “I don't think I have much longer.”

Weiss pulled out her phone and called for an ambulance, warning them that there were still two active shooters but a civilian was injured. Meanwhile Ruby did her best to stop the bleeding, but unfortunately it looked like Tukson might be correct. The bullet had hit his lung, and it looked like he wouldn't make it until they could evacuate him.
“You're working with Blake?” he asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said as she kept an eye out for the other attackers. “I've called for an ambulance.”

“This is the second time I've met you... you don't seem like I thought a Schnee would be,” he said. “I always pictured monsters... but you're working with a faunus, and trying to save a faunus...”

Weiss thought for a moment, before settling on the simplest reply. “It's my job.”

He smiled thinly, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. “So it is. I had a job with the Schnees once. It paid for this shop... for the beginnings of it... I paid for it with money from the Schnee mines. I hated you...”

“I'm sorry,” Weiss said softly. “I know that doesn't change anything, but I am. I want to improve things someday.”

He nodded. “It means more than you think. I didn't then, but I know now how important dust is, but the hate didn't go away. I joined the White Fang, hoping to make a difference, and when Sienna Khan took over I thought... thought it was for the best. That they'd do more. Make life better for us. I was a fool... I left when the bloodshed really started up. Became an associate, still helping out, but not a member... still helped more than I should. How could I say no to old friends? To people burning with the same hate I had?”

Weiss didn't know what to say. She'd never really spoken to a member of the White Fang before. Never even tried to do anything but kill, arrest or interrogate them. They were terrorists, monsters, the enemy. The subject of her nightmares, and they struggled endlessly to turn those bitter dreams into awful truths. They shouldn't have been sad, broken down men dying on the floor regretting where their life took them. They shouldn't have been human.

When she couldn't answer him he smiled slightly. “I don't expect an answer. Hate begets hate, and our people have hated each other for so long. I... even now I hate the Schnee. Even thought you and your partner are the ones helping me, and my fellow faunus shot me and left me to die.”

Weiss sighed, suddenly feeling very, very tired. “Even though you're bleeding out on the floor, part of me is still afraid you're going to try to kill me.”

He nodded, his eyes getting more and more unclear as he died. “Blake... she was looking for Torchwick. I can... tell you what I know. The White Fang... should've never worked with scum like him. He's... he's what we claim to hate about you. Lawless... violent... uncaring. But Adam... Adam invited him in... him and some... patron he won't... talk about.

“Torchwick... he stays at some... rat trap motel... at the edge of the barrier... not sure which one. Just... what I heard once...”

“Thank you,” Weiss said, but he was already dead.
Seventh Case: Betrayal

Ruby checked Tukson, desperately hoping that he somehow wasn't dead. Weiss carefully put a hand on her shoulder as she slumped. He wasn't breathing, his heart wasn't beating, and a careful probe with necromantic mana showed that she could animate his corpse if she wanted to. He was stone dead, his soul no longer within his body.

“We failed,” Ruby said.

“No,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “The White Fang murdered him. By the time we entered the building it was too late. I could see him aspirating blood from the door. He was a tough, strong willed man to be able to hang on long enough to tell us what he knew before he died.”

Ruby hesitated a moment longer before pulling back and wiping her eyes on her sleeve. Weiss squeezed her shoulder harder and opened her mouth to try to comfort her again when gunfire erupted behind them, making them both jump. “We need to help Blake and your sister.”

Ruby nodded and drew her handgun, face hardening. “That door is cracked open and it wasn't a minute ago. I think Blake went into the back, probably chasing after them… or running from them.”

“ Alright, I'll go after her,” Weiss decided. “You help your sister.”

“Right,” Ruby said, before hesitating. “Good luck… please don't get shot.”

“You too,” Weiss said before scurrying low to the door behind the counter. The door was cracked slightly open as Ruby had pointed out, although she hadn't noticed coming in whether that had been the case the whole time or not.

She paused near it, relying on being hidden from the other gunman by the counter and the rows of shelves, listening intently for anything going on inside. After a moment she heard voices, and carefully pushed the door open, slipping through with her eyes darting around, gun in one hand.

The back room was severely cluttered, boxes and piles of books everywhere. There were several desks and work benches, some of the books sitting on them awaiting minor repairs, or verification in the case of some of the more valuable ones. Behind a pile of boxes Weiss could see Blake crouching, her gun in hand. Across the room, near the back door was the woman who had changed colors. Weiss could barely see her from her angle as she crouched behind a desk.

Weiss crawled over to a pile of boxes, looking for cover before she was spotted. Neither of the two reacted to her in any way, Blake's cat ears focused directly on the terrorist. After a moment the color changing woman spoke, her voice angry. “How? How could you do this?”

“Ilia...” Blake said. “Your people shot Tukson. He was a friend to both of us. Don't you remember… when we were young all the time we spent in his store? Most bookstores people would stare at us… whisper things about us like we couldn't hear them. Like I couldn't hear every hateful thing they said about us. But we could come here, a place run by a faunus… he didn't even chase us away when we'd spend all day reading his books instead of buying them.”

“He sold us out,” the woman, Ilia, spat. “He betrayed the cause.”

“He hadn't done anything!” Blake objected. “You're killing people who retired from the White Fang now?! He even helped you still, tracking down books, helping people lay low. So you just killed him?”
“He was a loose end,” Ilia said. “And he was talking to you.”

“Me?”

“Don't try to pretend to be above it!” Ilia shouted, turning bright red again. “I saw her! Don't pretend to be different than that murdering filth you're running around with.”

“What-”

“The Schnee!” Ilia snarled. “You're with her. I thought you couldn't sink any lower, traitor. I was wrong.”

“Ilia…”

“Nothing you say could change that!” Ilia shouted. “Does she scratch your ears? Let you wear a nice collar? Does it feel good working with a fucking Schnee.”

“No,” Blake said. “I hated her at first. How could I not? She's a Schnee. It wasn't until I got to know her that I realized she's different.”

“Different!?” Ilia shouted. “We sent a team into Faerie to find out what happened to our people there. They were all dead or gone. She hung around a mine, enjoyed watching our people suffer for her wallet, then murdered every last White Fang on the plane, before spending Christmas with you. She's a monster. A murdering, entitled coward!”

Weiss carefully crawled around the edge of her cover, shifting herself until she found another hiding spot. She was getting close to a position she could fire from. Her heart pounded in her ears as she listened to Ilia snarl invective about her and her family, and while she wasn't giving the most passionate argument her friend was defending her. It had taken a long time for them to get to know each other, but Weiss felt that they were quite close, and it felt good to be defended by Blake for a change.

“She's a lot of things, but Weiss isn't a coward,” Blake said. “She's not the person you think she is.”

Ilia scoffed. “You really have sold your soul to the Schnees, haven't you? You weren't just my friend. I admired you. I joined the White Fang to follow you!”

Weiss froze, her heart skipping a beat. Before she could react in any way Ilia continued. “You know what happened to my parents. My father was killed in a damned Schnee mine, and when a cop shot my mom no one did anything about it. Her killer walked the beat every day after until the White Fang broke his kneecaps. I was lost, scared, messed up… and then you told me all about the White Fang.

“How we could stand up for ourselves,” Ilia snarled. “How we could band together and force the humans to respect us. Band together to fight them off when they tried to hurt us. Feed and care for each other, because the fucking humans sure wouldn't. Then one day you leave, join the police, cut all ties. Adam was furious. He wanted to hunt you down and kill you himself. He almost did.”

“Please, Ilia,” Blake said. “I'm sorry. I know things must've been difficult-”

“Difficult!!” Ilia shouted. “This isn't about me, anyway. This is about you, traitor. You used to be one of the best. You could sneak in anywhere, sabotage anything, steal everything. You did more damage to the Schnees than any dozen other agents. The only ones in better standing were the ones who managed to spill Schnee blood, and most of them had to martyr themselves to do it. Then you betrayed us. Joined the racist cops. They say you've been hunting down our brothers and sisters…”
and a Schnee. You're working with a fucking Schnee. You murdering traitor! When I tell Adam… there's going to be a reckoning.”

Blake tried to say something, her mouth moving but no sounds coming out, until Ilia raised her gun and fired at her. Blake barely ducked before the shot, her reactions slowed by whatever she was going through emotionally. Ilia started to step out of cover to get a better angle on Blake when Weiss stood and fired her own gun.

“Shit!” Ilia shrieked, her skin turning first blue, and then blurring to match her surroundings as one of Weiss' bullets hit her. She ducked low, her camouflage helping her hide, before suddenly opening the back door and running down the alley. Weiss chased after her, pushing the door open before it could close completely but was forced to duck back as Ilia fired blindly back at her, one of the bullets slamming into the door right by her ear.

“You're White Fang,” Weiss said quietly, flatly. Her face was entirely blank of emotions, only the way her hands shook gave away the maelstrom she felt inside.

“White Fang,” Weiss said quietly, flatly. Her face was entirely blank of emotions, only the way her hands shook gave away the maelstrom she felt inside.

“Did you?” Weiss asked. “Even if you did, is that supposed to make it okay? The damage you did to my family, to the company, to the lives ruined by you… that just goes away?”

“What's going on here?” Ruby asked as she opened the door, stepping into the room with Yang.

No one spoke for a moment, until finally Weiss broke the silence. “She's White Fang. Blake. She's White Fang.”

“Was,” Blake interjected. “I- I left them.”

“White Fang… please don't point your gun at Blake,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss blinked, not having realized that she had done so. She had been intentionally avoiding pointing the gun at her, but when her partner came through the door she had inadvertently changed where she was aiming. She carefully pointed the gun off to the side, but once again she kept it at a position where she could easily point it at Blake.

“She's a terrorist,” Weiss said.

“She's Blake,” Ruby said.
“Weiss, put away the gun,” Yang said. “I'm only going to ask you that once, and then I'm going to get angry.”

“She admitted to it,” Weiss said. “She's a terrorist. You're defending one of the people who blew up a building last week! Who shot up a park, shot my sister just days ago!”

“She didn't do that,” Ruby said. “She's been doing everything she can to catch the people who did.”

Weiss gritted her teeth. “What about what she did before she 'changed her mind'? What about those crimes? Or does she just get to ignore them because she's with your sister? She was one of those criminals! She's a liar and a murderer, just like them!”

“I did what I thought was right!” Blake yelled. “We did what we had to do! If we hadn't fought we'd still be abused. The White Fang have taken it too far, but only because we were pushed!”

“Pushed?!” Weiss shouted. “Pushed?! What will you think when the SDC retaliates for what you've done! Will you think it's okay when people get pushed too far when father retaliates against the faunus for what you did! He won't even need to use violence! Haven't you seen how many congressmen are lining up to sign away everyone's civil rights to stop faunus terrorism!”

“Why do you think I left!” Blake shouted. “We were going too far, hurting to many people! It was counterproductive!”

“So that's all that mattered?” Weiss asked. “If you could've killed the Schnees without consequences it would've been okay?”

“Don't put words I my mouth!”

“Stop!” Yang shouted, eyes red and hair smoldering. “Stop right now!”

Ruby walked over to Weiss and slowly reached over, placing a hand over her gun which had drifted towards Blake again, pushing it towards the floor before wrapping her other arm around her in a hug. “Not right now,” she said quietly. “You're both too angry right now. Later, okay?”

“She's a terrorist,” Weiss growled.

“She's your friend,” Ruby said.

Weiss didn't say anything, simply pulling back and holstering her gun, before storming out the door, leaving Blake and Yang to deal with the crime scene. Ruby ran after her, staying close and climbing into the diver's seat when Weiss got into the car.

“Where are we going?” Ruby asked.

Weiss tersely gave directions, and after hesitating for a moment Ruby started to drive. Once they were on the road for a bit Ruby broke the awkward silence. “Does it really matter what she did before? She's our friend. I've known her for years… she's saved so many people. I mean, you saw how hard she's been working trying to catch the White Fang! She barely sleeps anymore, and that was before the bombing. Yang's really worried she's going to work herself to death.”

“Turn left at the light,” Weiss said.

Ruby sighed, biting her lip as she followed the directions, trying to find a different tack. “What about your talks? Haven't you enjoyed them? You even talked about going out for tea before the bombing happened, remember?”
“It's the next right,” Weiss said, making Ruby sigh again.

Finally they reached their destination. It was a well tended cemetery near the edge of Vale, with obvious signs that it was not only very expensive, but in active use still. The parking lot was almost empty so early on a weekday, however, and after parking Weiss lead the way through the grounds towards a hill. Once she reached it she paused, crouching in front of a grave and staring at it.

“Willow Schnee,” Ruby said quietly. “Is this… is this your mother?”

“Yes,” Weiss said after a few long moments of quiet. It had been a long time since she'd visited her mother's grave, and it hurt more than she would've expected to return. Finally she managed to move away, walking over to the next graves. “These are my grandparents.”

“I'm sorry,” Ruby said, gently taking her hand.

Weiss continued, showing Ruby graves dedicated to cousins, aunts and uncles, until finally she arrived at the next section. “I called this man 'uncle' when I was young. He was on the SDC's board, and was quite close to father. His wife is beside him.”

“Why are you showing me this?” Ruby asked.

Weiss just shook her head and continued. For a while she showed Ruby grave after grave, pausing at some for a while as long buried memories reasserted themselves. The farther she walked the less she knew most of them, however, and she was able to show them to Ruby without taking as much time.

“These people,” Weiss said finally. “They were my family, family friends… all of the board members, every company executive… that hill, however…”

Weiss paused and pointed at the next hill, which was equally covered in graves. After a moment of thought she began walking towards it, Ruby following cautiously. She didn't actually recognize any of the names, but that didn't stop her from feeling the weight of their lives.

Finally Ruby spoke. “Who are these?”

“People from the company,” Weiss said. “Employees of all kinds… that were killed by faunus, by the White Fang. Janitors, drivers, maids, office workers… it doesn't matter what they did, we offered to bury them here if they were killed in the line of duty by those terrorists. Most of the family graves I showed you… they were killed by faunus as well.”

“That's… that's a lot of graves,” Ruby said.

“It's not been that many years since Sienna Khan took over,” Weiss said. “Even before there were deaths. But after… after it was like night and day. Suddenly we were under siege, and many died before we figured out how to tighten security sufficiently. Even now they're killing more of us, even ignoring all of the deaths in the bombing.

“The White Fang are murderers. They lie and claim to care about the faunus, but they'll kill anyone, destroy anything to tear us down… and to make themselves look like the victims. And Blake is one of them.”

“Was,” Ruby said. “Blake was one of them.”

“How do we know she really left?” Weiss demanded. “You said it yourself; the most likely way the White Fang got ahold of the branding iron was an inside person. Someone in the police who was really working with them.”
“There's no way that was Blake,” Ruby said. “I mean… she's Blake. And she… she got into a fight with those White Fang today!”

“Who happened to just… conveniently show up to kill a witness right in front of us,” Weiss said. “And even if she didn't coordinate with them. If it was just a coincidence that they showed up at the exact moment that we did… that doesn't mean anything. The White Fang are a loose collection of cells. She could easily be an undercover member and even someone who knew her might think she was a traitor.”

Ruby was quiet for a while. “I trust her.”

“Even if she isn't a traitor,” Weiss said. “Even if she did have a change of heart. Even if she decided that being a terrorist is wrong… she still was. And this… this doesn't go away. These people died largely because of the White Fang. Not being a member anymore doesn't bring them back.”

“What about the faunus who die working for the SDC?” Ruby asked after another pause.

Weiss' brow furrowed. “What do you mean? Some of these are faunus. The White Fang don't just kill humans… they're perfectly happy murdering faunus who 'sell out' as well.”

“I don't just mean them,” Ruby said. “What happens when workers die in the mines? What happens to the bodies? Do they get shipped home through the portals?”

“I… I'm not certain.”

“They died working for the SDC,” Ruby said. “Shouldn't they be buried here, too? Why don't they get a chance for that? Is there even anywhere their families can go to see them?”

Weiss wanted to answer, but the longer she thought about it without one the more her rage cooled. Finally she looked away. “I'm not sure.”

Ruby nodded. “I'm not saying this is okay. All of these people should still be alive. But… you care more than any of the other Schnees or SDC people about the faunus… and you don't even know what happens to your employees when they die. But all of these people are held up like martyrs. Maybe it doesn't matter, but-”

“It's wrong,” Weiss said. “I should know. I should care.”

“You never thought about it,” Ruby said. “It's okay not to know everything. But it's just… things are complicated. Sometimes you can be part of a group doing bad stuff and not know how bad it is. I mean, you supported the SDC, and you had no idea how rough things were for workers in Faerie. Maybe she didn't realize how bad things were either.”

“I guess… I guess it all comes down to trust. Do you trust Blake?”
Seventh Case: Target

It had been a long morning even before they had started their search, and the rest of the day hadn’t gotten any better. It was actually a little after their normal quitting time, and Weiss had managed to avoid going back to the office at all, avoiding answering questions and filling out reports on the gunfight in the bookstore. She knew that she was in for a serious lecture and perhaps even a writeup by internal affairs, but she wasn’t ready to deal with bureaucracy.

She frowned moodily out the window, a little surprised by her own thoughts. Perhaps Ruby's more free spirited ways had rubbed off on her, as in the past she would've gone out of her way to comply with every regulation. She actually found paperwork to be calming, helping her relax and process what she'd experienced.

She wasn't even sure what she would say or do if she ran into investigators just then. Would she tell them what she’d overheard from Ilia? Throw Blake to the wolves as the terrorist she'd admitted to being? With so many groups and agencies trying to do something about the recent White Fang attacks she was certain that her claims would be acted on by someone. Blake would probably wake up in Guantanamo Bay the next morning.

Was that what she wanted though? In the heat of the moment she'd been very close to shooting Blake, but as the day passed she remembered all of the times she'd talked to Blake, gotten advice from her, even been rescued by her. Even when they'd been fighting, when she'd just been a racist Schnee to her Blake had helped rescue her from Grimm during her very first case.

Ruby's words also plagued her. It was easy to feel like a victim when you'd been victimized. No matter what else, the White Fang had proven themselves to be horrible, murderous terrorists. They had killed hundreds of people during two different mass incidents in a week, the second one targeting random civilians trying to celebrate diversity, even if Sienna Khan had denounced that second attack.

That didn't mean that the SDC was innocent, however. It was easy to remember the terrible things that had happened to them and forget that they had blood on their hands, too. She herself had done things she wasn't proud of, things that were illegal or immoral. If she held everyone to the strictest of standards, Ruby sacrificing the White Fang in Faerie to save her life was cold blooded murder, and she still loved Ruby and had forgiven her for that the moment she awoke, something that she didn't think Ruby had ever, or would ever do for herself.

Was Blake just a terrorist? Did her crimes, which were implied to be many, outweigh any good she could ever do? Should she assume her friendship was simply an act, or that she had changed and was trying to do the right thing?

Weiss went around and around in circles in her head, distracting herself briefly to question every motel owner who had a business near the edge of the city ward line. She had let Ruby take the lead, both in finding the businesses and in actually questioning the people, although she had stepped in from time to time when she felt like there was something worth following up on. So far she suspected that a few of the motels were used as fronts for questionable activities, in particular the one near the truck stop that rented by the hour and whose clerk seemed extremely nervous when he saw their badges.

“Well, here's another one,” Ruby said, breaking the silence. “Um… how many more do you want to do today?”
Weiss sighed. “I suppose… we can stop soon.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, obviously relieved. “It’s getting a bit late to have to keep hiding from the office, huh?”

“Do you want me to answer questions about what we talked about?” Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow. “Because I’m sure we could’ve spent the day talking to every investigator in the city about how Blake is a terrorist.”

“Was a terrorist.”

“I think terrorism is the sort of title that sticks with you,” Weiss said dryly. “Like 'president' and 'olympian’.”

“Or 'goat fucker','” Ruby said.

Weiss jaw dropped and she turned her head so sharply to stare at her partner that she heard her neck pop. “WHAT?!”

Ruby winced. “Sorry… just a joke Yang told me about a bridge builder…”

“And that's an excuse to use that kind of casual vulgarity?” Weiss seethed.

“It's not like you've never said it,” Ruby pouted. “I remember a few nights back you telling me to- OUCH! Pinching really hurts, Weiss.”

“Then don't say things like that!” Weiss shouted.

They sat in silence for a little bit, looking up at the motel. It was rundown, a faded brick structure that probably looked cheap and tacky in the post war boom when it was built. A life time later, without any apparent upkeep or cleaning in the interim it looked like the sort of place that didn't need an exterminator, as even vermin had better taste in lodgings.

“What are you gonna do about Blake?” Ruby asked.

“I don't know,” Weiss said with a sigh. “I want to look her in the eyes again before I decide anything.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “Okay.”

They waited for just a little longer, before finally in an unspoken consensus they both opened their doors and left the car. They were one of the few parked in the lot, and they quickly walked inside, Weiss letting Ruby get the door as she wasn't fond of the thought of touching anything inside, even with her gloves on.

The man behind the counter looked like he'd been installed when the building was constructed, and was too dumb to figure out how to operate the doors to get out after… or how to use a shower to get clean. Weiss wrinkled her nose in disdain, shooting Ruby a disgusted look.

Ruby just shrugged and pulled out her badge. “Um, hello, can I ask you a few questions?”

Weiss tried to pay attention, but something was bothering her. It was a strange sensation, something almost like an itch but unfocused and more unpleasant. She frowned, hoping to figure out what about her was so discomforted, but couldn't find anything at first.

A second sensation began, however, this time coming from her right hand, which felt like it was
cramping. She flexed it, frowning in annoyance at the pain as she tried to work it out. It was only when Ruby turned to face her with a big grin on her face that she realized that she’d completely zoned out for the entire interrogation.

“Come on!” Ruby said happily. “He's still here!”

Weiss smirked, relieved that the search was finally over. Roman Tochwick wouldn't be getting away from them again, and maybe she could figure out why he was working with the White Fang. “Let's go.”

They walked back outside and up cracked exterior stairs to the second floor. A glance showed a car driving away, leaving the lot even more empty than it was before. She flexed her cramped hand again, although it was finally starting to feel better.

“Whoa, what happened!” Ruby suddenly exclaimed.

“Don't yell,” Weiss scolded. “We're about to arrest someone in a nearby room, remember?”

“Sorry,” Ruby said sheepishly. “But you're bleeding!”

“Huh?” Weiss said, looking down. Sure enough, her glove was soaked with blood, some having gotten on her clothing as well. Her eyes widened as she examined her glove, but she couldn't see any obvious tears or other damage. She carefully pulled it off, examining her hand.

Her right hand had an odd, bright red scar whose color had never faded after she had used the strange, inhuman energies that she had drained from Neo, Torchwick's companion, to heal herself the year before. The cut seemed to have reopened all on its own, although a few moments later she noted it 'healed' again, leaving only a bright red line and blood to show that anything had happened.

“What was that?” Ruby asked.

“I… I don't know,” Weiss said. “An old wound just… reopened.”

“Do you have scurvy?” Ruby asked. “That can make wounds reopen.”

“First, how do you know that?” Weiss asked. “Secondly, you watch me eat fruit every morning, dolt.”

“Oh, right,” Ruby blushed. “Um… I read pirate stories sometimes. They're not as fun as stuff about heroes, but they're okay.”

Weiss shook her head, looking back down at the red scar, before turning around and walking back down the stairs. “Keep an eye on his room; I've got spare gloves in the car.”

She worked as quickly as possible, using napkins and water to wipe away some of the blood, although she accomplished little, before pulling on her spare pair. She was glad that she'd added them to the car after touching one too many gross things on a case before lunch, and before long she returned to Ruby.

“So… any idea what happened?” Ruby asked.

“No, not really,” Weiss said. “That scar was from where I grabbed Neo's blade. It always looked strange, so perhaps there's something about it… I'll have to investigate it later. Right now we have a thief to catch.”
Ruby gave her another concerned look and it seemed like she was about to say something, but Weiss felt fine, the strangely unpleasant sensation long gone and the cramping ache in her hand a thing of the past. She strode towards the door, pulling out Myrtenaster and holding it low, ready to lunge if Torchwick tried something.

Ruby pulled out her pistol and after a moment knocked on the door, both of them standing just out of sight of the peephole and window, ready to act at a moment's notice. They didn't have to wait long as they heard the door unlock, a man's voice grumbling from the other side even before it opened. “You're back quick Neo. Forget something?”

It was Torchwick. After he slipped away so easily the last time, fleeing by helicopter no less, and with how much effort it had taken to find him originally, and now all of the hours spent looking it just seemed too easy. He didn't even have his cane with him as he blinked at them, obviously even more surprised than she was to be confronted at the door of his room.

“Shit!” he shouted, trying to slam the door, although with a loud grunt Ruby rammed shoulder first into it, knocking the door back into him, making him stumble a little. Ruby hit the floor, having thrown her entire body into it, and Torchwick turned his stumble into a dive for his cane, which Weiss saw leaning against the wall.

Weiss didn't waste another second, leaping over Ruby and throwing her body into a full extension lunge of the rapier, the blade sinking into the meat of his upper arm just before his could grab the cane. He howled, his fist clenching involuntarily, accidentally knocking his magical weapon to the floor before he managed to jerk himself off of her blade, rolling across the floor and back to his feet, fortunately away from the cane. Unfortunately, he wasn't entirely disarmed.

“Tyazhely,” he shouted as he came to his feet and tossed something underhanded that he'd pulled from his pocket. It was a small bag tossed directly towards Weiss' face, and only endless training drills allowed her to react in time, bringing her blade up so that the rapier intercepted the pouch. The moment it did her weapon slammed into the ground, ripped from his hand as its weight multiplied a thousand fold, the suddenly heavy weapon making the room shake and groan as it cracked the hardwood floor.

“Nice reflexes!” Torchwick complimented. “Although taking your weapon away is a pretty good consolation prize. Tyazhely!”

He then threw another small bag at Ruby, but by then she had managed to find her feet, and she easily dodged the throw, the bag instead hitting the partially open door. The hinges were instantly ripped from the wooden frame, and the suddenly many ton door collapsed inwards, almost hitting Ruby again, before slamming into the floor. This time the object was too heavy, and Weiss found herself falling as the ground gave way.

She slid down a suddenly angled board then fell a few feet with a grunt, coughing on dust and blinking back tears. After a moment she found her bearings and stood, looking around groggily as she tried to find her partner and Torchwick as well as figure out where she was. “Why does the floor keep collapsing on me,” she muttered, annoyed.

“Well, I'd make a comment about your weight, but even I can tell you're way too thin for that to land,” Torchwick said. “It'd probably slip right between your ribs.”

“Hey, don't talk about her weight!” Ruby objected from the floor where she was still trying to find her footing. “Although you really could stand to eat more, Weiss.”

The room was a near mirror of the one above, although it was now filled with the shattered debris of
Torchwick's room. His room had had two small beds, which now lay beside and partially on top of the single king sized bed in the new room. Laying on the bed, half covered in broken furniture were two terrified people who had apparently been having some personal time before they broke through. They were staring, shocked and unmoving in their fear, and after a moment Weiss wrote them off, other than as people that she needed to avoid hurting.

Torchwick was scrambling along the floor, probably either looking for his cane or some other weapon. Weiss wasn't sure how long her's would take to return to its normal weight, so she didn't bother trying to find Myrtenaster, instead pulling out her handgun and pointing it at him. “Freeze!”

“Zhecht!” he crowed as he stood, the runes flaring along the length of his cane. Weiss dropped her gun as it began to superheat, and she heard Ruby yelp and do the same.

The couple in the bed began to scream as combat broke out, distracting Torchwick for a moment. Weiss used that to grab the first thing that came to hand, a length of floorboard, and charge at him, ready to swing it like a bat. Unfortunately he recovered in time, swinging his cane to meet it, the force easily ripping the awkward improvised weapon from her hands.

“You're gonna have to do better than that!” he shouted, swinging his weapon in a wide arc. Weiss dove backwards, grunting as she slammed into a tipped over dresser from above, before scrambling back over it as he slammed his cane into it. “Look, why don't you just stand still for a minute and I can wrap this whole thing up?”

“Why don't you!” Ruby shouted, running at him with her scythe out.

“Little red!” he greeted. “Vliyaniye!”

Last time that move had easily shattered the haft of her scythe, and one blow from it had sent Yang through a wall. Neither Weiss nor Ruby were tough enough to stand up to that kind of punishment without major, perhaps life threatening injury. Without guns and with the floor a mess of rubble and broken furniture, the chances of them overcoming his magical advantage was pretty slim even without his throwing fireballs.

Ruby wasn't the same combatant that she had been the year before, however. As she closed her features were a mask of intense concentration, and at the last moment she hopped and pressed both feet against a plank that was pressed to the wall, allowing her to shed her momentum entirely, a small cloud of rose petals drifting from her as she used her enhanced speed to give her the ability to perfectly time and position her moves. When she swung he scythe the blade rather than the haft met the cane, point first directly into its center.

Weiss would have warned her about the dangers of trying to destroy magic items. Even minor magical items were much, much tougher than the physical materials they were constructed from, and could have very unpleasant reactions if you did managed to damage them. No normal weapon wielded by someone with human strength could hope to harm something with as much power as Torchwick's cane obviously had.

Ruby, however, wasn't swinging a normal weapon around. She was swinging Death's scythe, and she was pushing every scrap of her aura that she could into the weapon to magnify its sharpness the way her mother had shown her. In that moment the edge was sharper than any blade forged by human hands, and while the cane provide enough resistance to make Ruby grunt like a professional tennis player she still cut it cleanly in two.

Torchwick's expression of shocked horror as he stared at the halved cane in his hand would've been a lot funnier if Weiss didn't have the same look on her own face. Everything froze for a moment,
until a stream of liquid flame poured from both ends and began to pool on the ground, the impossible substance flowing into every crack and nook on the floor like water from a pipe as it ignited everything it came in contact with.

“Shit!” Torchwick shrieked, tossing the half in his hand away, a spray of liquid fire spreading the blaze across the room as it tumbled.

“Run!” Weiss screamed, turning and scrambling for her sword, desperately hoping that it was no longer super heavy. She did not want to abandon Myrtenaster, but the heat was already intense and growing rapidly. She felt an incredibly wave of relief as she was able to pick it up without trouble just moments before a stream of liquid flame would’ve reached it.

The couple on the bed, the man fat and middle aged and the woman with fresh tracks on her arms ran past her, the man slamming shoulder first into the door with enough fearful adrenaline to force it open. They stumbled outside and she ran after them, coughing slightly as smoke was filling the air. She gasped a deep breath of fresh air once she was in the clear, desperately trying to recover.

“What were you thinking!” Torchwick shouted.

“I'm sorry!” Ruby yelped. “I didn't know that would happen. Why did that happen?”

“Magical items are full of dust and charged with mana!” he shouted back. “Only an idiot wouldn't know something bad would happen if you damaged one! We're lucky the hotel isn't a crater and we're not bits of kibble!”

“Well… well you blocked with the cane!”

“Magic items are super tough!” he defended himself, pulling out a cigar and sticking it in his mouth. “Look, I don't care how cool your scythe thing is it shouldn't have been able to cut my cane like that. Honestly, what is that thing made of?”

Weiss cleared her throat, putting her sword tip against his back. “I can lecture her about her recklessness later, thank you. You, however, are under arrest.”

“Ugh, fine,” Torchwick sighed. “I lost my best weapon and you already stabbed me once. Obviously I wouldn't be trying to get a last smoke in if I still felt up to resisting. What's it with you and stabbing me in the arm, anyway?”

“I can stab you somewhere else if you'd prefer,” Weiss said with a cold smile.

He shuddered. “Ugh. And people call me evil. At least I don't torture people and burn down hotels full of innocentish people.”

“What was that?” Weiss asked. “That sounds like someone was saying, 'please, stab me again'. Well, if you're gonna say please and everything…”

“Um… I guess you've got this under control,” Ruby said, trying not to laugh as Torchwick pouted. “I'm gonna make sure everyone gets out and call for an ambulance for him and all.”

“If he doesn't shut up he'll need it very soon.”
“So you not only decided to *not* remain at the scene where you not only discharged your firearms but actually killed suspects, but then you proceeded across town to set a motel on fire with the patrons still inside?” Goodwitch asked, her enchanted riding crop slapping against her palm rhythmically.

Weiss wasn't entirely sure *what* the riding crop was enchanted to do, but staring down her captain when she was in this kind of mood made her really not want to find out. She tried to think of something to say that would deflect her anger, but unfortunately Ruby beat her to it. “We didn't mean to burn the building down! I mean, who knew it was a bad idea to cut a magic cane thingie in half?”

Goodwitch closed her eyes, her off hand gripping the tip of her crop and flexing it slightly as she obviously tried to keep from doing something destructive. “Everyone. Knows. That.”

Ruby pouted. “No one told me.”

Weiss cleared her throat. “Please ignore her. We did manage to bring in Roman Torchwick, however.”

Goodwitch glared at Weiss. “Yes, you brought him in… after burning everything down. If he had any evidence related to the statues in his room it's long gone now. He also seems unlikely to talk about anything *useful*.”

Weiss looked down, clenching her fists tightly behind her back. The thing that bothered her the most was that Goodwitch was correct. Not only did they endanger many lives when the motel burned down, but any evidence was gone, and despite being injured and in the back of a police car Torchwick had looked amused by his arrest more than anything else. He was unlikely to tell anything about the people who hired him to steal the statues, nor were they likely to find out where they went.

Her heart sank as she decided that her captain was right. She had decided to evade her responsibilities at the bookstore, and then had let things get out of hand at the motel. She had failed, and as she stood, called to explain herself she had a sudden flashback to all of the times her father had summoned her to his office to explain her many, many failings. She didn't know what to say as she continued to be lectured, until finally, after the better part of an hour the captain seemed to run out of steam and she sat back down in her desk with a sigh.

“Was there anything else?” Goodwitch asked finally.

Weiss ran through everything they had been able to tell her before she had begun scolding them. “Torchwick was still carrying a rather elaborate hand mirror. I suspect that it's what he was using to perform his sub-dimensional infiltrations. I would like to study it to see if I can find anything of use, such as locations he may have marked that could be of value to tracking down the statues. He strikes me as the kind of man who would use magic to flashily appear before allies and business partners.”

Goodwitch looked thoughtful for a moment, before finally nodding. “ Granted. Studying magical objects can be time consuming, however, and with Torchwick caught the dust thefts may not persist. If they do not then you will be assigned another case soon.”

Weiss nodded. “Of course.”

“If there's nothing else then you're dismissed,” Goodwitch said. “But I expect at least the preliminary paperwork to be finished before you leave.”
They left her office and went to their cubicle, crossing through the surprisingly busy squad room as they went. It was quite late, but with so many people putting in overtime trying to track down the White Fang, and everyone else working twice as hard to make up for most of the department being on a single case, the room was full of people finishing up paperwork, or preparing for stakeouts or meetings with sources. Blake and Yang, however, were noticeably absent.

Weiss sighed in relief when she finally sat down, the length of the day catching up to her. She stared at the forms on her desk for a moment, before reaching past them to pick up the fancy hand mirror. The frame was solid silver, with elaborate, abstract designs that, upon closer inspection, hid delicately wrought runes. Even without her ability to sense magic she would've guessed that it was enchanted, and when she focused on it she could tell that it was an extremely powerful object, and quite old as well.

“Hello Weiss, hello Ruby,” Pyrrha said.

“Hey!” Jaune added cheerfully, giving them both a dopey grin.

Weiss sighed, a headache coming on. Jaune was trying at the best of times, and she really wasn't in the mood for him right then. Ruby grinned happily upon seeing them however, and Weiss forced herself to put on a polite smile. “Pyrrha… Jaune.”

“Hey!” Ruby chirped. “What are you two up to?”

“Actually, we're going to a movie,” Pyrrha said happily.

“Yup,” Jaune said. “Hey, you interested in going with us?”

“Like a double date?” Ruby asked.

Pyrrha blushed and Jaune blinked in confusion. “Huh? Oh, no, we're just gonna hang out.”

“Right,” Pyrrha said brightly as she looked away. “It will be a fun evening between friends.”

Weiss lowered the mirror, looking at Pyrrha carefully. She wasn't the best at social cues, but even she could see that Pyrrha was disappointed at that statement. Perhaps she had been too hard on Jaune, as they had rarely interacted, but he had always rubbed her the wrong way. He had a nervous, trying too hard quality about him that made her want to grit her teeth and question how he could possibly qualify as a detective. Perhaps, if someone as impressive as Pyrrha Nikos was interested in him she had been overly dismissive of him.

“Hey, that's a cool mirror,” he said. “Checking your makeup? You look lovely, by the way.”

Then again, perhaps she was correct about him in the first place. “It's enchanted. I'm studying the magic it contains.”

“Oh,” he said. “I didn't know.”

“Yes, you seem to have missed a lot of things,” Weiss said, glancing at Pyrrha, who blushed again and looked down.

“So!” Ruby said suddenly, shooting Weiss a look. “What have you guys been working on? You're here pretty late aren't you?”

“Yeah, we had stuff to finish up before we could go,” Jaune said with a sigh. “We've been looking into possible suppliers for that orichalcum.”
“Oh?” Weiss asked, actually curious. “I wasn't aware of anyone capable of supplying more than a small amount.”

“There aren’t many dealers offering any,” Pyrrha agreed. “The amazons tested it in weapons for a time, but its difficult to work, and normally is softer than gold without being as malleable. Making a weapon solid enough to hold its edge was virtually impossible without enchanting it, and only the gods can do such a thing.”

Weiss nodded. “It's very impressive when enchanted, though.”

“Yes,” Pyrrha agreed. “It actually does a surprisingly good job of harming demons and the like as well, as it disrupts auras when it penetrates their bodies. The effect goes away when the blade is removed, but there were experiments with daggers and arrows before the idea was given up a millennia or two ago.”

“If it wasn't so expensive it'd make good shotgun ammo,” Jaune said. “I mean, just imagine how hard it would be for a demon to regenerate without its magic working, and orichalcum can't be much softer than lead, right?”

Weiss blinked, looking at Jaune. “That's… actually a very astute observation. Unfortunately the price would be quite prohibitive, and incendiary dust rounds do an even better job against most common demons.”

“If we used orichalcum bullets would we need as much dust?” Ruby asked.

Weiss shook her head. “It wouldn't make much of an impact on dust usage. Most goes to magical workings, such as keeping the Great Barrier intact, or the creation of normal wards and magic items. It only takes a few grains of dust to make each incendiary round we employ, so the impact would be negligible. Also, as terrible as mining is in Faerie, mining hell dimensions for orichalcum would be worse.”

“Is that the only place it comes from?” Ruby asked.

“In useful amounts,” Pyrrha said. “The olympians made significant use of it once upon a time, extracting it from Tartarus. The money paid for the metal to Hades is why he became known as the god of wealth by the Romans. Eventually it became too risky to keep extracting more, as the demons that dwelled there became more clever in fighting back.”

“So it comes from Tartarus?” Ruby asked.

Jaune shook his head. “If that was the only place finding who supplied it wouldn't be so hard. It seems like almost half of the known lower planes have a bunch of it.”

“So how do you track down where it came from?” Ruby asked.

“We're assuming for now that whoever is supplying it was contacted from here,” Jaune said. “So we've been going to every market and dealer in the tri-state area that sells things from other planes.”

“So, like the Traveling Market?” Ruby asked.

“Indeed,” Pyrrha said nodding. “We went there first, as well as visiting a number of dealers that receive goods from the Traveling Market for normal resale. We did not have any luck, unfortunately.”

“What about sources that aren't coming to our plane?” Weiss asked. “What if the White Fang went
looking for a supplier directly? They obviously have access to a number of binding mages capable of
opening interplanar portals."

“Ren and Nora are looking into that, so you'd have to ask them for the details,” Jaune said. “I think
Nora knows a summoner who the department is paying to summon demons to question.”

Weiss made a face. “That's very risky. I can't imagine intentionally summoning actual demons for
any reason. Even an expert with the best facilities can make a mistake more serious than just death.”

Jaune nodded. “Yeah, I guess that's why they didn't want one of us to try to do it.”

Weiss was a little surprised as the conversation drifted to small talk. Perhaps Jaune wasn't the same
blithering fool who'd somehow impressed Ozpin by hitting a a Grimm with a board that she had first
met the year before. She supposed that she wasn't the only one who had changed.

Before she could say anything else the door to Goodwitch's office slammed open and she came
storming out, her face furious but her eyes frightened. Weiss glanced back at the paperwork she still
hadn't started, but before she could do anything the captain raised her voice loudly enough for
everyone to hear.

“There's an emergency. Two of our detectives managed to discover a large gathering of White Fang
members. As you can imagine, they would only come together like this if there was an imminent
attack and that appears to be the case. Detectives Belladonna and Xiao Long informed me that they
were planning on taking action to delay the launch of the attack, which will put them in extreme and
unacceptable danger.

“Gather your gear and get ready for immediate combat. I've already contacted SWAT, but we'll be
needed as well... so move!”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a look. However annoying Yang could be, she had eventually
welcomed Weiss into her home and family, and before the recent revelation Blake had become a
close friend. The thought of them in danger made Weiss' stomach churn and heart pound, and she
wasted no time grabbing her sword and gun, as well as several spare magazines. She was about to go
join the assembling detectives when she hesitated, opening up a locked desk drawer and pulling out a
pouch full of dust, adding it carefully to her belt.

Ruby had used her time to pull out and prepare a rifle, checking it and its magazines carefully. The
two shared a brief look, and at the fear in her partner's eyes Weiss reached over and took her hand.
“We'll get them back.”

“Yang gets reckless... and Blake's been obsessed with this case,” Ruby said quietly.

Weiss pushed aside her mixed feelings about Blake and squeezed Ruby's hand. “They've come to
our rescue several times when we got in over our heads. Our first case against the Grimm, and later
with the Dagon cultists. Now it's our turn to be the heroes.”

Ruby looked away for a moment, before looking back at Weiss with a small, determined smile. “I
don't need to be a hero. I just want to help people... and now we're going to help some of my most
important people.”

Weiss leaned over and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “You're my hero. Now come on... we've got
a brute and... someone else to save.”

Ruby rolled her eyes but smiled as they went to where the rest of Supernatural Affairs was gathering.
Jaune was wearing a sword at his side and had picked up a shield somewhere, while beside him
Pyrrha checked the edge of her own blade. Near her were Velvet and Coco, who didn't have any obvious heavy weapons with them, although Weiss knew that Coco's bag contained a variety of useful things. They were speaking quietly to a large, muscular man with an enormous sword on his back and a shotgun cradled in his arms. Beside him was a dark skinned man, who had a pair of katar tucked into his belt next to a pair of handguns. It took a moment for her to recall their names as Yatsuhashi Daichi and Fox Alistair.

Goodwitch was standing in front of the group speaking quietly to Sergeant Port, a shotgun over one shoulder and an axe on his back. He nodded sagely to something she said, before she turned and addressed the group. “It appears that the White Fang were planning an attack on city hall tonight, which is why so many had gathered in one place. Unfortunately, that also means that they are well armed and prepared for combat. This will be extremely dangerous, so don't take any chances. Understood?”

A small chorus of 'yes, ma'am's' were mumbled, which was apparently good enough for her. With a sharp nod she gave them directions and they immediately set off, all going to the various unmarked cars that they had been issued, the vehicles peeling out of the parking lot one after another as they all rushed into danger.

The streets were relatively quiet so late in the day, and despite driving separately they all made good time, arriving at the destination all too quickly. The street was old and rundown, with a long abandoned factory of some kind down the road. The amount of lights on inside of the obviously unused building told Weiss exactly where their target was.

“Alright, it appears that things are quiet, let's-” Goodwitch started, only to be interrupted by gunfire echoing from inside of the building. “Damn it… go!”

Pyrrha didn't hesitate, simply dashing directly into trouble, pulling a handgun from her belt as she did. A heartbeat later everyone went running after her, including Port and Goodwitch, although Port was soon left somewhat behind in the rush.

“SWAT will be here soon!” Goodwitch called. “They will guard the perimeter, then go in with flash bangs, so be ready. Schnee, Rose, there should be a loading dock in back! Go there!”

“Right!” Ruby shouted, speeding up to a run and forcing Weiss to go into a dead sprint to keep up with her. She could hear more orders being issued to the remaining detectives, but the pounding of her heart and feet were too loud to hear any of it as they left the group behind.

The factory was very large, and they could still hear some gunfire occurring within. Weiss wanted to pull her gun in case anyone was standing guard outside, but she didn't dare take the time for fear of losing Ruby. Her partner could be impulsive at the best of times, and with her sister on the line she doubted that she would even notice that she'd burst in alone.

Fortunately Pyrrha running ahead first had its advantages, as when they closed with the brick building Weiss saw several people in White Fang body armor, although without the masks, laying dead on the ground.

Weiss snarled as Ruby sped up once again, this time letting a few petals drift in her wake as she rushed around the side of the building. Once she turned the corner several gunshots rang out, and Weiss almost tripped at the sound, finding another reserve of strength within as she ran even faster, desperate to reach her partner.

She turned the corner too tight, almost tripping as she clipped the wall with her shoulder, the impact jarring her and leaving her fumbling at her holster, any hope of getting a weapon out lost as she took
in the circumstances at the back of the building.

Two White Fang were down, and Ruby was standing over them breathing heavily with her handgun once again holstered as she walked over to the door they had been waiting near. The rear of the factory had several large garage style doors, and situated between them was the formerly well guarded back entrance.

“Ruby!” Weiss gasped as she stumbled to a halt, hands on her knees as she doubled over, gasping for air.

“Weiss, what's wrong?” Ruby asked.

Once she could breath a little she glared up at her partner. “Not everyone has super speed.”

“Oh,” Ruby said, blushing a little. “Sorry.”

Weiss tried to maintain her glare, but she soon closed her eyes as she tried to get her breathing and heart rate under control. From the front of the building more gunfire began as the other detectives, having a shorter distance to run, entered the battle.

Finally Weiss straightened back up and nodded to Ruby, who had been fidgeting in place, obviously barely restraining an urge to simply run into trouble alone. She gave Weiss one last sheepish smile and walked over to the door, testing it.

“It's unlocked,” she said, taking her rifle from her back and gripping it firmly.

Weiss nodded and stepped up beside her, pulling out her gun and grabbing the door. Ruby stepped to the side, out of the line of fire if anyone was waiting for them and gave her rifle one last check.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”
The back of the factory resembled a warehouse. Old pallets, some still stacked with crates, dominated much of the cavernous space, with a large and obviously broken down forklift sitting by itself on the far side of the room. Several large doors led out into the rest of the factory, and standing near one of them was a member of the White Fang with greasy hair and triangular ears on top of his head.

He had noticed the door opening, and he was raised his gun, pointing it at Weiss, who wasted no time firing at him. She missed, and he fired back, making her duck back against the door, trying to present as small of a target as possible as she fired at him several more times. He ducked behind a pile of crates, only sticking a small amount of his body out to return fire.

Tense seconds of gunfire felt like minutes, until finally Ruby stepped up beside Weiss, raising her rifle and smoothly firing the moment he emerged from cover again. The rifle barked once, and he fell to the ground, the large caliber bullet having struck him directly between the eyes.

Weiss cleared her throat nervously, changing magazines as she had emptied the first one. “That was very far for pistol shooting.”

“Of course,” Ruby said.

Weiss narrowed her eyes suspiciously at her partner, who would've looked completely innocent except for the obvious humor in her eyes. It was mixed with the regret and pain she obviously felt about killing a person, so Weiss decided to let it go. If she felt better about things by concentrating on Weiss' lackluster shooting performance then so be it.

After rolling her eyes Weiss lead the way into the warehouse, holding her gun in front of her with both hands as she moved through the building. The maze of crates presented far too many hiding places to feel at all safe, and Weiss found herself wishing that she'd requisitioned herself body armor for these sorts of situations. Of course, a bullet proof vest would make it difficult for her to fight with her rapier, but a gunfight wasn't the best place to use a sword, anyway.

They reached the first of the doors and peeked through, revealing yet another maze-like room, this one full of broken equipment, including another obviously malfunctioning forklift, along with the tools to fix anything that could be brought in. Weiss glanced around the machine shop suspiciously, but didn't see anyone in hiding.

“Cool,” Ruby murmured. “You know, I always wanted to work on a forklift.”

“Why?” Weiss asked as she carefully lead the way to the next set of doors.

“I dunno, they just seem really cool,” Ruby said. “It's like... a car with robot lifting arms. Like a real world transformer kinda... except without the cool transforming part.”

Weiss shook her head. ‘I'm dating the weirdest girl in the world.’

She reached the next door, which opened to reveal part of the production line for the factory. Five White Fang were crouched behind industrial machinery, some popping up now and then to shoot at the far end of the room, presumably at people hiding behind more equipment there. A moment later a familiar head of golden hair popped up briefly to shot back, before ducking down again.

Weiss heard Ruby's breath hitch, before she crouched on one knee and raised her rifle. “I've got far
Weiss nodded and took the time to carefully aim her pistol, sighting in on the White Fang on the far left. “I've got left.”

They didn't have to say anything, both firing moments later. Weiss shot her target twice, blood and bone exploding from his head, before she shifted her aim and fired at the second. Ruby's rifle cracked again and again, taking out several with single bullets before she moved on. The White Fang started to act, turning to face them or diving for cover, but between Weiss' rapid if not overly accurate fire, and Ruby's sniping they dropped the remainder before they could shoot back.

A moment later it was relatively quiet again, although they could still hear more gunfire deeper in the factory. “Yang?” Ruby shouted.

Yang poked her head back out. “Ruby?”

They both cautiously moved into the room, scanning for danger. Yang emerged from cover, a grin on her face, although her eyes were still worried. “You're okay!” Ruby said cheerfully.

Yang chuckled. “It'll take more than an army of terrorists to take me down, Rubles.”

Weiss glanced around, and upon noticing a lack of Blake felt her stomach churn. Was she dead, killed in the protracted gunfight? Or did she reveal her true colors, rejoining the White Fang and abandoning Yang to her fate?

“Where's Blake?” Ruby asked.

Yang's expression fell. “We split up. There were too many to just... fight. She said she had a plan to slow the leader down, and went to go do it. One of them noticed me and I had to start shooting... we've got to find her.”

“Are you sure she was trying to stop them?” Weiss asked.

Yang's eyes flashed red, and she stepped forward, only stopping when Ruby subtly moved between the pair. “What was that?”

Weiss gritted her teeth. “She left to find the leader, and nothing happened to stop this? You didn't hear anything at all? Are you sure she was trying to stop them.”

“You bitch,” Yang growled. “Blake gave up everything to turn on the White Fang... they were like a family to her, and she turned herself over to Ozpin to stop them when she realized they went too far. She's spent years trying to make things right, trying to help enough people to fix what she did, and the minute she was offered a chance to go after her old friends, her former family, she jumped on it! Hell, she almost worked herself to death for it!

“Now she gets into a gunfight with them, and you say this kind of shit? Fuck you, Weiss. What the fuck have you done about what the SDC does? Because Blake has done a hell of a lot about the White Fang and all you can do is accuse her of being a criminal!”

Weiss opened her mouth to retort when Ruby interrupted them both. “Stop it! We're in the middle of a fight! I just killed a bunch of people! They're still bleeding on the ground, and you're yelling at each other! A bunch of our friends are getting shot at in the next room!”

Yang scowled. “Fine. I'm going to look for Blake. Do whatever you two want.”
Ruby looked back at her Weiss, and she nodded sharply. Ruby sent her a small smile, although it didn't quite reach her eyes, before following Yang across the room and deeper into the factory. With a sigh Weiss realized that she needed to do something to make things up to Ruby and her sister, but that could wait until they were all safe.

Ruby hadn't quite been literal about where the main gunfight was occurring, but the trio only had to walk down one more length of hallway before they reached the largest room in the factory. In order to make gathering a large crowd easier the White Fang had moved quite a bit of equipment out of the way, but the room was still dominated by sections of assembly line. All around it were crouched dozens upon dozens of White Fang, all heavily armed and shooting at various detectives at the far end of the room.

Some of the White Fang were down, but even a glance told Weiss that very few had been killed since taking proper cover. There were so many of them, and all were armed with guns, which made the detectives unable to accomplish much. Even poking a head out to look at the enemy risked them being instantly killed given the sheer numbers they were facing.

Despite the incredible danger Yang scurried into the room, staying low and sliding behind a large section of metal machinery near the side of the room. Ruby ran out after her, and after cursing under her breath for a moment Weiss followed. She felt the danger incredibly keenly as she moved, as around a hundred armed terrorists who hated her beyond all reason had a clear shot at her before she reached the sisters.

Once she was hidden Yang popped up and opened fire at the nearest group of White Fang. A shout went up, and she was soon forced to duck back down again, but the damage had already been done. Not only were several of them shot, but many others were forced to shift to different cover, trying to find protection from her as well as the other detectives, something that became an even bigger priority when Ruby popped up a moment later, her rifle killing several more.

With the White Fang suddenly caught in a crossfire they had some amount of an advantage finally, until Weiss heard an angry voice start haranguing the terrorists. “What are you doing?! I get lead away for a minute and I find you losing to humans you outnumber ten to one? Use the grenades!”

There was a pause in gunfire, and the three of them shared a long, horrified look as a spherical object flew over their cover and landed in front of them. It was definitely a grenade, and for a moment Weiss felt her life flash in front of her eyes. If she tried to get away from it she would be exposed to gunfire, and staying meant she would be ripped to shreds.

In the span of the heartbeat while that terrified thought ran through her head Yang gained a look of determination and dove forward, obviously planning on covering the grenade. Ruby, however, was faster. Before Yang even reached the peak of her arc Ruby lunged forward, picking up the grenade and tossing it back towards the White Fang, the motion almost invisible except for the trail of rose petals she left behind.

Yang hit the ground with a grunt, and then an instant later Weiss fell back at the sudden, deafening explosion. She dared to peak out a moment later, eyes widening as she saw a huge, flickering wall of energy covering the far side of the room. Behind it Captain Goodwitch stood, both hands outstretched as she protected her detectives both from the hand grenades as well as any possible gunfire. The detectives took advantage of the magical wall, rushing to spread out, trying to get better angles for when they could start shooting again.

The White Fang had fared less well, however. While the grenades that had been thrown at Goodwitch exploded near the wall that they had bounced off of, the one that Ruby had thrown back had exploded near the middle of the room, and she felt sick as she saw almost a dozen wounded or
dead from the blast. The grenade had ripped them to pieces, limbs no longer attached to bodies, intestines or other less easily identifiable organs spilling from riven torsos, and brains oozing across the ground, floating on growing pools of blood.

It was a horror show, and Weiss was almost glad to be forced to duck again a moment later as the enemy spotted her and began to shoot in her direction. Once she was in cover again she looked over at the sisters, who were both leaning against the wall near her, waiting for the shooting to slow down.

“What'd you see?” Ruby asked.

“Goodwitch made a shield to protect the others,” Weiss said. “They're trying to find better vantage points to shoot from when she drops it.”

“And… the White Fang?” Yang asked.

Weiss shook her head. “The grenade did some damage, but… there's just so many of them.”

“Maybe they won't try that again, though,” Ruby said hopefully.

Yang snorted, and eventually they heard the chatter of a submachine gun as it opened fire. Bullets stopped slamming so often into their cover, and Weiss risked another quick glance. The forcefield was down, and with the detectives more spread out they were able to more effectively shoot back, and Coco was giving them an opportunity to aim and prepare by firing wildly into the room, trying to force the White Fang to keep their heads down until they were ready.

A few moments later she stopped firing and dropped back down, but the first of the White Fang to try to stick their heads out after were shot at by the other detectives, with Yang and Ruby quickly joining in. As Weiss fired a few times it finally occurred to her why Yang ran to the side of the room instead of taking the first cover available near the door, as doing so would've put them in the line of fire for their allies.

The battle entered a brief stalemate, with both sides firing mostly futilely after that, simply popping up now and again to shoot, with Coco providing heavy suppressing fire now and then. Despite apparently having gotten ahold of hand grenades somehow none of the White Fang had any automatic weapons, but sheer numbers gave them the ability to produce a truly staggering volume of fire.

There was another loud explosion, and at first Weiss thought more hand grenades had been thrown, but it was a breaching charge opening a side door. A handful of flash bangs were thrown into the room only to explode a moment later, blinding and deafening everyone who wasn't fully prepared. Weiss was unfortunately one of them, so she crouched low and hoped for the best while she waited for her vision to clear and ears to stop ringing quite so loudly.

As things started to clear she could hear the battle still going on as intensely as ever, and a quick glance showed that both Yang and Ruby hadn't been effected by the flash bangs and had never really stopped shooting. After taking a moment to glare at them she peeked over again, taking in what had changed.

The breaching of the room was caused by SWAT, who had both heavy weapons and serious body armor, and they were well trained enough to know the limits and advantages of both. They had managed to take positions along the same wall that she were crouched near, and while the terrorists still outnumbered them significantly the tide had finally turned, and it seemed like the White Fang were on the back foot and not long from defeat.
Weiss ducked back behind cover, checking her gun and discovering that it was empty again. She checked her magazines, grimacing when she realized that she was out of normal bullets. She could use silver or incendiary rounds, but both were expensive and not intended for a normal firefight. After a moment of hesitation she inserted the silver magazine but decided to wait and use it if she had a need rather than just shooting at anything that looked potentially like a terrorist but was more likely a trick of the light.

Over even the sound of the gunfire and the screams of the wounded and dying Weiss heard a high whistling sound. She frowned, the strange sound seemed familiar to her for some reason, and she looked around, a chill running up her spine. It sounded like it was coming from outside, and she was sure that it was significant in some way, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what it was.

It was only moments later when it was answered by a series of howls all around the building that she remembered where she'd heard it before. Her very first case there had been a woman controlling a pack of Beowolves using a whistle, and a quick glance at Ruby confirmed what they were hearing.

“Oh no,” Ruby moaned.

“Grimm!” Weiss shouted. “Beowolves!”

Screams erupted outside, and a member of SWAT ran into the building, only to be gunned down by the White Fang. It wasn't long before several more rushed inside, although they kept low despite seeming more concerned about what they were fleeing from than even the army of terrorists within the factory. Weiss felt a moment of fear at the thought of her sister outside commanding the SWAT team, until she remembered her gunshot wound.

Backing into the building came Inspector Ironwood, who was holding an enormous fifty caliber handgun and firing incendiary rounds outside with one hand while dragging another officer behind him with the other. The man was missing a leg, and despite Ironwood's heroic efforts she doubted that he'd live long enough to receive medical treatment.

A moment later one of the Beowolves leapt through the door that SWAT had blasted open, only to freeze in midair as Goodwitch used her magic to halt it inches from being able to tear Ironwood's head off. She dropped it when Ruby, who'd had the presence of mind to switch to incendiary dust rounds when she figured out what was coming, shot it in the head with her rifle, turning its enraged howls into a death rattle.

Unfortunately that wasn't the end of it, and the SWAT team tried to reposition away from the door, but that was complicated by the White Fang still shooting at them despite the incoming Grimm. Weiss cursed under her breath and started firing rapidly at the terrorists, hoping to encourage them to keep their heads down, a thought apparently shared by a number of the other detectives, including most effectively Coco with her submachine gun.

While SWAT took a number of casualties the survivors eventually found cover that put them away from both the open door and clear lines of fire from the White Fang. Several more Beowolves came charging through the doorway, but the narrow point of entry allowed Ruby and a few of the other sharpshooters in Supernatural Affairs to stop them from getting too far, and the situation seemed somewhat under control as some of SWAT switched to incendiary rounds and began to help as well.

Then there was a loud roar, almost as painful as the flash bangs had been. With a terrible crash a huge, towering beast smashed through the far wall of the room. It was more than fifteen feet tall, a hulking mass of muscle, fur and boney plates, with red eyes glinting with sadistic hunger.

Weiss could only stare in horror at the nightmare given flesh as it roared once again. Everyone
stopped shooting, and all was silent in the wake of the primal sound, even the Beowolves cowed by the challenge.

“Ursa Major,” Ruby breathed.

“Well…” Yang said. “Shit.”
Incendiary dust bullets did a fine job of killing most demons, and Grimm weren't an exception. Normally chemical incendiaries were far less effective, but the magical nature of the alchemical dust fire did significant harm, allowing even a normal handgun to take down a powerful demon. The Beowolves entering through the front door had been easily cut down by incendiary rounds, containing the flow of attackers.

The Ursa Major, on the hand, was not so easily harmed. Enough pistol shots would eventually take it down, and Ruby's rifle hitting it the face repeatedly obviously did not feel good, but after Weiss emptying her own magazine center of mass left it still standing if slightly on fire she swallowed hard. The other police could've worked to take it down, but they were more concerned about the wave of Beowolves pouring in through the massive breach in the building the monster had left.

"Why aren't they attacking the White Fang!" Yang complained, before having to duck as bullets started to slam into their cover as the terrorists realized the same thing and began to shoot at them again.

"That woman with the whistle… she must be able to get 'em to do that," Ruby said, obviously having recognized the sound as well. "Is she working with them, or does she just want us dead more?"

"Doesn't matter, sis," Yang said. "We can't fight hand to hand with all these bullets, and we can barely shoot, too. We're gonna get torn to pieces."

"I've got an idea," Weiss said. "Keep them off of me for a minute."

"We might not have a minute, princess," Yang complained.

Weiss pulled out the container of dust she had grabbed, not even bothering to look up as she tore it open. "Well, if you're that incompetent at keeping away a few Grimm then I guess we'll all be meeting Ruby's mother together."

Yang had some reply to that, but Weiss didn't have time to listen to it. She had only practiced what she was going to do once, and that had been with all the time in the world to make sure that she got it right. No matter the cost in dust and the difficult to explain cuts she would've worked on it more if she'd known that she would have to do it under such duress. It was too late for regrets, however.

The chalk glyph was quite intricate, but she'd always found that the easiest way to memorize magic symbols was to practice drawing them over and over again, and that practice meant that she could draw it quite quickly. She didn't even bother to check over her work, knowing from the rapid gunfire and concerned sounds she heard from the other two that she didn't have time. She simply had to assume that she had done everything correctly, as any mistakes would kill them all.

She then poured the entire container of dust in the correct spots around the circle, before shedding a glove and half drawing Myrtenaster to slice her palm open. She clenched her fist to encourage bleeding, then pulled her other glove off with her teeth so that she could wet her fingertips and draw the final runes in her own blood. Once she was done she placed her bleeding palm in the very center of the glyph and began to pour mana into it.

It didn't take long to activate the magic, the dust providing most of the power. Gray smoke rose in a billowing cloud above her head, before spreading out and blocking her vision. It then cleared swiftly
as the smoke coalesced into the intimidating form of the Knight.

“What the fuck!” Yang yelped, staring up at the living armor, which was so big that it towered over even the Ursa Major.

“Kill the Grimm!” Weiss shouted up at it. “Stop any White Fang that won't surrender!”

The Knight nodded and then stepped over the section of machinery that they'd been using as cover. It moved towards the Ursa, bullets simply bouncing off of it as it casually punted a Beowolf that tried to attack it across the room, the demon yelping like a puppy as it bounced off of the far wall and fell twitching to the concrete floor, its spine shattered but still alive.

The Ursa roared again before dropping to all fours and charging the Knight, who began a counter charge, raising its giant sword above its head as it did. The Grimm had avoided attacking any of the White Fang, but apparently charging through their positions didn't count as attacking them as the huge beast simply ignored anyone in its way to engage the summon.

The ceiling was very tall, but the top of the Knight's swing actually tore a hole in the roof, exposing the stars overhead before the sword came down with the force of meteor. The Ursa was smarter and more agile than it looked however, and hitting the ceiling slowed the swing, which allowed the Grimm to dodge just to side. It couldn't completely avoid the stroke however, the sword actually sheering off one of its front limbs.

Rather than stopping the monster, losing a limb simply made it roar more angrily as it stood up on its hind legs again to slam its remaining paw into side of the Knight with a sound like a car wreck. The Knight stumbled, a series of dents visible on its torso, but then it brought its sword back around, cutting deep into the Grimm's side.

This time it howled in pain, but it ignored the injury to sink its teeth into the Knight's arm and bite down. There was a shriek from the tortured metal, but the armor was empty and felt no pain as it dropped its sword to wrap both arms around the Grimm. The Ursa grabbed the Knight with its paw, and the two began to stagger around like drunken teenagers failing to dance, until the Knight tripped over on a section of assembly line, sending them falling to floor, where they began to roll about, wrestling for dominance.

Being at the center of a wrestling match between two super powered giants was distinctly unhealthy, and it was finally enough to break the resolve of the White Fang. First a few, then steadily more began to run away, most fleeing towards the hole the Ursa had made or the back door that she and Ruby had entered through just a few long, long minutes earlier.

“Holy shit, Weiss,” Yang breathed. “What the hell is that?”


“Why didn't I know about this?” Ruby asked.

Weiss huffed. “I mentioned him! Remember, I said I bound a Knight in Faerie.”

Both sisters gave her deadpan looks. “That didn't mean… that,” Ruby said, gesturing at the battle. “I thought you, like, tied someone up.”

The Knight shifted, gaining a position on top of the Ursa, wrapping an arm around its neck. With a great heave and a sound like an oak tree snapping in half it broke the Grimm's neck, before dropping it to the ground and standing once again. It began to reach for its sword again, but two Beowolves leaped onto its back. It paused to reach back and grab one, ripping it away and then swinging it like a
club to slam into the other. A few more hits and both dropped to the ground, broken and oozing thick blood.

There was another roar outside, and the Knight looked up before grabbing its sword and running through the hole in the wall, ready to attack yet another Ursas. The room, which had far fewer White Fang than a few minutes ago was still filling up with Beowolves, and across the battlefield they could see the other detectives leaping into action.

Yatsuhashi had drawn his two handed sword before leaping from cover to swing it at a Beowolf, cleaving it in two before attacking the next. He moved with surprising grace for his size, and he wielded his enormous blade with the same delicate skill that Weiss used with her rapier. It was impressive to watch, and obviously very deadly. His partner, Fox, was wielding his twin katar and followed in his wake, watching his back and finishing off any that were merely wounded by his companion's broad swings.

Velvet was moving from wounded person to wounded person, using her magic and knowledge of first aid to heal them while Coco guarded her, her submachine gun spitting bursts of incendiaries at any enemy who came close. Weiss noticed that despite having different objectives Velvet and Coco stayed quite close to the two detectives that she didn't know very well, and when one pair or the other got into trouble they instantly supported each other. It was impressive coordination, obviously gained through long hours of field experience in even worse situations than the one they found themselves in.

Pyrrha and Jaune had worked out tactics of their own to take advantage of their strengths. Jaune acted as a stable base, moving slowly towards the gap in the wall, fighting defensively with his shield and sword. He rarely more than wounded any of the Beowolves, but he also didn't give any ground to them as he continuously advanced. Pyrrha, on the other hand, darted and leapt all around him, killing Beowolves at a staggering rate with her enchanted bronze sword, but never losing track of her partner, returning to him to kill any that started to get past his guard, before launching fresh attacks from his side.

Goodwitch and Port stayed together, and they had moved to where the SWAT teams were, joining up with Ironwood. The front doors permitted fewer Beowolves to enter at once, but when SWAT ran out of incendiaries they would be sitting ducks. Goodwitch's magic and Port's axe and shotgun, however, helped reduce the amount of shooting that they would have to do.

“Well, I can't let them have all the fun!” Yang said cheerfully, slamming her fists together, causing them to burst into flames as her eyes turned red. “Keep an out for Blake!”

Yang vaulted over the barricade, pouncing on a Beowolf that had been creeping towards Velvet, slamming both fists into it with a roar and pummeling the demon into broken pieces. Ruby dropped her apparently empty rifle and summoned her scythe, giving Weiss another moment to recover and draw Myrtenaster before they engaged the enemy. They decided to circle around the side of the room, with Ruby leading the way with broad strokes of her long weapon, and Weiss surgically thrusting her blade into any that threatened to slip past her guard.

Weiss turned to deal with a Beowolf that tried to attack her from behind, and when she did she saw movement from a side room. While the Grimm she had stabbed in the throat clawed feebly at the rapier in its neck she looked again, frowning at what she saw.

Blake was standing in the next room, her side facing Weiss with that leg bleeding, not heavily, but from the way she moved the wound was obviously painful. She had her kusarigama in her hands, the end with the blunt metal weight spinning in her left hand, while her right held the sickle end steady. She was staring down two Beowolves, sometimes lashing out with the weighted end to keep them...
off balance, and slashing with the sickle whenever she had an opening.

If she didn't have the wounded leg Weiss suspected she would have already dealt with them on her own, but she didn't seem to want to move very much, content to wear them down instead. That might not have been a problem if it weren't for the Beowolf creeping up behind her, the other two pressing Blake enough to keep her from noticing it despite her inhumanly sharp hearing.

Weiss didn't hesitate, leaving Ruby and rushing towards Blake. When she closed she extended her full body into a flying lunge, rapier sliding under the arm of the Beowolf just as it was about to pounce, the blade piercing its heart. The demon collapsed, dragging Weiss into a crouch as her full extension gave her no leverage to extract the sword.

She looked up from her crouch, locking eyes with Blake, who had half turned to face her. They stared for a long moment, and Weiss could see the guilt, the fear, the frustration… the hope in her eyes. This was Blake. The woman who she went to for advice about sex. The woman she borrowed books from, including some that made her blush bright red even before she had found the illustrations. The hard working detective with the dry sense of humor.

Blake.

Her friend.

They locked eyes only for a moment, but an understanding passed between them, before Blake flicked her gaze over Weiss' shoulder. Without hesitating Weiss finally withdrew her sword from the dead Beowolf and thrust it at one of the two injured Grimm that Blake had been fighting, finishing it off with a rising stab to the throat. Blake moved back to back with her, tripping the Beowolf that had been coming up behind Weiss while she'd been distracted and finished it off by slitting its throat with the sickle end of her kusarigama.

They fought back to back for while, staying mostly still because of Blake's leg, but with plenty of Beowolves coming for them from various side rooms. It seemed that, while the majority were coming through the hole in the side of the building the first Ursa made, or through the door blasted open by SWAT, some had found other entrances. Finally, after an eternity of parrying, slashing and thrusting things became quiet for them, although the sounds of combat were as intense as ever in the main room.

After one last look around Weiss stepped away from Blake and started to walk towards the main area, suddenly concerned about Ruby again. She knew her partner was incredibly capable in a fight, but without her there to watch her back she was worried. Before she could reach the doorway Blake spoke up. “Weiss?”

She paused. “Yes?”

“I'm not with them anymore,” Blake blurted. “I turned state's evidence when-”

“I know,” Weiss interrupted.

“You- you do?”

“Yang told us a few minutes ago, but… that's not important,” Weiss said.

“I never killed anyone,” Blake said. “I stole things, sabotaged things, spied… other things I'm not proud of, but-”

Weiss turned to face her. ‘It doesn't matter.'
“What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Weiss said, looking her in the eye and taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry for doubting you. You’re… you’re my friend, and I let a lifetime of prejudice turn me against you like that meant nothing.”

“It’s not your fault,” Blake said. “I was a terrorist. Doing the right thing now doesn't change that.”

“Maybe not, but trying to do the right thing does mean something,” Weiss said. “I spent my whole life being a racist, and maybe I wasn't as bad as some people, but I was what I was raised to be. I try to do better now, but maybe I haven’t improved that much since I was still so quick to dismiss you when I learned about what you had done. Nobody's perfect, Blake. We just… have to do the best we can with what we're dealt.”

Blake blinked back tears. “Okay. That’s… that's okay.”

Weiss smirked. “Now, how about we save this stuff for when an army of demons isn't trying to kill everyone we care about?”

Blake nodded, and they moved to the doorway. The situation seemed to still be in a stalemate. Some White Fang were still scattered about the room, but most were either out of ammunition, or were so overwhelmed by the battle that they weren't participating even if they could. Many were on the ground, injured or dead, and more than a few members of SWAT were in the same state.

The detectives were still up and fighting. Pyrrha and Jaune had linked up with Fox and Yatsuhashi, and they were doing a good job of keeping more from coming in the Ursa's hole in the wall. Yang's hair was burning as she and Ruby moved around the room, cutting down Beowolves with brute strength or inhuman speed.

Weiss pursed her lips. Things weren't getting worse, but unless the demons started running out of reinforcements they would eventually tire or make a mistake, and things would be over. “I've got an idea, but I'll need you to cover me.”

“Okay,” Blake said, adjusting her grip on her kusarigama.

Weiss crouched on the concrete floor and closed her eyes, putting both ungloved hands on the ground. With a deep breath she opened her connection to the afterlife, channeling necromantic mana into her aura, and then into the ground beneath her. Concrete was a terrible conductor of magic, but she’d done it enough times over the past year that she knew what to expect, and had even learned a few tricks to make things easier.

She reached out to as many of the dead, human or faunus, as she could find, and once she had touched them all she began channeling power into them. They wouldn't be the most powerful of zombies, but they would be able to move and fight, and that was enough for a battlefield gambit. She felt like she was on the verge of passing out when finally they began to stir, and she sighed in relief when she was able to stop channeling her power.

With a single collective groan dozens of zombies rose, and more than a few screams of shock and fear filled the room. Most of the SWAT officers at least calmed down when the zombies grabbed hold of Beowolves, attempting to either beat them to death with arms like clubs, or at least keep them still long enough for the defenders to get the upper hand.

“You okay?” Blake asked.

“Yeah,” Weiss murmured as she sat back on her haunches, panting heavily. “I'll recover… I just
Two Beowolves moved towards them, and Blake stepped in front of her to fight. She was still strongly favoring one leg, but she wielded her weapon with consummate skill, tripping one with the weighted chain before finish it off and turning her attention to the other. She had an easy time killing it as well, as a moment before it reached her a zombie grabbed it from behind, letting her simply slash its throat.

“Blake!” Ruby called, running up to them. “You're okay! Um, she is okay, right Weiss?”

“Yeah,” Weiss said with a smile. “We're okay.”

Ruby grinned, then dismissed her scythe and walked over to Weiss, crouching beside her and wrapping an arm around her back. “Come on, let's get somewhere a little less… overrun with demons. You need to catch your breath.”

“You don't have to,” Weiss objected. “I can take care of myself…”

Blake shook her head. “There are Grimm everywhere. You should keep an eye on her.”

“I'm not the injured one,” Weiss grumbled, but she stopped objecting as she had to lean on Ruby heavily to stand. Ruby lead her down a hallway and to the room past where they'd found Yang, letting Weiss sit down on a crate with a sigh of relief.

“You okay?” Ruby asked. “Really? And with Blake?”

“Yeah,” Weiss said. “We're okay.”

They smiled at each other, until suddenly Weiss frowned, her hand first itching, then starting to ache. She glanced down at it, expected for there to be something wrong with the shallow cut she'd made to summon the Knight, but it looked like it had already clotted. Her old scar, on the other hand, began to ache and bleed freely.

“You're bleeding!” Ruby shouted.

Weiss heard footsteps, and looking up she saw a familiar figure slowly approaching them. Neo was dressed the same as before, a complete outfit of brown, white and pink, and she was still carrying her parasol. This time she glared at them hatefully, her multicolored eyes promising retribution.
Neo walked slowly towards them, a cruel smirk tugging at the corner of her lips while her multicolored eyes glared at them hatefully. Weiss slowly stood, a sudden burst of adrenaline helping her find her footing despite her exhaustion as she raised Myrtenaster, pressing her bleeding right hand to her side.

Between one step and the next Neo was gone, suddenly appearing almost inside of her guard, swinging her umbrella like a club. Weiss' one handed block did her no good, her sword slamming into her shoulder, thankfully flat first, knocking her to the ground with a shout of pain. Ruby, who had barely managed to conjure her scythe, took a swing at Neo, but she casually ducked under the blow, spinning as she swung her umbrella in return.

Ruby disappeared in a cloud of rose petals to avoid the attack, reappearing just behind the swing to reply with her scythe. Somehow Neo was able to bring her umbrella around to block the haft, and the two began trading swings, moving faster and faster until Weiss couldn't see the individual moves, the motions far too fast for her to make out, even with all of her experience sparring with Ruby.

She climbed to her feet and moved around the edge of the duel, looking for an opening to help, but unfortunately as Ruby began to shed more rose petals it became impossible for her to do so. She was stuck hanging back, rapier raised in the perfect position, turning from side to side as the battle shifted positions.

Finally they broke apart on their own, Ruby panting slightly, although Neo looked unaffected, until Weiss saw a thin line of blood drip down her bicep. Neo examined it for a moment, but it was obviously little more than a scratch, although it did mean first blood to Ruby.

“Why are you here?” Ruby asked. “Why were you and Torchwick working with the White Fang?”

Neo returned her attention to Ruby, frowning as she tightened her grip on her umbrella. Weiss took in her reaction and decided to take a gamble. “We arrested Torchwick earlier today. He's not leaving prison for a long, long time.”

Weiss had been hoping to provoke a rash response from Neo. She wasn't human, and while it was possible that Ruby would be able to beat her in normal hand to hand, it looked as though Ruby was the one becoming tired out by their fight, which made her worry that eventually Neo would get the upper hand. On top of that, the wound Neo gave her so long ago seemed to bleed in her presence, and if the conflict went on too long she would pass out.

Neo's entire face twisted into a rictus of rage, and for a moment Weiss thought that her plan would succeed. Neo then began to twitch, her different body parts apparently acting independently. Her skin began to ripple, and then, before Weiss could say anything, she burst, shattering like glass, and in her place arose a figure as tall as her Knight.

Neo had three faces, one in the front, and the others on each side of her head. The center face had pale blonde hair above it, while the left had pink and the right had brown, but other than prominent fangs and sharp teeth they resembled her human disguise. She wore thin pink and brown robes, and her skin was a riot of brown, pink and white swirls. She had six arms, all rippling with muscle, with fingers ending in long, sharpened claws.

The pain in Weiss' hand magnified, making her gasp and press it more tightly to her side, hoping that the blood flow hadn't increased. She wracked her brain for a moment, the shock and pain making it
difficult to think, but finally she was able to place the creature.

“What is that?!” Ruby asked.

“Asura,” Weiss said. “She's an asura.”

“What's an asura?”

“An ancient being,” Weiss lectured. “Not mortal, not demon, but some strange hybrid of both, and possibly older than either. A creature infused with more mana than normal beings that live on most planes, nearly immortal and incredibly powerful, but not formed by any kind of thaumogenesis.”

Ruby tightened her grip on her scythe. “How do we stop her?”

“Violence,” Weiss said. “They can be killed like a mortal being… it's just very, very difficult.”

Ruby tensed for a moment, gathering her mana, and then disappeared in a cloud of rose petals. Despite her massive size increase Neo barely seemed to have lost any speed as she took a swing at Ruby with one clawed hand, forcing Ruby to vault into the air where she was met by a powerful backhand by one of the other five arms, sending her flying back so hard that she actually skipped twice on the concrete floor.

“Ruby!” Weiss shouted, rushing over to her.

Ruby had managed to bring her scythe up to block even in midair, and that had saved her life. Despite that her nose was laying sideways, obviously broken, with blood pouring down her face. She still appeared somewhat alert however, and Weiss was able to help her sit up as Neo approached. Weiss glared up at the asura, about to reach out in an attempt to drain her despite the damage she had suffered last time when they heard an enraged shout from the entrance to the room.

Yang had come, and Weiss could see Blake just past her as well. She had obviously seen her sister's injury, and her hair and hands burst instantly into flames as her eyes turned red. Without even a trace of hesitation she charged forward, leaping at Neo with one fist cocked back behind her.

Neo tried to swat her out of the air just as she had done to the much faster Ruby, but Yang met the blow force for force, slamming a flaming fist into the asura's clawed hand. There a loud boom from the power of the impact, but the asura managed to completely arrest the momentum of Yang's leap, causing her to fall to the ground. Yang immediately followed up, taking another powerful swing at Neo, who blocked that blow as well. It was actually hard enough to make the asura grunt slightly, her guard standing up to the hit, but only barely.

A chain wrapped around Neo's neck from behind, and Blake appeared out of nowhere clinging to her back, the sickle of the kusarigama embedded deeply in the asura's flesh like a climber with a pick, while she held onto the weighted end. Neo's six eyes bulged and she reached back with one pair of her arms, moving them faster than expected and managing to grab onto one of Blake's legs and pull. This didn't quite have the desired outcome, however, as her eyes bulged as it pulled the chain tighter.

Before she could come up with a new plan Yang stepped in, punching Neo again, trying to go for her knee. The asura blocked the strike and then bared her fangs and ran backwards, avoiding both Yang's follow up and slamming through a wall. Fortunately she'd released Blake when she started to move, and the faunus dove off of her back, rolling across the floor without her weapon, but avoiding being crushed.

Neo walked back into the room, unwrapped the chain and wrenching the now deeply embedded
sickle from her back, throwing them aside before glaring hatefully at the four of them. Ruby, who had recovered from being knocked across the room, and Weiss, who still had enough adrenaline to keep fighting, had joined Blake and Yang, and all four stood side by side, ready to fight.

“Any ideas?” Yang asked.

“Don't die?” Weiss offered as she raised her sword into a fencing pose.

“We should go for the joints,” Ruby said. “She's way too tall to hit her anywhere important, and we have to slow her down. Yang and I'll keep her busy, you two look for openings to hit her.”

“Right,” Blake said, and Weiss nodded.

“Let's do this!” Yang agreed, her smoldering hair burning brighter before she charged forward with a roar.

Neo had obviously come to understand what they were capable of, no longer underestimating them and giving them any openings. Her six arms and three sets of eyes meant that she was almost impossible to overwhelm, and she managed to keep both Yang and Ruby busy while still keeping an eye on Weiss and Blake, who were both trying to circle around the asura while waiting for an opening.

Eventually Yang found a good rhythm, forcing Neo to use two arms and more of her attention to keep her at bay, and Weiss lunged, sinking her sword into the back of the asura's knee. It was like striking solid oak, impossibly hard for living flesh, but the magical blade pierced some distance in, drawing a high, screeching shriek of pain from all three mouths.

Ruby dashed in, a trail of rose petals behind her as she leapt at Neo, swinging her scythe and channeling mana through it. Neo was less distracted than she looked however, and she actually managed to catch Ruby by the lower leg, stopping her in midair. Ruby looked shocked for a moment, before bringing her scythe down anyway.

Neo started to move another arm to grab the haft, but Blake wrapped the weighted end of her kusarigama around her wrist and pulled hard. The faunus was quickly lifted off of the ground, but it still delayed Neo's move, causing her to be hit in the forearm with the scythe's blade rather than safely stopping the weapon. She screeched again, before snarling and hurling Ruby away, the scythe pulling out messily in a shower of blood, that arm now only half attached, the hand hanging limply.

The throw wasn't a simple toss, however, Neo shook her hard and flipped her aggressively away, sending Ruby tumbling wildly through the air with a scream, and she actually landed on the leg that had been grabbed by Neo. Instead of finding her footing there was a loud pop and she crumbled to the ground with a wail of agony. Weiss gritted her teeth and twisted her blade for a moment, trying to do more damage before she checked on her partner, not wanting to leave Yang and Blake alone with such a dangerous enemy.

Yang responded to Ruby's injury with a berserk roar, bullying through Neo's parrying arms to slam a fist into her knee. She took a painful hit of her own, sending her stumbling back and obviously woozy from the blow, but in exchange she shattered Neo's knee, the joint actually bending backwards as she tried to stay standing, the tip of Myrtenaster poking out a few inches as a river of blood poured out of the gruesome wound.

Unfortunately, while Neo's mobility was severely compromised and she'd lost the use of an arm, she was still incredibly dangerous, and the two physically super powered combatants were both temporarily away from the action. Weiss tried to move away, wrenching out her sword as she did,
but she still caught the edges of a powerful hit, fingers grazing her upper arm hard enough to spin her
around and wrench her arm from the socket, making her yelp and stumble away. It was the same arm
that had been dislocated fighting the Prince, which unfortunately meant that her sword arm was out
of commission.

Blake avoided serious injury, although Neo managed to grab the chain of her kusarigama, ripping the
weapon from her hands and tossing it all the way across the room this time, sending it crashing into a
pile of crates in one corner. Blake and Weiss exchanged a glance as they moved away, before
nodding to each other and running to their partners.

“Ruby!” Weiss called as she slid to a stop next to her girlfriend.

Ruby was pale and sweaty, but she focused immediately on Weiss. “Your arm!”

“It's just dislocated,” Weiss said dismissively, trying to pretend that it didn't hurt so incredibly badly.
“What about your leg?”

“I think somethings wrong with my knee,” Ruby whimpered. “I can't move it.”

Weiss bit her lip and looked at it for a second, but she didn't have much medical experience, and
she'd never really learned how to heal anyone else. She looked back over at Neo, who has somehow
standing, although she didn't put any weight on her destroyed knee. “I doubt Neo has much
sympathy.”

Ruby sat up slightly and winced when she looked at the enemy. “I have some for her, though.
Ouch.”

Weiss winced as well as Yang tried to close again, obviously expecting the crippled Neo to be easier
to take down, but instead she went flying back before she got close enough to do any damage. “I've
got to help them… somehow. Let me move you a little out of the way.”

“Your arm is dislocated!” Ruby objected as Weiss tried to shift her. “Look, let me fix that.”

Weiss paused. “You know first aid?”

Ruby scoffed. “Of course. I think you're the only one in the department who doesn't… probably
because of the whole kill people with a touch thing. You should probably think about getting
certified now that you can…”

Weiss glanced over at the battle, with Yang, who was starting to look quite battered herself, trying to
find some kind of opening while Blake finished retrieving her weapon. She also noticed that Neo's
injury was rapidly healing, the cut that had once nearly removed her forearm now much less severe.
“Not the time.”

“Right,” Ruby said. “Okay, you should really see a doctor for this and get x-rays or something…
sometimes you could have serious damage like a broken bone or severed artery, but… not the time.
Okay. Lay down and give me your arm.”

Weiss did so, and Ruby took it and paused for a moment. “Okay, this'll hurt, but it should feel better
after.”

Weiss nodded and gritted her teeth as Ruby steadily pulled on her arm. She ignored the distant
gunfire, the closer battle and the thought of Grimm and terrorists running around eager to kill her.
There was a scrape of bone and Weiss gasped, before sighing in relief. It still hurt rather badly, but
the pain had greatly lessened.
“Okay, you're supposed to put it in a sling… sometimes fixing it takes surgery, and this is the second time you've dislocated that arm in the past six months or so,” Ruby said professionally. “You really need to be careful with it…”

“No time,” Weiss said, standing and grabbing Ruby by the armpits. She grunted as she began to pull on her, the action difficult as she didn't want to pull hard with her left arm, but her right hand was still sluggishly bleeding and ached terribly from both her summoning and the old wound Neo had given her. Ruby helped with her arms and her uninjured leg, and soon she'd managed to move her partner to a sheltered spot by the forklift and tool chest along the wall.

“What are you gonna do?” Ruby asked as Weiss caught her breath.

Weiss examined the fight and bit her lip. She doubted that she could wield her sword very effectively without magical healing, and she didn't have time to do it for herself. Yang was bruised and battered, with a split lip and numerous small injuries, and while her flames were burning steadily brighter Weiss doubted that she could fight an asura for much longer.

She looked around for Blake, and she saw that the faunus was circling around behind Neo again, but the asura was turning her head, trying to keep at least one of her three faces turned towards her the whole time. A human would've found multiple opponents extremely distracting, but that wasn't a problem for an asura, and Weiss doubted that Blake, even with how incredibly stealthy she could be, would find another good opening.

“She isn't moving… I can create a magic circle to bind her while she's distracted,” Weiss mused. “It'll take a while, but maybe they can keep her busy long enough that she won't have time to leave it. She's an asura… I don't really know much about them, so I'll have to use a powerful general circle to trap her just in case.”

Before she could stand to go try it a figure emerged from the far door. He was very tall, with a lean build, black and red hair, and curved horns at his temples. He was dressed in an all black version of the White Fang outfit, with a half sized mask covering only his eyes, and a katana at his belt.

“Blake!” he shouted. It was the same voice that had exhorted the White Fang to use grenades earlier, and if anything he sounded much angrier than he had then.

“Shit,” Blake said, stepping away from Neo to face him. “Adam…”

Weiss bit her lip. With an outside attacker there was no way that she could draw a magic circle, and time seemed even more pressing. Weiss had heard the name Adam Taurus, and it was always connected with some of the worst crimes perpetuated against the Schnee family. Blake didn't look at all confident about facing him, and she knew that, injured or no, she needed to help her friend.

Weiss pulled out a piece of chalk and quickly sketched a simple glyph on the ground, placing her still bleeding hand on it and adding a small amount of mana to it. Once it had flashed and faded away, consuming the chalk mark as it did, she stood and carefully drew her sword, gritting her teeth against the pain.

“Um… you shouldn't try to do that,” Ruby said worriedly.

“We don't have much of a choice,” Weiss said. She then hesitated slightly, glancing back at Ruby. “I just called for the Knight to help with Neo, but Blake needs me. Ruby, I… I love you.”

“Wait!” Ruby objected as Weiss moved towards Adam. “Weiss! Don't do that! You aren't allowed to get dramatically killed! Again!”
Weiss ignored her as she moved up beside Blake, who was slowly twirling the weighted end of her kusarigama. Adam, who was holding the sheath of his katana in one hand and gripping the hilt in the other, shifted his gaze to her. “Schnee.”

“Wait, Adam, I thought you were trying to kill me,” Blake said, taking a slight step in front of Weiss.

Adam sneered. “I'm going to kill you, my love… I'm going to kill you slowly. I knew you'd betrayed me, the White Fang… your family. But consorting with a Schnee? After everything they've done to our people?”

“She's not perfect, but Weiss is a good person,” Blake said, making Weiss smile slightly despite the situation.

Adam's hand tightened on his sheath, before he relaxed slightly, shifting his feet and hunching over a little. “I was just going to kill your partner in front of you, but if you're friends with the Schnee… I'm going to kill her, too. I'm going to kill everything you care about, my love. I'm going to rip it all away from you before you die.”
Seventh Case: Collapse

Weiss didn't like the situation. At all.

Adam Taurus was a name that she recognized. He'd become famous leading a squad of White Fang that had successfully killed one of her cousins, and that wasn't the last time he'd spilled Schnee blood. He'd reveled in it, his bloodlust seemingly unquenchable. In person he was even taller than she'd imagined in her head, and even more intimidating.

As if one of the boogeymen for everyone connected to the SDC wasn't bad enough, Yang was still fighting Neo, an asura. Only the catastrophic knee damage they'd managed to inflict to her kept her from killing them all, but that didn't mean that she was defeated. Far from it, and Yang looked to be on her last legs as well. Weiss wasn't sure exactly how her berserker abilities worked, but Yang was looking less and less coherent as she struggled to keep fighting, so Weiss guessed that she was overusing them to stay in the fight.

The rest of them weren't any better. Ruby was down, her knee out of commission as well, but she wasn't a twenty foot tall pseudo-demonic monster able to fight on anyway. Blake had a cut on her leg, and although she was moving almost normally, Weiss could see that she was avoiding putting weight on it when she didn't have to. Weiss' injury was to her sword arm, which meant that she doubted crossing blades with someone like Adam Taurus would end well for her.

Adam shifted, and Weiss forced her wavering focus back onto him. She was exhausted to the bone, and she kicked herself for her inattentiveness. Fortunately it hadn't cost her anything. Adam was slowly shuffling towards them, keeping himself perfect balanced at all times, with his posture slightly hunched as he gripped his sheath and katana.

"Don't try to block his swings," Blake said quietly.

"I wasn't planning on it," Weiss said. "I don't know how much force I can exert with my arm hurt like this."

Blake shook her head. "It's not a matter of force. His sword would cut through yours like a twig."

"Myrtenaster is the finest sword money can forge, infused with the strongest and most modern magics available to the SDC," Weiss huffed.

Blake shook her head. "That doesn't matter. His blade is an original Muramasa, and it can cut through anything. When he channels his aura into it produces a magical edge just above the steel… I've seen him cut through a warded bank vault in one swing. And it's very bloodthirsty."

Weiss blinked. She frantically tried to recall what she knew about Adam Taurus, but in truth she knew almost nothing. She had never been interested in studying the White Fang in depth, instead focusing on what they had done to her family rather than finding out anything actually useful. She would have to correct that oversight if she survived.

"How does he fight?" Weiss asked, starting to slowly back away to maintain distance from him as he continued to shuffle closer.

"He's a skilled swordsman, but he's a master of iaijutsu," Blake said.

"Iaijutsu?"
“Drawing and sheathing his sword,” Blake explained. “He can draw, strike you, and sheath again so quickly that you don't even realize that you've been killed.”

“I suppose that explains his unusual posture,” Weiss mused.

Blake nodded and began to twirl the weighted end of her kusarigama again. “He's going to try to cut you down before you know what to look for.”

Weiss hummed. “We need to buy time. I called for my Knight, and eventually SWAT and the other detectives will arrive.”

“Okay,” Blake said. “We need to act before we're pushed against the wall. I'll circle to the side and hit him when he tries to make a move. Stay well out of his reach, and remember, don't block.”

“Right.”

Blake broke away and circled around to the right, trying to get on Adam's flank. Weiss really, really wished that she still had ammunition for her gun, but she'd used it all up shooting Grimm and terrorists, leaving her stuck in a sword fight against an unknown foe. While she was very confident in her fencing, that didn't mean uninjured she couldn't lose, and he was obviously in better condition than she was.

Once Blake was in position Weiss decided that it was time to act. She darted forward, thrusting her rapier in a probing strike, gritting her teeth at the pain in her shoulder for doing so. Adam didn't even flinch, taking a half step back, then suddenly lunging forward as she withdrew. His sword exploded from the sheath, and if she hadn't spent the past year training regularly with someone with actually superhuman speed she wouldn't have reacted in time. Instead she managed to hop back, rapier pointed up to keep it clear as well.

Blake made her move, throwing the weighted end of her kusarigama at his head, but he simply continued his motion, spinning on the balls of his feet and making a broad, looping swing with his katana. He sheared through the steel weight at the end of her weapon's chain like it was nothing, and with a subtle flick of his wrist he balanced the half a weight on the flat of his sword as he continued twirling, throwing the piece of metal directly at Weiss, who only managed to deflect it because her weapon was already raised in front of her face.

A moment later he sheathed his sword with a flourish, returning to his stance as he advanced on Weiss again, the entire exchange having taken barely seconds. Blake and her exchanged glances, before the faunus nodded and darted in first this time, making a probing strike with the sickle end of her weapon.

The three of them danced back and forth, three different weapons somehow finding a rhythm that kept Adam from advancing any further, although they hadn't managed to stop him, either. The longer the fighting went on however, the more Blake favored her injured leg, and the more Weiss' shoulder ached. Something would have to give eventually, and Weiss was afraid that it would be them.

There was a loud scraping sound, and suddenly the Knight forced itself through the doorway, standing tall as it looked around. It was battered, with a few seriously damaged sections, but it still looked combat ready as it raised its sword. Weiss backed away from Adam, who had turned to look as well, although he still kept up a ready stance.

“Knight!” Weiss called. “Help Yang with the asura!”

The Knight raised its sword and charged at Neo, who glared hatefully at Yang, Weiss, and the
Knight, each with a different face. She winced as she shifted, making the first offensive move in a little while against Yang, backhanding her across the room, before turning to meet the Knight, catching its forearms with her upper pair while her other arms, even the wounded one, caught the Knight's body and threw it to loudly to the ground.

To its credit the Knight recovered well, quickly rising again, but before it could fully do so it met with all six arms slamming down onto it at once. The blow caved in the Knight's back in a way that would've killed anyone living inside, but it showed little reaction, this time getting up into a crouch. Neo started to repeat the powerful attack, only to collapse with a piercing shriek like an air raid siren as the Knight punched her in the damaged knee.

"Weiss!" Blake shouted, and Weiss instinctually dodged back, barely avoiding being sliced in half as Adam attacked her. She tried to follow up with a tight slash of her own, but he easily withdrew, resetting himself again.

Something warm ran down her face, and she frowned, putting a hand to her chin. It came away red, and as she touched it again she winced, finally feeling pain. The cut wasn't very deep, the very tip of Adam's katana barely scratching her, but it had cut her so cleanly that she hadn't even felt pain at first.

Adam took advantage of her distraction again, and this time he wasn't content with a single, blindingly fast strike. In the past he had simply struck once or a couple of times before withdrawing, so when he attacked and initiated a long pattern of attacks Weiss was taken off guard, and he managed to catch part of her sleeve, slicing a neat line that could have easily been the removal of her entire hand with a little less luck.

Weiss was used to fighting people armed with swords a certain way, whether they were her fencing teachers with their rapiers and sabers, or Pyrrha with her xiphos, and that included the use of a parry in defense. She tried to avoid it, afraid of damaging Myrtenaster, but as he pressed her with great skill and speed she realized that she couldn't keep avoiding his attacks with simple dodges. Narrowing her eyes, she carefully timed his next attack and flicked out her blade.

She didn't actually parry it, and she certainly didn't try to block it, but instead with perfect point control she tapped the flat with her own weapon, knocking the katana slightly off course. He was obviously surprised by the maneuver, hesitating slightly, and she took advantage of that to slash at his arm, opening a long but thin cut. He might've gotten first blood on her, but she had answered with a wound to his sword arm, although her shoulder ached from the speed she'd just moved it at.

He back off, giving her room to recover, and she noticed Blake moving her hands in strange patterns behind him. A moment later a half dozen Blakes appeared around her, all indistinguishable from the real thing as they raised their damaged kusarigamas. Weiss had heard of the use of hand signs to perform magic rather than words, but she'd never actually seen it done, nor had she seen Blake use magic before. With a blink Weiss realized that she'd never really watched Blake fight in a protracted battle, just quick, silent attacks from behind, or desperately fending off opponents that didn't give her a chance to cast spells.

Adam raised his sword above his head, angling it backwards, and with a twirl he lashed out at the first Blakes to attack him. His sword went straight through several of them as if they weren't even there, all except for one who was forced to duck back to avoid being bisected. He ignored the rest, and leapt forward, his katana striking Blake and cutting cleanly through her body. Weiss almost screamed, but instead Adam did, as a different Blake stabbed him in the back with her kusarigama.

He had started dodging just in time to avoid a killing stroke, but the weapon still opened a deep wound in his upper back as he dove away. He swung his sword even as he came to his feet with a
wide, rising attack that forced Blake to back away as she allowed her images to fade. Adam glared at her hatefully as he sheathed his sword again. “That was new, my love. Normally you're too much of a coward to come that close to being killed just to trick me into focusing on one of your shadows.”

“I'm not that person anymore,” Blake said. “I'm not like you. I'm not just a coward in a mask attacking the defenseless. I'm not the coward you trained me to be!”

Weiss looked back over at the battle with Neo while Blake kept Adam distracted. The Knight had been pounded into an almost unrecognizable state, the damage severe enough to make it have difficulties moving. It was trying to wrestle with the asura, but it was obviously on the losing side of the effort, as Neo soon got a good grip on its body with her six arms before she began to twist, making the metal shriek as it was contorted in impossible ways.

Weiss hesitated, torn between helping Blake fight Adam and trying to save her summon, when there was a sudden loud rumbling noise. The broken down forklift started to move, turning as it sped up until it was on a collision course with Neo. Ruby dove from the cab as the vehicle slammed into the asura, one of the front forks actually hitting her mangled knee, the agony making her go limp for a moment, releasing the knight before she and the forklift slammed into the wall.

There was a roar as a berserk Yang charged into the back of the forklift. With superhuman strength she began to push, and the pain in Neo's leg, combined with her awkward position and complete lack of leverage meant that she could do nothing but be pressed into the wall. Yang roared even louder, and the forklift was slowly crushed, and cracks began to form on the wall.

The concrete wall crumbled, but the asura was caught on a pair of steel support beams. Yang didn't stop, wasn't coherent enough to do anything but try to crush the enemy who had pushed her so far into her curse's influence. She was actually foaming at the mouth, her eyes rolled back in her head, but still she pushed harder and harder, and eventually something had to give. That something turned out to be the heavy steel beams, which gave with a terrible groan, caving in a small section of the ceiling and compromise that structural integrity of that entire part of the building.

Ruby was still laying on the ground where she'd jumped, and Weiss ran over to her, crouching by her side. “Ruby!”

Ruby was blinking back tears, her face scrunch up in pain. “Hey… I get her?”

Weiss looked up at the hole in the wall, which Yang, still burning, was standing in front of trying to catch her breath. “Yeah. You got her.”

“Oh, good,” Ruby said, biting her lip. “I kinda landed on my bad knee when I jumped out of the forklift. It… it hurts.”

Weiss looked back over at Blake, who had once again conjured a group of images of herself to keep Adam distracted. She suddenly realized that she'd just… abandoned Blake mid battle.

“She okay?” Blake asked.

Weiss jumped, spinning around to find the cat faunus crouched right behind her. A quick glance showed that Adam was still being harassed by images. “What-”

“I'm fine,” Ruby said. “Is Yang okay?”

“She's berserk,” Blake said. “Weiss, get Ruby to safety. Adam's figured out I'm not over there.”

Weiss looked up, eyes widening when she saw Adam charging at them with his sword held above
his head. Blake ran at him, diving aside at the last second and throwing the chain of her kusarigama at his legs while she tumbled. He hopped over it, planted one foot on the ground to pivot and lunged at her. Blake flexed her body with impossible agility to avoid simply being bisected, but she was forced purely on the defensive as she tried to stay ahead of him.

Weiss grabbed Ruby under the arms and began to pull her again, groaning as her shoulder ached from the strain. Ruby did her best to help push herself across the floor until finally they reached the far wall. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “Go help Blake… and stay away from Yang. She's exhausted so she might drop out of her berserking soon, but… she's not gonna do great at telling friend from foe right now. And she was already kinda mad at you earlier…”

Weiss pressed her lips together. “Right. Just… please don't try to get yourself killed again.”

“Hey, I was careful,” Ruby objected. “Plus, it's your fault for leaving me next to something as cool as a forklift. I mean, I always wanted to play with one and I had nothing else to do except worry about you guys getting killed so I started playing with it, and it wasn't hard to fix the engine so then BAM…”

Weiss stood. “Stay safe.”

She started to return to the battle, raising her rapier as she tried to think of some way to usefully get involved. Blake had conjured a small army of images again, and they were darting all around Adam while he stood mostly still, only moving to deflect the occasional image's attack that was aimed for somewhere vital. Then, suddenly, he spun around and stabbed his katana straight into one of the Blakes coming up behind him.

Unlike the rest this one froze, and Weiss could see blood on the end of the sword. The images faded away, leaving only the impaled Blake behind. Adam grabbed her by the neck, then pulled his sword out, flicking his wrist to clear it of blood before raising it so that the tip was half an inch from one of her eyes. He then leaned in and whispered something, only to be interrupted by a loud, inhuman scream of rage.

Yang had seen Blake being impaled as well, and if she had been beginning to leave her berserker state she wasn't anymore. The flames burned hotter then ever as she shouted, then began to run full speed towards Adam. He contemptuously tossed Blake away and sheathed his sword, returning to his iaijutsu stance.

“Yang… no…” Blake groaned, raising a bloody hand toward her partner.

Yang didn't stop, didn't hesitate in her charge. She pulled one arm back and leapt forward, launching a burning punch that even the asura would've been hurt by.

Adam took two steps past Yang's charge, and Weiss saw him sheathing his katana slowly as he did. Yang tumbled through the air, her flames snuffing out as her arm and body hit the ground in two separate places. Blake, despite bleeding heavily herself from a stab all the way through her stomach desperately clawed her way across the floor to Yang's side, grabbing the stump of her arm in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

Adam finished sheathing his sword, locked eyes with Weiss, and began to slowly walk towards her.
Seventh Case: Damaged

Weiss ignored the pain in her shoulder as she raised her sword. Before her eyes she could see Yang and Blake bleeding severely, possibly dying. Blake was doing her best to keep Yang alive despite the loss of her arm, but with a wound all the way through her body she was perhaps even more grievously injured.

Behind her was Ruby. She wasn't nearly so critically injured, but she wasn't in a position to do much fighting without the use of her knee. Adam Taurus marched towards her, sheathing his sword again as he walked. "I love killing Schnees. Will you beg like your cousin before she died? Or will you just whimper like a dog like your uncle?"

Weiss tightened her grip on her sword. She was in a lot of trouble. Even uninjured she didn't feel confident that she could beat him. But that didn't mean she wouldn't die trying if it meant protecting the others. "I'm not so easily defeated," she said as confidently as possible.

He chuckled menacingly. "I'm going to enjoy killing- AHH!"

The Knight, which had been twisted and battered into an almost unrecognizable lump of metal lying on the ground, suddenly swung an arm, slamming it into him like a battering ram. He had been so focused on her that he had assumed that the summons was dead and hadn't even bothered to avoid walking right by it.

It slowly and with great difficulty climbed back to its feet, stumbling towards Adam with all the grace of a newborn deer. Adam had gotten to his own feet by the time it reached him, and with a single slash he bisected the knight, the two halves falling to the floor with an echoing clatter.

Weiss could see it still trying to rise to fight again, but with a heavy heart she focused, channeling mana towards it as she banished her own summon. If she survived the next few minutes she would make it up to the being, and at the very least she would ensure that it recovered fully. If she survived.

Then Pyrrha walked into the room with Jaune following in her wake. Pyrrha looked completely unharmed, sword still in hand and with plenty of energy to fight more. Jaune, on the other hand, looked utterly exhausted, with a shield scratched and dented almost into oblivion, and a number of shallow cuts and bruises, including an already closing black eye.

"You are Adam Taurus," Pyrrha said, pointing her sword at him. "Surrender, now."

He sneered, turning to face her and sheathing his sword once more. Without saying a word he began to shuffle closer to her, readying to draw and kill her in one move.

"Jaune," Pyrrha said calmly. "Please go check on Blake and Yang. I'll deal with him."

"Right," he said, edging around the wall, giving Adam a wide berth before moving over to give first aid.

Weiss frowned as she realized that she most likely the only member of Supernatural Affairs who didn't know first aid. Even Jaune looked confident as he took charge of caring for the grievously wounded detectives.

Just as Weiss was about to relax Neo came limping through the hole in the wall. She had reverted to her human appearance, which if anything only made it more obvious just how badly destroyed her knee was. Weiss suspected that if she were a human without magic the level of damage she had
sustained would require amputation to resolve, but she somehow managed to move despite that by using her umbrella as a cane.

Neo gave her a glare full of hate, and Weiss tightened her grip on her sword again, ready to defend herself. She gave a quick glance towards the other battle, but she could see that Pyrrha appeared to have things under control as she skillfully dodged all of Adam's attacks, riposting now and then, forcing him to give ground. It was a little humiliating that Pyrrha was doing better than her and Blake combined managed, but measuring yourself as a combatant against Pyrrha Nikos was a sure road to insanity.

Returning her gaze to Neo, she saw that the asura in human form hadn't moved much closer. In fact, she had gained a confused expression as she studied Weiss' once again bleeding hand. After another moment she locked eyes with Weiss, and a slow, evil smirk began to spread across her face.

Weiss had been able to ignore the pain in her hand for the most part, although she had been very grateful that it wasn't her sword hand. It had bled enough that she should probably start getting concerned, but it wasn't exactly gushing blood. While she intended to do some research into why it was happening, she'd thought that she had everything under control.

Neo narrowed her eyes in concentration, and then everything changed. It was like Weiss had plunged her hand into an electrified vat of acid while setting it on fire and beating it with a sledgehammer all at once. She had once briefly experienced a pain spell during her magical education, and this was a thousand times worse. The agony burned through every nerve in her flesh, and even scorched her very soul. For a moment she watched the blood from the wound begin to gush, spraying more strongly than a scalp wound, and then her eyes rolled back in her head as she began to scream.

Weiss had received singing lessons while her mother was alive, and they had continued on for years after out of sheer momentum. She hadn't sung in half a decade, but she still had a scream that only the trained voice and lungs of a vocalist could produce. She dropped her sword and collapsed to the ground as she wailed like a banshee, in too much pain to even put pressure on her wound, which was now causing her to rapidly bleed out.

Normally the level of pain she was experiencing would make a person black out to escape from it, but somehow she couldn't, nor could her mental training and many years of experience with meditation help her deal with it. She simply experienced the agony endlessly as she screamed until she ran out of air, and even after her mouth hung open as she was unable to draw breath.

Neo's smirk widened and she began to limp towards Weiss, who by then could barely see her. She thought she heard Pyrrha shout something, but it was garbled by the agony she was feeling. She felt like a balloon tethered to someone's hand as her consciousness tried to float away, but still the pain was there keeping her anchored to reality. She couldn't even concentrate enough to use magic to try to repel whatever was happening.

Then suddenly the pain eased up as Neo went flying across the room. Weiss gasped in a breath of air, rolling onto her back as the bleeding slowed down to the trickle that it had been earlier. Standing in the doorway was Captain Goodwitch with her riding crop extended and a furious look on her face. If that look had been pointed at her she would've crawled to safety no matter how badly she was hurting, and the look became even darker when she saw the condition Blake and Yang were in.

“Adam Taurus… Neo,” Goodwitch said in a firm tone. “You are under arrest. If you wish to go to jail in better condition than you've left my detectives I'd advise immediate surrender.”

“Weiss!” Ruby said. “Weiss!”
She managed to turn her head to find her partner leaning over her. “Hey,” she rasped, before clearing her throat. “Hey, I'm okay.”

She wasn't actually sure that she was okay, but she'd managed to not damage her voice too badly screaming the way she had, and she was slowly feeling better. It was hard to remember just how badly it had hurt, her mind doing its best to shield her from it as time passed. She reached over and took Ruby's hand, giving her a reassuring smile, although she didn't quite feel up to actually moving yet.

“Vercundus!” Goodwitch roared, and Weiss looked up to see her tossing Adam across the room with her magic. He flipped end over end, tumbling like a rag doll before slamming into the far wall and slumping to the ground. She then turned her attention to Neo, flicking her crop with a snarl. Contundito!”

Sergeant Port stepped in front of Weiss' line of sight, giving her a very concerned look as he kept his shotgun pointed at the two criminals who were both struggling to reach their feet again. “Detective Schnee, Detective Rose, how are you feeling?”

“I'll be fine… as long as Goodwitch deals with Neo,” Weiss said.

“My knee's messed up, but I'm okay,” Ruby said. “My sister and Blake need help, though!”

“They'll have it,” Port said, nodding to the door. Velvet and Coco had just arrived, and they immediately went over to check on the wounded, Coco standing guard over them while Velvet used her magic to stabilize Blake, who was pale and weak from blood loss.

“What's the situation elsewhere?” Weiss asked.

“An excellent question!” Port said cheerfully. “The Grimm seem to have been slain to the last foul beast, and the White Fang that didn't escape in the confusion are dead or arrested. Many are injured on both sides, but we have every ambulance in the city routed here, and many have already arrived. Once things calm down here we'll have you all on the way to the hospital before you know it!”

Weiss carefully sat up, leaning on her girlfriend as she did so that she could better see what was happening. Neo and Adam both looked okay, but they were breathing heavily as Pyrrha approached them, sword in one hand and handcuffs in the other. Goodwitch was standing well back from the criminals, crop raised and ready to blast either if they caused more trouble.

“Those might work for Adam, but Neo isn't human,” Weiss said, flexing her hand, which had thankfully stopped hurting for the most part. “We'll need a general containment circle until we can figure out a way to actually hold her.”

Pyrrha suddenly jumped back, bringing her sword up with one hand in a block and lashing out with the handcuffs with the other. Neither of the two criminals had made a move, and in fact they appeared to be scared and confused by what Pyrrha was doing.

“Pyrrha, what's wrong?” Coco asked, raising her submachine gun warily.

“Inanis,” Goodwitch said, swirling her crop in a wide motion. Light poured from the weapon, becoming a wave that flowed across the room. When it touched Neo and Adam they popped like soap bubbles, revealing a pair of hulking Beowolves in their place. With a roar they leapt at Pyrrha, claws raised and drooling, fang-filled maws gaping open.

They didn't stand a chance. Pyrrha casually moved through them, her weapon flicking out as she dodged with millimeters to spare. Before they hit the ground they were both dead, heads bouncing
along the floor, coming rest near the far wall.

“Damn it!” Goodwitch scowled, jogging towards the exit at far end of the room with Pyrrha following after. “They have an illusionist!”

Weiss tried to rise, but Port gestured for her to stay down. “I'm recovering. My hand isn't even bleeding anymore.”

“You're still pale even for yourself, if you don't mind my saying,” he said gently. “Besides, if they escaped with the aid of illusions they may be far away, or they could be sneaking up on us as we speak. If you're able to fight again then you need to stay here and help defend the more injured.”

“I can fight, too,” Ruby said. “Um… can I borrow a gun?”

“Of course!” Port said jovially, handing her his enormous shotgun and pulling out his axe. “I'll wait by the door, but I'm sure things will be resolved shortly!”

A few minutes later the first group of paramedics arrived, and Weiss scrutinized them with her aura sight. After assuring herself that they probably weren't under an illusion she didn't object as they took first Blake and then Yang away to the ambulances. A frustrated Goodwitch returned soon after with Pyrrha, shaking her head in disgust. “They're gone.”

Weiss looked down at her hand. The old wound was fully healed and didn't even twinge with pain anymore, despite being incapacitating so recently. “I think so as well. Something about my hand hurt when Neo was near, and it's fine now. She also seemed to be able to manipulate it somehow once she noticed it.”

“You're hand?” Goodwitch said thoughtfully. “Didn't she injure it when you encountered her before?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, looking down at the unusual scar. It was still the same strange bright red, having never changed any despite reopening twice. “I drained her energies to heal it; that's how I figured out that she isn't human. It's always looked… odd.”

“Most likely using her energies marked you,” Goodwitch said. “For it to have never faded despite traveling between planes and passing through Schnee Manor's wards it must have marked you body and soul.”

Weiss frowned down at the wound, casting her mind over what she knew about such things. She then clenched her fist, furious at herself for never checking for any lingering effects from the scar. “I'll look into it.”

“See that you do,” Goodwitch said with a nod. “Now, you need to see a doctor, and it seems that they're ready to take you and your partner now.”

“I'm fine-” Weiss started.

“You've bled enough that I'm half surprised you're still conscious, and you're favoring your injured arm,” Goodwitch cut her off with a glare.

Weiss sighed and nodded, relaxing when Ruby grabbed her good hand and squeezed. “It won't be so bad, Weiss. We'll all be there together!”

“That's not very reassuring when you're referring to the hospital,” Weiss said flatly.

Ruby smiled and squeezed her hand tighter. “I know, but… I'm glad you'll be there. Yang… she…”
Weiss' eyes widened as Yang's condition suddenly came back to her. She felt so selfish worrying about going to the hospital when her friend, her girlfriend's sister, was maimed. She was no doubt going to be forced to retire from the field, and her life was never going to be the same. “I'm sorry.”

“It's okay,” Ruby said, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek as paramedics finally approached them.

Weiss wasn't generally fond of being touched, and the cause had always been an excuse not to be in the past. She never would've imagined her ability to be touched could be disadvantageous, but as she was checked over by the medics she had to exert great control over herself not to react badly while they poked and prodded her.

Two hours later she'd been x-rayed, which fortunately revealed that her shoulder wasn't broken, nor would she required surgery to repair it, but even with magical healing the doctor had insisted she keep it in a sling while it recovered. Because of her blood loss she’d been hooked up to an IV and ordered to stay overnight, which she finally acquiesced to only after arranging for Ruby to share a room with her.

With nothing better to do once she was in a medical bed she closed her eyes and began to meditate. It was surprisingly difficult to start, but images of the wild battle flashed through her mind and wouldn't leave her alone. Gunfire, demons, an asura, Yang losing an arm... it was all insanity. There was no other word for it.

She had finally started to make progress on healing her shoulder when she was interrupted by a voice cheerfully calling her name. “Weiss!”

She opened her eyes, her smile falling as she saw Ruby getting brought in in a wheelchair. Her leg was fully immobilized, but she still managed to look fairly cheerful.

“Ruby!” she said. “Are you alright?”

“Well... I don't remember all the fancy doctor words, but you know all those ligament thingies that hold your knee together?” Ruby asked.

“Yes...”

“Well, when I landed I came down really, really wrong on something, because I don't seem to have any of those in one piece anymore... like, at all. I'm gonna be going in for surgery when the swelling goes down, and they were talking about cadaver parts and stuff so... yeah. Ew.”

Weiss frowned. “This is a good hospital, but... if you want a second opinion I can have you flown anywhere in the world. There's a doctor at the Mayo Clinic that-”

“It'll be fine, Weiss,” Ruby said. “Don't worry.”

“Of course I'm worried,” Weiss grumbled.

“She always was one to fret over such things,” Winter said from the doorway. “You should've seen the way she acted when I was hurt for the first time on the job.”

“Winter!” Weiss exclaimed happily.

Winter smiled at her softly. She was wearing her police uniform, although her arm was in a cast and sling. “How are you?”

“I'm alright,” Weiss said. “I'll be released in the morning.”
“That's good,” Winter said with a nod. “And you, Ruby?”

Ruby gave her a grin. “I'm great! They gave me some pills that made the pain go away, and I've got Weiss here now, too, so things are great!”

Weiss put her head in her hand. “I think they gave you too big of a dose.”

Ruby giggled, but calmed down soon after. “Do you know how the others are?”

Winter sighed, sitting down beside Weiss' bed. “Casualties could've been worse, I suppose. Almost half of the SWAT team received a notable amount of injury, with almost a third of those are dead or in critical condition. The most seriously wounded members of Supernatural Affairs are Detectives Xiao Long and Belladonna, who are both listed in critical condition.”

The room was silent for a little while, until Ruby broke it with a soft question. “And the White Fang?”

“They suffered more casualties,” Winter said. “Preliminary reports indicate that about a third of those at the scene died, and another third were captured. The rest escaped... including Adam Taurus.”

“That's... it doesn't seem worth it,” Ruby said in a small voice.

“Ruby?” Weiss asked.

“Just... so many people died... on both sides,” Ruby said sadly. “All for what?”

“We stopped them from following their plan,” Winter said. “They were going to attack city hall. Why they thought something so drastic was a good idea only they know.”

“Would anyone have been present this late?” Weiss asked.

Winter nodded. “There was a late meeting between the mayor and the governor along with most of their staff. The assistant mayor is out of town, but this attack would've otherwise decapitated the executives of both state and city governments.”

Ruby frowned. “That doesn't sound like an end.”

“What do you mean?” Weiss asked.

“Getting rid of the people in charge, all of these mass attacks all of a sudden, someone controlling Grimm, and now Torchwick is involved somehow, and he stole all those statues last year... and all of that dust they stole but haven't done anything with... I don't think this was the end of things.

“I think they're just getting started.”
Interlude: Descent

“So… dad said he'll be here soon to take you home,” Ruby said.

She was at a loss for words. Yang was the strongest, greatest big sister in the entire world. She had been like a mother to her since her own had… returned to the afterlife. She had been there to soothe her every nightmare, tend her every bruise, share in her every joy.

Sure, she could be overbearing. Yang had never known how to give anything less than one hundred thousand percent in any situation. She couldn't imagine her sister without her face showing every emotion flowing through her. She'd had a difficult time learning to meditate as she'd always felt so strongly, and even while at peace she had a certain light to her.

Laying on the hospital bed with one arm, it was like no one was home. She spoke sometimes, she ate some of the food brought to her, but mostly she sat and stared into space. She didn't smile, or laugh, or cry, or even get angry as she was so prone to be. She just… sat there.

It was tearing Ruby apart. She loved her sister so much, and to see her acting so devastated was heartbreaking. She wanted to throw herself on her and cry her eyes out, but she couldn't be a burden to her. Yang's injury wasn't about her, and it was her job to help her sister through it.

If only she knew how.

“So… after I visited you yesterday I went and saw Blake,” Ruby said. “I was telling her about how Weiss cuddles. You know how she's all, um, kinda pointy? Not just, you know, her elbows and stuff, but she is kinda all angular and a little boney, but um, prickly. Like a hedgehog. And she hadn't been hugged or anything in so long she'd kinda forgotten how, so I thought, you know, she'd be all not so cuddly?”

Yang didn't even react, instead just staring out of the window from her hospital bed. It would've made more sense if she could actually see anything interesting outside, but the blinds were mostly closed, and even if they were open all you could see was a parking lot and more tall buildings.

“Right… so then I slept with her- er, um, I mean… not like that kinda slept with her!” Ruby said with a blush. “It was a while before we did that kinda stuff! But, um, I spent the night in her bed and she cuddled with me. Like, she was kinda nervous at first, you know, and she didn't seem to know what to do with herself. But then she fell asleep and she just latched on. Like, I think she could've been used to haul a trailer down the highway kinda tight, and it was almost like she had a billion extra arms or something… like more than Neo had. What was I talking about?

“Oh, right! So I told Blake that Weiss cuddles like an octopus, and then she asked me if I liked being with an octopus in bed, and I said sure! 'Cause I mean, who wouldn't like to be with Weiss in bed? Not that I want anyone else to be with Weiss in bed! She's my Weiss… well, I mean, if she wanted to leave me I guess she can, but I hope she doesn't 'cause I really love her and I know she loves me, and, uh, anyway…”

Ruby trailed off for a moment, hoping that her babbling would make her sister do something, even if it was get mad at her and yell for talking about being in bed with Weiss. Ruby had had no idea that there was something worse than angry Yang or disappointed Yang but she'd found it. It was perhaps even worse than sad Weiss, and sad Weiss made her want to do anything to make her happy again.

“So then Blake said if I like octopuses in my bed she had some manga I should read,” Ruby said. “I
asked her what she meant but she wouldn't tell me. Do you know what she meant?"

There was no response. Ruby had had more exciting conversations with their dad's ficus after she kinda accidentally by no one's fault over watered it.

“Have you talked to Blake—”

“I don't want to talk about Blake,” Yang said. It was the first words that she'd spoken in almost half an hour. Ruby had been hoping her sister would interrupt her embarrassing babbling at some point, but she hadn't been expecting that.

“What's—what?"

“She hasn't come to see me and I'm moving back home with dad,” Yang said flatly. The freaky necromancer had put more expression into things, and Ruby wasn't sure he'd remembered how to be human.

“She's… she's hurt really bad,” Ruby tried.

“If she wanted to see me she could see me,” Yang said. “I even went to visit her and she acted like she was asleep.”

Ruby looked down. “She probably just feels guilty about what happened.”

Blake felt like it was all her fault, and nothing Weiss or Ruby said could change her mind. Ruby didn't realize that her and her sister hadn't talked at all though.

“I'm sure she'll talk soon,” Ruby said. “She probably—”

“I want to be alone for a little while,” Yang said.

“O-oh,” Ruby said. “I'll, um… I'll be back when dad gets here. Okay?”

Yang didn't say anything, and after an uncomfortably long time Ruby stood with her crutches and hobbled out into the hallway, finding a seat and collapsing into it. Without even thinking about it she picked up her phone and called Weiss.

“What's wrong?” Weiss asked.

“Nothing, just…” Ruby sighed, blinking back tears. “Nothing's wrong.”

She could feel Weiss roll her eyes. “I can come be there.”

“No!” Ruby said. “Your business thingie is super important.”

“No as important as you.”

Ruby smiled, relaxing for the first time in what felt like hours. “I'll be okay. Just… tonight, can you bring home a big tub of ice cream or something? I kinda just… wanna cuddle.”

“Sure,” Weiss said. She was quiet for a moment before speaking again. “I can come if you need me. Really.”

Ruby shook her head. “No… don't worry about it. I just… it's hard. I've never seen Yang like that and… it's hard. But what you're doing… it's important, right?”
“Yes,” Weiss said. “If I want to secure my place as heiress I need to make an end run around my
father. I doubt he'll be pleased about my choices… but if I can convince enough board members I
can make it difficult to change who's going to inherit.”

Ruby nodded. “Yeah. That's important, so… don't worry. I'll be okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I'm sure flaking out wouldn't look good for them to let you be heir, and if you
don't… you said Whitley agreed with your dad about faunus stuff, right?”

“Right,” Weiss said. “Maybe I can't fix everything, but if I don't take power… then things might
never get better.”

“You'll be able to do something,” Ruby said with a smile. “You're way too stubborn not to… and
way too awesome.”

Weiss cleared her throat. “It's time for my meeting. Are you sure you're okay?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “You're gonna do awesome… love you.”

“I love you, too,” Weiss said, before hanging up.

Ruby sighed and leaned back in the chair. She'd spent almost the entirety of the last couple of days
moving from one chair in the hospital to another, and that was after she'd finally been cleared herself.
Her knee surgery had gone well, and Weiss had paid for several magical healers to visit her while
she was recovering, and they'd even shown her a number of techniques to help her heal herself more
efficiently. In under a week she'd gone from bedridden to using crutches to hover over her sister and
Blake's bedsides, but she was pretty sure much longer in one of the hospital chairs would send her
back into surgery. Couldn't they make them at least a little comfortable?

“Ruby?”

She looked up at her father, giving him a wan smile. “Hey, dad.”

He sat beside her. “What's wrong?”

She gave him an incredulous look, but he just waited patiently until she slumped. “Blake and Yang
haven't talked… and Yang's just… it's like she's barely there.”

He sighed, putting a comforting arm around her shoulders. “I know. It's going to take a long time for
her to heal, but we'll be there for her every step of the way, right?”

“Right,” Ruby said with a small smile.

He nodded. “Blake will smarten up eventually. We just need to focus on helping Yang right now. So
come on, let's get her out of here.”

“Okay,” Ruby said, standing. She hoped it would be that easy.

Emerald paused outside of the door, her heart pounding in her chest. She had thought she loathed
Mercury, but Adam was on a whole other level, and Neo was too disturbing for words. Still, she didn't want even them to be exposed to where they were going unprepared.

"Are you ready?" she asked, looking over her shoulder at them. "Because you won't live long if you aren't."

"Just get on with it," Adam growled.

She nodded and opened the door, and even with layer upon layer of containment wards drawn on the floor, walls and ceiling of the room, both inside and out, opening the door released a painful miasma of dark magic. No matter how much skill someone had at controlling their aura, no living human could spend long in the room and live.

That didn't apply to Cinder though, who seemed to revel in it. Stepping into the former grove under the abandoned nightclub Emerald shivered as she slowly walked across the dusty ground, taking in the most recent changes as she went. Standing on pedestals around the pile of corpses, many of which stirred weakly on their own despite being long dead, were the statues that Torchwick had stolen. She shuddered as she could feel them looking at her with their blank, pitiless stone eyes.

Cinder slowly turned to face her from where she'd been meditating in front of the vast mound of the semi-living dead. She smiled wickedly at Emerald, and despite the horrific conditions she felt her heart rate speed up at the look. Cinder was very pleased, which meant that, as long as Adam and Neo didn't manage to annoy her she'd be in for a very good evening.

Unfortunately she doubted that Cinder's good mood would last, and she hated when Cinder was angry. Biting her lip, she stepped forward and gave her a kiss, hoping to keep her in a good mood. Cinder grabbed her hip and the back of her neck, deepening the kiss almost to the point where Emerald couldn't keep her aura protection active.

Finally Cinder pulled away, grinning even wider at the dazed look on Emerald's face. She shifted her hand slightly on her neck so that her thumb was in front of her throat, caressing her gently with it. "The magic in this place has finally ripened. I wasn't expecting the necromantic aspect to effect all of the corpses, but it shouldn't be a problem. The statues will be fully charged and ready in a matter of weeks."

"Schnee doing this and neglecting to clean it up was lucky," Emerald said.

Cinder chuckled. "Not luck. Fate… and some carefully misfiled paperwork. The time is almost right, and nothing will stand in our way."

"What about my people?" Adam interrupted.

Cinder's hand tightened on Emerald's throat, making her eyes widen as she suddenly had trouble breathing. Cinder slowly focused her orange eyes on Adam. "We were in the middle of a conversation."

"I lost nearly a quarter of the White Fang in the entire state last week, and many of them are still in jail," Adam snarled. "And it's not like I can recruit more, with Sienna Khan after my throat after you had me attack that festival. You need to free them."

"I need to?" Cinder asked, returning her gaze to Emerald's pleading eyes. She squeeze just a little harder before finally releasing her, letting Emerald gasp for breath. She carded her fingers through her hair reassuringly for a moment, and Emerald couldn't help leaning into the touch. "I think you've forgotten the nature of our relationship, Adam."
“Without my men you couldn’t have gotten the dust you need,” Adam said. “Nor could you have done whatever you wanted me to keep the police distracted for so long for.”

“Without my orichalcum you never could've blown up the SDC building. It was a simple quid pro quo relationship… and you never completed the final mission you agreed to.”

“I need my people to finish your plans,” he said. “Without me you—”

Emerald didn't even see her move, although she could feel the wind as Cinder shot past her. She turned around the find Cinder holding Adam's sword arm tightly with one hand, and gripping his face with the other. Despite being short and neatly trimmed her fingernails somehow managed to dig into his face deeply enough to make him bleed.

“You barely fulfilled your first tasks, and then when you fail at the last preparations you dare to presume your irreplaceability?” Cinder asked. “Get this through your empty head, changeling. You and your little social club are meaningless. My Mistress is going to remake this world, and the only thing that will keep your White Fang alive is their value to Her.”

Adam tried to struggle, but despite being much bigger than Cinder he couldn't move a muscle. Emerald bit her lip, aroused at watching her lover prove her dominance over him. She shifted her feet, excitement growing despite her worries about how angry she might still be later.

“I'm… sorry,” Adam ground out.

Cinder released him, letting him fall to the ground. She examined her bloodstained nails disdainfully for a moment, before looking at him with eyes that burned like hot coals. “We'll free your people… and Torchwick as well. Be grateful that a mass jail break will be a sufficient distraction for the next step of the plan, otherwise I would leave you to deal with your own incompetence.”

“When will we act?” Adam asked.

Cinder pursed her lips. “This summer, when the stars are nearly right. Did you see anyone who will be a problem, Emerald?”

“Yes,” Emerald said reluctantly. “Pyrrha Nikos, the amazon champion. I don't know how, but she dodged an attack hidden by my illusions.”

“Hmm,” Cinder mused. “I will look into it. No one is invincible however, and not even the chosen of gods can stand against fate. Proceed with the preparations… oh, and Adam?”

“Yes?”

“There's one more task that you and Neo will perform for me in exchange for my help cleaning up your messes,” she said turning her back on him and walking back over to Emerald. “There will need to be a sacrifice to offer my mistress, and I have the perfect candidate.”

“A Schnee?” Adam offered hopefully.

Cinder snorted. “No. Weiss Schnee has been very useful to our cause, but she has knowledge and resources that could be a problem. No, kill her when you get a chance. I'm speaking of her partner, Ruby Rose.”

“Who is that?” Adam asked.

Cinder smiled. “That is a very good question. She has a most interesting aura…”
Eighth Case: The Worst Day

Weiss sat primly on the stiff black chair. Without even looking she knew that her outfit, a lovely white with black accents skirt suit worth more than what the rest of the room was wearing combined, looked immaculate and did a good job projecting confidence and authority. She looked like she owned the room, and from the expressions in the crowd they believed it as well.

“Are these the devices you found at Mr. Albicant's store, Detective Schnee?” the prosecutor asked, holding up an evidence bag.

Weiss gave a firm nod. “Yes. We found three of the devices when we inspected the premises.”

“Let the record show that the devices in question are model SS-41 Ultrasonic Screamers, also known as Werewolf Repellers,” the prosecutor said. “Why did you confiscate the devices?”

“They are illegal to operate within the city of Vale,” Weiss said. “After determining that they were in operation, we ticketed Mr. Albicant and confiscated his three devices.”

“Thank you, Detective Schnee,” he said with a nod. “No further questions, your honor.”

“Your witness, Mr. Byzantine,” the judge said.

The prosecutor was older but professional looking. The defense lawyer, on the other hand, would've owned the most expensive clothing in the building if Weiss wasn't present, and he wore far more jewelry than she ever would. Every time she saw him it made her want to wrinkle her nose at how vulgarly he flaunted his wealth, and it annoyed her that an outsider trying to make a political stink would get involved in an otherwise minor court case. His legal fees by the end of the first day on the job were most likely already higher than the maximum fine Mr. Albicant could be forced to pay, and for all of his experience and theatrics he was unlikely to make any difference in the outcome.

“Thank you, your honor,” he said with a slick grin. “Miss Schnee, what is the history of the Ultrasonic Screamer device?”

Weiss pursed her lips. She knew exactly where this was going, but she wasn't going to fail in her duty, especially not for some thug with a briefcase. “The device was one of three present in Mr. Albicant's shop when we conducted our inspection. You would need to ask your client for any history prior to that time.”

There was a brief flash of annoyance in the lawyer's eyes. “Miss Schnee, you are aware that the device was developed by your family, are you not?”

“Objection!” the prosecutor said.

“I'm simply trying to establish the credibility of the witness, your honor,” he said.

The judge narrowed his eyes. “I will allow it, but keep this brief and on point or you will regret my granting you latitude.”

“The device was not developed by my family to the best of my knowledge,” Weiss said.

“It was created by a subsidiary of the Schnee Dust Company.”

“As you said, a subsidiary company owned by the corporation founded by my ancestors,” Weiss
said. “As far as I'm aware no Schnee was involved in the project or the actual company that created it.”

“What purpose did your family have in having these devices be created?” he asked.

“I can't speak for anyone else, and as I had no part in the creation of the device I couldn't say,” Weiss said smoothly.

The doors to the courtroom suddenly opened, and Ruby entered, blushing when all eyes turned to her. She looked frazzled, and Weiss frowned for a moment, concerned that something was wrong, although Ruby quickly found a seat near the back rather than trying to interrupt the trial. Weiss forced her attention away from her partner and back to the defense lawyer.

“Does the Schnee family employ any of these devices?” Mr. Byzantine asked.

Weiss paused. “I don't speak for the Schnee-”

“To the best of your knowledge,” he interrupted.

“I believe that the family has purchased and employed the devices in the past,” Weiss said.

“Even though they are illegal?” he asked. “Or is it only illegal when it isn't the ultra wealthy, but an honest, hard working American employing the device?”

“Objection!”

“Withdrawn,” Mr. Byzantine said. “No further questions for this witness.”

“Redirect, Mr. Dogwood?” the judge asked.

“Yes, thank you your honor,” the prosecutor said, standing. “Detective Schnee, were the devices operating when you confiscated them?”

“Yes, they were turned on,” Weiss said.

“Why did you inspect Mr. Albicant's grocery store?”

“We had received reports from the representative of a local werewolf pack that ultrasonic devices of some sort were operating on the premises,” Weiss said. “As operation of the devices are barred within city limits, in addition to being a title three violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act for their effect on those with lycanthropy, we investigated the complaint, as is standard procedure.”

“Thank you, detective,” he said with a nod. “No further questions.”

“May I recross, your honor?” Mr. Byzantine asked.

The judge shook his head. “I warned you before about the line you were walking, Mr. Byzantine. If your questions will be similar then I will have to refuse you. Do you intend to ask something material to the detective's investigation?”

A few minutes later Weiss had finally been dismissed, and she strolled casually to the exit. She had originally planned to watch the rest of the trial, but Ruby was standing by the door with all of the poise of a first grader too long denied a restroom break. She followed her partner out, and was then drug by her hand down the hall to a quiet alcove near the exit to the courthouse.

“What's wron-” Weiss stared, only to be cut off as Ruby pressed her against the wall in a fierce kiss.
It didn't take her long to kiss back, and soon they had hands that were beginning to wander a bit. She had actually forgotten where they were and was beginning to work a hand under Ruby's shirt when her girlfriend finally pulled back.

“Sorry,” Ruby said with a grin that said that she wasn't. “You just looked so hot up there, dressed all nice and staring down that jerk.”

“Don't apologize,” Weiss breathed. “I was planning to stay a bit longer here, so I guess no one would miss us if we snuck home for a couple of hours…”

Ruby groaned. “I really, really wish we could.”

“It's even your turn to pick what we do,” Weiss said, biting her lip. “Anything you want…”

“No fair,” Ruby whined. “Since when do I have to be the responsible one?”

Weiss shrugged. “I've already put in my hard work for the day. Besides, if you didn't want me to be interested in, um, in that kind of stuff, then you shouldn't have made it so… acceptable!”

Weiss still blushed when trying to talk about sex, and from her expression she knew that Ruby found her issues speaking on the subject to be excessively cute. It was embarrassing to be thought of as 'cute', but she was learning to accept it, in private at least. She could accept being cute for Ruby.

Actually, Weiss had learned to accept a lot of things for Ruby, and to even enjoy most of them. The things she didn't enjoy at least a little were never asked for again, even if she didn't actually complain about them. From learning to give up control in bed sometimes, to being tied up, strange toys, and even costumes and role playing, she and Ruby had done so many things that she had never even heard of the year before. And it was all worth it, too, no matter how ridiculous she felt putting on a magical girl costume from some old anime, or a baggy, ill fitting jumpsuit from some outdated science fiction show, Ruby's happiness was worth every silly moment of it.

“Acceptable, huh,” Ruby said, obviously amused. “Well, even though it's so 'acceptable', we really can't. We've been asked by Major Case to go see a crime scene.”

“Ugh, them?” Weiss asked. “Do we have to?”

Ruby shook her head. “I've corrupted you, haven't I? It only took a year and you're as bad as me… no, worse! I'm the one having to be the mature adult now.”

“Fine,” Weiss said with a sigh. “But you better make it up to me later…”

Weiss was mostly kidding, but she did hate working with Major Case, a group which seemed to believe that they were better than the rest of the Vale Police Department because they worked high profile crimes. It didn't help that the average member of the police was uncomfortable with Supernatural Affairs, and Major Case's arrogance seemed to ratchet that up a few dozen degrees.

They walked hand in hand outside, and once they did Weiss frowned at the already hot day despite still being long before lunch. It was already looking like it was going to be an unusually hot summer, and if her court clothes weren't perfectly tailored to breath as well as be comfortable to move in she would've been even more miserable. As it was she only grumbled under her breath as she climbed into the hot car and waited for the AC to cool it off.

“So what did Major Case want?” Weiss asked eventually.

Ruby's amused expression immediately fell. “Oh… um…”
Weiss sighed. “Just spit it out.”

“The mayor's dead.”

Weiss blinked. “What?”

“Someone, um… kinda assassinated the mayor,” Ruby explained.

“White Fang?”

“I dunno,” Ruby said. “I don't think they do, either. They kinda need us to figure out what happened, I guess.”

“And no case file or anything to look at?” Weiss asked.

“Nope.”

“Ugh. Major Case has no respect for proper procedure.”

The courthouse was close to city hall, and when they arrived Weiss was a little surprised to see nothing unusual about it. “Are you sure it happened here?”

“Yeah, I guess they're trying to keep it quiet for now,” Ruby said.

Weiss shook her head. “There's no way that will last long.”

They passed through the lobby and followed the path marked by the most lavishly decorate hallways until finally they reached the mayor's office. For the first time the police made their presence known, as they had to show their badges to make it into the right hallway, but soon they walked up to the detective in charge.

“What's the situation?” Weiss asked.

The detective was a clean cut, well dressed man in his late thirties with sharp eyes but an ever present sneer. He reminded Weiss of an older version of her younger brother Whitley, and she hated him before he even opened his mouth. “Detectives. I'm Lieutenant Slate from Major Case. The mayor was killed in his office this morning. He was discovered by an aide who opened the door and became violently ill at the sight.”

Weiss saw a pool of vomit drying on the rich carpet by the room's other door, and then let her gaze flick around the area. The outer office had a desk for a secretary, which looked like it had seen some use that morning, including a cup of coffee sitting out on it. The far door, which lead to the actual mayor's office, was closed.

“What about the secretary?” Ruby asked.

Slate grimaced slightly. “She's dead as well.”

“I take it you want me to question the victims?” Weiss asked.

If Slate had been displeased about the state of the secretary's body, that was nothing compared to his expression when thinking about what he had called Weiss in to do. “Yes. Also, your… expertise might be useful in determining the method of assassination.”

“The method?” Weiss asked.
“You'll see what I mean when you go in there.”

Weiss and Ruby exchanged a look, and then headed to the door. Even from beyond the door they could smell the thick stench of far too much blood, as well as other odors released by ruptured organs. Even without seeing how pale and out of sorts the hardened police around her were she would've known to brace herself for whatever lay within just from the smell alone.

In the end, no matter how much she prepared herself it wasn't enough.

It was easier to catalog what within the office wasn't soaked in blood than to try to figure out what was. The floor, walls and ceiling were painted with it, and the source was obvious, as scattered about everywhere were torn and shredded body parts and formerly internal organs. Weiss felt numb as she struggled to catalog what she was seeing, as the tiny, almost obliterated chunks of flesh made it nearly impossible to even identify how many could be dead within, or that they had even been human at all.

Weiss had never seen anything like it before. Even feral demons like Grimm tended to be less thorough in the destruction of bodies, and it might take forensics weeks to determine for sure how many bodies the pieces represented. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a few deep, slow breaths, almost gagging on the stench but eventually settling her stomach. She would not vomit in front of Major Case.

Walking a little further into the room she found a relatively bloodless patch to stand, wrinkling her nose at the need to replace her shoes, before closing her eyes and reaching out with her aura senses. She could feel only a little magic, so any that was recently employed in the office was fairly subtle. She then channeled more aura into her eyes, this time including a small amount of necromantic mana.

Opening her eyes, she could see the outlines of two dead bodies on the floor with her magically enhanced sight. “Two people died in this room today, so they weren't dumped here. What do the security cameras show?”

“If we had something useful from them we wouldn't be calling you in here for this,” Slate grunted. “Apparently the computer that's supposed to run all the cameras went down last night, and security said the backup tapes haven't been available for weeks because of some paperwork screw up. Now, can you get them to talk or not?”

Weiss looked around. “I don't see their heads.”

“Over here,” Ruby said.

Weiss followed her partner across the room, and she found herself gagging again at what she found. The heads were placed side by side, but they had both been smashed to pieces. Bits of bone and brain were scattered around, and the tongues and eyes were missing. It was a truly gruesome spectacle even for a room in the hideous state the mayor's office was in.

“Can you still bring them back?” Ruby asked.

Weiss pursed her lips. “There is a way, but it will be much more annoying. I'll need… a considerable amount of both bodies transported to the morgue.”

“Why?” Slate asked.

Weiss looked back at him. “I'll need a mouth for them to speak through.”

Without explaining more Weiss and Ruby returned to the outer office as several forensics people
loaded bags with body parts. Eventually Weiss decided that it was enough, and without any further explanation they headed to the morgue. Once inside, Weiss had to track down the head coroner to get things arranged.

Eventually Ruby and Weiss were alone in an examination room, with two bags of destroyed human remains and a man's body sitting on the slab between them. Eventually Ruby broke the silence. “So, um… whatcha gonna do?”

“I can use the bodies… partial bodies to bring the soul to me,” Weiss said. “It won't be able to speak without a functional mouth, but… I can then put the soul in a different zombie that can talk.”

“Will that work?” Ruby asked.

“In theory,” Weiss said. “I've never tried it, but I saw a reference to it in a proscribed tome, and the premise is certainly sound. Now, it's not going to be easy to convince the soul to enter the wrong corpse, so this will take a little while.”

“Is this legal?” Ruby asked.

“The coroner said he donated his body to science,” Weiss said dismissively.

“Um… this isn't exactly science.”

Weiss glared at her partner. “That's mostly just an expression. Anyway, do you want to catch who or whatever did this or not?”

Ruby pantomimed locking her lips, and Weiss walked over to the first bag and opened it. She carefully removed her gloves, tucking them away, and then delicately touched some of the least befouled skin that she could find. The bag sloshed around slightly as the body part animated, but she ordered it to be still before reaching through it for the soul.

It wasn't easy to find, but the murder was very recent, so despite the thoroughly degraded condition of the body she eventually reached the Mayor's soul and drew it in. Rather than bringing it into his body she reached out with her other hand and touched the corpse, animating it as well, before ordering it to be still and gently shepherding the soul into it.

“Where am I?” the corpse asked after long, long minutes of delicate concentration.

Weiss sighed in relief as she opened her eyes and straightened up. “Mayor Cinnabar?”

“Yes?” the body said, before frowning. “Wait… that doesn't sound like me… wait… I died. I'm… I'm dead.”

“Yes,” Weiss said gently. “I'm very sorry that this has happened. I'm with Supernatural Affairs, and I've brought you back to ask you a few questions.”

“I see,” he said, looking around the room. “You look like a Schnee.”

“I am,” Weiss said. “I'm Detective Weiss Schnee.”

“Hmm,” he hummed thoughtfully. “I knew of your sister in SWAT, but I didn't realize another one of Jacques' had joined the force.”

“I wanted to do good in the world,” Weiss said. “Now, what can you tell me about what happened?”

“My secretary paged me, said that Cinder wanted to see me,” the mayor said. “I called for her to
come in, and the secretary brought her and another woman I didn't recognize into my office. My secretary started to leave, but the other woman… she just smirked and shut the door, leaving the three of us inside the room.”

“What did the other woman look like?” Ruby asked.

He frowned for a moment. “She was pretty plain. Short, pale, with shoulder length dark hair. She was wearing a skirt suit so she didn't really stand out. I'd never seen her before.”

“What happened next?” Weiss asked.

“Cinder smirked, and then kinda… rippled, and she wasn't there anymore,” the mayor said. “I think… I think it wasn't really Cinder. Some kinda illusion magic maybe? I'm not sure. But after there was just this young man, early to mid twenties, but with gray hair. He kicked off his shoes, and his feet… they were both black and skeletal, like he wasn't human at all, and they had these claws at the end…

“He told me… he said he's glad he never voted for me anyway, and then he jumped at me and kicked me in the chest… the next thing I knew it was just now and I was waking up here.”

“Who is Cinder?” Weiss asked.

“The assistant mayor,” he said. “Well… interim mayor, now. Can you… can you find who did this?”

“That’s our job,” Ruby said.

“Good,” he said quietly. “Give 'em hell for me, okay?”
“So this is a gyro?” Ruby asked as she stared down at her food. “It's kinda like a taco.”

Weiss rolled her eyes but smiled all the same. She'd never tried very much greek food either, but she wasn't about to admit that to Ruby. “Not overly. It's a pita wrap.”

They had decided to stop by a food truck on the way back from the morgue. It was a little early for lunch, but they had been called into a meeting with Major Case about the investigation, and they'd both doubted that it would be catered. Ruby had begun to complain about being hungry, which soon lead them to their current situation.

“'S good,” Ruby mumbled around her gyro. “There's french fries on it!”

“We should eat quickly,” Weiss said as she tried her own. It wasn't her favorite, but it was quite acceptable, and she happily continued eating, even if it did have french fries in it. “We don't want to give them any openings.”

“Any openings?”

“Of course,” Weiss said. “If we don't behave in the most professional possible manner then they won't take us seriously. We'll be relegated to the fringes of the investigation at best, perhaps even asked to leave when we aren't actively using my abilities.”

“Ugh, probably,” Ruby said with a frown. “That Slate guy was a real jerk.”

“That's all of Major Case for you,” Weiss said with a sigh. “Remember last time we ran into them on a case? So if we want to stay involved we have to show them why they need us… we're smart, competent, skilled, professional investigators, and just the sort of people who should be in charge of solving the mayor's murder.”

“Wait, in charge?” Ruby asked. “Shouldn't we just do our best to catch the bad guys?”

“Look, if somethings's worth doing, it's worth doing right,” Weiss sniffed. “And I for one can't imagine Major Case doing a better job than us. Furthermore, those glory hounds will do everything they can to sideline us, so we have to sideline them as much as possible first.”

Ruby squinted at Weiss. “Um… isn't that what you're scared of them doing to us?”

“Exactly, which is why we need to strike first,” Weiss said. “So remember: Professional. Competent. Smart. Oh… you've got some sauce on your face. Hold still, I took extra napkins.”

“You really are prepared,” Ruby said as Weiss cleaned her up and gave her a quick kiss.

“Naturally,” Weiss agreed, making Ruby roll her eyes, although she didn't say anything.

They threw away their trash and then headed into Beacon. The front doors were propped open, and inside was a workman with pointy ears on top of his head pushing a large dolly loaded with crates into the lobby. Weiss had seen the occasional delivery be made, but a glance back revealed a heavily loaded truck, which was far more than she'd seen moved through the front doors of the building before.

“What's that?” Ruby asked curiously.
The faunus workman jumped and looked over at them, wide eyed for a moment. Weiss sighed at the way his gaze lingered on her, and she knew that being a Schnee was making him nervous. She decided to ignore the whole situation and just let her partner make small talk with him if she wanted.

“I'm not sure,” he said. “It's my job to deliver the crates, not ask questions.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “That's a lot of crates. Why aren't you using the loading dock?”

There was a pause, and he cleared his throat self consciously. “Loading dock?”

“Oh, you're new?” she asked. “Yeah, there's a loading dock for this kinda stuff… whatever it is. Where'd all this stuff come from?”

He shrugged and showed her the paperwork, but by then Weiss had reached the elevator and cleared her throat. Ruby jumped and scurried over, shouting a quick 'goodbye' over her shoulder as she did. Once they were in the lift Ruby frowned at Weiss. “Did that seem weird to you?”

“You worrying so much about some random deliveries?”

“No, I mean, shouldn't he have known where to take stuff?” Ruby asked. “Plus, the assistant mayor signed off on all of that today… you'd think she'd be busy trying to do, I dunno, something bigger now that the mayor's dead.”

“She is busy,” Weiss said with a shrug. “But she has to keep the city running, and the actual mayor would've been the one signing for things if he wasn't in the morgue.”

“And did he seem nervous to you?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “He was a faunus, and an armed Schnee just walked past him. Honestly, there aren't many faunus that stay calm when I'm around them. Look, we're already late to the meeting because of your lunch, so why don't we forget that for now and go deal with Major Case. We can go check the work order after if something's bothering you about it.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “You ate too, you know.”

Weiss arched an eyebrow. “Do you want to sleep on the couch tonight.”

Ruby huffed. “Honestly, your sofa is comfier than my last bed, and I think you'd be punishing yourself harder than me if I wasn't around for you to cuddle to death.”

“Is that a challenge?”

Ruby's face fell into a pout. “No… you don't have to make us both miserable just to prove stuff.”

Weiss glanced around the hallway they were walking down, and then leaned over gave Ruby a quick kiss. “Good. Tonight's your night, and I'd hate to miss it.”

Ruby grinned. “It's gonna be good. I bought a new thing.”

“What is it?”

“Not gonna tell you,” Ruby teased. “You'll just have to find out tonight!”

Before she could think of a good retort they reached the meeting room, and they both settled their expressions into professional looks. As Weiss had feared they appeared to be some of the last people to make it, although it looked like the meeting hadn't quite started yet.
Eventually an older, balding man stood and cleared his throat. “Aright, I'm not sure what's keeping the commissioner, so I'm just going to get started without him. Clare, go call his office, would you? Try to find him.”

“Yes, captain,” a woman said, before standing and heading out the door.

“Detective Schnee, what did you learn?” the older man asked.

“It seems that the assassin was a human male, twenties, but with gray hair,” Weiss said. “He had an accomplice, a short woman with pale skin and shoulder length dark hair. Unfortunately, these identifications are suspect, as the assassin initially appeared to be the assistant mayor, an illusion that dropped when they were alone in the mayor's office.”

“An illusion?” Slate interrupted. “So what, is anything you have for us useful, or did you desecrate the mayor's corpse just to get lies they set up for you passed on to us?”

Weiss pursed her lips. “It's possible that it was a show for me, but I think it unlikely. Performing the attack as the assistant mayor would've been far more disruptive that showing that they were using illusions. Furthermore, the severe damage the bodies had taken may have been an attempt to prevent me from questioning them; knowledge about necromancy isn't widespread, and even experts on magic might not be aware that I could question them in that condition.”

“Or maybe it was just because some sick freak decided to make it messy,” Slate said. “Did you learn anything useful?”

“Slate…” the older man said, his voice tired, although he didn't actually do anything.

Weiss narrowed her eyes. “The weapon used in the crime was the man's legs. They seemed to be some form of demonic appendages, which means either he was a demon in disguise himself, he is partially a demon, or something far beyond human crime is involved.”

“What do you mean?” the older man asked.

“Replacing limbs is very difficult magic,” Weiss said. “If it was something that anyone could do then there wouldn't be so much effort put into mundane prosthetics. There is no known magic that can be performed by humans that can actually replace a lost limb and have it still function. If he was a human who gained demon legs… that would require intervention by a god or demon lord, or some other entity at that level, and I doubt an archangel did it.”

Slate snorted. “Like angels would give a shit about us. Meanwhile, we real detectives checked the building. No witnesses, but we'll ask again now that we know the killer was cross dressed as the assistant mayor. Maybe someone saw her going somewhere odd.”

“Where was she today?” Ruby asked.

Slate shrugged. “We'll ask her that, too, but she's been busy trying to keep the city running. Hasn't even had time to hold a press conference yet, and the news is already out somehow, so the reporters are starting to swarm.”

“What about building security?” Weiss asked. “Sign ins, metal detectors, cameras, the wards. Anything?”

“Not a thing,” Slate said. “Camera computers crashed last night, so nothing was working, and the manual tape cameras were shut off. Someone screwed up the paperwork and they haven't been filming in weeks. Nothing from security, no word of an attempt to break in, and the wards didn't do
Some of the other detectives began going over the evidence, but frankly there was very little. Given the messy murder method Weiss was surprised that the killer hadn't left a blood trail all the way out of the building, but either they had a physical method set up to deal with it, or magic was involved. So far they hadn't found anything useful, but it would take weeks to go over everything they'd found at the crime scene. Weiss did not envy forensics that job.

They had just turned to discussing what to do next when the door opened and the secretary who had been sent out came back in looking distressed. “Captain?”

The older man stood. “What is it, Clare?”

“The commissioner went home to have lunch with his wife, but he wasn't responding to his phone,” she said. “I asked a patrolman to drop by and check on him… no one answered but his car was there.”

She hesitated, and Slate stood. “Did he go inside?”

“Yes,” she said. “The commissioner… he said it looked like the mayor's office.”

There was a long, horrified pause. The mayor might've signed the checks that kept the Vale PD running, but the police commissioner was their commanding officer. Weiss had never actually met him, although she knew her father had invited him to many events and fundraisers over the years, and had made sure to donate well to the police long before his two daughters had joined.

The room erupted as everyone started talking at once, several detectives pulling out cell phones or grabbing their coats to head over. Chaos reigned for a long moment before finally Slate yelled loudly enough to get everyone's attention. “Quiet! Are you with Major Case or Traffic Enforcement? Shut up and let the captain speak!”

“Thank you,” he said with a nod. “Alright, let's break here. Slate, grab half our team and go to the commissioner's house. Schnee, Rose, you're with them, if you would. Sergeant Bleu? Go down and find the assistant mayor. If this assassin is still active she could be another target. Debian, go coordinate with SWAT. We're going to need more combat readies, and if we find him we'll need the muscle. Cerise, go—”

Weiss and her partner followed Slate out of the room as the captain kept giving orders. “You gonna need a ride?” he asked.

“We've got it,” Ruby said. “I know where to go.”

“Try not to be late to this,” he said sarcastically.

“Try to actually find some evidence this time,” Weiss said as she followed her partner to the elevator. Once the doors closed Ruby giggled, although it was a little hysterical. “And you call me childish.”

Weiss sniffed. “I simply refuse to let him walk all over us.”

“Right,” Ruby said with a smile that slowly faded. “The mayor and now the commissioner. This isn't good.”

“No, it's 'not good','” Weiss said with a sigh. “I don't want to jump to conclusions…”
“But an illusionist and someone killing authority figures in the city?” Ruby said. “This is the White Fang, isn't it?”

“Adam Taurus got away, and so did Neo and who knows who else,” Weiss agreed. “They were planning on killing as many local government leaders as possible, and they fled with the help of an illusionist.”

“And someone who could control demons,” Ruby pointed out.

“That's a good point,” Weiss mused as the elevator opened again and they began to swiftly walk through the lobby towards their car. “We've only seen that whistle used to control Grimm, though.”

“Are Grimm different from other demons?” Ruby asked.

“Not really. They're more common than most; they seem to be very eager to reach this plane, and even with the Great Barrier they find ways.”

“So would the whistle thingie only work on Grimm?” Ruby asked. “Or did they only use it on Grimm 'cause there were Grimm around.”

“Difficult to say,” Weiss said.

With nothing else to speculate about Ruby began to ramble about whatever passed through her head as they drove to the commissioner's home. Weiss half listened, amused by the stream of random thoughts that apparently ran through her partner's brain all day. She had never been able to decide whether it was a mark of how smart Ruby was, or simply a sign of how scatterbrained, but regardless she had come to enjoy listening to her.

“Well… this is it,” Ruby said when they reached the home. They were first, other than the policeman who had checked it over. He was sitting on the porch looking rather green, which was not encouraging about what they would find inside. “Wow. How much does being commissioner pay?”

The commissioner's home was squarely in the wealthy area of town. It wasn't a mansion, but it was a large two story affair with a sprawling, well kept lawn, and a while picket fence for privacy. “I suddenly wonder how much of the money father donated went to the police and how much went into the commissioner's pocket,” Weiss drawled.

“Your dad gives money to the police?”

“Of course,” Weiss said. “Many wealthy people do. After all, whose job is it to protect them if the proletariat decides to seize the means of production?”

“The who?”

Weiss sighed. “I weep for public education.”

Ruby pouted but climbed out of the car. “Come on. Let's take a look before jerky guy gets here.”

Despite still looking ill the police officer moved to intercept them as they approached, only to be appeased when they flashed their badges. “What did you find?”

“They were… it was awful,” he said. “Just… they were torn to pieces.”

Weiss ignored her partner's follow up questions and channeled mana into her eyes, looking at the wards with them. They were quite impressive, obviously professionally done and in good shape. She
didn't see any obvious flaws, nor did she see any signs that someone had messed with them in any way. She frowned, suddenly wondering how the policeman had gotten inside without the home owner being able to answer the door.

She studied the wards more closely, blocking everything else out, until finally she realized why. All of the wards actually allowed police officers to cross the wards unaffected. She'd seen similar on cheap wards, but never on the kind of tight, well crafted protections the home otherwise enjoyed.

“Weiss?” Ruby said.

“Yes?”

“Ready to go in?”

“Sure,” Weiss said, before looking at the officer. “Major case is sending people as well, but keep watch here until they arrive.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said, looking relieved at being allowed to stay outside.

Weiss lead the way, opening the door and walking past the threshold, studying the wards intently as she did. Like she had expected, they didn't react at all to her and Ruby as they went inside.

“Did you see something?” Ruby asked.

“The wards haven't been tampered with... but they will let anyone with the police inside,” Weiss said. “We've wondered about the White Fang having an inside man before...”

Ruby nodded, before leading the way as they looked around. The foyer seemed normal, except the smell of blood and death was heavy in the air, and following their noses they quickly found the commissioner. The room had no doubt been a nice, happy family living room once upon a time, with comfortable furnishings, a nice television, and shelves packed with various mementoes, pictures, and even some children's toys.

The way the killer had left the body of the mayor and his secretary had been one of the most disturbing things Weiss had seen in over a year as a detective. It was even more horrible to see the same thing in an obviously well loved home. For a long time they both could do little more than stand and stare at the scene, unable to act.

The door opened behind them, and they turned to see Slate and a few detectives entering. He glared at them as he approached, although he too hesitated when he saw just how bad the room looked.

“Find anything?”

Weiss swallowed, straightening up slightly. “The wards are undisturbed. Either they circumvented them, or...”

“Or?”

“They were keyed to allow police to pass through unaffected,” Weiss said, before looking back at the mess.

He grunted. “Let's not jump to conclusions.”

Weiss activated her aura sight using a sliver of necromantic mana to do so. Once again she saw that two people had been killed in the room. “Two people died in this room. How many live here?”
“The commissioner, his wife, and his granddaughter,” Slate said.

“His granddaughter?” Ruby asked.

“They took her in when their daughter got hooked on Red Sap,” Slate said. “She's still in and out of different rehabs.”

Weiss pursed her lips, her heart going out to the woman. Even so long after being unwillingly injected with a massive dose she still had the occasional moment of weakness where she wanted to make all of her problems go away with the drug, although she'd never given into the urge to try to find any.

“Where's the granddaughter?” Ruby asked.

“She spent the morning in daycare,” Slate said. “She's got some other relative that's taken her in for now.”

Ruby nodded, and slowly they all began to canvass the scene, looking for any useful clues. Like last time nothing stood out to Weiss, and she suspected that once again she was going to have to wait for forensics to document the scene before having them gather up a few bags worth of the victims to interrogate.

“I know you're young, but why are you playing with children's toys at a crime scene?” Slate demanded.

Weiss looked over and saw her partner pulling a teddy bear off of the shelf and flipping it over. “This isn't a toy.”

“It's a stuffed animal,” Slate said.

“Nope,” Ruby said as she waved at the front of it. “It's a nanny cam… and it was in a good spot to see everything.”
It didn't take long for them to set up the video for viewing. They would need to send it off to forensics for a more detailed analysis, but they quickly cued up the memory card from the nanny cam to a laptop one of the detectives had with them and they all gathered around to watch it. Weiss found herself close enough to another detective that they were almost touching, making her stiffen up and lean as far from him as possible. She still disliked being touched, but she was slowly learning not to panic about it.

The beginning of the video was boring, but they didn't want to skip over anything so that they wouldn't miss anything important. Not much happened at first, with a woman, most likely the commissioner's wife, sitting in the living room watching television. Eventually the commissioner came home and they talked for a while, but they were interrupted by something happening in the foyer.

The commissioner realized something was wrong and rose to his feet, reaching for his gun. Unfortunately he didn't have time to draw it before he was kicked in the gut by someone who came dashing into the room. When the commissioner hit the floor his attacker paused for a moment with a smirk on his face.

"Who are you?" the commissioner gasped once he found his breath. "What do you want?"

"You don't recognize me?" the attacker chuckled. "Now I almost don't feel bad about ripping you into itty bitty pieces."

"If you feel bad why are you doing this!" the commissioner's wife cried.

He reached down and pulled up his pants to his knees, then kicked off his shoes, revealing skeletal black legs with three large, clawed toes. "Sorry, you're not worth the breath."

With that he leapt forward, landing claw first on the commissioner's face while his wife screamed, until that too was cut off shortly thereafter. Weiss had to look away at points, and she heard one of the detectives vomit, although thankfully not on her. Finally, after what felt like an eternity the killer stopped and walked to the foyer again. They could hear some shuffling sounds, then the sound of the front door opening and closing again, and all was silent.

"That was…" Weiss tried, but trailed off, unable to properly put what she had just seen into words.

"Well, looks like we don't need you to raise the dead after all," Slate said. "Why don't you leave this to us, we'll let you go back to doing spooky cases."

"You wouldn't even have found the nanny cam without us," Weiss said. "This is our case as much as yours."

"Fine, but you can work it… elsewhere," he said dismissively.

Weiss seethed, but didn't say anything when Ruby took her elbow and gently lead her away. She did glare at everyone, including Ruby, as she was taken outside. "Why are we leaving?"

"I've seen him before," Ruby said simply.

Weiss looked over at her partner. "You have?"
“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I think… remember our first case together?”

“Of course,” Weiss said, shuddering slightly as she thought about the ambush by Grimm they had been subjected to in that first case.

“Wasn’t he Pyrrha’s old partner before Jaune?” Ruby asked. “You know, the guy who got his legs bitten off by Beowolves?”

“That was him?” Weiss asked.

“Pretty sure,” Ruby confirmed.

“We should find Pyrrha then,” Weiss said, before falling silent.

“What?” Ruby asked.

“Why did you not tell them?”

She shrugged. “He didn’t seem to care about what we knew, so why say anything? Besides, he told us to work the case… elsewhere. So we’re going to.”

“Good idea,” Weiss smirked. “Wait a second… who are you and what did you do to Ruby?”

Ruby rolled her eyes, and they soon drove back to Beacon. “Do you think Pyrrha will know what happened to her old partner?” Weiss asked.

“Probably,” Ruby said. “I mean, she doesn’t seem like she didn’t care.”

Weiss gave her a sidelong look but decided to stay quiet about the double negative. “At least she should remember his name.”

Ruby frowned. “So many people were hurt or killed that day and we can’t even remember names.”

“We didn’t really know him,” Weiss said. “He seemed like, well, a bit of a jerk, and I was still trying to get used to working along side this hyperactive, childish beat cop who had suddenly become a detective.”

“And I guess I was stuck with this grumpy princess,” Ruby said, poking her in the side before taking her hand when she jumped. Weiss gave her a glare, but it was returned with a cheeky grin.

They passed through the lobby and went downstairs, deciding to check the squad room before doing anything else. Unfortunately Pyrrha’s cubicle was empty, but a voice spoke up before they could leave. “Looking for Jauney-boy and Nikos?”

They turned around, Weiss frowning when she saw Cardin Winchester sitting in the cubicle behind them. He was very annoying, but apparently he did a good job as she doubted that Ozpin and Goodwitch would put up with his attitude otherwise. “Yes. Do you know where they are?”

“They went up to the cafeteria to grab a late lunch,” he said. “You can catch them if you hurry.”

“Thanks,” Ruby said a little awkwardly. Weiss gave him a nod before they headed back through the building and up to the cafeteria on the first floor.

They rarely visited the cafeteria, and ate in it even less often. Weiss was a picky eater, and Ruby had no problem getting better meals than the institutional slop. Rumors abounded that the food served there was offered under the same contract as the city jail, and if that was the case Weiss felt sorry for
the prisoners. She wrinkled her nose at the smell as they entered, and one look at the soggy casserole being shoved around desultorily by disgruntled officers said everything about the quality of the food on offer.

“There they are!” Ruby said.

Jaune and Pyrrha were indeed sitting in the cafeteria. Weiss felt disgusted as she watched Jaune actually eat a spoonful of the vile concoction that the food service staff had provided, making her hope that he didn't have a recurrence of the event that had earned him the nickname 'vomit boy.' The food already seemed like something that was thrown up, and it would surely be even worse after a partial digestion.

As she approached Weiss noticed that Jaune was actually looking a bit worse for wear. He was pale, with a bruise on his cheek and his clothing was a bit rumpled. Pyrrha looked much better, although she did look a bit tired. Whatever they had done that morning that had made them late for lunch had apparently been quite strenuous.

The two were also watching the news, and on the screen was the acting mayor, Cinder Fall, as she finally had a press conference about the mayor's assassination. She looked calm and determined as she stood at the podium solemnly answering questions. Weiss wondered if anyone had spoken to her yet about what had happened, or if they would need to do that later.

“Weiss, Ruby, it's good to see you,” Pyrrha said. “You don't usually come to the cafeteria, especially not this late.”

“Yeah, we had food cart for lunch,” Ruby said. “I'd never had a gyro before.”

“It's pronounced similar to 'hero',” Pyrrha said, making Weiss blush at the correction. “Did you enjoy it?”

“It was great!” Ruby said enthusiastically as she sat down at the table. “Um… are you okay Jaune?”

He nodded slowly. “Yeah. Just… if Captain Goodwitch ever asks if you're arachnophobic before giving you a case… say yes.”

Ruby frowned. “But I'm not.”

He shuddered while Pyrrha patted his shoulder delicately. “I wasn't.”

Weiss finally sat down herself, having taken a few moments to inspect the bench for cleanliness. Anyone willing to eat the 'food' on offer couldn't be trusted to maintain any basic standards, and she had no interest in ruining her nice clothing.

“It's hard to believe that the mayor is dead,” Pyrrha said as she nodded at the screen. “I met him once. He seemed… sufficient. Nice, if formal. But I suppose it was an award ceremony.”

“Yeah, it sucks,” Jaune said. “Hey, you're so distracted you're not even eating! Aren't you hungry? It's a bad idea to miss lunch, especially after all you had to do today… so many of them…”

Pyrrha looked down at the food, which had surely gotten no more appetizing having gotten cold on her plate. “Yes… distracted. Anyway, what did you come to see us about? I presume you didn't come here for a social call.”

“You are correct,” Weiss said. “We were working a case, and we needed to ask you a question.”
Jaune smirked. “Should we get some lawyers?”

Weiss rolled her eyes while Ruby giggled and answered him. “Not like that! Just, Pyrrha has some info that could help.”

“Then I would be honored to aid you,” Pyrrha said with a smile. “What do you wish to know?”

“Ummm… well…” Ruby fumbled. “Do you remember your old partner? Before Jaune?”

“Of course,” Pyrrha said, her smile dropping. “I wouldn't say that were ever terribly close, but we had been partners for some time before his injury.”

“Do you keep in contact with him?” Weiss asked.

“No,” Pyrrha said, shaking her head sadly. “I tried my best, but he refused all contact. After I visited him in the hospital he checked out against the doctor's advice and went home. He never answered calls, and refused to come to the door… or was unable to. I thought about breaking in, but he shouted through the door for me to go away. He even changed his phone number shortly after that, and he blocked my email. My letters were returned to sender… that was when I decided to give up.”

“I'm so sorry,” Ruby said, reaching across the table and taking her hand.

Pyrrha smiled slightly. “Like I said, we were not terribly close, but we were partners for long enough for me to care for him.”

“What was his name… and do you remember his address?” Weiss asked.

“Mercury Black,” she said. “I do, in fact, if you need it. But… why are you looking for Mercury? Did something happen?”

Weiss and Ruby looked at each other, not sure what to tell her. “Um… it's for a case. We need to speak with him.”

Pyrrha crossed her arms. “I am not a fool, and I would appreciate it if you did not treat me as one. What has happened? Please?”

Ruby slumped slightly and nodded to the screen. “We're part of the case involving the mayor.”

“What could he possibly know about that?”

“He kinda, um…” Ruby fumbled.

“Yes?”

Weiss sighed. “He has demonic legs of some kind grafted to him and he used them to kill the mayor, among others.”

Pyrrha went very still. “What?!”

Weiss nodded. “We saw a video of his second attack… which probably hasn't been released to the press yet, so I'd rather not say who. Regardless, we need to find him.”

“Of course!” Pyrrha said. “Is there anything that I can do to help? I feel somehow responsible for this.”

“You aren't!” Ruby said. “You said it yourself, he wouldn't let you help him!”
“Still,” Pyrrha said. “If your past partner was involved in even simple corruption, wouldn’t you feel the need to do something about them?”

“I understand,” Weiss said. “Still, I think it's for the best for you to stay out of things for now, but if we need your help we’ll contact you.”

“Alright,” Pyrrha sighed. “I just… he always had temper problems, and while I do not know everything, I know that he had a rough childhood. But to think that he could take such a turn… it seems unfathomable.”

“He lost a lot,” Ruby said quietly. “That can change a person.”

“How is your sister?” Jaune asked.

Ruby bit her lip. “She's… taking it hard. Physically she's getting better, I mean, except for the no arm thing, but… she's able to get around and take care of herself. But she never… does anything. Just kinda… stays in bed all day watching TV. I'm worried about her, but she gets annoyed when I fuss over her… and not like before. Just… empty mad. It hurts seeing her like this.”

Weiss reached over and gently rubbed her partner's back. She had some idea how Ruby felt, since if seeing Ruby down about her sister made her feel this terrible, she was sure that Ruby was suffering even more from being unable to help Yang. The only good thing about the entire terrible situation was that Ruby was finally coming to her when she needed help.

Ruby preferred to keep her problems to herself, but living together while she was going through so much pain meant that Ruby was unable to hide it. It took weeks, but slowly Ruby was learning not to try, and instead just letting Weiss know how she felt so that they could talk about it, and when that failed she would cuddle Ruby until she felt better. She felt guilty sometimes that Yang being maimed had improved her relationship with her girlfriend, but whenever she felt that way she made up for it by being extra attentive to Ruby's needs and wants. She was sure that Yang would appreciate that form of penance.

Ruby gave her a small smile, and when Weiss returned her attention to the others she saw a sad, longing look in Pyrrha's eyes before the amazon forced it away with a smile. Jaune was looking at the two of them with a determined look on his face, and he eventually cleared his throat. “Er… Ruby? Can I talk to you for a sec?”

“Sure.”

When Ruby didn't move he scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “I meant, um, over there? In private?”

“Oh!” Ruby said, before leaning over and giving Weiss a quick kiss on the cheek. Ruby chuckled a little at how brightly it made Weiss blush, which made her turn her attention to the news conference to try to ignore their audience.

“Police are doing everything in their power to track down those involved in this heinous crime,” Cinder was saying. “Any other questions? Yes?”

“Lisa Lavender, Vale News Network,” the reporter said. “What do you plan to do now that you've formally stepped in as Interim Mayor?”

“This has been a difficult year for our city,” Cinder said. “Acts of terrorism, unprecedented violence against the police, new drugs on the streets, and even a rising number of Grimm attacks. I will be taking action soon to forever change this perpetual state of chaos, and I hope that-”
“I'm not sure what to make of her,” Pyrrha said. “This is the first time I've seen her speak.”

Weiss nodded. “I encountered her once while I was in City Hall, but otherwise she seems to have kept a low profile until now.”

Weiss looked over at Pyrrha, who looked conflicted about something. “Is something wrong?”

“Do you believe in destiny?” Pyrrha asked.

“No.”

Pyrrha's eyebrows rose. “That was a swift answer.”

Weiss put a hand on her chin thoughtfully. “If you want the longer version, it's still 'no'. I know prophecy is real, that fate conspires to bring about certain ends. I know that some things are inevitable. Despite that I refuse to accept any philosophy that denies me agency in my own life. For all the power and resources of being a Schnee, I'm still human. And humans choose their own fate.”

Pyrrha hummed. “My mother wasn't born an amazon, but she was accepted into the tribe. She had been a soldier and an olympic athlete, but I know she never felt as though she truly belonged. She wanted to prove that I deserved to be an amazon, and so she brought me to the temple as a babe and dedicated me to the gods, and they granted me their blessing. My whole life has been determined by that moment.”

“It doesn't have to be,” Weiss said. “I know about the weight of ancestry and family, but that's why I strive so hard to do what I want. I won't let anyone take my future from me.”

Pyrrha smiled slightly. “That sounds… scary.”

Weiss shrugged. “It can be. But… it's worth it. If I didn't choose to forge my own path away from my father I wouldn't be here. My life was so empty before… so lonely. But now I have fulfilling work, control of my own powers, friends… and love. I will never regret making my own choices.”

“But what if you were destined to make those choices?” Pyrrha asked. “What if your fate was intended to take you to this moment? That the thread of fate bound you to Ruby long before you met her, and you simply followed your intended course to reach this present, only believing that you chose your own actions?”

Weiss waved her hand dismissively. “There's a reason prophesy is so uselessly vague, and only understood by people deciding to translate its ramblings after the fact. I refuse to accept that I'm not the master of my own fate, and I will continue charting my own course in life. What brought this on, anyway?”

“Just… some thoughts that I've been struggling with of late,” Pyrrha said. “I've been a champion of the amazons, a champion of Olympus, for so long… but I sometimes wonder at what it has brought me. I've never fought against fate the way you have… and I feel a certain inevitable weight to destiny approaching me. I… I feel like I'm nearing a crossroads in my life, and it makes me wonder about my future.”

Weiss pointed at her. “That sounds like you have a choice to make, and if you think you're fated to take one path then it's no decision at all. You should pick your own road… or go off the beaten path and do what you want. You aren't a goddess, no matter how much they bless you. You can choose who and what you are.”

Jaune and Ruby came back, and Weiss got the address for Mercury's apartment from Pyrrha before
saying farewell. She noticed her partner give Jaune a thumbs up behind her as she left, and she gave her a questioning look.

“Jaune finally noticed that Pyrrha has a thing for him, and he decided to ask her on a date!” Ruby said with a bounce in her step as they headed out to the car.

“Really?” Weiss asked. “I didn’t think he’d ever notice… or have it in him to do something about it.”

“Yeah, he’s kinda dense,” Ruby agreed, before squealing happily. “Oh, they are going to be so cute together.”

Weiss made a face. She had become a little more accepting of Jaune, but that didn’t mean she could imagine what someone like Pyrrha saw in him. Was that the crossroads she was talking about? Had she noticed that Jaune was finally working up the nerve to ask her? Being involved with Jaune of all people would certainly be a life changing decision, and she suspected that the amazons had some fairly particular standards for acceptable lovers for their champion.

When they reached the car Weiss found herself suddenly pinned against it and kissed hard. She froze for a moment, both from surprise and concern about how public it was, but then finally relaxed into the kiss, enjoying it until Ruby pulled back to catch her breath.

“What was that for?” Weiss asked.

Ruby grinned. “Nothing. Just… I love you.”

Weiss leaned forward and kissed her nose, before pressing their foreheads together. “I love you, too.”
Eighth Case: Following Up

If there was one useful thing about the mayor and the commissioner being murdered, it was how quickly judges were able to rubber stamp warrants once they found out that they were investigating the case. In less than an hour after speaking to Pyrrha, Ruby was pulling to a stop in front of Mercury's apartment, legal requirements met.

“You ready?” Weiss asked when Ruby didn't move.

“It's just... why would someone do this?” Ruby asked. “I know he got his legs eaten and all, but... killing the mayor and the commissioner? He's supposed to be a cop. One of the good guys.”

Weiss smiled slightly, before leaning over to awkwardly hug her girlfriend. Ruby had become far more realistic over the past year, at times almost to the point of cynicism. It was nice seeing a glimpse of the naive Ruby still peeking through. “He was a jerk even when he was a detective.”

“Jerks aren't murderers,” Ruby said. “I bet we could find plenty of people who'd say you're a jerk, and you've got... well, your father. But if your legs got chopped off you wouldn't do this.”

“Well, I'd hope that I'd have you helping me through it,” Weiss said. “Just like you've been there for Yang.”

Ruby shrunk in on herself, and Weiss nodded, sure that she had found what was really bothering her partner. “Yang would never turn out this way,” Weiss said firmly.

“I know,” Ruby insisted weakly.

“No,” Weiss said. “You're afraid she will. Well, she won't. Ever.”

“How can you know that?” Ruby asked.

Weiss smiled. “Because she's the most stubborn, hardheaded dunce I've ever met, and she's got the kindest, bravest dolt in the world for a little sister looking out for her. I know she's angry, and depressed, and that it takes forever to get you to smile again after we visit her... but she won't change like this. She'll recover eventually, and when she does things will be much better, you'll see.”

“I just... it hurts, seeing her like that,” Ruby said. “What if she doesn't get better?”

“She will,” Weiss said.

“You don't know that,” Ruby said.

Weiss huffed. “Aren't you supposed to be the optimistic one? Look, maybe she won't be the same Yang she was before. Trauma changes people. But the new Yang will still be Yang, and she'll be a good Yang just like the old one. You just need to keep showing her how much you care, and when she gets better she'll be grateful for all of your efforts.”

“I don't want her to be grateful. I just want my sister back.”

“I know,” Weiss said, kissing her forehead. “And you will, even if I have to hit her over the head until she snaps out of it.”

Ruby smiled for a moment. “Thanks.”
“Of course,” Weiss said. “Are you ready to stop this guy?”

“Definitely,” Ruby said with a nod as they pulled apart.

The apartment building was in a rundown area. Weiss paid for her lifestyle through her trust fund and the family money she could access, not her quite generous Supernatural Affairs paycheck, but Yang and Ruby had been able to afford a comfortable apartment on their salary, and Tai had been able to buy a nice suburban home with his. Mercury living in a dump meant that he didn't care, or he had serious expenses eating away at his paycheck.

Weiss let Ruby take the lead, not wanting to touch the graffiti covered doors with her bare hands, and she wrinkled her nose in distaste at the stench of the apartment stairwell. She was pretty sure that the liquid on the floor was primarily urine, and that whoever was using the room as a toilet needed to visit a doctor.

Mercury lived on the third floor, and that hallway was slightly less rundown than the rest, although it was by no means up to any acceptable standard. The only thing up to code appeared to be stoutness of the doors and the quality of the locks, which were no doubt necessary to keep out criminals, although Weiss couldn't help but wonder at what people willing to live in such a place could possibly have worth stealing. They were also necessary due to the total lack of home warding, although at least basic anti-demon wards were in place over the building itself.

They exchanged a look, and Weiss rested her hand on her sword before Ruby knocked. They listened carefully, and after no response Ruby knocked again, louder. After a pause she shrugged and pulled out a lock pick gun.

It didn't take long for her to get the door open, although she pulled out her gun before turning the knob. Part of Weiss had been expecting him to be lying in wait, or to have just fled moments ahead of them. Instead the only motion within was from the cockroaches scurrying away from the hallway light, and the dust was thick enough for her to make out rat tracks on the counters. If she had to guess, no one had been inside of the apartment in months.

Ruby pulled out a flashlight, shining it around carefully, before reaching in and delicately turning on a light switch. The dusty lamp provided poor illumination, but with only a little hesitation they walked into the apartment's main room.

“Well… guess he isn't here anymore,” Ruby said.

“No, although he may have left something of value behind,” Weiss said. “We should probably look around.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, starting to walk towards the couch and television, where various documents and object were sitting between copious piles of rotting fast food scraps.

“Be careful!” Weiss said.

“From what?”

“Well, besides possible plague from the rats, he may have left booby traps behind,” Weiss said.

Ruby snickered. “Booby.”

Weiss rolled her eyes but decided to ignore the childishness, pulling out her own small flashlight as she began carefully poking around the other half of the room. There were only two doors, other than the entrance, one leading to a bathroom, and the other to the bedroom. Ruby beat her to them,
although she froze at the entrance to the bedroom.

“Weiss?” Ruby said.

“What?”

“Uh… I don't know what that is… but I think it's a booby trap.”

Weiss moved up next to her partner, and examined the floor in front of her with her aura sight. There was a small throw rug on the ground right on the other side of the doorway, and it was glowing with magical energies. She crouched to get a better look, pursing her lips at what she saw.

“Yes, it's a trap,” Weiss said. “It looks as though a person trying to step past or on this throw rug would create a massive fireball, killing them and destroying any possible evidence with them.”

“That's bad,” Ruby said. “But isn't it kinda obvious?”

Weiss shook her head. “We had our magical sight active. Most normal police and forensics teams don't have many members with those sorts of abilities, and often we're called in after the scene has been swept by ordinary investigators.”

“I guess,” Ruby said. “Still… I doubt he'd have anything that important still here if he left a trap like that. I mean, imagine if you forgot about it and got up to pee in the middle of the night? And… how did he make it? I don't remember him being a magic user.”

“Whether or not he was proficient in binding magic, he could have simply acquired the rug,” Weiss said. “Some criminal magic users sell them on the black market. They simply require a command phrase to active them after placing the rug on the ground.”

“Can you turn it off somehow?”

“If I knew the proper command phrase,” Weiss said. “Barring that, I can directly manipulate the magic with my own binding magics.”

Weiss pulled out a piece of chalk and drew a complex magical sigil on the floor in front of the trapped carpet. Once she was finished she spent a little longer ensuring that it was correct, before placing a hand on the symbol and activating the magic with a pulse of her aura before standing up and moving away from it. The sigil began to faintly glow, which spread to the carpet, which glowed far more brightly. The glow of the carpet began to dim, and at the same time the sigil she had just drawn glowed brighter.

“So what is that?” Ruby asked.

“With unknown magic I can use binding magic to either activate it directly, or to drain it away,” Weiss lectured. “I'm doing the latter here, of course. Activating a trap directly wouldn't be a very good idea, especially given how powerful it was.”

“Why would you want to just activate stuff, then?” Ruby asked. “Wouldn't it be… really dangerous to do that? I mean, if you don't know what it does…”

“It would be, which is why I wouldn't activate something that I don't know what it does,” Weiss said, rolling her eyes. “It's beneficial for magic that you know what it does, but don't know how to activate it. That's how I've been testing Torchwick's mirror, for example. I know what it does, but I don't know how to properly activate it, but I've been quite successful at figuring out all of its functions with glyphs to force its abilities to be employed.”
“Oh, that makes sense,” Ruby said.

“It can also be done to activate raw magics. The most common example would be pure dust, which can be activated simply by pushing mana into it… but that would be difficult to control and require you to be dangerously close. If I simply wanted an explosive dust reaction I could make a sigil that channels just the right amount of mana into it, and then activate the sigil remotely, or on a delay.”

“Couldn't you just… make an explosive glyph and save dust?”

“Obviously.” Weiss said, rolling her eyes. “There are other forms of magic that this can be done with as well. Many magical entities have a significant amount of magic within their very being, and some of them have spell like effects when activated. Phoenix feathers, for example, can aid healing if activated this way.”

“Is it better than going to a healer?” Ruby asked. “I mean, Velvet's really good, and those healers you paid for after I hurt my knee were even better!”

“Well… no,” Weiss said, before sighing. “Look, there's a reason it doesn't get used very often. Activation glyphs are difficult to safely direct, and they are rarely the best solution to any problem. I was just explaining that they can be used, not that they should! I-”

Ruby leaned over and cut Weiss off with a kiss. She froze for a moment in shock, before finally giving in to her girlfriend's insistent lips. Finally Ruby pulled back, a satisfied smile on her face.

“Wh-what was that for?”

“You're cute when you're teaching stuff, but you were getting a bit worked up, and not in the fun way,” Ruby said with a cheeky grin.

Weiss blushed and crossed her arms. “Well… you're lucky there's no one else around. And that I'm feeling generous, because in no way do I consider this place a good one for romance.”

Ruby looked around and winced. “Yeah… its almost as bad as that sewer from the Dagon case.”

Weiss wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Yes… not quite as smelly, but just as vermin and roach infested.”

“Hopefully our next case meets your standards a bit better,” Ruby teased.

Weiss sniffs disdainfully. “I doubt it. There are few places in the world that live up to my standards, and just containing criminals lowers their stature immensely.”

Ruby rolled her eyes, but before she could say anything else there was a small flash of light from Weiss' glyph, before it faded away completely. “Is that it?”

“Yes,” Weiss said, casually walking over the once trapped rug. “Now let's see what he was hiding.”

Unfortunately the answer seemed to be 'not much'. The bedroom was in similarly pitiful condition as the rest of the apartment, and careful examination found little of interest. Weiss was just about to give up her efforts as a waste of time when Ruby spoke up. “Hey, look at this!”

“What is it?” Weiss asked as she walked over to her partner, who had been searching a rickety desk pressed against the wall. She hesitated for a moment as a thought occurred to her, and after blushing slightly she leaned against her partner, doing so both from how pleasant it felt and in an attempt to
Unfortunately Ruby didn't react the way she would've to sudden casual affection, instead leaning back into her with a brief smile before looking serious again as she showed Weiss the documents she had found. “It's his hospital discharge forms.”

Weiss skimmed over them, her own small blush fading and frown deepening as she saw what no doubt caught Ruby's attention. “Checked out AMA… co-signed by someone else?”

“Yeah, the doctors were really, really against him going home… but someone else signed saying they would help him,” Ruby said. “I can't read the signature, though.”

It was an unintelligible squiggle of ink that didn't even look like letters, much less a name. “I can't read it either. But... if he was released so early that the doctors were upset, the person who helped check him out might have had something to do with his new legs,” Weiss offered. “It's a bit of a stretch, but...”

“But it's better than nothing... which is all we're finding here,” Ruby said, looking around the dilapidated bedroom. “This has been a bust.”

“I suppose so,” Weiss said with a grimace. “Let's go back to the car. We can arrange to have a full forensics team go over it when we get back to Beacon.”

Weiss was happy to be outside, as even the dirty streets smelled far better than Mercury's apartment had. She would probably go at least a day without yelling at Ruby for leaving her shoes out of place after seeing just how bad other people let things get. Maybe.

Once they reached the car and sat down, Ruby sighed. “Do you want to check the hospital? Maybe someone remembers that person.”

“I suppose,” Weiss said. “It's a long shot, but we don't seem to have any other choice. We should also put out an APB soon, since he wasn't here.”

Ruby nodded and started the car, but before she could begin driving Weiss' phone went off. “Detective Schnee,” she said as she answered it.

“This is Lieutenant Slate,” the voice on the other end said, making Weiss scrunch her face in annoyance. “There was another attack, this time it was on the interim mayor.”

“We're on our way,” Weiss said, before hanging up and looking at Ruby. “Take us to city hall.”

“What happened?”

“The assassin attacked the interim mayor, but her security drove him off,” Weiss said. “Slate must be feeling desperate if he actually called us back in.”

“Three attacks in one day?” Ruby asked. “That's crazy. What are they after?”

“The White Fang was planning to assassinate the mayor and governor in one stroke,” Weiss said.
“Maybe they are simply trying to cause complete anarchy?”

“Or maybe someone benefits from this,” Ruby said. “Who's next in line to be mayor?”

“I… that's a good question,” Weiss said. “I'm not really sure how this all works.”

“Something else to look into,” Ruby said.

“If we can find the time,” Weiss groaned. “All of these attacks in one day… if they have more planned how are we supposed to keep up? I feel like we're about five steps behind, and the lead is getting longer. We just don't have enough eyes.”

“Maybe we should get more, then,” Ruby said excitedly.

Weiss closed her eyes with a sigh. “Ruby… even if it was possibly to grow extra eyes magically… what good would that do?”

“Huh?” Ruby asked. “What, no, that's not what I meant! I just meant we should call Juane and Pyrrha!”

“Oh,” Weiss said blushing. “Right. I suppose that they could help, if they haven't already been assigned other work.”

“Well, call them and see if Pyrrha can get to the hospital and ask some questions,” Ruby said. “Maybe she'll recognize some of the nurses or something and make it easier, anyway.”

Weiss called Pyrrha, and as always the redheaded champion was eager to help. When she hung up she leaned back into her seat and sighed.

“What's wrong?”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “What isn't wrong?”

“Us,” Ruby said with a goofy grin. “Lots of stuff, probably.”

Weiss smiled sightly, before leaning over an placing a quick kiss on her girlfriend's cheek when she saw that they were stopped at a light. “I know I'm not the best at showing how I feel at times… but I love you. You make my life so much brighter.”

Ruby blushed. “I love you, too. So, so much.”

After all of the horror and frustration of the day, just spending a few moments with Ruby en route to another massacre was enough to relax and reinvigorate Weiss. She couldn't imagine what life could possibly be like without her partner, and she didn't want to think about it. In a little over a year her existence had transformed completely, and she could never go back to the way things were before.

City hall looked the same as always, and after finally finding parking the two took a moment to compose themselves and check their weapons before strolling into the building. Security at the entrance carefully checked their badges before letting them pass, but before long they were walking quickly through the richly decorated halls until they neared the assistant mayor's office.

Before they even reached it they could hear the sounds of worried police, and after making it past another line of security Weiss felt her stomach twist at the sight before them. Perhaps the bodies were less destroyed than previous attacks, but the numbers made up for the horror.

Cinder fall had employed a ridiculous amount of security outside of her office, and at least a dozen
had died, torn and shredded by Mercury. Weiss couldn't tell if he had been injured in return, but there were a lot of brass casings on the floor, indicating that the police put up a protracted fight to repulse him.

“Come on,” Ruby said quietly. “Let's see if Ms. Fall knows anything.”
They had encountered Cinder Fall before, but at the time it had been a chance meeting, and not one that she had thought overly much about. Running into the assistant mayor on the way to pull records at city hall was to be expected, and didn't stick in Weiss' mind nearly as strongly as the following encounter with a murderous necromancer.

She seemed calm for someone who had not only just been raised to her boss' job, but had subsequently been the target of an assassination attempt on the same day. When they came in she was busy filling out forms, although she gave them her full attention when they approached her, setting down her pen and locking her orange eyes on them.

“Can I help you, detectives?” she drawled smoothly.

“I hope so!” Ruby said. “I'm sure we all want to catch the person trying to kill you!”

“I assume you have questions?” Cinder asked.

“Yup,” Ruby said. “How are you?”

“How… am I?” Cinder repeated.

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I mean, all this stuff happening… are you okay?”

Cinder gave her a dumbfounded look for a moment, before smirking ever so slightly. “I'm fine. I wasn't overly fond of having a press conference this morning, and of course all of this could shock anyone, but I'll make sure I follow the plan and do what must be done.”

“What time did you arrive at city hall this morning?” Weiss asked.

“Seven fifty,” Cinder said.

“Did you go straight to your office?” Weiss asked.

“Yes… why do you ask?”

“The mayor's assassin used an illusion to disguise himself as you,” Weiss said. “Do you normally go straight to your own office and stay there for a while in the morning?”

“Yes,” Cinder said, eyes narrowing. “How did you know that they looked like me? I thought that there weren't any witnesses?”

“There's always a witness… as in most cases, the victims had much to say to me,” Weiss said.

“But… I had thought that you required… intact bodies to question them,” Cinder said delicately. “The word that had been passed to me was that the bodies had been thoroughly… damaged.”

Weiss' eyebrows raised. “That's… why do you ask? I wasn't aware of your expertise related to magic.”

Cinder gave her a small smile. “I'm not an expert on necromancy, to be fair. I'm a curious person, however, and Mayor Cinnabar had long ago delegated most police activities to my desk. I've read or skimmed almost every report of note, and I must say, of everyone's efforts, yours are my favorite, Detective Schnee.”
“Mine?”

“Yes,” Cinder said, her smile growing. “So many reports are brief and sloppy, barely covering what happened in the most basic, desultory fashion. You, on the other hand, actually record things thoroughly, and with explanations. For the same case, for example, your reports are usually three to five times longer than your partner's. Of all of Vale's Police Department, your reports are by far the most interesting and useful. If only more detectives could be like you…”

Weiss found herself blushing slightly from the praise. So few people appreciated proper paperwork, and she was glad that the new mayor did. After a moment of thought she decided that it wouldn't hurt to explain. After all, she would be writing up what happened in her police report eventually anyway, and apparently Cinder was apt to read her work. “It's much easier to question the dead if they are in one piece, but when needs must I can question them otherwise. I suppose that isn't very common knowledge about necromancers, and most likely the assassins believed as you did.”

“Assassins?” Cinder said. “There's more than one person involved?”

Weiss paused, her initial impulse to share held back by her own sense of caution. Talking about her abilities was one thing, but even the victim didn't need to know what was happening in a case. As Ruby had pointed out, someone involved in city hall could be behind the killings, and she did not want rumors to spread about what they knew. After a pause to get her mind back on track she continued her questions without answering Cinder's own. “Do you generally follow the same routine?”

“Nearly every weekday,” Cinder said.

Weiss and Ruby questioned her for a while, carefully recording what she knew. It unfortunately wasn't much. Cinder was apparently aware of the problem with the security cameras, and had in fact been the one who filled out the orders to have it repaired, although it still wasn't done. She had nothing to say about the first attack other than what she'd picked up from earlier questions Lieutenant Slate had asked, or which had come from the rumor mill.

“When the assassin attacked, what did you do?” Ruby asked.

“I stayed at my desk,” Cinder said. “When I ordered so many police to stand guard the captain I spoke with thought that it was a waste of resources using so many people to dissuade an attacker, but in the end they were barely able to drive the assassin off.”

“So you didn't see or hear anything?” Weiss asked.

Cinder shook her head. “Just the door to my room, and the sound of screams and gunfire.”

Weiss tried to think of other lines of questioning when the door opened again, revealing Lieutenant Slate. “Detectives, can I have a word?”

“Sure,” Ruby said, before smiling at Cinder. “Thanks for answering our questions!”

“Yes, thank you,” Weiss said.

“It was no difficulty, although I must get back to work,” Cinder said, picking up her pen. “I'm going to be working late to get everything finished tonight.”

The two followed Slate and passed through the horrific scene outside of the assistant mayor's office. Once they were away from the stench of blood and death he turned to face them. “You questioned the interim mayor?”
Weiss shrugged. “I was given to understand that there were survivors of the recent attack, so my necromancy wasn't likely to be useful, and I didn't see any obvious signs of magic that we needed to investigate. Was there another reason that you invited us to the crime scene?”

He gritted his teeth. “I called you down here because my boss wanted you involved, so you're involved. Since there's no use for your magic here, why don't you go on back to Beacon?”

“We're all trying to solve this,” Ruby said. “This is big. Really big. If they're willing to kill so many people in charge of the city I doubt this is the end of things. We think that—”

“I don't give a damn what you think,” Slate said. “You want to keep working this case? Fine. Keep working it. I'll keep calling you down to crime scenes because I've been ordered to, and if you actually find something useful let me know. Otherwise, investigate elsewhere.”

“This case is bigger than egos,” Weiss sneered, before sighing at his angry expression. “Come on, Ruby. We have leads we can follow up elsewhere.”

They walked out of the building, neither saying anything until they reached the car. Once they did Ruby sighed. “I just… why doesn't he want us to help?”

Weiss frowned. “He's a lieutenant for one of the most glamorous groups in all of the Vale PD, and he reached that position at a fairly young age. He's a ladder climber, and if we steal his spotlight then he risks his career trajectory slowing down.”

“But people are dying!”

“And he doesn't care,” Weiss said. “Trust me when I say I've seen enough hot shot executives at SDC events my father forced me to attend to know exactly what I'm talking about. For some people lives don't mean anything, so saving a dollar or getting one positive report written about them is worth more than preventing a dozen deaths.”

“It's not right,” Ruby said as she put the car into gear.

“No,” Weiss agreed. “No, it isn't.”

When they reached the squad room she quickly went over to her desk, although Ruby wandered off to the vending machines in search of more cookies. Weiss noticed Blake sitting at her own desk working on a report and walked over to her cubicle entrance. She saw the faunus' ears point in her direction, although she didn't otherwise acknowledge her in any way.

“Hello,” she said eventually.

Blake finished what she was working on before looking up at her. “Hello.”

The faunus looked tired, and Weiss felt her heart go out to her. “How have you been?”

“Busy,” she said. “I've been doing a lot of legwork for the department, following up on cases, clearing out files.”

“Have you been to seen Yang lately?” Weiss asked delicately.

Blake looked away guiltily. “Of course.”

Weiss crossed her arms and stared at her without saying a word until finally Blake spoke again. “I have! Some. We... have spoken a couple of times. I've visited often.”
Weiss sighed. “I know Yang's not exactly easy to get along with right now, but I've spoken with her more often, and I'm not her girlfriend. She's very upset, and you avoiding her is just making things worse. And I know you're doing it because you feel guilty and want to protect her or some other drivel you've probably read in way too many cheap romance novels, but honestly, you're just making things worse by staying away.”

“I'm not staying away,” Blake repeated. “I just… don't know what to say. I go into her room sometimes, and she just… sits there. She doesn't say a word to me. And… Adam, he…”

Weiss groaned. “Ugh, since when am I the person who has to point out when people are being terrible with their interpersonal relationships? I was still reading self help books on how to make friends six months ago.”

Blake smiled slightly. “Can I borrow a few? Or maybe some of those other books you had hidden away. Maybe one of them will have something I can apologize to Yang with.”

“Ha ha,” Weiss said flatly. “I'd start with words, first.”

Blake smiled crookedly. “If I must.”

“Hey Blake,” Ruby said. “How are you?”

“Feeling chastised,” Blake answered.

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” Blake said. “How are you?”

“Working hard, getting mad at smug jerks in Major Case, but I got more cookies,” Ruby said, holding up the vending machine snacks.

Weiss shook her head. “Those are quite overpriced… and great, now I'm the voice of personal thriftiness and general fiscal responsibility?”

“I only bought them here 'cause you wouldn't let me get any at the grocery store,” Ruby whined.

Weiss shrugged. “They're bad for you.”

“But they taste so good!”

Weiss sighed. “Come on, we've got work to do.”

Ruby's smile faded. “Yeah. You gonna be okay, Blake?”


They sat down and pulled out their notes. Weiss sighed, suddenly even more tired as she thought about the situation with Blake and Yang. She knew that her faunus friend was feeling needlessly guilty over everything that had happened leading up to the loss of Yang’s arm, but that didn't mean barely seeing her girlfriend after was excusable. If she lost a limb the only thing that would help her through it would be Ruby at her side.

The two had just begun going over all of their notes when Goodwitch stormed into the middle of the room. “Everyone! There's a major situation at the city jail. It appears that the White Fang are making a move to free their arrested members, and as they appear to be supported by a significant number of magic users I will be going to assist.
“Anyone available can come and help,” she finished, before looking over at Blake. “Detective Belladonna… please remain here. Without a partner, and given the circumstances…”

“I understand,” Blake said flatly, returning to her desk.

Weiss and Ruby looked at each other, and then after a moment Ruby shook her head. “I think we should keep working on this.”

Weiss’ eyebrows shot up. “I thought I’d have to try to convince you.”

“I think… I think we're close to something,” Ruby said. “Maybe all of the attacks were just to distract the city from this jail break, but…”

“Right,” Weiss said, focusing on her notes. “Let's go over everything. We're almost certainly missing something important.”

Even Weiss ate a few of Ruby's cookies as they skipped going to dinner to pour over their notes and all of the other evidence they had collected, until eventually Pyrrha and Jaune approached their cubicle. “Hello,” Pyrrha said.

“Hey, Pyrrha,” Ruby said with a groan as she leaned back from her seat and rubbed her neck.

“Where is everyone?” Jaune asked.

“The White Fang,” Weiss said. “They're trying to raid the jail, and Goodwitch took volunteers to go deal with the situation.”

“I'm surprised that you didn't go,” Jaune said.

“Yes, well… our investigation is very important, and we both wanted to keep working on it,” Weiss said. “Did you find anything?”

“We asked around, and eventually were able to speak to the person who filled out the paperwork the night Mercury was released,” Pyrrha said. “They didn't get her name, but he was accompanied by a beautiful woman with dark hair and orange eyes.”

Weiss felt like her heart stopped for a moment, and a chill ran down her spine. She locked eyes with a suddenly pale Ruby, making it obvious that they were thinking the same thing. “The White Fang had planned on killing the mayor at a meeting… but didn't someone say she was out of town?” Ruby asked.

“The lost paperwork for the older security cameras, access to the normal ones to disable them…” Weiss said.

“She was the only one to survive Mercury's ambush,” Ruby pointed out. “All of those police… that could've been just to throw us off.”

“No wonder she was so surprised when I told her that I could still contact the people he killed,” Weiss breathed. “She was the one who told him to rip them to pieces since she thought that defeated my magic.”

“She reads all of our police reports,” Ruby said. “She knows… everything. I always knew paperwork was evil…”

Weiss cast her an angry, unamused glare as she tried to ignore the twisting in her gut. Ruby was
joking, but she was right. Everything Weiss wrote down had been read and used by their enemy. She knew everything. She could plan and prepare and be five steps ahead of them.

“What are you guys talking about?” Jaune asked while Pyrrha looked at them with open concern.

Weiss didn’t answer as thoughts of the power a mostly ignored paperwork pusher had. She had taken over as the mayor now, but in general she’d spent her time quietly reading and manipulating things behind the scenes. She could’ve lost paperwork at just the right moment, doing things like ensuring security cameras were out of operation for weeks at a time, or even make sure that no one was using facilities or guarding resources that she wanted access to. She could even send resources to where they would be most helpful, or…

“Oh no,” Weiss breathed, before jumping to her feet.

“What?” Ruby asked.

Weiss called over her shoulder as she ran for the door. “No time! Pyrrha, stay here! We might need you! Get armed!”

“Oh!” she called, walking towards her own desk. Weiss saw a concerned Blake do the same, readying her own combat gear, and on the other side of the room Cardin was rising and readying weapons.

“Where are we going?” Ruby asked, having easily caught up with her as they ran down the halls. Fortunately it was getting fairly late, and the day shift had already mostly gone home, meaning there were fewer people to get in the way.


They ran up the stairs until they reached the lobby, drawing surprised looks from the people in the room. Weiss skidded to a halt in front of the clerk, out of breath, but fortunately Ruby was able to take over. “There were bunch of boxes delivered today… he didn't know about the loading dock.”

“I- I don't know,” the clerk said. “I just got on.”

“There should be a record in your files!” Weiss snapped as she caught her breath. “Check it!”

“Y-yes ma'am,” the man stammered as he dug through the day's documents. “Uh, I think this is- hey!”

Weiss didn’t wait for him to offer the forms, simply snatching them from his hand. They were dated that morning, filled out minutes after the death of the mayor, and they were signed by Cinder Fall. Weiss was no handwriting analyst, but she thought their was some similarities to the style of the almost unreadable scribble left on Mercury’s release forms, although this was obviously intended to be legible.

She glanced over the rest of the form and saw that the deliveries were to two places. The bulk were to be taken to several rooms near the top of the building, while the rest was to be brought to the lowest subbasement. For a moment she thought about splitting up, but rejected that immediately after as she threw the forms down the desk and started running again. She couldn't afford to lose Ruby, and her gut twisted with terror at the all too likely possibility of everything going wrong. They were a dozen steps behind, and probably out of time. What better time to make a move than when everyone was gone stopping an attack on the jail?

“Where are we going?” Ruby asked.
“The second subbasement,” Weiss said. She wasn’t sure if it was the correct place to check first, but it was more out of the way, and thus more likely to be used by someone planning something dangerous.

The second subbasement was quiet, designed for secure storage, although a lot of backup paperwork and supplies had been put there as well. She skidded to a halt when she reached the room listed on the form, gasping for air as she examined the door. It wasn’t one of the heavily reinforced and warded doors used for storing dangerous objects, and instead was just a standard door. Once she could breath again she put one hand on her sword hilt and threw open the door.

The room was full of large crates, many of them pried open to reveal dust. If all of the crates were dust, it was a huge amount, perhaps of a fifth of what had been stolen by the White Fang, and this was only one of the rooms the deliveries were sent to.

The very center of the room was clear of boxes, and instead had a large magic circle drawn using lines of pure dust, projections of which stretched outward to touch every crate in the room in complex fashions. Sitting around the outside of the circle were thirteen statues, and she felt her heart skip a beat as she recognized them as the Grimm statuettes stolen by Torchwick the year before.

At the very center of the circle was the faunus who had been delivering the crates. He was swaying and chanting quietly, and as he did the dust circle began to glow a sickly purple color. The statuettes began to radiate a greasy miasma of power, and Weiss and Ruby were forced to take a moment to ensure that their auras were prepared to repel the dark magic. Once they were they both pulled their guns and aimed them at the man.

He had finished however, raising a silver dagger and pressing it against his own throat as his chanting ended. All three froze, staring each other down as the magic circle thrummed with gathered power and the thirteen statues watched what was unfolding.
Eighth Case: The Blood-dimmed Tide

The eyeless gaze of the statuettes made Weiss’ heart pound, the dark power pouring off of them almost choking her despite years of training and discipline with her aura. The magic gathered for the completion of the ritual could no doubt be felt anywhere in the building, perhaps even in the city beyond, and for a moment she entertained the thought of Ozpin or Goodwitch swooping in and defusing the situation, before accepting the truth. There was no diffusing what had begun.

“You're too late,” the faunus said smugly.

“You don't have to do this,” Ruby pleaded. “Whatever you're doing… you don't have to go through with it.”

“And why wouldn't I?” he asked. “I know exactly what path I've chosen. It's the path forward for the White Fang. Soon the world will be torn down and rebuilt anew, and when it is we will be standing atop the ashes, grinding you humans under our heels.”

“And all of the faunus who will die in this?” Weiss asked.

He sneered. “I don't want to hear anything from you, Schnee. How does it feel knowing you could've stopped me this morning, if you weren't so sure I was just some stupid, useless changeling. If you'd stuck around you might've figured out what I'm really up to, and then it would've all been over. All of that dust, the statues, everything could've been seized. But you did nothing.”

Weiss gritted her teeth before sweeping her gaze over the magic sigil on the floor. It was obviously binding magic, and fairly crude at that, but the sheer power of that amount of dust was unreal. Even more, the thirteen statues were mana batteries for demonic magic, and if they had somehow been recharged then even more power was about to be expended.

“The magic… you're activating the statues using the dust,” Weiss said slowly. “I don't see any direction symbology, nothing attempting to control them at all. You're just… activating them and offering them power. There's no telling what they will do.”

“I know exactly what they'll do,” he sneered. “They're going to rip every last one of you cops to pieces.”

“What makes you think they won't do the same to you?” Ruby asked. “Those things are evil.”

He chuckled. “Do you think I've got this knife to my throat for fun? There's one more step to the ritual, and I've let you delay me long enough.”

“Don't!” Ruby shouted, but it was too late as he plunged the knife into his own throat, blood spraying down on the magic circle below.

Everything went still, and then the dark power that they had been feeling burst forth ten fold. Both detectives staggered back, barely remaining on their feet as the foul, twisting energies wrapped around them, only just repelled by their auras. Within the room the faunus magic user collapsed to his knees, his body rotting away until he was nothing but a pool of black sludge that rained down on the center of the ritual circle.

There was a blinding flash, and when they were able to see again every bit of the dust was gone, consumed in a moment leaving nothing but the empty crates, the thirteen statues, and a pool of black goo that was once a man in the center of the room. The goo slowly spread outward, impossibly
increasing in mass, until it filled the entire room and began to spill slowly out into the hallway.

A clawed hand suddenly burst forth from the goo at the center of the room as something pulled its way out of the floor. It was a Beowolf, and its rise resembled a beast emerging from a tar pit. Once it was on the surface it turned its glowing red eyes on them, before leaning back and howling at the top of its lungs.

More creatures began to emerge, pulling themselves out of the fluid all around the room. Mostly they were more Beowolves, but behind them the vast bulk of an Ursa began to pull from the floor. Weiss was stunned at the sight before her, but then Ruby raised her gun and began firing.

She'd apparently been prepared with incendiary dust rounds, shooting and killing several Beowolves with well placed headshots. Weiss fumbled with her gun for a moment, simply dropping the magazine that was in it onto the floor before sticking in her own incendiary magazine and opening fire. She was far less accurate that Ruby had been, but the room was so full of Grimm that she finally understood the expression 'like shooting fish in a barrel.'

Unnoticed the black goo reached their feet, flowing around them and starting to fill the hallway. Just as Weiss started to reload she saw movement from the corner of her eye and barely ducked in time to avoid being beheaded by a Beowolf that had spawned right behind them. She ripped her sword from its scabbard and stabbed up into the creature's chin and brain before stepping back and taking in the full situation.

The black goo continued to spread, and everywhere it went Grimm were beginning to spawn. They were going to be overwhelmed in moments, and that assumed that some Grimm didn't simply appear under their feet and kill them from below before they even knew it was there.

"Ruby! We have to run!"

She looked over, her own eyes widening when she realized what was happening, and without further words they ran down the hallway, the tar-like substance on the ground slowing their steps and almost making them trip and fall. Weiss started to raise her sword as a Beowolf spawned at the very edge of the goo, but three snap shots by Ruby put it down and they ran past, quickly reaching the stairs.

They climbed a few steps and then turned back around, Weiss with her sword at the ready and gun holstered, and Ruby in a firing stance two steps higher. They both panted, more from shock and stress than exertion as they held the only non elevator entrance to the rest of the building that Weiss knew about.

Several Beowolves approached the doorway, growling at them loudly, before Ruby shot them dead, Weiss keeping Myrtenaster up in case any managed to get close. “Maybe we should try to get backup. You're going to run out of ammunition soon.”

“I'm sure they've heard this,” Ruby said as she shot another. “I don't want them getting loose in the building. The longer we hold them the more police will be ready for them, and the more people who can't do anything can get a chance to run.”

“Fine, but…” Weiss started, only to trail off as something sent the Beowolves in the doorway flying. “Oh no…”

The head of a snake so large that it barely fit through the doorway burst into the stairwell. The scales were pitch black, except for a bonelike mask covered in red patterns that covered the top of its head. The snake fixed its glowing red eyes on them before opening its mouth to reveal rows of fangs.
longer than Weiss' arm.

“King Taijitu!” Ruby shouted, firing her gun repeatedly, but the sheer size made the incendiary bullets less than effective at stopping it.

The snake lunged, the motion only slowed by it having to force itself through the doorway. The slowdown was probably the only thing that saved Weiss' life as she danced back, slashing at the snake's long tongue as it tried to bite her. The jaws snapped shut, and she slashed at the eyes, but it was too quick for her to hit them.

“Come on!” Ruby shouted, running up the stairs as she reloaded her gun, and Weiss followed right behind. Unfortunately the Grimm came as well, and the more of its body that entered the relatively wide open staircase the faster it could move.

Weiss made it to the landing halfway up the stairs when the Grimm caught up to her. She turned and raised her sword despite knowing how impossible it would be for her to stop the giant monster, but before its jaws could snap shut on her she felt arms wrap around her torso, and then suddenly the world blurred as she was pulled up the steps so fast that her limbs dangled in the air behind her.

Then she was dropped to the ground in the basement hallway, having been pulled to the top of the stairs that stretched through both subbasements. “What the hell!!?”

“Sorry!” Ruby panted. “I've never tried carrying someone like that before. Are you okay?”

Weiss shakily climbed to her feet, glad that she still somehow had her sword in her hand. She was even gladder a moment later when the door was knocked out of its frame, revealing the King Taijitu again. She was ready however, lunging forward and stabbing it deep in the side of the head. At the same time Ruby began shooting again, one incendiary round even catching the snake in one of its eyes.

The Grimm gave a hissing shriek that no snake could normally produce before snapping at them, forcing Weiss to back up to avoid being bitten. Just like at the bottom of the staircase, passing through a narrow doorway and immediately turning a corner slowed the massive creature, and this time she even timed it right to give a nasty cut to the eye that wasn't on fire, blinding the Grimm. It reared back for a moment, and then slammed forward, forcing itself into the hallway as fast as possible to kill them for what they'd done to it.

Ruby holstered her gun and started to conjure her scythe, the larger weapon obviously needed to actually kill the huge monster. Before it had even finished forming a large figure jumped past them both, slamming a heavy weapon down on the top of the snake's head, hitting it so hard that it crashed into the floor.

“Cardin!?” Weiss said incredulously.

He looked back at her and smirked. He was wearing a bullet proof vest, and he rested his mace on his shoulder as he spoke to them. “You really having this much trouble with one snake?”

“Look out!” Ruby shouted.

The Grimm had recovered from the hit and reared back as much as it was able to in the hallway, mouth open as it descended on him, ready to kill Cardin in his distraction. Before it could a javelin flew past them, passing through the roof of its mouth and straight into its brain. The snake thrashed about blindly again, before Cardin spun and slammed his mace into it, knocking it to the side hard enough to break some of the cinderblocks making up the wall before it pulled back, retreating once...
again down the stairs, the dead head dragging behind it.

Pyrrha walked up to them with a frown on her face while Jaune trailed behind her. “I was fond of
that javelin.”

“Pyrrha, Jaune!” Ruby said, holding her scythe in one hand and waving at the newcomers.

“We heard gunshots, thought we’d come help,” Jaune said. “So how’d a giant snake get in here?”

“It’s not just the King Taijitu,” Weiss said.

“What do you mean?” Cardin asked.

As if on cue Beowolves came pouring out of the open doorway. They all turned and faced the mob,
but the narrow hallways meant that they couldn’t all get involved. Cardin and Ruby were closer to
the door and ended up taking point, with Ruby killing most of them with her scythe while Cardin
concentrated on keeping them at bay while she swung her larger weapon.

“Okay, army of Grimm,” Jaune said. “Where did they come from?”

“We have to block the other stairs,” Pyrrha said, turning and running down the hall. “If there are this
many we may not be able to contain them forever. Please inform the rest of the building!”

“Other stairs?” Weiss repeated. “I thought this was the only one.”

Cardin snorted. “There’s another set on the other side of the building. Me and Ruby have this, go
find that faunus and anyone else who can fight.”

Her eyes narrowed at his audacity to try to boss her around, but after hesitating for a moment she
knew that he was right. With the amount of dust consumed the White Fang had unleashed an army
of Grimm, and even the natural chokepoints on the stairs wouldn’t keep them contained forever.

“Stay safe, Ruby,” Weiss called as she began to run down the hall towards the squad room.

She reached her destination quickly, and once she was inside she found Blake waiting, fully armed
and ready to fight. “What’s happening?”

“An army of Grimm is spawning in the basement,” Weiss said. “We need to get the building
evacuated and people who can fight them ready.”

The ground shook for a moment, and there was a loud crash down the hall, making the two look at
each other. Blake ran in that direction, and Weiss started to follow when she felt a painful throbbing
coming from her hand. She looked down, eyes widening for a moment as she saw blood starting to
spot on her glove.

She ripped the glove off and threw it on the ground, before pulling out a different one she’d prepared.
It had taken weeks of research and even more effort to enchant the item, but she wasn’t going to be
cought unprepared by Neo again. The new glove, which was covered in intricate runes stitched with
silver thread, would provide the edge she needed.

She ran out into the hallway and down towards where Ruby was. She paused for a moment when
she saw several officers with guns jogging down the stairs to the rest of the building, which
fortunately for them having any chance of containing the outbreak, were separate from the ways to
the subbasements for security reasons.
“There's a major Grimm incursion,” Weiss snapped. “Go spread the word. We need people ready for heavy combat, and everyone else should evacuate the building immediately.”

The cops looked down at their sidearms. “SWAT went to the jail. Shouldn't you spooky types be able to handle this?”

“Most of SA are at the jail as well,” Weiss said as she started running again. “Just spread the word and evacuate!”

It didn’t take long to figure out what had caused the loud crash. Ruby and Cardin were quickly backing down the hallway, but despite how far back they had retreated Weiss could still see the large hole in the wall where the Grimm had finally crashed through the cinderblock rather than continue trying to force the narrow choke point.

Leading the charge, and most likely the Grimm that had burst through the wall, was an enormous scorpion-like monstrosity that Weiss recognized from her research as a Death Stalker. The top of the creature's exoskeleton was bone white with red patterns, while the underside was stark black. The stinger on its long tail, on the other hand, was golden in color and appeared to be faintly glowing.

The Death Stalker was incredibly agile for its bulk, as despite having to squeeze its legs awkwardly close to its body in order to fit somewhere obviously far too small for it, it barely seemed impaired at all. The two pincers were also inhumanly swift, snapping at anyone who came close, and the stinger was even faster.

Even Ruby, with all of her speed, couldn't outrace the stinger by a large enough margin to get close enough to do any real damage without getting stung, forcing her to make aborted attack after aborted attack. Blake and Cardin were alternating who was closer, as neither were able to do anything but try desperately to slow the monster down. Without an open area so that they could circle around it there was no way to stop it short of an antitank weapon or a powerful spellcaster.

“You’re going to tell Pyrrha and Jaune to retreat upstairs!” Ruby called over her shoulder when she noticed her partner.

“What? Why?”

Ruby darted in again, trying to bait the stinger into attacking so that she could hit it, but the Death Stalker seemed wise to her plan, fainting with the stinger and then attempting to grab her with its pincers during her counter attack, forcing her to leave a cloud of petals behind as she barely avoided meeting death again. “There are stairs up past this thing, and Grimm are going to cut us off! We have to get above them!”

Weiss looked past the fight and cursed at what she saw. An army of Grimm was pouring through the wide hole where the staircase doors used to be. Some were following the Death Stalker, or checking the different rooms for victims, but many more were rushing in the other direction.

“Damn it!” Weiss snarled, before turning and running. It didn't take her long to find Pyrrha and Jaune, who were still guarding the door effectively. Jaune was mostly hanging back, only tagging in occasionally to give Pyrrha a moment if she needed it, but the amazon champion was easily dispatching everything that came up the stairs, although her enemies appeared to mostly be Beowolves and other weak Grimm. “Pyrrha?”

She stepped back, and Jaune waded in, using his shield to keep a Beowolf back while he chopped away at it with his sword. He was still the least skilled fighter in Supernatural Affairs, but a year of intense practice had made a world of difference and he was actually fairly competent against such
foes.

“What is it, Weiss?”

“They’ve lost control of the other stairs, we have to retreat before the Grimm cut us off!”

Pyrrha scowled for a moment before nodding. “Go! We'll be right behind you.”

Weiss turned and ran, reaching the first staircase she saw and dashing up it. The stairs took her quite close to the lobby, and she found a number of police and detectives, some with riot gear and rifles, preparing themselves. While she wished that there were more, or that they were better equipped for a pitched battle, she was impressed that so many had managed to gather in a few scant minutes.

“Is there anyone else who can fight?” Weiss asked.

“We’ve got barricades getting ready at every exit,” Lt. Slate, apparently having taken command of the lobby, said calmly as he checked his rifle. “I’m not sure how long they’ll be able to hold out, though. We contacted SWAT and the rest of your types and they’re going to try to send relief, but things are still tense over at the jail.”

“What about Ozpin?” Weiss asked, looking up.

Weiss felt a wave of relief as another staircase pushed open, revealing an exhausted Cardin, with Ruby and Blake coming right behind. That relief ended almost immediately as she saw the Death Stalker forcing its way out of the door right behind them.

“The new mayor went up to see him a little bit ago,” the desk clerk said as he readied a shotgun. “He didn't answer his phone so I sent a runner up but I haven't heard back from them.”

“Wait, Cinder Fall went to see Ozpin?” Weiss snapped, looking up, just as a massive wave of power hit her mystical senses from above.
Eighth Case: Things Fall Apart

Weiss had felt the presence of a demon lord, battled a Sidhe lord and an Asura, and had even met Death. She'd walked through the Schnee's most secure vault of artifacts, seen massive magical rituals, and traveled between worlds. She'd thought that, no matter what she encountered, she'd at least be able to say that it was similar to something she'd seen before.

The presence she felt was nothing like any of that. It was warm and bright, but it burned with terrible power. Weiss felt as though being even closer to it could've consumed her utterly, reducing her into nothing, or leaving behind some husk that scarcely resembled a person. Weiss saw the other detectives quailing as well, even the normal police, who had no magical training or honed mystical senses to speak of, were staring slack jawed upwards as they felt something. The only person who didn't react was Ruby, who charged forward, raising her scythe to attack the huge Death Stalker.

Weiss started to step towards her, blocking out the power above as best she could, not wanting to leave Ruby alone and overwhelmed, but she froze again in shock at what she saw. The power above wasn't only leaving the humans overawed by it, but it had an even greater impact on the Grimm. They cowered, shaking and helpless, barely even trying to avoid Ruby's attacks as she slammed the scythe blade through chitinous shells and furred flesh.

Then something else came from above, another power growing ever stronger as it rose to challenge the presence that had overwhelmed them all. It had a familiar feeling, like she'd encounter something similar before, but at the same time it was tainted, heavy demonic power mixing into the aura. It continued to gain strength, until finally the two auras above clashed, making the entire building shake, but as dust drifted down from the ceiling tiles everyone shook themselves and focused on the Grimm again.

Unfortunately, the Grimm seemed to come out of their stupor at the same time, moving forward once more. Ruby had managed to trim the numbers that had made it up the stairs greatly, but more began to pour out of one of the two stairwells near the lobby. There were other ways up from the basement, more staircases in other parts of the building as well as the elevators in the lobby and the cargo lift, but blocking the stairs would no doubt slow the Grimm down and buy them time for reinforcements to come.

“Ruby!” Weiss called.

Her partner pulled back for a moment, Pyrrha taking her place at the center of the room, anchoring the battle line. “Yeah?”

“Come on, I've got an idea,” Weiss said as she moved around the edges of the lobby, her partner following without complaint.

They quickly reached the other nearby staircase, and Weiss pulled out a piece of chalk and began drawing a complex sigil on the door. She couldn't hear any movement below, but she knew that it was only a matter of time until Grimm found those stairs and doubled the numbers facing them at a time, likely costing them control of the lobby.

Once the hastily drawn sigil was finished Weiss placed her hands on it and began filling it with mana, closing her eyes to help her concentrate. She could still hear the battle happening behind her, and she had to resist the urge to stop and help her partner when she heard her fighting a Grimm right behind them. She would've scoffed a year ago, but even in the worst situations she could always trust Ruby to watch her back.
She finished with a sigh, turning and drawing Myrtenaster as she watched Ruby holding off two Beowolves and a hulking, gorilla-like Beringel. The Beringel had long arms for its stature, and for something that stood almost ten feet tall that meant that it had far greater reach than Ruby's scythe. Whenever she tried to use her speed to attack it the two Beowolves would either try to hit her flanks, or bypass her entirely to attack Weiss, who was very glad that she'd grabbed her partner to watch her back.

When one of the Beowolves tried to attack Ruby again Weiss lunged, extending her full body to give herself enough reach to stab the Grimm right through its throat and into its spine. Even as she retracted her weapon it fell limp, growling feebly for long moments as it slowly died.

Ruby reacted to her joining the fight by ignoring the other Beowolf and charging the Beringel in a cloud of rose petals. It tried to slam its massive fists into her, but she was fast enough to avoid them, ducking under the attacks and rolling between its legs, before smoothly rising to her feet as she slashed, cutting the tendons on the back of its legs, dropping the massive monster to the floor with a howl.

Weiss made short work of the other Beowolf, killing it with a stab through the eye, before she made a feint at the Beringel. As she'd expected it reacted instantly to the attack, swinging an arm at her that would've killed her if she'd actually tried to commit to her move. She'd done her job however, as the momentary distraction gave Ruby an opening to leap onto its back and put her scythe's blade against its throat. Her face was a mask of concentration as she jumped back, the enhanced edge easily parting even the steel-like bones of the massive demon, removing its head in a single move.

Ruby glanced around, before looking curiously at the door. “What'd you do?”

Weiss smirked. “I locked the door. Maybe something like that Beringel or an Ursa Major can bash it open, but it would be faster to smash the wall out like the King Taijitu downstairs did. It might not stop them forever, but Grimm aren't exactly smart, and most of them will follow the path of least resistance and not even try.”

“Good thinking! Now come on, we have to help the others.”

The lobby was a war zone by the time they returned. The normal police had recovered from what was happening above and were liberally using their incendiary dust ammunition, mostly fired from shotguns and rifles, to wound or kill any Grimm passing through the other stairway, or trying to come down the halls. Standing in the middle of the room were the detectives, who guarded the gunmen and killed any of the tougher or luckier demons who made it out of the killing field.

They circled around the outside of the room again, although this time they worked together to pick off a few Grimm along the way. Nothing they ran into was as tough as the Beringel they'd killed, but they knew it was only a matter of time until more major Grimm arrived.

The next problem didn't turn out to be Grimm, however. Around the time they'd circled back around to the line of officers holding the lobby doors the elevator opened. Standing inside were Mercury and Neo, the former looking bored and the latter scanning the room with her strange eyes, obviously seeking something. When she saw Weiss a wicked smirk slowly grew on her face.

Before any of the officers could decide if they should shoot at the two seeming humans rather than the Grimm still assaulting the lobby Mercury leapt forward, flying through the air like some kind of humanoid grasshopper, before landing feet first on Jaune's shield, who barely raised it in time with how shocked he was at the sudden attack. The impact drove him to the ground with a shout of pain, but before Mercury could do anything else he was forced to leap away again to avoid being cut in half by Pyrrha.
“Is that any way to greet your old partner?” Mercury asked.

“You're a murderer, and you just tried to kill Jaune,” Pyrrha said angrily.

“Just saying 'hi' to my replacement,” Mercury said. “I have to say, I'm not very impressed.”

“Are you alright Jaune?” Pyrrha asked.

“I'm fine,” he grunted as he climbed slowly back to his feet, the wind obviously having been knocked out of him.

“Go help with the Grim… this is my fight,” Pyrrha said.

“Ooh, scary,” Mercury mocked, before kicking off his shoes to reveal his black claws.

There was a loud hiss, and a huge white snake began slithering towards them from down the hallway who's stairs Weiss had blocked, obviously having taken a distant staircase up. It was a King Taijitu, and Weiss could just barely make out the other black half of the double headed Grimm being dragged along behind it limply, meaning that this was almost certainly the same one that they'd fought downstairs.

Ruby hesitated, torn between helping with Neo and Mercury and attacking the Grimm large and powerful enough to shrug off the gunfire of the normal officers. Before she could decide Weiss nodded towards it. “Go.”

“But-”

“Don't worry,” Weiss said. “I'm ready for her this time.”

Ruby hesitated just a little longer, before nodding and dashing off, scythe at the ready. Weiss stared after her for a moment, hoping that she would stay safe somehow, before turning her attention to Neo, who had been slowly walking across the lobby. She was seemingly without a care in the world despite the gunfight against an army of demons happening in that very room. She kept her eyes on Weiss, and when she got close she paused, her grin widening.

“You seem awfully confident for someone who had to have help running away last time,” Weiss taunted. Neo's eyes narrowed, obviously annoyed at the words, making Weiss' catty grin widen. “I'm surprised you're here. Did you give up on Torchwick? He's at the city jail, and I bet you could've made a difference there… or were you too afraid of running into Goodwitch again?”

Before the Asura in human form could respond there was another burst of power from above, and then suddenly the vast, inhuman presence was dwarfed by the demonically infused aura facing it, until the first was snuffed out. The dark power then withdrew its presence, but she could still feel it in her bones, and now that the clash of auras above was finished she could feel something else. Some kind of ritual magic was being worked, one which felt as though it involved piles of the dust that had been taken to the upper floors.

Weiss wanted to head to the elevator, or even the Grimm infested stairs. Facing the being above would no doubt be suicidal, but she knew in her gut that whatever the ritual magic was it would be a very, very bad thing to let it finish.

Before she could even try to think of a way to do that, however, Neo had closed the distance between them, pausing just out of reach to lean on her parasol. Weiss locked eyes with her, and the malevolent grin on her face grew more deranged as her strange, multicolored eyes move to Weiss' right hand.
As before the Asura pushed her tainted aura at Weiss, using the connection forged by the scar to attack her. During the battle with the White Fang it had caused unbearable pain, almost killing her in fact, and it had taken many days to truly recover from the soul deep magical damage she had suffered.

This time, however, she was prepared. When the mana reached her gloved hand she felt a burst of pain, but the runes then activated, extracting the mana from the attack and using it to empower the now glowing runes, and with a sneer she gathered her own aura, concentrating it into a magical battering ram, before throwing it back at the Asura through their connection, the effect enhanced massively by the glove's magic.

This time it was Neo who screamed. Her voice was inhuman, like something produced by dying industrial equipment, and when she fell to the ground her body blurred and contorted. Her limbs and head thrashed about, the motions impossible to follow with the naked eye, although they stopped from time to time, limb trembling or even totally still, before thrashing about faster than any human seizure. The most disturbing part was that every part of Neo's body moved independently, thrashing about at its own pace completely out of sync with the rest of her body.

Despite the surprise and the incredibly agony she was in, Neo fought back hard. The glove converted Neo's mana into a magical aid for her own assault, so her attack simply increased her own torment, but there was a limit to how much the glove could take, and Weiss gritted her teeth as the Asura began to surpass it. She began to slowly feel the pain she had in the past, but this time it was accompanied by growing heat as the glove began to smolder on her hand, unable to take much more.

Weiss pushed harder, straining as she forced every bit of her aura into the connection. Neo was the source of the scar, and therefore had more control over it than she ever could, and she had an immense reservoir of power. Without the glove aiding her she would be the one on the ground screaming, but even with it she wasn't sure that she could win, especially as it continued to burn out. She gritted her teeth, doing her best to ignore the pain as she engaged in a battle of wills with Neo to see who would give in first.

Weiss' world shrunk down to nothing but pain and mana, and then, finally, something gave. The connection shattered, and she fell to her knees in both relief and shock as the struggle with Neo ended abruptly. She gasped and panted for a long, long minute, completely defenseless in the middle of the battlefield, unsure if Neo was dead or alive, unable to feel anything but the pain in her hand and her own exhaustion.

When she finally began to recover she felt the warm drip of blood going down her face, and she frowned as she wiped her nose with her shaking left hand. In the brief exchange with Neo she'd managed to push herself far too hard, leaving her unable to safely use more magic, or even move. She was barely even able to stay up on her knees.

Finally looking around, she saw that Neo was still alive, laying still and panting, blood having run out of her eyes, ears, and nostrils. She had obviously taken far more damage than Weiss had, and a gentle probe with the shredded remains of her aura found that the connection her scar had formed had been severed entirely, obviously intentionally by Neo in a last resort to save herself. If anyone wanted to finish her the Asura was completely defenseless in that moment, although the same could be said for Weiss as well.

That thought finally made Weiss raise her head from where she was slumped on the floor to look around the room. The situation had only gotten worse since Neo and Mercury had arrived, with the amount of Grimm pouring from the hallways steadily increasing, and the amount of ammunition available to the officers rapidly dwindling. Eventually they would be overwhelmed, and when that
happened Weiss doubted that she'd even have the energy required to stand.

The fight between Pyrrha and Mercury was at least going in their favor, as despite the speed and strength of his demonic appendages it was obvious that he was completely outmatched trying to fight Pyrrha Nikos. He sported several shallow but bleeding wounds, and he had to stay in constant motion, both to avoid her attacks, and to make sure that none of the police decided to switch targets to him instead of keeping the Grimm suppressed.

Ruby was doing well, her scythe blurring as she cut down any Grimm that tried to come close. She had apparently managed to kill the King Taijitu during Weiss' confrontation with Neo, and with Jaune and Cardin covering her flanks she was holding one of the two main hallways, the one who's closest staircase she had sealed with a glyph, allowing the the police to focus on the Grimm coming down the stairs and down the other major hallway. To her surprise Weiss found Blake was standing near her, keeping any Grimm away while she recovered from her own battle.

Things were at a standstill, but if they could hold just a little longer, then perhaps reinforcements could arrive. Perhaps they could stop whatever this plan was, since this obviously wasn't the endgame. There was a ritual still occurring upstairs, after all. Even destroying Beacon wasn't the last act.

Then the elevator doors opened once again, revealing Cinder Fall wearing a bold red dress and holding a familiar cane in her hand. It wasn't something she had seen often, but Weiss recognized it as Inspector Ozpin's cane. The woman took a single step into the lobby and slowly looked around the room, before smirking and tossing the object onto the floor.

She then raised her hand, and flames began to gather in it. With a gentle shove she spoke words of magic, launching her spell. “Teine Boghaidh.”

The flame, which had a core the size of a baseball, flew from her hand and impacted on the floor at the far end of the line of police where it exploded, the concussion of the blast and heat of the flames intense enough to knock Weiss off of her knees and onto her side. Before she could recover another blast exploded as Cinder continued to launch fireballs at the gunmen, filling the air with their screams and the smell of roasting meat and brimstone.

Weiss gagged at the stench, wincing from the burning heat as she tried to drag herself to her feet before failing utterly. She looked up just in time to see Cinder start to throw a third fireball, this one aimed close enough to Weiss to catch her in the direct blast, just as Pyrrha landed a hard kick to Mercury's side, sending him to the floor and allowing her to jump between Weiss and Cinder.

When the interim mayor threw the fireball Pyrrha was there, and instead of being struck she slashed down with her sword, somehow cutting the spell in half. It still exploded, but the magic in her sword had destabilized the spell, leaving her unharmed as she faced the magic user.

Cinder just smirked as Pyrrha raised her sword and faced the interim mayor.
Weiss could tell without even looking that the woman in front of her wasn't human, and more than that, was the source of the tainted aura that had crushed the other one above. Given the cane, and the well established non human nature of the impossibly long lived Inspector Ozpin, and it was obvious that the fight above had been between him and Cinder Fall, with Cinder emerging as the clear victor.

With almost half of the police down from her initial attack, Weiss would've expected for them to be immediately overwhelmed by a horde of Grimm, but instead the demons were cowering, afraid to enter the lobby with Cinder's revealed power in it. That her mere presence could strike fear into the hearts of Grimm was mind boggling, but it was apparently the case.

“Are you alright?” Ruby asked quietly. She and the other detectives had moved over to where Weiss was collapsed, weapons at the ready as they carefully observed the face off between Pyrrha and Cinder.

“Define alright,” Weiss said.

“That's not very reassuring,” Ruby murmured.

Weiss reached over and placed a hand on her girlfriend's ankle, being careful not to hinder her movement if she had to act quickly, but needing that reassuring connection. “I'll recover. Just… I'm not going to be very helpful fighting today.”

“Great,” Cardin said with a scowl.

“Hey, you took out Neo, that's pretty good in my book,” Jaune said.

“Yeah, we've got it from here,” Ruby said, while Blake simply nodded.

Weiss sighed, hating being useless. “There's some kind of magical ritual going on upstairs. I'm not sure how long it will take, but if they use enough of the dust they shipped here it could be… very bad. When we get a chance we need to disrupt it.”

“Okay,” Ruby said. “You should retreat when you can move.”

Weiss shook her head. “You might need me to help stop the ritual. I might not be able to fight or do much magic, but I can tell you what to do.”

Cardin snorted, drawing an angry sidelong glance from Weiss, but Ruby sighed. “Okay. Just… be safe. Please?”

“You, too,” Weiss said.

While they'd been talking Pyrrha and Cinder had been staring each other down. Eventually Cinder smirked and clapped her hands, then held them out open beside her body. “Sgaradh,” she said, as a pulse of power erupted from her person.

Pyrrha tensed, her sword at the ready to react to the spell, but the pulse passed through the room without any effect, until it hit the glass doors and windows at the front of the building, shattering them into small fragments. A moment later the glass began skittering along the floor, until a cloud of broken glass flew to Cinder's hands, gathering above each one. “Gruag Glainne,” she finished with a feral grin.
The glass glowed red for a moment, before flowing and merging into two long, glass swords, one in each hand. Once they were complete she pulled them up into a fighting stance, before pointing one at Pyrrha. “I will offer you one last chance to flee, champion of a declining pantheon.”

“Never,” Pyrrha said.

“Come on, we have to help her,” Jaune said, starting to move forward.

“Wait!” Pyrrha called. “Protect the injured… I will deal with her. The Grimm won’t stay quiescent when she falls.”

They hesitated for a moment, before finally nodding. The other Supernatural Affairs members spread out, covering the police who, after a barked order by Slate to get them moving, started tending to those injured by Cinder's fireballs.

Pyrrha stared at her enemy for a moment longer, and then Cinder was gone, reappearing right in front of Pyrrha, both swords somehow blocked by her weapon, which had been perfectly positioned to halt both attacks. There was a long pause, and then the fight truly began.

Weiss had trained with Ruby more over the past year than she had with anyone in her life besides her fencing tutors when she was first learning the blade, and for much of that time Ruby had been superhumanly fast. She had mastered the inherent spell that gave her that speed so well that she hardly had to concentrate to activate it, and it seemed to come out at times without her even thinking about it. Weiss probably had more experience than any other mortal human at fighting an opponent that fast, and it gave her a good understanding of what speed really meant in battle.

Cinder was fast. Maybe not quite as much as what Ruby was capable of when she really tried, but the human eye could track neither, and even against Grimm Ruby wasn’t capable of the sheer deadly intent with which Cinder was acting. Weiss doubted that she would’ve survived the initial clash with the interim mayor, and while she subconsciously cataloged everything that she could make out in case she needed to battle her at some point, Weiss really hoped that she would never have to.

There were two other people who had sparred against Ruby’s speed on nearly as many occasions as Weiss, those being her uncle Qrow and Pyrrha, both of whom had worked hard to teach her how to fight with a weapon as awkward as a scythe. Pyrrha put that experience to good use as she somehow blocked and even counterattacked Cinder despite the incredible speed disparity. To Weiss it looked like Pyrrha was waving her weapon around in almost random patterns, with only the near constant ringing sound of super hard magical glass striking enchanted bronze letting them know that the seemingly aimless moves were perfectly executed parries.

Finally Cinder pulled back, but despite having been foiled by the amazon champion she actually looked amused. “You’re every bit as skilled as people claim.”

“I will stop you,” Pyrrha said, pointing her weapon at the woman. “Surrender or I will be forced to kill you.”

“Stoirm Glainne,” Cinder said, raising her swords directly above her head.

Weiss heard a rattling sound, and looking behind her she saw the remaining glass shards from where she’d shattered the windows begin to rattle on the ground, before skittering towards Cinder. When they reached her they swirled into a twister of broken glass, before she made a wide, sweeping gesture, sending all of the glass flying in a super fast cloud towards Pyrrha.

Pyrrha pulled out her pistol with her off hand, and then began to spin frenetically, knocking the tiny
glass shards out of the air one after another with her sword and gun. She fired the pistol several times, the bullets aimed behind her back or along her side, somehow not hitting herself despite her rapid motions, the shots apparently shattering pieces of glass before they could reach her. After almost ten seconds of this, she spun on her toes like a ballerina and then fired the last round in her gun at Cinder, who casually knocked the bullet out of the air with one of her swords.

There was a moment of calm, and slowly broken pieces of glass fell around Pyrrha like rain. She had not only held off the storm of glass shards, she had done so without taking even a single scratch, and had even counter attacked at the end. Weiss could find no words for what she had just seen, and neither could any of the other police watching.

Cinder apparently could, however. “As I thought. It doesn’t matter what kind of attack I send against you. Direct combat, blasts of magic, even attacks hidden by illusions or from every direction at once cannot beat you. You truly have the blessings of gods in battle.”

“I am their champion,” Pyrrha said with pride. It wasn’t arrogance in her voice; it was plain to hear that Pyrrha simply felt honored to be what she was.

Cinder sneered. “You might have been granted power, but how long did you have to whimper and crawl at the feet of beings unworthy of even human worship?”

“Do you not serve a master?” Pyrrha asked. “I feel the touch of power that isn’t your’s.”

“I approached my mistress, but we struck a bargain,” Cinder said. “It was my fate to gain that power, and it is my fate to fulfill my mistress' will. Tell me, champion… do you believe in fate?”

“I do,” Pyrrha said.

Cinder nodded, and then raised her arms so that her swords pointed out to the sides. They began to glow with a bright red light, and Weiss could see that flames were actually building inside of the glass weapons. “Losgadh Ifrinn.”

The contained flames burst forth, creating a line of fire as wide as the room. It rippled and bubbled, rising and falling in place for a moment, until Cinder brought her arms together, the glass weapons striking each other and making a chiming noise. The fire then rose like a wave, cresting nearly at the ceiling, before surging forward.

The living police started to stumble black, but the wave of flame was too fast, and in mere heartbeats it reached Pyrrha, who gripped her sword in both hands to block the flames. She slid back several inches before the wave of flames were somehow stopped by her magic sword, the entire attack halted by her defense.

Then suddenly Mercury was behind her, having launched himself through the narrow gap between the ceiling and flames, a dagger in hand. He hit the ground and immediately lunged, sinking the blade into her back. Pyrrha shifted slightly to keep the blow from being mortal, but she otherwise ignored him, gritting her teeth and shifting her grip on her sword. With a shout of effort she swung her her blade up, cutting the flame wall in half, making the spell dissipate into nothing.

She turned and swung her sword at Mercury, who had been about to kick her with his clawed feet. He barely managed to avoid being killed by her attack, hopping back out of her reach with a long cut across his torso. She didn't follow up, half turning again to chop a fireball in half that had been flying directly toward the detectives standing behind her.

For an instant she hesitated, tensing like she was about to dive to the side, but instead she shifted
slightly in place and chopped through two more fireballs that would've landed in the center of the group, killing Weiss and many of the other police. The moment her sword cleaved the final fireball into fragments of flame she stumbled, eyes going wide as a glass blade emerged from her chest.

“A pathetic end to an invincible champion,” Cinder said from right behind her. “Your skills and your blessings made you invulnerable, but your human heart defied that fate by being weak. You couldn't dodge with those you cared for standing behind you… and so you die, champion of the amazons.”

Pyrrha's green eyes were wide with pain for several heartbeats, but as she fell to her knees, blood leaking from her mouth, they relaxed into acceptance. She swept her gaze over all of them for a moment, before focusing her attention on Jaune. She mouthed three small words, unable to even draw breath to speak them, and he fell to his knees in response, a shaking hand reaching out for her. She extended a hand of her own, and then the sword in her chest burst into flames, the fire spreading through her flesh until she was consumed from within. In moments all that remained of Pyrrha Nikos was ash slowly drifting to the ground.

“NOOOO!!” Ruby screamed, disappearing in a cloud of rose petals.

Cinder's expression of triumph fell into shock as she was immediately forced back. Ruby was too fast to see, only the trail of petals hanging in the air letting them know where she was. Cinder, for all of her speed, strength and skill, was pushed back step by step, desperately trying and failing to hold the enraged woman at bay. One of her swords shattered, and she was forced to assume a two handed grip on the remaining one to try to block the incoming attacks.

Just as Cinder was almost forced to the far wall she suddenly reached out and grabbed the haft of Ruby's scythe. She was strong enough that Ruby couldn't pull the weapon free despite her best efforts, and she paused in place to struggle, becoming clearly visible for the first time since she'd attacked Cinder. After a few seconds she let her scythe dissolve into rose petals, reforming it instantly, but this time reversed so that blade was below her body and almost pressed up against her enemy, a position that granted Cinder no chance to defend herself.

Just as she began to raise her weapon to cut the interim mayor in half Mercury landed beside her, his body already spinning for a back kick. Ruby had been so focused on killing Cinder that she didn't even notice him until his heel crashed into her solar plexus, lifting her from her feet and making her fold up limply, her scythe falling apart once more into petals as she flew through the air and hit the ground, breathless.

“Ruby!” Weiss screamed, shakily trying to reach her feet, adrenaline giving her just enough energy to stagger two steps forward before collapsing to her knees again. “RUBY!”

Ruby turned her head, glazed eyes locking onto Weiss' for just a moment, before Cinder stepped up next to her and kicked her in the head, knocking her unconscious. The woman then put a foot on top of Ruby's chest, standing over her like a hunter with a trophy, before she pulled a bone flute from her dress and blew into it.

The familiar piercing whistle cut through the stunned silence, and then all they could hear were the roars and howls of an army of Grimm. They began to pour out of the side hallways, rushing towards the detectives to finish them off. Some of the police began shooting, any bullets aimed at Cinder casually knocked out of the air by her remaining sword, and those shot towards the wave of Grimm too few to make any difference.

Weiss tried to stand again, desperate to reach Ruby, but once again she started to fall. Her eyes were solely focused on her partner, not even noticing the army of Grimm surging towards them, or the large, boar-like Boarbatusk smashing through the door she had sealed with her binding magic,
increasing the flood even more.

Then Jaune, tears pouring from his eyes scooped her up in his arms and began running towards the exit. “NO! JAUNE! RUBY! We can't leave Ruby!”

He flinched at the words, and again as she weakly struck his shoulders with her empty hand, trying to get him to let her go. “We can't. There's too many of them.”

“Nooo!” she shrieked, arm reaching out for her girlfriend. She saw the foot resting on Ruby's chest grind down for a moment, and she looked up to see Cinder Fall smirking at her tauntingly, her eyes triumphant. She felt a wave of hatred fill her, displacing even her fear and grief, and if she had been close enough she would've tried to strangle Cinder with her bare hands. “I'll kill you! I'll kill you Cinder Fall! I'LL KILL YOU!”

She was far from the only person screaming in the lobby. Jaune was a fast sprinter, and even burdened with Weiss he outran most of the other police. A few stood their ground to buy their fellows time, firing wildly into the onrushing tide of demons only to be torn apart in moments. Some of those who tried to run suffered the same fate, and in fact one of the police running right beside them was stabbed through the chest by a Death Stalker and pulled off of his feet, gurgling as blood poured from his mouth.

Weiss finally looked directly behind them, her eyes widening as she saw the nine foot tall, heavily armored form of an Alpha Beowolf running after them on all fours, its mouth drooling as it prepared to pounce on them both. She gripped her sword tightly, but being carried in Jaune's arms didn't give her much ability to wield it, and her arms felt too weak to really try. Just before it caught them several high caliber bullets slammed into the side of its head, disorienting it.

Weiss looked over and saw Lt. Slate standing in the doorway, firing his rifle at any Grimm that came close to his fellow police. He could've made it outside at any time, but instead he kept firing even as more people were torn to pieces. As they reached the doors Weiss saw a King Taijitu swallow him whole, his gun still shooting even as he was devoured.

They had made it outside, and for some reason the army of Grimm didn't follow them out of the building. Jaune didn't stop running, taking the steps down three at a time until they reached the street. Only then did he pause, setting her on the ground and falling to his knees, gasping for air between desperate sobs.

Weiss looked around for a moment, and if it wasn't for the pain in her hand she would've pinched herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Things didn't feel real. Ruby was gone, captured by Cinder, but at least she was still alive. Beacon had fallen, and most of the defenders had been torn to pieces by a vast army of Grimm, leaving only herself, Jaune, Cardin, Blake and four normal police still alive from their group. And still she could feel the ritual building towards its climax. Whatever was coming it was too late to stop it, even as she saw Goodwitch and several members of Supernatural Affairs parking cars and rushing towards them.

Pyrrha was dead.

Ruby was captured.

She took a shuddering breath and climbed unsteadily to her feet, activating her aura sight and looking up at Beacon, trying to see if she could make out what was happening in the building. Despite the massive, intricate wards covering the structure, the ritual happening near the top floor was intense enough that she could see it making the entire top of the building glow.
“What is happening here?” Goodwitch demanded.

“Grimm,” Cardin said. “A hell of a lot of Grimm just came pouring out of the subbasements. Then some woman-”

“Cinder Fall,” Weiss interrupted. “The interim mayor isn't human. She did this… she's been playing this city for over a year, getting this ready.”

“What ready?” Goodwitch demanded.

“I don't know, but she has someone conducting a ritual near the top of the building with most of the dust the White Fang stole,” Weiss said.

Goodwitch paled, before looking around at the detectives. “Alright, we need to-”

There was burst of mystical energy so intense that it drove all of them to their knees, and Weiss was briefly blinded from her aura sight being overwhelmed. The world went still, utterly and completely silent for a several long heartbeats, and then a sound, too low to be heard with human ears but easily felt through their bodies could be heard as the clouds above suddenly parted, revealing the night sky.

The sound ended, but there was a shift in the air. Something felt different, and Weiss cautiously reactivated her aura sight, looking around to try to figure out what had changed. She saw that the ritual had ended, and the first thing she saw was that the wards around Beacon had been altered. They were much heavier than they should've been, and while they were too complicated for her to make more than an educated guess about what the alteration was, she doubted that it would be easy for them to enter the building again.

While adding to a ward scheme like Beacon's would've required an immense amount of power, she didn't think that the entire ritual was just for that. She looked around, not seeing anything different at first, until finally she looked up and her heart almost stopped.

Goodwitch had been issuing orders, and was just about to send everyone towards the building when she heard Weiss' horrified words. “The Great Barrier…”

“What?” Goodwitch asked.

Weiss pointed up with a shaking hand at the sky above. Normally under aura sight there was a faint glow to the sky, day or night, caused by the Great Barrier. It was thicker over cities than the countryside, and in places like Vale it was even brighter than the city's light pollution. “The Great Barrier is gone.”

Goodwitch studied the heavens for a moment. “Goddess… how? Why?”

Nora had walked over to the building, trying to get a look at the lobby through the shattered windows, when she bounced off of the outer wards of Beacon. She placed a hand on them for a moment, before raising her hammer and slamming it into the magical barrier to no effect. “Uh… what?”

Goodwitch looked away from the sky before causally flicking her riding crop towards a stone on the ground, launching it towards the wards with the force of a canon without any incantation. The stone shattered without leaving a mark. “Detective Schnee?”

Weiss studied the wards for a moment, before a suspicion hit her. “The Great Barrier… it isn't gone, it's been twisted. The local part has been warped into a dome protecting Beacon instead of covering the city.”
“So they didn't just destroy it,” Goodwitch said.

Weiss shook her head. “They warped it instead. That means if we can get into the main ward room in Beacon I might be able to reverse it. The Great Barrier doesn't want to be this way, and it won't take that much power to convince it to spring back into its proper form. But… with it here… even if I somehow managed to breach the wards and enter Beacon, the damage that would do would keep me from fixing the Great Barrier.”

“Why would they do this?” Goodwitch said, sounding lost.

In the distance they suddenly heard hunting horns, and every turned to look towards the sound. “What was that?” Ren asked.


“The Wild Hunt?” Cardin asked.

“It's group of Sidhe from Faerie,” Velvet explained. “They used to hunt mortals across the world… before the Great Barrier prevented them from coming here easily.”

“They aren't the only problem,” Coco said, lowering her sunglasses and pointing at a tall building, around which circled a flock of harpies. Beyond them a pack of hippogriffs suddenly plunged down from the sky, flying towards the ground in a distant part of Vale, and a massive birdlike figure could be seen in the distance.

“Every extraplanar creature the Great Barrier has been keeping out… they've all found a way in,” Weiss said quietly. “The city is going to be overrun with demons, faeries, monsters and anything else you can imagine.”

“And prisoners,” Goodwitch added. “We pulled back to come here, and it looked as though the White Fang might succeed in destroying the city jail.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, before Weiss turned to face Beacon again. “We have to find a way in. We have to stop Cinder, save Ruby, and end this.”

“The city is more important,” Goodwitch said. “We can't leave the civilians in the hands of those monsters. We need to spread out and contain the situation.”

“This isn't the end,” Weiss said, gesturing towards Beacon. “They wanted to be in there with the Great Barrier compromised. They aren't finished. We can't let Cinder do whatever she's planning on doing. And she has Ruby.”

“I know,” Goodwitch snapped. “But our priority is to this city and its citizens. When we have a plan to stop this we'll do it, but until then we need to save lives.”

Weiss heard a horn, and turned her head to see an SDC branded armored SUV parked nearby. Apparently her father hadn't wasted time sending someone to retrieve her when the Great Barrier fell. She looked back at Goodwitch for a moment, then up at Beacon, where Ruby was still being held, before turning and walking slowly towards the vehicle without another word.

She had her own priority.

And she wouldn't let anything stand in her way.
When Ruby first woke up the only thing she was sure about was that she wasn't dead. For starters, she was in quite a bit of pain. Her head was spinning, her arms and legs hurt, and her stomach churned and ached. On top of that, her mother wasn't there to greet her. No, she definitely wasn't dead, which was the only positive thing that she was feeling at that moment.

She tried to move her arms slightly but found that they didn't want to go very far. She was bound somehow, and after an initial frown she carefully cleared her face. If she wanted to escape she would need to be in good shape, and that meant trying to recover some, or at least finding out what was wrong with her.

It took a while to reach the proper meditative state. Weiss always made it look so easy, but just thinking her name made it harder to calm down. She didn't know what had happened to Weiss since she was knocked out, but despite her fears she refused to accept that she could've been killed. Not Weiss.

Once she was meditating she scanned her body with her aura. Her head had taken a hard hit when she'd been knocked unconscious, and the kick to her tummy had left some serious bruising. The rest of her injuries were fairly minor, so she spent a little while concentrating on her bigger problems. Once they were feeling better she left her meditation and finally opened her eyes.

She didn't see much at first. It was quite dark, but she eventually managed to make out the bars of a small cage. She wasn't the tallest person around, but it was too short for her to stand fully, and she could barely lie flat without touching two sets of bars. She wasn't sure what the cage was normally used for, but it certainly wasn't keeping people in comfort.

Of course, comfort wasn't going to be had with her arms and legs restrained. She shifted her legs to get a look at her bindings, and found them to be some kind of metal cuffs which covered both of her calves with a single piece. She could still feel and wiggle her feet, so at least her circulation wasn't cut off, but flexing her calf muscles didn't seem to dislodge the binding at all. It appeared to be made exactly for her, which meant either someone had a lot of perfectly sized bondage equipment, or magic was involved.

She twisted her head and shoulders to look behind her back, only to discover what looked like an identical binding on her forearms. With her arms bound together behind her back the way they were she couldn't even try to get them in front of her, and she frowned as she realized that something was keeping her hands restrained as well. A little investigation revealed what appeared to be some kind of reinforced mittens on her hands which kept her fists clenched. She tried to summon her scythe, but found she couldn't without an open hand to make it appear in, and she didn't know any other useful magic for her current situation.

She was very stuck, and the thought of it began to make her nervous. How long were they going to keep her that way? How was she going to eat, or go to the bathroom? What else were they going to do to her? Was Weiss okay?

Somewhere in the darkness of the room a door opened, and someone stepped inside. A moment later lights came on, illuminating the surprisingly large room that she was being kept in. Once her eyes painfully adjusted she saw that she was in what appeared to be some kind of warehouse, in better condition than most of the abandoned ones criminals usually seemed to make use of, and it was mostly empty except for her cage.
Striding through the room with a smirk on his face was Torchwick. He'd replaced his cane, but even at a glance Ruby could tell that it wasn't anything special. Still, he was obviously feeling pretty pleased with himself for someone who'd just escaped from jail.

“Why, hello there little red!” he called. “I must say, not loving your accommodations. I just escaped the hoosegow and even I think this place is depressing. Are those dog food bowls?”

With the better light Ruby surveyed her cage, and sure enough she saw a pair of bowls in the corner. One appeared to have water in it, while the other was empty. She supposed she'd figured out how they were planning to feed her, and the answer really didn't fill her with confidence about her other bodily needs.

“Looks like it,” Ruby said, before clearing her scratchy throat. Despite it having been sitting out in a warehouse for who knows how long since she'd been unconscious, part of her was tempted to crawl over to the bowl and drink.

“Ugh, and they get pissy when people call them animals,” Torchwick snorted. “I guess this is their idea of revenge on the humans or whatever.”

“If you hate them so much, why are you working with the White Fang?” Ruby asked.

“You know, I've asked myself that very question quite a few times now,” Torchwick mused. “I was just doing some for hire thievery for ol' Cinder way back when I thought she was just some local politician with sneaky plans. Now she's torn apart the Great Barrier and the streets are overrun with demons and monsters.”

“She what?” Ruby gasped.

“Oh yeah, after your little scuffle at Beacon she decided to kick off a fun little local apocalypse,” Torchwick said. “What's worse, whatever she did completely sealed off the city, so there's no way for people to escape, and no way for reinforcements to come fix things. Honestly, we're about a month away from roving gangs with spike covered cars building their own Thunderdome.”

“Then why are you helping her?” Ruby asked. “You're a thief, not… not whatever she is. She was talking like some kinda comic book villain!”

He sighed, pulling a cigar out of his coat and lighting it up. “Look, kid, if I'd known what I was getting into I'd've grabbed Neo and we'd've taken the first flight to somewhere warm and sunny instead of robbing those dust stores and stealing those statues. But what I am more than anything else is a survivor, and I intend to keep surviving no matter what it takes. And getting on Cinder's bad side? That's not how you keep breathing.”

“But what about what she does next?” Ruby asked. She saw him hesitate and kept pressing. “Maybe you're free and alive now, but like you said, there's an entire city trapped in here with free reign for demons and whatever to run loose, and she isn't done, is she? What's she gonna do next? Can you 'survive' an actual apocalypse? Because I can't think of much else she could do bigger than this!”

He stared at her for a moment, before walking closer and crouching right in front of her cage. “Look, this is pretty shit, I'll give you that, but I'm not gonna switch sides for someone locked up in a cage.”

Ruby bit her lip. “What about… what about Weiss? And- and the others?”

He gave her a compassionate look. “If it makes you feel better, from the bitching the White Fang have been doing I'm pretty sure all the Schnees are intact, and most of SA as well. I dunno what they're up to, 'cept I've heard some of them are running around trying to kill the nastier stuff invading
Ruby asked. “They aren't gonna take all this sitting down. They'll fight back, and they'll beat Cinder.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Torchwick said. “Look little red, you're right that I don't like the way this is going. This… this is all way above my pay grade, and I'm the best damned thief on the east coast. But there's no way I can get in contact with anyone who can stop her without getting noticed by somebody, and I'm not sticking my neck out for the losing side.”

“But if they found you?”

He puffed his cigar and looked up for a moment. “If they find me… I guess that means they've got the tools to make a difference. I'll give you one thing though, in case you manage to get out of this without seeing me again.”

“What?”

He leaned right up against the bars. “It took a lot of trouble, but I figured out what Cinder is. She's a Sidhe lord, same as that 'Prince' idiot who was running around Vale last year. Difference is, she wasn't banished. She found her own way here somehow, and at full strength, too. And that's without whatever her 'mistress' is.”

Ruby nodded, the speed, strength and magical prowess Cinder had displayed suddenly making a lot more sense. “Thanks. You know, you're not so bad after all.”

He scoffed and stood up. “I'm bad to the bone, little red. Now I'm outta here before Adam decides to ask what I'm up to with the prisoner. Oh… before I go, apparently Cinder wants you as a sacrifice or something.”

“S-sacrifice?”

“Yeah, sorry kid,” Torchwick said. “Upside, she ordered you to be 'unspoiled', so they won't torture you or anything. Nobody asked what she meant by that, so other than the whole cage thing they'll probably take pretty good care of you just in case. Downside, whenever she's ready for her next move you're on the chopping block.”

Ruby swallowed hard. At least she would be okay when Weiss found and rescued her. She had to believe Weiss was still alive and looking for her. She had to.

Beacon's physical structure might not have changed, but the building was still very different than it had been a few days before. It wasn't just the Grimm roaming the halls, or the absence of any other people. It was a miasma of dark magic that was already tainting every inch of the building, from the subbasement source to the highest offices.

Cinder had changed as well. Emerald had obviously recognized what she was, meeting her so soon after the death of the Prince, but she'd always kept that side of herself subdued. She was a Sidhe through and through, and even stronger than the former drug lord had been, but she'd never let even a sliver of her presence show. Even with aura sight Emerald hadn't been able to see exactly what she was, and she’d managed to fool the entire city for years.
She wasn't concealing herself anymore, however. She radiated dark and dangerous power, and like
she had for so many months Emerald found herself drawn to her like a moth to flame. She knew on
some level she was being foolish, but she couldn't help herself. Even now, as frightening as she
found her, Emerald couldn't do anything else. Never in her life had she known love, but now that she
had she couldn't do anything but follow Cinder wherever she went.

They reached Ozpin's office, Cinder opening the door and leading her and Mercury inside. The room
had obviously seen a recent, intense battle, with the desk smashed and papers everywhere, but she'd
managed to avoid damaging any of the complex gears that empowered the building's wards.

“Mercury, if you would go and retrieve the statues from the basement, as well as the remaining dust
from the storage room, it's almost time to begin preparations,” Cinder said.

He nodded and left. He'd been quiet since his old partner's death, and while Emerald was concerned
about what he might do, Cinder seemed convinced that he wouldn't be a problem, so she didn't say
anything.

Cinder looked at her finally, a small smile on her face. “Everything's coming together, and it's all
thanks you.”

“Me?” Emerald asked with a blush.

“Of course,” Cinder said, stalking up to her and pulling her into a demanding kiss. By the time she
pulled away Emerald was fuzzy headed and short of breath. “Not only have you done so much to aid
our cause, but you managed to perform a very complex piece of binding magic to change the Great
Barrier.”

She blushed, looking down. “It wasn't that difficult. The dust did most of the work, I just had to
follow the instructions.”

Cinder placed a hand on top of her head and began stroking her hair. “You did a marvelous job.
We're only days away from finishing this, and when the world is remade you'll be rewarded beyond
all others. What do you desire? You can have anything mortals have ever dreamed of.”

“I just want to be with you forever,” Emerald whispered, not able to meet her gaze while revealing
that.

There was a long pause, and then soft arms wrapped around her, holding her gently but more firmly
than solid steel. “Don't worry. You're mine.”
Ninth Case: Dark Places

The creature had a bloated, round body covered in glistening rolls of oily fat, supported by three evenly spaced batrachian legs. It had two long, heavily muscled arms which reached the floor, allowing the bloated monstrosity to support itself on a five points stance. The head was like a crude wax sculpture of a human being as created by a blind creature that had never encountered the species and was working off of vague reports, which had then been partially melted in a fire.

It was truly hideous, but Weiss didn't bat an eye as she stared into the empty black sockets just peeping out from its runny flesh. The creature opened its rubbery lips and spoke with a deep, commanding voice. “Why have you summoned me?”

“You know why, demon,” Weiss said coldly.

It chuckled darkly. “You think much of yourself if you believe the actions of one brief mortal are of interest to those of power on the lower planes.”

Weiss' smile was all teeth and no warmth. “If you aren't aware of who I am and what I seek then it wouldn't have been worth the trouble of tracking down your true name. Stop wasting my time.”

“Or you will dispose of me as you have those who failed you?” it asked. “I am indeed aware of the fate of those petty demons and imps who tried to hide what you seek from you. I can also assure you that none can aid you better than I at retrieving Death's Daughter.”

Weiss nodded and walked to the edge of the magic circle keeping the powerful demon contained. She had started with the demons whose true names the Schnee family had recorded, summoning those most able to trade for the knowledge she sought. Unfortunately none of the petty demons had been willing or able to risk angering Cinder and her allies, and she hadn't found what she wanted to know. Those that made her attempts to find Ruby more difficult didn't survive to be banished back from whence they came. Eventually she had progressed to summoning more and more powerful demons, coercing the names of ever mightier beings from those she could summon.

All had been dead ends.

“Tell me how to reach her,” Weiss demanded.

The demon chuckled again. “I'm not some spirit you can so easily extort. I'm an Archduke of the Sixth Circle, vassal to Lord Beelzebub himself. If you wish to gain my knowledge then you must barter for it.”

“What is your price?” Weiss asked.

The demon leaned closer to the edge of the circle, until its hideous face was mere inches from her own, making her nose wrinkle at the moist stink of rot and brimstone that pervaded the air around it. It gave a great, snuffling sniff, before grinning, revealing blackened stumps of fangs. “I can smell the desperation wafting from you, and I can assure you that none but myself can tell you that which you most desire in time.”

“In time?”

“Yes, summoner. Time is not on your side. The machinations of beings greater than even myself come to fruition, and soon all will fall.”
Weiss' eyes narrowed. “Name your price.”

“You're soul,” it crooned. “If you swear to me your soul upon death then I will tell you that which you want to know.”

Weiss had spent a week seeking a way to rescue Ruby. She wasn't even certain that her beloved partner was still alive. While none of the demons had spoken of her in anything but the present tense, that meant nothing. They could be referring to the current disposition of her soul in the after life without lying.

Weiss closed her eyes for a moment. She was exhausted. While summoning demons with the aid of the Schnee family ritual chambers, and the endless supplies of dust she could take from the family vaults wasn't too taxing magically, she had barely eaten, and her only sleep had been moments napping on the concrete floors while waiting for demons to gather knowledge she had demanded. Not knowing if Ruby was even still alive was killing her, and the demon was correct about her desperation.

“Come now, how does ownership of your soul truly effect you?” the demon asked. “It's something I'll collect long in the future when you are dead. No one even has to know, and you can live a happy life until the end. I have no need to accelerate your death, after all. I can wait until you come to my hands. I can even offer my aid to retrieve that which you seek. Just promise me your soul. It isn't much to ask, is it?”

Weiss was exhausted. But no matter how little rest she'd allowed herself, she wasn't a fool.

“Baalchazernebaranthafal.”

The demon's true name, spoken with malice and force, struck it in its twisted essence. It reeled back, howling in torment, and for just a moment Weiss truly saw it. Not simply the twisted, horrible form that it favored when interacting with mortals, but the true, impossible shape of a demon older than man. It was a writhing, twisting, protoplasmic mass of cancerous growths and tumid cilia, warping and distorting in ways that made her head ache. The being was from a plane that lacked any semblance of natural law or reason, and the blight on existence that the demon represented showed that in all of its ingloriousness.

After a long moment Weiss stopped pushing mana towards the demon through her voice, letting the distorted, hateful version of the true name hang in the air for a bit longer as it glared at her, once more garbed in its favored appearance. It then smiled, and between one heartbeat and the next it changed, leaving Weiss staring into the pleading, downtrodden silver eyes of her lover.

“Please… save me…” Ruby pleaded, reaching out a hand.

Weiss' own arm twitched as she almost reached out for her, forgetting somehow that Ruby couldn't possibly be within the summoning circle. Fortunately she stopped herself long before she crossed the boundary of the magic circle, as doing so would've allowed the demon to grab her hand and pull her into its grasp.

The demon in Ruby's form smirked before it began to rot, in a matter of moments her belly bloated and maggots and other insects began pouring forth from her decaying flesh. Weiss was almost sick as she watched a centipede push her eyeball from its socket to climb out of her skull, bloated and fat from devouring her brain.

“Baalchazernebaranthafal,” Weiss snarled, and once more the demon began to scream as it was forced to assume its true form. She held her magic for much longer, straining like she had when she'd pushed her will against Neo, until finally she relented as sweat dripped down her brow.
The demon chuckled deeply. “Did I strike a nerve, summoner?”

“Baalchazernebaranthafal,” Weiss repeated. She let it suffer for a long, long time, until finally she stopped channeling mana through its true name.

It still chuckled, although the sound was weaker than before. “You won't find any other way to save her in time, summoner. Do you truly wish to anger me? You hold my true name, but that leverage will only extend so far.”

“Leverage?” Weiss repeated. “You think that's the only leverage I hold over you? Tell me, what will happen to your domain in your absence?”

“I don't fear oblivion. Offering death will not loosen my tongue.”

“I didn't say death,” Weiss said. “I don't have to do anything. I can walk out the door, seal this room, and have contractors pouring five feet of concrete over it before the day is out. It wouldn't even be the first time that my family has done such a thing. How many millennia would that trap you on this plane? I wonder how long it would take for your minions to forget you ever existed?”

“I am immortal,” the demon said, although it sounded less confident.

“Immortality is a curse, demon,” Weiss spat. “Even if you aren't reduced to drooling imbecility, trapped in a tiny circle alone for countless thousand years, what will you do when you're free? Even the lower planes change and evolve, and your reappearance would simply mark you as a pariah. The demon lord you serve would no doubt have been cast down by betrayal in the interim, and the one after that as well. You would be anathema to your kind, feared and hated as part of an old guard scarce remembered. I wonder how long they'd torture your essence trying to learn ancient secrets?”

“And how long will you wait to learn the fate of your precious lover?” the demon cooed. “Is she dead? Is she being tortured? Did her soul get ripped from her living corpse and get sold to my brethren? Is she begging, pleading,” his voice shifted mid-word to Ruby's, “please, Weiss, help…”

“Baalchazernebaranthafal!”

Weiss felt weak by the time she finally stopped. The demon didn't need to breath to scream; she was fairly certain that it didn't actually have lungs of any kind, in fact. She, however, panted like she'd been running a marathon after using so much mana to wrack its soul. “This is your last chance to barter, demon.”

“If your soul is not on offer, than I will have your name,” the demon said.

Weiss paused. Giving up her entire name wasn't simply foolish; it was perhaps more dangerous than mortgaging her soul. While that would have unimaginably bad consequences in the long run, there had been accounts of people occasionally retrieving their souls from perdition, or she could try to cheat it by using the brand the other necromancer had employed to send her soul straight to the afterlife at death instead of letting it get dragged by the deal to the lower planes. Once her name was known, it was known, however, and the power it would grant this demon over her was vast.

“One word,” Weiss bartered.

Even a single word was a risk. A true name could only be learned by hearing the word spoke directly from its owner, or passed on by those who knew the secret to preserving it. A demon like this not only knew that secret, but would possibly barter it away to other demons. If ever in her life all three words became known to any being willing to trade for it…
“One word,” the demon agreed. “The first.”

“The first,” Weiss said. “And if you are deceiving me… if you don't have what I wish to know I will ensure your existence is long and wretched.”

“Then we have an accord,” the demon said.

“Is Ruby alive?” Weiss asked. “Is she hurt? How can I reach her?”

“Give me your first name, summoner,” the demon said.


**Weiss Schnee,** he purred, the invoking of most of her true name with power behind it sending a shudder down her spine despite the intervening summoning circle. She suddenly knew why he had insisted on learning her first name, as he had already known 'Schnee' from some past action. There was a reason her family never spoke their middle names aloud under any circumstances. “You wish to know the disposition of Death's Daughter?”

“Yes,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Your lover is still among the living,” the demon said. “She was taken prisoner by the Herald and passed to her changeling minions to keep unspoiled. She is no longer within Beacon, but instead in a building in Vale, one protected by anonymity and force of arms.”

Weiss fell to her knees, the pressure that had been squeezing her chest loosening for the first time in a week. Ruby was alive. Ruby was alive! RUBY WAS ALIVE!

“The White Fang have her?” Weiss breathed.

“Indeed,” the demon drawled. “She was ordered to be kept intact… for sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice?”

“Yes. When the stars are right the Herald shall make her move, and when she does she will offer Death's Daughter as the first sacrifice to what shall usher in the Next Age. You have little time Weiss Schnee before she and all else on this plane will be lost. You will need help to avert the coming apocalypse… help that I can provide. For a price…”

“She's still alive,” Weiss breathed, reaching up with shaking hand to wipe away tears. “She's still alive.”

“If you wish her to stay such-”

“Begone, demon,” Weiss said, rising and triggering the banishment portion of the binding magic to send it back to where it came from. She knew what had become of Ruby, and even if she didn't know her exact street address, she knew how to start looking.

Weiss cleaned up the ritual chamber mechanically, her mind far away as she contemplated her next move. A week to simply learn the basics of Ruby's condition almost seemed like a waste, but she'd been afraid that, if she was alive at all, she was trapped within Beacon. Weiss still hadn't figured out a way past the warped Great Barrier protecting the building, but with Ruby in the city itself that didn't matter. She could, no, *would* rescue her.

Once the room was in acceptable condition again she finally left it, pausing at the sight of the most
recent food tray. Klein had been bringing them to her three times a day, leaving them outside of the ritual chamber and sending a message to inform her of the offering. She had rarely taken advantage of them, and suddenly, for the first time in a week she felt her hunger as her stomach began to growl.

She wasn't sure how long that particular meal had been sitting out, waiting for her. She wasn't sure what time of day it was at all, actually, having gotten even less sleep than food for the past week. Just as she was about to start eating with her bare hands she heard someone clear their throat behind her.

“Miss Schnee,” Klein said, giving her a concerned look. “I was just about to take breakfast away before preparing your lunch. If you'd like I can make something fresh.”

Weiss hesitated. Fresh and hot food sounded lovely, but leftover breakfast was right there. “Um…”

He chuckled slightly. “Why don't you take one of the pastries and then go clean up. By the time you finish a shower a hot lunch will be ready.”

Weiss flushed and resisted the urge to sniff herself. It suddenly occurred to her that barely sleeping and rarely eating went well with never showering or even changing clothes, and being in close quarters with demons, and frequently dying demons when they didn't tell her what she wanted to know, likely did little to help with her smell.

“Thank you Klein,” Weiss said, carefully picking a nice danish. “I will go to the small dining room near mine when I'm finished.”

“Very good, miss,” he said.

It took all of Weiss’ willpower to calmly eat the delicious pastry as she walked to her room. She had always been careful about what and how she ate since she was a child, her father's insistence that a lady should be refined and beautiful having been absorbed and lived by without question until she met Ruby. Suddenly a life time of table manners and being expected to only delicately pick at healthy food was unnecessary, and while she wasn't going to become a barbarian, she didn't have to live like her father wanted. Despite that, the last thing she needed right then was to have reports reach her father about her scarfing down a sweet like a commoner. She had enough problems as it was.

When she reached her room she stripped quickly and went to the bathroom, hopping into the shower and beginning to scrub herself clean. She worked quickly, but she knew that lunch would take some time to make, and she needed to be thorough if she wanted to actually get clean again. Eventually she was satisfied with her condition and stepped out of the shower to dry off.

It was only when she was almost finished with her routine that she looked in the mirror and frowned. Dropping the towel, she took a long look at herself, and what her obsessive week had done to her. She was always thin, thin enough for Ruby to try to push her to eat more. She had lost most of the little fat she normally had, however, leaving her ribs slightly visible. She had fully made the transition from thin to unhealthy, and with a sudden burst of shame she knew that she wouldn't be able to put the weight back on before she saw Ruby again.

She averted her eyes as best she could as she dressed, not wanting to look at herself anymore. She knew that Ruby would be more upset about her health than her looks, and instead of being comforted that actually made her feel worse about what she'd done to herself in her obsession.

It had taken her longer than she would've like to get herself cleaned up, her long hair having required washing, but eventually she reached the small dining room to find Klein waiting with a large plate of food for her. It was a plate of pasta, lightly sauced and with plenty of vegetables. It was also a much
larger serving than she normally ate, especially around Schnee manor, but he was no doubt just as concerned with her weight as Ruby was.

“Thank you, Klein,” she said quietly.

Klein hovered over her for the whole meal, and between his worried presence and thoughts of Ruby she did her very best to eat as much food as possible. Unfortunately her week didn't do her any favors in that regard, and she soon found that eating any more would make her sick. She shot him an apologetic look as he took the plate away, but he just gave her a sad smile. “Will there be anything else, miss?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “Could you have one of the armored vehicles brought to the front for me, and get the keys?”

“You're going into the city?” he asked, pausing his cleaning up.

“Yes,” Weiss said firmly. “That's where Ruby is.”

“I don't think it will be easy to convince one of the drivers to go with you,” he said. “Only the security teams would be willing to leave the ward line, and they only answer to your father.”

Weiss shook her head. “That won't be necessary. I can drive.”

He looked even more hesitant than before. “You… haven't driven in some time, miss.”

“I doubt the streets will be overflowing with traffic today, Klein.”

Before he could come up with any more objections Weiss left, a destination in mind. Showering and eating had reinvigorated her, and she knew exactly what she needed to do next. Klein was correct that most people would avoid the streets, relying on their wards to try to protect themselves as much as possible from all of the horrors removing the protection of the Great Barrier had unleashed, but she knew exactly where to find allies.

She went straight to the storage room she'd shown Ruby so long ago, and after picking up some dust she walked over to the orichalcum prosthetic arm sitting on the shelf. It had been waiting for centuries, unused since one of her relatives almost died after trying it on, but she was confident that she now knew who it had been meant for. She carefully picked it up, and left the room, heading towards the front of her family manor.

She was almost to the door when a voice spoke up behind her. “Where are you going?”

She paused for a long moment before finally turning around. “I have business in the city, father.”

He did not look pleased.
Jacques Schnee was a middle aged man with well groomed white hair and a bushy mustache. He hadn't changed at all since she'd last seen him months earlier when One Schnee Plaza was destroyed by the orichalcum bomb the White Fang had detonated. Despite a week having passed since the fall of Beacon he looked completely unaffected and unconcerned.

He did look angry though, but that wasn't unusual either. “You will not leave this estate,” he said coldly.

“I have pressing business elsewhere, father,” Weiss said.

“In case you didn't notice, the city has fallen,” he said. “There is no reason to leave until things settle or we evacuate.”

“My partner… my girlfriend is still out there,” Weiss said, raising her chin defiantly. “I am going to rescue her, and nothing you say can stop me.”

He looked even angrier at her words. “I don't care about your infatuations, but I will not allow you to risk your life for such foolishness.”

“Foolishness?” Weiss repeated. “I love her father. Maybe you don't remember what that feeling is like, but it's worth risking everything for.”

“You don't know what love is,” he said.

“If I don't it's because of you!” Weiss shouted. “After mother died I had nothing. The only people that gave a damn about me were Klein and Winter, and neither could give me what I needed.”

“I gave you everything, you foolish girl! You wanted to learn the sword, so I found the best teachers. You wanted to keep singing so I found instructors. Any hobby, any interest provided for! You have the greatest magical education in the world, and a general education that rivals a terminal degree in several fields! I bought everything you ever desired!”

“I just wanted my father!” Weiss shouted, blinking back tears. “Before mother died you weren't… you weren't this. Those murderers made me an orphan when mother died, leaving some shell in your place.”

“Don't you dare bring her into this,” he seethed. “It's obvious that I've indulged you for too long. You will go to your room and stay there until this situation ends, and once it does you will tender your resignation to Supernatural Affairs.”

“No. I am not your puppet! I'm not a doll you can dress up to look nice for guests. Something to be looked at and not touched. I'm not something you own.”

“You're my daughter.”

“You abrogated your rights to that relationship a long time ago. I'm leaving now. Don't wait up.”

“It's obvious I should've done something the moment you came home, but I assumed that you'd get it out of your system with time. I almost put my foot down when I discovered you were trafficking with demons and who knows what else, but I held my tongue. No more. You will give up this insanity now.”
“I won't stop until I've rescued her and stopped this disaster.”

“Stopped this?” he shook his head. “You haven't even glanced outside of a window in a week! We're prepared to depart this plane to a safe haven your grandfather constructed if whatever is happening comes fully to fruition. Beacon's wards are impassible, and no one can leave the city normally, either. Even if the ones behind this don't have any further plans people will resort to cannibalism in weeks. Vale has fallen.”

“You're just going to abandon hundreds of thousands of people?”

“I'm prepared to abandon billions,” he said.

“I'm not,” Weiss said. “Just because you're a defeatist coward doesn't mean that I am.”

“It's not bravery to risk your name and soul making deals with demons,” Jacques spat. “It's not bravery to run headlong into danger because you're too blind to care. It's madness.”

“Then maybe I'm mad,” Weiss said. “At least one Schnee will have tried to do the right thing.”


“Trying,” Weiss said. “Maybe I'll fail. Maybe I'm just tilting at windmills. But if I don't even try to help I'll never forgive myself. Goodbye father… you can't stop me.”

She started walking towards the door again when his next words stopped her. “No daughter of mine will leave this house! If you do… you will no longer be a Schnee!”

She paused, before turning to face him. “No.”

“No?”

“I am a Schnee! More than you ever could be! I was born to the name, and I've borne its weight my entire life. I am a Schnee by blood and deed, and nothing can take that away from me. Not even you.”

They stared each other down, tension heavy in the air. “Perhaps I can't kick you out of the family, but I can disown you. You will receive not a single penny more from me or my company. That includes the dust you're carrying, and the prosthetic you're stealing.”

“No,” Weiss repeated. She looked down at her gloved hand and flexed it for a moment, before clenching it into a fist. “I'm no longer cursed by my power. I have control now. I can touch and be touched. I can continue the family name.”

“What?”

She looked him in the eye. “You never formally removed me from my position as heiress, and I refuse to give up the position now. I am now eligible to carry on the family and company, and I will do so.”

He was obviously taken aback by her declaration, but after a long moment he narrowed his eyes. “You've gone to the board haven't you.”

She smirked. “Of course. I knew that you wouldn't approve of my life these days. Or of my plans for the future. I've already convinced the board that I should inherit, and I've had lawyers looking into everything. You might be head of the family and company for now, father, but you will not be the
end of the Schnee name. You cannot stop me from claiming my birthright.”

“And how do you intend to do that when you plan to throw your life away? You think you can run the SDC when you're this blind? We've existed for centuries because we avoid needless risk.”

“We've existed because we grew strong on the backs of the weak and helpless,” Weiss said. “The faunus we employ are slaves in all but name, and we're responsible for their fate.”

“Those changelings deserve everything they get,” he growled. “Or did you forget what they did to your mother?”

“I'll never forget,” Weiss said. “I'll never forgive the people who did it. But it wasn't even the White Fang who had her killed. It was some idiots with guns who thought they'd strike a blow against our family. It wasn't all of the faunus.”

“They cheered,” he shouted. “When word reached the mines they threw a party! Because your mother was dead! My wife was dead!”

“And how many of their wives are dead?! How many of their husbands and sons and daughters have died for the dust we mine? This family has cause so much death and destruction, and the things done to us in return don't wipe that all away!”

“We do what we must,” he said. “Or did you forget what dust does? Without it we get what you see in the streets! What the White Fang helped cause! The Great Barrier can only exist because of our faunus workers, and if its all torn away the entire world will be overrun with demons and monsters!”

“That doesn't mean we can just give up!” she shouted. “Even if it's necessary, it's wrong. Even if I have to spend my life throwing children into those damn mines to save the world that doesn't mean I can stop looking for a better way. Something to let everyone live better lives! You've given up on them, just like you've given up on Vale. Just like you gave up on me when I couldn't touch anyone!”

He stepped closer. “And what will you do? If you somehow survive and find your partner? If you manage to save this city? If you inherit the SDC? What will you do?”

“I don't know yet,” Weiss said. “But the one thing I won't do is give up. I might fail, but I'll at least have tried.”

“Trying is meaningless,” he said. “If you try and fail you've simply wasted resources that could've been put to useful ends. When lives and fates are on the line you can't just do as you please for moral victories. You have to look at the big picture.”

“You can't forget the little pictures that make up the big picture,” she said. “No matter how much good we do we don't get a pass on the suffering we cause. We have to at least try to make things right.”

“The changelings don't deserve it! They're nothing but animals!”

“No father,” she said. “They're people. They're people just like you and just like me. Some of them hate us… most of them hate us. But they hate us for the same reason you hate them, father. Because of things that we've done. Their hatred is well earned.”

“So you plan to just roll over and surrender to them?! Surrender our company, our family, our legacy?!?”

“Never,” Weiss said firmly. “But someone has to make the first move. If I hurt them for what they've
done to me, then a new generation of faunus will grow up hating me for what I've done to them, the same way I grew up hating them for what was done to me. It's a cycle, and it never stops until someone stands up and says they will let it."

"Then what will you do? Ignore them when they kill us? They just destroyed our headquarters! They killed us in our hundreds! The worst attack they've ever done, and now you want to give in? They'll just take more from us! They'll keep killing!"

"Not if they don't have a reason to," Weiss said. "When I take control I'm going to do everything in my power to fix things. Maybe I'll fail. Maybe it can't be fixed. Maybe I'll have to keep the faunus chained to our mines with magic. Maybe I can't even make their lives better without a price we cannot pay. But unlike you I'm going to try."

He scoffed. "You're still a child. You think you're the only Schnee to ever get a guilty conscience? You think you're the only one to try to fix things? Hell, I tried to pass reforms. Your grandfather did pass reforms. It wasn't enough. Nothing has ever been enough, and ever since we made that devil's bargain of keeping the Great Barrier active we've been lashed to the faunus like the man riding a tiger. If we ever let go it will turn around and devour us."

Just like the situation with the faunus itself, Weiss knew that nothing she said or did would change his mind. He'd suffered too much pain, too many lonely years letting his hatred fester, and in him she could see what she would've become without people like Ruby. People like Blake, and Yang, and Pyrrha, and everyone else she'd met since joining Supernatural Affairs. It was so easy to give into hatred, to think of the enemy hurting you as subhuman, those that you have to hurt as being unworthy of being given succor.

"If I fail then I fail," Weiss said calmly. "Maybe the years will wear me down. Maybe an assassin will kill Ruby and I'll fall apart like you. But I'm not going to give in without a fight. I'm going to go out there and I'm going to save Ruby, and I'm going to save this city, and when you lose your grasp on power I'm going to save this company's soul if it takes my last breath. I'm a Schnee, and I don't back down just because you, or the world, or fate tell me it can't be done. I'll just do it anyway."

He shook his head. "You're a fool. I should've paid more attention to what your tutors were teaching you."

"That would've required paying any attention to me at all. Goodbye, father. I imagine the next time we speak will be across the boardroom or the courtroom."

He didn't say anything as she turned again and left, her chin held high despite the tears in her eyes. As much as she'd come to resent her father, he had cared for her once, and she still remembered the man who, while busy, took time to play with her as a child. Before her mother died. Before she could no longer inherit. Before she was worthless to him.

It was the first time she'd stepped outside since she'd arrived at the manor, and she was surprised to see the early afternoon sun beating down on her. With everything that was happening it felt as though the sky should be black as sackcloth, with a moon like blood hanging overhead. Instead it was a beautiful summer day, hot and bright, the sort of weather where families visited beaches and children played in parks.

Sitting in front of the home was a heavily reinforced SUV with the SDC logo painted on the sides. It was one step shy of being an actual military vehicle, but the armor included mithril weaving and adamantine reinforcements, and every bit of it was enchanted as well. No Schnee was going to die in a company car again after what had happened to her mother.
Standing in front of the car waiting for her was Klein. She walked quickly to him, giving him a small, shaky smile. “Thank you, Klein.”

“Are you alright, Weiss?” he asked. “Do I need to prepare Mr. Schnee's food wrong for a bit? Add too much starch to his laundry?”

She smiled faintly. “No, I think I came out the better of the argument, although I probably just gave myself more headaches for the future.”

“Very good, then,” he said with a smile. “I presume you'll be working to make sure that we have a future?”

“Yes,” she said. “I'll do my best.”

“Then I'll go ahead and request a nice vacation this Christmas,” he said. “I'm sure I'll be around to enjoy it.”

“You will,” she said, before biting her lip. Suddenly she stepped forward and pulled him into a hug, which after a moment he awkwardly returned. “You've been more of a father to me than he has for a very long time, Klein. Thank you for everything you've ever done for me.”

He squeezed harder. “Of course, Weiss. You and Winter have become the children I never had. I'm so glad that you've found a life that makes you happy, even if it is dangerous.”

“I am happy,” she said quietly. “And now I'm going to go rescue the thing that makes me happiest.”

“Very good then,” he said, pulling back with a smile. “You know, your father put away your mother's engagement ring in the vault. He didn't want to look at it after she died.”

She jumped, shocked at the thought, before blushing slightly. The idea of marrying Ruby, of securing a future for the two of them… she wanted that very much, although she wasn't sure that she was ready. “I'll remember that. All the more reason to rescue her.”

“Please, take care of yourself, Miss Schnee,” he said, stepping away. “You need to eat and sleep more. Killing yourself won't find her faster.”

“I will,” she said. “I expect she'll scold me more than anyone else.”

“As well she should,” he sniffed. “Be safe.”

“You as well,” she said.

She almost walked over to the passenger side, but managed at the last moment to remember to walk around to the driver's seat. It was very large, and she had to spend several minutes adjusting the seat far enough for her to actually reach the pedals. Once she did she carefully buckled in and started the engine, which hummed to life with a loud purr.

“Okay, Weiss,” she murmured. “You can do this. You got your license… eventually. You can do this.”

Her first attempt to put the car into drive started the windshield wipers, and after a wince she tried again, sighing in relief when the dashboard lit up indicating that she was in the right gear. After adjusting her mirrors so that she could actually see things she lifted her foot off of the brake and gripped the steering wheel tightly.
The armored vehicle drove like a bathtub full of water, and Weiss found that steering it was more
difficult than wrangling her partner on a sugar high. Even in a nice, responsive car she had trouble
keeping control, being prone to oversteering and under accelerating, so she almost failed to stay on
the path at first as she crawled along the lawn. By the time she reached the gates she had to turn the
air conditioning down to keep from getting too cold, and she had to park the car as she fumbled
around looking for the remote to signal the guards to open the exit for her.

Once she was off of Schnee lands she became even more nervous, although fortunately there weren’t
many any other cars on the road. Most of those she saw were similar to her own, and the majority
were full of armed and armored men and women. The rich part of town, in addition to being full of
very strongly warded homes, had the ability to hire vast private security forces. From what she could
see, when the Great Barrier fell in Vale the families must have banded together to form a mercenary
army to keep their part of town secure.

Here and there Weiss saw a few signs of combat, but everything was neat and orderly until she
reached the edge of the rich part of town. The street ahead was barricaded with metal fencing backed
up by layers of sandbags, and the only way through was to carefully weave between obstructions.
This gate was guarded by more than a dozen men armed with rifles, and what appeared to be an
actual machine gun was set up on top of a building half a block back.

One of the guards motioned for her to stop, and she did, rolling down her window as he approached.
She could see the SDC logo on his bullet proof vest, and he gave her a respectful nod when he
recognized her. “What's your business here, Miss Schnee?”

“I have tasks to accomplish in the city,” she answered.

“It's dangerous out there, ma'am,” he said, shaking his head. “The police have managed to protect
some of the residential neighborhoods, and we've got this part of town locked down, but criminals
and the White Fang are out in force in some of the rougher areas, and monsters are everywhere. You
should really go back to Schnee manor.”

“I'll simply have to be careful then,” Weiss said firmly. “I have something to do, and neither you nor
any number of demons will stop me.”

He nodded. “Yes, ma'am. If you wish to return your vehicle will have to be thoroughly searched,
and we'll need a mage to make sure you're not under the effects of anything.”

“Understood,” Weiss said. “Is there anything else?”

“No, ma'am,” he said with another nod. “Just be careful out there.”
Weiss screamed as the SUV she was driving plowed into some kind of giant, six foot long, cricket-like insect which splattered all over the front of the vehicle. She lost control for a moment, swerving all over the street, her view blocked almost completely by the phosphorescent orange goo that made up the creature's insides. A few moments later the slime boiled away into an opalescent fog, letting her see clearly through her windshield again and making her sigh in relief.

The streets of Vale outside of the area protected by the SDC and the other's private army was quite a bit more infested with creatures from other planes. Some, like the giant bug she'd accidentally hit, probably weren't sentient and hadn't come on purpose, simply getting caught up in the backwash of the Great Barrier being warped. Others, like a Sidhe she'd seen riding a reindeer down a side street, had no doubt been waiting centuries for a chance to return to the mortal world.

Fortunately, virtually every home and business in the city had wards to help protect them, and while some of the stronger creatures wouldn't so easily be stopped, as long as people didn't spend much time on the streets, especially at night, there would hopefully be relatively few deaths if the situation ended soon. She tried not to think about the effect this would have on the homeless population.

Many of the more animal-like, or in her recent encounter's case, insect-like beings had headed to the outskirts away from wards and humans, and she'd seen more than a few strange things since she'd reached the edge of the city. She parked briefly, taking a deep breath, before looking out the window and smiling slightly at a couple of lovely deer standing under a copse of trees. It was good to see something normal despite the situation.

A moment later one of the deer lunged forward, mouth opening to reveal rows of jagged fangs which it used to tear into a rabbit that had been standing nearby. The two sharp toothed deer monsters began to split the small meal hungrily. Weiss looked away and hit the gas, almost swerving off the road before she recovered and managed to herd the heavily armored SUV back into its lane.

After much longer than it should've taken she finally reached the edge of the city's wards, and even without activating her aura sight she could see them glowing under the afternoon sunlight. The Great Barrier had somehow merged with the edge of the city wards, trapping everyone within them, which included Yang and Tai, who's house she finally managed to park in front of.

A loud barking sound came as soon as she parked the car, and she saw the front door crack open for a moment to reveal Tai holding a shotgun, which he pointed at the car. After a moment he recognized the symbol painted on it, relaxing slightly as Zwei came running past him, barking happily and bringing a small but real smile to Weiss' face.

She climbed out of the SUV and crouched in front of Zwei, rubbing his head for a moment. “Hey, little guy. I missed you. Keeping your master safe?”

Zwei barked affirmatively, and she gave him a few more head pats before she stood up and faced Tai, who had walked down to greet her. He looked much more tired and burned out than he had at Christmas, and Weiss felt great sympathy for him. He had not only been dealing with his terribly wounded elder daughter, but he had also lost Ruby with the fall of Beacon.

“Weiss,” he said. “How are you holding up?”

She reached out to shake his hand, only to squeak and stiffen up when he pulled her into a hug instead. She really didn't like to be unexpectedly touched, but after a moment she was able to relax.
slightly, his daughter's efforts having made her a little more used to such things. She was still relieved when he released her, however.

“I'm... okay,” Weiss said. “I've been busy.”

“Seems like it,” he said, giving her a concerned look. “Too busy to take care of yourself?”

She sighed, not quite sure how to respond. The only person who had given her a look like that in a long time had been Klein, and he always at least maintained a facade of professionalism even when caring for her. She didn't know what to do about the raw paternal concern being sent to her by her girlfriend's father. “I'm sure I'll get scolded often, but I can at times become a bit... one tracked when I'm consumed by an important project.”

“Important project?”

“Finding Ruby,” she said resolutely.

“Is she... did you hear anything about her?” Tai asked.

“She's alive,” Weiss said firmly. “Cinder Fall handed her over to the White Fang to keep her prisoner.”

The relief Tai felt sent him stumbling sideways to lean against her SUV for support. Tension and worry had been keeping him on his feet, and the relief he suddenly felt was so profound that he had trouble standing. “She's still alive.”

She carefully reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, offering him a small smile. “She is. I promise. And I'm going to go rescue her.”

“Thank you,” he said, breathing deeply a few times and straightening up. “Come on inside. I'll get you a snack and some coffee.”

“I'm not really...” she trailed off at his stern look and sighed. “Thank you.”

She retrieved the orichalcum arm from her passenger's seat and followed him in. She had visited a few times with Ruby since Yang had moved back home, and despite how painful those visits always were she felt more comfortable there than had in her own childhood home for the past week. She soon found herself sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee in front of her along with several cookies.

“Do you have any carrots or celery?” she asked, eyeing the baked goods dubiously.

He chuckled slightly. “Neither of my daughters like healthy snacks very much, and you could use the calories. Besides, I'm living on what I had stocked up, and most of the fresh vegetables have already been used up.”

“Sorry,” Weiss said, pulling her gloves off and tucking them away before carefully grabbing a chocolate chip cookie. It wasn't the freshest, probably having been baked the week before, but she dutifully nibbled at it. She wasn't the fondest of sweets, but it was quite good. “Have you been safe out here? There seem to be a lot of creatures in the outskirts.”

“I've got my dogs, and I used to be in Supernatural Affairs myself,” he said. “It's going to take more than a few stray monsters to be a problem.”

Zwei barked at that, and she smiled and petted him gently. Tai cleared his throat. “How have you
“I've been looking for a lead on Ruby,” Weiss said. “I was concerned that she might still be in Beacon, which would make reaching her difficult, but I just learned that the White Fang have her. I was hoping to speak to Yang and Blake about it…”

His face fell slightly. “Blake stopped by the night Beacon fell, but then she left again. I think she was looking for the White Fang leadership, but I don't know where, and the cell towers are down.”

“And Yang?”

“She was upset when Blake left again,” he sighed. “They argued and then Yang went to her room, and Blake didn't come back.”

“I see,” Weiss said. “If you don't mind I'd like to speak with her.”

“Of course,” he said, looking at the arm curiously, although he didn't say anything as she picked it up and walked to Yang's room.

Yang was physically much improved since she'd first lost her arm, but she'd been subdued whenever Weiss had seen her. She had at least recently showered and was wearing clean clothing, but it was strange to see someone usually so active sitting on her bed placidly flipping through a magazine.

“Yang,” Weiss said.

She looked up, and then back down at her magazine. “Weiss… you're alright.”

“Yes,” Weiss said, stepping fully into the room. “How have you been holding up?”

Yang shrugged. “There's nothing to watch on TV, and the internet's messed up, so I've just been reading.”

“Have you been keeping up with your rehab?”

Yang scoffed and returned her attention to her magazine. “What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean? I'm here to see you.”

“If you wanted to see me why didn't you come when Beacon fell? When Ruby…”

“She's alive,” Weiss said. “Ruby's alive.”

Yang studied her closely. “How do you know that?”

“I know,” Weiss said. “I've spent the last week trying to figure out how to save her, and I've finally gotten a lead. The White Fang are holding her… and I'm going to need help rescuing her.”

“Don't look at me,” Yang said, looking out the window. “I'm useless.”

Weiss scoffed. “I didn't say I needed someone to proofread quantum physics papers. I need your help saving your sister.”

“And what good would I be for that?” she said. “I can't fight anymore.”

Weiss scoffed again, louder. “I doubt that. And even if it were it were true, if you think the only thing you're good for is fighting than you're even thicker than I thought you were.”
Yang looked at her, really looked at her, for the first time since she'd come in the door, and Weiss held her gaze. “I love my sister. Winter was the only real family I had after mother died and father no longer had use for me. She did everything she could to make me feel loved despite people trying to keep us apart, to keep her safe from my touch. I even started to avoid her, afraid of hurting her, and with father being the way he was… eventually she escaped and I was alone in that mansion, with only a few servants to interact with.

“We love each other, but no matter how much I wish it were otherwise, in some ways I'm closer to you than I am to her. You and I fought and half hated each other for so long, but… then you welcomed me into your family. You've done your best to look out for me, and even when your teasing drives me completely up the wall I know you actually care. You're a good friend, Yang, and an even better sister. And Ruby needs you.”

Yang looked down, blinking back tears. “You say that, but… what am I supposed to do? I can't help anything.”

“You're the strongest person I know,” Weiss said. “Your injury isn't keeping you from being Yang, you are. You just need to get back on your feet and prove it. Not to me, but to yourself.”

“What do you need?” Yang asked, a little more light in her lavender eyes. “You said she's alive? You're sure?”

“I'm sure,” Weiss said. “She's definitely alive… and the White Fang have her in the city somewhere.”

The light that had begun to fill Yang's eyes faded and she looked away. “If you want Blake she isn't here.”

“I want both of you,” Weiss said.

Yang shook her head. “She stopped by and talked to us the night… everything happened. She came up to my room, too. Tried to talk, but… she didn't stay long. She's out there looking for that Adam guy, the one with the sword, and I would've just slowed her down.”

Weiss sighed. “Did that idiot say that?”

“No, but she didn't have to,” Yang said. “After I lost my arm… she's been by sometimes, but she never really says much. She'd rather be anywhere else than around me.”

Weiss shook her head. “Of course she doesn't want to see you like this. She's in love with you, and it hurts seeing you so upset. It hurts me seeing you like this, and a year ago I hated you.”

“If you don't want to see me, then go,” Yang said. “Blake's out there, and she'll know how to find Ruby.”

Weiss closed her eyes, struggling to control a sudden burst of fury. She'd been focused almost entirely on finding Ruby, but a pit of caustic anger had been brewing without her notice at everything that had happened. Seeing Yang giving up brought that feeling roaring to life, and suddenly she didn't care about being nice. Yang seemed like the tough love type, and if someone needed to give her that last push to stop moping around then Weiss was suddenly happy to be that person.

“Oh, that's enough of this pity party,” Weiss said. “So you lost your arm, and your girlfriend is being a scaredy cat, and your sister is missing, and the apocalypse just started. So. Fucking. What.”
“You just…” Yang trailed off, gaping as she looked at Weiss again, obviously not expecting that.

Weiss stepped forward, leaning down so that she was right in Yang's face. “You're pathetic. All it took was one setback and you go crying home to daddy and stop caring about everyone around you. I had to hold Ruby every time she cried after visiting you.”

“She cried?”

“Of course, you boob!” Weiss shouted. “Your sister loves you! You mean the world to her! Having you spend your time with her staring at the TV and ignoring her hurt her! And now I'm suddenly doubting whether you really love her at all.”

Yang's eyes flashed red for a moment. “How dare you say that! Of course I love Ruby!”

“Then act like it!” Weiss shouted. “Stop wallowing in self pity and help me save Ruby!”

“I can't!”

Weiss slapped her. She'd never really slapped anyone before, and it actually kind of hurt her hand, making her wish she'd kept her gloves on. On the other hand, it did feel kind of good, and the stunned look on Yang's face was pretty satisfying. Not wanting to lose her momentum Weiss leaned in close and prodded her chest with one finger. “Even when I thought you were the most annoying brute ever born I respected you. Now look at you? You lose one fight and you throw in the towel. Do you really think one little arm missing means you can't stand up for yourself? Be the Yang we all know? Fight your heart out and beat all comers? The only thing still holding you back is you. The arm is just an excuse.”

“Shut up,” Yang snarled. “God, how can my sister put up with a bitch like you? What do you know about it, huh? What did you do this week after you went home to your daddy?”

Weiss slapped her again. She was pretty sure that it was hurting her hand more than Yang's face. “I did nothing but try to find out how to rescue Ruby!”

“Stop hitting me!” Yang growled, eyes red and hair beginning to smolder.

“What, you're mad?” Weiss sneered. “Want me to get Tai in here so he can keep coddling you?”

“I want to put my fist through your prissy little face,” Yang answered.

“So now you want to fight?” Weiss mocked. “Someone says a few mean words and hurts your feelings, and you get fired up. I guess you don't really love Ruby after all, since you didn't care this much about her going missing.”

Yang roared and lunged forward, a burning fist flying at Weiss' face. Fortunately she'd been expecting it and stepped back just enough, although the heat of the flames made her eyes water as it flew an inch in front of her nose. Yang hadn't set herself for the punch and hit the ground, but she hopped right back to her feet, teeth gritted and arm raised in half of a boxing position, only to stop with a grunt as something slammed into her stomach.

“What the hell is this?” Yang asked as she fumbled with it.

“It's a magic arm,” Weiss said. “Forged by a god from orichalcum and imbued with magics beyond mortal comprehension. Use that and one of two things will happen.”

“What?” Yang asked, her hair snuffing out as she stared down at the arm.
“You'll either get a new arm just as good in a fight as your original… or it'll sear the flesh from your bones.”

Yang looked up at her incredulously. “It'll do what?”

“Either you'll get a working arm again, or you'll get a new reason for self pity,” Weiss said, turning around and walking to the door. “Put it on or not, but either way it's time to choose. Are you going to fight or are you going to give up on life? You can obviously still fight even with one arm, so do you want to have one or two when you save your sister? Or do you just want to go back to bed and pretend that you aren't as strong as I know you are. Whatever you choose, I'm going to go find Ruby.”

She strode briskly back through the house, only hesitating when she found Tai waiting for her near the front doors with his arms folded. “What?”

“I heard shouting,” he said. “What did you just do?”

Weiss sighed. “I don't know if I made things better or worse, but I didn't have the patience for her self pity any longer. Either she's the woman I think she is and she just needed that last push to remember how to fight back against the world, or she isn't and she'll crawl right back into her bed. Either way, if I want to save Ruby I can't spend any more time here.”

He looked unimpressed. “She went through a terribly traumatic experience. Yelling at her-”

“Was probably a bad idea, yes,” Weiss said. “If we manage to save the city she can bill me for her psychiatrist. But nothing else I said was going to get her out of bed, and I need her if I want to pull this off. And it hurt seeing her think that one injury means she isn't the strong person we all know she is.”

“What are you going to do next?” he asked, still upset but putting that aside for the moment.

Weiss pursed her lips. “I wish I could find Blake, but it looks like I'll have to find the White Fang on my own. I'll get one of them to tell me where they're keeping Ruby.”

“They won't want to talk,” he cautioned.

Weiss nodded, but didn't say anything. They stood awkwardly for a long moment, before she gave him a small smile. “I'm sorry that this visit has been… difficult.”

“I used to be spend time with Yang's mom and her brother Qrow at the same time,” he said. “I know all about difficult. Will you come back? You can stay here tonight.”

Weiss looked in the direction of Yang's room. “Um…”

He chuckled, although it was a little forced. “If she's pissed enough to give you problems, then she's fired up enough to help you once she calms down. If she isn't… well, she won't be a problem for you. Ruby loves you, and as far as I'm concerned that makes you family. Please, I'd feel better knowing you're somewhere safe for the night. And I might be able to get word out to a few other SA members who might be able to help.”

Weiss finally nodded. “Thank you. I… I don't know what to say.”

“Just say you'll be safe,” he said.

“I'll do my best,” Weiss said. “And I will rescue Ruby.”
By the time Weiss had reached her SUV the rest of her anger had receded, leaving her tired and feeling guilty about treating Yang that way. She spent her next trip stewing on the situation, worrying about her friends, but unable to stop thinking about Ruby. She would make things up to Yang someday… preferably by bringing her sister back.

Weiss didn't have anymore leads, and she was really starting to regret not trying to bargain with the demon for more information. Knowing she was being held by the White Fang somewhere in the city had seemed like enough to go on, but she was quickly reduced to only one possible avenue for learning more.

The streets she was on were clear in the same way that the rich district had been, and she saw a number of people wearing suits and carrying machetes and guns scattered around the area. They stared at her car distrustfully as she drove down the street, but no one tried to interrupt her as she struggled to park just down the road from Junior's. She could've stopped a little closer, but that would've required parallel parking, and she doubted that smashing the owner's vehicle would make a good first impression.

Junior's nightclub still had bouncers standing out front, although the shotguns were new. She strolled confidently up to them, pausing when one raised a hand and the other put a finger on the trigger, although he kept it pointed up in the air. “Junior's is closed.”

“I'm not here to dance,” Weiss scoffed. “I have business with Junior.”

“Junior doesn't have time-”

“Then he'd better make time,” Weiss said, starting to step past him. He made the mistake of grabbing her arm, and she paused, side eyeing him. “Take your hand off my arm.”

“You might be some big deal when the city's running and the banks work, but right now you've got nothing but paper in your pocket, and if someone shot you they wouldn't even look for your body. Now go away before- AHH!”

Weiss interrupted him by placing a hand, which still didn't have gloves, over his and draining his life. The rush of energy was better than coffee, perking her up despite having gotten so little sleep. She reached over and grabbed the other bouncer's hand when he tried to aim his gun, draining his life as well.

After a few moments she forced herself to stop and let them both drop to the ground, winded but still conscious. They were just trying to defend their boss and she didn't want to do any more damage to them than she had to, but nothing was going to stop her from getting the answers she needed, and Junior was her only option.

The inside was decorated the same as before, although it was mostly empty. There were a few more people dressed the same as the bouncers and the guards she'd passed, but otherwise she didn't see anyone. Junior was sitting at a side table by himself going over some documents with a shot glass and a bottle of whiskey in front of him.

Weiss walked directly over to him, ignoring the crawling sensation of having so many armed criminals staring at her. Junior looked up at her when she got close, before leaning back and taking a sip of whiskey. “Ms. Schnee.”
“Junior,” she said, pulling out the chair across from him and sitting down.

“How’d you get in here?”

The door opened and one of the two guards stumbled inside, shaking visibly and barely able to stand. Seeing that Junior sighed and gestured for the guards to relax, and a fresh group of bouncers went outside to deal with situation she’d left there, as well as to taking over standing guard.

“I assume you have a reason to come here?”

“I need information,” Weiss said.

“Is that Weiss Schnee?” a voice interrupted.

Weiss looked over and saw the twins she'd met last time she'd come here approaching. She felt the brush of their magic, but it had even less effect on her than before. She gave them both a nod and returned her attention to Junior. “I need to locate something the White Fang are hiding. I was hoping you would know something useful.”

“And why should I help you?” he asked.

“Have you looked around the city?” Weiss asked rhetorically. “It's not going to be much longer before food starts running low. Right now people are too afraid of demons to cause much trouble in the streets, but when they get hungry they won't just loot grocery stores. They'll start to riot. And that assumes we all live long enough for starvation to kill us.”

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Do you really think that this is Cinder's last play?” Weiss asked. “She killed the mayor and the commissioner, then warped the Great Barrier so that no one can enter or leave the city or Beacon without her consent, and then she hid herself inside those wards. This isn't the end, and I doubt we have much longer before she makes her next move.”

Junior took a sip as he considered that while one of the women, Miltia, Weiss thought, spoke up. “So, how's that little partner of yours? You two finally bang?”

Weiss gritted her teeth. “The White Fang took her.”

“Oh,” Miltia said with a flinch.

“What about Yang?” Melanie asked. “She's still been ditching us. It's so annoying.”

Weiss reached over and poured herself a shot of whiskey, ignoring Junior's annoyed grunt. “The White Fang chopped her arm off, and her girlfriend is out there looking for them right now. And of course, my partner is her little sister, so she isn't happy about that as well.”

“What!” Miltia and Melanie said at the same time.

“How could…”

“That's awful!”

Even Junior looked shaken at her words. “I never imagined anything could take down blondie.”

“Well, an asura and Adam Taurus together could, apparently,” Weiss said, throwing back her shot. She didn't normally drink very much, but suddenly the weight of everything that was happening hit
her again. She suddenly really, really wanted a dose of Red Sap. The thought of being together and happy with Ruby again was painfully tempting, even knowing the consequences of using it.

“I try to avoid the White Fang when I can, and that's when the city was up and running,” Junior said. “All I know is that they've staked out most of the faunus heavy parts of town the same way I've taken control of the club district. If you try to go there they'll kill you on sight, so just cruising around isn't going to find your partner any time soon.”

Weiss' fist tightened. “I was hoping that you would know something more useful.”

He was about to answer when the doors opened again, and he rose to his feet, his expression hard. “I think you might get a chance at some answers.”

The bouncers that had gone outside slowly walked back in with their hands in the air and their weapons missing. Entering behind them were almost two dozen White Fang members wearing their masks and uniforms and holding firearms and melee weapons. They fanned out, pointing guns at the various criminals around the room, most of whom were well armed and aimed guns right back at them.

Junior's thugs had better cover and positions, but they were outnumbered two to one, and the end result was neither side wanted to do anything violent. Instead they stared each other down, waiting for whatever was going to happen. Eventually Junior stepped forward and broke the silence. “Sorry, gentlemen. The club's closed right now. You'll have to come back when the city is up and running again.”

Several of the White Fang chuckled, but the sound was far more menacing than it was amused. “Don't worry, we aren't here to dance. We're here to make you an offer.”

“What kind of offer is that?”

“Your allegiance, in exchange for your existence,” the leader said. Behind his mask Weiss could see a fanatical gleam to his eyes. It was the kind of look someone had when their commitment to a cause had truly exceeded all rationality, or, as Yang would put it, when someone had drunk their Kool-Aid and gone back for seconds.

Junior scoffed. “You're the ones caught in a crossfire right now. We aren't just going to roll over and surrender to you.”

The White Fang leader looked around, taking in the club. “You've got quite the operation here. Not just for peacetime, but a lot of muscle answers to you. You're practically your own warlord now.”

“I wouldn't go that far,” Junior said. “There are quite a few of us that realized we'd need to take our protection into our own hands. The police are busy trying to keep the bigger residential areas safe.”

“Except faunus neighborhoods,” he growled. “They didn't have a problem leaving our kind to rot.”

“That might have had something to do with the army of White Fang in place before word even spread Beacon had fallen,” Junior drawled. “I'm not surprised they didn't try to run your barricades.”

“We were just prepared for them not to help us,” he said. “We've been stockpiling weapons and supplies for this day, and we were ready for the fall of the Great Barrier.”

Junior nodded. “So the rumors were true. The White Fang are the ones who did this.”

“Of course,” he crowed. “Soon the whole world will be remade, and we will be standing on top. If
you wish to live to serve us then surrender now.”

“I'll pass,” Junior said dryly. “If there's nothing else, then leave and don't come back.”

“There is one other thing…” he trailed off, before turning to face Weiss. “We're not leaving without the Schnee.”

Weiss tensed, her hand gripping her pistol in its holster for a moment. She'd acquired replacement ammunition when she'd first arrived at her family manor, all incendiary dust rounds, but she didn't have that much on her, and without going back or getting into contact with more police she didn't have access to more. She eyed the table for a moment before deciding that it looked sturdy enough and casually rested both hands on the edge as she watched the White Fang carefully.

“Sorry, we don't sell people,” Junior said calmly.

“She's not a person, she's a Schnee,” he sneered. “If you don't want this place burned to the ground then give her to us.”

“Not gonna happen,” Junior said.

Things were silent for a long moment, and then one of the White Fang pointed a gun at her and fired. Weiss had been watching them all closely and dropped, heaving with all of her strength to flip the table as she did. It was made from metal, and while she doubted it would stop rifle fire it would at least make it a little easier to survive what was coming.

What was coming was a lot of bullets. Many of them bounced off of the table, but others punched right through it, and even laying flat on the ground and covering her head with her hands Weiss was sure that she was dead. After a few moments however, fewer shots hit the table, and eventually she risked climbing to her knees to take in the situation.

The White Fang had more to worry about besides herself, as most of the Junior's thugs had followed her plan and taken cover while returning fire. The White Fang might've had the numbers, and the cover was too flimsy to stop all of their gunfire, but they were still standing right out in the open and exposed. A good chunk of the group quickly retreated, giving up the attack as a terrible idea, and the leader was dead from dozens of bullets.

Suddenly with a shriek Miltia and Melanie charged forward. As they moved their bodies shifted slightly, growing vestigial bat-like wings and horns. Miltia, the twin dressed in red and black, grew long, talon-like claws from her hands, while the other, dressed in white, grew similar from her feet, bursting out of her high heels as she leapt toward the remaining White Fang.

The attack was reckless, but they were fast and agile enough to surprise the remaining terrorists and get in close without being shot. They tore into them with wicked claws, and in moments all but one was down. Miltia grabbed him around the throat, although she was careful not to cut him open, and she and her sister dragged the faunus over to their boss.

“Good job,” he grunted. “Alright everybody, check the perimeter. There might be more.”

As the thugs filed out Weiss walked over to join Junior and the twins. “Thank you,” she said hesitantly.

“I wasn't about to roll over for the White Fang,” he grunted. “Besides, when this blows over I'm sure being on the good side of a Schnee and the police in one go will be useful.”

She smirked. “Fair enough.”
Looking at Miltia and Melanie up close, Weiss found numerous other changes to their appearance since they had shifted. Their skin was slightly scaly, and their eyes had black sclera and long, vertically slit pupils. If she hadn't known about their succubus ancestry it would've been profoundly obvious looking at them, and yet, despite the devilish appearance, they were incredibly attractive.

The twins thoroughly bound the faunus to the chair, and Weiss recognized some of the knots and placement of the ropes from a brief study into bedroom activities that neither she nor Ruby ended up having the patience for. The two employed the knots with obviously great ease and experience, making her wonder once again about Yang's former relationship with the pair.

“Alright, you got some questions for him?” Junior asked. “He probably knows a lot more about what you're looking for than anyone else around here.”

Weiss walked in front of him, ignoring his hateful sneer when he focused on her. “I'm looking for my partner, Ruby Rose. The White Fang are holding her.”

“I'll die before I tell a Schnee anything,” he spat.

“That can be easily arranged,” Weiss said, putting her hand on her sword hilt.

Melanie scoffed. “Ugh. We already have enough to clean up.”

“Yeah, let us handle this,” Miltia said.

The two part succubi walked forward, and suddenly the seductive presence they had increased a thousandfold. Weiss blinked, still barely effected, but it was certainly more noticeable all of a sudden. The rest of the room, however, felt it far more keenly. A few of the thugs started to drool while they stared at the twins, and Junior obviously had to strain to stay away from them.

The faunus, who was the focus of their efforts, stared slack jawed at them as they strutted closer. Melanie straddled his lap and gently caressed his face, while Miltia moved behind him and draped herself over his back, whispering sweet nothings, or not so sweet nothings, into his ear. After a few moments of this Melanie began the interrogation.

“What's your name?”

“S-Slater Gialo,” he stammered.

“Ah, that's a cute name!” Miltia cooed. “Almost as cute as you.”

“Hmm… what would sound better, Melanie Gialo or Miltia Gialo?”

Miltia leaned past him and kissed her sister on the lips. “Maybe both?”

“Mmm… yeah, that sounds good,” Melanie purred. “Do you like both?”

“Y-yeah,” Slater moaned.

“Mmm, yes, that sounds amazing,” Miltia gasped. “But… but what about our friend?”

“Does she want to be a Gialo, too?”

“Oh yes, and she's almost as hot as us,” Melanie purred. “There'll be three new Gialos, all excited for their honeymoon. Mmm… all of us taking turns with you, and playing with each other in between… can you picture that?”
He could do nothing but moan in response, his hips trying to thrust up to rub against Melanie while she straddled his lap. She cooed and ran a finger down his chest while Miltia took over the interrogation. “But Slater… we can't find her! The White Fang took her! We can't be with you without her…”

“You're right sister, without Ruby Rose we couldn't possibly make love… we're too distracted. I guess we should just go home and cry…”

“No!” he shouted. “I can help!”

“You can!” Melanie gasped, leaning in to nuzzle against him. “Ooh, you're amazing Slater! Please, help us!”

“Tell us how to find Ruby Rose,” Miltia cooed.

“I don't know who that is,” he moaned.

“Oh no,” Melanie sobbed. “Without our Ruby Rose… we can never be together…”

“I don't know, but I know who would!” he shouted. “Please, let me help!”

“You know someone,” Miltia gasped. “Ooh, I knew a big, strong handsome man like you would know how to find her. You're just so smart!”

He perked up. “No one was supposed to know, but word got out about where some of the leadership meet!”

Weiss had been a little overwhelmed watching the interrogation. It wasn't their magical seduction abilities effecting her for the most part; as someone in love she was almost immune to that, and their ability was less powerful than a full blooded succubus' would've been, anyway. Still, part of her wished that she was tied to the chair being the center of their attention, and she felt a little guilty thinking that, especially while Ruby was being held prisoner. She decided to make it up to her once things were safe again… possibly involving trying out those velvet ropes she bought after all, along with a nice soft chair…

She regained her focus when he mentioned knowing where some of the leadership was, however. That was exactly the kind of lead she needed to find Ruby.

“That's amazing!” Melanie gasped. “Where is this safe house?”

“Just at the edge of the faunus district,” he said. “It's one of the guard posts, but they set up in an old grocery store with a bunch of space, so they're using a break room for meetings. If anyone knows where this Ruby Rose is it's them!”

“That enough to go on?” Junior asked her.

“Yes,” Weiss said, breathing a sigh of relief. “I don't know how to thank the three of you enough.”

Miltia leaned away from Slater and gave her a seductive smile. “You could always spend a little time with me and my sister… we'll show you an amazing time. And it's not like you'll want to go to the faunus district in broad daylight, anyway.”

Weiss crossed her arms. “I would never betray Ruby like that.”

Miltia pouted. “Ahhh… well, when you free her the offer still stands. Come by any time, and the two
of you will be coming again and again and again…”

Weiss turned bright red and didn't dignify that comment with a reply, all but running out as Junior chuckled loudly at her expense.
Ninth Case: Stray

When Weiss left Junior's behind it was getting well into the afternoon, so she had immediately gone in search of something to help disguise herself while poking around the edges of White Fang controlled territory. While she had at first considered getting something large and concealing, like a poncho, she had quickly thought better of it. She would leave the ridiculous ideas to Ruby and instead just decided to get a hat to at least hide her signature white hair.

Most shops were shut down, employees and even owners not wanting to risk going onto the streets if they didn't have to. Most grocery stores and pharmacies had sold out early in the week as people had desperately stocked up, and a few had actually been looted as people became more desperate. Normal stores, however, were intact for the most part, if abandoned.

She eventually settled on nothing but a cheap white summer hat from a department store, whose sliding doors had been unlocked and had automatically opened for her, the city's power not having failed yet. She left cash sitting at one of the registers before returning to her SUV and driving towards the faunus district.

Once she was close to her destination she parked the vehicle, put on her frankly ugly hat, and began to walk the rest of the way. It wasn't long until sunset, but despite that it was still hot, and she was extremely nervous as well. Her 'disguise' wouldn't really fool anyone who looked closely, and with so few people out on the streets people were likely to look very closely.

Eventually she saw a commotion ahead, and as she came closer she saw a rundown looking grocery store with a line of people behind it, and a group of well armed White Fang guarding the area. Like the rich district the streets leading to that area were barricaded, and while there was a crude gate that she could pass through near the grocery store, it was well guarded and she doubted that they'd let her through in one piece even if she wasn't a Schnee.

She walked up and down the streets, until she found an alley that was both unguarded, and the barricade was near a dumpster to help her climb over it. She wrinkled her nose at the stink of the dumpster, which was even worse than it normally would've been, as sanitation had stopped running when the city had fallen. Fortunately the lid was closed, and even if it smelt awful she could at least climb on top without worries of falling into… whatever was within.

The barricade was made from whatever the White Fang could find to use. Cinderblocks, sheet metal, broken down cars and sections of wooden crates and pallets, all piled precariously and barely holding together made up the wall, and while it was taller than a person she had a good few feet on it when standing on top of the dumpster.

She was about to put her hands on it to lever herself up when she noticed broken glass scattered on top. She paused, carefully put her gloves back on, and then delicately brushed the pieces off of it, making sure to drag them onto her side of the fence rather than letting them fall off onto the other side where she was about to drop down. Once she had a large clear area she found the best handholds she could and, after a deep breath to psych herself up, hopped over the barricade.

As it turned out, jumping over the barricade was easier than landing on the other side. She landed hard and almost fell to the ground, barely recovering by windmilling her arms, and she knew her ankles were going to feel it in the morning. She wished that she'd found a better way over, or at the very least that she'd worn more comfortable shoes.

After grumbling under her breath a little she adjusted her hat and gloves and carefully walked to the
end of the alley, looking up and down the street. Once she was sure that no one had noticed anything she cautiously walked towards the grocery store.

The line of people behind it appeared to be receiving handouts of food. Weiss wasn't sure if the White Fang were somehow bringing in new food to the building and using it as a distribution point, or if they had simply taken control of it and had established rationing when Beacon fell, but it appeared that they'd made the locals dependent on their 'generosity' for survival. Unless they ran out it was an effective way to keep the population compliant.

Weiss found another alley near the grocery store and entered it, waiting in a dim spot to observe the situation while formulating plans. She wasn't sure if she would have better luck trying to sneak in under cover of darkness or trying to blend into the crowd now. In the dark there would be fewer people around, but faunus had excellent night vision and she wouldn't have an excuse for being in the area. In the daytime she could try to blend into the crowd, but she wasn't exactly an inconspicuous person.

She was leaning towards going out immediately, the thought of making Ruby wait longer than necessary tipping her towards trying her luck with the crowd, when suddenly a hand covered her mouth and pulled her back further into the alley. She tried to scream, then to drain their life, but they were wearing gloves and long sleeves despite the weather, and her own gloves didn't help when she tried to grab them to pry them off of her.

“Shh,” the person who'd grabbed her said. “Calm down, Weiss.”

She paused, no longer fighting, and when the person released her she spun around, incredulous. “Blake?”

“What are you wearing?” Blake asked, obviously amused as she looked at the cheap hat on top of her head.

Weiss blushed, and then she really looked at her friend. Even in the dimly lit alley she could see that Blake hadn't been taking very good care of herself. Her hair was a mess, she had deep bags under her eyes, and her clothing looked like she'd been living and sleeping in it for a week solid. Most like she had, Weiss realized.

She crossed her arms defensively and raised an eyebrow. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You look… awful.”

“Thanks,” Blake said sarcastically.

Weiss huffed. “Well, if you don't want people to tell you you look awful, then you shouldn't let yourself look awful. When was the last time you had a shower? Or a real night's sleep? Have you been living on the streets?”

Blake looked down for a moment, then frowned. “What about you? When was the last time you ate?”

Weiss huffed. “I know… I ate enough that I wasn't dying this week, but I admit that I don't eat well when I'm stressed, and this is a little stressful. I also… spent too much time trying to find Ruby to properly take care of myself. But trust me, everyone I've spoken to today has tried to get me to eat more, and I am. But what about you?”
“Well… everyone I've talked to today has told me I need to take better care of myself,” Blake said, crossing her arms. “And I **have** been eating normally.”

Weiss raised an eyebrow. “And have you talked to anyone besides me today?”

“What are you doing here?” Blake asked, avoiding the question. “It isn't safe for you to be here. Do you have any idea what they'd do to you if they caught you?”

“Is it much worse than what they'd do to you?”

“I wouldn't be caught so easily,” Blake said. “You apparently thought a silly looking hat would be enough of a disguise to make people not notice you're a Schnee wearing a thousand dollar designer dress.

“More than that,” Weiss mumbled taking her hat off and carefully fixing her hair. “Fine. Maybe I'm not good at the stealth thing, but I have to be here. You were gone, Yang is a mess.” Weiss noted Blake's flinch but didn't say anything, “and the White Fang have Ruby.”

“They what?” Blake said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?” Blake asked. “No one's mentioned anything about prisoners.”

Weiss raised an eyebrow. “They're ruling over a good portion of the city and they haven't taken anyone prisoner along the way?”

Blake hesitated. “They prefer executions.”

Weiss pursed her lips. “Lovely.”

“If they have Ruby… they probably…”

“No,” Weiss said, shaking her head. “She's still alive, and they have her.”

“You might not want to face it, but you should be prepared. Being in denial-”

“I'm *not* in denial,” Weiss growled, before taking a calming breath. “I'm not in denial. She's alive, and the White Fang are holding her for Cinder. I, we, just need to find and free her. What are you doing out here, anyway?”

“I'm looking for Adam.”

Weiss reared back in shock. “Are you insane? You lecture me for being reckless while going after someone like that *alone*?”

“I have to.”

“Why?”

Blake hesitated. “I knew him. When I was in the White Fang.”

“Okay,” Weiss said. “He greeted you personally when we fought him, so that's not exactly a revelation.”

Blake slumped, looking around for a moment, eventually sitting on a nearby crate. Weiss thought
about sitting down as well for what was obviously going to be a long story, but she wrinkled her nose at the thought of doing so in the filthy alley and decided to remain standing instead.

“I didn't just join the White Fang… I was born into it,” Blake said. “My parents were heavily involved in the faunus rights movement, and I went to the safer rallies when I was young, carrying signs and protesting for our rights. I thought we were making a real difference, making the world a better place…

“When I got older I started to realize how little difference we were making. We'd march and no one really cared, we'd disrupt roads or businesses and the news treated us like we were the worst criminals in the world. We worked with groups like the SPLC and the ACLU to sue for our rights, and we'd win, but nothing really changed. And I wasn't the only one who noticed.

“People started getting angrier… more violent. The old leadership tried to stop it, but even they knew they needed muscle. People to keep us safe at protests, people to defend our neighborhoods when humans came around looking for targets. It wasn't that big of a leap for some of them to start attacking people that denied us. Shops that wouldn't sell to us got trashed, and then even the owners beaten up sometimes. They clashed with human supremacists, then others who caused problems…”

Weiss reached over and put a hand on her shoulder. Blake put her hand over it and relaxed a little. “A lot of the old guard, included my parents, ended up leaving the group when Sienna Khan was voted into the leadership. All of my friends were in the movement, and most of us stayed, including Adam. I'd always admired him, and he was the one who taught me how to fight. He was my friend, my mentor… and eventually my lover. But he changed… or maybe I never really knew him.

“He was violent towards our enemies, and then violent towards all humans. I thought he stood for justice, trying to make our lives better… I was wrong. The only thing he lived for was spite. He hated humans, hated this country, hated the whole damn world. And he wanted to tear everything down.”

She was silent for a while and eventually Weiss spoke softly. “What happened?”

Blake shuddered. “I did a lot of things I'm not proud of. A lot of crimes that ate away at me, but I'd never killed anyone, or even hurt anyone outside of self defense. Adam though… his hands were soaked in blood. And it was never enough. One day he decided that it was time to make a big move, something that couldn't be overlooked. By then Sienna Khan had transitioned the White Fang fully into a terrorist organization, and he got approval for his plan.

“The details don't matter, but… he would've killed so many people. And it was enough to finally make me realize what kind of person he was, what kind of group I was a part of… what kind of person I was becoming. I turned myself in, and the FBI managed to stop the attack, but Adam got away.”

Blake paused for a moment. “And now he's doing it all again. I don't know what Cinder's plan is, but… even if it leaves this world a lifeless rock he'll be happy, because every human dying means he's won, even if it kills every faunus, too. And I have to stop him.”

“What do you mean you have to stop him?” Weiss asked. “Last time I checked we all lived on this planet. Unless some animal mascot like on one of Ruby's cartoons came along and named you world savior it's everyone's job to make sure we don't all die horribly.”

“But-”

“Ah-bah-bah-bah-bah! Did you force Adam to become a monster?”
“No.”

“Did you try to make him into a monster?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why are you acting like everything is your fault?” Weiss asked. “Everything that's happening is on him and Cinder and Mercury and everyone else who decided to do… whatever they're doing. None of this is your fault.”

“I have to stop him,” Blake said stubbornly.

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Look, you want guilt so bad? Then how about you take responsibility for the one thing you did do. Yang. And no, I don't mean it's your fault she lost her arm. That was all on Adam, and frankly, I'm surprised nothing happened to her sooner. She's tougher than a normal person, but being a berserker in a world with guns isn't a great idea.

“No, what you did is abandon her.”

“I had to protect her!”

Weiss folded her arms. “She's hurt, but she's a big girl.”

“Adam told me… when he stabbed me. He said that he was going to kill everyone close to me,” Blake said softly. “He was going to take away everyone and everything I care about, and once he did he was going to put me out of my misery. Don't you understand? Every time I went to see her… every moment I couldn't stay away… every second I tried to help her just put her in more danger.”

“God, that's even dumber than I thought,” Weiss groaned. “Are you completely brain dead?”

“Shut up,” Blake said coldly, jumping to her feet.

“He obviously knows who Yang is!” Weiss said. “He cut her damn arm off! Do you really think staying away now would keep him from going after her? And is that why you've been alone on the streets all week instead of working with anyone else?”

“I- I have to try to protect her. To protect everyone.”

“And do his job for him,” Weiss scoffed. At Blake's look of confusion Weiss rolled her eyes. “He said he'd take everyone away from you, but you just did that to yourself. And from the looks of things he's not going to have a hard time finishing you off. You've been running yourself into the ground, all alone, and now you want to take him on?”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Blake demanded, tears in her eyes. “The whole world is falling apart, and Pyrrha's dead, and Yang is hurt, and Ruby's gone… what am I supposed to do?”

Weiss took a deep breath to steady herself, and then stepped forward, wrapping her arms around Blake. She'd learned the art of the hug from Ruby over the past year, and while doing it to someone with several inches on her like Blake was a little different, she smiled as her friend relaxed into her arms. She carefully ran a gloved hand through the faunus' hair as she felt her shoulder get wet, although she couldn't hear any sobs.

“You should let your friends help,” Weiss said softly. “We care about you just as much as you care about us. I know I'm not the most open person, and I was focused on finding out what happened to Ruby this week, but I would've been there for you if I'd known you were hurting this much. I
should've been there for you the past few months, but I thought you'd work things out with Yang on your own.”

“I should've,” Blake murmured. “Everything just… it's all been so hard. It feels like I haven't been able to think in so long. I just keep remembering Yang's arm…”

“It's not too late to fix things,” Weiss said. “Yang is upset about you avoiding her so much, but she really loves you. Besides, I'm sure she's too angry at me to remember anything else right now.”

Blake pulled back and narrowed her eyes at Weiss. “What did you do?”

“I gave her a pep talk,” Weiss said. “Then kind of a pep slap. And a pep yell. And, well, you get the idea.”

“What are you, General Patton?”

“Huh?” Weiss asked.

Blake shook her head. “Forget it… but what were you thinking? You can't just yell at someone going through something like that! You could make things much worse.”

“I lost my temper,” Weiss mumbled. “Besides, Yang is good at being angry, and I just wanted to get some kind of reaction. Look, I already told her father I'd pay for her psychiatrist when this all over.”

Blake smirked. “Typical rich girl. Cause problems then throw money at it until it goes away.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes. “You don't have any room to talk about stereotypes, scaredy cat.”

Weiss worried for a moment that her joke was in too poor of taste, but relaxed when Blake just shook her head with a wry grin. “And I thought Yang had a bad sense of humor.”

Weiss grumbled for a moment. “And to think I was willing to soil myself to hug you. I don't have any changes of clothes, you know.”

“I'm not that dirty,” Blake said flatly.

“Um… when's the last time you looked in a mirror?” Weiss asked delicately. “I know they don't have any outside, but… you kind of really need a bath. And a warm bed.”

Blake rolled her eyes. “I'm still better at sneaking into places that you, and we should get on things. I've been staking out this place among others for the past couple days, and they won't be changing watches until midnight, and the afternoon shift guards get complacent after the sun sets and all of the people waiting for food go home. If we want to grab documents and leaders to interrogate we should get into position soon.”

“Are you sure you're up to it?” Weiss asked. “I wasn't joking about how dead on your feet you look.”

“I'm sure,” Blake said. “I'm tired, but I'm not going to let you go in alone… and there's no way you'd leave without trying to find where Ruby is, is there?”

“No,” Weiss said. “Are you sure you'll be okay?”

“I'm sure,” Blake said. “Now come on. We've got work to do.”
Weiss slowly walked towards the grocery store, although she was barely able to make it out. She was wreathed in a layer of shadows which clung to her body like morning mist to pond; it was thick and obscuring, but the slightest motion could disperse it, and a little sunlight would simply burn it away.

Despite the flimsy nature of the cover none of the faunus standing guard even glanced in her direction, the shadows even muffling her footsteps and the sound of her breathing. She was the closest thing to invisible that she had ever been, and it was strangely freeing not being seen.

Just ahead of her she could make out the distorted form of Blake creeping along. She could only see her because they were both under her magic, and Weiss could still see the strange pose her hands were in as she maintained the spell she had performed. Sometime when everything was finished she really needed to sit down and find out exactly what Blake could do, but she could barely even think about such things when she was so close to a lead on Ruby's location.

They avoided the main entrances, which were not only likely to be guarded but also featured automatic doors. Weiss wasn't sure if the electronic sensors would notice them under Blake's spell, but it really wasn't the time to experiment, so she followed her friend around the outside of the building until they reached a normal door. When Blake paused at it Weiss took the lead, trying to open it, only to find that it was locked.

She pulled out a piece of chalk and quickly drew a glyph around the doorknob. Normally she let Ruby deal with such things, but she'd mastered quite a few tricks with her binding magic that she'd never imagined needing when she was younger. She ignored the pang of fear and loss once again as she thought of her partner, before placing a hand on the glyph and activating it. There was a muted flash and a surge of magic, and then she heard the lock click open.

Inside the next room was dark, and they both slipped inside, shutting and locking the door behind them in case patrols checked it. Once they were in Blake sighed and dropped the concealing magic, and for the first time Weiss noticed how strained she was. “Are you alright?”

Blake nodded. “I'm fine… I'm just not used to using that on two people at the same time.”

“You never used it with Yang?”

Blake shrugged. “Yang hates being sneaky. If we had a case that called for that kind of thing she'd usually make a distraction and I'd take care of the stealth.”

Weiss nodded. “Do you need a minute?”

She smirked. “I'll be fine. Let's find that meeting room.”

They were in the back of the grocery store, and once she'd had a moment to catch her breath Weiss let Blake lead the way through the building; she was the expert on both the White Fang and infiltration after all. Fortunately they didn't see anyone, and they quickly cleared several rooms until they reached their destination.

The room had obviously been used for staff breaks at one point, but documents were scattered across a table which sat at the center of the room, and all of the chairs had been gathered around it. No one was inside at the moment, however, so the two of them shared a glance and walked over to the table, sitting on opposite sides and starting to go through the paperwork, using Blake's flashlight and a light
spell from Weiss to make it harder for anyone to notice lights on under the doorway from the
darkened hall outside.

Weiss quickly found, to her surprise, that even a group of terrorists like the White Fang operated in a
surprisingly mundane manner. There were requisition forms, reports about personnel transfers and
patrols, as well as lists of creatures sighted and dealt with. Some things were vaguer than a proper
paramilitary force would have been, no doubt caused by their cell structure and long history of
keeping membership and activities secret, but Weiss doubted that the documents were much different
than those prepared by the militia guarding the wealthy district.

Unfortunately she wasn't finding any leads on Ruby's location. Lists of people being transferred from
one location to another told her nothing, as the locations didn't list their purpose, nor could she guess
at who might have been assigned to watch a prisoner as opposed to watch a block of apartments.

Finally she huffed a sigh and leaned back in her seat. Blake looked up at her and opened her mouth
to say something only to freeze, her cat ears swiveling to face the door they’d entered through. She
carefully stood while turning off her light, Weiss following suit, and they soon both moved to
opposite sides of the door, and just as they got into position it opened.

The man who came in was middle aged, with a receding hairline and a beer gut, but sharp, intelligent
eyes. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, and his White Fang mask hung around his
neck, both as limp as his scaly tail. He reached over to flip on the light switch without looking, and
the moment he reached out Blake grabbed his arm and put him in a painful hold, her other hand
quickly freeing itself up to cover his mouth as she dragged him to the ground.

Weiss waited until Blake had taken him into the room to close the door and turn on the lights, before
walking over and crouching in front of him. His eyes narrowed into a hateful glare when he saw her,
and she smiled coldly in response. “We were just thinking that there had to be a better way to find
out what we want to know than looking through these document, and look who appears.”

Blake tightened her hold for a moment, making him wince, before leaning in and speaking softly into
his ear. “If you try to shout I'll not only cover your mouth, I'll make sure this arm never works again,
understood?”

He glared but managed a jerky nod before she moved her hand slightly, although she still kept it
close to his mouth to muffle him again if he tried to shout for help. Fortunately he didn't, although he
did speak. “I'll never tell you anything.”

“Everyone says that,” Weiss drawled. “Everyone thinks they're the hero of the story. That they'll win
the battles, that captivity is just temporary, that they'd never crack under pressure and talk. But the
White Fang had to set up cells and keep anyone from knowing things they shouldn't for a reason.”

“I don't know anything, anyway,” he spat. “And even if I did I'd never tell a traitor and a Schnee.”

“Oh, you know plenty,” Blake said. “I saw the way you reached for the lights in the dark. You've been
in this room many, many times to do that without even looking, which means you're not just
passing by. You work in this room... and unless you worked at this grocery store before the city fell
apart that means you're involved in these leadership meetings.”

He paused for a moment. “I worked here.”

“Funny, I don't believe you,” Blake said. “What's your name?”

“Danny Grullo,” he said.
“Danny, my name is-”

“I know who you are, traitor,” he interrupted her. “Everyone in the White Fang knows who you are. It's your fault so many of our brothers and sisters have been jailed. I will never tell you anything.”

Blake looked pained, but Weiss just stared Danny in the eyes. “I'm looking for my partner. Ruby Rose. The White Fang are holding her prisoner somewhere.”

He scoffed. “We don't take prisoners.”

“You don't, but apparently you hold them for Cinder Fall,” Weiss said. “Tell me where she is.”

He chuckled hoarsely. “Your lover deserves whatever happens to her, just like you do. You will never find her.”

Weiss felt cold for a moment, before her face twisted into a snarl and she grabbed his, leaning in until she was glaring into his eyes. “You will tell me everything you know.”

“Never,” He growled, the words distorted.

“I wasn't asking,” Weiss hissed, tightening her grip until it was bruising. “I was telling you. If you don't want to talk… I'll make you talk.”

“Weiss?” Blake asked, her voice worried.

“We can't do this here,” Weiss said, finally letting him go. “Someone could hear us, and I'd rather not have to fight all of the White Fang.”

Weiss looked around, and found some masking tape. It wouldn't be nearly as good as duct tape, but after she stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth she wrapped the tape around his head many, many times, until finally it seemed likely to hold. She thought about doing the same for his wrists, but Blake pulled out a pair of handcuffs and put them on him.

“Now what?” Blake asked. “Do you have somewhere to take him?”

“Yes,” Weiss said coldly. “Can you get all three of us out of here?”

“If you can keep him under control,” Blake said.

Weiss drew her sword and put the tip under his chin and stared into his eyes. After a moment she moved it lower, resting the sharp blade over his crotch, which finally drew a worried look. “You no doubt have the same brand as the rest of the White Fang, so killing you isn't an option. Keeping your manhood, however, isn't my concern. If it concerns you then I'd advise climbing to your feet and not causing any trouble.”

“Weiss,” Blake said waringly, but she didn't say anything further as the man stood unsteadily.

She kept her sword out and her eyes fixed on Danny. “Let's go, Blake.”

Blake sighed, and after a moment began to perform a long series of hand gestures, flashing through them too fast for an untrained observer to understand them. Finally she stopped with her hands in the same complex shape, and the darkness gathered around all three of them.

The walk back through the store and outside again was easier than entering had been. They knew exactly where to go, and with the shadows concealing them they didn't have to worry about being noticed. Whenever their prisoner hesitated Weiss prodded him with the flat of her sword, not
interested in actually hurting him if she didn't have to. Fortunately he always got the point before Weiss felt pressed to use it, and they made good time.

Once they left the building they went back around the outside and walked several blocked down, before entering another alley. This one didn't have a garbage dumpster, but it did have a pile of crates, and it wouldn't take much effort to set them up in a way that would let even someone as short as Weiss, or overweight as Danny, cross the wall.

Blake breathed a sigh of relief and let the magic fade again, before turning to face Weiss. “Where are we going to take him?”

“I've got an idea… actually, I need to check something,” Weiss said. “I really wish cell service was still working…”

“Will the library have what you need to know?” Blake half joked.

Weiss thought about it for a moment. “Maybe. I need to see birth and death records.”

Blake looked at her questioningly for a moment, before shrugging. “You're in luck, I guess. We're just a few blocks from a Department of Health office, but I'm not sure if they'll have whatever you're looking for.”

“Let's drop him off in my car and check,” Weiss said.

They took a couple of minutes getting the crates set up to help them climb over the fence, and then to brush the broken glass off of the top. Blake had to un-cuff Danny so that he could make the climb, but they managed to all make it over and get him bound again in just a few minutes. Once they reached the large armored SUV Weiss was using she popped the back hatch and pushed him inside behind the seats before closing it again. It wasn't the perfect solution, but it wouldn't be easy even for someone as slender and graceful as Weiss to escape the back area while handcuffed, and he was much older and heavier set.

“What are we looking for?” Blake asked.

“A few documents,” Weiss said vaguely. “Starting with his birth certificate.”

Blake's brow furrowed. “His birth certificate? Why?”

Weiss shrugged as they walked. “We need to get him to talk. Unless you want to try waterboarding him or something-”

“Never,” Blake interrupted with a glare.

Weiss just nodded and continued. “-then we need to learn more about him to get leverage. I've got an idea, but I need some information.”

“That… makes sense,” Blake said after a moment. “But why his birth certificate?”

Weiss didn't answer, and after a moment Blake dropped it. Instead they focused on the streets, keeping an eye out for any dangers, human or otherwise. A week was a long time, and Weiss was certain that the city was on the brink of complete anarchy. Food had to be running low, and the fear the citizens felt as they were stalked by monsters was palpable. The only thing keeping large scale looting and violence from breaking out was the vast majority of citizens staying in their homes, relying upon wards and any defenders to keep them safe from everything bumping in the night.
And many things seemed to be bumping in the early evening. In the distance Weiss could make out gunfire, a lot of gunfire, as some organized group, whether a street gang, militia or law enforcement, fought something, and she could also hear a distant, echoing wolf howl, picked up here and there throughout the city. Other, less easily defined sounds happened as well, keeping them on edge, but soon they reached their destination without any trouble.

Weiss easily broke into the DoH building, and the two got lucky when they found a logged in computer with a local copy of the records database available. In under twenty minutes Weiss had found what she was looking for, and the two returned to the car, Blake still not sure what they were doing. Still, she trusted Weiss enough to climb into the passenger's seat after checking on their prisoner, and soon Weiss was driving with a destination in mind.

Of course, Weiss' driving hadn't really improved in the past hours, and despite driving slowly she managed to swerve around quite erratically, taking corners far too wide and coming so close to crashing into everything near the street that Blake was left gripping her seat so hard that her fingers ached.

"Watch out!" Blake shouted, eyes bulging as some large feathered thing ran briefly in front of the car's lights.

Weiss responded with a yelp, jerking the wheel to avoid a collision, making the SUV spin out and thump to a stop with its side hitting a streetlight, which groaned loudly but didn't fall over. Things were quiet for a long, long moment before finally Blake exploded. "WHAT WAS THAT!"

Weiss flinched and fiddled with the shift for a moment, managing to put the car into reverse after a brief pause in neutral as she tried to get them moving again. "It looked sort of like a feathered dinosaur of some sort."

"And your driving?!"

"What about it?" Weiss asked defensively as she narrowly avoided crashing the SUV into a car parked on the other side of the street. They had just started moving again when the lamppost finally gave up and collapsed to the ground in a shower of sparks.

Blake gave her a flat look, and Weiss huffed. "I can drive! Just… usually I let other people do it."

"I can see why," Blake said, flinching as Weiss barely wove through some tipped over trashcans on the street. "If your plan is to get him to talk by driving around with him… it'll probably work."

Weiss huffed but didn't say anything further, and eventually they reached her destination. It was a large cemetery, still in active use, and she stopped near the gate instead of bothering to look for the actual parking area. She climbed out and went around to the back, dragging Danny from the luggage area. He was soaked with sweat and shaking slightly, making her think that Blake's comments about making him talk with her driving might have had some merit.

"Eastpark Cemetery?" Blake asked. "Why are we here?"

Weiss didn't answer, and after a moment Blake sighed and helped her with their prisoner, who was mumuring something through his gag which they both ignored. They moved quickly, Weiss using a light spell to search for her target, until finally she stopped and pulled Danny away from Blake, shoving him to the ground in front of a double gravestone.

"Ouch!" he yelped when she roughly tore off his gag. Masking tape might not have been very good at sticking to skin, but she still managed to rip out a few hairs when she freed his mouth. "The fuck is
“Wrong with you?”

“Tell me where my partner is being kept,” Weiss said.

“I already told you, I don't know anything, and I wouldn't fucking tell you shit even if I did. What, not used to being told no, princess? I'm White Fang, not one of your little slaves. Not all faunus are domesticated.”

“If you don’t know where she is, tell us where to find someone who might know,” Weiss said.

“How about… up your ass,” Danny said. “Why don't you try looking there?”

Weiss smiled coldly and pulled her gloves off, then placed her hands on the ground. She channeled mana for a moment, and then she saw Blake's ears flick out of the corner of her eyes. She had heard something, and her gaze looked down at the ground beneath them.

There was soon sounds loud enough for anyone to hear, and then an arm burst from the dirt beside Danny, making him scream. Another hand broke through right after, and then another pair on his other side. A minute after she had begun a pair of old, decrepit zombies crouched on either side of Danny, and joining the stink of their putrefaction was the smell of her prisoner's bowels.

“The fuck is THIS!” he shouted as their bony, rotten hands pressed down on his hips and shoulders, keeping him in place.

“Don't you recognize them?” Weiss asked casually. “This is Orchie Grullo and Flae Grullo… your parents. Flae, it's been a long time since you've seen your son… why don't you greet him properly?”

The female corpse gave a deep, unsettling moan, and then leaned forward and placed its rotting lips against his cheek. He screamed incoherently and tried to get away, but the four zombie hands held him in place as well as iron bands would've. His eyes rolled around in panic, but there was nothing he could do.

“Now Danny, here's what's going to happen,” Weiss said calmly, like she was talking about the weather. “I've brought back your parents, and they are under my complete control. I can make them do anything I want… and I want them to make you speak. I find torture to be quite distasteful… a fact you should be grateful for, as it's the only thing keeping me from forcing your mom to slowly flay the skin from your flesh and flense the flesh from your bones… with her teeth.”

The zombie moaned pitifully, and Danny screamed again, before incoherently begging her to stop. Blake almost intervened, but a cold, hard look from Weiss left her hovering, unsure of what to do. Finally she returned her attention to the terrorist.

“Like I said, that would be distasteful, and furthermore, illegal,” Weiss explained. “However, there seems to a be a bit of a legal loophole involving the deceased. You see, there isn't a law against torturing the dead in this country. So you have a choice… either you tell me what I want to know, or we can stay here all night while your parents endlessly brutalize each other.”

“You can’t,” he gasped. “You can't do this!”

Weiss leaned forward until her face was close to his. “I'm a Schnee, remember? Did you forget what that means? What I'm capable of? You're used to being treated with contempt by my family, and you hated it enough to fight back against us. Now… now you're keeping me from the woman I love… and I will do anything to get her back.”

She leaned in even closer, until their noses touched and she was staring straight into his terrified eyes.
“Where. Is. She.”
Weiss knew that she'd managed to freak Blake out when they climbed into the SUV with her still in the driver's seat. Blake didn't seem to notice at all, lost in her own world until the second time Weiss almost hit something, but by then it was too late for her to take the wheel.

“What was that?” Blake asked quietly.

“Um… I think it was a deer,” Weiss said, craning her neck to look back at the animal she'd almost run over, nearly making the vehicle run off the road. “It could be some kind of monster deer, though. I saw these sharp toothed deer earlier…”

“Sharp toothed… no, not that,” Blake said, shaking her head and focusing on Weiss. “I meant, what the hell were you doing? With our prisoner. Former prisoner.”

They had decided that they didn't want to keep him in the back of the SUV like a spare tire, and neither knew where to take a prisoner. Without actually discussing it they had decided to abandon him in the graveyard, no longer handcuffed but unarmed and far from the rest of his terrorist organization.

“I got him to talk.”

“You… you got him to talk?” Blake said incredulously. “You brought his parents back as zombies!”

“I did what I had to do,” Weiss said firmly. “He talked, didn't he?”

“Maybe you didn't touch him, but that was still torture!” Blake said. “And what you did to his parents… threatened to do to them.”

Weiss waved a dismissive hand at that. “They've been dead for years. Their souls were long gone, so all I was doing was manipulating their bodies. They didn't think or feel any more after I animated them than they did while they were in the ground.”


“I needed to get him to talk, and we didn't have the time or the facilities to try the Reid technique, or anything else for that matter,” Weiss said. “He knew something, and now we know it. I did what I had to do.”

“What you had to do,” Blake repeated. “What would you do to find Ruby?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… if you could bring his parent's souls back… would you have? If that's what it took to find her? Would you torture dead, innocent people just because it's legal and would let you find her faster?”

“Of course not,” Weiss said, although not as firmly as she'd like. “There would be another way.”

“Like torturing the living?” Blake asked.

“Torture is a bad idea,” Weiss said. “In addition to being reprehensible, it doesn't really work. Someone being tortured will say anything to make the pain stop, whether or not what they are saying is true.”
She thought for a moment about all of the things she'd spent the last week doing to demons, but in her opinion it wasn't the same thing. They were demons after all, and sidestepping any potentially sticky moral issues her actions raised, a summoned demon couldn't directly lie to its summoner, which meant that torturing them was far more effective than doing so to a human.

“Oh good, a practical objection to torture,” Blake mocked.

“I said it was reprehensible,” Weiss huffed.

“Okay, so no direct torture at least,” Blake said. “If he wasn't branded, would you have killed him and then forced his soul to talk?”

Of that… Weiss was less sure. She wanted to say she wouldn't commit cold blooded murder to a helpless captive, even if that captive was a terrorist who was keeping her and Ruby apart. She wanted to believe that she was better than that.

Of course, she had believed that she was better than using racist language, like calling Blake a 'changeling' on the day they met. She had long ago swore to herself that she wouldn't traffic with demons, but her entire past week had been spent that way. She had promised herself that she wouldn't do a lot of things, and as she drove away from the cemetery she realized that she had no idea what was a line too far to cross anymore.

“I hope the answer is no,” Weiss said eventually. “But if killing him was the only way to find Ruby… I doubt the answer is really no.”

“She wouldn't want you to do that,” Blake said quietly.

“I'm a Schnee,” Weiss said. “My family has always done the pragmatic thing, even if it's reprehensible.”

“You're Weiss,” Blake said. “The Weiss that's my friend, the Weiss that Ruby loves and believes in… the Weiss we know isn't just a Schnee. She's better than that.”

Weiss blinked back tears, which did little for her driving, although she managed to avoid hitting a stray black dog by a slim margin anyway. She hoped that it was only her blurry gaze that gave it three heads, but she didn't bother looking closer. “I… I try to be better. To be the kind of person who deserves… everything I have. I just don't know if I can be.”

“You are,” Blake said firmly. “I've done a lot of things I'm not proud of. Even turning my back on the White Fang and turning them into the FBI before my cell could hurt a lot of people felt wrong despite knowing it was the right thing to do. I know something about feeling like I'm nothing but a terrible person… and I realized something along the way.”

When she didn't say anything Weiss glanced over at her. “What was that?”

“You are what you do,” Blake said. “If you want to be a good person… act like a good person. Everyone has bad thoughts, wants to take the easy way sometimes. What makes a good person is that they don't listen to that little voice. Just like it doesn't matter how good of a person you think you are, if you take the easy road you aren't a good person. You are what you do, and if you do the right thing then you're a righteous person. And Weiss… you usually do the right thing. Just… believe in yourself and don't do things that you'll regret and you won't have anything to regret.”

“You make it sound easy,” Weiss said.

Blake shrugged. “It isn't. But if it was then there wouldn't be bad people in the world. And Weiss…
doing anything because of things that have happened to people you love, being willing to do the
difficult, terrible things because you feel the ends are important enough to justify any means? I've
been down that road. The White Fang is still going down the road. You can do better than that. I
know you can.”

They stayed quiet for a while, until finally they reached their destination. Weiss had to drive almost
two more blocks before she found a place to park that didn't leave the car in the middle of the road or
require parallel parking. She managed to run up on the curb parking normally, so she really didn't
want to try to do it the hard way.

“You really can't drive can you,” Blake said with a wince as Weiss tried reversing to park better and
almost hit a car. “Did you bribe the DMV?”

“Ha ha,” Weiss muttered as she finally got the SUV stopped. “I haven't driven in a while, but I'd like
to see you do much better. This thing is like steering a barge with one paddle.”

Blake snatched the keys from her hand. “Alright, I will. And when I don't drive like seven year old
who stole her parent's car keys you won't ever drive me again.”

“Fine,” Weiss grumbled, although she was actually relieved not to be forced to drive anymore.

They walked until they were close to their destination, stopping behind a truck to keep from being
easily spotted. It was a narrow two story townhouse in a line of similar homes, only distinguishable
from the rest by the address in faded letters stuck beside the door. It had a single window beside the
front door, and two windows near each other on the floor above, all covered by curtains that blocked
any view in, or any easy observation out.

“So this is where Torchwick is holed up,” Blake said, scanning the townhouse just as intently as
Weiss was.

The White Fang officer they had interrogated really hadn't known where Ruby was being kept, nor
did he know where the top leadership was hiding out. Despite being more open and acting like an
army more than a terrorist group since Beacon fell, some habits were too ingrained to be ignored, and
one of those was apparently Adam Taurus' secretive nature. If they had no other objective that kind
of gap in the chain of command could be exploited to bring down the entire group, but they had
much bigger concerns.

The only thing he did know of interest was where Torchwick was, and they could only hope that he
either knew how to find someone with more information, or he knew Ruby's location himself. Either
way they had swiftly driven across the city, wanting to make an attempt at capturing him if he wasn't
too heavily guarded that night.

Which seemed to be the case. The local area was patrolled by a rough looking biker gang, although
they seemed mostly interested in keeping monsters out of the area as they hadn't tried to stop them
from driving by. The street they were on was completely empty, although most of the townhouses
had light coming from them, indicating that people were still living in the area. Still, they saw no
signs of guards, and she doubted that the bikers would've been so nonchalant about an armed force
of White Fang passing through.

Once she was sure they wouldn't be dealing with an army Weiss activated her aura sight and studied
the buildings. Unfortunately, unlike many of the poorer homes in the city, the wards guarding the
townhouses included protections against human intruders. The only way in was to beat the wards, or
to be invited inside by someone properly keyed into them.
“What do you think?” Blake asked after a while.

“I think we can do this,” Weiss said. “The wards are going to be a problem, though.”

Blake nodded. “They look commercial, but they're dense, and I don't see any obvious gaps… and
that's about all I know about wards.”

“They don't simply rely on intent,” Weiss said. “They fully stop unapproved entry. I'm going to have
to compromise them if we want to get inside.”

Blake tilted her head. “Can you do that?”

Weiss nodded. “Like you said, they're commercial, and we aren't very close to any ley lines. They're
also pretty new looking.”

“How does that effect them?”

“It means they aren't very powerful,” Weiss explained. “They're well made, but it's like finding a
finely crafted privacy fence made from balsa wood. You can't get past it without dealing with the
fence, but it isn't going to be enough to keep out an intruder who really wants to get inside.”

“So… you need to break through them?”

“I could,” Weiss said, studying the building's wards again. “I could summon my Knight and have it
smash through with force, or some other entity with enough power to overwhelm the wards. A
magic user like Goodwitch could probably batter the wards down with one well placed spell and a
bit of dust, or I could do the same with a glyph and some dust of my own. And of course the wards
wouldn't keep out zombies, so I could find another cemetery and have an army drag him out for us to
capture. There's a better way, though.”

“What's that?” Blake asked, tilting her head curiously.

Weiss pulled out a piece of chalk. “It'll take longer, but I can drain the mana out of the wards. When
I'm finished they'll be weak enough we can simply walk through them with no more obstruction than
if they were cobwebs.”

Blake smirked. “I like that plan better than knocking them down.”

“I thought you might,” Weiss agreed. “I'll need to get close to the wards to do this. Watch my back?”

“Of course.”

There was something exciting about breaking into a building. The wards wouldn't stand a chance
against her magic, and despite being relatively straightforward, drawing the perfect circles to drain
away the wards quickly and subtly was just complex enough to be interesting. In twenty minutes she
was finished, having settled on two large but relatively simple glyphs drawn near the front corners of
the townhouse. After giving them one more glance she activated them both and then lead Blake back
to cover.

“What now?” Blake asked.

Weiss glanced at the circles with her aura sight. They glowed a dull blue color, and the wards, which
were a rainbow of colors, slowly dulled, making the blue glow ever brighter. The change was
proportional, and after a moment she was satisfied with what she was seeing and returned her
attention to Blake. “My binding magic will drain the wards over the next hour or so. After that we
just have to sneak in.”

“And they won't notice?” Blake asked.

Weiss hesitated. “The wards don't look to be tied directly to anyone inside, so most likely not. The only way to see the change is if they look at their wards with aura sight, and even then they might not notice; I made the drain slow and steady so that there wouldn't be any rapid changes.”

Blake pulled out her cellphone and glanced at the time. With the cell towers not fully operational and the internet not working properly either her phone was little more than a glorified pocket watch, but after glancing at it she nodded and put it away. “So we'll be getting in a little after midnight. Not bad.”

Weiss nodded, and they waited awkwardly for a while, until finally Blake broke the silence. “So how are you doing? Really?”

Weiss sighed. “I just want to get Ruby back. Stopping Cinder would be nice as well.”

They talked quietly for a while, neither of them delving too deeply into any serious topics, just catching up. They hadn't spoken nearly as much since Yang lost her arm, which was a shame as they had finally accepted each other without any of the baggage about the White Fang between them. Despite the time barely interacting they felt closer than ever before as they waited for the wards to drain.

There was a small flash, subtle enough that it could easily be mistaken for normal city disturbances as her glyphs finished their work, and Weiss took a moment to study the home just to make sure. Finally she was satisfied with the results and turned to face Blake. “Ready to go in?”

“Yes,” she said. “How do you want to approach this?”

“Put a sword to his throat and demand he talk?” Weiss offered. “Take down anyone who tries to stop us. Probably not a good idea to use guns though; the biker gang guarding the area didn't seem worried about people passing by, but they might object to a shoot out.”

Blake nodded and pulled out her kusarigama, which Weiss noticed had been repaired since her battle with Adam. “Do you feel Neo?”

Weiss looked down at her hand. “No, but that doesn't necessarily mean she isn't here. The scar looks normal now, so I think when she broke the connection when we last fought she actually destroyed the link entirely. I think we're just going to have to hope that she isn't here, or at least that she'll back off when there's a sword to Torchwick's throat.”

“Do you think you can climb the side of the building?” Blake asked.

Weiss side eyed her. “No.”

Blake blinked at the blunt answer. “I should be able to get to the window. If it can be opened I should be able to slip in that way.”

“Or I could just unlock the front door with magic,” Weiss said. “Splitting up is a bad idea.”

“And going in through the front door isn't?”

Weiss shrugged. “A door's a door. Unless they have squads worth of people taking shifts standing guard I don't think any entrance is going to be much more secure than the others.”
“And if he has a bunch of White Fang standing guard?”

“Then we're in for a tough fight no matter how we sneak in,” Weiss pointed out. “He doesn't seem like the type to have an army hanging around his hideout, though, and a bunch of White Fang might not be too welcome with human criminals offering security. Honestly, the fact he didn't set up in the faunus district and just let the White Fang protect him makes me think he wants some distance from them.”

“Fine,” Blake said. “Why don't you go in the front door, and I'll slip in through the window?”

Weiss didn't like the idea of splitting up, but after a moment she agreed, if only to keep them from standing in front of their target arguing for any longer. Blake pulled a pair of small objects from her clothing and attached them to her hands, giving her small metal claws. With their help she easily scrambled up the brick wall, reaching the window in moments without making a sound.

Weiss took a little longer to magically unlock the front door, but once she did she drew her sword and carefully opened it, slipping inside first. The wards barely tingled as he broke through them, and she didn't see any other kind of security when she glanced around the small living room she'd entered. There was a staircase up right in front of her, and she could see the entrance to a kitchen on the other side of the room.

She decided against checking the rest of the floor, instead opting to climb the stairs as quietly as she could. She didn't really have any training or experience with sneaking around, and she winced every time her slight weight made the old staircase creak. She managed to reach the top floor without hearing any reaction to her moves though, so she pressed on, carefully opening the door to the room containing the window Blake had climbed to.

It seemed she'd hit the jackpot on her first try, as laying on the bed snoring slightly was Torchwick. For a moment she couldn't believe her luck as she started to walk towards him in the dark. With the curtains drawn she could barely see anything, but she didn't care, only focusing on getting to him and capturing the criminal.

Then she accidentally kicked *something* fragile, and it shattered loudly.

Torchwick rolled out of bed, unfortunately away from her, grabbing a cane as he went. Hearing the noise within, Blake, who had apparently raised the glass from outside but was waiting for the right moment to enter, hopped through the window and raised her weapon, the part in the curtains letting everyone see a little better.

“Freeze, Torchwick,” Weiss spat, jumping onto his bed with her rapier extended.

“You!” he shouted, stumbling back further. “I'm flattered, really, but I'm not the sort to invite women into my bed without at least a date first.”

“I will *happily* stab you,” Weiss growled.

“Whoa, whoa, wait a second!” he objected, backing fully into the corner. “Let's talk about this!”

“The only talking you're going to be doing is telling me where Ruby is.”

“*Weiss!*” Blake shouted, stepping towards the door she had entered through and starting to spin the weighted end of her kusarigama.

A quick glance made Weiss' heart drop into her stomach. On the one hand, she was glad that her connection to the asura was fully broken. On the other, it also meant that she had no warning before
an enemy that she doubted that she and Blake could beat had approached them.

“Look, why don't we- yikes!” Torchwick began, before being cut off as Weiss exploded into motion, slashing at the hand holding his cane. He managed to block, and tried to keep talking as she continued the attack. “Aren't you supposed to be the good guys! I'm trying to wave a white flag here!”

Weiss didn't respond, using every bit of her skill to try to disarm her opponent. He was very good, and the fact that he was entirely on the defensive helped him, but he was backed into a corner, and Myrtenaster was a much better weapon than the random cane he had acquired to replace the one Ruby had destroyed. She managed to get his weapon into an awkward position, and was just about to disarm him when he shouted something that made her freeze.

“I know where Ruby is!”
Weiss froze at those words, a wave of triumph filling her as she finally had the lead she'd been looking for. She pulled back slightly and pointed her rapier towards his face. “Tell me where Ruby is or I'll stab you until you talk.”

“Yeesh,” he said. “She's gone one weak and you're this cranky? I can't imagine how pent up you'd be in a month.”

Weiss snarled, hand tightening on her sword until the point began to shake. “Tell me where she is.”

“And lose my leverage?” he asked, before yelping as he barely parried her next attack. Weiss had abandoned all subtlety by simply thrusting forward as fast as she could, blindly trying to impale the annoying criminal. “I'm going to tell you! Just not when you're about to stab me!”

“Weiss,” Blake said, a little amused. “Why don't you let him speak. Whatever happened to 'torture doesn't work'… five minutes later you're trying to stab someone until they talk.”

Weiss took a step back. “It might not work… but it would make me feel better.”

“Yeah, when you rescue her I'm going to send little red a fruit basket,” Torchwick said. “Whatever she's doing is probably the only thing keeping you from going on a rampage through the poor, not-so-innocent criminal element.”

Weiss grumbled under her breath, but after a glance at Blake and Neo, who had backed away from each other, she sheathed her sword. “There. Now tell me where she is.”

He scoffed. “You think this is a two second conversation? You woke me up in the middle of the night… I mean, I'm still mostly dressed since I've been concerned about something going wrong; we're pretty apocalyptic outside, and I'd rather not have to flee naked from a plague of locusts or something. Anyway, the point is, I'm going to need a nice cup of tea if we're going to have a chat.”

“Tea?” Weiss said incredulously. “You want tea?”

“It's nice and soothing,” he said defensively. “Good for the nerves after almost getting run through by an obsessed lunatic. Besides, what would you want to drink, coffee? At this hour? You might not take care of yourself, obviously, but my body is a temple.”

“This is ridiculous,” Weiss snapped. “And I'm not a lunatic!”

“At least she's copping to 'obsessed',” Blake said. “A cup of tea sounds lovely… but I'm going to watch you make it.”

“You really think I'd do something nefarious to your drink?” Torchwick protested innocently. “Good idea! You ever think about doing the criminal thing? You know, when not being part of a terrorist cult?”

“I'm starting to understand the urge to stab you,” Blake said. Neo just nodded vigorously at that, making Torchwick pout.

The next several minutes dragged endlessly for Weiss. She couldn't believe they were actually drinking tea with a notorious criminal, or that the notorious criminal actually took the time to make finger sandwiches to go with it. Or that she was sitting mere feet away from Neo, who was leering at
her threateningly the whole time.

“Sorry, nothing’s very fresh,” he said casually as he set the tray of food down on the kitchen table in front of them. “Still, if anyone needs some food it’s you. I do not want to see how upset your partner would be if she saw you all skin and bones like this.”

“I'm not that skinny,” Weiss grumbled, although she did grab one of the small finger sandwiches. She normally wouldn’t eat this late, but he was right about Ruby being unhappy with her for not taking care of herself.

“This is good,” Blake said, sipping her tea.

“Thank you!” he said happily. “I spent a couple years in London after getting a little too much heat out west. Not my favorite city in the world, but I have to admit to picking up a taste for good tea while I was over there. Thank whoever's listening for online ordering or I'd be stuck drinking American leaf water instead.”

Weiss took a small sip. “Yes, very nice… now where's Ruby.”

He sighed. “Alright, alright, keep your skirt on. Hmm... where to begin?”

“How about with why you're helping us?” Blake said. “Maybe I could've bought enough time for Weiss to stab and grab you, but I'm not sure the two of us could've beaten Neo. We're good fighters, but the real heavy hitters are our partners.”

Torchwick nodded. “Fair enough. Look, I may be a master criminal, but at the end of the day I'm really just a dashingly handsome rogue who pals around with an asura. I steal stuff, sometimes on commission, sometimes because I think it'd look nice in our living room. But all I really am is the best thief in the world. Apocalypses aren't really my thing.”

“You should've thought of that when Cinder Fall had you stealing dark artifacts,” Weiss said.

He winced. “Probably. Look, I've got a bit of a blind spot when it comes to magic toys. I like magic toys. I've stolen some amazing magic toys over the years. And Cinder knew exactly the kind of things to pay me with on top of the millions in cash in my numbered accounts. A lot of it burned down when your partner chopped my cane in half, but I had really started putting a nice collection of magic items together...”

“So you sold the world for some cheap baubles,” Weiss said, her voice unimpressed.

He pouted again. “I didn't know it was going to get this bad! I mean, look outside! We're a week past going crawling to Vault-Tec out there, and it's only going to get worse.”

“So you want us to stop Cinder Fall?” Blake asked.

He pointed at her. “Get the kitty cat a kewpie doll, Neo! I don't know exactly what she's up to, but I know it's going to make everything that's happened so far look like puppies and rainbows. And it's not going to be much longer, either. A few more days and 'the stars will be right' or whatever and we're going to all be wishing we'd never been born.”

“If you're so against her, why haven't you done anything to stop her?” Weiss asked.

He snorted. “You don't live as long as I have in the criminal underworld by not knowing who you can't survive pissing off, and more than anything else I'm a survivor. And in the interests of surviving past this month, I'm going to help you out and then stay the hell out of everyone's way until this...”
whole thing blows over.”

“What is she?” Blake asked. “What is Cinder Fall for you to be this afraid of her?”

He sighed and leaned back in his chair. For a moment he dropped his usual roguish demeanor, making him look almost as tired and worn down as the two detectives were. It seemed like very few people were resting well in Vale, no matter what side you nominally worked for.

“I know you've met them before, Schnee,” he said. “One came to this city a while back and set himself up as a crime boss. He'd been exiled by his people so wasn't as strong as he could've been, but he was still too powerful for any criminals to risk taking him on. If you hadn't shut him down things might've gotten ugly.”

“The Prince,” Weiss said, thinking back to everything she knew about Cinder Fall. They hadn't met often, but she was apparently very skilled at keeping her presence undetected, and she couldn't think of her showing any tells either way, although if she was a Sidhe it was impressive that she'd managed to rise in human politics without the ability to actually lie. “She's a Sidhe lord?”

“Well, Sidhe lady,” Torchwick said.

Weiss shook her head. “The magical community doesn't use gendered language for non human entities like that. Male, female, neither, both or other, if its powerful enough to gain the appellation 'lord' then that's the title used.”

He rolled his eyes. “Great, wonderful, what would I do without that info. Here's the thing though, that's not all she is.”

Weiss nodded. “I noticed. When she revealed what she could do at Beacon I felt something familiar, which I suppose was her Sidhe nature, but there was something else. Something demonic.”

“And that's exactly what it is,” Torchwick agreed, taking a long sip of tea. He stared down into it for a moment, then leaned back in his chair to snatch a bottle of whiskey from the kitchen counter, pouring a dollop into his cup before taking a bigger sip. “I don't know how it works. I'm good with magic items, great with them even, but I know my limits, and I know I don't know much about whatever she is. She serves some demon lord though, and she gets power from that.”

“So a Sidhe lord working for a demon lord?” Blake said. “I remember Dagon… how much of her master's power does she have access to?”

“Hard to say,” Weiss said, leaning back in her seat in thought. “Humans have difficulty channeling demonic mana. Even a small infusion can lead to very messy ends. I have no idea what kind of tolerance a Sidhe would have, much less a Sidhe lord.”

“And that's the situation,” Torchwick said with faux-cheer. “But hey, knowledge is power, right? Feel empowered to deal with her yet?”

“I'm not going to deal with her until I've saved Ruby,” Weiss said firmly. “You said you knew where she was.”

“And they say teenage boys have one track minds- OW!” Torchwick yelped, jumping as she kicked his shin. He frowned and rubbed it for a moment before answering. “Yes, yes, I know where she is. As you’d probably guess she's in White Fang territory. They're keeping her caged up in a warehouse.”

“Caged up?” Weiss repeated flatly.
“There were dog food bowls involved,” Torchwick said blithely. “When I was leaving they were
talking about tracking down a shock collar for her as well, but they weren't sure just how unharmed
Cinder wanted her, and they were afraid to find out the hard way what 'unspoiled' might mean for a
sacrifice.”

“She growled, suddenly remembering what the demon she'd summoned had said. She'd
been so focused on finding Ruby she'd never really absorbed its other words.

“Oh, right,” he said sheepishly. “Um… apparently whatever Cinder's up to, she wants to sacrifice
little red as part of it. So… yeah. There's that.”

Weiss couldn't think, couldn't do anything but sit and try to process those words for a moment. She
couldn't, but she pushed that aside to focus on the key point, that being the need to rescue Ruby
immediately if not sooner. Preferably sooner.

“When is she going to… make her move,” Blake asked, casting a concerned glance towards Weiss,
who was still staring into space.

“All I know is she was babbling something about 'the stars being right', whatever that
means,” he said. “I haven't heard anything since, so I'd imagine you have at least a couple more days. Ugh, what
I wouldn't give to have my mirror right now. Neo and I could climb through and escape to one of my
boltholes in London or southeast Asia instead of being stuck in this glorified bubble.”

“We need to save Ruby,” Weiss said. “You are going to help us, right?”

He hesitated. “Telling you where she is is a kind of helping.”

“You can do better than that,” Blake said.

“Why should I?” he asked. “I'm already risking Cinder's wrath just doing that much. If her or the
Fang figure out I told you how to find her you'd never find my body.”

“I'm going to rescue Ruby before I even think about stopping Cinder,” Weiss said. “If you want to
survive what's coming you should help us save her.”

“What makes you so sure you can stop her?” Torchwick asked. “She's locked up tight in Beacon,
and the only person who can let anyone in or out of there is her. And even if you reach her, how
could you stop her? She's too powerful.”

Weiss scoffed. “If you think we can't stop her then you don't know what the hell you're dealing with.
I've spent my life studying magics you've never even imagined, Blake is apparently an actual ninja,
Yang is going to be ready to fight, stronger than ever, and she was strong enough to give an asura a
run for her money… and Ruby is a damned living demigod. And that's just four of us out of all of
Supernatural Affairs. Vegas should be putting its money on us… but only once we get Ruby back.”

Torchwick stared at her a moment, before jumping when Neo poked him. He looked over at her to
find her nodding before sighing and straightening up. “Wow. Great speech, really gave me
goosebumps. Honestly, it's moments like this that I think maybe I joined the wrong side, going with
the whole villainy thing.”

“So you're going to help?” Blake asked.

He smirked. “We'll help you save little red. After that you're on your own… and I'd better get
positive results. I'm expecting the barrier down and for Neo and me to be sipping fancy drinks on a
tropical island before the end of the week. If we get devoured by Grimm I'm going to be pissed.”
Weiss raised her teacup. “To not being eaten by Grimm.”

“Hear, hear!” he said cheerfully, clinking their cups together.

Weiss took another sip and then set her tea down. “Alright, so let's go.”

“Oh no, no can do,” Torchwick said.

Weiss' eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“First of all, and I think this is pretty important. I'm the one you just pulled from my nice REM cycle, at sword point no less,” Torchwick said, pointing at her accusingly. “And, despite that, you two are the ones who look like you need to take five... hundred. So we're not going anywhere until we're all rested and ready, and preferably with at least a little more backup.”

“And is Ruby rested?” Weiss asked. “Or is she in a cage ready to be sacrificed?”

“Ugh, this is what I'm talking about with the one track mind thing,” Torchwick said. “She's already been there a week, she can wait one more day. I'm sure she'd rather you wait and actually, you know, successful spring her from her kennel than go rush in now and die messily in front of her.”

“A week too long,” Weiss growled.

“Okay, if basic logic and reason won't sway you,” Torchwick said, rolling his eyes. “There are a lot of guards there, and not just because he's having to keep a prisoner. Taurus holds meetings with his innermost circle in the same building, so the place is full of guards, even if they make it look normal from the street. I can go in during the early evening, but this late at night? There's no way they'd let me past.”

“We can just sneak past any guards,” Weiss said. “Did you miss the part about Blake being a ninja?”

“Well, you aren't, and even if you were do you really want to risk making a mess of things while they still have Ruby?” Torchwick asked. “I dunno at what point Taurus decides killing Schnees and traitors is more important to him than keeping Cinder happy, but if you go barging in there what are the odds someone puts a gun to her head, or a bullet in her brain?”

“So you want to go in first and free her?” Blake asked.

“I'll try at least,” Torchwick agreed. “Look, here's the plan. I've only ever stopped by in the evening, so we're gonna have to hit the warehouse a little before sunset. I'll go in with Neo, charm my way past the guards, and I'll unlock the back door for you lot to sneak in. Give me a few minutes, and then take down anyone you see. I'll have picked the key from someone's pocket and be freeing little red. Then me and Neo can go our merry way while you lot take down Cinder and save the world for all the good little boys and asuras to keep robbing it.”

“What if he's there?” Blake asked.

“Then you better be ready to fight really hard,” Torchwick said. “Unless you want to call it off and try again on another day, we'll just have to hope that tomorrow isn't one of his meeting days. He's going to have more numbers, some magic users, and his own emo self ready to fight you if it is. And someone's bound to notice something if you just try freeing her without dealing with all the guards. Faunus have sharp ears.”

“We won't wait any longer,” Weiss said firmly. “Even one more day is pushing it. If he's there then he's there.”
Torchwick raised his cup of tea at that. “See, I knew you'd say that. So, how’s that for a plan? This time tomorrow night you can be cuddled up to your cute little reaper having your wicked way with her or whatever, and I'll be finding somewhere else to lay low until this is all over one way or another.”

Weiss glared at him for a moment before finally nodding. “Fine. We'll meet you here in the afternoon with as much backup as we can find. But if this is a trick I will rip out your soul and—”

“Until then,” he interrupted with a nod. “Now if you would, I need my beauty sleep, and you do, too. Unless you want your partner to see you like that.”

Weiss glared but stood, heading outside with Blake on her heels. They stayed quiet until they reached the SUV, where Blake pointedly moved ahead of her to climb into the driver's seat. Weiss didn't object, happy to no longer be behind the wheel.

“So, where to next?” Blake asked. “Your apartment?”

“No,” Weiss said. “Tai's place.”

Blake paused. “Are you sure that's a good idea?”

“Yes,” Weiss said firmly. “You need to talk to Yang. And we need to try to find backup in case we have a real fight on our hands tomorrow.”

Blake started the vehicle, and after a few moments of driving had it up to full speed, easily avoiding any obstructions with her keen nightvision and driving skill. She at least had the decency not to rub in how much better of a driver she was than Weiss, although that may have been because she was so focused on her upcoming meeting with Yang.

The tense silence in the SUV only broke when they finally pulled to a stop in front of Tai's house. “It's going to be okay.”

“How?” Blake asked. “We... we've barely talked since it happened, and I've seen her, but... I haven't been there for her, not really anyway.”

“Yeah, that wasn't a good move,” Weiss acknowledged. “But you love each other, right?”

“Yes,” Blake said quietly.

“Then explain why you were so upset, and just... be honest,” Weiss said. “Most problems aren't so bad if you're willing to really talk about it.”

“Okay,” Blake said, taking a deep breath. “Okay.”

They climbed out of the car and walked up to the porch, where they paused again. “Should we bother them? I mean, it's really late. Almost one in the morning. They're probably asleep.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “The lights are on.”

“Still... it's really late,” Blake said. “I don't want to disturb them.”

The door opened before Weiss could say anything, revealing Yang standing on the other side. She gave them both a long look before finally breaking the heavy silence. “Jeez Weiss, and here I thought the cat was the one who was supposed to drag something in.”
Yang looked different from how she had been just that afternoon. She had her hair up in a ponytail, and she was wearing exercise clothing, and in fact looked as though she had recently been doing just that. That change was nothing compared to her new arm, however. The dull gold color of the orichalcum suited her, and it was stunning to see the tiny, perfect articulation as she folded her arms, the artificial limb moving as smoothly as her natural one.

“Yang…” Blake said, trailing off for a moment. “I'm… I'm so sorry. I know I've-”

Before she could finish her sentence Yang stepped forward and grabbed her, pulling her into a hug. Blake stiffened up for a moment, before leaning into the contact. “It's okay,” Yang said.

“It isn't.” Blake said softly. “I felt so guilty every time I'd come visit you. Losing your arm… it was all my fault.”

“How was it your fault?” Yang asked. “I was the one that went berserk for so long. That's why I attacked him blind like that.”

“Adam and I have a history,” Blake said, stepping back to look at Yang.

Yang's brow furrowed. “A history?”

“He wasn't always like this,” Blake said, before sighing sadly. “Or maybe he was, but I was too naive to see it. I told you I grew up as part of the White Fang before it became so violent, right?”

“Yeah, your parents were in it,” Yang said.

“I met Adam when I was young,” she said. “He was a little older than me, and he was so dedicated to the cause. So passionate. When things became more violent, he was there every step of the way, fighting for our people, then literally fighting with people. And I followed him… and we were together. Romantically.”

Weiss bit her lip, not sure if she should be here for this. They were both ignoring her, and while she considered them both friends, and in fact they might someday be related by marriages, that didn't mean that Blake should talk to Yang about something so intimate with her bearing witness.

“Weiss, Blake?” a voice said from inside the house.

“Oh, hello Mr…. Um, I mean, Tai,” Weiss said as Blake and Yang pulled apart.

“If you're going to have a heart to heart why don't you do it inside or outside?” Tai said. “I don't need every bug in the city coming indoors, and you're wasting the AC.”

Yang huffed and half turned to look at him, crossing her arms again. “Dad…”

“Look, I'm just saying, in or out, whichever you want, just not neither,” he said. “This is even worse than when your mother was trying to push you out.”

“DAD!”

“Seriously, thirty-seven hours of labor,” he said shaking his head. “We're all lucky your mother didn't destroy the whole hospital. And here you are, twenty-four years later and you still can't decide if you want to be in or out.”
“Ugh, come in,” Yang said, stepping back and gesturing with her artificial arm towards the bedrooms. “No sense in talking outside.”

Blake meanwhile was staring at the arm, apparently having just noticed it. “Your arm…”

Yang looked down at it and gave a small smile as she clenched her fist. She then looked up at Weiss, who cringed slightly as Yang as walked up to her, before she was pulled into a too tight hug. “Thank you.”

“Air…”

Yang squeezed a little harder for a moment, before letting Weiss breathe, although she didn't let go. “Thank you for the arm, and the push.”

“I'm glad it worked,” Weiss said. “The last person to try to use it spontaneously combusted.”

There was a long pause as all three of them turned to stare at her. Tai finally broke the silence. “What?!”

Weiss shuffled back slightly, although she couldn't quite escape Yang's grip, which tightened as she tried to get away. “It was forged by the god Hephaestus and given to one of my ancestors. He said that a Schnee would have a need for it one day, but the only one ever to try it… it didn't work out. I guess the arm rejected him.”

“So you gave it to me?! I'm not even a Schnee!”

“No, but I needed you,” Weiss said quietly. “Ruby needs you, so I need you.”

Yang looked at her with a very mixed expression. “I can't decide if I want to hug you again or strangle you.”

Weiss frowned. “There's a difference?”

Yang scoffed. “Yes. Trust me, you're coming very close to getting both to death.”

“Well, exciting revelations about what could've happened to my daughter aside, can you please come inside,” Tai said, making Yang sigh and finally release Weiss, who wobbled for a moment.

They trooped inside, Yang and Blake going to her bedroom, while Weiss followed Tai into the kitchen. She smiled when Zwei greeted her again, sitting down and pulling the dog into her lap, petting him for the second time that day. Tai bustled about for a minute, before putting a coffee cup down in front of her.

“Thank you,” Weiss said, smiling and grabbing it. She took a sip and almost spat it out when she realized that it was hot chocolate, but after a moment she swallowed anyway. She wasn't usually a fan of sweets, but the hot drink was surprisingly comforting as she relaxed, the exhaustion of the past week catching up to her again.

“I'm the one that should be thanking you,” he said as he sipped his own drink. “Maybe it's the arm, or maybe she just needed a push. Yang's always been strong… but she's my baby. I guess I never forced her to get up and do anything, not like you did.”

She shrugged. “You don't have to thank me. If things didn't work out I could've just made everything worse. I just… I just needed her to be strong so we could save Ruby. And it hurt seeing her like that.”
He nodded. “Well, serious mental trauma and risks of spontaneous combustion aside she's on her feet again, and you managed to bring Blake home. Seems like a win in my book.”

She smiled slightly before her face dropped into a look of determination. “Tomorrow we're going to bring Ruby home.”

“You found her?”

“We found someone who found her,” Weiss said vaguely. “He'll be bringing us to her tomorrow evening.”

“Do you need reinforcements?” he asked. “I worked with Yang all evening and she's already pretty comfortable with that arm, but if you need more I used to be part of SA, too. I mean, I'm a little rusty, but… she's my little girl.”

Weiss smiled at him. “I really appreciate the offer, but you've been out of the field for a long time. I couldn't face Ruby if you were hurt trying to rescue her. Besides, it's good to have somewhere safe to come back to when we have her.”

“Fine, fine,” he sighed. “I knew retiring would come back to haunt me; I'll stay and guard the homestead. Do you want any other backup? I'm sure I could get ahold of some more SA people.”

Weiss nodded slowly. “Our plan calls for stealth, but we could probably bring a few more along if you know a way to contact anyone. If Adam Taurus is there this could get messy.”

“I'll see what I can do,” he said. “Now why don't we get you settled in for the night. I'm sure my daughter and her girlfriend have a lot to talk about.”

“Thank you,” Weiss said, walking over to the sink to empty out her half full cup of hot chocolate. It was nice, but still too rich for her taste, especially so late at night.

As expected he took her to Ruby's room, and she smiled slightly as she saw that it looked exactly the same as it had at Christmas. It hadn't been very long, but so much had happened. She was still getting used to touching Ruby when she'd last been in the room, and now she was thinking about being with her for the rest of her life.

“Goodnight,” Tai said.

“Goodnight,” she said in return, offering him a small smile. Once he was gone she walked over to the bed and sat down, putting her head into her hands with a sigh.

One more night.

Weiss had never had anyone as close to her as Ruby. Her mother had died at a young age, and after that her father had become distant. As much as she loved and looked up to Winter, she had moved away from home many years ago, and had become stern and a little distant. She knew Winter loved her, but she wasn't there for her as often as she wished. The person in her life she had probably become closest to before Ruby was Klein, and technically he was paid to be there, although at least that meant that he was there.

Ruby meant so much to her, and the thought of Ruby cold and alone in a literal cage hurt her soul. Ruby was probably so frightened, maybe even unsure if she was still alive and looking for her, and everyday alone with nothing to do must've felt like an eternity. Solitary confinement did terrible things to the mind, and she'd been kept prisoner for over a week. She needed to save Ruby.
After a while Weiss stood and walked out into the hallway. Yang's room was next door, and she paused a moment outside of it. They were still talking, not just about Adam or Yang's arm, but about all kinds of problems in their relationship that they'd been ignoring. She smiled for a moment and then continued on. They would be okay.

She didn't see Tai on her way out, but soon she was outside and climbing back into the driver's seat of her SUV. She carefully started it and began driving, keeping her tired eyes peeled for any obstructions or creatures as she slowly drove back into the city.

Things were fairly quiet, although she saw movement here and there in the darkness. Some of it may have been her exhaustion and nerves playing tricks on her, but not all of it. There were definitely *things* active in the dark, and being all alone in the night as she was probably made her seem like a juicy target. She tried not to think about that.

Eventually she reached a police roadblock, but after flashing her badge she made it past. The police were for the most part dressed in riot gear and armed with rifles and shotguns as they guarded the heart of the downtown area. It was one of several sections of the city that the police had staked out to defend, and soon she pulled to a stop in front of her apartment building.

The lobby was unchanged, although the doorman was missing, and no one else was visible. She was still able to take the elevator up to her penthouse apartment, and after unlocking the door she didn't even bother to close it before walking inside and looking around.

It had only been a week, but her home somehow felt barren. There was little dust, although it more than there had ever been before as her cleaning service no longer came. After taking it all in she slowly walked around, looking at the home she shared with Ruby. She felt numb, until finally she reached something that made her pause.

Ruby had taken over a desk in their living room, covering it with partially deconstructed machines and electronic devices. Weiss had grumbled a little about the mess, but secretly she had loved watching Ruby get lost in her projects, taking the devices apart and fixing them up again. Sometimes she would pretend to do paperwork for hours just so that she could watch Ruby enjoying her hobby.

Before she realized what had happened she fell to her knees, sobbing. Ruby was gone. Pyrrha was *dead*. She'd avoided thinking about that for so long, but she was. Maybe she could get Ruby back tomorrow, but she would never again see the amazon champion. They weren't as close as she was to Yang and Blake, but she was a good friend all the same, and Cinder and taken her life at the same time she'd taken Ruby away.

She didn't know how long she cried for, but then a hand touched her shoulder. She jumped, terrified at who or what could've made it past her wards without her knowing, only to find Yang and Blake crouching beside her. She remembering keying them into her wards to make it easier to deal with their help moving Ruby in, and to allow someone to come to their aid if there was an emergency.

She supposed collapsed on her floor crying her eyes out counted as some kind of emergency. She hesitated for a moment longer before surrendering to Yang's embrace, her cries growing louder. In Yang's strong arms she finally felt safe to break down completely, and it was a long time before she stopped crying.

“Are you alright?” Blake asked softly.

“Are any of us?” Weiss asked thickly as she pulled back, wiping her face clean.

Yang chuckled. “No. I'm not at least.”
"Do you... do you want to talk about it?"

Yang looked down at her metal hand, clenching it into a fist. "I'm... thank you for getting me a new arm. It's amazing, but... I still don't feel whole. I failed to keep Blake safe, and when I tried to kill Adam Taurus for what he did I ended up losing an arm for it. And I spent so long knowing I couldn't do my job anymore. Couldn't protect Blake, or Ruby, or even you, or the rest of the city. I felt so... worthwhile. I still feel that way. I wasn't strong enough to get the job done when I had both real arms. How am I supposed to do it now?"

"Yang..." Blake said, trailing off as she put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's okay not to be okay," Weiss said. "I know I pushed you hard today. I just... I just thought you could handle it. And you seem to be handling it. I don't know what you've gone through, what you're still going through, but I can't think of anyone in the world that I think could make it through it better than you. You might feel weak, but you're strong. And not just because of how well you can fight, or how much weight you can lift."

Yang gave her a crooked smile. "Aw, didn't know you cared so much ice queen."

"Of course I care!" Weiss shouted. "I might not be good at showing it, but I care!"

Yang nodded. "I know you do. I know we didn't always get along, and you're really bad at being teased, but there's no one I'd trust with my sister more than you. You might be an ice queen, but you're our ice queen. Right Blakey?"

Blake rolled her eyes. "If we have to claim her."

"Thanks," Weiss grumbled.

Blake smirked at her for a moment before sighing. "Yang was hurt because of Adam... and me. If I hadn't been involved with him he never would've cared to hurt Yang the way he did. He wants to hunt down and torment everyone I care about before killing them. And now he has Ruby in a cage, and we might have to be face him again tomorrow. After last time... I'm afraid. I'm so afraid."

"We'll win this time," Yang said firmly.

"Yang-"

"No, this isn't just me being, you know, me," Yang said. "I know I screwed up last time. I needed all the strength I could get to fight that asura so I let myself get lost in my berserking. That cost me my arm, not you and your past. Even if he didn't know you he would've cut me down, Blake. It wasn't your fault at all.

"This time, though," Yang said with determination. "This time I'm gonna fight like dad taught me. I'm gonna keep my cool and take him apart piece by piece. I've got this... we've got this."

Blake smirked. "I thought you were the one who didn't think she could do this?"

"I can't let my kitty cat down," Yang said. "I might not be okay, but I'm not gonna leave you out to dry. But what about you, Weiss-y? What's screwed up about you tonight?"

"I've spent every waking moment focused on getting Ruby back," Weiss said. "I didn't take the time to think about what happened to her, or to mourn Pyrrha, or think about the fall of Beacon or that there's an apocalypse happening in our backyard. Now that I can't just... keep moving forward it caught up to me. Everything is just... terrible. I just..."
“You're not okay,” Yang said. “You know what we need?”

“What?” Blake asked.

Yang grinned. “A group hug!”

“What, no- ACK!” Weiss objected as she and Blake were hauled uncomfortably close. The arm wrapped around her back was the metal one, but despite being harder than a normal arm it wasn't really uncomfortable.

She glanced over at Blake, who rolled her eyes and gave in, wrapping one arm around Yang and the other around Weiss. Finally, after squirming a bit she accepted her fate and hugged both of them. It felt surprisingly good, and while she didn't want to admit it she actually felt a little bit better. She wasn't alone. They were all in this together.

“You're a brute Xiao Long,” Weiss grumbled softly.

Yang chuckled. “I guess. Do you feel better though?”

Weiss just harrumphed as she was finally released, refusing to answer, which made both of the others laugh. “You two are the worst.”

“Better than being the Weiss-t,” Yang tried.

“No, just… no,” Weiss said, standing unsteadily. She had been on the floor for a long time.

The others rose too, Yang giving her a small smile. “So! What do we do now?”

“I came here to get something, but I should grab a few other things as well,” Weiss said. “If I'm going to stay at your family home for the night, and maybe a few more nights after I might as well have clean clothes and toiletries.”

“Sure, gotta look your best for Ruby when we save her tomorrow,” Yang agreed. “We should grab some stuff for Blake-y on the way home, too. I didn't want to say anything, but… you kinda stink.”

“Hey!”

“What, did you turn into an alley cat when you turned stray?”

Weiss shook her head and ignored them, going into her bedroom and grabbing a small suitcase before loading it up with everything she might need to stay somewhere for a few days. Just before she closed it she went over to her own work table and grabbed what she had originally come to her apartment for.

She took a moment to study her reflection in Torchwick's mirror, which she had been reminded of when she'd spoken to him. She tried a shaky smile on for size, trying to ignore the deep bags under her red, swollen eyes and her thin cheeks. She would get Ruby back, and then they were going to stop Cinder and save the world.

That's all there was to it.
Ninth Case: Rescue Mission

Weiss had thought that waiting so late in the day to make their move would've been incredibly difficult, but as it turned out going for a week with so little rest, and then finally sleeping in a comfortable bed with a full belly had knocked her out for a very long time. Whenever she began to wake she would smell the distinctive scent of Ruby that had seeped into the bedroom and fall back asleep until finally, well into the afternoon, she could no longer ignore the call of nature and the realization that Ruby wasn't actually there hit her hard.

A long shower had cleared her head somewhat, and then, despite the lateness of the hour, Tai had managed to stuff her full of two large meals between trips out of the house to look for reinforcements. She had offered to go along, if only to not be driven insane waiting, but instead she'd been put in charge of guarding the house while Blake and Yang reconnected (noisily) in their room for most of the afternoon. Weiss was glad that Tai showed her where his music collection was, even if hair bands weren't at all to her taste.

Tai didn't return alone on the trip after providing her with dinner. She was still picking at her meal when he came home leading Jaune behind him. It was the first time she'd seen him since he carried her out of Beacon, and he looked like he'd experienced a rough week just like everyone else. He was pale, with deep bags under his eyes, and a number of bruises, fresh cuts, and large bandages decorated his body.

“Hey Weiss,” he said, studying her just as closely as she was him.

“Jaune,” she said with a nod. “You've been keeping busy I see.”

“Yeah,” he said, sitting down across from her and sighing. “Things are tough out there. I've been working with the police guarding a bunch of apartment complexes, trying to help them keep the monsters in check. Just... there's a lot of monsters.”

“Yes,” Weiss agreed. “Every creature waiting for its chance to visit our plane that couldn't because of the Great Barrier finally found an opening. Even stopping Cinder and restoring our protections won't fix everything. We're going to spend years rooting out some of these monsters.”

“They aren't exactly being subtle,” Jaune said. “We've had refugees from other parts of the city come to us. Most places have people guarding them, even if the guards are just gangs running the area and doing whatever they want. A few places... a few places have nobody, and there're demons breaking through wards and killing people in their homes. When they run out of easy targets... I don't know that the police can hold them off, especially spread thin trying to protect so many people. It's going to be a slaughter.”

“We won't let that happen,” Weiss said firmly. “The obvious monsters will be easier to deal with once the Barrier is back up and the army can come in. Flamethrowers and tanks are pretty effective, and the army has units dedicated to fighting large supernatural threats. They'll bring in food and medicine as well, so that problem will be dealt with. The long term problem is going to be all of the subtle demons that will blend in during the aftermath. Vale is going to be a hotbed of supernatural crime and unusual murder for decades after this. Although at least we'll have job security.”

“We have to stop Cinder first,” Jaune said darkly.

“We will,” Weiss said. “Once we get Ruby and her father finds more reinforcements I've got an idea about how to stop her.”
Jaune's attention, which had been wandering a little as he took in the room, focused on her with laser-like intensity. “How? I've heard of some attempts to probe Beacon, but the only thing that can make it through the wards are whatever Cinder wants.”

She smirked. “There are always ways. We just need the manpower to beat Cinder and her demons… and Ruby will help with that.”

“Can we beat her though?” Jaune asked. “You saw her fight with Pyrrha… or the parts we could see. Most of it was too fast.”

Weiss shook her head. “It won’t be easy… but yes, she can be beaten. Ruby almost beat her, and if she wasn’t so aggressive she might've won right there. Pyrrha could've beaten her.”

“Pyrrha died,” he said harshly.

Weiss nodded. “She decided that protecting the people she cared for was more important than killing Cinder. She believed in fate… but in the end she defied it.”

“She died because of it,” Jaune said. “Because of us.”

“She lived because of us,” Weiss countered. “Without the people she cared about she never would've been anything but the champion of the amazons. Her friends, and especially you, gave her happiness. She didn't die because she lost her battle with Cinder. She died because she won her lifelong battle with fate, or did you think the champion of a pantheon was supposed to die saving a handful of police officers?”

“She still died,” he said quietly.

Weiss hesitated, and then carefully reached out a hand, putting it on top of his. “She did. And nothing can fix that. Nothing can bring her back. But she died because she chose to live her own life and do what she wanted instead of being a slave to her destiny as the amazon champion. The same way we as humans can make our own choices every single day. And I'm choosing to rescue Ruby, and then to destroy Cinder for doing this and so many other things.”

Jaune nodded, his face determined. “We will stop her. For Pyrrha and everyone else who's died.”

“Man, where's my camera when I need it,” Yang said from the doorway.

Weiss retracted her hand to cross her arms and glared at Yang. “It's part of your cellphone where it always is, you brute.”

“Good point,” she said. “Still wish I had a photo of the ice queen getting along with vomit boy to show Rubes when we save her. It'd blow her mind.”

Weiss rolled her eyes, while Jaune stared slack jawed at Yang. “I think the arm is crazy enough.”

Yang looked down at her metal limb and flexed the fingers. “Yeah, Weiss gave me a hand yesterday, and now I'm ready to kick some White Fang ass and take back my baby sis. Which, by the way, it's time to do.”

Weiss groaned. “Really? We're about to go rescue Ruby and you descend to punning about your artificial limb?”

“What can I say? I'm handy with that sort of thing.”
“Ugh, that's basically the same pun from a minute ago,” Weiss said, glaring at Yang.

“Alright, alright,” she said. “I guess when it comes to making you laugh I'm still coming unarmed to the fight.”

Weiss rolled her eyes and stood, before pausing and giving Jaune a serious look. “Are you ready for this?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I still wonder sometimes why I'm in Supernatural Affairs at all. I mean, I'm not like you guys. I can't do magic stuff, and I'm not super strong or super fast or anything. I'm just... a guy. But if there's anything I can do to help, then I'm going to do it.”

“Being willing to stand up for what's right and put in the hard work to actually make a difference is enough,” Weiss said. “So let's go save Ruby.”

“What she said,” Yang agreed with a grin, and Blake drifted into the living room and gave them all a nod as well. “At the very least you aren't a thief we're trusting for some reason.”

Soon the four of them loaded into the SUV and drove to where Torchwick was staying. The sun was low in the sky, although it was still up, and here and there people were out on the streets. It was still dangerous, but many demons and monsters were nocturnal, or even harmed by daylight, and so people that had to go out did so while the sun was still up.

“We don't have much longer, do we?” Blake asked.

“We've got plenty of time to reach Torchwick,” Yang said from the driver's seat. She'd grabbed the keys, having heard enough from Blake to know not to let Weiss behind the wheel.

“I mean, we don't have long until the city falls apart completely,” Blake said, nodding to a group of scared looking people pushing a cart with a pitiful amount of canned food in it along. The strongest members of the group were carrying baseball bats and watching everyone warily.

“Yeah, things are getting bad,” Jaune said. “The police I was with commandeered every source of food we could find, but it isn't going to last much longer. There's a lot of people in the city, and the stores rely on getting deliveries in. Things are getting ugly out there.”

“You said you had an idea about how to stop Cinder,” Blake said.

“I do,” Weiss confirmed. “But if we're going to confront her we'll need more people than just the four of us. Ruby will help, but even then things would be desperate if we made our move without Tai finding more people.”

“Either way, it's time to get Ruby back,” Yang said, pulling to a stop in front of the townhouse Torchwick was living in.

Weiss saw that the wards were still weakened, but there was no sign that something else had broken through them overnight. She was still concerned that Tochwick might have fled instead of waiting for them, so she felt her heart unclench when he stepped outside to meet them before they'd even left the SUV, Neo following behind.

“Well, well, well, if it isn't goldilocks,” Torchwick said, before pausing to light a cigar. “And here I thought snow white over there had gone crazy when she said you'd be useful reinforcements.”

Yang looked down at her orichalcum hand, flexing it into a fist. “Arm or no arm I'd be able to help. I could beat you with one arm tied behind my back, so what's a little dismembering?”
He smirked. “As I recall I sent you flying through a wall last time we fought, and Neo did a real number on you as well.”

“Care to try me again?”

Blake rolled her eyes. “Enough with the posturing. Are you ready to take us to Ruby?”

“I'm ready.” he said, eyeing the group. “Are you ready? I don't need anyone getting impatient and screwing this up. And that includes little miss obsessive-Schnee over there, and big sis, too.”

“We're ready,” Weiss said. “Now let's go.”

When there were no other objections Torchwick lead them to a large white panel van. It was old and bit rusty, the sort that straddled the line between looking like something a contractor without spare income would use, and something parents warned their children about accepting candy from. He unlocked the side door, and after a bit of heaving he managed to slide it open, letting them climb inside.

“There are no seats,” Weiss objected.

The back was completely empty, just bare, slightly rusty metal behind the front seats. Torchwick just rolled his eyes. “Sorry princess, next time I'll make sure your carriage has gold trim before I take you to save your lady love.”

Weiss scoffed, ignoring Yang's chuckle at her expense. “If I slide into something back here I'll repay you with ten times as many bruises.”

“I'll drive safe,” he said flatly, closing the door behind them. It took a few grunts of effort, but the four in the back were too busy trying to get comfortable to help. Once that was done he and Neo climbed into the front seats, and before starting it he turned and looked back at them. “When we reach the checkpoint I'll give a shout. Lay low and try not to get spotted or this could get ugly real quick.”

The ride was intensely unpleasant. Despite his promise to drive safely Weiss found herself sliding around a bit, although at least she didn't actually hit anything. The tension in the air could be cut with a knife, as all of them knew they were trusting Torchwick with their lives, and they couldn't even see where they were going from the floor.

After what felt like forever he shouted back at them while slowing down. “Alright, lay low and stay quiet.”

When he finally came to a stop and rolled the window down they could hear an annoyed voice greeting them. “This is White Fang territory. No humans allowed.”

“Look, you seem like a dim kid, but even you should know who I am,” he said. “Roman Torchwick. Works for your boss's boss's boss? Any of this ringing a bell?”

“No humans-”

He rolled his eyes. “Look, can I talk to a manager? Or someone with an IQ over thirty? Maybe a dog who's learned at least fetch, as in, fetch someone who can get me waved through?”

Blake silently seethed, and if she'd had the ability to Torchwick would've been set on fire by her glare alone. Fortunately the guard's leader came over and dealt with the situation, and despite a few more vicious insults from Torchwick they were let through and were soon driving away.
“What the hell was that?” Blake spat. “Are you trying to get us all killed?”

“Jeez, I dunno kitty cat, did they search the back of the van?” he asked. “You know, like they were supposed to? Or were they too pissed about a few wittle words to remember to do their jobs?”

“So you did that on purpose?” Yang asked.

He lifted a hand level with the ground and wagged it back and forth. “I mean, I wanted to say that anyway. But I knew being a notorious asshole would be useful there.”

Blake scoffed but quieted down, and it wasn't much longer before they pulled to a stop. When he shut down the engine he turned around in his seat and tossed Yang the car keys, which she caught with her metal hand without even thinking about it. “Here.”

“What's this for?”

“Oh, I dunno, I thought maybe you'd like to have a way out of here,” he drawled sarcastically. “We're in the middle of White Fang territory and I really don't feel like hanging around while you get into the fight you're no doubt going to get into. Me and Neo have our own way out of here, you can grab little red and drive off in this hunk of junk. You're on your own getting past the checkpoints, though, and that's assuming you don't have an army on your tail.”

“We'll worry about that when we've rescued Ruby,” Weiss said.

“Good, it's not like planning a getaway in advance is a good idea or anything,” Torchwick said sarcastically. “I'll be going into the warehouse with Neo. It's that one over there, and while there aren't any guards outside there are plenty on the inside. Assuming Taurus and his merry band of idiots doesn't decide to show up and cause problems I should be able to palm the key to red's cage and unlock the back door in about ten minutes. If trouble shows up… well, I'll try, but I make no promises. Your job is to deal with the guards, I set little red loose and we all go our own way.”

After they murmured their agreement he and Neo left the van, strolling casually up to the doors. He knocked a code on them with his cane, and then opened it, strutting inside like he owned the place. After that they all settled in to wait, checking their phones for the time occasionally as the minutes crawled by.

It was at the five minute mark when Blake cursed. Yang glanced over, raising an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“Cars are coming… several of them,” Blake said.

They sat up higher to see six cars parking down the street from them, and climbing from them came several uniformed White Fang. They all tensed as another figure climbed out once the street was secured.

“Adam,” Yang growled.

Adam Taurus and almost twenty White Fang entered the warehouse, leaving the street empty once again. After a long moment of silence they all looked at each other, not sure what to do.

“Should we keep waiting?” Jaune asked.

Yang scoffed, clenching a suddenly shaking metal fist. “No. We need to move closer in case this all falls apart. We're relying on Torchwick to do his job, and even he admitted Adam being here would be a problem.”
“Let's give him the ten minutes… and then we'll check the back door,” Weiss said. “I don't see any wards that would keep us out on the building, and if we have to I can get the lock open magically.”

Blake shrugged. “I can pick the lock as well.”

“And if all the plans fall through I'll 'open' the door for us,” Yang said, slamming her metal fist into her open palm. “Uh… how much longer?”

“Two minutes,” Jaune said.

They spent those minutes checking their gear, getting ready for a real fight. They would be severely outnumbered, and guns were the great equalizer, making it difficult for them to overcome the numbers even with their skill and power. Fortunately they should have surprise on their side, because they didn't have much else going for them.

Finally it was time, and without a word Yang wrenched the van's side door open and they all trooped out, moving quickly but quietly around to the back of the warehouse. Weiss saw that it was newly constructed, unlike the mostly rundown industrial buildings the criminal element of Vale seemed to favor in her experience. It was also extremely large for a warehouse in the middle of the city, which meant that it probably had several rooms, which made sense. Even Adam Taurus wasn't arrogant enough to hold sensitive meetings in the same room as a dangerous prisoner.

When they reached the back Blake checked the door, and she shook her head when she found it still locked. Weiss started to reach for a piece of chalk only to stop when Blake pulled out several tiny tools and crouched in front of it, inserting them into the keyhole. She had never seen anyone actually pick a lock the old fashioned way before, but in moments Blake twisted some of the tiny tools, and she could hear a faint click.

She tucked them away and pulled out her kusarigama. All of four of them exchanged looks, Jaune and Weiss pulling out their pistols while Yang clenched her fists and bounced on her toes, loosening up. With a nod Blake opened the door and slipped inside, and then a few seconds later they followed her in.
As Weiss entered the modern, still clean warehouse she finally recognized it. The oversized building was one of several that were the basis of a new industrial park that was being built in the heart of Vale, right at the edge of the faunus district. Most of the city had approved of the measure as a way to bring in new jobs, easily ignoring the faunus who complained about losing their homes to the new development.

The inside of the warehouse was pitch black, and the three humans shuffled in after Blake and closed the door behind them, making it impossible for them to see. Faunus night vision was much better than human, but even Blake was unlikely to see well in the room, and she doubted than any guards were waiting for them in the dark.

After hesitating for a few moments Weiss held out a hand and muttered a spell under her breath. “Meridiem.”

Normally the spell was much brighter, but instead she made a tiny marble sized speck of light, allowing it to shed just enough illumination so that she wouldn't walk loudly into anything on the ground. It didn't light up much of the area, leaving even the three people around her mostly hidden in shadow, but she could at least make out the ground right in front of her feet.

“Keep the light dim and it should be okay,” Blake breathed. “I'm going to scout ahead… wait for me to come back.”

“Blake-” Yang started, but she was already moving away, blending into the shadows even without her magic. Weiss couldn’t even hear a ghost of her footsteps, and soon the only sound was their breathing and, after listening closely, distant voices.

They shifted uneasily in the dark, the stillness getting to them, until they saw a sliver of light for a moment as a door opened. Weiss hid her globe of light against her body, and after almost a minute the sliver of light returned. They still jumped out of their skin when Blake broke the silence from right next to them.

“They have about thirty White Fang gathered together,” she said. “I got the drop on the two guarding the door to the meeting area, and I can probably trim their numbers a little more, but eventually someone's going to notice. Worse, Adam and several others are in that room… and they're talking to Torchwick and Neo. I don't think they had a chance to free Ruby.”

They exchanged looks, before Yang spoke. “Don't think? Did you see Rubes?”

“No,” Blake said. “It looks like the warehouse is broken up into six main rooms laid out in a two by three grid. This one is empty, and the next one just had two guards lounging against the far wall near the door. The room after that is the front of the building and has everyone. I haven't checked the other side of the building, yet.”

“We should look for Ruby,” Jaune said. “If we can free her without fighting Adam we could just leave.”

“And just let Adam Taurus keep doing… everything?” Weiss hissed as the three of them looked at him like he was crazy.

“We have a chance to get the drop on him here,” Yang said. “Sure, he's got some goons, but we've got the advantage of surprise. But if we make too much noise freeing Ruby he'll get the drop on us.
“And if we don't stop him he'll keep exploiting the people here,” Blake said. “If we stop Cinder he'll just disappear into the community again, and with the White Fang feeding and protecting the faunus district he'll be even more beloved than ever. If we want to bring him down… this is our only chance.”

“Besides,” Weiss said. “He's working for Cinder, and when we go after her we don't want him bringing an army of White Fang as reinforcements when we make our move. I've seen their paperwork, without a central leader they won't be able to respond quickly.”

“Alright, alright, that's a no on the voice of reason,” Jaune said, holding up his hands in surrender, the gesture barely visible with Weiss' dim magical light. “If we're gonna do this I think we should split up. Freeing Ruby might get noisy, especially without Torchwick's keys, and we don't want to risk them turning her into a hostage if we attack Adam first.”

“Agreed,” Weiss said. “I'll go after Ruby. The three of you start with Adam.”

“She's my sister,” Yang said. “I haven't been there for her in too long. I should help.”

Weiss shook her head. “I'm the only one who should do it. You'll need Blake's sneakiness to soften them up first, and when she gets noticed you can go crashing in and wreak havoc on them. And… Jaune can help you.”

“What is Jaune going to do against thirty armed White Fang?” Yang asked.

“What is Jaune going to do sneaking around trying to find Ruby?” Weiss countered.

“Feeling the love here,” Jaune grumbled.

Weiss shrugged. “You're wearing a bulletproof vest with trauma plates. That can't be easy to sneak in. It'll be handy if you get shot at, though. You can provide adequate fire support for Yang and Blake when the battle begins in earnest.”

“I-” Yang started.

She was cut off by an angry hiss from Blake. “You know, I'm not the only faunus with good hearing. They probably won't notice because of the meeting, but you three really need to quiet down.”

“Sorry,” Yang muttered.

“Jaune,” Weiss whispered. “Ignore Yang, she's just being grumpy. You'll do fine, just stick to cover and shoot anyone that threatens Yang and Blake.”

“I guess we don't have a better plan,” Jaune sighed. “Unless you want to try the save Ruby and live approach? No takers? Then let's do operation frontal assault. It'll be fun.”

“I'll lead them to the next room, it has enough light to see a little,” Blake said. “There's a door along that far wall which should lead to the other half of the warehouse.”

“Good luck, all of you,” Weiss said earnestly.

“Just don't die on us, ice queen,” Yang said as they walked off, the other two simply nodding.

“You too,” she breathed, closing her eyes for a moment before walking away from them and towards
the door that Blake had pointed out.

From what little she could see of the room Weiss didn't think that anyone had actually used the warehouse yet, which certainly made her job easier as it meant that she didn't risk walking into anything. Eventually she reached the far wall, and after checking up and down its length for a minute she found the door to the other half of the building.

Weiss put her ear to the door and listened carefully. She didn't hear anything, so she pressed her light against her body to obscure it and carefully opened the door, revealing nothing but darkness beyond.

She crept across the next room, moving slowly to try to avoid making noise or stumbling, although once again the room was completely empty. Eventually she found the door to the next room, and like the last she pressed her ear up against it. This time she heard something, and she felt her heart skip a beat when she recognized the sound.

It was Ruby, and whatever noise she was making was awful. Some kind of painful caterwauling, and Weiss began to shake as she realized a sound so terrible could only mean that she was being tortured. It took everything she had not to simply rip the door open and charge in, knowing that her being shot by guards wouldn't save Ruby. With shaking hands she dismissed her magical light and then cracked the door open.

The room beyond was lit, and without it muffling the sound she could finally hear clearly. Ruby was… singing. Badly. Completely off key. As she carefully peeked in and tried to figure out what was going on it occurred to Weiss that someone was being tortured after all… just not Ruby.

The room was empty except for a cage near the middle of it, along with several cheap folding chairs near it. Sitting in the cage was Ruby, who despite looking dirty and tired seemed to be in good shape. She was still wearing the same outfit as the day she was captured, her red hoody and a comfortable black skirt, and her arms were restrained behind her back.

“Fourteen bottles of beer on the wall, fourteen bottles of beer, you take one down and pass it around, thirteen bottles of beer on the wall!” Ruby sang. Her voice, in addition to being completely untrained, was done no favors by the awful acoustics of the warehouse, but Weiss was suddenly very glad that Ruby didn't like to sing in the shower.

“Stop it!” one of the two guards, who had been sitting in the chair, shouted at the top of his lungs. “Just stop it for one minute! I'll give you another cookie!”

“Really?” Ruby asked excitedly. “And can I get a soda, too? With a straw? I'm kinda getting tired of drinking from my water dish.”

Weiss felt a flicker of anger mixing with her amusement at the scene unfolding before her as she saw a pair of dog dishes in her cage. One was no doubt full of water, and the other probably contained whatever she was supposed to be eating whenever she couldn't torment treats out of her guards.

“Look, I'll bring you a can of coke tomorrow if you'll just shut up!”

“But… that's tomorrow, so… aww, and you made me forget where I was in my song,” Ruby pouted.

“Good,” the other guard sighed.

“Hmm… guess I'll just have to sing something else,” Ruby muttered. “Hmm… oh, I know! The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round-”
“We're not even on a bus!” the first terrorist screamed.

Ruby paused for a moment frowning. “Huh… good point. I guess it's a metaphorical bus?”

“What do you do when you aren't driving us insane?” the guard groaned.

“Well, sometimes I lecture guards about why being a terrorist is a bad thing and try to get them to quit, but usually they ignore me so I start singing after awhile,” Ruby said. “I sleep a lot too, and when I don't feel like talking I usually think about Weiss.”

“Weiss Schnee?” the guard sneered. “Why would you think about her?!”

“Cause she's amazing,” Ruby sighed, laying down on her side. “She's grumpy, and well… prickly and stuff. And she's kinda stuck up and little mean sometimes… I mean, she won't even let me buy as many cookies as I want!”

Weiss rolled her eyes, and then began to carefully sneak across the room. The only two guards seemed well and truly distracted by Ruby's talking, probably grateful for the torturous concert to be over for the moment, and so she quietly circled behind them, removing her gloves as she did.

“But Weiss… she's also the kindest, sweetest person in the whole world,” Ruby said. “She doesn't do anything halfway. When she cares she does everything she can to help, and when she loves she loves with her whole heart, no matter how much it hurts her. And she's so smart. She makes me feel like an idiot sometimes, but never on purpose, you know, even if she calls me dolt and dunce and stuff. I know she doesn't really mean it, 'cause she has this light in her eyes when she talks to me. She's just… she's the most beautiful person in the whole world, inside and out.

“I- I love her so much,” Ruby finished quietly after a short pause.

One of the White Fang scoffed. “She's a Schnee. She doesn't even have a heart much less a soul. I guess she's pretty enough if you like scarred scrawny albino freaks, but… it's not like it matters anyway. Adam said it won't be much longer and we get to hand you over to Cinder and she'll be sacrificing you once she's finished with remaking the world.”

“You mean destroying the world,” Ruby said darkly.

The other guard shrugged. “Same thing. When it's over people like Schnee will be dead or suffering, and we'll be on top laughing down at humanity. That's all that matters.”

Ruby was silent for a long moment. “No. She's gonna find me, and she's gonna rescue me.”

“She's probably already dead. If she comes here we'll try to keep her alive for you… I wonder how long you'll be able to sing while we cut off every strip of her skin.”

Ruby was quiet for even longer after that, and Weiss was close enough to clearly see her upset expression. It made Weiss' heart clench, and she wanted more than anything to shout out that she was there, that she was almost rescued already. Ruby's eyes were closed however, and Weiss refused to make a sound until she got the drop on the distracted guards.

Eventually, without opening her eyes Ruby began to sing again. “This is the song that never ends. It goes on and on-”

“Oh for fucks sake!” the first guard shouted, putting his head in his hands.

The other tightened his grip on his rifle. “I don't care what Cinder told Adam, is she really gonna
Weiss cut him off mid sentence by grabbing both terrorists by the back of the neck while activating her life draining ability. She had avoided using her ability in front of Ruby since their trip to Faerie, but it pulled their life away as quickly and easily as ever. While she was tempted to just kill them for their part in holding Ruby captive, in the end she was sure that Ruby wouldn't approve, and looking into her girlfriend's stunned eyes, which slowly turned to joy as they locked onto her's, she couldn't bring herself to disappoint her.

The two terrorists slumped to the ground, a few years taken off of their lives as she drained them enough to ensure they wouldn't be a threat for days before releasing them. She then stepped forward, staring down at Ruby with her hands on her hips. “I've been looking everywhere for you.”

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“Y-you're really here?” Ruby asked, her lip quivering as she got up onto her knees and crawled to the edge of her cage, pressing her face between two bars. “This- this really isn't another dream? You-you really are here?”

Weiss crouched in front of her, staring into her partner's glistening silver eyes for a moment. It had been so long, and she had done so much looking for her, but she'd finally found her. She had found her Ruby. She then reached up, gently caressed her cheek as best she could with the bars in the way, and then, when Ruby's eyes started to flutter shut, moved her hand higher and flicked her forehead.

“Ow!”

“This isn't a dream you dunce,” Weiss said lovingly.

Ruby pouted a little. “You're so mean.”

“Sorry,” Weiss whispered, leaning close and kissing her, long and gently. When she was finally running low on air she pulled back and kissed Ruby's forehead where she'd flicked her. “Is that better?”


“Let me get you out of this,” Weiss said, pulling back reluctantly. Even more than wanting to kiss her, she really wanted to hold her in her arms, and the cage was preventing that.

She examined the cage and restraints for a moment, her anger flaring as she saw that the bowls were indeed full of water and some gross looking food that she decided she'd be happier not looking at closer. Pulling out a piece of chalk, she quickly drew a circle around the outside of it, her hand flying through the symbols as she went while Ruby turned to face her the entire way, not wanting to take her eyes off of her or distract her, but squirming impatiently the entire time.

In a matter of minutes Weiss had drawn a modified version of the glyph she used to unlock doors. Instead of unlocking the object it was drawn upon, however, she had changed it to instead unlock all mechanical locks within the boundary of the circle. After taking one last glance to ensure that it was correct she placed her hand inside of it and began filling the circle with mana.

There was a flash, and then three loud clicks. Ruby wiggled for a moment before the large manacles
covering her shins and forearms fell off, making her sigh in relief and then groan as she moved her arms in front of her body for the first time in a week, staying in that position having obviously put a strain on her shoulders. Unfortunately she still had the heavy mittens on her hands, and while they weren’t locked in place she struggled to free her hands from them.

Weiss opened the cage door and stepped back, letting a grumbling Ruby climb out and stand unsteadily. She then gently reached down and freed Ruby's hands one after the other, smiling as Ruby flexed her fingers before looking up at her again. They both froze for a long moment, until Ruby finally broke the silence. “Weiss…”

That one word was enough for Weiss to finally step forward and wrap her arms around her partner, squeezing her hard. She was still soft and warm, just the way she remembered her, and as Ruby hugged her back she couldn't contain herself anymore. With her face buried in her shoulder Weiss began to cry, sobs pouring convulsively from her as she wept away the grief and fear of the past week.

Ruby was there. Ruby was safe. Ruby was in her arms again.

Ruby was crying as well, but she recovered first, murmuring in her ear once she did. “You're crying more than I am, and I was the one in the cage.”

“I missed you so much, you dolt,” Weiss sobbed. “I love you more than anything, and I didn't know if you were alive, and whenever I'd close my eyes I'd think about what they might be doing to you. And then I find you singing children’s songs and getting cookies.”

Ruby chuckled slightly. “It wasn't all songs and cookies. Torchwick told me you were probably okay, but… but I was worried about you, too. And I couldn't move much, and I was scared, and the guards couldn't do anything to me but some of them were really mean, and I don't even want to talk about how embarrassing going to the bathroom was. It was… it was bad. Half a star Yelp review at best.”

Weiss finally got her crying under control and nodded, pulling back just enough to look at her partner but not letting her go. She never wanted to let her go again. “But you're okay? They didn't hurt you? Or… or anything?”

Ruby shook her head. “No. They didn't do anything to me, I promise.”

“Oh,” Weiss said, before wrinkling her nose. “And they didn't let you shower.”

Ruby rolled her eyes. “I haven't showered or changed clothes or anything.”

“I can tell,” Weiss said. “I didn't want to say anything, but you smell really bad.”

“Well excuse me, princess.”

“Really bad,” Weiss repeated, although she didn't break the hug despite her complaints. “I guess when we get you to your dad's house I'll have to make sure you get clean.”

“Huh?”

Weiss smiled a real smile for the first time since Beacon fell. “I'm not letting you out of my sight, and that shower is big enough for two.”

“Oh!” Ruby said, her eyes lighting up.
“When we're done you'll be so clean I could eat dinner off of you… or at least whipped cream,” Weiss murmured.

“That sounds-” Ruby started, only to be interrupted by a shout and a loud explosion. “What was that?”

“Oh… right,” Weiss said. “We should go help them. They're fighting Adam Taurus.”

“What?!” Ruby yelped, pulling away finally.

“Are you up for this?” Weiss asked.

Ruby just conjured her scythe, and without a word the two ran for the doors.
Ninth Case: Impact

They burst through the doors into the last room of the warehouse, the only one that none of them had been in. The lights were on in it as well, revealing an empty room with two guards standing at the door to the meeting room. They stood on either side of that doorway, leaning around it intermittently to shoot into the next room, the sound mixing with more gunfire coming from beyond, but despite being distracted they still noticed the two detectives bursting into their room.

They tried to bring their rifles around, but Weiss skidded to a stop and raised her handgun, firing wildly at them. Her gun was loaded with incendiary dust rounds, many of which slammed into the walls around them with blasts of flame, but she managed to hit both before they could bring their guns to bear, sending them screaming in agony to the ground as her magazine finally emptied.

As she reloaded they moved closer to the door, both flinching as they smelled the sickly sweet stench of cooking people, both quietly glad that the two White Fang had seemingly died from their injuries or been knocked out by the pain by the time they reached them.

“I see why the department doesn't want us using those on people,” Ruby said, a little green.

Weiss nodded. “They're expensive and hard to acquire, too. I didn't want to have normal bullets in my gun if I ran into a demon in the streets, though.”

Ruby nodded, and then peeked around the doorway into the room beyond, Weiss following suit a few moments later. It took her longer than she wished to really get a feel what was happening in the meeting room, but it was amazing the level of chaos that three detectives had managed to cause.

Unlike the rest of the warehouse, the final room actually had a significant amount of material in it. Pallets were piled up on one side of the room, and several forklifts were parked next to rows of crates. There didn't seem to be any finished product moved into the room, but instead large amounts of supplies for the companies ready to make use of the building.

In addition there was a large wooden table in the center of the room that had been flipped over onto its side with a number of White Fang, including Adam Taurus, as well as Neo and Torchwick crouching behind it. The table itself was glowing with a dim violet light, and Weiss could see bullets simply bouncing off of it.

Most of the White Fang were making use of the less impressive cover elsewhere in the room. The pallets and crates did a good job of blocking line of sight, but the hollow wooden objects weren't the best for actually stopping bullets, although they were better than nothing.

Jaune was apparently still in the far room, peeking out from its doorway from time to time to shoot at the White Fang, doing enough to keep their heads down, although he didn't seem to actually be hitting them. Yang was doing similar, although she had apparently stolen a shotgun from one of the terrorists, and she was crouched behind a forklift inside of the room itself.

Weiss couldn't see Blake at first, and she felt her stomach churn with worry until she saw one of the White Fang on the far side of the room suddenly get pulled down fully behind his cover and not return. She didn't see Blake or what happened to the terrorist, but she was pretty sure that her faunus friend was dealing with distracted gunmen around the edges of the room before blending back into the shadows, real or created by her magic.

Ruby leaned out into the open with her rifle and fired several precise bullets into the criminals
crouching behind the magically reinforced table. She couldn't get a clean shot on Adam, but she killed several in rapid succession before she was forced to pull back into cover as the rest returned fire. Weiss flinched every time a bullet cut through the walls near her, but neither she nor Ruby were hit by the blind fire.

When the attacks slowed down Ruby and Weiss exchanged a glance before both leaned out and opened fire at the same time. Several more terrorists were gunned down until a man with a hood stood up and clapped his hands while shouting “Olvadekfem”.

There was a ripple through the air which radiated outward like a visible wall of sound from his clap. It passed through everyone in the fight, including Weiss and Ruby, and both flinched back behind cover as it did, although nothing seemed wrong at first. A moment later Weiss yelped and dropped her gun, which was suddenly red hot, the heat softened metal actually denting as it hit the ground. Ruby threw her gun away as well as it suffered the same fate, only barely tossing it before some of the bullet cooked off inside of the magazine, tearing the weakened metal apart. It was only moments later before the incendiary dust in Weiss’s gun started to burn, creating a blowtorch-like rainbow colored flame that shot straight into the air and continued to burn for a long, long time.

After a few moments Weiss realized that there was no more gunfire period, and she and Ruby exchanged a glance as they realized that it was similar to something Torchwick's cane had once done, although on a much broader scale. Then realization hit, and Weiss smirked as she pulled Myrtenaster at the same time Ruby conjured her scythe.

Destroying everyone's guns had kept the White Fang leadership from being cut down by Weiss and Ruby's gunfire, but it also meant that everyone was reduced to hand to hand combat. The White Fang had many skilled fighters, but outside of Adam Weiss doubted that there were many better than herself, and letting someone like Yang run wild was a terrible idea.

They stepped out into the open, weapons ready, only to find Yang had come to the same realization. With an incoherent battle cry she charged a barricade of wooden crates with several White Fang behind it, simply plowing through the wooden barrier to engage the enemy. Weiss couldn't see much of the subsequent fighting, but from the sounds of things it wasn't going to take her long to deal with them.

The closest terrorist charged Weiss, a heavy bladed machete held above his head. She set herself, and when he was close enough she casually ran him through while swaying to avoid his wild swing. She moved past, flicking blood from her blade as she checked on Ruby. Her partner had also finished off an opponent, easily knocking him unconscious with the flat of her scythe. Even after a week imprisoned by the White Fang she still spared their lives when she could, making Weiss smile softly.

“Schnee,” Adam Taurus growled, pulling her attention to him. He stalked forward, getting close before dropping into his iaijutsu stance, his sword sheathed, hunched over slightly with a hand hovering over the hilt of his weapon.

“Adam Taurus,” Weiss said, narrowing her eyes coldly. “You have much to answer for.”

“I'm going to bathe in your blood, Schnee,” he sneered.

“Lovely imagery,” Weiss drawled. “Did you write about that in your high school notebooks?”

He exploded into motion, taking several rapid steps as he drew his sword and swung it in a low, wide arc designed to cut her in half. Weiss had expected something of the sort, however, and she hopped back, carefully keeping her balance and stance despite the rapid retreat. The moment the sword passed by her stomach she lunged, rapier aimed for his heart, and he was the one who had to
jump back to avoid being killed.

Ruby ran, visible only from her cloud of rose petals, circling around him with an obvious intent to hit him from behind. Before she could reach him she ran into a suddenly formed wall of purple energy, which stretched like rubber until suddenly she was launched backwards, tumbling through the air and bouncing into a roll on the ground. The energy field slowly fell apart, bursting like a bubble in slow motion from the hole Ruby's scythe had made in it without her even trying.

“Ruby!” Weiss shouted, but she was forced to return her attention to Adam before her partner could respond. She hopped back, keeping her sword away from his unimaginably sharp one despite her instinct to parry as he launched a series of rapid slashes towards her.

“Hey, Adam!” Yang shouted. “Think fast!”

He stepped back and half turned, slashing with his sword to cut a large crate in half. Yang had thrown it at him, and his defense cleanly bisected it, sending both halves wide past his body. Unfortunately for him, Yang seemed to have anticipated such a fancy defense as she followed right behind it, slamming her metal fist into his face before he could bring his sword back up. He rolled with the hit, avoiding serious injury, but it was still enough to crack his mask.

Weiss glanced over at Ruby, and she was relieved to find her on her feet and apparently uninjured, but her heart clenched as she saw her desperately trying to avoid flaring motes of purple energy that chased her around the room, with most of her attempts stymied by walls of light that only became visible when she ran into them.

“Go help her,” Yang said. “I've got this.”

“He's dangerous,” Weiss warned.

Yang smirked, slamming her fists together as she stared Adam down. “So am I.”

“Don't get killed… and remember, don't try to block his sword,” Weiss said.

“Yeah, yeah, just go save my sister from whatever the hell that is over there,” Yang said.

Weiss gave Adam a wide berth, although he seemed satisfied with taking on Yang instead of her. Weiss looked around the room, taking in the broader situation for a moment. Jaune had his sword and shield out, and he was easily taking on two White Fang at the same time, his approach defensive but obviously capable. Blake had created numerous copies of herself, and was using them to distract many of the remaining terrorists. Weiss couldn't find the real Blake in the confusion, but her efforts were obvious as the numbers of White Fang were slowly decreasing. Even Torchwick and Neo had joined in, knocking out a few guards standing near the front door to the building.

Weiss also spotted the cause of Ruby's trouble. Two faunus, one with large ears on top of his head and the other with a tail, were focused on using magic. They had red hoods with short mantles over their shoulders and wore no masks, and they seemed to be completely focused on casting their spells.

Weiss ran towards them, her aura sight active as she tried to look for any invisible walls. They were hard to spot even with the ability to see magic, but a faint glimmer on the ground made her suspect that there was one around their sides and back, although apparently they couldn't have one in front of them and still send their spells through.

When Weiss was close to the gap something lashed out at her foot, and a sudden sharp pain sent her tumbling across the ground. She ended her tumble on her back, and she looked up to see a familiar faunus; it was the woman that Blake had argued with in Tukson's bookstore, Ilia. She had a long
whip in her hand, and Weiss could see that it had metal barbs worked into its length.

Ilia lashed out with the whip, and Weiss barely rolled to the side in time to avoid being struck. She was then forced to roll the other way a moment later as Ilia lashed out again, and then again. “How does it feel for the faunus to be the one holding the whip, Schnee?”

Weiss grunted and managed to scramble back to her feet, using her sword to deflect the tip of the whip when she was attacked again. Weiss stumbled slightly as she moved, and a glance down showed a cut on her lower leg where Ilia had used her weapon to trip her. Fortunately it was shallow, but she knew that it would hurt badly when the adrenaline wore off.

“Would it make any difference if I told you I've never held a whip before, or had a slave, or treated anyone the way you apparently think I do?”

“No,” Ilia said. “I know the truth about the Schnees. My parents worked in your mines… died in your mines. I'm going to enjoy every second of this.”

Weiss had thought that standing would help, but in the first few moments of the fight she realized how disadvantaged she was against Ilia. Her opponent was fast and acrobatic, easily giving ground whenever she tried to close, and her whip had far greater reach than a rapier. Even worse, blocking it was futile, as her one and only attempt to parry it and close in resulted in not only a bloody arm, but a nearly lost sword when the barbed whip wrapped around the blade.

She was considering the merits of simply charging into the reach of the whip and accepting injuries until she reached Ilia and finished things when a weighted ball on a chain suddenly wrapped around the terrorist's leg and dragged her to the ground. Blake then landed on top of her, going for a pin but was thrown off. She immediately tumbled to her feet, but Ilia kipped up just as quickly, leaving the two staring each other down.

“You!” Ilia shouted angrily.

“Weiss, help Ruby… she needs it,” Blake said. “I'll deal with Ilia.”

“Right!” Weiss answered as she backed away from the fight, happy to not have to deal with the other faunus any longer.

“Weiss!” Jaune called, jogging up to her. “You're bleeding!”

“Right.” Weiss drewled as she looked around, trying to get a feel for the current situation. Blake was working Ilia away from the boundary the magic users had invisibly created, and Yang was engaged in a delicate dance with Adam, with neither willing to take a real hit from the other but both unwilling to back off. Most of the White Fang around the room had either been beaten or fled, however, and Torchwick and Neo had disappeared with them, only a small pile of downed faunus near the doors showing where they had been.

Turning her attention to Ruby, Weiss saw that she was slowing down, her week in the cage most likely catching up to her, although she'd avoided any real injury yet from the two magic users. They continued to create walls to block her in and keep her from taking advantage of her incredible speed, while simultaneously sending homing blasts of magical energy after her. Ruby had apparently learned some things over the past few minutes, however, as she was tricking the magical attacks into striking the walls to peel them off of her as she dodged and ran.

Weiss pulled out a piece of chalk and a vial of dust, turning to face Jaune, who had even more bruises than before, but seemed to be ready for more fighting. “Let me see your shield.”
He presented it to her, and she immediately began drawing a complex glyph on it with her chalk. “Uh… what's that for?”

“It will help protect you from magical attacks,” Weiss said. “The shield should absorb spells that hit it until it takes in too much mana, and then it will release the energy in a shockwave. Keep the shield between you and the mages at all times, and make sure it stays pointing at them.”

“Okay…” he said, eyes narrowing as he watched her work. With a dash of dust she finished the preparations, placing a hand on it and channeling her own mana until the shield began to glow a very pale shade of blue.

“You go first,” Weiss said. “Keep them focused on you, and I'll look for an opening to run them through.”

“Right,” he said, taking off at a jog with Weiss following on his heels.

Instead of attacking from the front like Weiss would've been forced to do, Jaune simply charged the mages from the side, his shield held in front of him. When he ran into the magical wall it flared to life for a second before popping like a soap bubble, the barrier doing nothing besides making his shield glow brighter.

The two mages looked over in surprise, but to his credit the one with the tail reacted immediately, snapping off a spell before Jaune had taken more than a step inside of the barrier. “Vaku!”

The spell was much simpler than the homing blasts the two were sending after Ruby. From his raised hand came a vaguely spherical blob of purple energies, which shot through the air with commendable speed, although Weiss could've dodged it if she had been the one in front. Jaune didn't bother, however, trusting her magic and keeping his shield up as he ran headlong into the blast. He grunted liked he'd run into something hard, but he kept going, his shield glowing brighter but showing no other effect from blocking the spell.

The other mage turned to them, and he cast a spell of his own, this time creating a coruscating rope of energies, but once again the shield blocked it easily. The first mage paused, trying to figure out what to do, his hands glowing but no spell coming forth as he studied the shield. “Wait, brother! Stop!”

The other mage stopped his spell. “What?”

“His shield is eating the spells! We must hit him with something that will overwhelm it! Together!”

The two mages joined hands and then extended their others in front of them, speaking a spell in unison. Their hands began to glow, and a line of crackling purple energies formed between their extended ones, and at the exact center a glowing orb of energy grew. Just as Jaune reached them the orb erupted with a gout of eye searing purple lightning, and with a yelp of shock Jaune found himself sliding backwards, his shield beginning to shake as it glowed brighter and brighter.

Then suddenly Ruby ran past, sliding along the ground between the two mages with a cluster of magical orbs still chasing her. In the brief moments Jaune and Weiss had managed to distract the mages she'd found her way through the field of magical walls, leading their attacks right back to them.

The mage with the large ears was struck, the cluster of spells ripping gaping holes in his torso and spraying blood and bone everywhere. The spell that he'd been helping to maintain immediately became unstable, and the other mage gaped down at the body as one of the remaining seeking orbs
struck the heart of the spell as it hovered between them.

Time stood still for a moment, the spherical spell no longer blasting Jaune's shield. As everyone present stared for a moment the heart of the spell began to ripple and pulse, and visible cracks ran along its surface. Weiss had no time to do anything but point her rapier away from her and Juane and cover her face before it exploded, sending them flying through the air.
Weiss tumbled through the air in slow motion. Her ears were ringing from the blast, and as she blearily stared up at the industrial ceiling she assumed that she was going into some form of shock. Was her life about to pass before her eyes? She kind of hoped that it would soon, actually. Her life hadn't been that great, especially before the past year, but it was better than staring up at the boring, repetitive ceiling as she ever so slowly fell.

After a little while she began to think more clearly, and it occurred to her that, in fact, she wasn't simply disoriented. She actually was falling slowly, and flying slowly through the air as well. She carefully craned her head, and despite having already realized the truth she felt her jaw dropping at what she saw.

Multiple spells interacting, particularly very powerful ones, could have strange consequences, and the primary spell that fell apart had been the combined work of two strong magic users, one of whom had died while maintaining it. The effects would no doubt be short lived, but it was apparently powerful enough to resembled the destruction of a magic item more than simply a spell breaking down.

Ruby had been moving fast enough that she was left tumbling through the air with a cloud of rose petals drifting with her. The sight was so beautiful that Weiss couldn't help but smile despite being in the middle of a battlefield. A glance around showed that all of the remaining combatants had been separated by the blast and were all dealing with the lack of gravity in their own ways.

Weiss heard sudden impacts, and a glance around showed that the object furthest from the explosion were losing the effect first, several floating crates hitting the ground at once. She had been quite close, however, and so half a minute after the first object became reacquainted with gravity she finally fell, and she had just enough time to curl up to protect her neck and head as best she could before she hit the ground.

Despite her preparations she dropped ten feet onto solid concrete, the impact knocking the air from her lungs and leaving her stunned once again. When she was finally able to breath again she shakily climbed to her feet, still gripping her rapier as she looked up just in time to see a katana rapidly approaching her neck.

She started to raise her sword, but she wasn't fast enough, and even if she was there was no way that it could've blocked Adam Taurus' sword. He had been much further away from the magical explosion than she had been, and so he had returned to the earth well before her, and he had apparently decided that killing a Schnee while she was defenseless was the best use of his time.

Then Yang was there, shouldering her out of the way and making her hit the ground once again, as she still hadn't fully recovered from the explosion and her subsequent fall. “Yang!” she shouted, not wanted to look up and see the gruesome fate as her friend took the hit instead of her.

There was a loud clang, and rather than being showered with blood she saw Yang holding the blade of Adam's sword with her metal hand. All three of them stared, not having expected the arm to block the sword, as it was supposed to be sharp enough to cut through anything.

“What?” Adam growled, trying to pull back his weapon, only to find the task impossible as Yang tightened her grip.

“Huh,” Yang said. “I thought this thing was supposed to be pretty sharp?”
“It can cut through anything,” Adam said as he futilely alternated between trying to press his sword into her metal hand, and trying to pull it free. “I've cut through a foot of warded steel to rob a bank before.”

“Hmm… you seem to be having performance issues,” Yang said. “It happens to men sometimes, especially as they get older. They make pills to help with your… sword these days.”

Weiss stared blankly at the exchange, unable to take her eyes off of the place where Yang was gripping the weapon. Yang was stronger than Adam, but he was using his whole body for leverage, making it shift a bit in her grip, and as it did Weiss couldn't even see so much as a scratch on the artificial limb. If she hadn't seen him casually cut her Knight in half she might've believed that Blake had been exaggerating about how sharp it was, but it truly was everything Adam was saying about it.

“Orichalcum,” Weiss breathed as she climbed shakily back to her feet.

“Ori-what now?” Yang asked.

“Your arm,” Weiss said. “It's made from orichalcum, the most magically resistant material known to alchemy. Humans have never been able to give orichalcum even the simplest of enchantments, and even working it is nearly impossible. That arm was crafted by the god Hephaestus, and despite being an incredibly powerful magical artifact, it still behaves like orichalcum.”

Yang half turned her head to give Weiss a lost glance, and even Adam was paying attention to her.

“Do what now?” Yang said.

Weiss grunted in annoyance. “That katana is an ancient artifact which projects a magical cutting edge in front of the blade. It isn't actually very sharp without that magic, and your arm is immune to magic!”

“Huh,” Yang said, before grinning. Her eyes turned red and her hair caught on fire, and she lifted her other hand, which she clenched into a fist as it caught fire as well. A moment later her metal fist also began to burn, and jets of flame emerged from small seams on the upper part of the arm. Yang glanced down at it before smirking. “Neat; didn't know it could do that either. Thanks for the arm, Weiss-y. This thing is really handy.”

“I can't imagine what Blake sees in you,” Adam snarled.

“Yeah, well, you're a terrorist asshole who abused her, so I don't give a flying fuck what you think of me,” Yang said. “Plus, I'm gonna break all of your teeth.”

Before Adam could do anything Yang swung a powerful roundhouse punch with her burning human fist, every bit of the power she was channeling from her curse slamming into his face with the force of a runaway freight train. Before he went flying back Weiss could hear his jaw shatter, and bloody teeth flew from his mouth as he soared through the air. When he hit the ground Weiss could actually see branded indents from Yang's fingers impressed into his cheek.

“That's for Blake, you piece of shit,” Yang said, before glaring down at the sword in her hand. “Ugh, this thing feels foul. This… this is for my arm, no matter how cool the new one is.”

“Wait, no—” Weiss started to shout, but it was too late.

A burst of heat made Weiss stumble back as Yang's hair burned brighter. With a roar of effort she flexed her arms and snapped the katana in half. For a long moment all was still, every sound leached out of the air, and with it color seemed to fade as well, until the entire world was only visible in shades of gray.
Bursting the combined spell of two mages had altered the effects of gravity and momentum in the area for a short period. Destroying Torchwick's cane, a powerful magical item, had released a wave of impossible liquid flame that had not only burned down an entire building, but which continued to burn for three days and nights despite having no more fuel and the best efforts of the fire department.

Adam's sword was an ancient artifact created by the master smith Muramasa, and it was not only powerfully enchanted, but had been used to kill countless people over the centuries. Even worse, as Yang had pointed out, it was full of dark magic, and Weiss desperately pulled her aura into a protective barrier around her body as the sword finally began to release its power.

It started with a great rush of wind, like a small tornado that burst from the broken ends of the weapon. Yang hastily threw them onto the ground and stumbled back as a foul miasma of dark magic poured forth, filling the warehouse with its power. All around the room many of the injured White Fang, those without sufficient control over their aura, began to scream and writhe as their bodies were torn apart by rapidly growing tumors and unfortunate mutations that caused swift, painful deaths and left behind all but unrecognizable corpses.

A spark of color returned to the otherwise gray world in the form of an eerie green light, the glow at its brightest where the broken pieces of the sword were lying. As the light brightened Weiss began to see shapes within the vortex still spinning above the weapon, and then she began to hear something. The shapes took the form of human silhouettes within the tornado, and the sound of the wind became screams.

The tornado wasn't made of wind, but rather was a swirling vortex of disembodied souls. They wailed and gibbered in torment, their faces tortured as they reached out desperately for some succor that was denied them. Within the mass Weiss saw a figure she recognized, and it turned to look at her, crying out to her unintelligibly for help.

It was her uncle, the one that Adam Taurus had murdered. After looking at the rest for a moment she saw her cousin as well, and a number of people who appeared to be employees of the SDC. There were many, many other souls though, including a great many dressed like samurai or feudal Japanese peasants.

Unless it was all some illusion created by the mass of released mana, the sword wasn't only super sharp, but it had actually been absorbing the souls of those that it had slain over the centuries. Further, the wild magic was allowing them to actually see the normally invisible souls, and even allowing them to hear them.

Beyond the mass of souls, at the very edge of the green glowing patch Weiss saw motion. Stepping into the light she could see the silhouette of a woman wearing a cloak and holding a scythe. Despite not being able to see her features clearly Weiss was certain that she was looking at her, and then the figure gave her a nod of greeting.

“Mom,” Ruby gasped.

It was the first sound other than the wails of the stolen souls that had been made since Yang had somehow managed to break the magic weapon. Weiss was barely able to pull her eyes away from the show before them to find that Ruby not only was able to speak, but she seemed to be the only person in the room capable of moving as she walked up beside Weiss. “Mom!”

Death waved at her, before she turned her attention to the pillar of souls, spreading her arms wide. The swirling vortex twisted and writhed like a cobra before a snake charmer, before finally turning around and spiraling towards Death, where the souls seemingly flew into her cloak and disappeared until finally they were all gone and everything was still again.
The glowing green light slowly began to condense, gathering into a single bright orb, and then shrinking further and further until it was nothing but a tiny marble that was so bright that they had to avert their eyes or risk going blind. Then, with a massive crack and a burst of displaced air the light went out.

Weiss looked up to find the green light and Death were gone, and color and normal city sounds had returned to the world. Where the sword lay, however, a large, indistinct shadow hovered in the air. It became larger and larger while still not having any distinct form, until finally, when it was the size of an elephant it began to resolve. Between one heartbeat and the next a hideous monster suddenly crouched in the center of the room, looking around with hungry eyes.

The monster had the body of an immense tiger, but it had too many shoulders, as rather than having four limbs it had eight, and each was massive, hairy spider leg, which ended with a set of foot long claws. The head of the monster was almost human-like, but with red skin, a bulbous nose, and horns on either side of its bald forehead. It's eyes were yellow and bloodshot, and after looking around the room it focused on them as drool began to pour from a mouth full of razor sharp fangs.

“What the hell is that?” Yang gasped.

“It's a tsuchigumo,” Blake said, her and Jaune having joined them while they had been distracted by the monster. “I've never seen one, but they used to hunt in Japan until the last one was finally killed during World War One.”

“How did a Japanese demon end up in a warehouse in Vale?” Yang asked.

“Thaumogenesis,” Weiss answered.

“Gesundheit,” Yang said.

Weiss glared at her. “When you destroyed that magic sword it release a massive amount of dark magic, which spontaneously gave birth to a new demon.”

“Oh,” Yang said. “Sorry.”

“Sorry?!” Weiss screeched. “SORRY?!”

“In my defense, I didn't know demons would come out,” Yang said. “I just thought, you know, I'd break his sword? I mean, he seemed really into it.”

Weiss growled. “You... you idiot. Firstly, I'm not sure how you broke it, since it should've been impossible even for a brute like you to do something like that to a magic weapon. And what is with you and your sister destroying magic items!”

“It was only once,” Ruby pouted.

“I was caught up in the moment,” Yang pouted as well.

“Um... guys...” Jaune said tentatively.

“Of all the irresponsible-”

“Guys!” he tried again.

“What?” Weiss shouted.

He just pointed, making everyone look at the demon again. It grinned, fangs longer than Weiss' hand
on full display, and slowly began moving towards them, the spider legs both shockingly quiet at moving such a large creature, and incredibly disturbing to watch.

“This discussion is not over,” Weiss said, turning to face the demon and raising her sword.

“Oh, good, and here I was afraid we'd all get eaten by the giant monster and I'd get to miss the lecture,” Yang drawled.

“No, she'd lecture you from inside the stomach all the way till we got digested,” Ruby said. “Then she'd reanimate us and lecture our zombies.”

Before Weiss could think of a suitable reply the tsuchigumo darted forward, launching itself at them with incredible speed. Weiss, Blake and Ruby easily dodged back and away, but Jaune was left stumbling back slightly, and Yang simply met it head on, throwing a punch with her new metal hand towards its face as it tried to bite her. Unfortunately, while she managed to break out its front teeth, the beast was enormous, its mass enough to drive Yang into the ground despite her strength.

The creature tried to slash her with one of its enormous claws, but a cloud of rose petals drifted by, and that limb tumbled free with a spray of black ichor, causing the creature to rear back and screech. It glared towards Ruby, tensing like it was about to move towards her, before instead taking a surprise swing at Yang with one of its back legs.

Yang managed to block with her metal arm, but the force of the hit sent her skipping along the ground. The monster then turned its attention to the next closest target, Jaune, hopping forward and bringing one of its limbs down on top of him with impressive speed. All he could do was bring his glowing shield up, the impact sending him crashing painfully to the concrete, although he was able to avoid being torn to pieces.

Ruby tried to repeat her earlier attack, darting towards it at high speed, but the tsuchigumo was ready, lashing out with two clawed limbs so suddenly that, while Ruby was able to avoid the claws, her momentum was too great to avoid running into it completely, part of the hairy leg clipping her shoulder and sending her tumbling along the ground, leaving her slightly stunned as the creature raised a leg in the air to finish her off.

“Ruby!” Weiss shouted, rushing forward despite knowing that she would be too late. Her girlfriend was shaking her head as she tried to climb to her feet, obviously a bit disoriented even as the clawed foot started to descend.

Then the demon flinched and stumbled, its aim thrown off, the clawed foot slamming into the floor right next to Ruby instead of killing her. Somehow Blake had gotten onto the back of the demon without anyone noticing, and she had managed to wrap the chain of her kusarigama around its neck. She strained with all of her might, trying to choke out the massive demon. Unfortunately the spider legs were far more limber than they looked, one of the back legs managing to swing up and over its body, slashing Blake's side.

The cat faunus jumped down, landing on her feet despite the distance, her face a grimace as blood began to soak her shirt, although Weiss wasn't sure how serious the injury was. It was enough to make her retreat, however, but just in time Yang recovered and grabbed one of the back legs of the demon, wrapping her arms around it and twisting. There was a snap, and the demon howled again, body writhing to try to claw at her, only to lose its limb when Yang forced it into the path of the claws, which cut through easily, raising the pitch of the demon's voice.

The entire time this was happening Jaune had been trapped under one of the demon's feet, his shield pressed against his body, making it hard to breath as the huge monster squatted above him. Weiss
studied the creature for a moment, waiting until it was fully distracted by Yang and a recovered Ruby, who darted in and out, trying to harry it while Yang held most of its attention by swinging its severed leg like an oversized club.

Weiss ran forward, sliding under the body and ending the move on her knees next to Jaune, placing a hand on the side of his shield. She immediately began channeling as much mana as she could into it, the glow becoming brighter and brighter, until she was forced to look away from it. When she did she locked eyes with the tsuchigumo, which had noticed the light and was glaring balefully at her. It began to lunge, mouth gaping to bite her head off when the glyph she had drawn on Jaune's shield finally reached its capacity.

The shockwave of energy was blindingly bright, and it was powerful enough to shatter the leg pressing down on the shield into pieces and launch the massive demon across the warehouse in a high arc, slamming into the ceiling and breaking it as well. The demon then fell to the floor on its back, its remaining five legs twitching spasmodically for a few long moments before it managed to flip itself over and glare at them, eyes mad with pain and rage.

“Huh, that thing's not so tough,” Yang said as she and Ruby came up alongside Jaune and Weiss, Blake, her injury hastily bandaged, joining them a moment later.

The demon growled, and then tar-like black goo burst from the three stumps. Replacement legs grew out of them so quickly that they appeared to explode from the injuries, and new fangs even formed in place of those Yang had knocked out with her first blow. In seconds it was like they'd never even hurt it at all.

“Yang…,” Ruby groaned. “Don't jinx us!”
“What do we do?” Ruby asked.

“I’ve never heard of a tsuchigumo,” Weiss confessed. “They’re normally extinct on this plane, so it wasn't something that I really studied.”

“They killed the last one with a lot of dynamite,” Blake said. “Some of the older ones were killed by samurai armed with swords, though.”

“Sounds like the best solution is lots of violence,” Yang said smacking her fist into her palm.

Weiss gave her a sour look. “That's your answer to everything.”

Yang shrugged. “When you've got hammers like theses babies-” she paused to kiss her real and metal fists- “every problem can be pounded like a nail.”

Weiss closed her eyes. “Blake… you have my sympathies.”

“Um… guys?” Jaune interjected. “Shouldn't we be concentrating on the giant unkillable demon thing?”

“We will,” Ruby said. “We're just trying to deal with the mortal terror.”

The demon slowly backed away, before turning around and running straight up the far wall and onto the ceiling, somehow scuttling across as it as easily as an actual spider despite its massive size. Once it was there it raised its tail and squatted upside down, before half turning and launching a long white rope at them. It flew with impressive speed, but all five were able to move out of the way.

“Ugh, that's just gross,” Yang said.

“It's spider web, and it's strong enough to catch people,” Blake said, keeping a close eye on the monster while it squatted again.

“Yeah, but its got a tiger body, so it just looks like a cat using the litter box upside down,” Yang said.

“Focus, Xiao Long,” Weiss snapped.

“So, any ideas?” Yang asked. “It's kinda hard to hit while its that high up.”

“I can summon my Knight,” Weiss said. “I was hoping to save it for our return to Beacon, but unless we want to let this thing run loose through the faunus district we might need it.”

“We are not letting it loose here,” Blake growled.

“I know!” Weiss objected. “I wouldn't do that!”

“Okay, here's the plan,” Ruby said. “Weiss, you summon the Knight, we'll keep it distracted until you do. When it's here it can get it off the ceiling where we can all work it down. It has to get too beaten up to heal at some point, right? I mean, otherwise swords couldn't kill it… or there's a weak spot we don't know about.”

Weiss nodded and ran towards the next room, only to hit the ground a moment later as Ruby tackled her. She was already somewhat injured, and hitting the concrete hard like that really hurt, knocking
“Sorry,” Ruby said, helping her unsteadily to her feet. “It shot webs at you.”

“Ouch,” Weiss muttered, glaring while trying to catch her breath and stay on her feet.

“Eh heh… sorry Weiss,” Ruby said. “I'll kiss it better when we get home.”

“I think all of me is bruised,” Weiss growled.

“That's fine,” Ruby smirked. “More of you to kiss. Except... uh, kinda less of you to kiss. You felt pretty boney when I grabbed you. Have you been eating right?”

“Worry about her not taking care of herself later!” Yang shouted, making Weiss growl but not say anything.

While they'd been distracted the demon hadn't sent any more webbing at them. Instead it had scurried towards the doors, laying several strands of thick webbing across each of them in a matter of moments. While Yang could no doubt knock a hole in the wall, or they could figure out how to open the large loading doors, the demon was obviously making its point known that it would work to prevent them from escaping the room.

“Just cover me,” Weiss said, pulling out chalk and her vial of dust. “I'll summon it right here.”

“Got it!” Ruby said, raising her scythe.

Weiss focused on the glyph she was drawing, but after the last time she'd had to summon it during combat conditions she'd practiced it extensively, trying to ensure that it wouldn't be so difficult to do again. It still took a little while, but she was able to glance up occasionally to get a feel for how the battle was unfolding while she worked.

The demon still seemed to be staying on the ceiling where they couldn't reach it as easily, making her wish that the warehouse didn't have such a high ceiling. It continued to launch strand after strand of webbing, quite of few of them at her, but Ruby used her scythe to catch the strands, letting her weapon dissolve and reform once she did, sending the webbing falling to the ground in a pile.

After a little bit it gave up, seeing that that wasn't working, and distracted by Yang, who had taken to throwing crates at the demon with enough force to shatter the empty wood into fragments whether it hit or missed, although the tsuchigumo was agile enough to avoid most of them, especially when it was no longer concentrating on shooting webbing at Ruby and Weiss.

Just as she was finishing up she heard a shout of panic, and she looked up from her dust vial to see Jaune dangling in midair, a strand of webbing having hit his shield. He tried to chop the webbing with his sword, but the blade wouldn't cut through, even getting briefly stuck before he was able to free it. It probably didn't help that he was dangling painfully by one arm, from the look on his face close to tearing something as the tsuchigumo pulled him up toward its jaws.

“I hate spiders!” he shouted, flailing at the strand with his sword again, only to shout in agony as Yang jumped up and grabbed his legs. “My arm!”

Their combined weight was still being pulled up, and seeing that Yang scaled Jaune's body until she was actually balanced on his shoulders, much to his shouts of distress. Her hair then caught on fire, and she jumped up, hands blazing to throw a burning punch at the demon. Unfortunately it managed to swat her out of the air with one of its eight limbs, although it did drop Jaune to the ground while doing so. He lay stunned for a moment, unable to move, until a half dozen Blakes swarmed the area,
the real one pulling him away to catch his breath while the rest kept the demon distracted.

Weiss cut her hand at the same time that she poured dust into the circle. She placed the cut hand down in the center and began channeling her mana, looking back up again at the evolving situation. Yang was back to throwing heavy objects at the demon, while Ruby squirmed in place, obviously eager to get back out there. Blake was near Yang, kusarigama in hand, and Jaune was nowhere to be seen.

Before she could find him her view was blocked by a cloud of gray smoke, which soon formed into the Knight. She'd spent a considerable amount of dust and other resources helping it heal after the last time she'd summoned it for battle, and it was as good as new as it raised its enormous sword and took in the situation.

“Get that demon off of the roof so that we can kill it,” Weiss ordered, standing and raising Myrtenaster.

The Knight nodded and jogged forward, sword held in both hands as it charged into battle. The demon turned its attention to it, and it managed to scurry away from the Knight's first attack, moving with all of the speed of a real spider across the roof despite its bulk. The summon pounded after it, swinging several more times despite not making contact.

Just as the Knight was finally getting close to actually hitting it the tsubigumo sudden stopped running and jumped, flipping as it flew through the air to land directly on top of the Knight, sending both crashing down onto the ground. Rather than trying to futilely claw the silversteel warrior to pieces, the demon instead focused on laying webbing, scurrying across its body and leaving a trail of silk wherever it went.

The Knight dropped its sword to free up both hands as it tried to grab the demon, succeeding only in pulling off one of its legs, which made the monster scream in pain as it continued its attempts to cocoon the summon. They flailed about wildly for a long moment, until finally the Knight managed to get a firm hold around the squirming tiger torso of the monster, although by then it was so webbed that it could barely move itself.

Yang had been waiting for such an opening however, and she jumped up and slammed her flaming metal fist right into the back of the demon with so much force that she knocked the Knight off balance and sent both titanic figures to the ground with a deafening clatter. The demon was howling, and Weiss saw that its back pairs of limbs were completely limp as it managed to free itself from the Knight and began to crawl desperately away in the confusion.

It didn't get very far, as once again Blake managed to find her way on top of the tsubigumo's back, this time going for the kill as she wrapped her arm around its neck to then drag the scythe end of her weapon across its throat. There was a spray of dark ichor from the massive wound, and the demon's pained screams were cut off by liquid gurgles as it began to choke on its own blood.

Then Ruby shot under it, a trail of petals falling behind her as she kept her scythe above her head, the impossibly sharp blade sinking into the slowly regenerating wound Blake had left and then digging in as she ran right under its torso, dragging the weapon behind her at incredible speed. She made it clear out the other side, barely avoiding the webbing festooning the Knight, and then gore rained down along her trail.
The demon froze, eyes bulging, unable to scream as its body was nearly cut in half. The inside apparently lacked any of the internal organs that an animal would've had, instead being filled with a noisome goo, which poured forth like a ruptured tank of molasses, covering the floor and filling the air with a stench that almost made Weiss vomit.

Yang climbed on top of the crouched Knight, her burning hands torching the webbing instead of making her stick to it, and once she was on top she leapt, bringing her metal fist down once again in the center of the tsuchigumo's back. There was a tremendous cracking sound, and the jets of flame on the back of Yang's arm bloomed, pushing her fist even harder into the demon. It hit the ground, limbs curling up above it and its insides spraying out everywhere as the body flattened.

The demon made one last pitiful choking sound and went still. Everyone stood and watched, unsure if it was really over, until slowly it began to dissolve into wisps of black smoke, taking the webbing with it. The four of them gathered together next to the Knight, which after a few moments managed to stand again, retrieving its sword.

“Thank you,” Weiss said, smiling up at it. “I'll be needing your help again soon. We'll be fighting a major battle… probably tomorrow. Will you be ready?”

The Knight raised its sword in a salute, and with a nod Weiss dismissed it, letting it return to its home plane with a swirl of gray smoke.

“Well, that was a thing,” Yang said.

Weiss glared at her. “Only because someone thought it was a good idea to destroy a magical artifact.”

“Well sorry,” Yang said, crossing her arms.

Weiss sighed. “Well… at least you freed those trapped souls, so I suppose it wasn't all bad. Just… don't do it again.”

“Ah, I knew you loved me,” Yang said, pulling her into a half hug.

“Don't touch me,” Weiss grumbled.

Weiss didn't actually try to pull away, although she was stiff in Yang's arms, only relaxing a few moments later when Ruby moved into her eyesight before hugging her as well. “Group hug!” she shouted.

“Ugh, you guys are the worst,” Weiss complained as Blake joined in with a smirk. With a long suffering sigh Weiss brought her own arms up and hugged the others.

“Jeez, I go away for a minute and I get left out of the celebration?” Jaune joked as he walked up, short on breath. As they pulled apart Weiss saw that he'd picked up a split lip and the beginning of a nasty bruise on his forehead, and he was dragging something heavy behind him, and was struggling to do so.

“Is that...” Blake trailed off, eyes wide.

“I present one Adam Taurus,” he said proudly, releasing the terrorist leader and stepping aside so that they could all see him. Adam's jaw was still broken, and his face had Yang's fist branded onto it, but he looked surprisingly coherent as he glared hatefully up at them.

“How did you catch him?” Blake asked, walking closer and checking his handcuffs, ensuring that he
wouldn't be able to easily escape.

Jaune just shrugged but with a smug smirk on his face. “Well, after you pulled me away from the soochie thing I noticed him working his way through the door. I just snuck up behind him while that Knight was stomping around loudly and jumped him from behind.”

“I guess he isn't much without his sword,” Yang taunted.

He glared up at them and with some obvious effort managed to speak, his words slurred from the damage to his jaw and teeth. “I will kill you all.”

“Wooo, scary,” Yang mocked.

“You think you've won, but someday I will get free,” Adam said slowly, despite the obvious intense pain caused by speaking. “My supporters will free me and I will continue where I left off. Humanity will get its due, and I will make sure that your suffering is the stuff of legends.”

“You won't,” Blake said coldly, crouching in front of him. “You're everything that's wrong with the White Fang. Sienna Khan may have started this… this madness, but you've pushed it further and further. All you care about is hurting humans. You don't even care about the faunus anymore.”

He raised his chin, burning eyes defiant. “They will all pay.”

Blake shook her head. “I can't imagine what I ever saw in you. How blind was I? You've done so much damage, caused so much pain. All for what?”

He didn't answer, and Yang spoke after a long quiet moment. Weiss noticed that she had her metal fist so tightly clenched that it was shaking slightly, although her voice was level. “What do you want to do with him?”

“He needs to go to jail,” Ruby said with a frown.

“Where?” Yang pointed out. “The only one in the city kinda got broken into, didn't it? And it's not like we can keep him ourselves; we need to stop Cinder.”

“The cops I was working with have a temporary jail they set up,” Jaune said.

“Can it hold him?” Yang asked. “He's pretty beaten up, but I doubt he'll be easy to keep for long.”

“He knows how to heal himself,” Blake agreed. “I'm sure he already is, actually. He couldn't talk so easily if his jaw was still totally broken.”

“We can't just kill him,” Ruby said after a long moment of silence.

No one said anything, Blake staying unmoving where she crouched inches from him, the two staring each other in the eye, seeing who would flinch first. “It's Blake's decision,” Weiss said after a while.

“We can't just kill him!” Ruby repeated her objection louder, like they hadn't heard her the first time.

“We're in an apocalypse at the moment,” Weiss pointed out. “The normal rules and laws of society are a bit… fuzzy right now. Keeping him alive might lead to a great many more deaths, including police if Jaune's friends can't keep him contained.”

“We can't just kill people!” Ruby said. “Maybe things are bad right now, but that just means it's even more important! If we don't do the right thing, how can we expect anyone else to?”
Weiss nodded. “Blake knows him, has known him for many years. She knows him better than anyone, and she knows if we can do the right thing, or if we must do the expedient thing. And as a Schnee, I don't think I should make the decision of what happens to a faunus leader, no matter how twisted he's become.”

“He's not a faunus leader anymore,” Blake said. “He gave up that right when he decided to help a Sidhe destroy the world. But too many faunus look up to him. They think he's noble, that his hate can guide them to a better future. Killing him isn't the pragmatic choice; killing him just makes him a martyr. The only thing we can do is keep him in prison, and when we stop this mess we'll make sure he gets a very public, very fair trial, and that when its over the world will see what he really is.”

“Oh, good,” Ruby sighed, a smile on her face. “I knew Blake would do the right thing!”

Even Weiss felt relieved that Blake didn't just kill him. He was a rabid dog, biting everyone that came close and destroying everything he touched, but Weiss was glad her friend wouldn't have his blood on her hands. Blake had enough guilt without killing a former lover, no matter how much better off the world was without him.

“Come on,” Yang said, grabbing Adam and roughly hauling him to his feet. “Let's get out of here.”

They started to walk back through the warehouse, and Ruby happily reaching over and grabbing Weiss' hand. She smiled and squeezed back, and the two walked at the back of the group, hand in hand as they strolled toward the van.

“Thank you for coming for me,” Ruby said quietly. “I knew you would.”

“I'm sorry I took so long,” Weiss said.

Ruby studied her closely. “I can tell you looked hard… and you didn't take very good care of yourself, did you?”

Weiss looked down. “I… no. I didn't.”

“You can't do that to yourself,” Ruby said sadly. “It hurts thinking about you… hurting yourself. I want to live a long, happy life with you. I can't do that if you kill yourself.”

A childhood growing up in Schnee manor had made Weiss expect to be yelled at for her failures. Instead Ruby looked sad and hurt, and that was far, far more painful. Weiss paused in her walk, turning to face Ruby who looked at her with worried eyes. Finally, when she was able to speak past the lump in her throat Weiss broke the painful silence. “I'm sorry.”

“I don't want you to feel sorry,” Ruby said. “I just want you to take care of yourself. I love you, Weiss.”

“I love you, too,” Weiss said, blinking back tears. “I don't want to hurt myself either. I'll… I'll try to be better. It's hard, though. I… when I'm down I forget to eat sometimes. I just… don't feel hungry. And when I'm focused on things I don't always notice. This week… I was both.”

Ruby nodded. “Sometimes it's hard to get you to eat, but if I could always be with you we could deal with that. But if something like this happens again… you need to take care of yourself Weiss. Not just for me, but for you too.”

“I'll try,” Weiss said.

“That's all I can ask,” Ruby said, kissing her lightly before they started walking again.
Ninth Case: Breakout

They reached the van, and after some effort Yang managed to get the side door to slide open. While waiting Weiss and Ruby had been standing next to Jaune and Adam, and while mostly distracted by being with Ruby again, she had noticed that the terrorist leader had dilated pupils. He was most likely seriously concussed in addition to the broken jaw and burns, and as someone who had been forced to heal injuries magically while suffering from a head injury, Weiss understood why he was following along so docilely. Hopefully they would be able to drop him off with someone soon or they could end up with a real fight on their hands keeping him contained, handcuffed or not, once he recovered some.

“So… how has your week been?” Ruby asked when she was forced to let go of Weiss to climb into the van.

She tried to ignore the pang of loss as she responded. “I tried to find out how to reach you the entire time.”

“Yeah, but… I mean, I was just kinda in a warehouse,” Ruby said, as she helped Jaune position Adam near the back of the van.

“I thought you were still in Beacon, and it wasn't until I went looking for you that I figured out a way to enter there,” Weiss said.

“You know a way into Beacon?” Ruby asked.

“Yes, I-” Weiss started, only to be cut off by Blake.

“Yang!” the faunus said. “Hurry!”

Yang didn't ask why, slamming the van door shut and running around to the driver's seat while Blake climbed into the passenger side. “What's going on?” Ruby asked.

The answer quickly became obvious, as down the street a number of cars and motorcycles turned a corner and began driving towards them. Yang didn't hesitated, starting the engine and hitting the gas, turning the van around so sharply that everyone in the back was thrown against the wall. As Weiss fell to the metal floor she silently cursed Torchwick for using a van without any seating, or even anything soft to cushion the hard metal.

“Hold on!” Yang shouted.

“To what!?” Weiss objected.

“Your asses!” Yang crowed as she jerked the wheel sideways, slamming them into something. Weiss flew through the air again, but before she could slam head first into the other side wall arms wrapped around her, and Ruby shifted so that she took the hit on her shoulder instead. “Owie!”

“What was that?!?” Weiss shouted.

“Motorcycle,” Yang said casually, before she began to slalom back and forth across the street, sending everyone in the back bouncing from one side of the van to the other. Weiss and Ruby continued to cling to each other, and they both flinched when they heard gunfire erupt behind them. “Shit!”
The van, which had been driving erratically before, suddenly began to fly all over the road, occasionally turning corners far too sharply, even scraping against buildings or other objects from time to time. Stuck in the back of the dark van, unable to see what was going on, bouncing into the metal walls, and knowing there was a concussed but still dangerous terrorist leader handcuffed with them in the compartment was one of the most frightening experiences of Weiss life. Normally she had some degree of control over the situation, but instead she was trapped, unable to even see what dangers were coming, completely at the mercy of Yang's driving.

The only thing that made the nightmare bearable was Ruby in her arms. After a week of constant fear for her love's life, holding her close gave Weiss such a buzz that she still felt it even under those conditions. She was sure that the high of triumph would run out soon, but at least they were together for that moment.

And then she heard Jaune vomit nearby, the stink making her own stomach churn, along with the knowledge that eventually one of Yang's maneuvers would send them sliding into it. Just like that, the elation fell away, and Weiss felt the fear of losing Ruby before they even had a chance to properly reunite fill her.

“Sorry,” Jaune said. “I get motion sickness.”

“And humans call faunus animals,” Adam said darkly.

A moment later there was a thump on the top of the vehicle, and Yang swore loudly. “What was that?” Ruby called.

“Someone actually climbed onto the van!” Yang shouted. “I didn't think anyone actually did that! What the fuck is he planning on doing back there?!”

“Try to drive steady for a minute,” Ruby called.

“I'll try,” Yang said.

Ruby climbed to her feet, Weiss helping her, and once they were both standing Ruby conjured her scythe and focused for a moment. Yang juked the car slightly, making them both stumble, but Weiss held Ruby around the waist and did her best to keep them both up. “Thanks, Weiss,” Ruby murmured.

There was a thump above them, and Ruby swung her scythe up, the blade punching easily through the metal roof. There was an agonized scream, and a moment later Ruby dismissed her scythe as they heard a series of thumps as the person on top of the van bounced off of the back and to the street behind them.

“Thanks sis!” Yang called. “Just glad he didn't do… whatever he was gonna do.”

Ruby and Weiss helped each other stagger to the front, until they were able to hold onto the seats. Even with the headlights on they were driving far too fast through the dark city streets to really see much, but somehow Yang was able to avoid running into anything while still mostly focusing on the vehicles chasing them. Weiss was suddenly unsure which was worse, seeing the insanity that was outside of the van, or not knowing about it.

“What's going on?” Ruby asked.

“White Fang are chasing us,” Blake said. “Ilia got reinforcements.”

“Ilia?” Ruby asked.
“The one with the whip,” Weiss said. “She and Blake knew each other.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “Um… at least your friend didn't die in the warehouse?” Ruby offered.

“Hold on!” Yang shouted.

Weiss had just enough time to grab the back of Blake's seat in a death grip when she saw the checkpoint ahead. It was the one with the grocery store that she and Blake had been to earlier, and before the guards had a real chance to react they went flying through it. Unlike the entrance to the wealthy district, this one actually had an improvised gate, and they plowed into it at the highest speed the white panel van could move.

Weiss slammed painfully into the seat in front of her, the air driven from her lungs as everyone, even Adam, screamed at the impact. For a moment she went airborne, almost losing her grip on the seat, before they slammed back down and bounced several times. The van weaved back and forth as Yang loudly cursed, until finally she got it under control again and started accelerating once more. Just as they were starting to pull away they heard gunfire, and with a loud bang the van jerked, almost slamming into a building as Yang lost control of it.

“What was that!” Weiss shrieked.

“They shot out a tire!” Ruby shouted.

“They're still following us!” Blake called, looking into the side mirror.

“Everyone stop screaming!” Yang screamed back as she struggled with the wheel.

With one of the tires shot out the van was almost impossible to control at those speeds, but Yang had taken offensive driving courses and managed to keep them going where they wanted, although the pursuit cars were easily catching up. Despite her best efforts, it didn't look like they would be able to get away. They all flinched when someone in the closest car opened fire again, and without one of the tires Yang was having trouble driving erratically enough to make hitting the others difficult.

“If we still had guns… damn it,” Yang growled. “We're not gonna make it at this rate.”

“There has to be something we can do!” Weiss said.

“Hold on!” Yang shouted again.

One of the pursuit cars managed to pull up beside them and slammed into the side of the van. It was much smaller, but it had all four tires, and they were thrown back and forth for a moment until Yang got things under control. She pulled way from the other car, then at the right moment hit the breaks, making the White Fang miss its follow up, instead giving Yang an opening to jerk the wheel sideways, tapping the back corner of the other car and making it spin out.

Yang barely avoided crashing into the car she'd taken out, but soon they were accelerating away again. It was only a few seconds later when the van jerked like crazy once more, a bullet taking out the other back tire. The van almost flipped, but Yang managed to keep them going, but for how much longer was in question.

“Maybe I can get them with my scythe!” Ruby shouted. “If we open the door I could jump out-”

“No!” Everyone except for Adam shouted.

“Don't even think about it,” Weiss growled.
“Are you crazy?” Jaune groaned, sounding on the verge of vomiting again.

“This isn’t a Hollywood blockbuster,” Blake scolded.

“Even I think that’s a bad- OH SHIT!” Yang started, only to scream at the last moment.

Something hit the side of the van, and this time they not only went airborne, they actually flipped over in the air. Weiss didn’t have a good enough grip for that, and soon she was flying through the van until she slammed into the side wall and saw stars. She continued to bounce around the dark compartment as the van rolled over and over, until finally coming to a stop.

It was silent and dark, and Weiss wasn’t sure if she was awake or not. Distantly she heard another car crash, and some loud, indefinable gurgling sound mixed with a high pitched roar outside. She thought about getting up and seeing what was going on, or more importantly making sure Ruby and the others were okay, but moving seemed like a lot to ask all of a sudden.

Someone then straddled her waist in the dark, and she flinched away from them. They were too heavy to be Ruby, and any doubts about that went away instantly as two large, rough hands wrapped around her throat. “Die, Schnee,” Adam growled as he started to strangle her.

Weiss wasn’t sure how he’d gotten out of his handcuffs, but then again, she wasn't sure how long it had been since the crash. She thought it had only been a few seconds, but it could’ve been much longer and she’d simply been knocked out. Or perhaps he'd healed enough in the back during the drive despite the insanity of it all, and had simply taken his time freeing himself while it was too dark and chaotic for anyone to notice what he was up to.

Weiss pushed that aside and opened her connection to the afterlife, making Adam flinch away and release her neck. She had managed to pull only a little of his life force from his hands before he pulled them away from her, and she gasped for air as he cursed quietly. There was a clinking sound, and she somehow managed to bring her arm up in time to block his handcuff, which he'd grabbed and tried to swing down into her skull while she was still dazed.

She grunted from the hit, and he tried to swing again, but she reached up and grabbed his face, pulling at his life energies. He managed to knock her hand away, but she was able to grab his arm with her other hand. He tried to wrestle her away from him, dropping the handcuffs as he did, but any skin to skin contact made him weaker, and soon she had the upper hand, gripping him hard until he was unable to resist.

The life force felt good as it slowly healed the many injuries she'd accrued that night. It was hard to stop draining him before he died, but in the end she knew that Ruby was mere feet away, and that Blake was also there and had wanted him to be taken in alive. She waited until he was too weak to put up any further fights for days before cutting off the flow of energy. He fell limp on top of her, making her grunt again as he inadvertently had her pinned to the floor under his deadweight.

She was stuck for a few moments, the difficulty breathing his weight was causing making her consider draining him again until he disintegrated, until she heard movement next to her and a voice softly speak. “Weiss?”

“What?” she grunted. “Get him off of me.”

“Who?” Ruby asked. There was a shuffling next to her, and Weiss could almost make out Ruby in the dark. There was the faintest amount of light streaming through the front windscreen of the van, although it was quite dark outside as well, but she had been trapped inside long enough to start to adjust. Either that or she was simply hoping that she could see Ruby in the dark so hard that she was
hallucinating her.

Whichever it was Ruby grunted and levered Adam off of her. “How did he get there?”

Weiss took a few deep breaths and sat up before speaking. She was still battered from the recent fight and the car crash, but she felt a little better after draining the terrorist into a near coma. “He was trying to strangle me until I knocked him out. Didn’t you hear him say he was going to kill me?”

“Are you okay?” Ruby asked, Weiss jumping slightly when her partner’s hands started checking her body for injuries. After a while they paused at somewhere that made Weiss clear her throat. “Oops… sorry Weiss. Oh, uh, I was kinda hit on the head a little. Like, My ears are still ringing a little but I think I'm kinda okay-ish. Like, I don't think I'm really hurt, but I guess I missed him talking.”

“What about the others?” Weiss asked as she shakily stood.

“I dunno,” Ruby said, her voice worried. “I just found you.”

“Meridiem,” Weiss said, blinking against the light as her eyes adjusted. The van was apparently lying on its side, and Jaune and Adam were both down on the ground. Ruby scurried over to Jaune and checked on him for a moment, until he groaned, and struggled to sit up.

“Ruby?” he asked.

“Yeah, Jaune,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just a bit beat up,” he groaned. “There's supposed to be three of you right?”

Ruby continued fussing over him while Weiss carefully made her way to the front of the vehicle. The van had apparently come to a stop against a building, the nose partially crumpled, although the front window was in one piece, if covered in cracks. Blake and Yang were missing, and Weiss suspected that they'd climbed out one of the passenger door. They could do the same, but she wasn't sure if Jaune was coordinated enough when he didn't have a head injury to make it, and there was no way they could get Adam out that way.

“Are they okay?” Ruby asked as she helped Jaune to his feet.

Weiss glanced back and grimaced as she saw that doing so had gotten some of his vomit on Ruby, but she didn't say anything as she walked back to them. “Probably. They seem to have left.”

“They left us?” Jaune asked.

“Probably trying to figure out what to do about whatever that thing was,” Ruby said.

“Thing is,” Weiss said. “I can still hear it out there.”

Ruby cocked her head, and then swallowed when she heard the same thing Weiss was. It was a low, gurgling sound, like a massive pool filter when the water level was just a bit low, and mixed into it occasionally was a disturbing crunching noise.

“We should get out of here,” Ruby said after a few moments.

“I think your sister and Blake climbed out of the- or we could do that,” Weiss said.

Ruby had interrupted her by conjuring her scythe. She easily cut a huge hole in the former roof of the van, which fell with a clatter to the street. They were apparently facing away from the whatever was making those horrible sounds, as all they could see were empty streets.
Weiss drew her sword and stepped out beside Ruby, while Jaune groaned as he started to drag Adam from the van behind them. The crash had apparently happened in an industrial area, as all around them were factories and warehouses. After exchanging a glance the partners walked quietly to the back of the van and peeked around the corner.

The monster was almost impossible to put a description to. It was like an enormous, bristly star fish had merged with a bloated leach, with a head vaguely shaped like an enormous cow, but with a circular, lamprey like maw. It had four sets of black, doll-like eyes, and it was perhaps even larger than the tsuchigumo had been. It was crouched over the remains of several wrecked vehicles, and it was worrying at the corpse of a White Fang member as they watched. From the shredded piles of White Fang remains around it, it had been feeding far a while.

“What is it?” Ruby asked.

“I have no idea,” Weiss said.

“What do we do?” Ruby asked. “It's kinda… big. And weird looking. I mean, starfish can live without their arms right?”

Weiss side eyed her partner. Fighting the tsuchigumo had been dangerous, perhaps even foolhardy, but as Blake had insisted, leaving it alive in a populated area would have lead to countless deaths. The… thing they were looking at was away from people, and it was on its way to being well fed. The odds of it causing trouble in the near future were slim, but Ruby wasn't one to leave dangers unstopped.

“Ruby…” Weiss trailed off. “We're all hurt. And it's not going to cause anyone problems for a while. I don't care how ravenous it is, it's going to be satisfied for at least a few days after eating that many people. We can let the army handle it.”

“But what if it attacks someone?” Ruby said. “We're right here.”

“You've been inside this whole week,” Weiss said, reaching over and taking her hand. “I know it's hard to accept, but… the whole city is overrun. Not just with a few monsters, either. There are hundreds of demons everywhere, and the only thing keeping anyone safe are their house wards and militias guarding different districts.”

“So because there are lots of problems we're going to just ignore this one?” Ruby asked incredulously.

“Yes,” Weiss said bluntly. “Even if we worked ourselves to death we couldn't kill a tenth of the demons attacking people in Vale right now, and this thing is at least away from the neighborhoods. We need to focus on stopping the problem at the source.”

“The source?”

“Cinder Fall, and the warping of the Great Barrier,” Weiss said. “We beat her and we can fix this whole mess, and the army can swoop in and finish the big monsters off for us. If we get killed here then the whole city is doomed.

Ruby watched the demon for several more long, long seconds, before sighing and letting her scythe fall apart into rose petals. “Okay.”

Weiss breathed a sigh of relief and sheathed Myrtenaster. “Now we just need to find your brute of a sister…”
A car came slowly rumbling down the street. It was coming the opposite way from the demon, and when it came close it paused near them. A window rolled down, revealing Yang and Blake in the front seats. “Need a lift?” Yang asked.

“Where did you get a car?” Weiss asked as she climbed into the back seat. She watched Ruby and Jaune manhandle Adam into the trunk, smirking with satisfaction as they slammed it closed on him.

“Hot wired it,” Yang said casually.

“What?”
Ninth Case: Care

It didn't take long once they were away from the still unidentified monster to drop Jaune off with the police he had been working with, the precinct happy to take the unconscious Adam Taurus into custody as well. Jaune had promised to return the next day, and while he wouldn't be Weiss' first choice for storming a Grimm filled tower, she knew that he would insist on helping, and he had proven himself competent enough not to turn away. They needed all of the help they could get, anyway.

Once Ruby was alone with Weiss in the backseat she had cuddled up against her, and despite a few half hearted gripes about seatbelts and car safety, Weiss had only held her close, grateful to be able to again. She didn't really care how bad Ruby smelled after a week in a cage, or that she had a bit of Jaune's vomit on her from the chase, she was just happy to be with her again. Even Yang hadn't teased them for it, sending them the occasional warm glance in the rear view mirror while she drove.

When they pulled to a stop again Ruby looked around in confusion, still not pulling away. “Where are we?”

“Torchwick's safe house,” Yang explained.

“Oh,” Ruby said.

“He's probably long gone,” Blake said. “We need to get Weiss' car back, though.”

“Yeah, might as well check while we're here,” Yang said. “I'd like a few words with him about only doing half his job.”

“His job?” Ruby asked.

“Blake and I tracked down Torchwick, and he's the one who knew where you were,” Weiss said. “He agreed to help us free you, but he and Neo disappeared in the confusion instead of getting the key to your cage.”

“Oh,” Ruby said. “So he did it after all.”

“Did what?” Weiss asked as she opened the car door.

Ruby whined slightly for a moment at having to get up, but followed her girlfriend out of the car, taking her hand immediately after. “He said if you could find him he might help free me. I guess he decided to go through with it.”

“He made it a lot easier,” Weiss agreed, leading Ruby over to the SUV while Yang and Blake went up to the townhouse. She agreed with Blake that he had probably skipped out to some fallback shelter rather than returning after what had happened, so she didn't see a point in going up to check herself.

“Whoa, that's a big SUV,” Ruby said.

Weiss smirked. “It's a top of the line custom armored vehicle. My family uses them when we need to transport important people or sensitive materials that we can't risk losing. If we'd had this earlier that gate, those pursuit cars... even that giant monster wouldn't have been more than a speed bump.”

“Cool!” Ruby said, letting go of Weiss to run around the car, examining everything. She asked a host
of rapid fire questions, and Weiss indulgently explained everything she knew, which admittedly
wasn't that much. By the time Yang and Blake returned Ruby had climbed halfway into the engine
compartment and Weiss had promised to introduce her to someone who knew more about them.

“He's gone,” Yang confirmed, smirking as Ruby reluctantly closed the hood so that they could leave.
“Most of the stuff's still there, but I doubt it's his. He probably just grabbed a place and set up shop.”

Once they climbed in the back Ruby cuddled up against Weiss again, and they both ignored Yang's
chuckle as she started the SUV. “You sure you don't want to drive, Weiss? It's your car.”

“I could if you'd like,” Weiss said, calling her bluff.

“I didn't know you drove!” Ruby said. “How come I'm always the one driving us around?”

“Yeah Weiss, how come she's always the one driving you around?” Yang taunted.

“I don't see why you're needling me this way, you brute,” Weiss growled. “I've never wrecked a car.
You have within the last hour.”

“Monster attacks don't count,” Yang pouted.

“Yang's driving is an… experience, but one I'd rather not repeat today. Or ever.”

Weiss scoffed but stayed quiet, after a little bit Ruby spoke to her softly. “Are you really that bad?”

Weiss glanced at her. “I… I'm not overly used to driving. I managed to get my license, but after that I
hadn't been behind the wheel again until I went looking for you. This SUV is also hard to drive.”

“So you just need more experience,” Ruby said. “When things are normal again you should take
over driving! That way you'll get comfortable again.'

“No!” Yang objected. “You are not driving my baby sister!”

“You don't get to decide that,” Weiss said, raising her chin in the air. She didn't want to drive, but it
was the principle of the matter.

“I'm putting my big sis foot down on this one,” Yang said. “You are not driving Ruby.”

“If she wants to she can,” Ruby said. “You're not the boss of me! Or, uh, Weiss.”

“Already talking about yourselves as one unit I see,” Blake said blandly. “When's the wedding?”

Yang lost control of the vehicle for a moment, but she quickly recovered. Ruby, on the other hand,
went bright red and sputtered out a shocked ramble so rapid that even Weiss couldn't understand it. Not that she was understanding much of anything, as she was bright red herself as she remembered Klein's mention of her mother's engagement ring. It'd serve them right if she put a ring on Ruby right then; the blonde would probably have a stroke.

Of course, as satisfying as it might be, there was no way that she was going to propose to Ruby in the backseat of an SUV while covered in filth. When she asked it was going to be perfect. With a glare at the smug couple in the front seat, she decided that it was going to be soon, too. Or, soonish at least.

Without intending to Weiss had hugged Ruby harder, and rather than complaining she had simply snuggled in closer. The rest of the trip was quiet, with the couple in the front seat talking softly to each other while Ruby and Weiss simply held each other peacefully.

When they finally pulled to a stop in front of the Xiao Long household Ruby spoke up quietly. “Thank you for saving me… it was… I'm really glad you came.”

“Of course we came,” Yang said, before hesitating. “Or… I wanted to. When I first heard about you being taken I wanted to go look for you. And when Weiss came to see me I wanted to then, too. But I just… I felt useless. Like I was a failure to get injured, and if I failed before how could I win when I was so much weaker with just one arm? Weiss is the one who got me to come save you.”

“You chose to come on your own,” Weiss said. “I just reminded you that you weren't the invalid you were making yourself. Even if I hadn't thought of the prosthetic arm you would've remembered what you're capable of eventually.”

“You've got more faith in my than I do,” Yang said.

“That's what friends are for,” Weiss said. She blushed when Ruby leaned over and kissed her cheek.

Before they could say anything else the front door opened, and Tai stepped out onto the porch looking out at the car. Ruby climbed out from under Weiss' tight grip and threw the door open, scrambling out of the car and running up to him. “Dad!”

“Ruby!” he shouted, stumbling back as she shot into his arms with the force of a battering ram. He managed to keep his feet, picking her up and swinging her around and around in circles.

Weiss smiled, climbing across the SUV to exit through the same door Ruby had, closing the door she had left open behind her and slowly approaching the pair. Despite the giant grin on his face Tai was crying, and she could hear Ruby sniffing as well. She hung back, smiling gently, until Yang and Blake walked up behind her.

“Come on,” Yang said. “I think this calls for a group hug.”

“We shouldn't-” Weiss started.

“Yeah, group hug!” Ruby shouted.

“Come here, girls,” Tai said with a smile.

“You heard them,” Yang said.

“But…” Weiss trailed off. She then yelped as she was shoved from behind, stumbling forward several steps until Ruby grabbed her and pulled her into the hug, Yang and Blake piling on after. She grumbled quietly for a few moments, but it was halfhearted.
“Jeez, glad I finished my drink before coming out,” Qrow said from the doorway.

“Uncle Qrow!” Ruby shouted, squirming somehow out of the center of the group hug to run up to him, nearly knocking him off of his feet as well.

“Ugh!” Qrow grunted. “Whoa, you stink.”

The group hug had drifted apart without Ruby to anchor it, and Weiss stepped closer to Ruby and Qrow with a huff. “I don't want to hear that from you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asked indignantly.

“If a brewery were homeless it would still smell better than you do,” Weiss said, crossing her arms and raising her nose in the air.

“You really take after your sister, don't you?” he complained.

Weiss raised an eyebrow. “I take that as a compliment. How do you know my sister, anyway?”

“We go way back,” he said with a smirk.

“No wonder my sister seems so stressed when I see her, if she's forced to interact with an inebriated rapscallion such as yourself,” Weiss said.

“And I woulda thought Ruby could've made your ice heart melt,” he said.

“Naw, she's too busy making other parts of her melt,” Yang said.

Weiss' brow furrowed in confusion for a moment while Qrow gave a nasty chuckle, making her huff angrily. “Don't be obscene.”

“What, I was just talking about your eyes,” Yang said faux innocently. “They seemed to be leaking a bit while she was gone.”

“Aww, Weiss!” Ruby cried, letting go of Qrow and running over to grab her in a hug. “I'm back! You don't have to cry anymore!”

“And now somewhere else is melting,” Yang said.

Weiss growled while Qrow and Yang snickered, Blake smirked, and Tai blushed. Ruby was too busy hugging and fussing over her girlfriend to pay much attention to what they were saying, but Weiss was blushing fiercely and glaring at Yang. After a moment her expression shifted and she gave her a smirk. “You know what? Laugh all you want. I'm taking Ruby to go get a shower. Don't wait for us.”

Yang choked slightly, and Qrow took a shot from his flask. Tai turned on his heel and headed towards the kitchen calling back at them. “I'll cook some food. It's late, but I bet you're all hungry.”

“Don't rush,” Weiss called as she pulled Ruby further into the house.

“We're gonna shower?” Ruby asked, before grinning. “Great! I've never wanted to get clean so bad in my life!”

“Come on then, dolt,” Weiss said fondly.

“Are we still gonna do the whipped cream thing?” Ruby asked innocently as she took the lead,
Weiss felt deeply embarrassed by what she and Ruby had been saying and doing in front of the others, but at the same time it felt liberating to be so open about things with people she trusted. It also made her feel triumphant to have gotten the last word over Yang without having to descend to insults. In the end she decided to just go with it, lost in her happiness at having Ruby back. “Maybe next time.”

Ruby then smirked over at her, and Weiss found herself smiling back as she realized that Ruby hadn't been quite as oblivious about the situation as she'd been acting. It didn't really come as a surprise; Ruby had a bright view of the world, if a bit more realistic than the year before, but that didn't mean she was a total innocent. Of the pair, she was the more experienced one in such matters, after all.

Before going to the bathroom they stopped in Ruby's room to grab some clothing. Ruby kept some in her old room still, and Weiss had the bag she had gotten from their apartment. It didn't take long to get everything they needed, and in under a minute they had reached their destination.

Despite how excited she had been the entire time about this, she suddenly felt strangely shy at the thought of sharing a shower. They had done so fairly often over the past few months, but for some reason doing so again after a week of worry felt awkward. She bit her lip, and toyed with her skirt rather than removing it right away.

Ruby apparently had no such qualms, tossing her dirty clothes in a waiting laundry basket with a sigh of relief. “Ugh, I think maybe I should just burn those. If I ever wear them again it's too soon.”

Weiss didn't say anything, just watching Ruby strip. Her girlfriend was little changed physically from her week in a cage, other than a need for serious grooming, but the first stirrings of excitement she normally would feel were muted. It was her turn to strip, but she just stood there nervously as Ruby walked up to her. “What's wrong?”

“N-nothing,” Weiss said. Ruby just stared at her, waiting patiently and without a care in the world despite being naked. Finally she gave in when Ruby took her hand gently. “I don't know. I just… feel nervous.”

Ruby stepped closer and kissed her. It was slow and gentle, and when Ruby had to pull back for air Weiss finally smiled slightly. “I love you, Weiss. If you don't feel comfortable for some reason we don't have to shower together.”

“No!” Weiss said. “I… I don't want to be anywhere else.”

“Then get out of those clothes!” Ruby ordered with a grin. “Why are you the only one who gets a show?”

Weiss blushed slightly but decided to stop arguing, reaching down to start undoing her skirt. After a few moments Ruby apparently got in impatient as two sets of hands started working on her clothing. Weiss didn't mind, especially when Ruby began peppering kisses wherever she bared skin.

When she was finally naked she shivered as Ruby gently caressed her side. The sexual excitement the gesture invoked immediately dying when she saw the sad, worried look on her girlfriend's face. “Oh, Weiss… how could you do this to yourself?”

Weiss looked down and bit her her lip as she saw once again how much weight she had managed to lose. A couple of days of eating wasn't going to fix a week of barely touching food, and with how
thin she normally was every pound lost was painfully obvious. “I'm sorry.”

“Weiss… this isn't about being sorry,” Ruby whispered. “I'm… concerned. If you do this to yourself because I'm gone… that's not good. I want to spend the rest of my life with you beside me, not- not have you get yourself killed if something happens. You- how can you not take care of yourself?”

“I…” Weiss trailed off. Ruby stepped forward and wrapped her in a hug, and after a moment she hugged Ruby back, leaning into her warm strength. She blinked back tears, and despite being the one who was rescued mere hours before, Weiss found herself leaning on Ruby to even stay standing as she blinked back tears. “When I was younger Klein had to all but force me to eat when I was upset. I just… don't feel hungry when I'm under stress, and so I never remember to get food. And when I get busy on something I don't stop working on it… time goes by, and if you don't interrupt me I'll keep working until I'm done.

“This week… I was so worried about you I could barely breathe, and I spent every waking moment, which was least twenty hours out of the day, trying to find a way to reach you. I did… things I'm not proud of to find you, and stopping to eat or sleep… when I finally found a lead I didn't know what time of day it was, or even what day of the week. I just… lost track of everything.”

Ruby hummed softly, stroking her back. “We should work on that. If something happened and we had to be apart again… I don't want to come home to find you starved to death. You need to learn to take better care of yourself.”

“I don't know how,” Weiss admitted. “Klein took care of me until I moved out of Schnee manor, and almost immediately after that you were there to keep me on track. Even before we got along you made sure we stopped working to get lunch, and if you didn't… I'd probably have forgotten whenever we had a big case.”

“We'll figure it out… together,” Ruby said. “Just… until then I'll have to keep bugging you everyday, okay?”

“Okay,” Weiss said with a smile, before yelping slightly when Ruby's hand dropped down to grope her bottom. “Ruby!”

“What?” she said innocently, before yelping as Weiss gave her a half hearted spank. She giggled and trotted over to the shower, warming up the water while Weiss recovered her composure after the talk.

Once Ruby got in the shower Weiss slipped in after her, and the next few minutes were full of laughter even as hands lingered on each other's bodies. Weiss and Ruby washed each other, scrubbing every inch of each other's skin, the thoroughness a mix of practicality given how dirty they were, and sensuality as they reconnected after their separation.

Weiss was shampooing Ruby's hair, her body rubbing up against Ruby's back teasingly when she felt her girlfriend's breath hitch. At first she thought that she'd gotten shampoo in her eyes, but after a few moments she realized that she was sobbing. “Ruby?”

Ruby just shook her head, and Weiss bit her lip, eventually deciding to continue washing Ruby's hair, massaging her scalp while she did and pressing even closer, letting her know that she was there. Only when she was clean and her hair was washed did she force Ruby to turn around, holding her close. The small sobs turned into weeping, and Weiss began to sing a soft lullaby to try to calm her down.

“Sorry,” Ruby finally mumbled when she did.
“Dolt,” Weiss whispered. “You're not the only one allowed to take care of your partner. What's wrong?”

“I... this week,” Ruby finally said. “I tried to be strong, and it wasn't... it wasn't as bad as it could've been. But I was so scared, Weiss. If Torchwick hadn't told me you and the others were alive I don't know what I would've done. But it was hard to believe trapped like that. And those people... they hated me so much. What did I ever do to them? How could... how could they? I was... I was so scared...”

“I was scared, too,” Weiss said. “I can't imagine how it must've felt in that cage. It doesn't matter if it could've been worse... it was still bad. I don't know if I could've been strong enough to be held like that and still get up again so fast like you have. You even showed mercy on your captors. You're... you're so amazing, Ruby Rose.”

Ruby blushed and sniffled, burying her head in Weiss' shoulder. Weiss smiled, clean and warm and happy with the love her life in her arms. She still felt a little jittery from the adrenaline that had been driving her for so long, but she finally began to truly relax as she held Ruby close.

Then Ruby kissed her shoulder and she jumped. Ruby giggled, before pressing another kiss farther over, and then the next one to her throat. Her pulse sped up for an entirely different reason, and she gasped. “Ruby...”

They didn't leave the shower for a long time, and when they did they were both smiling.
“You girls sure took your sweet time,” Qrow grumbled while taking another swig from his flask.

Weiss and Ruby's cheeks turned red, but while Ruby looked away from everyone at the words Weiss simply raised her chin haughtily in the air. She was incredibly embarrassed, but she was still too happy just to be with Ruby to care about what some drunkard thought about her love life.

“Couldn't you wait until tonight?” Yang asked. “I never would've taken you two for the type to go at it the minute you get some privacy.”

Weiss turned even redder as she turned a baleful glare on Yang. “I don't want to hear that from you. Of course, I didn't want to hear anything from you and Blake all day long, loudly, and unlike your father I didn't have the excuse of looking for backup to get out of earshot.”

Yang actually looked abashed for a change. Before she could come up with a retort to that Tai spoke up, his voice higher and more frantic than normal. “Dinner's served! Let's eat! And never talk about any of this again!”

They all lined up to receive plates of food. Weiss' appetite had returned with Ruby, and so she was as eager as the rest to get something hot to eat. She wasn't quite sure what the food was though.

“What's this?”

“Venison,” Tai said cheerfully. “I managed to get a little hunting in earlier this week, and it seems like this was the perfect time to break out the goods.”

Ruby, who had been eagerly prepared to stuff the food in her mouth, paused and stared up at him with wide eyes. “B-Bambi?”

“No, no, this wasn't Bambi,” Tai said quickly. “I made sure I only killed a really mean deer. You know, the kind that would've bullied Bambi.”

“Are you… are you sure it was a deer?” Weiss asked as she eyed the meal skeptically.

Yang, who had been happily stuffing the food in her mouth spoke up. “He said it was venison, didn't he?”

“Well… regardless of the original meaning of venison applying to more than just deer meat… I was referring to his certainty that it was actually a deer.”

“I think I've hunted enough to recognize a deer,” Tai said humorously.

Weiss thought back to the monstrous deer that she'd seen outside the other day, with their sharp teeth and hunger for live meat. She carefully activated her aura sight, but couldn't see anything untoward about it. If it was from one of those creatures and not a natural deer then at least the meat wasn't permeated with dark magic. “Um… you're sure it didn't have sharp teeth?”

“What kind of deer do they grow on the Schnee estate?” Blake asked.

The food smelled really good, and everyone except herself and Ruby were already eating. She decided to just trust that Tai knew enough not to hunt and kill a demon deer without noticing. He was former Supernatural Affairs after all. After taking a steadying breath Weiss carefully cut a bite of the food and ate it.
“This is good,” she said. “Thank you, Mr. Xiao Long… Tai.”

“You're welcome,” he said with a smile.

Light conversation started up around the table, with Yang leading the way by telling the story of how they killed the tsuchigumo while Tai looked horrified at what they'd done, and Qrow inserted snarky commentary. Weiss leaned close to Ruby and spoke so that only she could hear. “Aren't you hungry? I saw your, um, your food bowl.”

Ruby made a face. “Yeah… this smells really good, too.”

Weiss gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Just eat. Wasting the poor deer's sacrifice isn't going to make it any less dead. And after a week you're lucky to get fresh meat at all. As this situation persists more and more people are becoming desperate for food, and they aren't all be the hunter your father is.”

“I… I guess you're right,” Ruby said. “Sorry Bambi…”

While the meat wasn't as delicately prepared as the meals she'd had from high end chefs, it was still delicious, and the company made it even better. Soon everyone was gathered around close, laughing and smiling, and for a little while it didn't matter that the city was being overrun with demons, that someone was plotting the end of the world in an impregnable building mere miles from them, or that the vegetables with the food weren't very fresh, but still represented better than what much of the city was no doubt eating that night. Everyone was together, and that was more than enough.

“So Yang, that arm's super cool,” Ruby said. “Where'd you get it? Can I see it? What does it do? How does it work?”

Yang's face flashed with pain for a second, before she smirked, flexing her metal arm before waving her gold colored fingers at Ruby. “Ask your girlfriend.”

“Weiss?” Ruby prompted.

Weiss shrugged. “You're as responsible for her receiving it as anyone. I would most likely have forgotten that it even existed if you hadn't asked about it when I gave you a bit of a tour of Schnee manor.”

Ruby's brow furrowed for a moment before her eyes lit up. “Oh! I remember that! So that's that arm?”

“Yes,” Weiss said. “I remembered it while I was at the manor, and I retrieved it before coming here looking for Yang and Blake.”

Ruby frowned. “Wait, didn't you say the last person who tried the arm on got burned up or something?”

“He survived the experience,” Weiss said dismissively. “He just… needed to stay in the hospital for a few… months.”

“Good thing I'm so hot already,” Yang joked.

There were groans around the table, but Ruby wasn't deterred, getting up and walking over to her sister to get a better look at the arm. She carefully poked it with one finger. “Can you feel that?”

Yang poked her back, aiming for her side where she was ticklish. “Can you feel that?”
“Hey!” Ruby giggled. “My side isn't metal!”

Yang, who had looked tense when Ruby started to examine her new arm, slowly relaxed, a smile growing on her face as Ruby continued to fawn over it. She seemed so excited by every little detail, making Yang wiggle her fingers while oohing and ahhing over every little thing, that it seemed to make Yang appreciate the limb in a very different way.

“Thanks for getting her that,” Qrow said quietly.

Weiss side eyed him. “You don't need to thank me. I got it for her… and for Ruby.”

He scoffed. “What is it with you Schnees? You're all pains in the ass.”

“We just have trouble getting along with inebriated scoundrels, I suppose,” Weiss said snootily.

He rolled his eyes. “You know, Winter's going to be happy to hear you're okay.”

“I don't know how to get into contact with her,” Weiss said. “I assume that she's with SWAT, but I'm not sure where they are.”

“She asked me to look for you,” he said. “Don't know how she got word you left home, but she was worried enough about you to track me down.”

“Why you?”

“I'm in charge of SA's Intel division for a reason,” he said. “If I want to find it, I can find it.”

“Did you know where Ruby was?” Weiss asked, turning to face him.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “If I had I would've busted her out of there days ago. I assumed Cinder either killed her or kept her locked up in Beacon.”

“I had assumed similar,” Weiss admitted, looking at Ruby again. “Can you pass a message onto my sister for me?”

“Sure,” he said. “Don't be surprised if she comes calling, though. She was pretty worried.”

Weiss sat in silence for a little bit. “Just let her know I'm alright. And… thank you for looking for me for her. You know, you aren't as bad as you look, act and smell.”

He rolled his eyes and then they both looked over at Ruby who had finally finished bugging Yang about her new arm. “So… what's next?” she asked.

“Well, I was saving something for when you came back,” Tai said, getting up and walking out of the room.

“What is it?” Ruby called, walking around the table and sitting next to Weiss again, giving her a kiss on the cheek as she did.

Tai came back in with something held behind his back. After pausing dramatically for a moment he finally revealed a large plate with a flourish.

“COOKIES!” Ruby shouted, lunging for the plate.

While Ruby was busy stuffing her face Yang answered Ruby's original question. “Now that we've got Ruby back we need to stop Cinder Fall.”
“How do you plan on doing that?” Qrow asked. “I talked to a few people, and it would take a lot of
time and dust to break through Beacon's walls, and if you tried she'd just send an army of Grimm to
kill you before you finished.”

“I know a way in,” Weiss said.

He raised his eyebrows. “Really?”

Weiss smiled slightly. “We'll only get one shot at it, though, and we probably don't have much
longer before everything comes to a head, anyway. We need as many capable people as possible so
that we can make a move soon.”

“If you want backup, I can get backup,” Qrow said. “I've got a general idea where everyone in SA is
right now. I can get an army together by lunch.”

“That's great!” Ruby said, spitting a few crumbs. She swallowed sheepishly when Weiss glared at
her for it. “Um... if you can get everyone I'm sure we can beat Cinder!”

“Alright,” he said, standing and taking a swig from his flask. “If I want everyone I should start
looking now.”

“It's late,” Tai said. “Are you sure you don't want to stay the night?”

Qrow snorted. “I'd say I'm a night owl, but that's the wrong bird. Besides, I've got too much to do to
rest.”

Ruby hopped up and hugged him when he tried to walk by. “Be safe, Uncle Qrow.”

“You too,” he grunted.

Once he was gone Tai began to clean up the dishes, and the four women drifted into the living room,
where Yang turned on the TV. Unfortunately the lack of any broadcasts reaching Vale hadn't
magically fixed itself in the past few hours, so with a grumbling sigh Yang stood back up and stuck
some random action movie in. It wasn't at all to Weiss' taste, but despite that she wasn't eager to seek
out her bed.

“Ugh, I don't want to shower yet,” Yang grumbled, obviously not that into the movie despite having
picked it.

“You're not getting into bed with me without one,” Blake replied.

“Hmm... that's some pretty good incentive,” Yang admitted. “I wonder if we have any hot water
back yet.”

“I know how big a boiler dad and me put in when you got into high school,” Ruby said. “There's no
way me and Weiss used it all up.”

“Weiss and I,” Weiss corrected automatically, before her brow scrunched in confusion. “Used what
up?”

“The hot water,” Yang clarified.

Weiss felt even more confused as she looked over at her girlfriend. “You can run out of that?”

Ruby giggled. “Of course! I mean, it has to come from somewhere when you turn the faucet. I guess
rich people water heaters are better than normal people ones…”
“Not fair,” Yang pouted. “Blake, make Weiss stop hoarding all the good water heaters.”

Weiss rolled her eyes and settled against Ruby. She was tired, but at the same time she was still keyed up from the battle and the car chase, as well as the excitement of finally having Ruby back in her arms. It felt so wonderful having her there that she was afraid if she fell asleep she would wake up to find that it had all been a dream.

“You know, this is nothing like a real car chase,” Ruby said. “I'd never really been in one before today, but…”

Weiss focused on the screen for a moment and saw the protagonist jumping a car from building to building. “This does seem quite ridiculous.”

“That's kinda the point,” Yang said, rolling her eyes.

“Why would anyone want to watch something so bizarre?” Weiss asked.

“Don't you watch Disney movies with Ruby?” Blake asked.

“What's your point?” Weiss asked defensively. “They are quite interesting visually, and the music is well done.”

“How can you complain about silly car chases when you watch things with singing animals?” Yang asked.

Weiss' brow furrowed. “I'm not certain what you mean?”

“Well… you complained this isn't realistic, right?”

“I'm not an expert on physics, but I'm quite certain that that is completely impossible,” Weiss said, gesturing to the over the top action sequence still going on on screen. The fact that it was this crazy early on did not bode well for how ridiculous the climax of the movie was going to be.

“And you don't have a problem with animals that could talk?” Yang said.

“Why would I?” Weiss asked, genuinely confused.

“Because… singing animals?” Yang tried.

Weiss just stared at her blankly. Ruby giggled, and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Eventually Weiss just rolled her eyes and cuddled against Ruby, deciding not to worry about what Yang had against animals that could talk. Sure, they weren't common on the mortal plane, but Weiss had interacted with a few over the years.

“Shouldn't you girls be getting to bed?” Tai asked from the doorway. “It's really late.”

“Please, I stayed up later than this in high school,” Yang snorted.

“Didn't you sleep through class all the time?” Ruby asked.

Yang gasped. “Betrayal!”

“I'm not surprised,” Weiss scoffed.

“Don't believe her hair color,” Tai said with a chuckle. “She might've been a handful for the poor teachers, but she got good grades at least.”
“Really?” Weiss asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I bet you were the goody two shoes type who never missed a class,” Yang scoffed.

“It would be difficult to considering I was educated by tutors,” Weiss said. “When your classroom is across the hall from your bedroom you aren't able to miss classes even if you wanted to. Not that I wanted to, mind.”

“Anyway, I'm going to bed,” Tai said. “Even if you're gonna sleep in late tomorrow I'm probably gonna be spending the morning entertaining SA folks as Qrow sends them this way.”

“Night dad,” Yang said.

“Love you, dad!” Ruby added.

“Love you too, sweetie,” Tai said. “Goodnight girls.”

After a few minutes Yang spoke again. “So… I'm totally a better driver than this guy.”

“You wrecked the van,” Blake pointed out.

“Giant monster!” Yang objected.

After that the two playfully argued for a while, and Weiss finally found herself relaxing. She even dozed off briefly when Ruby shook her slightly. “Come on, sleepy head. Let's go to bed.”

“We don't have to,” Weiss whispered.

“It's fine,” Ruby said. “I'm tired, too. 'Night Yang, Blake.”

“Night guys!” Yang said, while Blake nodded.

Weiss groaned as she stood, feeling stiff from the exertions of the day after finally resting. “Good night and sleep well,” she told them, before following Ruby to her old bedroom.

They quickly changed for bed, Weiss pulling on a clean nightgown and Ruby finding a tank top and some shorts in her drawer. She fortunately hadn't changed size much since high school, and the clothing was loose and comfortable. In a matter of minutes they were curled up together in bed, and Weiss found herself drifting again.

Just as she was about to fall asleep Ruby spoke up. “Weiss?”

“What?”

“Are you asleep?”

Weiss sighed. It was going to be one of those nights. After a week of Ruby-less nights, however, she would gladly take it. “Obviously not… what's wrong?”

“Do you… do you really think we can do this?” Ruby asked. “You know… beat Cinder and stop this demon invasion and everything?”

“Of course,” Weiss said. “Just think of everything we've accomplished in the past year. We stopped Dagon from entering the world, shut down an extraplanar drug lord, went to Faerie and stopped dust smugglers there, beat an ancient necromancer, spoke to Death, captured Torchwick and Adam Taurus… what's one more obstacle? Before you know it we'll be right back at Beacon doing
paperwork with you wishing for something big to happen as a distraction.”

“Not this big,” Ruby mumbled. “Do you… do you remember what mom said?”

“You mean about something big coming?” Weiss asked. “Obviously that something has arrived. As much as it pains me to admit it, I'm certain a lot of people have died since Beacon fell. I wonder how many of the homeless people we interviewed earlier this year are still alive…”

Ruby groaned. “Ugh… I was trying not to think about that. But what I meant was… about me being able to be, uh, to be more.”

“Are you referring to your heritage?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I mean… what if Cinder is prepared? She was tough before, and I kinda took her by surprise jumping her like that. What if I'm not strong enough to beat her while I'm still just… me?”

“You don't have to be strong enough alone,” Weiss said. “We're bringing an army, after all.”

“She's got one, too,” Ruby pointed out.

Weiss was silent for a while. “If you want me to explain what I know about apotheosis I can. After that meeting I studied the subject thoroughly in case you wanted to know more about yourself. But… you're wrong.”

Ruby chuckled. “You usually think so.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “Well, you often are, dunce. And you're wrong about… everything you said. We can definitely beat Cinder. You can beat Cinder if you fight her again, just like you were beating her last time until Mercury hit you while you were distracted. But also… you said you wanted to be able to be more.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said. “I don't get this whole… being a god thing or whatever, but… if I'm not strong enough while I'm a normal person, then being more than a person.”

“And that's where you're wrong,” Weiss cut her off. “Being a god isn't being more than human. It's being less.”

“What do you mean?”

Weiss was quiet while she sought the words that she needed. “People… people have free will. We can do and be anything we want if we try hard enough. Sure, we might not know how to enchant orichalcum, or to grow stronger by the amount of people that worship us, or any of a dozen other divine tricks, but someday we might make those breakthroughs. We grow, we live, we evolve.

“But the gods… they just are. They don't truly… live. They just exist. They don't make their own future, they are bound by their fate since the moment they become gods. You might think being a god makes you stronger, but all it does is give you power.

“You aren't strong because you're the Daughter of Death. You're strong because you're Ruby. And you don't ever need to be less than that, especially not to beat some reject from Faerie. If you think you need an edge to beat her… then find an edge to beat her. Exploit her weaknesses. Fight dirty. Win. Humans invented tools to tame the wilderness, and mastered magic to tame the supernatural. We don't need to be gods to rule this world. We just need to be prepared.”
Ruby was silent, but she felt more relaxed in Weiss' arms than she had. “A weakness, huh….”
Weiss was so warm and comfortable. Even when she began to wake up she decided that she wanted no part of consciousness, and so she stayed in a warm, happy daze. She still felt a few lingering aches, injuries from the previous day no doubt, but she didn't want to think about that, or anything else, except the warm, soft presence in her arms.

Then something poked her face. She tried to ignore it, but the poke came again, and then over and over again. It wasn't terribly hard, but it was very annoying. Eventually she had no choice but to crack one eye open to see if she needed to kill someone.

Unfortunately it was a wide awake Ruby poking her face. After more than a week of searching for her she couldn't bring herself to even be mad at her partner, just vaguely and sleepily annoyed. “Why are you poking me?”

“You're awake!” Ruby cheered.

“Now,” Weiss grumbled, before snuggling in closer, like Ruby was her own large sized teddy bear.

“Ah, don't be grumpy Weiss,” Ruby said, happy to hug her close. “Be nice Weiss. It even rhymes, and rhyming makes everything better!”

Weiss gave her a blank look, before deciding not to dignify that with a verbal replay. She did, however, start tickling Ruby's side.

“Wha- ah! No fair!”

After a few moments of squirming and giggling Ruby managed to push her hands away. Weiss hadn't thought the situation all the way through, however, as she suddenly found herself being tickled. She was so unused to physical contact that it had come as a shock the first time Ruby had tickled her, and she had found herself to be extremely sensitive to it. Even worse, Ruby had a lifetime of experience in sisterly tickle wars, while Weiss was a complete novice.

In moments Weiss was on her back, squirming helplessly as Ruby tickled her mercilessly. Just as she was beginning to regret all of her life choices Ruby leaned down and kissed her. Once she had a chance to take a breath she began to kiss back, one hand drifting down to squeeze Ruby's bottom. She loved the way her girlfriend moaned, and she pulled her hand up to slip it under her nightclothes when there was a loud knock on the door.

“Hand check!” Yang called from outside.

“Go away or I will end you Xiao Long!” Weiss shouted breathlessly as Ruby stopped kissing her to rest her head in the crook of her neck.

“Save that anger for Cinder,” Yang said, jiggling the doorknob. “It's time to get up, though.”

“Why?” Ruby whined.

“Well, for starters, it's almost two, and you guys haven't eaten anything,” Yang said. “Also, while me, dad, and uncle Qrow don't want to hear you get your freak on, it's almost more awkward with most of the department here…”

“What?!” Weiss yelped.
“Yeah, so… you might not wanna do that anymore,” Yang said. “Why don't you two get dressed, and I'll throw together some food for you.”

“Thanks, sis,” Ruby called.

They sat in silence for a few long moments before Ruby sighed. “How are we supposed to look anyone in the eye ever again?”

Weiss frowned, although her cheeks were red as well. “I intend to pretend that this never happened. If they have even the slightest bit of class then they'll do the same.”

Ruby pondered that. “But… what about when Yang teases us about it in front of everyone?”

“That brute would,” Weiss grumbled. “Well, when she does we'll simply have to own it. I'm not ashamed to be with the cutest girl in the world.”

“Ahh, Weiss,” Ruby said, giving her a kiss. “And you're the bestest, most beautiful girl in the world. But if we keep this up we'll start doing that again. Come on, let's get ready.”

Weiss thought about showering, but it was very late and she had taken a long and very pleasant one with Ruby the previous night. It still took her a while to properly prepare herself for the day, but eventually she was wearing one of her favorite outfits, a white and black dress which resembled a coat, while Ruby was in her usual red hoody despite the summer heat. After one last kiss they walked to the kitchen hand in hand.

As it turned out, Yang hadn't been exaggerating about the rest of Supernatural Affairs being there. “Ruby!” Nora shouted, running up to her and giving her a hug that knocked the breath from her lungs. “Look Renny, it's Ruby! I'm so glad you're not dead!”

“Hello, Ruby, Weiss,” Ren said stoically. “It's good to see you both again.”

“Nora, if you don't release Ruby she really will die,” Weiss said sharply.

“Oh!” Nora said, letting go. “Oopsy!”

Ruby gasped for breath as Weiss surreptitiously steadied her. It seemed that coming down had drawn the attention of the entire crowd packed into the house, as their friends all came over to speak with them. Some of them Weiss barely knew, but she smiled more than simply politely when she saw Coco and Velvet.

“Hey, good to see you both in one piece,” Coco said, lowering her sunglasses for a moment. “Velvet was worried about you.”

“I wasn't the only one,” Velvet said, rolling her eyes. “I'm so glad you're okay. I was really worried when I heard you were captured.”

“I was worried when I woke up captured!” Ruby said. “But I knew Weiss would find me, and then she did!”

“I remember when the Prince took you prisoner,” Coco said. “I would not want to have been between you and Weiss while she was searching for you.”

“You have no idea,” Blake said with a shudder.

“Huh?” Ruby asked.
Coco and Blake shared a commiserating glance, before speaking in unison. “Don't worry about it.”

“Huh?” Ruby repeated.

“Jeez, you two took your time,” Yang said. She had a plate of food in each hand, and she gave one to each of them. “Alright you guys, give them some room to eat! We can't go kick Cinder's ass if they're starving.”

The food wasn't anything fancy, just leftovers from the night before fried in a hash with potatoes. Still, it was hot and tasted fairly good, and it had been a long time since she'd last eaten, having never slept in so late in her life. She did her best to maintain etiquette, however, not wanting to look like some low class savage in front of all of her coworkers.

Ruby was less worried about such things, although Weiss had at least broken her of the habit of talking with her mouth full for the most part. A quick glare to remind her at least had Ruby swallowing before replying to the people who kept coming around to speak to her, and Weiss found herself smiling as Ruby relaxed and seemed even happier as she got to see all of her friends again. Weiss was satisfied just to have a few friends, but her girlfriend needed more people, and she'd learned to appreciate the differences between them.

She was just finishing her meal when a voice called her name. “Weiss!”

“Winter!” she answered, climbing to her feet with a smile. Winter shoved her way through the crowded room, and with only a moment's hesitation she pulled Weiss into her arms in a crushing hug. It was still strange to be able to hug her sister, but she soon relaxed and reciprocated.

After several long moments Winter pulled back, clearing her throat and blushing slightly. “It is good to see you well, sister.”

“You as well,” Weiss said with a smile. “I was able to retrieve Ruby, so my first job is done.”

“I'm not a piece of luggage or something,” Ruby pouted. Weiss just reached over and placed a hand on her shoulder, but she didn't otherwise acknowledge the complaint.

“First job?” Winter asked.

“I assume she's referring to stopping Cinder Fall and this demon invasion as the other task,” Goodwitch said from the doorway, having apparently just arrived.

“That's correct,” Weiss said with a nod.

The exchange had gained the attention of not just the room, as everyone in the house was gathering to listen in. Weiss saw Qrow, Lieutenant Oobleck, and Sergeant Port, along with everyone she knew from Supernatural Affairs, including Sun and Neptune from the Intelligence Division, who were hanging back with several other strangers who were most likely also part of their group.

“Don't leave us hanging, Ice Queen,” Yang said after a moment. “We've got work to do.”

“Of course,” Weiss said. “I had not been able to think of an effective way to reach Beacon. Even planar travel would likely prove extremely difficult, as it is effectively warded against such via the Great Barrier and Beacon's own wards against unauthorized extraplanar transit. It was only when I interrogated Torchwick while searching for Ruby that I remembered a way in.”

Goodwitch's eyes widened. “The mirror.”
“Precisely,” Weiss said with a triumphant smile. “I was able to master its use earlier this year, and it is perfect for our needs.”

“Mirror?” Winter asked.

Weiss glanced around the room, and upon seeing further confusion from most of the faces she adopted a lecturing tone of voice and began to explain. “A year ago Roman Torchwick was stealing a selection of dark artifacts for Cinder Fall, which were ultimately used to create the demon army inside of Beacon. To perform the thefts he used a magic mirror, which upon being linked to another mirror could then transport someone with the magical one to the other mirror it had been key to.”

“But don't you have visit the mirror in person to key it in for that to work?” Blake asked. “I didn't think Torchwick ever got inside of Beacon.”

“He didn't,” Weiss acknowledged. “However, while investigating the first theft I transferred the magical connection to a different mirror, which was then placed in a secure vault at Beacon and monitored in case he attempted to return through it. Even after Ruby and I managed to retrieve the mirror the trap was never dismantled, and the mirror should still serve as an access point for an assault.”

“Then what are we waiting for!” Nora shouted, brandishing her hammer, which forced a visibly annoyed Cardin and Fox to duck out of the way before they were hit. “Let's go!”

“Everyone, gather in the living room in five minutes,” Ruby said. “Weiss and I need to get our weapons and stuff. Will everyone be ready then?”

There was a rumble of assent, and the two quickly cut through the crowd towards Ruby's bedroom. Once they were away from the others Ruby grinned at her. “I forgot all about that mirror! I mean, you spent months working on figuring out how it worked, but I didn't even think about using it to get into Beacon.”

Weiss shrugged. “I forgot about it as well, to be honest. If Torchwick hadn't been bemoaning his lack of it then using the mirror probably wouldn't have occurred to me.”

They reached Ruby's bedroom and spent a moment gathering their weapons and equipment. Weiss also took as much dust as she could secure on her person, both to let her summon the Knight and for any binding magics she might need to perform to end the distortion of the Great Barrier, before she retrieved the mirror from her luggage. Unfortunately they didn't have any guns, Weiss' having been destroyed while freeing Ruby, and Ruby's having been taken when she was captured.

“We can borrow some from dad,” Ruby said, grabbing her hand and dragging her down the hall to his bedroom. Weiss stood awkwardly at the door while her partner went through the safe in his closet, eventually coming up with a handgun similar to her service pistol for Weiss, and a hunting rifle for herself.

“I'm surprised that he has access to incendiary dust rounds,” Weiss said. “These aren't easy to buy, especially in the city like this.”

“He's a former cop, plus he still has a lot of connections,” Ruby said. “I think Uncle Qrow helps him get it, actually.”

He only had two magazines of dust rounds for the pistol, one of which Weiss loaded into the gun, while Ruby checked and readied her rifle. Once they were both done they started to head back to the living room, only for Ruby to pause for a moment. “What's wrong?” Weiss asked.
“I just thought of something else… you go on, I just need to grab something from my work bench in the garage!”

“What-” Weiss started, only to sigh when Ruby dashed off. She almost went after her to see what Ruby was getting, but she knew they had already taken more than five minutes, and she hated to keep people waiting. “Dolt.”

She returned to the living room, moving in front of the open window and using it as a backdrop for her presentation of the mirror. The sun wasn't behind her, so it wouldn't bother anyone's eyes, and it was certainly a better view than the living room walls, which honestly could've used a fresh coat of paint, not that she'd ever say that out loud.

“Hey, snow angel,” Neptune said, giving her a charming grin.

She smiled at him a little stiffly. She'd been preparing herself mentally to start the attack, but greeting him gave her an excuse to wait for Ruby, who she wanted to be there before she started anything, anyway. “Neptune. How are you?”

“I'm good,” he said, striking a pose while flashing her another grin straight from a toothpaste commercial. “That's a lovely outfit, by the way. I really like the look.”

“Oh, thank you,” she said, glancing down at it. “It's one of my favorites as well. I decided that if I was going to fight to save the world, I might as well look my best for it.”

“When we win, what are you-” he started, only to be interrupted as Ruby came flying in with a trail of rose petals floating down behind her.

“Oof!” Weiss grunted loudly, barely keeping her footing as Ruby slammed into her side. “Ruby!”

“Hey Weiss!” she said, steadying her and kissing her cheek at the same time. She then glared at Neptune for some reason Weiss didn't understand. “Hello, Neptune.”

“Oh… hey,” he said awkwardly. “Um… I'd better go… elsewhere.”

“Have a nice day,” Weiss said, before giving Ruby a look. “What was that all about? You almost made me drop the mirror.”

Ruby kept glaring at Neptune for a moment, before giving her a sheepish grin. “Sorry.”

Ruby could be so weird, Weiss decided. Still, it was impossible to be upset for long when she was using her puppy dog eyes. With a sigh Weiss returned her focus to the mirror and cleared her throat. “Well… let's get started. It took me a long time to reverse engineer the magic words to use this without employing activation glyphs, but I suppose the effort paid off. Ahem…. 'Mirror, mirror, in my hand, show me all the routes you can.'

The mirror became cloudy for a moment, and then she saw what appeared to be a men's room, thankfully not in use. She shook the mirror vigorously, Ruby gasping as it clouded up and then cleared, revealing what appeared to be a basement apartment.

It took several minutes, but finally the image cleared after a shake to reveal a familiar looking building. The door the mirror was facing had been knocked off of its hinges and laid on the floor, which was covered in a tar-like black ooze. It was obviously the view from the mirror in one of the subbasements of Beacon, although Grimm had apparently managed to destroy the warded door when everything had happened.
Weiss turned the mirror around to show the room, which was packed full of people ready to fight. “Our destination. We simply have to climb through the mirror and we will emerge in the subbasements of Beacon, specifically the second subbasement. Now, we'll-”

She was cut off as the room suddenly dimmed. The light from the window went out in moments, the sun disappearing behind clouds that came from nowhere but were thick enough to cast the city into a night-like darkness. Everything went still, no one even breathing as power filled the city. There was an invisible pulse of magic, unseen but felt by everyone in Vale, and all those present shuddered as it passed through them.

Weiss turned around, looking out the window, but she could see nothing but darkness. Activating her aura sight she saw a blinding glow in the distance, a violent purple light glaring like a beacon even above the endless ripple of wards throughout the city. Reaching out with her senses, she tried to place what she was feeling, but it was unimaginably powerful, even beyond the ritual that had distorted the Great barrier of Vale.

“What is that?” Weiss breathed. It felt like a crime to break the silence that had fallen over the room.

“I know this feeling,” Goodwitch said, walking up beside Weiss and glaring out the window. “It's not something I have ever seen on this plane, but in my youth I experienced it once. Exactly once.”

“What?” Ruby asked.

“It was a piece of one plane jutting into another, a planar convergence caused by powerful ritual magics,” Goodwitch explained. “It was used as a bridge to allow an entire population to travel between planes to escape an enemy hunting them to extinction.”

“Is that Cinder's goal?” Ruby asked. “Bringing a bunch of somethings here? Didn't she do that when she brought that army of Grimm? And couldn't she have just opened portals? I mean, the Great Barrier is gone, right?”

“The Grimm she released into Beacon were created by magic for that purpose,” Goodwitch lectured. “While many people or a great amount of goods can be brought between planes via portals, the portal has to be very powerful, such as the one that cult was trying to use for Dagon last year. That takes a great deal of time and power, but you can also make the journey easier by using magic to bring the two planes closer together. If you do so strongly enough even a large number of people can pass through with little more difficulty than walking down a street.”

“But a very powerful entity,” Weiss said slowly as she stared at the magical light. “Cinder has a demon patron, presuming a full demon lord, not simply some noble of the lower planes. She intended for Ruby to be used a sacrifice of some kind. The White Fang have been speaking of the world being reborn. She had to wait until the stars were right. Then this…”

“Manifestation,” Oobleck took over, his voice clipped. “This is a massive ritual to bring a demon lord to our plane. There can be no other explanation. And given the allies she most strongly is associated with and is able to control, the Grimm, there can be only one possible being.”

“Salem,” Goodwitch said. “Everything she's done… it's all been part of the manifestation of Salem.”

Ruby turned away from the window and looked at the room. Weiss looked away from the darkness outside as well, and she saw that everyone looked worried. They were no longer simply facing a dangerous enemy and her pet demons, but rather the possibility of a demon lord manifesting right in the middle of Vale.
“We don’t have long,” Ruby said. “If Salem comes through we’re doomed. I remember seeing Dagon… feeling his presence. We don’t stand a chance of beating her if she reaches here. But that makes things simple; we don’t have to worry about what happens if we’re too slow. Our backs are to the wall, and all we can do is push through and win, since we can’t afford to lose. Once we beat Cinder, Weiss can end this and fix the Great Barrier, and in a few hours we’ll all be relaxing as the army cleans up the rest of the mess.

“So who’s ready to follow me through the mirror? Who's ready to beat Cinder and kick demon butt?”

“Always, sis,” Yang said with a smile.

“Of course,” Blake agreed.

“I’m not going to let Cinder get away with killing Pyrrha,” Jaune added.

“Let’s break her legs!” Nora crowed gleefully while Ren nodded.

“We’re ready,” Velvet said, while Coco put a hand on her hip and smirked.

Soon everyone else was chiming in, and just like that the darkened room didn't feel so dark anymore. They were in a terrible situation, but they weren't defeated. All they had to do was win and everything would be okay.

“Then let’s go kick butt and save the world!” Ruby said cheerfully, thrusting a fist into the air. “Uh… how do we go through the mirror again?”
Weiss went through the mirror first. Ruby had objected, but she was the only one who had ever tested it before, and so she insisted on being the one to lead the way. She had had Tai hold the mirror, and then she'd grabbed the frame like she would a window she was climbing through, and, despite how small the hand mirror was, she easily passed through it.

Just like a window, she climbed through and immediately emerged inside of Beacon. When she was about halfway through the far mirror she made the mistake of looking down, her head swimming for a moment as she saw her body emerging from the small makeup compact that she'd transferred the mirror's connection to. Looking away from the impossible sight of her body coming out of something so tiny she finished climbing through, hopping down onto the black slime that covered the floor.

Weiss shuddered as she looked around. The walls at first looked like the normal concrete of the basement, but between one blink and the next they wavered and distorted, appearing to be made of ancient stone before returning to normal. She blinked a few times, then went to the doorway and peeked out, sword in hand.

The hallway was still and empty, the ground covered in the black ooze that had spawned the army of Grimm that had overrun Beacon. The air was thick with the stench of death and a powerful haze of demonic mana, but she didn't see anything moving. It was entirely possible that the ooze had expended itself completely and that it was nothing but a tainted residue on the floor, but she couldn't help but eye it warily, afraid that another army could form under her feet at any moment.

Still, she saw nothing that would prevent their attack, and so she faced the mirror and gestured for people to come. A moment later hands emerged from the tiny compact, somehow wrapping around its sides as another person impossibly forced themselves out of the tiny mirror. The most disturbing thing about the view was that focusing on any individual part of the person she couldn't see any distortion. Ruby was easily passing through a mirror a couple of inches wide, even though she was obviously much larger than that. The impossible view hurt her brain, but she ignored that and focused on helping Ruby find her footing as she climbed out.

“See anything?” Ruby whispered as she raised her rifle.

Weiss shook her head. “It's still out there.”

A moment later the world rippled and distorted again, the walls turning into the ancient looking bricks before fading once again back to normal looking concrete. Ruby looked around wildly, her grip tightening on the rifle. “What was that?”

“The manifestation is still taking hold,” Weiss said. “Beacon is merging with some location on the other plane. Aspects of the two realities will slowly blend, and as it does this place will become more and more like the hell dimension the Grimm hail from.”

“That's bad,” Ruby said.

“Yes Ruby, that's 'bad',” Weiss said. “If we don't hurry and disrupt the effect the two locations will become close enough that anyone could pass between them with little more effort than walking between adjoining rooms.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Yang said. She and Blake had been the next two out of the mirror, and more were coming behind.
Ruby stepped out into the hallway, looking around for a moment, before pointing in one direction. “I guess the stairs up are that way. Um… where do we need to go to end this? I think I feel something up.”

“Yes,” Weiss agreed, looking up and reaching carefully out with her senses, not wanting to risk exposing herself to the heavy dark magic contaminating the building. “The ritual is above us, near the top of Beacon. It may not be easy to get there, however.”

“Let’s go!” Nora said, dragging Ren and Jaune behind her, Velvet and Coco following.

The nine of them started down the hallway, the small secure room not being a great meeting point for so many people to come through anyway, and no one wanted to risk waiting too long and letting Salem and her army of Grimm enter the world. As they walked down the hall the walls continued to flicker and blur, the effect becoming more frequent and lasting longer the more that time passed.

They soon reached the stairs, and it was the same ones that Ruby and Weiss had fought a retreating action on just the week before. There were signs of the battle everywhere, particularly at the top where the wall had been smashed to pieces by the King Taijitu. When they passed through the large gap everything blurred and distorted for a moment, and when they could see clearly again everything had changed.

Instead of the familiar basement hallway not far from the large room that Supernatural Affairs called home, they were standing in a cold, round room with ten other large archways leading to halls spreading in every direction. The walls, floor and ceiling were the large, heavy stone blocks, and they glistened and dripped with the black, tar-like slime that covered the floor of the subbasement. The only lights were small orbs embedded in the ceiling, which cast a sickly greenish light over the room, furthering the sense of nightmarish unreality to what they were seeing.

“Are we too late?” Blake asked in a whisper.

“No,” Weiss said softly. She wasn't sure why they were being so quiet, but a sense of alien menace filled the air, making it feel dangerous to break the tense silence. “I can still feel the magic growing. We're just coming closer to the source of the manifestation. Given time this will spread across the whole city.”

“I get that things are supposed to be mixing, but how does that make the hallways change?” Yang asked. “I mean, there aren't this many ways to go from those stairs. And if things go back to normal where would we end up if we go somewhere that doesn't exist?”

“You'll end up somewhere in or near Beacon, Ms. Xiao Long,” Goodwitch said.

Weiss turned to find the remainder of their strike force climbing the stairs and taking in the room. They were all pale and tense, but with sharply determined looks on their faces. Weiss' eyes caught on Winter for a moment, her sister holding a gun in her hand and with her saber on her hip. She was whispering something to Qrow, who looked annoyed at whatever she was saying.

“We should-” Ruby started, only to be cut off by a loud howl.

From one of the side hallways emerged a massive Alpha Beowolf. It was the biggest Beowolf Weiss had ever seen, its body covered in spikes and its red eyes gleaming with a cruel intelligence in addition to the normal bloodlust. Its howl was answered in moments as dozens of Beowolves, smaller than their leader but still quite large and powerful, began to emerge from the tunnels around the room.
Then with a painfully loud bang the closest Beowolf collapsed to the ground. Ruby had shot it directly between its glowing eyes with her father's rifle, the incendiary dust round killing it instantly. There was a single heartbeat of silence, and then all at once the remaining demons roared and charged.

Gunfire answered the roars, from the rapid chatter of Coco's submachine gun as she cut down an entire row of Grimm, to the loud barks of rifles and shotguns, which overshadowed the more common pistols. Weiss thought about drawing her own gun for a moment, but she already had her sword out, and as the first Beowolf closed she took a half step in front of Ruby and assumed her stance, rapier at the ready to defend her partner who was firing with lethal precision and incredible speed.

When the first Beowolf finally reached her Weiss darted in, stabbing it in the throat with Myrtenaster before dancing back out of the reach of its claws. It gurgled as it choked on its own blood, before collapsing to the ground. She raised her rapier to prepare to stab the next, only for its head to be blown off by a shotgun fired by Sergeant Port, who had come up beside them in the battle.

The Alpha Beowolf, seeing the fight turning against its follows, slinked off into the darkness of a tunnel. It was strange behavior for a Grimm, the sort of thing most often seen in very old examples of the species, making Weiss suspect that it wasn't one that had been spawned during the fall of Beacon. Had Cinder brought in outside Grimm, as she seemed able to control them? Or had it already crossed over from its home plane?

If it was the latter… “We need to hurry.”

The battle was over, and Goodwitch moved up beside her as they all eyed the possible paths before them. “Agreed, but any or all of these could lead to our destination, and if this merged structure continues to be such a maze…”

“We need to split up,” Qrow said.

“That's far too dangerous,” Winter objected. “In small groups even those Beowolves could be too much, and there are sure to be worse things than them in these halls.”

“He's right,” Weiss said, the words almost physically painful. She hated the thought of siding with Qrow over her sister, but they needed to act quickly. “If we choose the wrong path and take too long the world is lost. We cannot beat Salem if she arrives.”

Goodwitch sighed. “I'm going to take the hall the Alpha retreated down. Anyone that wants to come with me is free to do so. Any groups that volunteer to go alone, stay safe. We don't have time to argue about this.”

“Come on, I'm feeling good about this way,” Yang said, nodding towards one of the halls.

It looked no different from the rest, but Ruby, Blake and Weiss followed her anyway. Just as they got close to the archway Weiss paused as Winter called out to her. “Weiss?”

“Yes?”

“Stay safe, sister,” she said. “Let's meet again when this is over.”

Weiss smiled at her. “Of course. Be safe.”

Weiss wasn't sure what to make of her sister following Qrow down a side hallway, but she knew that they would be able to take care of themselves. It raised a good many new questions about how they
knew each other, however.

“Coming, ice queen?” Yang called.

Weiss rolled her eyes but quickly jogged after them, falling into step with Ruby as Blake and Yang led the way. The hallway was unlit, unlike the main room had been, and after a moment she murmured a spell, “meridiem,” allowing the bright magical orb to light their way.

They passed a number of archways, and each time they did they paused to peer down them for a moment before continuing on. They were in a seemingly endless maze of dark tunnels, like something from one of Ruby's video games, the occasional report of distant gunfire more out of place than the accompanying roars of angry demons.

Ahead at the edge of the light they could finally see that the hallway they were in was ending in a large chamber, and just as they began to speed up to reach it Blake suddenly turned on her heels and opened fire with her handgun. Weiss barely turned in time to duck below the flashing claws of the same Alpha Beowolf from the earlier ambush, the demon having someone gotten away from Goodwitch and her group, only to sneak up behind them in the dark halls.

Only Blake's faunus hearing had saved Weiss from a bloody death, and she stumbled back, barely able to defend herself from the follow up as the Beowolf continued to attack. Then Yang roared and leapt at the demon, slamming her flaming metal fist into the side of its head, shattered the thick bone plating and making the monster yelp like a kicked dog.

“There's more!” Blake shouted.

From both directions came a soft skittering sound as dozens of lizard-like, bony plated, two legged Grimm hopped towards them at high speed. The closest leapt through the air, flying a shocking distance with its wickedly sharp clawed feet extended and fanged jaws gaping open, only to come to stop as it bloodily met Ruby's scythe.

“Creeps!” she yelled, and as the demons closed in Weiss ran to her side, falling into formation with her as they both readied their weapons.

The battle was a confusing, hard to see mess of blurring shadows and flowing monster blood. The only light sources were the rapidly moving glow of Weiss magical light, and the burning flames of Yang’s curse. Every shadow seemed to hold an enemy, and everything was in shadow. Weiss and Ruby stabbed and swung their weapons, watching out for each other as best they could, while behind them Blake and Yang did the same, keeping the demons from the other side of the hall from getting them from behind.

While the numbers were many, they were far from the only intruders in Beacon, and from the sounds in the distance virtually everyone had found battle. After a few intense minutes of fighting the enemy numbers began to thin, and no reinforcements arrived to support them. Eventually things in their area became quiet again, and all four stood back to back, catching their breaths.

“That damn alpha slipped away again,” Yang growled, obviously still angry, although her flames had gone out.

“We've seen it driven off twice now, this time with injuries,” Weiss said. “It probably won't cause us any further trouble.”

Ruby groaned. “You jinxed us!”

“What?” Weiss asked.
Yang sighed. “You said it won’t be a problem. Now it's guaranteed to be a problem.”

“Also, things often come in threes,” Blake added. “Two attacks just means the biggest one is yet to come.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I'm surrounded by children. Come on, we've got to stop Cinder's ritual or we're doomed.”

The hallway ended in a large, round room quite similar to the one they had arrived in at the top of the stairs, including having the odd green lights. It had six hallways leading off of it, with the far side of the room instead having a large staircase following the curve of the wall up to some higher floor. After looking around for a moment to verify that everything was still Yang and Blake took the lead as they began to climb.

The staircase went endlessly upwards, leaving Weiss short of breath as she followed the others ever higher. She glared a little at them while she still had the spare energy, as it seemed like she was the only one struggling to keep climbing. Just as she was starting to wonder if she would be able to keep her breakfast down if she didn't take a break the staircase ended at an archway, light faintly visible beyond it.

Stepping through, Weiss put out her magical light as they all stopped and stared at the impossible vista stretching before them. They had climbed not only out of the basement, but several stories up, and were standing on a balcony high up a great stone tower. All around them were other towers connected by stone catwalks and freestanding stairs, which widened into great plazas when they met each other. Some were empty, others had fountains spewing black slime, or gardens of strange, white leaved plants which moved without any wind.

The ground directly below the towers was a desert of white sand, broken only by scattered gray rocks, and large pools of thick black slime. Occasionally a Grimm would pull itself out of the pools, and she could see endless tracks from countless demons that had walked on the ground below them throughout time. Weiss was certain that was she was looking upon was ground of the hell dimension Salem claimed as her domain, although Weiss didn't know if she would actually reach it or not if she fell from the catwalks.

Above them the towers continued to climb ever higher, a few of the freestanding plazas even spawning new, ungrounded towers in defiance of gravity and logic, until finally, at the very highest point stood one last, grand structure. It was a palace, vast in size and constructed of delicate, curving walls set at strange angles in accordance with a style that fit no human aesthetic sensibility.

Somehow more jarring than this impossible structure was what was all around them. They could still see the city of Vale with its modern lights twinkling, although even the tallest downtown buildings were dwarfed by the height the palace reached. She could even see the occasional person moving around in the city despite the distance and darkness, and Weiss couldn't help but wonder if they could see the changes wrought to Beacon, or if it was only something they saw as they were inside of the growing magical effect.

Gunfire erupted again, and Weiss saw Velvet, Coco, Yatsuhashi and Fox fighting a group of Ursa and a Death Stalker on one of the catwalk plazas. A look around showed that they were one of the last groups to make it out into the open air, the others having apparently chosen to climb towers as well. She also saw hundred of Grimm moving about the catwalks, looking to engage in battle with anyone they could find.

She started to look for her sister when Ruby began moving again, walking over to a staircase at the edge of the balcony. “Come on. We've got to get to that palace.”
“The palace?” Yang asked as she followed.

“Where else would Cinder be?” Ruby asked.

Standing around stunned had at least given Weiss a chance to catch her breath, and she followed the others onto the stairs that Ruby had chosen. They were six feet wide, and had no railing, just stairs climbing unsupported through the air. She saw that they ended at a large plaza where three catwalks met, and at the edge of the plaza was another tower climbing high into the air, this one ending near the base of the palace.

When they reached the plaza, which was simply a flat stone platform the size of a baseball diamond, Ruby walked confidently towards the archway that led into the tower. She stopped the second she could see inside however, Weiss and the others moving up beside her.

The inside was another large round room, lit by the odd green orbs, with a spiral staircase along the far wall. In the center of the room were two familiar figures. One was the dark skinned woman with green hair who had been working for the Prince so long ago. The other was Mercury, his clawed black feet and skeletal legs fully on display in a pair of shorts.

“Well, well, well, just when we were wondering what to do without Cinder's sacrifice, she decides to deliver herself to us,” Mercury said with a smirk.

“Oh, wow, Emerald, how will you ever get over being called something so harsh,” Mercury drawled.

“I think she was talking about you,” Emerald replied.

“Oh, man, that's even more brutal than I imagined,” he gasped.

Ruby growled, and unfortunately it was incredibly cute instead of at all menacing. “I was talking about Mercury, but you're a bad person, too. You worked for that Prince guy!”

“You know, I never used to think I was doing anything wrong, but now I've seen the light,” Emerald said. “I guess I can't continue doing this anymore now that you've opened my eyes.”

“Don't mock her,” Weiss spat.

“Oh no, did I bother the Schnee?” she said. “Has no one ever said anything mean to your pet before?”

“We don't have time for this,” Blake said. “They're just trying to keep us distracted from what's going on.”

“Oh, you caught us,” Mercury said.

“What are you doing here?” Blake asked. “Shouldn't you be with Cinder?”

“This is the shortest path to where she is,” Emerald said. “The longer ways have been packed with strong Grimm, but we decided to cover this tower.”

“It also means we're far away in case Cinder wants a sacrifice since Taurus fucked that one up,” Mercury added, making Emerald glare at him. “Of course, it looks like you came waltzing right back in, and with friends, too.”

“You think the two of you are more dangerous than a pack of Grimm?” Yang asked skeptically.

“Probably,” Emerald said, pulling out a familiar flute. “But we've got one of those, too.”

She blew through the instrument, and from up the stairs came a roar, followed by a thundering charge of heavy feet. Storming down the stairs came a huge pack of Ursa, the largest of which was an enormous, spiny monstrosity bigger than any real bear had ever grown, even those from prehistory.

Weiss sheathed her sword and pulled out her pistol, immediately pointing it at Emerald. She fired, but instead of hitting her the dust round passed right through where she had been. Emerald's body rippled and distorted, fading away a moment later, although the sound of the flute could still be heard. In an instant Weiss realized that Emerald was without a doubt the illusionist that had been involved in Cinder's crimes for so long, and her being present meant that everything in front of them was in question.

“Illusionist!” she shouted. “Don't trust your normal senses!”
“What am I supposed to do then!?” Yang shouted, her fists burning as she paused in her advance. She had been moving towards Mercury, who had a smirk on his face. When he saw her no longer coming closer he made a rude gesture and then waved for her to come on.

“Use aura sight,” Weiss said. “It's not perfect, but illusions at least leave signs that there's magic present.”

Weiss saw that there was a distortion where Mercury was standing, as well as near him. Yang apparently understood what that meant as well, as she charged the magic near where he was, throwing a punch at the empty air. There was a ripple, which cleared to show Mercury ducking below her punch as the visible version of him faded away.

The Ursa were real, however, and Ruby ran forward to meet them before they reached the bottom of the stairs. As large, strong, and deceptively fast as Ursa were, they weren’t the most agile creatures in existence, and the stairs were smaller than their clawed feet, and really not designed for a creature running on four legs. The end result was Ruby easily cutting the first two down without them putting up a real fight.

Blake and Weiss hung back while the other two fought, keeping an eye out for where Emerald could be, as well as trying to spot any other illusions before they could cause problems for the others. She couldn't help but admire how well their partners fought.

Ruby had come a long way from the unskilled hand to hand fighter that she had been upon joining Supernatural Affairs. She stayed at the bottom of the steps, darting in to slash any Ursa that tried to reach the bottom with her incredibly sharp blade. If they stood on their hind legs to attack her, then she cut those legs off before killing them when they fell howling to the ground. If the tried to rush her on all fours she swung the point of her scythe into their faces, piercing their brains and causing instant death.

Yang and Mercury were engaged in a furious battle of their own. Yang was powerful enough that her burning punches could be crippling, but Mercury’s feet were incredibly deadly as well, the claws capable of slicing through human flesh like a hot knife through butter. Yang stayed relatively still, keeping to a defensive stance and avoiding over-pursuing despite her burning fury, while Mercury hopped around like a hyperactive grasshopper, not staying still long enough to be hit while trying to find an angle that his opponent wouldn’t be able to defend herself from.

“Look,” Blake said. “Most of the way up the stairs.”

At the highest point that could be seen from where they were standing on the spiral staircase Weiss saw that the Ursa were moving a little strangely. They wove around a single point as they charged down the stairs, and in that area she could see an aura of magic faintly glowing. It was more subtle than the illusion that had been obscuring Mercury, but that was most likely a combination of it being simple and something that Emerald was very used to using.

Weiss raised her handgun, carefully aimed, and fired repeatedly. The illusion collapsed as Emerald yelped and hid behind an Ursa, the illusion making her invisible fading away as she was almost shot. A moment later she popped up again and fired her own handgun, forcing Weiss and Blake to move as well.

They didn't really have any cover, but a couple of incendiary rounds had the Ursa Emerald was hiding behind roaring in pain and thrashing around. It stumbled and then fell from the stairs, hitting the ground with a loud thump. Before it could rise Ruby darted over and chopped its head off, before returning to the base of the stairs.
Before Blake or Weiss could take advantage of Emerald's temporary loss of cover there was a roar from the Ursa, as seeing one of them fall down made them all realize that they didn't have to keep rushing Ruby at the bottom of the stairs. One of the larger ones jumped off, landing hard but keeping its feet, and when it roared triumphantly many others followed. Weiss had to turn her focus to the sudden wave of Grimm attacking, firing her pistol into them until she ran out of ammo and pulled out her sword.

Ursa were large, tough beasts not easily slain with a rapier or pistol, and as Weiss and Blake moved up to support Ruby, who actually could make short work of them with her unimaginably sharp scythe, Weiss wished that Yang was able to help them. She glanced over and saw that the blonde was busy fighting Mercury, who was still using his speed to stay away from her attacks. Despite his best efforts he wasn't able to draw her out of her defensive stance despite her building anger at his taunts, which meant that he hadn't been able to gain any advantage either.

Weiss stabbed an Ursa in the knee, making the Grimm stumble for a moment until Ruby had a chance to cut a massive gouge in its torso. While it collapsed from the lethal wound Blake harassed another Ursa, unable to easily hurt it with her kusarigama, but annoying it thoroughly enough that it didn't notice Ruby until she cut it nearly in half. They continued fighting in that fashion for a little longer, until even the huge, spiny Grimm was cut down.

Weiss immediately began to search for Emerald, afraid that she would take advantage of them being distracted to snipe them with her pistol, but her attention was taken by a loud cry and a burst of flame. Somehow Yang had finally managed to land a real hit on Mercury, her burning fist slamming into his torso with all of her curse empowered might, sending him flying back. He hit the wall hard, before sliding down and lying limply against it. For all the superhuman power his demonic legs offered, his torso was no tougher than a normal human's, and Yang had hit him with enough force to derail a train.

"Go, I'll find Emerald," Blake said.

"But…” Weiss started, hesitating even as Ruby ran over to check on her sister.

Blake gave her a small smile. “I can probably hear her before she has a chance to do anything.”

With that she made several hand signs, shadows surrounding her body until she vanished entirely in the dimly lit room. Weiss hesitated a moment longer, casting her aura sight about, but then moved over to check on Yang and Mercury.

He was lying limply, a first sized hole burned into his stomach. Despite the obviously horrible injury he was still coherent, moving his eyes between the three of them as he slowly responded to whatever Ruby had just said to him.

"Do I regret it?” he chuckled weakly, before coughing up a little blood. “What's the point of regret? You do what you do, and then you get up the next day and you do that, too. Looking back just distracts you from the present, and if you're distracted you're dead.”

"So that's it?” Ruby asked a little angrily. “You killed all those people… helped kill Pyrrha. Did all of that, and for what? So Cinder could destroy the whole world?”

"Disappointed I'm not like you?” he asked. “I'm not a good person. I've never been a good person. But I… I don't know if it's really regret. But I wish I hadn't had to help kill Pyrrha. She was a perfect little goody two shoes… made me want to rip my hair out sometimes, but… she did care. I don't think anyone else has ever really cared about me in my life.”
“She did care,” Ruby said quietly. “When she realized you were working for the bad guys… she was really upset. She cared about you a lot.”

“I never asked her to,” he said softly. “Why the fuck did she care when no one else did? I guess I do have one regret… damn the bitch for making me feel this way. But I do regret killing her.”

“Why did you join them in the first place?” Weiss asked.

He scowled at her. “What the fuck was I supposed to do without my legs? Just waste away? I was less than nothing. I couldn't walk, couldn't do anything. So yeah, when she came offering these I said yes.”

“I understand how you felt,” Yang said, looking down at her own artificial limb. “When I lost my arm I just shut down for a while. I'm not sure what I would've done if Cinder had come to my hospital room offering to give me my life back.”

“Some of us didn't get second chances from a Schnee,” he said bitterly. “Some of us had to take the only option we had.”

“You could've chosen to not hurt innocent people,” Weiss said.

“Some of us weren't born with a silver spoon in our mouths,” Mercury spat. “I had to scramble and claw for everything I ever had. You have no idea what it's like.”

“No, I don't know what your life was like,” Weiss agreed. “Just like you have no idea what my life was like. You think not walking took your life away? I couldn't even touch anyone for most of my life. You think I didn't want to lash out at the world? That I didn't want everyone to suffer since they could be happy while I was always miserable? Do you really think having money solved all of those problems? It just hid them from the world, the way my family hid me and my condition away.

“The difference wasn't that I was born rich, or that Yang got an arm from me instead of Cinder. The difference is that we faced our pain. You let it consume you. I was lost in the darkness for a long, long time, but when Ruby reached out to me, I eventually learned to reach back, and even before I learned how to touch she was leading me from that darkness. Yang was suffering, but she never would've given into Cinder, no matter what she thinks.”

Mercury was quiet for a long moment, before coughing up a little more blood. Yang's hit had obviously broken some ribs, which had apparently pierced his lungs. “Maybe you're right. I guess I never did reach out. My father was an asshole, and I guess I've followed him in that. Whenever Pyrrha tried to help me I just slapped her hand away. I guess if I regret anything it's that. She tried to be my friend, and I never learned to reach halfway… I'm sorry, Pyrrha… fuck… I'm sorry…”

Tears poured down his face as he broke down, and Ruby started to reach out to comfort him when his whole body spasmed. His legs twitched spasmodically, heels banging against the floor as Weiss pulled her partner back. He howled in pain, his back arching, and then his howls rose even higher as blood sprayed from his legs.

His shorts ripped and tore, and they couldsee mouths at the top of his demonic limbs, which were devouring his thighs. They tore into him with the frenzy of starving piranhas, tearing him apart in seconds and devouring him completely, the skeletal limbs swelling into fat, bloated grubs, before dozens of legs burst out of their bodies along their lengths, transforming them into a pair of hideous black and bone white centipedes nearly six feet long, with gaping, toothy maws on either end of their bodies.
“Oh, that's just wrong,” Yang said. “Weiss… my arm won't do that, right?”

“Of course not,” Weiss said, looking quite green. Even someone like Mercury didn't deserve to be eaten alive by Grimm, and she certainly didn't want to see it happening.

“Oh god,” Emerald said, her illusion fading as she lost focus. She was high up the stairs, and it looked like she was going to get sick. She then turned and ran, fleeing up the steps as fast as she could, not even bothering to hide herself magically anymore.

The two Grimm centipede monsters then darted forward, moving even faster than the real thing despite their bulk. Weiss was forced to stumble back while interposing her rapier between herself and the monster, the centipede avoiding injury by dodging her wild stab with the kind of flexibility only something without a spine could have before lunging towards her legs, maw gaping open.

Then it hit the ground, body spasming as Blake landed feet first on top of it, having jumped down from the stairs. She had apparently reached a spot quite close to where Emerald was, but rather than pursuing her when she was distracted by Mercury's fate she had decided to intervene to save Weiss from the strange, incredibly fast and unpredictable Grimm.

With the Grimm thoroughly distracted by Blake standing on top of it Weiss lunged, stabbing it in the head above the mouth. Instead of dying, it thrashed about, shrieking loudly, before finally wrenching back, freeing itself from the sword and knocking Blake off of it at the same time. The faunus landed on her feet, which was good because the mouth on the other end of its body immediately tried to bite her, forcing her to jump into a forward roll to escape.

Weiss raised her sword in a defensive pose and waited. The Grimm seemed slightly warier of her than a moment ago, and she saw that the side she'd stabbed wasn't moving quite as quickly as the other side. Unfortunately both ends had a mouth, so the injury didn't really stop it from being a serious threat.

“Keep them distracted!” Ruby shouted.

Weiss glanced over quickly and saw Ruby standing at the far end of the room with her scythe held low behind her, her body bent like a sprinter on the starting blocks. Yang was holding one of the mouths of the other Grimm with her metal hand, the teeth grinding against it ineffectually, while she punched the other head repeatedly, trying to keep it away from her body.

The Grimm Weiss was fighting lunged, but this time she had a better feel for how fast it was and she easily moved back to gain space, slashing at its face as she did. It didn't inflict much injury, but the demon clearly didn't like it. When it started to follow up a half dozen Blakes suddenly charged it, making it rear back in confusion and allowing Weiss to stab it deeply under the head, although once again the blow didn't put it down.

Then Ruby shot by in a flurry of petals, her scythe cutting both Grimm cleanly in half. Four heads howled in pain, and the bodies writhed, mouths hissing and spitting furiously. Weiss didn't wait to see if it could adapt to being bisected, instead surging forward and stabbing the closest to her half over and over again, hoping to hit something vital. Blake apparently had the same idea as she used the sickle end of her weapon to cut the other end in two, from the middle up to the head, spilling its insides everywhere.

When both halves finally became still and started to dissolve into black mist she looked over and saw Yang finishing off the other one. She'd kept her grip on one of its mouths and she was using half of the Grimm to beat the other side repeatedly until both parts finally died.
The four stood for a moment, seemingly not sure what to do after that, until Ruby finally spoke up. “Come on… if they weren't lying we're close to Cinder. We need to hurry.”

“Right,” Yang said. “Come on, kitty cat, ice queen.”

“Don't call me ice queen!” Weiss huffed as the four ran for the stairs up.
Ninth Case: Spell Duel

Weiss was sure that this time she really was going to lose her last meal when the others finally slowed to a stop. She didn't know how high the tower was, but the climb had seemed endless as she ran up the slowly spiraling stairs to the top, where an archway led out onto another balcony.

Weiss was bent over, holding her knees and gasping for breath when Ruby gasped. “Whoa…”

Slowly she raised her head, and she saw what had caused the other three to stop and stare. They were much higher after climbing the tower, the balcony being near the very top of it, and the stone catwalk leading from it was a straight shot to a large, round platform with several other catwalks and a single flight of stairs leading from it. Those stairs were very high, and led directly to the palace where they had been heading.

Standing midway up those stairs was Cinder Fall. She was wearing a red dress with gold threaded decorations, which almost appeared to move in the flickering light of the flames in her hands. She appeared to be chanting a spell, a ball of white fire growing in her right hand which she held out to her side, while her left hand was thrust in front of her body, a steady stream of liquid flame pouring forth like a flamethrower towards the center of the platform.

Her target was Captain Goodwitch, who was standing against her alone. Her posture radiated confidence, with her riding crop raised in the air before her like a conductor's baton. The flames rushing toward her spiraled in the air when they came close, swirling around like water going down a drain, until they reached the very tip of her riding crop, where they gathered into a tiny speck of light so bright that it left an afterimage with a single glimpse.

Cinder suddenly threw the white ball of flames, the orb landing far away from Goodwitch and her defensive magics. Instead of exploding it splashed like a drop of water, and then flowed across the ground in a liquid wave of white flame. Goodwitch grimaced and raised her other hand above her head, palm up with fingers slightly curled. Around her the stone of the ground warped and twisted, creating a knee high wall all the way around her, which the burning white flame simply lapped around, before spilling over the edge of the courtyard and escaping to burn whatever was below.

Cinder finally stopped maintaining her first fire spell, the flamethrower effect dying out, and Goodwitch let the hand she'd had over her head drop, the floor smoothing itself out again immediately. She then stepped forward, flicking her riding crop, launching the tiny orb of intensely glowing flame towards Cinder, who raised both of her hands in front of her body like she was trying to catch a ball. The glowing mote slowed to a stop until it was paused between her hands, and the former interim mayor smirked at her opponent.

Goodwitch simply pointed at the mote and spoke a word, making a bolt of cerulean lightning strike it dead on. Weiss averted her eyes at the last moment, but from the pained sounds the others made they didn't think to do so themselves, as a blinding flash of light lit up the city, and a wave of hot wind blew all of their hair back.

Weiss looked back up in time to see the dying remains of a fireball the size of a football field slowly fade away. It had been centered where Goodwitch had intentionally overcharged and disrupted the flames she had gathered from Cinder, the fire having covered not only the courtyard she had been standing on, but the front of the palace behind them. The stone in that area was bright red and running slightly, and the palace looked like a melting wax sculpture, and in the air dozens of birds made entirely of bright blue flame flew about, apparently having been created as a side effect of the spells bursting apart.
As the fireball fully died away they could see both magic users still standing seemingly unaffected. They had both raised a defensive magical bubble around themselves, which was strong enough to protect both themselves and a patch of stone around them from being burned or melted. The two were simply staring each other down, neither making a move for a long moment.

Cinder cast the next spell, focusing on the flaming birds. They dimmed slightly, their motions become awkward and mechanical, and a moment later she sent them flying towards Goodwitch. Their captain cast her own spell, clapping her hands and releasing a wave of blue light which expanded over the entire area, reaching almost as far as where the four of them huddled on the balcony.

Everything touched by the blue light froze, the molten rock solidifying instantly before being covered in a thick layer of frost. The fiery birds snuffed out in an instant, and even Cinder seemed taken by surprise as the cold hit her, before entrapping her in a thick frozen shell. Goodwitch slumped for a moment, panting for breath, until she was forced to raise her riding crop again as the ice covering Cinder suddenly shattered.

Before the ice shards even hit the ground a massive wave of flame poured from her body, rushing out wildly before taking the shape of enormous snake. The burning construct reared back, hissing like a bonfire, before lunging forward, jaw hanging wide to swallow Goodwitch whole. She responded with another blast of the cerulean lightning, which blew it apart, making the snake explode into another blindingly bright fireball.

This time the flames encountered a thick layer of frost, which instantly turned into steam. The four detectives stumbled back from the blast of heat which threatened to scald them, and when it cleared up they saw that the battlefield had returned to normal, only the obviously once melted texture of the ground and palace revealing that anything untoward had happened.

“Oh no,” Ruby gasped.

Goodwitch was still standing tall, but she was obviously feeling the strain of performing such powerful magics. Weiss had only read about spellcasters doing spells of those magnitudes without the benefit of dust, and she had been engaged with Cinder for a while at that level. It was no surprise that she had failed somewhat to maintain her protections during the massive blast of steam that she'd been in the middle of.

The arm that wasn't holding her riding crop hung limply at her side, covered in burns. It had probably been at least partially protected since it didn't look completely cooked like it should've been, but obviously her ability to fully protect herself was failing. Still, she didn't react to the catastrophic injury at all, simply keeping her riding crop up and her eyes on Cinder.

“We need to help her,” Ruby said, starting to step forward.

“Wait,” Weiss said, grabbing her arm. “If we go in their right now we'll just get in Goodwitch's way.”

“But she's hurt!”

“And she's losing,” Weiss said tightly. “But if you go barging in she won't be able to use such large scale spells, but Cinder can keep doing so… and she will. And when she does, Goodwitch will try to protect us, and her magical defenses are already failing.”

“We can't just stand here and let her die,” Yang barked.
“Of course not,” Weiss agreed. “We need to be ready to engage the moment there’s an opening, not just charge in blindly and get in the way. This is a high level spell duel, and any distraction could be lethal.”

“A distraction, huh,” Ruby said, letting her scythe fade into petals and pulling out her father’s rifle. She crouched and carefully lined up a headshot, finger resting on the trigger as she took slow, even breaths.

Goodwitch slowly waved her riding crop through the air, glowing lines of energy trailing behind it as she formed a floating sigil. Weiss had never seen anything quite like it before, and from Cinder’s interest it seemed that she didn’t know what to make of the display either. It appeared to be some method of merging spell magic with binding magic, using a spell to create an ephemeral glyph to further enhance another spell being cast. Goodwitch had mentioned time spent planar traveling, and even with Weiss’ limited experience with such she knew that magics from other planes had evolved somewhat differently than on earth.

When she released the hybrid spell it surged forth as a massive wave of cyan energies, which rumbled forward like a tidal wave of mana, before slamming into Cinder’s raised hand. Her eyes widened and she grunted, before raising her other hand to help block the spell, which was obviously much, much more powerful than she’d been expecting. She had to set her feet after sliding backwards to the back of the step she was on, but she managed to hold it at bay.

Then Ruby fired, the incendiary dust round slamming into Cinder’s forehead in a blast of flame. A normal human would have died instantly, and even a Sidhe lord like Cinder shrieked in pain, distracting her from her defensive efforts. Goodwitch’s spell slammed into her like a freight train, and there was a flash of light that made everyone avert their eyes. When they could see again Goodwitch was leaning forward, her uninjured arm on her knee as she gasped for breath, and only a hole in the staircase remained where Cinder had been standing.

Without a word all four ran the length of the walkway, Weiss looking around as they did. The many visible walkways showed some battles still happening, and even more Grimm scattered everywhere. The black ooze that covered the ground below churned, and from it spawned forth wave after wave of demons, all of whom climbed up onto the bottom platforms and began racing up to reach them. Despite the dire situation she could see a number of Supernatural Affairs fighting members not far away, meaning that they would have more backup soon.

“You did it!” Ruby shouted when they reached the courtyard, shedding a trail of petals behind her as she sped up to reach their captain.

Goodwitch smirked as she straightened up. She was drenched in sweat, and while it was obvious that she was nearly tapped out she was starting to recover a little. “She may have resisted even that final spell if you hadn’t distracted her, Detective Rose, so you share in the credit.”

“Heh,” Ruby chuckled, rubbing the back of her head nervously. “Uh… what now?”

“Now we need to end the manifestation before anything else crosses over,” Goodwitch said, looking up at the palace. “The magic is still continuing even without Cinder directing it, and I’ve already seen some Grimm slipping through into our world. It’s only a matter of time before Salem is able to.”

“Then let’s-” Weiss started, only to stiffen up as she felt a massive pulse of familiar, tainted power.

Slowly rising into the air until she hovered several feet above the level of the platform came Cinder Fall. The terrible, incredibly powerful presence that they had felt during the fall of Beacon had returned as the demon infused Sidhe lord revealed her full power once again. Her face was twisted
with hate, and black flames burned in each hand and upon her brow where Ruby's bullet had struck. She locked eyes with Ruby before baring her teeth in something that no one could confuse for a smile.

“Salem's offering,” she crooned. “How good of you to arrive on your own. I'm going to enjoy watching Her rip your soul to pieces.”

Ruby responded by simply pointing the rifle at her and firing until it ran out of bullets. They did nothing, Cinder simply catching the dust rounds in her already burning hand, the black flames simply consuming the incendiary rounds. Once she was done firing Cinder pointed a single finger at the gun, and a black spark shot forward, striking the weapon and catching it alight.

Ruby was forced to toss the gun aside as the flames spread along its length, even the metal burning with the black flame. She conjured her scythe, and Weiss, Yang and Blake all stepped up beside her, a kusarigama, a rapier, and fists raised, ready to fight.

Everyone stood, waiting for Cinder to make the first move. Weiss opened her mystical senses as much as she could in the dark magic infused area, trying to get a feel for things as well as possible. Cinder was overflowing with dark power, her presence much stronger than the Prince's had been. Beyond her, inside of the palace the magic continued to grow stronger as the worlds came ever closer, and before long Salem would be able to cross over.

Before they could decide what to do next Goodwitch screamed. Weiss turned and saw her collapse to the ground, a bloody wound on her back. Before she could react further Ruby ran towards her, rose petals drifting behind as she swung her scythe where she had been standing. There was a flicker in the air, and an illusion dropped to reveal Emerald holding a bloody knife, the weapon cut in half as she had just barely managed to avoid death from Ruby's blind strike.

Before Ruby could follow up there was a blast of red flames, which she somehow saw at the last moment and managed to avoid, the fire striking the ground with enough heat to remelt a small patch of stone. Weiss turned back to face Cinder again, who had her hands in front of her with a ball of black flame slowly gathering. With a wicked smirk she thrust both palms forward, lobbing the black fireball like a basketball pass. “Teine Ifrinn.”

It moved with impressive speed, and Weiss knew that there was no way that she could dodge the fireball in time. It wasn't like the small fire that Cinder had thrown to harass Ruby, but rather a large, powerful explosive like the ones she had used against the police during the fall of Beacon, only made of black flames instead.

Then Yang was there, punching the black fireball with her burning metal hand. The heart of the black flames disintegrated, small sparks of black fire flying away from the direction Yang had punched, until Cinder waved a hand to dismiss the remnants of her spell. The Sidhe lord looked furious, but after a moment she landed on the platform, the black flame fading away.

There was a blurry ripple beside her, and suddenly Emerald was there, looking at her with concern. “Are you alright? You know channeling hellfire is dangerous…”

Cinder didn't look away from the detectives, but she did reach over and stroke Emerald's cheek. “I'm fine. Excellent job dealing with the witch, although I can't help but see that you left her alive.”

Weiss looked back, blinking in surprise when she realized that Blake had slipped away from their battle line at some point and was working to stabilize Goodwitch. Her hands were soaked in blood as she desperately tried to stop the bleeding, and from how frantic she was it was obvious that the woman had suffered a grievous injury.
“I’m sorry,” Emerald said. “She had a magic barrier around herself which deflected my knife.”

“No matter, you still incapacitated her, and while she’s too damaged to serve as a proper sacrifice, She may like her anyway,” Cinder said.

“You aren’t going to touch my sister or anyone else!” Yang shouted, charging forward. She kept her metal arm in front of her, ready to parry any magical attacks. Unfortunately she had forgotten that Cinder was a Sidhe lord as well, and just as she closed Cinder’s leg blurred too fast to be seen as she kicked her in the stomach, sending Yang flying back through the air more than a dozen feet and winding her.

“Yang!” Ruby shouted.

“I’m… alright…” Yang panted. “Ow…”

“You-” Ruby snarled, starting to step forward, only to stop when Cinder chuckled.

“As entertaining as this is, I need to keep an eye on the final stages of Her arrival,” Cinder said. “I would retrieve you to act as a sacrifice, but I get the feeling that you would disrupt things somehow. Instead I’ll simply wait until She crosses over to take you.”

“I’m not going to let you leave!” Ruby said, tensing to charge.

“You would leave your sister and captain at their mercy?” Cinder drawled. “I didn't know you were so cold.”

“Their?” Ruby asked, glancing around. Coming down one of the walkways was a large crowd of Grimm of all descriptions. Beringels, Beowolves, Ursa, and many stranger kinds besides, and leading them was the old looking Alpha Beowolf that they had fought before.

“I knew it would come back,” Blake grumbled. She was still working on Goodwitch, although she obviously had been keeping an eye on the rest of the battle.

There was a sudden burst of automatic gunfire, and Weiss saw that Coco, Velvet, Yatsuhashi and Fox had emerged from one of the other towers. Coco fired as she ran, the Grimm too densely packed on the exposed path to avoid the incendiary dust rounds, even fired as wildly as they were as she ran towards the platform. Looking around she saw her sister and Qrow fighting a King Taijitu on a nearby balcony, with Sun, Neptune and their two friends nearby as well.

Ruby moved closer to Cinder, although still well out of her reach. “My friends are here! They can take a bunch of Grimm no problem, so I'm not going to let you get away!”

Weiss smirked and stepped up beside her. “What she said.”

“Perhaps they could beat those Grimm… but what about him?” Cinder said, looking up.

Weiss followed her line of sight, and when she did she felt her heart stop. Slowly flying towards them was an enormous creature. As it grew closer she could begin to make out how big it was, and she felt her heart begin to hammer in her chest.

“Dragon!” Blake shouted.
Ninth Case: What Rough Beast

The dragon was simply enormous. At least a hundred feet long from the bony white head armor at the snout to the sharp shock at the end of its sinuous tail, with great, bat-like red wings that spread even wider. Its body was a deep, deep black, and it dripped with the foul slime from which new Grimm emerged. When it came close it opened its great, toothy maw, the mouth slit all the way to the neck and the jaw unhinging like a snake, to reveal a mouth full of jagged teeth and purple flames. It had come close enough that she could see its chest expanding as it took a deep breath, and then it exhaled a blast of purple fire larger than the platform.

A wireframe of blue light suddenly formed a dome over their heads, just before the purple flames would've struck them. The blue dome flickered and dimmed, but held firm until the dragon passed, ending the blast of unnatural fire. When it did the dome finally flickered and faded away.

Weiss turned and looked, and she was unsurprised to see Velvet bent over and panting at the edge of the platform. She had apparently arrived just in time to raise the protective barrier over them, although it seemed to have taken more out of her than it had the dragon, which was slowly circling back around. Coco fired at it for a while, the incendiary rounds burning on its scaly hide to no apparent effect. After a moment she turned and started firing on the horde of Grimm, which were moments away from reaching their platform.

“Emerald, make sure they don't follow me,” Cinder said, before lifting off of the ground again and flying towards the palace.

“Wait, come back here!” Ruby shouted, starting to run after her, only to stop when Emerald pulled a gun and fired several bullets at her. She yelped and dove, rolling across the ground to try to avoid being shot.

Coco turned from where she'd been firing and shot a burst at Emerald, who blurred and faded away, revealing that she had just been an illusion. Ruby hopped back to her feet, looking around desperately, before turning her attention to Cinder, who had already reached the entrance of the palace and was starting to head inside. She hesitated, before turning and running towards the arriving Grimm, leaving a trail of petals behind her as she charged.

Weiss started to follow, but then Nora arrived, charging into the fray with a cheer, her hammer knocking a pig-like Boarbatusk off of the walkway with her first swing, then sending a pair of Beowolves plummeting to their doom with her second. Ruby darted in and out of the fight, her scythe cutting down the packed in Grimm like wheat, using her speed to avoid Nora's wild blows. There was no room for her to get involved, and she would only slow them down if she tried.

Instead she moved over to where Blake and Velvet were working on stabilizing Goodwitch, while Yang, Ren, Juane and Coco stood guard over them, on the lookout for Emerald as well as trying to figure out something to do about the dragon circling lazily overhead.

Weiss activated her aura sight and looked around, hoping to spot the real Emerald. Unfortunately she'd wizened up, and had some kind of low level illusion covering half of the platform, which meant that everything simply looked enchanted, making it impossible to find her.

Before she could figure out her next move the dragon finally circled around again. It spread its wings wide, braking sharply nearly the platform, purple flames drooling from its mouth. It reared its head back, expanded its chest with air, and then blasted the platform with another wave of impossible fire.
Velvet had been keeping an eye on it despite being busy healing Goodwitch, standing up and casting the magical barrier with a single word, “Mirda.”

Once again the blue wireframe dome repelled the purple flames, although it began to flicker and fade earlier than last time. Velvet was sweating, and Coco put a hand on her shoulder, transferring mana to her to try to keep the spell active a little longer. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when the dragon was unable to hover any longer and was forced to fly away again.

“You're not gonna be able to keep that up much longer, are you?” Yang asked.

“No,” Velvet gasped. “Maybe one more time, two if people give me mana… but I'm going to burn out. Whatever that is it's hotter than normal fire.”

“If I could just reach it… maybe Nora could throw me,” Yang said, glancing back at the battle on the catwalk, where Ruby and Nora were still working hard to keep the endless waves of Grimm at bay.

Weiss pulled out a piece of chalk and knelt on the ground, quickly sketching a summoning circle. She really wished that she'd acquired more personal summons than just her Knight, or even had taken some useful summons from her family vault. She knew there were some feathers that allowed her ancestors to summon griffons to ride, which was exactly the sort of thing that could bring down a dragon.

Still, she had to make use of what she had, and so she quickly finished drawing the circle and poured handfuls of dust into the proper places just as Goodwitch spoke a word of power. “Inanis.”

There was a wave of magic, and the entire platform rippled. For just a brief moment she saw that they were in a meeting room somewhere high up in Beacon, before the manifestation restored itself, returning them to the platform high in the air. Emerald's illusion, however, did not survive the shift, revealing her to be barely a foot away from Weiss with a dagger pulled back, ready to kill her.

Then Yang intervened, throwing a lightning fast punch. Emerald barely managed to dodge it, just missing getting her head torn off by the furious blow. Rather than sticking around to fight she retreated once again, putting as much distance as he could from the detectives.

“How did you know?” Yang asked, glancing back at the captain.

Despite still being worked on frantically by Blake and Velvet Goodwitch scoffed. “You're way too young to think you know everything about this business. So what if she was invisible? Detective Schnee made herself vulnerable, and was about to do something to significantly help our side in battle. That's the precise moment an assassin would strike.”

Weiss returned her attention to her magic circle, cutting her hand and using it to perform the summoning. A cloud of smoke filled the area above it, before quickly coalescing once again into the Knight. The helmet panned about, obviously trying to take in the battlefield, before turning to look at her.

“How did you know?” Weiss asked, glancing back at the captain.

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“How did you know?” Weiss asked.

The Knight looked at the dragon circling over head, before looking at her and shrugging, obviously having no idea either. Before Weiss could say anything else Yang spoke up. “I've got an idea.”

“Is it… a good idea?” Weiss asked awkwardly.

“Hey!” Yang objected. “It's a great idea, trust me.”
“Your last idea was to have Nora throw you at the dragon,” Weiss pointed out.

“Don't you need to go stop Salem from showing up?” Yang asked.

“As much as it pains me to admit it, you need to go and let her do whatever foolish shenanigan she has planned,” Goodwitch said. “It won't be much longer and we'll be too late. You can feel it, can't you? That dragon already slipped between our worlds… Salem will be ready all too soon. You're the only one with enough skill with binding magic to ensure that this manifestation is stopped.”

Weiss sighed and looked up at the Knight. “I'm going to go… listen to what Yang and the others here say… unless the idea is too stupid.”

“Feeling the love here, ice queen,” Yang said.

Weiss stood and drew her sword, moving towards Emerald, who was still standing between her and the stairs up to the palace, or what remained of them. There was a large hole where Goodwitch's spell had blasted Cinder, but she had to get past the illusionist first.

“Why are you doing this?” Weiss asked when she was close enough. “Why are you helping Cinder Fall? Salem will destroy the world.”

“Like I care about the world,” Emerald snorted. “I'm not going to fail Cinder. She will get her dream.”

“Do you really think you'll live through this?” Weiss asked. “You heard what Mercury said… before his gift from her ate him. If we hadn't shown up to be possible sacrifices you and him would've been on the chopping block.”

“Maybe he would've been, but I'm important to Cinder!” Emerald objected.

“She's a Sidhe lord!” Weiss exploded. “They don't really care about humans! You're only around because you're useful to her! The moment you become more useful dead or gone she'll kill you.”

“No, that won't happen!” Emerald shouted back, charging forward and swinging a pair of heavy, long bladed daggers at her wildly. “I matter to her! I'm important! She cares about me!”

Weiss' eyes narrowed, not sure whether she should believe what she was seeing or not. Emerald didn't seem like the sort to charge blindly at someone with a longer weapon, and she was a master illusionist. Was the attack real? Were her guns earlier just an illusion? Were both attacks fake? Rather than thrusting past the clumsy attack, or parrying the smaller blades and trying to talk more, Weiss went for a wide, flourishing parry. Her weapon struck steel where there appeared to only be air, and she twisted her blade, thrusting the tip past the invisible dagger to a place in the air where she guessed Emerald would be based upon where she'd made contact.

She struck home with a small spray of blood, and the illusion fell as Emerald stumbled back, her side bleeding from the glancing hit. Weiss focused on her opponent, her aura sight telling her that the illusion had fallen when she'd been injured. She would launch an all out attack the moment she felt any attempt to perform more magic, unwilling to let her slip away again.

“You can't beat me,” Weiss said. “Your illusions are incredible, but they aren't nearly enough. Just run away like you did last time, or I'll rip out your soul and keep it in the Schnee vault beside everyone else who sided with the Sidhe over our interests.”

Emerald looked scared, but she didn't back down. “No. I'm not going to abandon Cinder!”
“She doesn’t care about you,” Weiss said.

“I love her!” Emerald shouted, losing all of her composure. “I don’t care what you think! I know she’s a Sidhe. I know what they’re like. But she’s different. She needs me! I’m important to her! No one’s ever even needed me before!”

Emerald then moved back in, not even using an illusion this time. She was skilled, her daggers moving in fast, deceptive patterns, but Weiss could only felt pity for the woman. She was in love with a monster, and she even seemed aware of the truth about what she was like, but she couldn't bring herself to admit it. Unfortunately, Weiss' feelings dulled her reaction just enough for Emerald to get in close, and Weiss suddenly found herself engaged with an opponent inside of her guard. It was all that she could do to keep from getting stabbed, and as she parried furiously with both her sword and her off hand she began to consider the need to get hit just to end things. She could drain Emerald's life if she was hurt badly enough while finishing her...

Then suddenly Emerald yelped and jumped back, losing a little hair and nearly her head as a saber slashed perfectly in the gap between them. “Winter!”

“Winter?” she said with a nod. “You seemed to be having trouble with her.”

“I would've beaten her,” Weiss objected.

Winter scoffed. “It's not a matter of beating her or not. Your form was appalling, and I'm certain that I and your tutors didn't teach you to be bullied by someone with shorter reach that way.”

“I—”

“I don't care about your excuses, you boob!” Winter barked. “You could've gotten yourself killed! Now I will be the one to deal with her.”

Weiss smiled, hearing the care behind the harsh words. “Be careful. She's the best illusionist I've ever encountered. If you lose focus on her for a moment she'll take advantage of that.”

“I see,” Winter said. “Thank you. Now, don't you have something else to be doing?”

Weiss glanced back, and she saw that Qrow had taken over for Ruby, her partner jogging over to join her. “Weiss!”


Winter scoffed. “Don't worry about me. I'm more than capable of dealing with some street rat who believes her own illusions.”

Emerald leapt forward, bringing both daggers around in a complex attack pattern. Weiss was tempted to step forward and help her sister, but Winter easily fended off the assault and immediately began pushing Emerald back with her own counter attacks. After a moment Weiss nodded, knowing that Winter would be okay as she had never actually beaten her sister in a spar. She smiled tightly at Ruby as she reached her side, looking eager to keep running. “Ready to stop Cinder?”

“Yes, of course,” she said, letting her scythe fade and patting her hoodie's pocket. “I'm definitely ready. Come on!”

Weiss looked around, hoping for more reinforcements against Cinder, but while she'd been distracted many more Grimm had come. They were pouring down many of the walkways leading to their platform, and the other detectives were engaged holding them against the demonic tide leaving no one
else free to fight Cinder. Turning her attention to the way up, she was dismayed to remember that the stairs were still in terrible condition from the earlier spell battle. After some thought she decided that they might be able to slowly scoot along the still intact edge like it was a balance beam, assuming that the stone didn't crumble any further.

“How are we going to- AHH!” Weiss started, only to yelp as Ruby suddenly picked her up in her arms like a bride on her wedding day.

Weiss blushed, freezing for a moment, unable to fully process what was happening. On the one hand, it felt good to be held that way by the person she loved, and she was surprised that Ruby was actually able to do it so casually. Sure, she'd always been athletic, and she'd managed to carry Weiss before during the fall of Beacon, but being cradled protectively in her arms was different, more intimate. She could feel the impressive strength the past year of hard training with her scythe had given her partner, and deep down she really liked it.

On the other hand, it was also extremely embarrassing. She might not have as strong of muscles as Ruby had been developing, but she was a strong person, and getting carried around like a fairy tale princess made her feel like she was weak, or that people thought that she was weak. Furthermore, she could just imagine people snickering at her if they weren't so distracted by the fighting.

“You go, Ruby!” Yang called, proving that the irrepressible blonde wasn't easily distracted, even by a giant dragon and an army of Grimm.

Weiss started to squirm only for Ruby to shush her. “We're gonna have to jump, and you can't make it that far.”

Weiss looked at the damaged steps. “No one can make it that far!”

“Cinder did.”

“Cinder can fly, you dolt!”

“Well, then we're gonna have to.”

“Ruby, that isn't- AHH!”

Weiss was once again cut off as Ruby ran forward. The only other time she'd been dragged along at super speed by Ruby she'd been distracted and hadn't really absorbed much of the experience. This time she saw the world blur and become indistinct, and the fuzzy staircase approaching so quickly that she barely had a chance to close her suddenly burning eyes before they were airborne. She held onto Ruby tightly, burying her face in her shoulder, hoping that this wouldn't end with a long, long fall into a pool of Grimm goo.

“Can't breathe,” Ruby grunted.

Weiss blushed and loosened her grip, raising her head and looking around. A trail of rose petals lay on the ground from near the middle of the large platform where she'd been picked up, all the way up the beginning steps and then beyond the gap where Cinder had been blasted through them. Slowly Weiss relaxed enough for Ruby to finally set her down, her partner gasping for breath after being briefly choked, as well as to recover from the sudden exertion.

While Ruby recovered Weiss felt her heart clench as she saw the dragon begin to dive again, although thankfully towards the platform rather than them exposed on the stairs. Velvet stood, hands raised, ready to raise another protective bubble, but before she did Yang said something to the Knight, knocking her fist on its leg.
Yang had obviously explained her plan to the Knight already, as it immediately scooped her up, wound up like a professional pitcher, and hurled the blonde directly towards the dragon. “That… that idiot. Having the Knight throw you is not a different plan from having Nora throw you! The one doing it wasn't the problem!”

Yang obviously couldn't hear her or Ruby's concerned moan, and even if she could, her exultant exclamation would've drowned it out entirely. She caught fire mid flight, her metal fist extended in front of her like she was some kind of superhero with actual control of her flight, instead of being entirely at the mercy of gravity and the aim of a hunk of sentient silversteel from Faerie.

Fortunately the dragon seemed just as confused as the rest of them, probably more so since it had no experience with Yang Xiao Long. It almost missed a beat of its wings, and didn't do anything to dodge the human meteor until it was too late. When it finally reacted it only managed to make Yang not hit it dead in the center of mass, but she still slammed into one of its back legs, shattering bone and making the demon howl deafeningly.

Yang held on somehow, shimmying up the leg and onto its back, using the bone spikes as handholds and avoiding the areas most oozing with black goo. With one of its two rear legs broken, and the forelimbs being part of the wings and therefore unable to do anything but glide and flap while in mid air, its self defense options were somewhat limited against the tiny human working her way up the length of its body. After a few awkward attempts to bite her it flew much higher, and soon they could barely see Yang, and even the great beast was almost lost amongst the clouds.

“Come on,” Ruby said after a long, long moment. “We don't have time to wait, do we?”

“But your sister…”

Ruby grimaced. “I just have to believe in her. I mean, she's not stupid enough to do that if she didn't have some kind of plan… and if we don't stop this manifestation thing everyone's dead, right?”

Weiss gave another long survey of the battlefield. It seemed like the rest of Supernatural Affairs had arrived while they'd been distracted, and with them came even more demons. Grimm were now flooding every path up, with pairs or small groups of detectives holding each catwalk against the endless army. Even if they didn't have to worry about Cinder and Salem above them, she knew that the detectives couldn't hold out forever, and just one mistake could lead to demons pouring onto the central platform, dooming everyone.

“Right,” Weiss said, finally turning away and looking up at the palace. “Let's go.”
Weiss had been expecting something more grand. What she wasn't really sure, but the palace no doubt reflected something about Salem's actual capital, but like the catwalks and most of the platforms, it was quite bare. The architecture was very elaborate, however, with high, vaulted ceilings, and tall stained glass windows, all in purple. But there was no furniture, or decoration, or even guards to break up the monotony.

Unfortunately, what it lacked in interesting details it made up for in sheer scope. Weiss was starting to believe that the interior was actually larger than the exterior, and the building had looked almost as large as Beacon from the outside. The two of them had been jogging continuously for many minutes however, and the longer they spent fruitlessly searching, the closer Salem came to entering the world.

Finally just when she was about to stop to rethink things Weiss felt it. They were getting close to the heart of the magic that was drawing the planes together, and it was making the hair on the back of her neck stand up. It was so thick and heavy that it was doing a good job of concealing even Cinder's presence, although she was finally beginning to sense that as well. Weiss saw that Ruby had also felt it, and with a nod they sped up slightly, climbing another set of stairs at almost a run.

They both stumbled to a stop when they reached the top, realizing that they had finally reached their destination. The room was big enough to be a regulation basketball court, but with an even higher ceiling. It had only one other door besides the one they had entered through, a high archway on the far side of the room, along with the standard purple stained glass windows along all of the walls.

At the very center of the space stood Cinder Fall, and behind her on the floor was a vast network of glowing purple lines. It was obviously the actual heart of the binding magic that was responsible for the manifestation, and if Weiss could successfully disrupt it before Salem made it through they could still end things. Unfortunately, whatever final details Cinder had returned to keep an eye on appeared to be progressing smoothly, as the Sidhe lord wasn't distracted at all, facing them with a calm expression on her face.

“I see that Emerald failed after all,” she said. “How disappointing.”

“You're gonna lose, too!” Ruby said, summoning her scythe.

Cinder chuckled. “This has been in motion for many human lifetimes. Her arrival isn't some mere whim, it is the inevitable conclusion of fate for this plane. You and all of your kind will be consumed by endless darkness, and I will stand upon a field of bones and laugh.”

“All our kind?” Ruby said. “What about Emerald?”

“What about her?” Cinder asked.

Ruby looked furious. “She… she *loves* you. She'd do anything for you! And you don't care what will happen to her?”

“She has been a valuable tool, and an entertaining diversion,” Cinder said. “She's been the finest pet I've ever owned. I'll be certain to remember her forever; what more can a mortal wish for?”

“And the White Fang?” Weiss asked. “What will become of them?”

Cinder smiled wickedly. “When She comes the human race will be cast down. That was all Adam needed to hear; I didn't even have to trick him when it came to the fate of the faunus. I don't think he
actually cares.”

“You're sick,” Ruby said.

Cinder chuckled. “This world is sick. Mortal life is a cancerous growth on the multiverse, and one that I am going to enjoy cutting out.”

“What does that mean?” Weiss asked. “Why are you doing all of this?”

“You want to hear some grand speech?” Cinder asked. “Some sob story about how I was forced into this? That the mean old humans took something from me? I'm not some exile, some deposed lord looking for revenge. I didn't come crawling to Her on my knees, begging for protection or scraps of power. I came to Her because our interests align.”

“Interests?” Weiss asked.

“Some people like to create, to build, to make new things,” Cinder said, her burning orange eyes dreamy as she began, staring into some vista of the mind. “I like rip things apart piece by piece. I like to watch living things squirm, not just from pain, but until they know that pain is all that they will ever have. I like to watch things end, people break, souls extinguish… I want to watch everything suffer and burn and die… it’s so beautiful. That look… that final release, that sweet begging for Death to come and take it away… I want to see that look in everyone’s eyes. I want to be there, strong enough to tell Death no… that she can take them when I'm finished shattering their worthlessness beneath my heels.”

“You're a monster,” Ruby whispered.

Cinder's eyes had changed, becoming wide open and burning with an inner madness hotter than the hellfire she channeled. The thin, vicious veneer had dropped completely, revealing a rotten, tumorous hatred so vile that it turned Weiss' stomach. She had seen terrible things done in the name of love, or power, or greed, or revenge. She had done things that she was still ashamed to think of, and her family had done far, far worse. But this… this was pure evil in a way that she never really wanted to believe existed.

Staring into Cinder Fall's eyes was like gazing into a deep, black abyss, and knowing that the things within thatgazed back hated. Not you, not what they saw, not anything in particular. They simply were hate.

“Ah, those are good looks,” Cinder said. “I had intended to have you tied down, helpless to watch the world end until She came to consume you as her first meal in this plane, but I suppose that would have been disappointing in the end. You finding your own way here, ready to fight to save this wretched world… there's something almost artistic about your imminent failure. Perhaps I'll write a poem about the futility of your struggle before you break and die. Please, make it memorable, if you can? And not over too quick?”

“I'll show you quick,” Ruby said, running forward so fast that Weiss could only track her charge because of the trail she left behind.

Cinder had apparently been more ready than she'd looked. With a casual wave of her hand she threw up a wall of fire, intense enough to make Weiss stumble back before trying to find a way around it. Ruby, however, just went straight through, her speed great enough that she avoided being more than slightly singed despite the incredible heat of the magical flames. Before Weiss had gone more than two steps she could already hear clashing weapons as the fighting began in earnest.
When she was finally in a position to see the battle Weiss could still barely make out what was happening. Ruby was moving with all of her incredible speed, and Cinder was easily keeping up with it. She had apparently brought real weapons this time, in the form of two silversteel swords, each quite short but wickedly sharp, and she used them to parry the haft of Ruby's scythe and smoothly counterattack at the same time, forcing her partner to defend herself while trying to keep on the offensive, a split of attention that undermined her assault greatly.

Weiss finally reached them, lunging towards Cinder's back with her rapier. The Sidhe lord twirled away with the grace of a ballerina, and only Weiss' experience with super fast opponents kept her from hitting Ruby when her foe disappeared, instead turning as best she could while fully extended to bring her weapon around in a defensive flourish. Metal rang against metal as she blindly caught one of Cinder's blades, and the other was busy parrying Ruby's counterattack, bringing all three to a brief pause.

Cinder's eyes were like burning coals, and up close it took all of Weiss' willpower to not quail at the sheer presence the Sidhe lord exuded. She was much stronger than the Prince had been, and with every passing moment she grew stronger and stronger as she let her true power come forth. Then she grinned and took the offensive.

Weiss didn't have time to think, she just focused on staying alive. Even with Cinder distracted by fighting both of them at once she still barely managed to keep from getting cut to pieces by the silversteel blades, and she had to give a lot of ground to keep parrying safely, forcing Ruby onto the back foot as well.

Weiss tried to figure out how things had changed from the previous week. Sure, Cinder had been able to beat Ozpin and Pyrrha, but Ruby had forced her back in hand to hand, and if it wasn't for Mercury's intervention she would've been beaten right then. Fighting with real swords rather than glass facsimiles no doubt helped, but it was only when Weiss' arm started to burn and she almost missed a parry that she realized the difference.

Last time Cinder had run through a gauntlet of incredibly powerful opponents, foes that Weiss and Ruby probably couldn't have beaten, even before she faced them. This time, it was the two of them that had been worn down, a week in a cage and a week spent frantically searching for Ruby doing nothing for either of their stamina, and that was without mentioning the rough battles the previous day, or all of the fights leading up to this one. This time the shoe was on the other foot; instead of Cinder being worn down before the battle, they were.

Weiss was starting to get desperate, thinking about some scenario that could give her an advantage, when the air was suddenly driven from her lungs and she found herself flying backwards. The world grayed out until she hit the ground, the impact finally convincing her body to breath again. She lay panting for breath for a few seconds, until finally she recovered enough to realize that she'd just been kicked hard.

Finally she sat up and saw that Ruby was still fighting Cinder, but from what she could see she seemed increasingly frantic as she did so. The scythe was a somewhat awkward weapon at the best of times, and while its size was useful against large monsters, or to keep enemies from getting in close, those with the speed to get inside of her guard were extremely difficult to deal with. In a matter of moments that was proven true, as Cinder stepped into the wake of one of her swings, forcing Ruby to desperately backpedal while trying to fend off two swords with the haft of her scythe.

Then Cinder released her grip on one of her swords, and reached out, grabbing Ruby by the collar of her hoody. Without any seeming effort she lifted Ruby up above her head and simply threw her across the room. Weiss followed her path, her heart stopping when she saw Ruby go through the
archway and down the stairs they’d climbed up. A moment later a stream of flame struck the top of
the archway, the fire so hot that the ceiling melted, slowly blocking the path up with a curtain of
molten rock.

Weiss scrambled to her feet, but before she could run after Ruby she felt Cinder's presence directly
behind her. She turned and barely brought up Myrtenaster in a wild block, somehow fending off the
first attack. She stumbled back, her sword weaving a frantic pattern as she struggled to keep from
being messily killed.

The worse part was how bored Cinder suddenly looked. Weiss was doing everything she could to
keep from being cut to pieces, while Cinder was seemingly casually overwhelming her. She gritted
her teeth, knowing that she couldn't keep this up for long, and when she saw an opening Weiss
reached out and grabbed Cinder's arm, pulling on her life force with everything she had.

Weiss screamed, the power cutting into her like burning obsidian shards. She shook, barely able to
force herself to hold on, but it was the most effective thing she could do, as it was very obvious that
she lacked the ability to beat Cinder in a sword battle. Unfortunately she wasn't going to be able to
drain her for much longer, the pain of trying nearly as great as when she did similar to Neo the year
before.

“Get off of me,” Cinder snarled.

“Go to hell,” Weiss groaned, dropping Myrtenaster to awkwardly grab on with her other hand as
well.

Weiss felt herself weakening as she struggled to process the inhuman, tainted energies of the
demonically empowered Sidhe lord. Still, she knew that however much of a toll it was taking on her
body, it was doing serious damage to Cinder as well. She knew that her enemy was weakening, and
if Ruby was alright then she could come and finish her if Weiss could just hold on…

And then Cinder reared back and head butted her with as much strength as she could muster while
being drained. Maybe a normal human wouldn't have been able to do so with any real force under
those circumstances, but Cinder was anything but, and Weiss felt her nose break and her vision went
black for a moment.

When she could see again she was being held by her throat in the air so that her feet weren't touching
the ground by a furious Sidhe lord. When she looked at Cinder she was suddenly slapped hard in the
face, making her see stars and cracking her cheek bone. A moment later there was a quiet pop as her
nose set itself, making her vision dim with agony, and she could feel her cheekbone painfully healing
as well. The energies she'd drained burned her body from within, but they were quite good at healing
her injuries.

Weiss tried to drain Cinder through the hand on her throat, but it seemed that she purposefully set her
grip so that she wasn't touching skin, making Weiss mentally curse herself for still wearing clothing
that covered as much of her body as she could. Adam hadn't been careful, but Cinder was, and the
collar of her summer dress provided the Sidhe lord protection from direct skin to skin contact.

She tried to reach out with a hand to make contact again, but Cinder smacked the arm away
painfully, before slapping her face again, hard enough this time to make her teeth rattle. “Your
healing is entertaining. Normally humans are much too fragile to really torture; just when I begin
having real fun they die on me. You, however, could be my toy for a very long time.”

Weiss looked at her, thought for a moment, and then spat in her face. Cinder looked shocked and
appalled, and Weiss couldn't help but grin triumphantly. Then Cinder squeezed her throat, cutting off
her air before shaking her vigorously. Just when she thought she would black out or die she was thrown across the room, bouncing several times before rolling to a painful stop.

Weiss had felt something break when she'd hit the ground, but the burning energy she'd drained fixed that as well. She wasn’t sure whether it was the amount she'd pulled out, as it had been more life energies than several humans human contained, or if it was something about her Sidhe nature, but while agonizing and with potential long term complications, Cinder's life energies seemed very effective at healing her injuries.

She started to sit up, only to be knocked back to the ground when Cinder, who was already standing over her, kicked her in the face. Her mouth bled and her lip split, and this time the injury only started to heal before finally she used up the energies she'd drained. While she wished that the wound had gone away completely first, the energies being used up meant that other things didn't hurt as badly anymore.

“Insolent cur,” Cinder growled, kicking her in the stomach hard enough to drive the air from her lungs. “How dare you spit upon me!”

When she could breath again Weiss scowled up at Cinder. “You aren't going to win.”

“I already have,” Cinder said with a grin that was all teeth and cruelty. “This plan has been in motion for decades, and tonight is its final culmination. Do you really think that you and a ragtag band of detectives could stop me?”

“Yes,” Weiss said.

Cinder's burning eyes narrowed, before she kicked Weiss again. This time she felt a rib crack, and nothing healed it. “Tell me, Schnee, do you believe in destiny?”

“No,” Weiss said. She smiled at Cinder's visible surprise. “I don't believe in anything that means I can't make my own choices. If fate is predetermined then nothing I do really matters, and none of the decisions are truly mine. I refuse to yield agency over my own life. I am me, and I choose what I do and I bear the consequences of my own decisions. That's what makes me human… what makes humans better than gods and demons.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You speak of fate, but that's because you're its slave,” Weiss said. “People look at the gods and think about how powerful they are, but the opposite is true. As a Sidhe you're bound by all of the contracts of Faerie, and your word is your absolute bond. Your power from Salem only makes you more limited despite how strong you are. A god is bound by chains of fate and faith. A human… a human chooses. And I choose to repudiate you and everything you stand for! You won't win, because I refuse to let you win, and damn any fate that says otherwise!”

Cinder looked furious for a moment, before smiling and stepping closer. She put a foot on Weiss' torso and ground her heel down with enough force to make speaking or even breathing impossible. “You can tell yourself whatever you want, it makes no difference. You lose, Schnee, and I think it's about time that I shut you up once and for all. Tell me, can you regenerate missing pieces? You won't need a tongue to scream, after all.”

Cinder started to reach towards her face, only to stop and draw her swords, crossing them in front of her body as Ruby crashed into her scythe first with enough momentum to send the Sidhe flying back. Ruby looked furious, as blood dripped down her face, her silver eyes narrowed at her enemy and hands clenched so tightly that her knuckles were white.
“Don’t touch her!”
Ninth Case: Standing in the Way

Ruby had never looked so fierce; normally even when she was angry or trying to look intimidating she did so about as well as a hamster facing down a pit bull. When she'd been thrown down the stairs she had hit her head at some point and it had opened a scalp wound, which had bled freely, staining her face as red as her hoodie. Beneath the blood she looked deadly serious, her eyes as hard as polished steel, and she gripped her scythe with confidence as she stared down Cinder, who was slowly climbing back to her feet.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

Weiss grunted, standing painfully with her broken rib. "I'll live. I need to get to my sword, though."

Ruby shook her head. "I can deal with Cinder. You need to do something about the magic."

Weiss focused on her mystical senses, and felt her heart drop into her stomach as she did. Something was moving beyond the archway at the far end of the room, and a moment later she saw a faint ripple in the air at its threshold. An almost invisible field was nearly at the entrance to the room, and after gazing at it with her aura sight she recognized it for what it was.

Salem wasn't going to pass through a portal like Dagon had intended to do. Instead, Cinder was bringing the planes so close together that she could simply step across the gap, and the blurry, indistinct line was the boundary between realities. When it passed them they would be standing in Salem's own hell dimension, and with every foot that it moved the difference between that realm and earth became less, until finally Salem would simply be on their plane instead of her own.

"Cinder won't let me do anything," Weiss said. "If she's still up and fighting there's no way I'll be able to disrupt this."

Ruby shook her head. "I've got a plan."

"Is it… a good plan?"

Ruby grinned fiercely. "Trust me. I had plenty of time to think about it when I was trying to get back up the stairs and get past that new wall she melted. It's like you said; we're human, and I need to fight like one."

Weiss tilted her head in confusion, but Ruby offered no further explanation. "Alright… just don't die. And if you can, keep in close. She can't cast many spells well if you're in her face, and that's the only advantage you'll be able to get."

"Not the only advantage," Ruby disagreed, pulling something out of her hoodie's pocket. It must've been whatever she'd retrieved from the garage before they'd set out, although Weiss still couldn't get a good look at it. "She'll give me an opening eventually."

"So, you've returned," Cinder said. "You're braver than I-"

Before she could finish the sentence Ruby blurred away, charging across the room with her scythe at the ready. Weiss activated her aura sight and pulled out a piece of chalk before painfully dropping to her knees, wincing as she jostled her cracked rib doing so. Still, she ignored the pain to concentrate on her work, knowing that she had a job to do, and far too little time to do it in.

She guessed what to do from a quick glance at the magical symbols on the floor, barely reading them
before sketching crude chalk sigils designed to drain away the magics drawing the planes ever closer. She activated them one after another, not even taking the time to proofread her circles before using dust and her own aura to power them, all before scrambling a few feet away to draw more. It was only when the room shook from an explosion that she looked up.

Before Ruby had been fighting hard, but there was a subtle difference compared to before. Whether it was the realization that this was the end, or something she realized upon her and Weiss nearly dying, Ruby had found a new resolve that had been lacking before. Cinder, on the other hand, was weakened from the lengthy draining of her life force, and her attacks didn't quite have the speed and strength they'd had before. The end result was dead even, which was all that Ruby needed, as she didn't have to beat her opponent as long she kept her away from Weiss.

Finally frustrated by her lack of progress for too long, Cinder slammed her swords together, releasing a blast of concussive fire that burst apart on Ruby's scythe vigorously enough to shake the entire room, the shockwave actually shattering the stained glass windows. Ruby danced back a few steps instinctively as her vision was obscured by the flames, and in that gap Cinder was able to form a full spell.

“Stoirm Glainne,” she incanted, and all of the broken glass flew towards Ruby and Weiss in a lethal cloud.

Weiss tried to cover her head, knowing that she couldn't do anything in time to keep from being torn to pieces by an attack coming from all directions at once, but Ruby did something else. She took a step forward and threw the object she'd brought with her at Cinder, revealing it to be a small bag. The Sidhe lord parried it instinctually with her sword with still focused on her spell, cutting it in half. Which was exactly what Ruby wanted, as the bag spilled open to reveal countless tiny scraps of iron filings taken from her workbench in her father's garage, the byproduct of years of mechanical tinkering. Cinder, worn down by both Weiss' draining and the newly intense battle, as well as heavily distracted by trying to control a vast cloud of glass shards, couldn't even begin to dodge the attack she thought she'd blocked before it struck her in the face.

Cinder shrieked loudly, her face bursting into sickly green flame as the iron ate away at her flesh, consuming one of her eyes in moments and doing terrible damage to the rest of her face as well. She reached up with one hand, desperate to claw the deadly material away, her spell failing from the agonizing distraction, the glass falling to the ground and shattering again all around them.

Ruby didn't hesitate, raising her scythe and jumping forward to attack again. Cinder raised the sword in the hand that wasn't clawing at her face, but unlike her earlier precise blocks she didn't manage to catch the haft of the scythe, but instead caught the blade. Death's scythe, with Ruby focusing on making it as sharp as she could, didn't even hesitate as it cut through the silversteel weapon, the hand holding it, and the arm at the shoulder as well.

Cinder's pained screech went up another octave as her arm fell to the ground in two pieces, and she staggered backwards, spraying blood while still clawing at her burning face. Ruby simply raised her scythe, stepping forward as she brought it back up, her face as calm and unyielding as a farmer preparing to reap wheat.

Then suddenly Emerald was there. Weiss wasn't sure how she got away from her sister, although from her injuries it was obvious that it had been a near thing for the illusionist. She had apparently gotten past the hole in the stairs somehow, before arriving to see the conclusion of the battle, as she would certainly have backstabbed Weiss for Cinder if she had made it earlier. Instead she came just in time to dive out of invisibility onto the seriously wounded Sidhe lord, tacking her to the ground and rolling across the room, both of them turning invisible again just as they passed through the
distortion in the air, which had entered the room proper by then.

Ruby started to step forward, no doubt to try to find them and finish Cinder off for good, but was stopped when Weiss shouted. "Don't! If you cross the boundary you'll be in Salem's domain!"

Ruby hesitated for just a moment, before running over to join Weiss, her scythe falling apart into rose petals as she did. "Are you okay?"

Weiss smirked. "I should be asking you that. You got her."

"She got away," Ruby said, glaring at the spot where Cinder and Emerald had disappeared. "If the Prince is anything to go by she'll get better eventually."

"It doesn't matter," Weiss said. "We need to stop the ritual. Everything else can wait."

"Uh… how do we do that?" Ruby asked, looking over the messy glowing sigils that Weiss had been drawing around the magics that covered the center of the room.

"You make sure nobody else shows up, I'll keep working," Weiss said, scooting over slightly and starting to draw again.

Minutes passed, and every time Weiss looked up she saw that the event horizon was still steadily expanding into the room. She was started to get more and more frantic after she completed a first ring of glyphs around the Cinder's magic circle, but she finally realized her mistake. Simply draining Cinder's magic sigils wasn't enough, she had to actively work to push the other plane away to halt the momentum of the intersection. She knew almost nothing about the process, but her brain felt like it was working at a thousand miles an hour as she began creating a second array of binding magic to use the power she'd been siphoning off with her first to force Cinder's glyph to function in reverse.

The boundary slowed to a halt, and she leaned back for a moment, studying the dozens of interlocking magical circles she'd created on the fly. She was completely in the zone, and despite barely understanding the mechanics she was working with she felt proud of her efforts. Then she felt a presence, and looking up she felt her heart stop for a long moment before struggling to beat again.

Standing in the archway on the other side of the planar boundary was a woman twice the height of a normal human. She had chalk white skin and hair, broken up by black veins across her body, and a black jewel at the center of her forehead. Her eyes were glowing red and had black sclera, and she was wearing a black and red dress that draped over her body like a cloak, despite being tight enough in places to display her womanly figure.

She barely saw any of that, however. Despite looking similar to human with her physical eyes, what she saw with her aura sight, which she had been keeping active to help her weave the flows of binding magic on the fly, was something completely different. Dagon had been like staring into the sun, a vast reservoir of magical energies fitting of a demon lord. The being before her had transcended that utterly, her power so great that Weiss couldn't even process what she was seeing, only where her presence interacted with other objects could she truly perceive its power, like a blackhole only being visible because of objects falling into its heart.

Dagon had the power of a god. Salem, for she could be nothing else, dwarfed him by a greater margin than Cinder had Goodwitch. Weiss' vision started to fade, and she wasn't certain whether it was because the presence was too much for her mind to survive, or because she had long ago stopped breathing and her body was what was failing her first.

"Weiss!" Ruby shouted, shaking her hard.
With a gasp Weiss could breathe again, and she forcefully turned her head away, deactivating her aura sight and shutting her tearing eyes tightly. She wanted to reassure Ruby that she was okay, but in that moment she wasn't actually sure of that fact. Mostly, she wanted to gibber and giggle hysterically, but Ruby's hand on her shoulder helped ground her in the present, and slowly she started to get control of herself again.

“Ruby,” she rasped, reaching up with a trembling hand to cover the one on her shoulder.

“Is that… Salem?” Ruby asked, gulping slightly.

Weiss steeled herself, and after taking a moment to ensure that all of her mystical senses were as locked down as she could make them, she turned her head and looked up at the demon lord. Salem was staring directly at them, and even with her senses as damped as they had ever been she felt her heart start racing like she'd just sprinted for her life. Something about the woman was utterly terrifying, and Weiss couldn't bring herself to make eye contact. “Yes,” she said. “That's Salem.”

Then Salem raised on hand, and the world trembled. The planar boundary began creeping forward again, and Weiss looked frantically at the layers of glyphs on the floor, both her own and those drawn by Cinder. “Oh… oh no. No, no, no, no, no…”


Weiss didn't answer, drawing a third layer of hasty glyphs, these an attempt to actively drain all magic from the surrounding area and shunt it into her second row of glyphs, trying to use the power of Beacon's ley lines, and anything else the magics could pull from, to force the magic circle to push Salem's plane further away. For a moment the room flickered and rippled, revealing that they were in fact in Ozpin's office, with all of the Grimm statues arrayed around them in the real world, no doubt helping to empower Cinder's binding magics.

Then Salem raised her other hand, and the room darkened. From her hands came what Weiss could only describe as anti-light, a non-glow that somehow made the room darker than before she began to generate it. The manifestation stabilized once again, the world rippling and shifting until they were in the palace, and the boundary continued its slow creep towards them.

Weiss thought frantically, trying to come up with a plan, any plan at all as she watched her world slowly being consumed by Salem's. Before long the event horizon would reach the magic circle at the center of the room, and when it did they wouldn't be able to reverse things without facing Salem directly, a task that was truly impossible.

“I don't… I can't stop it,” Weiss said, her voice hitching. “Salem's close enough that she can control the process from her own plane. Even… even with more time I couldn't overpower her. It would take so much dust… more than is in the city if I wanted to win this… this reverse tug of war. There's nothing I can do.”

“There has to be something!” Ruby said.

“There isn't!” Weiss snapped. “Salem's too strong, she can push more power into the ritual than a thousand human mages without even straining herself. I'm already tapping into the nexus of ley lines that runs under Beacon, and that isn't enough power! She's just… she's just too strong!”

“Then don't push against her,” Ruby said, before waving her arms in some ridiculous imitation of martial arts. “Do magic judo or something. Don't just fight power with power.”

“There isn't… there isn't time or space to set up a trap,” Weiss said. “I can't just pull her closer to trip
her up. It would be like wrestling a mountain. Except she's even bigger.”

“I don't know, you're the smart one with all the magic stuff!” Ruby said. “Can't you just, I dunno, end it? What would happen if you destroyed the circle?”

“It wouldn't matter anymore, not with Salem here,” Weiss said, risking another look at the terrifying figure. She had taken several steps closer, following right along the edge of the planar boundary, and nothing Weiss did could keep her from continuing her path. It was like being an ant trying to hold back a tsunami.

“Then… then what about doing something else?” Ruby said. “If what you're doing isn't working, then we should try something else! There has to be something! Or is Weiss Schnee just going to give up and let some demon tell her what to do?”

Weiss scowled, turning to face her girlfriend to give her one last scolding before the world ended. Ruby looked frightened but focused, not showing even a drop of the despair that Weiss felt creeping into her bones. Maybe she didn't understand the forces at work the way Weiss did, but she hadn't given up in the face of extinction. That confidence, in Weiss and in herself, warmed her, and despite the presence of Salem, despite the looming apocalypse slowly approaching, despite their injuries and the blood coating Ruby's face from her recent head wound, Weiss didn't think she had ever looked more beautiful.

Then Weiss looked at the blood. She had registered it before only in her fear for Ruby's safety, her concern for the woman she loved. But as she stared at it something else occurred to her. Words spoken months ago by a woman who was probably right there, observing undetectably.

“Blood,” Weiss said.

“Huh?” Ruby said.

“Blood,” Weiss repeated, her eyes wide as a thousand thoughts ran through her mind all at once, all leading to the same conclusion. “Blood. Oh, oh, I… oh.”

“What is it?” Ruby repeated.

“I just remembered, she told us, she actually… when you asked about…” Weiss trailed off. “Do you trust me?”

“Always,” Ruby said firmly.

“Then come on, we don't have any time to lose!” Weiss said, grabbing Ruby's hand and dragging her to the very heart of Cinder's magical circle.

Weiss pulled out her chalk and drew one of the simplest, most basic glyphs in existence on a clear patch of floor at the very heart of Cinder's complex binding magic. She finished it in moments, and it was none too soon, as the planar boundary had already reached the outermost ring of sigils that she'd drawn in her effort to counter the planar event.

“What is it?” Ruby asked, kneeling next to her girlfriend.

“Are you ready?” Weiss asked.

“Ready for what?” Ruby asked, kneeling next to her girlfriend.

Weiss took her hand, turning it so that the palm was face up. She studied the pale, calloused hand for a moment, leaning down to place a gentle kiss on the palm, before sitting back and looking into Ruby's eyes. “Your blood is the blood of Death. You're the child of the Omega, and your blood has
the power of the end, not just of life, but of all things.”

“My blood?” Ruby asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said. “This sigil is an activation glyph. We'll put your blood into it and channel your aura and my necromantic mana through it. The blood should end anything if we give it enough power… although what that means, what effect that will have, I have no idea.”

“Let's do it,” Ruby said, pulling out a pocket knife and without hesitation opening a cut on her palm. She winced and whimpered, but she quickly had a freely bleeding wound.

Weiss gently took her hand and turned it face down, placing it at the heart of her glyph. She looked Ruby in the eyes and whispered as she opened the inner door of her soul that connected her to the afterlife, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Ruby said, her silver eyes shining in the dim light.

They activated the glyph. Nothing happened for long, long heartbeats, and then, slowly but surely, the center of Cinder's magics faded into nonexistence, and like some kind of infection that cancelation spread, killing the binding magics one strand at a time.

“So you are Death's daughter,” a cold voice spoke.

Weiss looked up, only to see Salem standing just in front of them. If the barrier moved another foot they would be in the other dimension, and Weiss felt herself freezing as she stared up at the demon lord. She was like an insect sitting in front of a cruel cat, only alive because it hadn't made its a move.

Ruby, however, spoke calmly despite the situation. “Yes.”

“Know this isn't the end,” Salem said. “You have delayed my coming… for a time. But I will return to finish what I have started..”

“We'll stop you again,” Ruby said confidently. “We'll never give up.”

“Someday humanity will fail,” Salem said, her voice as inexorable as the tides. “I was mere heartbeats from crossing over this day, and someday I will return, as I have in the past. Humanity cannot continue to play these long odds and win forever, but that is what your kind are committed to. A single failure and you are lost; I merely have to win once, and I have endless opportunities to do so. That is the truth of eternity.”

As Salem loomed over them Weiss could see details that her human vision had fortunately not been able to make out from a further distance. Salem's skin had looked almost normal, but it lacked any pores or hairs, being an impossible, marble like surface only broken up by the black veins, which pulsed and writhed, shifting position in small, impossible ways. Even the subtle play of muscle under skin was all wrong, and Weiss was certain that whatever was inside of her had nothing in common with human anatomy.

Most disturbing of all was her eyes. She made the mistake of looking into them, and once again Weiss couldn't breathe or blink or move at all. Even her tear ducts failed, drying her eyes as she stared into the utterly alien orbs, and with her focus on that one point the rest of her vision blurred and distorted, until she couldn't quite see Salem's body anymore, but she knew, on some deep, visceral level, that if she could see in that moment, that there would've been nothing human about Salem's form.

Just as Weiss was the verge of passing out a blurry ripple distorted the room, and Weiss was able to
rip her gaze away, blinking furiously. When she dared to look again Salem was gone as if she'd never existed. In fact, the boundary that had been creeping ever closer had drawn away, slowly retreating to the far archway as the planes were pushed apart.

There was another blurry ripple, and then the ground in front of them turned into the center of Ozpin's office. Like a wave reality spread outwards, the walls becoming covered in the moving clockwork of the ward anchors that protected Beacon, and around the room the Grimm statues became visible once again. They were cracked, however, and all at once they burst apart into dust, releasing none of the energies that should've been contained within them.

“Whoa,” Ruby said. “You… you did it.”

“We did it,” Weiss breathed, not quite believing it.

Ruby's blood hadn't destroyed Cinder's spell. It had simply ended it, and instead of a chaotic release of wild magic, the spells simply died. In moments all became quiet, and when she was willing to risk opening her mystical senses again, Weiss felt nothing untoward. The planar convergence was over without a single side effect to show for it.

“We did it,” Ruby repeated, before leaning over and kissing Weiss. “We did it!”

Before Weiss could say anything there was a surge of power, and something heavy worked its way outwards from the center of the room, before pushing up into the sky. The energies struck Weiss like a blow, and she would've fallen over if Ruby hadn't been supporting her. “What was that?”

Weiss slowly smiled, climbing unsteadily to her feet and dragging Ruby by the hand out to the hall. “Come on!”

“What, what was it?!” Ruby demanded.

Weiss simply ran faster, ignoring the pain in her ribs until finally they reached a window. “That was the Great Barrier restoring itself.”

“You mean…” Ruby trailed off.

Outside the window they could make out a flock of Nevermores, great raven-like Grimm with wingspans in the dozens of feet, circling over a nearby section of the city. Then they began to explode as missiles slammed into them, and gliding into view came half a dozen attack helicopters. One dove, its guns opening fire to release thousands of high caliber dust rounds into some demon below.

“The army's here,” Weiss said. “We did it. It's... it's over.”
Weiss hummed contentedly as she adjusted course ever so slightly. It was far from the largest yacht her family owned, but it was one that she was perfectly capable of operating all by herself, which made it just what she was looking for, since it meant that the couple could spend their week off alone, just them and the waves.

Taking Ruby out on a yacht had been something that she'd wanted to do ever since she'd used one of the smallest ones to search for monsters during the Dagon case. Unfortunately they'd been too busy to do so before, and with the situation in the city after the near arrival of Salem they'd had even less time to do anything except work. It was only when Qrow, who was acting head of all of Supernatural Affairs, noticed that they'd been working seven days a week since everything happened that he'd finally insisted that they take some time off, which was when Weiss had decided to make good on that idea.

It had been a lovely time for a boat trip. It was well into fall, so the sun was less of an enemy to her extremely fair skin than it was during the summer, but it was still warm enough during the afternoon for Ruby to lounge about in a swim suit on the deck. Weiss had insisted on caring for her health, which meant frequent applications of sunscreen to her partner, which occasionally distracted them into activities involving even less clothing than Ruby's swimsuit. At least it was good for Ruby's tan lines.

All in all it had been the best vacation of her life, although like all good things it was coming to an end.

She heard footsteps behind her, and given that Ruby was barefoot it was obvious that she was borderline stomping just to make sure that she didn't sneak up on her girlfriend. Weiss smiled fondly as Ruby wrapped her arms around her, snuggling in close without a word. Even after dating for so long, Ruby still went out of her way to let her know she was there before she touched her, and Weiss felt her heart swell with even more love for her partner at her consideration.

“This has been the best vacation ever,” Ruby murmured happily in her ear. “I almost wish it didn't have to end.”

Weiss leaned back into the embrace, although she made sure to keep an eye on all of the fancy computerized controls while she did, not wanting to run into anything while going home. “Some people do just that. I've heard of quite a few wealthy heirs who just… sailed the years away.”

“I can see why,” Ruby said, before kissing the back of her neck, making Weiss shudder.

“We'll have to save that for next time... or when we get home. We're almost back, and the port authority would take a dim view of our yacht blocking the shipping lanes because you couldn't keep your hands to yourself.”

“They couldn't blame me,” Ruby said smugly.

Weiss rolled her eyes but couldn't help smiling. “Have you packed yet?”

There was a long pause. “Almost...”
Weiss chuckled. “Go on, then. I'll be docked by the time you're done.”

With a sigh and one last kiss Ruby went below deck, leaving Weiss alone to finish bringing them into port. Unsurprisingly, for all of her speed Ruby wasn't very fast at getting that kind of work done, and so she'd managed to get the ship tied off and had gotten below deck without Ruby managing to return.

“Almost done?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah,” Ruby grunted. She'd managed to cram everything she'd brought for their trip into her suitcase, but instead of folding things neatly the way Weiss had insisted when they packed originally she had just thrown everything in, meaning that she couldn't quite close her luggage. She was leaning over it, putting all of her weight on it with one arm with her other hand tried to force the zipper to work. Just when Weiss was about to intervene Ruby finally finished. “Got it!”

Weiss just smiled and shook her head. “Next time I'm going to supervise your packing, dolt.”

“I did it!” Ruby said, gesturing at the ominously bulging luggage. Weiss crossed her arms, giving her girlfriend a thoroughly unimpressed look. “I did…”

“If it's packed so well then it would be fine if I pulled on that zipper, right?” Weiss asked.

“Probably,” Ruby chuckled. “I'm not sure if it can be unzipped at this point. Besides, most of this is dirty clothes! You don't fold dirty clothes. You just, you know, wad 'em up and stuff 'em in your bag! It's got to be the law.”

Weiss looked over at her neat and tidy leather luggage, which looked no different from how it had been the day she'd climbed onto the yacht. “I folded my laundry.”

“I know, and it's only 'cause you're my girlfriend that I'm not hauling you in for that,” Ruby said. “Although maybe you'll need some punishment when we get back home.”

Weiss gave her another unimpressed look. “If anyone needs some punishment it's you, Miss Can't-Pack-Her-Luggage.”

“Oh look at me, I'm Miss Neat-and-Tidy, I fold my clothes,” Ruby mocked. “I know how to use an iron. That's you, by the way. That's what you sound like.”

“And you sound like a pest,” Weiss said. “So unless you want to get swatted you should hurry up and get to the car.”

“Hmm… tough choice,” Ruby murmured before darting in for a quick kiss. She then grunted as she hoisted her heavy luggage with both hands and then awkwardly tried to shuffle up onto the deck. “Come on, slow poke!”

“I'll slow poke you,” Weiss muttered.

“What would that even mean?” Ruby called back, having apparently heard her.

Weiss blushed. “I'll think of something!”

Weiss looked around for a few minutes, not wanting to accidentally leave anything behind. It was her family's yacht, and while her and her father hadn't spoken or even communicated since their argument, he hadn't even tried to block her from accessing family property, so even if she did leave something she could easily retrieve it. Still, she hated being disorganized that way, and with Ruby as
her girlfriend she'd long ago learned to be thorough about checking everything.

Once she was sure that they hadn't left anything, she opened up her luggage and checked a small compartment. Satisfied that the most important thing was there, she closed everything up and hurried after her girlfriend.

Ruby had already loaded her bag into the car, but was waiting with the trunk open, and when she came close Ruby gave her a kiss and took Weiss' luggage from her hands while she was distracted, heaving it into the trunk. Weiss rolled her eyes, perfectly capable of doing it herself, but she knew that Ruby liked doing things for her, and who was she to make her life harder when it would make her girlfriend less happy?

“So, ready to get home?” Ruby asked as she started the car.

“I suppose,” Weiss hummed. “I'm looking forward to starting work again.”

Ruby chuckled. “You know, I'm kinda hungry, wanna get some fish balls before-” Ruby started.

“I'm not in the mood for fish,” Weiss interjected, looking away, happy when Ruby decided to change the subject.

They chatted quietly, and Weiss couldn't help but look at the city and think about the changes while they drove. Even with months having passed since the incident the streets still showed the signs of the downfall of the Great Barrier and the subsequent retaking of the city by the army. It seemed like every street had some kind of damage from the fighting, and the people still moved quickly and avoided dark places. She couldn't blame them for that; many demons were still around, as the army was only able to root out the big and obvious ones before they withdrew, turning over finding the rest to the police.

The outside of their apartment building didn't really look much different from the way it had before everything happened. It was an area that had been well guarded by the police during the incident, and Weiss lived in the building in large part because of how high quality the main wards were. The inside, however, was a bit changed from everything that had happened.

Before there was only a doorman. Even months after the army had left, the building management company was still paying for twenty-four hour security by mercenaries armed with high powered rifles loaded with dust rounds. It was complete overkill, especially since nothing was likely to even try to force the wards, but it did make most of the people in the building feel safer.

“Excuse me, Miss Schnee?” the doorman called. “Miss Rose?”

“Yes?” Weiss asked, pausing and looking back at him.

“You got a delivery two days ago, just a moment,” he said, walking over to check his desk.

“A delivery?” Ruby asked, curious.

Weiss' eyes narrowed. She hadn't been expecting anything, and she doubted that Ruby was either. As both a detective and a Schnee, receiving an unexpected package was worrying; it could be anything, even something dangerous.

Then he returned with an expensive looking commercial fruit basket. Fortunately they hadn't returned so late that it had gone bad, as it still looked quite delicious. Weiss could actually see Ruby trying not to drool at the large, juicy strawberries.
“Who is it from?” Weiss asked as she examined it carefully, both with her normal vision as well as her aura sight.

“It was delivered by Fruit-o-Gram,” he said. “I called to ensure that it wasn’t a fake delivery, but it seems to have been real.”

“So we can keep it?” Ruby asked excitedly.

Weiss sighed. “Did they say who sent it?”

“No, other than whatever is on the card,” he said.

“Thank you,” Weiss said. “We can keep it.”

“Yay!” Ruby cheered, snatching it quickly. Unfortunately she had forgotten about her luggage and almost fell over when she lunged for it, but after a moment she found an equilibrium while somehow balancing both. “I got it!”

“Um, I can help carry it, ma'am,” the doorman said.

“It's okay,” Ruby said cheerfully.

Weiss sighed. “Thank you, but we'll be fine.”

Weiss kept an eye on her girlfriend, ready to try to intervene, but somehow Ruby managed to not trip and drop something as she walked. She sighed with relief when Ruby set her luggage down in the elevator, although that just meant that she had another chance to drop everything when she had to pick it up again.

“The strawberries looks so good,” Ruby said.

“You know, you used to look at me that way,” Weiss pouted slightly.

Ruby looked over at her with big, glistening puppy dog eyes. “But Weiss, all we need is some cream and we can have strawberries and Weiss cream.”

Weiss gave her an unimpressed look despite a slight blush. “Is that what you're going with?”

“Well, I was just kinda saying whatever popped into my head, but now that I think about it that sounds really good!” Ruby said. “Can we try it?”

Before Weiss could decide how to answer that the elevator dinged and they got off. As always Weiss checked the wards briefly before entering, but nothing seemed off. The cleaning service had done a good job while they were gone, as everything was still nice and neat and clean, without even a speck of dust to greet them while coming home.

“I wonder who this thing is from,” Ruby said as she dropped her bag to get a closer look at the fruit basket.

Weiss carefully set down her luggage and snatched the card, checking it carefully with her magical sight for a second time before reading the message out loud. “Ice Queen and Little Red, I see you saved the world after all. Guess I can still pick winners when I need to. It took a while to send this since we decided to work on our tan before getting new burner phones. We'd send a pic of us on the beach but you'd probably use it to track us down. - R and N”

“Torchwick sent us a fruit basket?” Ruby said, looking a little confused and a little disturbed.
Weiss rolled her eyes. “He promised he would. Too bad he didn't include a picture… I'm sure I could use it to figure out what beach he's on. I wonder if we could get any leads by pulling the delivery place's phone records…”

Ruby giggled and gave her a kiss. “Weiss… we're still vacationing for tonight. Save work for work tomorrow, okay? Besides, Torchwick helped us out, can't we leave him to Interpol or something? We've got enough problems here in Vale.”

“I suppose,” Weiss sighed.

Ruby grabbed a strawberry and bit into it, closing her eyes and humming with joy. “Oh… oh that's so good.”

Weiss wet her lips. The two of them had spent most of their vacation making love all over the yacht. In fact, she felt a little bad for the cleaning crew, since there was no way that they got everything pristine again after so much effort dirtying the ship. Despite that, watching Ruby’s eating her favorite fruit so rapturously made Weiss' heart start to pound and heat start to build low in her stomach.

Then Ruby's phone rang. “Hello? Oh, hey, how are you feeling? I know, I know, but- what? We just got in! Ugh, fine.”

“What was that?” Weiss asked.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Yang. She wants us to go clubbing with her and Blake.”

Weiss' face scrunched up in disgust. “Clubbing? Really?”

“I know, but I haven't seen her in a week, and you know how she can be,” Ruby sighed. “Besides, she hadn't gone out to a club since, you know.”

Yang had taken on the Grimm Dragon at Beacon by riding on it, and had apparently done a good job wearing it down by the time the military arrived. A handful of missiles had finished the demon off, with Yang still unfortunately riding it at the time. A normal human would have simply died from a fall that long, but Yang's curse had kept her alive, albeit with a lot of broken bones form the very, very hard impact. Even she would have died if she hadn't controlled her fall at best she could, landing on a tall building instead of falling all the way to the street.

“I was hoping to try out strawberries and me,” Weiss pouted.

Ruby almost choked on the strawberry she'd been eating. “Uh, I can, um, call her back.” Her phone beeped with a text message, and after checking it Ruby rolled her eyes. “Ugh, or not. She said she'll kick down the door if we're not ready when she gets here.”

Weiss sighed and begrudgingly went to change into a nice dress, this one blue and gray, and with the addition of a light jacket she didn't have much skin showing. Still, the clothing was just tight enough to show off her figure, which she knew that Ruby liked. Maybe they had to go visit some loud, crowded, gross nightclub with Yang, but she would make sure Ruby was ready for a fun evening after. She also carefully retrieved a small box from her luggage, putting it in the inside pocket of her jacket for later.

She started to check on Ruby, only to hesitate and go back for a pair of gloves. She hadn't worn them all week, but the thought of being somewhere so public sent her back for them. She knew that, for all of Yang's good intentions, it was going to be a trying enough evening without the added stress of having her hands bare.
Ruby was finishing putting on a pretty red dress, one short enough to move in, but which covered quite a bit of her body, as she had never been very comfortable showing too much skin in public. Unsurprisingly she was pulling her red hoody on over it, but other than rolling her eyes Weiss didn't say anything. Ruby didn't ever comment when she wore her gloves, so who was she to scold her partner for making herself comfortable when outside of her comfort zone.

All too soon the two were climbing in the back of a car with Yang behind the wheel. “We aren't going to crash again, are we?” Weiss asked.

Yang scoffed. “Monster attacks don't count.”

“You can keep saying that, but that doesn't make it true,” Weiss said.

Weiss and Yang fell into pleasant bickering during the ride, while Ruby and Blake talked quietly about some book the cat faunus had leant Weiss' girlfriend. It had been a while since she'd had a chance to poke fun at Yang, between being so busy at work and with the other woman's injuries, but annoying her made her smile. It was a far cry from how they'd been the year before, when their insults would have been cruel and aimed to inflict as much damage as possible.

When they finally arrived Weiss hesitated for a moment. “Junior's?”

“Yeah, the owner's shady, but he's not so bad once you show him who's boss,” Yang smirked. “Besides, it's time to cut loose, and nowhere's as good as Junior's for that.”

The bouncer didn't even look at Yang when she strutted past the long line, simply growing tense and letting the group of four pass through. The inside was as loud and packed with people as ever despite it being an early Sunday night, the people of the city still needing an outlet after everything that had happened, making the joy seem almost forced as people partied a little too desperately.

“Come on,” Yang shouted. “We're over here.”

Instead of cutting through the dance floor Yang led them around the outside of the room, much to Weiss' relief. The bouncer at the VIP area ignored them as well, and Weiss found herself smiling for the first time since coming inside the club when they were a little away from the crowd. Even better, she saw two familiar people waiting in one of the larger booths.

“Velvet! Coco!” Ruby shouted, running over to greet them. “I didn't know you were coming!”

“Yang mentioned it on Friday, and we had to come along,” Coco said with a smirk. “You're looking good. Even got a little bit of a tan.”

“Thanks!” Ruby said. “I was outside a ton, but I think the SPF million or whatever Weiss was using kept me from getting too much sun.”

“That was good of you,” Velvet said to Weiss with a smile. She was missing one of her long rabbit ears, it having been bitten off by a Beowolf during the intense fighting before the manifestation finally ended. “Skin cancer is no joke. Two of my aunts and my grandfather have all had it.”

Weiss and Ruby sat down next to each other, and after a moment Ruby scooted close and cuddled against Weiss, making her blush but smile as she answered Velvet. “Of course. My family tends to burn easily, so we always make sure to take care of ourselves in the sun.”

“Boring!” Yang said as she and Blake slid into the booth. “Come on, we're at the club! Don't talk about sunscreen!”
“It's important, you brute,” Weiss scoffed. “Not everyone likes burning like you do.”

Before Yang could retort a waiter with a tray of drinks walked up to them. “Here are your drinks.”

“We didn't order anything,” Weiss said.

“Compliments of Junior,” he said. “One whiskey for you, with the message 'drink your own', a strawberry sunrise with the message 'don't burn the place down' for Miss Xiao Long, a virgin strawberry daiquiri for Miss Rose, a glass of wine for Miss Belladonna, and a refill for the other two ladies.”

“When were you drinking Junior's drinks, ice queen?” Yang asked.

“When were you burning down his club?” Weiss countered.

“I burn up the dance floor every time I come out,” Yang boasted. “Not that I've come out as often outside of work stuff since I got together with Blakey here.”

“Why not?” Coco asked. “Don't like the clubs?”

“Not really,” Blake said with a shrug. “She doesn't really ask very often though.”

“There you are!” a familiar voice shouted. “It's been forever since we've seen you!”

“Yeah, like, over a year now,” another voice said.

Yang froze and became pale. “M-Melanie? Miltia?”

The two part succubi stood next to the table, crossing their arms and giving Yang angry looks. Weiss slowly smiled, carefully sipping her whiskey and leaning back in booth. Maybe she didn't like clubbing, but it looked like she was going to get quite a show, especially given Blake's apparent curiosity and confusion.
Conclusion: Ever, Ever On

Even months after the fighting ended Beacon still gave off unpleasant vibes to sensitive people. Entering the lobby Weiss wasn't surprised to see yet another cleansing ritual being performed, this time by what appeared to be a group of men and women wearing kimonos and odd hats while chanting in Japanese and performing unusual, ritualized activities. She couldn't help but stop for a moment to watch, curious about a foreign magic system with which she had little familiarity.

She heard Ruby giggle next to her. “What?”

“You are such a magic nerd,” she said with a smile.

Weiss blushed. “I am not; it's just a professional interest. Besides, this might effect our jobs at some point.”

“Nerd,” Ruby repeated.

“Quiet, you,” she said fondly.

After a few more minutes her natural interest in watching magic she wasn't familiar with finally began to struggle against the building fear of being late to anything. In the end her curiosity lost out, and with a sigh she looked around for her partner, only to find her chatting with someone a little younger than them wearing faded jeans and a button up white shirt.

“-that's why I'm joining,” he said as Weiss walked up.

Ruby noticed her and gave her a bright smile. “Oh, sorry Oscar, can't leave my partner hanging.”

Weiss gave the young man a stiff nod before leading Ruby to the stairs down. “Who was that?”

“Some new recruit,” Ruby said. “His family lives at the edge of Vale, and he had to watch everything that went down. He decided he wants to join the police to try to make things better.”

“Commendable,” Weiss said with a nod.

Ruby chuckled. “I remember when I was that excited my first day as a detective. I just ran up the stairs, not even looking where I was going until I bumped into this crabby girl…”

“I'll show you crabby,” Weiss said, poking her side. “I, on the other hand, was studying Beacon's wards when I was suddenly assaulted by an overgrown puppy masquerading as a detective. I was quite concerned that she might touch my skin and get herself hurt, but I suppose that wasn't actually an issue after all.”

Ruby leaned over and kissed her. “I am sorry about the whole running into you thing.”

“And I'm sorry about being so… difficult when we started working together,” Weiss said.

“Just back then?” Ruby teased.

Weiss huffed and didn't deign to give a reply, turning her attention as she always did when she was in the basement hall to the boards covering the stairs down to the subbasements. They were covered in binding magics, the first layer of which she had drawn herself back when she was still recovering from her cracked ribs from the battle with Cinder. While the rest of the building was still low grade contaminated by dark magic the subbasements, which had been soaked in the demonic black ooze
that had spawned the Grimm army, were still actively hazardous, with crews working round the clock to clean them up before the dark magic could metastasize into something even more dangerous.

Weiss being distracted worked in her favor, as apparently the timing of it made Ruby think that she was upset about her joke. Ruby leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek, before whispering in her ear. “I love you, and I'd never want anyone else for a partner.”

Weiss smiled, and after a quick glance to ensure that they were alone, gave her a brief kiss on the lips. “I love you too, you dolt. Now come on, we don't want to be late on our first day back.”

“So you'd be fine being late other days?” Ruby asked.

“Not on your life,” Weiss said.

“Ahh,” Ruby pouted a little, making Weiss kiss the expression away before they continued down the hall.

Despite the demon invasion Supernatural Affairs was little changed. With everyone inside having run out to face the Grimm on the stairs, the doors even being left open as they rushed into battle, the demons had simply checked the room and moved on to places that were locked up or still had people. Although they had thoroughly checked every inch of it for any traps or other surprises left by Cinder, they had found nothing, as apparently she hadn't even bothered to visit.

Weiss nodded to Coco and Velvet, with the former keeping her sunglasses firmly up and the latter with her remaining rabbit ear drooping more than usual. They had indulged far more heavily in alcohol than Weiss had, as she had only had the one shot of whiskey and a single glass of wine, accompanied by plenty of water and some celery when they returned home.

Of course, what they had done paled in comparison to Yang and Blake, who had partied hard. The blonde was actually head down on her desk, looking pale and miserable, while Blake was sipping tea with a look of amusement on her face.

“Good morning Blake, Yang!” Ruby called as she bounced up to them. She was a little louder than normal, which made Yang flinch and moan, much to the amusement of everyone else. “Thanks for inviting us out, sis!”

“Not so loud,” Yang whimpered.

Ruby grinned mischievously before talking even louder. “What was that?!”

As Yang whined painfully Weiss was suddenly glad that she wasn't a heavy drinker, as she suspected that Ruby would do similar to her, although probably not quite so viciously. She had never had the kind of little sister relationship with Winter that opened her up to causing this kind of mischief, but as she watched Ruby's delight in making Yang squirm, she really wished that she did.

Blake shared a look of amusement with Weiss, although she could see bags under the cat faunus’ eyes. While she was obviously much better off than Yang she had indulged nearly as hard, so she was feeling the effects, too. Still, she was taking vicious delight in Yang's suffering, making Weiss chuckle.

“What was that, ice queen?” Yang asked, levering her head up far enough to give Weiss a baleful if bleary glare.

Weiss smirked and leaned in closer before speaking loudly. “What was what?”
Yang flinched and whimpered. “Ugh. You're a monster.”

“And you shouldn't come to work hungover,” Weiss lectured. “Not only is it immensely disrespectful to your employer and fellow employees, but what if you had been called out to investigate a crime or hunt a demon this morning? You're certainly not on top of your game as it stands.”

Yang held up her metal hand, interposing it between herself and Weiss. “Ugh, why can't this thing block lectures instead of magic?”

Weiss smirked. “The cult that gave it to us said a Schnee would have need of it one day. I'm not at all surprised that it doesn't keep me from lecturing you.”

“Blakey, please save me,” Yang moaned. “I can't take much more.”

“Hmm, now that sounds familiar,” Blake hummed.

“So I guess you guys kept drinking after me and Weiss left?” Ruby asked.

“Weiss and I,” Weiss murmured, although no one except Ruby acknowledged the correction, and even she just gave her a little smile.

“Yeah, Yang switched to shots when you went home,” Blake said. “I told her it was a bad idea, but…”

“You drank them too!” Yang objected. “How are you not like this?”

“I'm actually surprised that you're like this,” Weiss said. “Shouldn't that internal alchemy your father taught you deal with this? From my understanding its supposed to bring your body into perfect harmony… which sounds like it should keep you from getting hungover. Or even drunk, I suppose.”

“It's not that easy,” Yang sighed. “When you drink you have to let yourself get drunk to feel it, and that means you get the hangover, too. You can't have one without the other. Or I can't have one without the other. Stupid cute kitties with their no hungover-ness…”

“I'm more surprised you both wanted to hang around so late,” Ruby said. “I mean, things were pretty awkward with the twins there, right?”

Neither of the other detectives made eye contact with them, and after a moment Weiss took over. “That was quite uncomfortable. Really, Yang, taking your girlfriend and sister out to the bar where your past, um, 'hook ups', I believe the word is, work? What were you thinking?”

“I thought they didn't work that day,” Yang said. “I usually keep an eye on their schedule, but I guess I forgot with everything going on.”

“You know I've dated other people before, Yang,” Blake said. “I wasn't going to judge you about the twin succubi you slept with.”

Weiss raised a hand. “I kind of want to judge her.”

Yang snorted. “You judge everybody, ice queen. Really though, I didn't want to bring you 'cause I thought it would be awkward, and, well, when we first got together you did that whole 'never mention us being together' thing, and that made me wonder how serious you were about us. I guess I just… didn't want to see them when I didn't know if you really cared about me as much as I cared about you, and eventually avoiding them was just… habit.”
“I'm… I'm sorry,” Blake said. “I know I was… hesitant at first, with my romantic history.”

Yang glanced at her metal arm. “Met the ex… not a fan.”

Blake looked pained for a moment before sighing. “I love you, Yang. I'm sorry I ever made you feel like you couldn't trust that.”

“Aww!” Ruby shouted. “You guys are so cute!”

“I don't want to hear that from you,” Yang scoffed. “You and Weiss act like you're on a twenty-four seven honeymoon. You are honestly the gayest couple in the entire world.”

Weiss blushed slightly and rolled her eyes. “What did you do after we left?”

Yang avoided eye contact. “You know, drank, danced, partied. Stuff like that.”

Weiss' eyebrows furrowed. Yang wasn't completely shameless, but she had an admirable confidence and an understanding that there was nothing wrong with being happy. For her to be acting like this was a little unusual, and the part of Weiss that was trained to trap summoned entities in bad bargains, and crush companies and competitors in the boardroom wanted to pounce on the exposed weakness.

She carefully examined the blonde, and then shifted her gaze over to Blake, who looked nervous at the sudden scrutiny. That meant that whatever it was involved her as well, which was somewhat surprising. What could Blake possibly have gone along with that even Yang was embarrassed about the next morning? Did she even want to know?

“What exactly did the two of you do after we left?” Weiss asked slowly.

“Nothing,” they said in unison.

Before Weiss could further her inquisition she was interrupted by another greeting. “Hey, guys. How was your vacation?”

Jaune was looking better after some months of hard work. He was still quieter than he had been, but rather than being crushed by Pyrrha's death, he seemed to have found some inner pool of strength, the loss giving him a new resolve that he had lacked before. He trained harder than ever, and he no longer seemed like he was just a tagalong filling in for a proper detective. He had become a worthy member of Supernatural Affairs, and Goodwitch and Qrow had been searching for a new partner for him to mentor, although it was slow going with the city a mess the way it was.

“Hey, Jaune!” Ruby said excitedly, grinning broadly at him. “It was the best vacation ever!”

“What'd you do?”

“She took me out on a boat! It was so cool. We just sailed around and spent time together and, uh, anyway, we had so much fun! Did anything happen while we were gone?”

Jaune chuckled. “When isn't something happening? I'm sure Goodwitch will be calling you into her office with a new case any second now. They've even been keeping me busy, and I still don't have a partner.”

“That's just 'cause they know how good you are,” Ruby said.

He smiled slightly. “Sure… something like that. Actually, I need to get back to work. If I don't find Nora then she'll-”
“Jaune!” Nora screamed, jumping onto his back and nearly dragging him to the floor. Nora was tiny, but she was surprisingly dense with her supernatural muscles. Her scream was the only reason he was able to brace himself enough to keep from hitting the ground, and even then he stumbled until Ren put a hand on his shoulder.

“Nora,” Ren said, grunting slightly as he tried to support both detectives.

“Oh, sorry Ren!” Nora said, letting Jaune go and reaching out a hand to help her partner.

Ren had taken some nasty hits from a Grimm, and only it happening very late in the battle had let him survive. Velvet had had just enough energy to keep him stable until he could be airlifted out of the city to a fully functional hospital, and even then it had been touch and go. Weiss couldn't be certain, but she was suspicious that Nora might have intervened somehow with her Valkyrie abilities to keep him alive until he could be stabilized.

Most days he was back to normal, but he'd lost a step compared to how he'd been, usually walking with a limp that on bad days was truly debilitating. In addition to the normal difficulties of finding a replacement detective for the specialized department, Weiss suspected that part of the reason Jaune was still alone was to keep helping Ren out until he either recovered fully or took the offered medical retirement. For now he seemed to be in limbo, choosing neither path but still useful enough not to be forced out.

“So, what's on the agenda today?” Jaune asked once he'd recovered.

“Goblin hunting!” Nora cheered.

“Goblin hunting?” Ruby asked.

“We're not sure what they are, actually,” Ren said. “One of the witnesses was apparently a gamer and said that they resembled goblins. Apparently they've been living in a section of the sewers and have been coming out at night to raid for food and anything shiny.”

“That… does sound like what a goblin would do,” Ruby said.

“Exactly!” Nora cheered.

“But you don't know what they are?” Blake asked. “Has anyone tried negotiating with them? They could be just as much victims of this as we are. More so, since they might not be able to understand what has happened to them, depending on their level of magical and technological development.”

“Actually, that is to be our first step,” Ren said. “We're going to be accompanying a negotiator with a background in xenology and thaumatology while she attempts to make contact with them. If we are able to determine their origin we may need your help to return them to their home dimension.”

He said that last part to Weiss, who nodded seriously. “I assume we've restocked on dust since the last banishment I performed for the department? We were running very low on supplies, and I'll need more if I intend to open a portal for an entire tribe, even just to send them home.”

“You'll have to speak to Captain Goodwitch about that.”

Ruby's desk phone rang, and she ran over to pick it up. A moment later she came back, an excited look on her face. “We can ask her now! She just called us into her office.”

“Good luck with your first contact mission,” Weiss told the others. “Be careful… I don't think I need to tell you how wrong that sort of thing can go.”
“I watch enough sci fi to guess,” Jaune chuckled.

Weiss rolled her eyes, and then pointed dramatically at Yang and Blake. “And don't think for a second I've forgotten about whatever the two of you are so embarrassed about. I will get the truth from you!”

“Not on your life,” Yang said casually.

As they strolled away Ruby frowned. “I'm not sure I want to know what they did anymore.”

“You don't want to be able to tease Yang about it?” Weiss asked. She could just imagine being able to hold whatever it was over the smug blonde's head indefinitely. She definitely wanted to know whatever it was.

“I dunno… what if it's, like, some weird, you know, you know what thing?” Ruby said, blushing slightly. “I mean, I don't even want to think about my sister doing… that stuff… and if it's that stuff that even she's embarrassed about… I mean, what if it was your sister.”

“My sister would never do anything uncouth like that,” Weiss deflected immediately, before grimacing. “I suppose you have a point, though. I'm suddenly very grateful for my sister being such a private person.”

“How's she doing?” Ruby asked.

Weiss smiled. “I talked to her briefly last night on the phone. She's practically pulling her hair out working with Qrow so much. Inspector Ironwood made her coordinate with our department to clear up some of the bigger groups of demons, so she has to deal with him almost every day.”

They arrived at Goodwitch's office and were immediately called in. Their captain's desk was swamped with paperwork, and she looked very tired as she filled out forms while giving them orders. “There's some kind of large demon in the industrial area near the faunus district. It hasn't killed anyone that we know of, but it's very big and potentially dangerous. Contact us when you locate it as you may need backup dealing with it.

“What kind of demon is it?” Weiss asked as she accepted a thin folder that the woman handed them without even a glance in their direction.

“Unknown,” Goodwitch said. “Eye witnesses have described it as a starfish-cow hybrid, but it hasn't been formally identified yet.”

When they left the office Ruby pouted. “I knew we should've killed that thing when we had the chance.”

Weiss shook her head, having also recognized it from the vague description. “I don't think we actually had a chance at the time. Besides, it seems as though it hasn't killed anyone since then.”

“Maybe,” Ruby said, brightening up slightly. “It was eating a lot of people, though. It doesn't seem like it would've stopped.”

“It could have hibernated,” Weiss suggested. “There are also some predators that gorge themselves before digesting their food for lengthy periods. It may well have claimed no other victims.”

“Good point,” Ruby said. “Come on, let's go deal with it before it does get anyone! I'll swing by the armory and get a rifle, meet at the car?”
“Alright,” Weiss said, accepting a quick kiss and smiling as her partner ran off, trailing a line of petals behind her. She walked out of the room at a more leisurely pace, heading to the stairs closest to the garage.

When she reached the car she paused, pulling a box out of her jacket's inside pocket and carefully opening it up, revealing her mother's engagement ring. For something so valuable it was actually quite tasteful, although the size and quality of the central diamond made it obvious that was worth quite a bit of money. She had been carrying it with her everywhere since Klein had retrieved it for her the month before, but despite the vacation she still hadn't found just the right moment to ask Ruby to marry her.

With a sigh she smiled, gazing at it fondly. She would do it soon, but there was no rush. Sure, they had a dangerous job, but after everything they had gone through she felt as though together they could handle anything thrown at them. She could wait for just the right moment, wanting to make it something they would remember fondly for the rest of their lives.

“What's that?” Ruby asked. “Is that… is that…”

Or she would have to propose right there, in a dirty parking garage right before going monster hunting.
Salem stared out across the endless white sand of her domain. With part of her mind she pondered the rate at which the ichor gathered, and how many of her Grimm were currently spawning. As always dozens of ideas to improve the situation floated through her mind, before being just as swiftly dismissed.

Another part of her attention was busy tracking the actions of her most powerful minions. She could follow the existence of every Grimm on her plane, although she generally ignored the rank and file, only focusing on the powerful and intelligent Alphas, as well as her eyes and ears, the jellyfish-like Seers. One in particular was of interest, as it was watching over Cinder, who was still grievously wounded. It was a shame to have such a valuable pawn be maimed in that fashion, but she would either recover or she could find another.

In some ways Cinder Fall being so badly wounded was an advantage for the Queen of the Grimm. The Sidhe Lord had a genius intellect and centuries of experience in the insidious politics of Faerie, but all of her years were a mere blink in the eye for Salem, who had existed long before the Earth had emerged from its accretion disk, and would exist long after it met its ignominious end. Having Cinder defeated, maimed, and dependent upon her aid would make her pliable, and she had time to turn her into a better tool than before. One who wouldn't lose to humans in what should have been her moment of triumph.

Another fraction of Salem's vast consciousness kept track of Emerald as well. The illusionist was far too weak to be of interest normally, but she did make it easier to take care of Cinder as her Grimm were ill equipped for the role of nursemaid. She was also a little impressed that the human hadn't simply died from being on the plane for so long. Even with binding magic designed to hold back the endless miasma of dark magic that permeated everything so that she could sleep, most humans would've slipped and exposed themselves to enough demonic energies to have already died. Salem gave her chances of living long enough for Cinder to take her off plane as quite low, but it was entertaining watching her struggle.

The majority of Salem's thoughts were consumed by her most recent meeting, however. Weiss Schnee had apparently summoned more than few demons recently, seeking aid in rescuing her demigod lover. She had finally tracked down the demon aristocrat that the human had sold part of her name to, and while it wasn't enough to actually harm the mage, it had other uses. Most would find it too difficult to do anything with only part of a name and with the Great Barrier restored, but Salem was powerful enough to establish a scrying link from just that, and she was already directing some of her seers to do so. Knowledge was power, and after coming so close this time that she didn't intend to wait a generation before trying to claim the mortal realm.

She was still mulling over her options when she felt a disturbance. Focusing part of her consciousness on the problem, she swiftly realized what it was. Honestly, she had been expecting his arrival for some time, and she quickly issued mental commands to her forces to send only the most expendable Grimm, and those that had recently annoyed her, into the path he was planning to take. There was no point in losing anything valuable, especially with how much energy she was already having to pour into replacing the dragon she lost.

As expected it didn't take him long to arrive, although she didn't move an inch from her position at the window, keeping track of his actions through those he killed along the way. He hovered near the
door as always, no doubt checking for the traps she had left and dealing with them. She had long ago learned that they were pointless, but he would be even more annoying to deal with if she didn't follow the forms.

“Your plan failed again,” he said.

Salem slowly turned and examined the luminous being. His body was composed of four wheels of constantly spinning fire, and hovering within three of them were large, human-like eyes which boldly locked with her own gaze. The entire being was surrounded by a glowing halo of golden light, and simply its presence was causing any of her ichor in the area to boil away into nothing.

“My plan may have been stopped, but I have suffered few losses, archangel,” Salem said. “You have found yourself once again disorporated. It will be years before you are in a position of power once again in the human world.”

“Ozpin was old, and it was time for his soul to know peace,” the archangel said. “I will find a new host soon enough. You have lost our conflict once again, demon.”

Salem chuckled. “You play the losing side. No matter how many pieces you capture, no matter how many times you block my way, my every move puts you in check once more. Someday humanity will fail the test, and even your presence will no longer be enough to change fate. All I need is one victory. You cannot withstand even a single defeat.”

“So you have said time and again,” he replied. “And yet, here we are once more.”

“Yes, here we are,” Salem said. She unleashed her full presence, shadowing the room in darkness and making every Grimm on the plane howl in unison as they fell to their knees in supplication to their god-queen. “Unless you intend for our ancient game to end at last, I’d advise that you depart.”

The archangel was unaffected by the aura, although it did start to move away. “You will not win, Salem. You cannot while there are still those willing to stand against you.”

Salem chuckled as he left. “No, Uriel. I have learned a few things from all of our conflicts; our war cannot be won with force of arms. No, when I am finished humanity will have no interest in standing against me. And when their corruption is complete I will watch you burn.”

Salem turned back to the window, her primary attention shifting to her next move. While Cinder had been focused on manifesting her, Salem had also asked her to make contact with certain interesting mortals. For the first time in her existence she had formed a cabal of humans to serve her, and she was looking forward to seeing what they were capable of.

The mortal world would fall, and she would make her next move soon.

Very soon.
I want to thank all of the people who left me so many reviews. Whenever it became hard to keep writing I'd get a supportive message, and sometimes that was all that kept me going. I still can't believe I managed to finish a story this big, and it was only because of all of you that I did.

I've started planning my next project (more White Rose!) but it'll be a while before it's ready to start posting. Hopefully you'll enjoy that as well! Until then, thank you all for being so supportive, and I hope that everyone has a lovely day!

End Notes

I started watching RWBY shortly before the end of season 3, and this was one of my original ideas for some fanfiction based on it. This story has been a long time in the making, and I've already written more than any previous story I've ever written. I've decided to start posting in the hopes of getting feedback to help keep me writing; it's hard to keep my momentum when the story is so long.

Please, enjoy this Urban Fantasy AU, with very slow burn White Rose.

I'd like to thank spicybon.tumblr.com for providing me with a cover image! I've never received unsolicited fan art before, and it really means a lot to me. So thank you!

Works inspired by this one: Benevolence by loudmarble

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!