Off the Beaten Track

by Stonehill

Summary

“Even if they’d met again by accident, even if he still hasn’t forgiven her, at least he’d chosen to call out to her, to call her friend once more.”

—

It’s easy to stay off the grid, and out of Salem’s sight when there is no clear path ahead of her. But when Ruby sets out for Vacuo and the Licence Exam, too many people are suddenly able to track her, and being reunited with Oscar on that path, while it should make things all the more bearable, only seems to remind them both of old scars.

Notes

Okay so ... I started this fic in December after vol 6 episode 8 came out, and needed to vent some steam over Oscar vanishing, and a lot of other conflicts that have escalated this volume, so this is really really self-indulgent and based on most of my own headcanons and theories. Just... FYI.

I’ll add some more info as I start uploading the chapters (as well as more tags), but just the basics for this chapter.
My general head canon is that Oscar is a cancer, and therefore born in summer, so since Ruby is nineteen in this, he’d be seventeen.
And as I mentioned in the tags this is based on a “what if” scenario where he actually runs away from everyone and practices on his own for a few years (together with Oz), and the
rest of the characters have also been split apart in the course of the 2-3 years between the current plot and this fic.

Oh and, my general interpretation of Oz’s situation is probably not the most common.... I think? So Ozpin refers to the soul that Oz shared a body with at the time when he was headmaster. And Oz refers the the combination of souls that started as Ozma and keeps growing for every cycle, who therefore isn’t entirely Ozma anymore, or something like that...

Anyway! Without further ado, happy reading!!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

'Tis the last rose of summer,
Left blooming alone;
All her lovely companions
Are faded and gone;
No flower of her kindred,
No rosebud is nigh,
To reflect back her blushes,
Or give sigh for sigh.

When true hearts lie withered,
And fond ones are flown,
Oh! who would inhabit
This bleak world alone?

There’s always a time and a place for a fight.

In the middle of a dusty market place on a cool spring evening, dusk falling on the busiest time of commerce, is not it.

The eastern territories on Sanus are old and full of memories, crooked streets bending around buildings made of two kinds of stones; the ones that have known war, and the ones that only know the blessing of peace. Young trees grow in gardens where the last rays of the sun hit their leaves on a vertical plane in hues of violet and misty grey. The tents set up in the square are made of colourful cloth, salesmen from Mistral competing with native farmers and fishermen of mixed heritage.

Life may be tired here, grey experience trickling into the people’s hair at early ages, strong limbs carrying on with the same movement as the last year, and the year before that, but the shadow of destruction hasn’t touched its face for many moons. Only in the crooks and corners, under the shade of a hood, in the world between day and night, can you catch the hint of a spider’s thread, or a whisper of hatred. But only if you know how to look without turning your head, only when you catch your breath and feel a trickle of another’s on the back of your neck.
Ruby pulls down her hood as she bends over a stall and smiles at the Vale salesman.

“One apple please,” she says, holding up a lien in return.

There hadn’t been anyone on the ship had there?

No. Maria would have picked up on that.

Her phone bleeps quietly in her bag, a message from another continent, and she allows herself a moment of disappointment that the CCT is back online, finally. After four years.

It makes it too easy for them to track her, and coordinate their attacks.

She thanks the salesman and throws the apple into the air before turning towards the end of the market, catching it almost as an after thought.

Ruby had left Maria and her remaining seasickness at the inn to scout the market town and check for supplies for a potential long track through the mountains. The remaining snow still blocks the passes that the caravans use. And she’s learnt through bitter experience that staying too long in one place only brings trouble.

Not that trouble had had any problems finding them as soon as they’d stepped onto Sanus soil for the first time in nearly four years.

Four years.

The knowledge is a physical ache in her breast and Ruby does her best not to think of her father.

Missing his sunny smiles will only bring a longing for home, a longing for companionship and friends she cannot afford to feel without the crippling reminder of their separation.

So she focuses on her breathing, checks that she isn’t shedding rose petals just yet, and steps under the memorial arch at the end of the market, large gaudy stone casting long shadows in the twilight, draconic gargoyles hissing at the dark shapes of the mountains behind abandoned buildings.

She wishes her heart would stop beating in fear, that her ears would stop playing the tune of Tyrian’s laughter, that the experience of being hunted had gotten less frightening over the years. But Maria’s presence is a stark reminder, is a constant whisper of caution in her heart, that if she takes one wrong step it will mean the end of her eyesight. And so much more.

But Ruby grits her teeth against the fear and with a swift movement of her arm, rose petals falling from between her fingers, the golden apple flies into the air in a clean arc, over her head and out of sight.

“Ow!”

The protest of her hunter is a cue, a word of warning that she has been waiting for and Ruby activates her Semblance, bloodied rose petals zipping through the air, down one alley, then the next, pausing when she reaches a smaller square, cornered between an old closed-up shop and a warehouse, the shattered windows of which betray their abandonment.

Ruby turns on her heel, short cloak whirling out of her way, and Crescent Rose unfurling like a fan from her hand, an extension of her limbs, twirling in the air before she cracks the pavement apart with the edge, waiting patiently for her assailant.
The last traces of her Semblance haven’t evaporated before a mist begins to roll in, thin and close to the ground, and it’s only her carefully nurtured reflexes that save her from the shot fired at her head.

She uses Crescent Rose only as support, jumping into the air, twisting her hold on the scythe and kicking the first man coming around her in the face, sending him hurtling across the square and hitting a wall with a spine-jerking crack.

Ruby lands on her feet and ducks a blow, retaliating as she comes back up by applying the heel of her hand to their chin and an elbow in the gut.

Two more go down before she gets her weapon out of the ground, swinging it low to knock two more off their feet and—

Crescent Rose shatters between her fingers in a heart stopping second, and Ruby’s heart shrinks in her chest, so somebody has a chance to pull back her hood with enough force to cut off her supply of air. A vicious boot connects with her back sending her flying across the square.

Ruby reactivates her semblance just in time to avoid a flurry of bullets, rose petals flying up in a storm, and knocking over half of her assailants, leaving only one real threat.

A woman with green hair pensively twirls her sickles round her fingers, and she looks up slowly, blood-red eyes following the movement of rose petals with deadly precision.

“Emerald,” Ruby says, materialising at a cautious distance from an old enemy.

The woman in front of her smiles with chill humour. “Welcome back on solid ground, Ruby.”

“Where’s Cinder?” Ruby asks, using the question as an excuse to search the grounds for her weapon.

“Not bothering with you, if that’s what you mean. She’s hunting bigger fish.”

On the last word Emerald materialises right in front of Ruby, who barely has time to duck another hit. She sidesteps instead, applying her semblance to her movements and rams a foot into Emerald’s shin in an old trick Yang had shown her, slamming both her hands, fingers linked, into her back so she goes down.

Ruby barely catches the flash of a blade just to her left, point aiming for her exposed neck, before it stops. Freezes.

The mist vanishes in the blink of an eye, but Ruby doesn’t notice, eyes caught on the blade trembling in mid air, and it’s wielder, caught struggling against tightening ropes, teeth gritted and eyes flashing with raging shock. Chains materialise from thin air, twirling around his limbs and snapping his legs together so he falls over, knife clattering uselessly to the ground.

And all around her other men and women fall to their knees, or topple over onto the ground, more than Ruby had been able to see in Emerald’s illusion.

Crescent Rose too, has reappeared not too far from where Emerald had attacked her, and Ruby is across the square in a flash to pick up her weapon.

She swings it over her shoulder, directing the rifle at the moon.

“Don’t move or I’ll—“
Ruby blinks up at the silhouette sitting in the shadow of a broken moon, foot resting over one knee, and leaning forwards as if watching an interesting spectacle.

Even from a distance she recognises the way his eyes glow briefly with gold.

“...Oscar?”

Relief rises inexplicably and powerfully from within her as his lips bend in a crooked smile, one she remembers of confident humour, though with less reservation now.

“You looked like you had things under control, but there was no need for it to drag on, right?”

The sound of his voice, so familiar, yet changed, soft tones bending around more confident edges, has her exhaling a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding, a shadow that had been resting on her heart for nearly three years.

He’s alive.

And just like that, joy overwhelms her, smile impossible to keep down, laughter so bright in her throat that she fears her eyes might reflect the beauty of the world, simply because Oscar is no longer lost to her.

He drops from the edge of the building, landing with the elegance and confidence of a trained huntsman, absorbing his weight into his knees so gloved fingers trace the edges of cobble, and he rises once more, the cloth of a short green cape whispering in the air.

Some of the joy escapes her, then, now that he’s closer, and she packs away Crescent Rose, freeing her hands to smack him across the arm with a merciless fist.

“Ow! What was that for?”

Ruby uses his shoulder for support as she ruffles his hair. “What’s with this height?” she exclaims. “How’d you grow this much taller in just a few years?”

“It’s ...it’s called a growth spurt,” he struggles to say under her ministrations, and adds when she releases him. “And I’m not that much taller than you, so is there really any reason for all this?”

“Well,” Ruby says, falling back on her heels to take him in once more. His green eyes still bend softly at the edges, and his dark hair is still a little too long, still sticking out at odd places. Ozma’s jade staff hangs from his shoulder, and a slim black sword that looks vaguely familiar adorns his hip. He’s a little thinner, a little taller, shoulders carrying a heavy weight with more ease. But the softness that had made him Oscar Pine still clings on even after nearly three years of separation. “I wasn’t there to witness them myself, was I?”

Blue seeps into his gaze, and his smile falls to tones of sorrow and isolation. But before he can respond, his eyes slide down and to the left, and she recognises that, too.

“We need to go,” Oscar says, and when he looks back at her there is no room for questions.

“Wha— why?”

“The spell holding them is an illusion,” Oscar explains, words falling from his lips in a rush, as he grabs her hand, and drags her along. “It’ll only hold them for so long.”

“Spell?! You can use magic now? I thought that was your semblance!”
“No!” Oscar says, as they leave the courtyard behind, feet thundering against the cobble nearly crowding out the hesitancy in his voice. “I don’t need a Semblance. I’ve got Oz.”

Maria Calavera takes one look at Oscar and whacks him over the head with her cane, before turning away, muttering about “problem children.”

“What is it with you people and violence?” Oscar complains, rubbing his head, fingers brushing through soft strands, leaving them more messy than he’d found them.

And he looks a little younger, in the warm light of the electrical lamps, in an unfamiliar inn with warm blue colours and a view of the ocean down the hill, clouds on a dark horizon. Smaller and softer, less confident than her first impression.

And Ruby remembers a younger Oscar, one she hadn’t had the confidence to speak up for.

She wonders if he’ll still forgive her for that.

“I’m sorry,” she says, biting back her guilt and fear. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Oscar doesn’t quite smile at her then, but his expression softens, melancholy longing dying his gaze with blue.

“I know there was no anger in the gesture, Ruby,” he murmurs, and then he’s past her, leaving her behind to offer Maria aide in her cooking, as if he had always been by the old woman’s side, as if he had never left.

And the mixed sitting room and kitchenette seems to grow in size for every step he takes away from her, lengthening his strides and the distance she hadn’t expected. The guilt she’d carried for so long, a burden on her heart, feels all the more palpable, choking as it turns to fear.

Oscar is back. Oscar is safe. Oscar is alive and he’s still himself.

But he isn’t back for her, and he hasn’t forgiven any of them for what happened in Argus.

This isn’t the same as Blake. This isn’t Yang.

They’d hurt him. And Oscar has no reason to forgive any of them for that, even her.

But then he turns from the kitchenette, laughter dancing in his eyes at something Maria had said, strict and blunt, and nostalgia quirks his smile and bends the edges of his eyes.

“Tea is almost ready, do you still take it with sugar?”

“Ooooh,” Ruby says, rose petals falling in her wake as she appears in the space between them to catch a whiff of the tea. “When it’s Jasmin I just drink it as is.”

But even if they’d met by accident, even if he still hasn’t forgiven her, at least he’d chosen to call out to her, to call her friend once more. So she won’t let the fear of the past clutter the future.

Maria badgers him for a while, but Oscar remains elusive on the topic of most of his activities after he’d left them in Argus, and eventually the old huntress leans back in her chair and narrows her mechanical eyes at him.

“Well, problem child,” she says, “I can at least figure some things out myself. You went back to
unearth Ozma’s staff for one. Unusual on its own, and suggests the old man is back, as I doubt you had access to that information by yourself. And that sword at your side is very suspicious, though I won’t venture a guess as to its origin.”

Oscar smiles, fond nostalgia, twirls his tea with a single hand, thumb tracing along the handle before putting the tea down beside the sword.

“We — I — went to Vacuo,” he says without touching the sword. Black gloves lie discarded at its side, gloves he’d only removed once the sword was out of his hands. They match the dark metal handle, and the old leather scabbard, the former adorned with dark green jewels and the latter carved with ancient dragons. “Oz predicted that Salem would target Shade next so he and the headmaster there agreed that removing the sword would be the best course of action.”

Maria hums and shares a look with Ruby.

“That reminds me,” Oscar says, leaning forwards, his hands clasping in a gesture that doesn’t quite feel like his own as he catches Ruby’s gaze. “What happened to the Relic of Knowledge?”

“It took a while,” Ruby says, doing her best not to squirm at the unfamiliarity of this situation. Time passes slowly but for every season that leaves them forever it brushes away another layer, leaving new marks, and erasing the old, until nothing remains of that which had once been known. “But we managed to locate the summer maiden and place it in the vault with the Relic of Creation.”

Oscar’s gaze slides away as he listens to a different voice, hooded green unseeing in the face of the present. And as Ruby, breathes a silent sigh of relief, she wonders, not for the first time, exactly what he hears. A soft smile tugs at his lips and he nods. “He says thank you,” he says, and meets her eyes again, gold bleeding into green, warming his gaze and softening his expression.

Maria nods curtly and puts her cup down with finality. “Good. And now we’ve reported you can drop the act,” she says, and gets off her chair with a spryness that would make most do a double take. “I’m going downstairs to see if I can’t catch some news of those morons that tried to ambush you, Ruby. And in the mean time you two can plan your next move.”

Ruby and Oscar share a look before Ruby gapes up at her teacher of three years. “Wha- what do you mean, our next move?”

“You,” Maria says, lifting her cane and pointing at Ruby so swiftly she pulls back. “Are going to Vacuo for your license exams, and you’re clearly not the only one aware of this. He—” she points at Oscar “— will be a lot less conspicuous than a crippled old lady with prosthetic eyes. And a lot better in a fight. And I—“ she slams her staff into the floor for emphasis “— have other things to deal with on Sanus that I might actually get the chance to do now.”

She’s out the door before either of them can stop her, mouths hanging open in surprise.

Slowly, they glance back at each other, and share a hesitant smile.

“Feels a bit like a tornado just passed through, doesn’t it?”

“More like a hurricane!”

Then a laugh. Childish cheer and exasperated familiarity, humour, mingling into a lighthearted joy.

After that it’s easier to talk, to share adventures on equal ground and find new commonalities. The brightness of the world dances like fireflies between them as they stick to all the good, and shy
from the bad.

“So,” Ruby says, moving to sit down in the chair Maria had abandoned beside Oscar. She leans forward, elbows against her knees, and tilts her head with a smile. “How did you find me?”

“I suppose you wouldn’t believe me if I said it was a coincidence, would you?”

“Nope! I’ve been hunted too long by now.”

Oscar’s smile falls and a shadow passes over his face for a moment just long enough to make her heart skip, and short enough to make her question if she’d seen the fury in the first place. “Is that really something to be proud of?”

Ruby exhales a sigh and straightens in her chair, missing the good humour that had passed between them only a moment ago. “I suppose not... Well?”

“That scroll of yours makes you easy to find now that the CCT is back up again. And you haven’t changed your contact ID since your Beacon days...”

Ruby produces her scroll and holds it up over her head as if to study it. “Oh, technology how I love you, but you make my life more difficult sometimes.”

That makes him laugh. The solemnity washes away momentarily and Ruby leans back in her chair, hands clasped around her scroll, to watch him. His eyes bend at the corners, smile bright and warm, soft like childhood and pretty like a sunrise. All the weight of the world trickles off his shoulders in moments of laughter and cheer, rare treasures.

And when the laughter turns into a smile, he looks up at her in that same meek way she remembers from Mistral, from Argus. Eyes dancing under a fringe that has grown a little too long.

“So? Would you like some company on your way to Vacuo?”

And it occurs to her that this is why he’s here, that Oscar had been waiting for her to step back on Sanus soil for this very reason, just as Emerald had. And she wants to believe that it’s because they’re friends, because he still cares about her as a person, because he’s still that kind. But she’s seen the hard edges of his personality already in battle today, the authority with which he now carries himself, and the anger that still dwells under his skin at their betrayal.

Because that’s what it was. A betrayal.

And now she sees the shadows of Oz’ habits in his mannerisms, in the way he interacts with her. Choice. That’s what he’s offering her. And wherever there’s a choice, to Oz there is a contract.

And as he had done all those years ago he sees straight through her, picks up on her quiet hesitance so his smile falls to concern. “What is it?”

“What about you? Don’t you have things you need to do?”

A twist of a smile and he shakes his head. “I’m taking the license exam this year as well.”

Ruby opens her mouth and closes it again. “But. But you’re— you’re only—“

She calculates in her head, but he’ beats her to it. “Seventeen. Yes,” he says, and there’s that crooked smile of confidence and humour again, fae mischief in the face of a world with too many rules. “But it helps that we’re on good terms with the headmaster there. And I finally had that
growth spurt, which means I won’t be standing out or looking too young.”

And it would be so easy to say yes, to go along simply because their ultimate goals must still be the same. And she’s missed him. She misses Yang and Weiss and Blake so much, Jaune and the others. Uncle Qrow. It’s a physical ache in her chest, the constant reminder of a separation she never wanted.

It feels like Oscar returning to her soothes that ache if only a little.

But she closes her eyes and the darkness behind her eyelids blocks out how easy his smile makes their task seem, and reminds her that the distance between them is still a vast desert sea.

There is still so much she doesn’t know.

She mustn’t forget that.

“Well,” she says, when she opens her eyes to find him once more. “Since we’re going in the same direction anyway, we may as well join forces.”

Yang smiles up at her, waving enthusiastically, hologram glitching at the fast movements, and then proceeds to drag a flustered Weiss into the picture.

“We passed!” They announce with bright cheer and starry eyes.

“Weiss won’t let me tell you what’s on the exam,” Yang says, bending towards the camera conspiratorially, even as she has to drag Weiss with her. “But trust me—oompf!”

Weiss places a hand over her face and pushes her away, taking up most of the frame, so only Yang’s flailing arms are visible. “We’ve seen much worse, Ruby. In a year’s time, when you’re old enough to take the test, it’ll be a piece of cake!”

She smiles and lets go of Yang to give her a thumbs up.

The video quickly devolves into a familiar argument, old footage she’s rewatched a million times in the past year, which has Ruby laughing behind a hand at the antics of her two favourite people in the entire world.

She’d been waiting at one of the larger communications towers on the other side of Anima for the news, scroll plugged in to be able to save the video for later reviewing, giddy and excited, the closest she’d been to them in months.

Now she receives near daily messages from both Yang and Weiss, and even Blake checks in when she can.

A blanket drops suddenly over her head, blocking out the view of her sister and friend.

Ruby starts and quickly pulls the blanket down.

“I don’t know whether to scold you for letting your guard down or attempting to catch a cold,” Maria says.

She pushes the scroll carefully across the roof with the tip of her cane but doesn’t take its place.
“Welcome back,” Ruby says in greeting. “How was your trip?”

Maria’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Uneventful. And useless. I might have gotten more out of that boy of yours than the people downstairs. But there are no other huntsmen staying here so that’s some consolation.”

Ruby opens and closes her mouth, trying to decide what to do with Maria’s words. Protesting would just result in a foot stuffed into her mouth, and expressing regret on Maria’s behalf won’t do her any good either. “We’re going to have to be careful not to be spotted on our way out,” she says instead, in an attempt to think productively.

The moon has crawled behind a pair of rooftops, but its cool light falls across the city below them and the mountains behind them. The ocean glitters gently in the bay not too far from their inn, the white light of a broken moon reflecting off its surfaces.

And from the window behind her warm light streams, casting endless shadows ahead of them until they merge with the darkness.

“Are you really not coming with us?” Ruby asks, looking miserably up at her mentor.

Maria’s expression softens and she places a hand on Ruby’s shoulder. “You surpassed me a long time ago, child,” she says. “It’s time you started drawing your own path towards that goal we’ve all been set towards. Don’t let this old woman hold you back.”

And she feels the weight of that, the sorrow of the loss of strength, the burden of old age. And Ruby thinks she might cry, thinks she doesn’t want any more people in her life doubting themselves. She crawls to her knees and throws her arms around Maria, hiding her face in the crook of her neck.

“Won’t you listen to another of my selfish requests?” She pleads.

Maria exhales softly in exasperation. “I’ll listen,” she says, and guides her fingers over the top of Ruby’s head.

Don’t leave. Stay. Let’s not get separated anymore.

The words lie restless on her tongue, prayers with no voice to sing.

But Maria was the one to teach her about the impermanence of life, that balance shows no empathy. That it is their duty to even the scales and make the lives of those left behind a little easier, if only with a smile, with encouraging words. With love.

So Ruby can’t be selfish.

Maria would not forgive it.

“Promise me we’ll meet again.”

She doesn’t realise tears are falling from her eyes, silver streams along her cheeks under a broken moon, until Maria gently pushes her back to cup her face. “Of course, we will meet again. We are guaranteed just that, after all.”

When Ruby opens her mouth to protest Maria knocks her over the head with her knuckles. “We have been hiding too long,” she says, strict determination returning to her voice. “It’s time to start fighting back. Your friends have been buying you time, but there are things only you can do in this
world now, Ruby. It’s time you held a mirror up to the world and reminded it that it’s full of light.”
A mist rolls in from the sea, diluting the early morning sun, slowly swallowing the landscape and the city until all that is left is a white world where the clopping of a horse’s hoofs and the creaking of a wooden wagon is muted, only the haunting silhouettes of the trees emerging unbidden from the fog that always listens.

Ruby and Oscar sit beside each other on the back of the empty wagon in silence.

The world had vanished so quickly around them and with it, Maria had been gone. That hasn’t happened before. Good-byes have been slow and peaceful, partings on a country road, by a city gate.

Never this.

Not since Oscar.

“She’ll be okay.”

Ruby starts out of her reverie and looks to her companion. “Oh, Sorry. I didn’t realise—“

She can’t let her misery overflow like this, or they’ll attract Grimm. “I’m not really worried about her,” she says, thinking of stories from before and after Tock had stolen her eyes. “She’s always been amazing, and I’m happy to have been her student for all these years.”

As she trails off, the smile Oscar had worn as he’d listened sours into an expression of annoyance, and he lifts his hand to gently knock her over the head with his knuckle.

“Ow! What was that for?!?”

“You’re doing it again.”

Ruby, still holding her hands over the top of her head, looks up at him in irritated confusion. “Doing what?”

“Repeating general phrases or what everyone can guess in order to distract from the fact that you’re hiding negative feelings.”

Ruby presses her lips together sourly and hugs her knees. “When have I done that before?”

“In Mistral. In the dojo. In our office after Cinder attacked you the first time. On the train—“

“Alright, Alright,” she says, turning back and forgetting to keep her voice down, though the eerie world around them swallows it. “So I do that, but it’s better to stick to the positive side of a problem anyway. It’s the only way to look forwards, so we don’t lose hope.”

She wishes he’d look away. Or blink more slowly, or something. It’s uncomfortable to have been figured out, and it gives the illusion of being seen through. But he’d so expertly navigated her ability to hide what she feels, even before he’d been able to dig through Oz’ memories with as easy and casual an attitude as he seems to be doing now, that Ruby probably shouldn’t be surprised.
Nobody has ever attempted to provoke her into talking about her feelings. Not before, not after.

“ Aren’t you missing a step?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you don’t talk about your feelings they fester and grow. No matter how much you smile on the surface.”

There’s a lonely, betrayed part of her that wants to point out that running away twice isn’t sharing your feelings, but hiding in them. And he isn’t exactly inscrutable, either.

“Are you offering to listen, then?”

He looks up into her eyes as if the answer is already on his tongue, confidence a comfortable coat that he wears without trouble. But round green meets her gaze and the coat slips a little, mouth opening and closing. And Ruby catches the pink in his cheeks even as he looks away.

“We all need someone to talk to,” he murmurs. “Even if it’s just a second mind attached to our soul. So, yes, of course I’m offering to listen.”

He looks back at her then, meek and boyish, softness returning once more. And Ruby breathes a sigh of relief she hadn’t realised she’d been holding.

“All right,” she says. “I’ll try. But it means you have to share in return. No more just talking to voices in your head.”

Oscar’s gaze glides away for a moment, listening. And then he smiles, laughs shortly. “He didn’t appreciate that.”

Ruby grins. “He knows what I meant.”

They make it down the coast that morning, setting off on foot quickly after waving goodbye to their guide by a split in the road leading to his home.

It’s not the slow and steady trip that had been her travels to Mistral with Jaune, Nora and Ren. There is little peace, and the cheer that erupts here and there is stolen away by the ocean mists. Nor is it the comfortably silent, but tedious travels with Maria, where Ruby had had to do all the fighting on her own and Maria had used every Grimm as a teaching opportunity. Instead, as they make it further inland over the next couple of days, the grimm increase and they have to take turns fighting. Neither is used to the other’s company or style yet, and awkward as they both feel, they stick to fighting on their own, rather than working out team attacks.

Ruby taps the screen of her scroll absently on her way back to camp. Old notes for Yang or Weiss, Maria’s and Qrow’s advice, and Ozpin’s old philosophies. There are plenty of ideas to draw from for inspiration, but they’d need the time to practice...

The world is setting into darkness, light vanishing between the trees of the forest they’ve set up camp in, the black sun of migrant birds returning for Vale’s summer having already passed over their heads. Some has settled in the trees above them, but most, thankfully, had moved on.

Patch’s forests were never pleasant when birds began to migrate, being a practice ground in autumn. Thousands of birds chirping and squawking over your head is an uncanny racket that would make even a beowolf hide its ears under its paws.
“—last forever and you know it.”

Oscar’s voice sifts through the sleepy silence of the forest from their clearing, murmur soft and a little desperate.

And Ruby stops.

He’s been careful to keep talk of Oz to a minimum over the last couple of days, and she hasn’t seen him communicating this obviously with his companion since their separation. It’s a moment of painful honesty, vulnerable insecurity only laid out for a person he truly cannot hide from. An exchange she wasn’t supposed to witness.

“Things always go wrong when others get involved, Oz. It’s— I can’t. Not when it’s—“ he stops and looks up, catching Ruby’s eyes through the trees. “Ruby.”

And there’s a moment of stillness between them, a breath caught in the distance, a rush of intensity, gold and green moulding together, hypnotic and captivating.

And then things snap back into place. Oscar flushes. He flails, awkwardly, nearly dropping the scroll in his hand. “So-Sorry! I- I didn’t hear you—“

“No, no, I’m the one intruding,” Ruby says, a little shaken by a moment lost, a pain in her chest. This is Oscar as she remembers him, awkward and not quite knowing how to step correctly yet. And she wonders at what she’s overheard, at the shell she now understands that he draws around himself, around others. It’s a relief.

But she stops herself, pauses, and rethinks her own instinct to move towards him. Takes a step back. “I can do another parameter check if you want privacy to finish that conversation.”

“No, I—“ he hesitates, smiles, and scratches the back of his neck, eyes straying. “I know how it ends.”

She tilts her head to the side. “In a draw?”

That makes him smile, laughter an unintended side effect. “More often than not.”

His hand falls back to his side, motionless beside the sword of destruction, and he stands alone, framed by the light of the fire as the sun dies beyond the horizon. Long shadows fall across the world, fading away into darkness before they can reach her.

This is how loneliness looks.

And that shadow has no trouble reaching her.

“Here,” she says, stepping back into the clearing and producing her scroll with one hand.

With the other she grabs his wrist and drags him over to the log keeping their supplies company. “I want to show you something.”

“Is it wise to keep that turned on?” He murmurs, grabbing the wrist she’s let go of with a hand still clothed in black.

And Ruby turns her gaze away, looks up to smile and hide the fact that she can still feel the heavy sensation of his wrist in her hand, the touch of bone, pronounced muscle, so different to the child-like hand she’d held so many times a lifetime ago.
“So long as I keep it off the communication networks we’re fine,” she reassures him.

Ruby had refused to leave her scroll behind, to abandon all the memories, the connections to all the people in her life she won’t let go off. That might be attempting to stay off the grid, but she needs to know that when they’re safe once more she can find her friends and loved ones again.

They won’t always come looking for her, after all.

“Blake and Sun,” she says, settling cross legged onto the ground and leaning her back against the log. “Are currently in Vacuo working with representatives from the new White Fang and Menagerie. They’re to figure out how to apply the methods they use to navigate Vacuo’s desert in Menagerie so the Faunus will have more space for their population.”

Oscar, sitting on the log, elbows against his knees, leans closer to study the holographic image of their smiling friends. Blake with her hair tied up is being nudged in the side by Sun, tanned beyond recognition, except for the grin on his face. “They look like they’re—”

He pauses, and then his smile falls. “Hold on a sec, Ruby.”

He gets up again to carefully unclasp the sword from his belt. The black gloves seem to merge into one with the hilt, and the blackness seems to grow thicker until it swallows the light around them. Oscar places it as far away from them as he dares, at the end of the log, on the other side of the fire, pausing to judge the distance, before nodding to himself and returning.

Ruby eyes him curiously as he begins to remove his gloves. “Do I dare ask?”

Oscar shakes his head with a wistful smile. “That’s a conversation for another time, I think. Not now.”

And she hears the words that he doesn’t speak, whispered promises and appreciative understanding. Not when you’re trying to create a positive mood. Not when you’re sharing what our friends have been up to. Not now. Later. I promise.

And it’s enough.

“Well, sit back down!”

And so he does, lighter and younger, tugging his gloves into his back pocket and sitting down beside her this time to get a better look, shoulders brushing and sharing smiles.

“She’iss and Yang,” she continues, scrolling to the video of her sister. “Spent some time with the Summer Maiden after we got the Relic of Knowledge safely to Atlas. We all agreed, after she helped us, that getting her as far from the vault was the best idea and they decided to work as her personal body guards so she isn’t alone if Cinder or somebody else should come after her.”

She slides to a different image of her sister, Weiss, and a woman with long black hair in her late thirties.

Oscar’s expression softens into real fondness at the sight. “She was always good with her powers,” he says, as if the memories are his own. “Managed to stay well out of Ironwood’s grasp too, which is one small blessing.”

And just like that he looks ancient all on his own, tired but affectionate, ever patient with the world. Beautiful melancholy, and wistful longing that cannot be separated between their two minds anymore.
“You know,” she says, keeping her voice quiet. She lifts her hand, careful not to startle him, to brush the tips of her fingers to the edges of messy brown hair. Not really touching. “You’re becoming more like him.”

It’s perhaps the wrong thing to say. A repetition of cruel accusations whispering in the spaces between her words. And Oscar closes his eyes painfully at memories she had not meant to stir up.

“I’m not really,” he says. “None of us are entirely alike. And we are separate entities, in a sense. Even if our souls are merged.”

And even as he looks up at her, pleads with her not to still think the same as three years ago, she can feel the soul below the tips of her fingers, the vast supply of energy and experience old as time, an ocean so deep you would never reach the bottom.

“But the memories trickle into my mind, like water from a broken faucet,” he says, flipping through the images on her scroll. “And it’s been a long time since I stopped fighting those, even if it means I change, even if I lose myself a little in the process.”

He stops at a picture of a beaming Nora, her red hair cut even shorter these days, frizzling with electricity. “She’s like Summer, you know,” he says, and genuine wistfulness slips into his voice, hurt woven into every syllable. “The original Summer maiden, I mean. Bright and enthusiastic. Always laughing and living life to the fullest. It’s not every day we meet people who can look past that authority, and treat us entirely as human. As ridiculous when that is all we are.”

Not impressive, not all knowing, just a human boy burdened with saving the remnant of a greater world.

For a moment Nora had truly adopted both Oz and Oscar, had treated them with real sisterly affection. And then everything had fallen apart.

And even if she’d regretted it for weeks and months afterwards, there was nothing Nora could do, because they’d all chased him away.

“They looked for you, you know,” she murmurs, pressing the back of her fingers against his cheek briefly, before stealing her scroll back. “We all did. But we also understood why you left.”

There’s a stunned silence beside her, frozen movements, and Ruby smiles to herself, sliding through images until she lands on one of team JNR.

“They searched for you the longest, even after we returned from Atlas. But it’s difficult to find a single boy in the world’s crowd, especially when he doesn’t want to be found.”

Ruby had slid her gaze away. She and counted a thousand white shirts in the crowd, before she’d stopped allowing herself to hope, before she’d found the strength to think only on her duty, on her education. You can only be disappointed at catching nothing between your fingers, before you lose the strength to reach out at all, before your heart begins to wither in your chest.

When she holds back the scroll for him to take, Oscar blinks at her instead, blue seeping into his gaze once more, melancholy longing and violent misunderstandings, fear creeping into his expression. “...why?”

“Because we were wrong,” she says. And she wants to keep her smile on her face for him, wants to show him that they are all on his side, on Oz’ side. And they are. She is. “Well, mostly.”

The others may have forgiven everything that happened, may even have decided they did not have
the right to forgive in the first place.

But to Ruby lying was never the transgression that hurt.

“Nora and the others have been helping rebuild Beacon the last year,” she says. “Clearing out Grimm, and even Uncle Qrow has begun working with Professor Goodwitch to collect information on Salem and keeping an eye on the Maidens, so the last two don’t turn from our side.”

She wants to tell him that humanity was always worth having faith in, that they just need a little time sometimes. That they’re bullheaded and stubborn and too used to peace to like change. To like truth.

But her bitter feelings of betrayal directed at Oz should not be projected onto Oscar. Especially not when he holds the scroll with fingers trembling from loneliness, from the burden of carrying the world alone for too long.

Before she can find the right words, Oscar slides to another image, one of her eighteenth birthday, the year after he’d left. They’re sitting at a table, and she’s caged in a hug by Yang and everybody else, smiling hugely at the camera. Qrow and Maria are clicking their glasses together in the background.

There’s so much light in that picture.

“You really love all of them, don’t you?”

“Yes.” She says, and places her hand briefly on top of his. “They are my source of strength, my light. And I won’t let the darkness swallow them.” She looks at him, meets him across the distance. “Or you. Both of you.”

A breath escapes him, silently ghosting past his lips, and his eyes dance like stars, constellations in an ocean of light. “I thought you were angry at him.”

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, he’d still been able to pick up on her bitterness.

“I am,” Ruby says, stretching before getting to her feet. “But not for something as insignificant as keeping secrets.”

Around them the shadows between the trees feel a little deeper, a little thicker, the fire a little too alive. But Ruby looks back down at the golden smile of her sister and feels the comfort of her presence.

Emerald had suggested Cinder was on a different task, and Ruby believes her if only because they haven’t run into the Fall Maiden yet. And the fact that Emerald herself hasn’t shown up either, proves that changing companion and turning off her scroll has been enough to hide their immediate direction.

Now she just hopes that her words had gotten through to him, that he will no longer feel entirely as alone, when there are so many people working towards the same goal, even if it’s shrouded behind a veil, details lost in the fog.

Ruby dreams of a dark street, of flickering lamp lights and the thundering of feet. She dreams of fear beating in her heart, coming out in short breaths.

Doors shutting. People hiding behind closed curtains.
And a single man stumbles to his feet, student uniform torn, staff clattering to the ground. Blood trickling between his fingers.

“No— little Rose,” he says, reaching a hand towards a tiny girl standing in the middle of the street.

His white hair parts to show golden eyes wide with fear and inexperience. A young face, student on wobbly feet.

But the little girl stands on steady ground, as a giant Ursa rises before her, towering over her, an enormous monster. “It’s okay,” she says, and her voice is as bright as a summer smile. “I won’t let it hurt you.”

Before the man can laugh at the irony in the situation, the Ursa opens its wide jaws and roars, roars with rage and hatred, terrible breath blowing her hood down to reveal short dark hair, the little cape fluttering in the wind. White rose petals scatter behind her, flying past the boy.

She lifts her arms wide. “I won’t let you take Oz!”

Enraged, the Ursa lifts its paw, ready to strike. And as it does, Ozpin attempts with shaking fingers to reach her one last time, protect just one more person.

His bloodied fingers graze her back, and as they do white light glows from her Silver Eyes and from her back, spreading out like wings of light.

A blast of air and light erupts from Summer Rose, turning the creature of destruction to nothing more than stardust.

Hope is a spark, a candle light, an unsoiled angel.

It’s the howls that break her from the dream.

The sun has barely risen over the treetops, but its light is blocked out by the large Grimm towering over them.

All the colour of spring seems to be sucked into the darkness that is its body, and the beowolf lowers its skeletal head to stare down at them with glowing red eyes, the blood and hatred of the ages directed at them. A creature that wishes for only one thing; destruction.

It swings its paw down, claws out, and Ruby only barely has time to scramble up and drag Oscar with her.

“Sorry about this,” she says, too loudly, still groggy, and drags him into a spinning vortex of red and green petals.

Waking like that cannot be pleasant and his panic and confusion is enough to make her knock over several other Grimm, stumbling into the ground on the opposite side of the clearing.

“What happened?!”

“We fell asleep,” Ruby says, crawling to her feet and grabbing for Crescent Rose, only to remember that it’d been right beside her by the log. “And I left our weapons over there.”

The clearing is crawling with confused Grimm, too slow to recognise what she’d done, but just fast enough and dangerous enough to be catching on to their new position.
“Do you need them?”

“I— what?” She stares at him, bewildered for a moment. “Well, it certainly makes it easier to kill things!”

He returns her stare, unimpressed, for a moment, and then a shadow passes over them both.

The Ursa’s paw slices air, as they jump in opposite directions.

“I hope you’re still just half asleep, Ruby!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Oscar groans. “Oz, some help would be nice right about now.”

He holds up his hand and the jade staff hurtles across the clearing, straight into Oscar’s hand so he can slam it into the head of an Ursa, sending it flying straight over Ruby’s head and clearing a path by knocking several other Grimm out of the way.

“Now!”

“On it!”

She zips back over the fireplace, re-materialising briefly to kick a beowolf out of the way, and grabs Crescent Rose, as well as their bags.

Ruby swings her scythe, beheading two Grimm in her haste, and then directs the barrel of her rifle into the ground, shooting up into the air and leaving a trail of bloodied rose petals not her wake.

More Grimm go down, but from this height she can see exactly how many have joined them in their camp, the ones still advancing into the field, and the two Nevermores gliding lazily in their direction.

Down again, then.

She shoots towards the ground with too much speed, wind in her hair and cape, and swings her scythe at the circle of beowolves awaiting her return.

Only Oscar had gotten into that part of the fray as well, and only just ducks in time to keep his neck.

“Hey!”

“Sorry!” Ruby says, holding a hand up in an apologetic gesture, before ducking a swipe from an Ursa. “There are two Nevermores on their way here.”

“Then we need to go. This place is becoming a hotbed of Grimm activity.”

As he says this, he places his hand on her shoulder and uses her as support to jump clean over the Ursa that had attacked her. Not expecting the extra weight, Ruby stumbles, arms flailing, and nearly crashes into the Grimm.

Seriously?

She wonders if this is what Weiss was complaining about in their first year.
With a swift strike she’s cut the Ursa in two, and followed him.

“Warn me next time, okay? And where are you going?”

“We can’t leave the Relic of Destruction behind.”

“I’ll get it, seek cover in the woods.”

“No— *Ruby*!”

Ruby reactivates her Semblance, and dematerializes into a cyclone of rose petals. She’s almost there, fingers nearly brushing the Relic, Black energy pulsing from a hilt so close she just catches the engraved rose thorns on the metal, before a hand grabs her arm and roughly pulls her aside, so they both tumble onto the grass in a heap.

“What’s wrong with you this morning?!”

Ruby slams her fist into his chest, temper snapping.

“That Relic is dangerous! Why do you think I’ve been wearing gloves? And what about you?!”

“Me?!” Ruby demands, grabbing him by the front of his white shirt and rolling him over onto the ground, just avoiding an attack from a Grimm that cracks the ground beside them instead.

Oscar’s eyes flash with green fire. “Yes, you! Why aren’t you using your powers?!” He demands, repeating her earlier action and avoiding another attack.

“Do you think I want to leave an entire forest of statues behind for Emerald to track?!” She rolls him over one last time and gives him a shake for good measure. “You’re not the only one with a brain, Oscar!”

He opens his mouth to retaliate, but the fire dies in his eyes, and he looks like he’s ready to laugh. Emotions changing so quickly she feels like she might get whiplash. “Right. Sorry. We should—“

But the rest of his words are drowned out by the massive rush of air that is the warning of the arriving Nevermores. The wind pulls on their clothing and through their hair, eyes watering.

Ruby groans, and crawls into a sitting position. “Just get the Relic.”

She looks up at all the new Grimm that have joined them, at the birds of terror towering over them, the Ursa right by her side. And she doesn’t feel afraid.

She isn’t even angry.

She closes her eyes and imagines Oscar still at her back. And then she opens her eyes again.

*You’re not touching him.*

The world vanishes for a moment in bright white light, the screeches of dying Grimm the only sign that she’d actually done her job properly, though the way it drains her aura tells a different story.

Ruby closes her eyes to pleasant darkness, world swimming, balance ruined for a moment. And she’s grateful for the gloved hand touching her shoulder.

“You okay?”
She opens her eyes and smiles up at him. “Just exhausted.”

Oscar’s hair is a mess of a bird’s nest after the fight, but his face glows with life, pretty and warm under an early morning sun, even though his eyes bend with concern.

He tilts his head, soft and round, cute. “I didn’t think it was supposed to drain your own reserves once you knew the trick to it,” he observes, and then adds. “Did you turn it off alright? Your eyes still look like they’re glowing a little bit.”

“Oh,” Ruby flushes and looks down, rubs her eyes. “I guess I just wasn’t in a mood to properly reflect the light of the world. How’s this?”

Oscar leans in a little closer, eyebrows knitting in concentration. And then he smiles, bright and beautiful, relief obvious. “Yes. And sorry about that. I guess I’m not very practiced in working with others.”

They help each other into a standing position, and when Ruby is secure on her feet again, she slams his backpack into his chest. “We’re going to have to work on that.”

Oscar laughs and scratches the back of his head. “I guess we are.”

Behind them the clearing is full of statues of Grimm, large monsters in white marble, a clear sign of the presence of a silver eyed warrior. Ruby swallows thickly at the sight.

“You... can’t do anything about those, by any chance?”

Oscar shakes his head. “The small ones, maybe. But the big ones? It would take too much magic...”

She glances up at him. “Really?”

“Yeah. That’s why we mostly use illusions. They don’t require too much.” He pauses for a moment, fingers hesitating over the hilt of his sword. “Oz, would this reawaken them?”

There’s a moment’s pause as he listens for a reply, and then sighs. “Alright. Ruby? Stand back a little. If there’s anybody this shouldn’t touch, it’s you.”

She nods and does as instructed, not entirely sure what to expect. Destruction has too many meanings in their world. The slow decay and disintegration that happens over time is just one of them. And the awakening of the Grimm another.

Whatever the gift of destruction meant to the gods, the Relic of Destruction will reflect that.

Oscar unsheathes the Sword carefully, Black blade reflecting nothing along its edge, and lifts it above his head. When he swings it down in a wide arc, a wave of darkness is released in its wake, rot and decay following close behind. And every stony Grimm that it hits, no matter the size, crumbles into dust that scatters to the wind.

The wave of destruction fades slowly, hitting the trees at the other end of the clearing so that even they begin to show signs of rotting and decay, spring leaves yellowing, some letting go entirely of their branches or disintegrating into dust.

This time it’s Oscar’s turn to crumble to his knees. His arm trembles as he holds the sword above the ground with difficulty, and he struggles to get the Relic back in its sheath.
“Here,” Ruby says, when he’s managed.

“Ah. No, Ruby—“

“It’s okay,” she insists, prying one of his gloves off his hand and using it as she reattached the sheath to his belt. “I got it. It’s dangerous.”

She shakes her head and wonders not for the first time what the gods were thinking, gifting humanity with objects so dangerous. Well, she supposes. It’s nothing compared to the magic of the first humans. But still...

She remembers the stories of the last king of Vale, the discussions in old history books of how the landscape had bent around the battles in Vacuo and storms had erupted out of nowhere around the king. Weather phenomena that could not be explained.

“Come on,” she says, helping him to his feet with difficulty, her muscles still complaining as well. “We’ll have to support each other, but we need to get away from here.”

“Yeah...” Oscar agrees, glancing back at the wreckage they’re leaving behind, even as she swings her arm around his ribcage. “It might have been better to leave the Grimm. This might bring more trouble than we asked for...”

“Don’t jinx it,” Ruby warns.

Oscar blinks, snapping out of his revery, and then glances down at her. “Wait a second, you looked like you were doing just fine standing on your own,” he protests, but his voice is soft and his hand is curling around her waist.

“Standing and walking are two different things.”

She gets a laugh for that.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading this second chapter!! I hope you enjoyed it!!

So, as I said, this is definitely one of those more self-indulgent chapters. After Ruby and Maria's talk it really became apparent how much the Silver Eyed Warriors are referencing angels, esp in their imagery and their relations to the God of Light (I've talked about this on tumblr as well, as some of you have most likely noticed; and istg at the Fall of Beacon Ruby sprouts giant white butterfly wings). Anyway... A couple days (or weeks?) after ep 8 came out I saw somebody suggesting that Ozpin's full name was Zoroaster.... I know it's a reference to the Wizard of Oz, but it bugged me for a while until I realized why: the first pre-christian mention of Angels is from Zoroastrianism. Wikipedia mentions that the most common rank of angels in that religion are guardian angels, with one angel for each person and well... what if there's a silver-eyed warrior for each Oz incarnation? Which is where all the self-indulgence comes in because I got this image in my head that maybe Summer Rose was that for Oz(pin) and Ruby is that for Oscar.... and just Oz in general, since they seem to be his spark of hope. and ANYWAY that's where the memory-dream came from with child-Summer (cause I didn't have time to draw it).
The rest, I hope, speaks for itself...
Thank you again for reading!! I hope, if you enjoyed it, you'll leave a comment and share your thoughts :D
Chapter 3

"If you think about it, fighting and dancing aren't so different. Two partners, interlocked. Although, one wrong move on the ballroom merely leads to a swollen foot."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

At the foot of the Sanus mountain pass they finally hit a village.

Large and thriving under the spring sun, its citizens are in the middle of sowing the day they reach it, curious onlookers lifting their heads from the fields to wave at them as they pass.

They’re met by the mayor at the entrance and saddled with several jobs before they’ve even found the inn, but the old man looks so grateful to see a huntsman and a huntress that Ruby and Oscar can only smile and agree to his requests.

“It’ll take us a few days to finish these jobs,” Oscar observes later, fingers tracing the lines of a map.

“Yes, but the pay should be enough to buy us passage on a train to the nearest airfield, which should cut our journey short. Nearly two months.”

He looks up at her, eyes dancing with gold in the soft light of the sunset. “No more walking.”

Ruby grins. “No more walking. Now come on,” she says, grabbing his hand and dragging him away from the desk to sit on the floor across from her. “We need to talk team work. I want to know everything I haven’t yet observed in your fighting style. Don’t hold anything back.”

Oscar hesitates for only a moment before beginning to speak, and Ruby does her best to concentrate on his words, rather than the ghost of his hand still in hers.

It’s becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the way her heart flutters in her chest, the way sunlight makes his smile glow.

“Okay, riddle me this,” she says a while later, after they’re done planning the basics of a practice session for the following morning, after they’ve devoured the food so delicious it could only have been prepared by somebody else, in the common room of a warm inn.

They’ve drawn the curtains on the dark night outside and are sitting on one of the two beds the inn had provided, Ruby with a blanket and book in her lap, Oscar with his nose in a collection of poems, mouth silently shaping the words.

He looks up at her voice.

“What's with the sword?”

His mouth shapes a tiny o, and he puts the book down at his side. “What do you want to know?”
“Why are you carrying it around? That doesn’t seem to be Oz’ general strategy.”

Oscar shakes his head. “This is a special case. The Relic of Destruction is the only one out of the four that doesn’t have a physical shape,” he explains. “It’s made of pure chaos, so for a human to be able to use it it has to be attached to something that human holds dear. I didn’t... I didn’t listen to Oz when we went to check the vault, and it accidentally got stuck to our cane.”

He looks across the room at their three weapons standing together by the door, blue seeping back into his gaze.

And Ruby remembers the inventor, whose family had been full of golden love and open hearted support. A happy time of retreat that Oz did not seem to have enjoyed again. The time when he had built the cane.

“They’re precious to you, too, aren’t they?”

She glides her hand into his and watches him start, watches the flush that crawls into his cheeks. Oscar looks back at her warily, but when she smiles at him, his lips bend with wobbly relief “Yes,” he admits, voice cracking on emotion he hadn’t meant to share, “but I’m not sure why.”

“Family doesn’t need a rational explanation.”

His laugh is hollow, vulnerable, and he scratches the back of his head with his free hand in that tell-tale show of awkwardness. But his fingers still curl carefully around hers. “I can’t argue with that.”

Another smile returns to the corner of his lips, and Oscar closes his eyes for a moment, seeming to enjoy the silence, reliving happy memories that are old and new to him all at the same time.

And Ruby wonders what it must be like to love a man who carries innumerable souls and lifetimes in his heart, who has known another world, who cradles magic in the palm of his hand, but gives it away at the first sign of true kindness. She wonders what it takes to accept the other, when all you really want is the one.

And she wonders at the strength of mind that such a woman must have had, what kind of courageous heart can love a man who is not always the one she knows or understands.

She wonders if it makes it easier to forgive.

For a moment when Oscar opens his eyes again she sees herself reflected in his gaze. “You know, you’re made of light, Ruby.”

For a moment she wishes her heart was as courageous as the women that have chosen to love men like Oscar Pine.

“I—” she tilts her head and does her best to hide the pain in her soul. “You mean the silver eyed warriors are made of light? Maria did theorise that the god of creation shared his powers with us, somehow.”

He studies her for a moment, and then he nods.

And it’s a relief.

“The sword of destruction targets anything that creation has made and puts an end to its existence,” he explains. “That’s why it’s so dangerous to creatures of light. Like you. Like Oz. It was safer to
keep the sword at my side, so that it couldn’t be used against any of us.”

Ruby tightens her hold on his hand. “Are you going to carry it around for the remainder of this lifetime?”

For the first time he smiles a full smile. “Of course not.”

And Ruby nods. “Good.”

“And Ruby nods. “Good.”

“For now the Relic isn’t Salem’s priority anymore, so putting it back in the vault would be safe. But I am planning on making this lifetime Oz’s last.”

And his face glows with it, with determination and confidence that comes from knowing he’s on the right path. With the joy of being finally able to say it out loud, to share it with another human being that will understand the significance of every word. It’s a core of light within him that Ruby realises she’d never truly seen in him until recently; not in Ozpin, not in Oz, and not in Oscar. Not until now.

And if he finally has a goal, has an answer to the riddle the gods have posed them, then she wants to see it through with them. Both of them.

“Remind me again how sparring is going to help us work better as a team.”

Though the sun has risen above the horizon, the morning chill still crawls across Ruby’s skin beneath the loose fitting pants she’s dug into her combat boots, and the white t-shirt she usually wears beneath her cape and corset. Slow clouds move across a blue sky, a single bird drifting far above them on a stronger current of wind, giving the illusion of lazy summer days spent in peace.

The inn keeper had graciously allowed them the use of her yard, provided they keep the uses of their semblances to a minimum and the destruction at zero.

Ruby grins at her partner as she gets up from her stretches. “Didn’t you notice back in Mistral? That it was a really good way of getting to know each other?”

Oscar eyes her dubiously. “I feel like we know each other fairly well by now... and as far as I remember, back in Mistral you were busy beating me to a pulp.”

Ruby’s laugh is short lived, and she steps up beside him to place a hand on his shoulder. “Yes, but talking and knowing the ins and outs of another’s movements are two different things,” she says. “Comfort zones and reflexes are different in a battle than in the comfort of a home. This is the quickest solution to that, without putting ourselves in a trial by fire to achieve it.”

She’s being cautious, she knows. But she’s not Yang, or Oz, or Maria. And she likes to know she won’t lose her friends and loved ones to the trials of teaching in a cruel world. And she wants to have fun with them too, while they’re there in the world.

If there’s one thing she’s picked up from Oz and refused to let go of it’s just that; to enjoy the time you have with friends, to know that the reason we fight is to see the light of another’s smile, to feel the glow of their laugh in your heart again. Unrestrained and safe.

She just hopes Oscar will share that philosophy with time and exposure to kindness, and not walk a lonely path of duty to old souls. Not alone.

“Alright,” he says, grabbing her hand and giving it a squeeze before letting go so it falls limply at
her side, fingers curling around the ghost of a touch that still lingers.

They are not the same that they once were, standing outside in the morning sun, no longer awkward children confined to a house while the adults make the decisions. No longer unrehearsed in the simplest forms of combat.

New habits have taken shape in the other’s absence, and old ones remain. Relearning those start with stumbling steps and slow movements, quiet observations, and the basics. Block, kick, sidestep. Attack and defence. Habitual actions with little heart, and no ferociousness, even as they speed up, push each other until the world becomes a whirl of motion and colour.

*It’s boring.*

Like being back in the classroom. Like caring about grades, rather than skill.

And enough is enough.

As Oscar crouches to knock her feet out from under her, Ruby does a backflip, easily getting out of range. Just before she lands she winks at his dubious expression and activates her semblance, scattering into rose petals.

“Wha— I thought we said no Semblance!”

“You made that promise,” she counters, re-materialising behind him and grinning as he whirls. “I don’t remember making any such promises.”

Oscar opens his mouth and closes it again as she scatters once more. “Yes, I realise it’s good practice!”

Ruby reappears at his left, laughing. “Must be annoying to have the voice of reason disagree with you,” she teases, and dances away when he directs a high kick at her head.

She sticks out her tongue at him.

“You’re really not taking this seriously, are you?”

“I am,” she says, re-appearing right in front of him.

Oscar startles and skids to a halt, and this close she can see the flecks of green and gold, separated. And she can see the blush that blossoms on his cheeks.

The sight makes her hesitate in the second it takes for her heart to skip. And then she grins, aiming a fist at that well-meaning face.

Only to have Oscar catch it.

“Thought I was going to just allow a repeat of the past?” He asks, a grin finally catching in the corner of his mouth.

And he’s so beautiful, the morning sun behind him making him glow in a world full of colour and life, warmth and confidence magnetising, enchanting. It’s nearly impossible to wrench herself away, to focus on what they are doing, to cheat herself of that sight after more than a second of heartfelt observation.

“Nope.”
She changes her footing, twists on her heel, and hurls him across her back and into a nearby bush.

Her heart is an overwhelming beat in her chest.

“Oi!” Somebody yells from behind her, and Ruby spins to see the inn keeper sitting in the door to the common area, watching them with a small group of early birds, coffee in hand. “I said no destroying property!”

“Sorry!”

“And I hope those rose petals clean themselves up as well!”

“Not a problem!”

The old woman waves her off, and Ruby, reminded of Maria, finds another smile. She scatters again and reappears beside Oscar, who’d rolled out of the bush, greeting him by poking his nose.

“Boop.”

Oscar narrows his eyes at her. “You know, that semblance is beginning to get on my nerves. How are you keeping it going that long?”

“Practice.”

Ruby rests her chin in her palms and tilts her head to the side. “Do you wonder why you haven’t found yours yet?”

Oscar shrugs. “I don’t need it, not when I have Oz.”

He rolls to his feet, hiding his face behind his back, leaving Ruby behind to watch him, frowning. “That doesn’t make you any less your own person, and a warrior needs his semblance.”

“Pretty sure a great deal of people would disagree with you on that first point.”

Ruby opens her mouth to ask if he thinks so too, but before she can Oscar turns to face her, smile back in place and hand waving her up.

“Come on,” he says. “Rematch.”

And he humours her again, her mood, her challenge; his movements becoming more whimsical, less predictable, forcing her, in turn, to put his unsettling words to the back of her mind, to concentrate, to give him her every last shred of her attention. Her semblance, she forgets to use, though rose petals fall in her wake as they are prone to do in moments of distractions, movements sped up in order to counter millennia of experience and muscle memory.

Oscar throws a high punch, but Ruby is just quick enough to counter it, ducking slightly and redirecting the blow over her head. When she sends him flying this time he’s ready for the attack and, agile as a cat, he lands briefly on his hands, using the ground as set-off, somersaulting in the air, and landing on his feet.

Ruby follows him across the courtyard, quick as rose petals on the wind, but this time, as she circles past him, something grabs her ankle through her semblance, an impossible feat, and this time it’s Ruby that lands in that same bush.

Ow.
Somewhere far away she can hear the inn keeper complaining, and Oscar responding that since she’d already ruined the bush earlier it couldn’t have done much harm with a second assault on its branches.

“Har-dee-har-har, young man.”

Ruby checks her ankle suspiciously. That hadn’t felt like a hand grabbing her, but something else... and even if he grabbed her how had she felt it through her boot? How had he made her re-materialise in the first place?

“Boop.”

Instead of touching her nose, Oscar slides his fingers under her chin and gently bids her look up. The touch is intimate and unfamiliar, a caress along her throat, and a breath whistles past her lips unbidden.

She’ll drown in a sea of jade.

“I win.”

It’s difficult to find her voice, heart in her throat. “Best two out of three?”

His smile, the fire in his eyes, is a thrill in her blood, is a sweet distraction.

Ruby doesn’t entirely forget whatever he’d done to her Semblance, however, and she relies instead on her combat skills, only using her semblance to enhance her speed where she needs it, or her aura to strengthen her blows in retaliation against Oscar’s own tricks.

Already they’re beginning to be better able to read each other, habits and favourite attacks burning into bones like old memories, system within a chaos of attacks and blocks, style and experience.

And it ends, perhaps a little inelegantly, as Ruby blocks another of his punches. Catching it strains her muscles, but she uses the momentum of the blow, and the help of her semblance to place her other palm on his wrist, cartwheeling up into the air.

Ruby had meant to grab his hand and haul him back into the bush one final time, but as she hangs up-side-down for a single moment, hands on Oscar’s arm for support, she sees the way he gapes up at her, concentration broken by golden admiration; she sees herself reflected in his eyes, bright and green, framed by an endless sky.

And for a single moment, seeing herself reflected, she feels like she has wings.

Then gravity comes crashing into her, momentum gone, and they both crumble to the ground in a mess of limbs, just barely managing to protect each other from hitting their heads on the cobble.

A white bird squawks in indignation at the racket and takes flight above their heads.

Ruby rolls over onto her back on the cobble, and follows it with her gaze, trying to catch her breath.

“Well,” she says, suddenly aware of how sweaty she’s become. “That didn’t go as planned.”

“You could say that again.”

They glance at each other, eyes dancing across the distance, and then they both break into loud laughter, cheer and joy powerful forces, impossible to stop.
She’s missed this. Without Yang, or Nora, or any of the others, there hasn’t been much excuse for laughter. There’s been no reasons to feel like a child.

But Oscar, under all the pressure, behind the righteousness, and the singleminded path he walks, is a golden-hearted boy who enjoys mischief and competition as much as Ruby.

He’s just difficult to see sometimes.

“Call it a draw?” He offers as they sit up.

“No way,” Ruby proclaims childishly. “I want revenge later.”

“Later.”

They share another giddy smile, and a quiet laugh, eyes closing with joy.

“Alright, alright,” the inn keeper says, placing a warm mug on top of Ruby’s head and stopping their laughter. “Thank you for the show, you two. At least we know now that our town will be free of those pesky Grimm soon. If only for the stink of sweat.”

Which just has them laughing louder.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! I hope you had as much fun with this chapter as I had writing it!

I really wanted them to have some playful moments, primarily because I think we don't get to see them interacting in that way ... well, at all, in canon and I'm missing it since they have the potential to be a playful pair. And also because I don't really enjoy writing for a ship if they're not having fun together, no matter how emotional or serious the story gets!

Can you believe today is the last episode, though? It's going to be a lonely 9 months without this series, and since it's not a japanese anime we can't just move on to the manga...

ANYWAY!! Thank you for reading this chapter as well!! And see you in four days!

PS: I STILL WANT TO KNOW WHO STEPPED ON OZ' FEET
Four days of hard work and practice during their days off, sees the area cleared of Grimm, and Ruby and Oscar working much more in sync than either of them had assumed at the beginning of their travels.

The train that will take them across Sanus to the air fields south of Vale is a slow bumbling ride; so slow and unpopulated, in fact, that Grimm ignore it as a prop of the landscape. At least, they’re told, that’s what normally happens. It’s not entirely the same when the Relic of Destruction is abroad. And Ruby and Oscar has several more chances to practice their teamwork, and nearly break their necks on the trip.

It’s enough to make Oscar wince as they step onto the platform for the air ship to Vacuo.

“Yes, I heard you the first time,” he murmurs under his breath.

Ruby tilts her head. “He’s that worried?”

Oscar shoulders his bag, a subtle shrug. “Yes. But we won’t make it in time if we walk. And we’ve been lucky enough to not attract any more attention than we have while on our way across Sanus.”

She nods and looks around at the crowds. Travellers and drifters. Families, mothers with little children, older kids arguing with their younger siblings, elderly couples. Business folk, and a few huntsmen. Grimm on land, in rural areas are a meagre threat, but Grimm in the air, with civilians at risk? Much worse. And Salem’s henchmen among those civilians?

“We can only hope nobody follows us on board.”

Oscar murmurs the words ‘bigger fish’, his apologetic smile brief. “Our luck is going to run out eventually.”

*It always does*, lingers in the space between them.

“Hey,” Ruby says, and nudes him with her elbow. “You’re supposed to be positive. We both are.”

She gets another apologetic expression, more grimace than smile as the pilot announces they’re ready for the passengers. And Ruby follows him onto the ship with a sigh.

“I guess I’ll have to be positive for the both of us, then.”

As luck would have it, they go almost the entire three day trip without any trouble or sightings of Grimm. Those they do see are handled by the pro huntsmen and huntresses on the airline’s payroll, and for once in the longest time they can both kick back a little and relax, leaving their work in other people’s hands.

Ruby finally manages to drag him into one of her video games, and they spend an entire night lying across from each other, stomach down, on the top bunk bed in their cabin, faces in their scrolls as they try to out-do the other in anything from combat games to racing games.

They also manage to procure new books, having been through every one in their combined
And though Ruby is quick to discard the three she’d been carrying since Mistral, replacing them
with three new novels of varying potential, Oscar hesitates in the vintage book shop with his poetry
book in his hand.

“I think I’ll keep this one, after all,” he murmurs.

“Are you sure?” Ruby glances over his shoulder at the title. “The Last Rose of Summer?”

Oh.

She catches a glimpse of the jade staff on his back and the engraved rose thorns on the dark metal.
They are allies bound together by the powers of the God of Creation, but how deep does that
attachment run?

It’s a question she’ll probably never find an answer to.

“Did Ozma have a last name, do you know?” She wonders aloud the next morning.

“I don’t think so,” Oscar’s voice floats down from the bunk above hers, before his head appears
over the edge, upside down, hair flying and eyes wide with childlike curiosity. “I could ask.”

“That’s okay,” she says, and looks down at the gloves in her hands. She’s had to adorn her
mother’s family emblem to her gloves because there was no other place it would safely fit. A silver
rose. “It was a random thought, anyway.”

Oscar swings over the edge with easy grace and joins her on her bunk bed, cape discarded and feet
bare. “It must have come from somewhere,” he says, mellow and encouraging, still ruffled by
sleep. Soft.

His bangs slip too easily into his eyes.

“Well...” she hesitates, looks away. The anger still simmers in her heart. It’s difficult to forgive
when you never have the chance to communicate, when you avoid the confrontation like the
plague. “It’s not as if I’m not aware that he was guiding me at Beacon. Maria’s philosophies on
what it means to be a silver-eyed warrior made that very obvious in retrospect.”

When he tilts his head curiously, Ruby smiles. “Do you ever look back at your younger self and
want to hide your face in embarrassment?”

“All the time. Regret isn’t something we—I am unfamiliar with.”

Mistakes. If there’s one thing all of Oz’ incarnations seem to excel at its making mistakes and
regretting them for lifetimes. And even Oscar has been quick to take responsibility for what his
predecessors have done.

“That doesn’t make you any less your own person.”

“Pretty sure a great deal of people would disagree with you on that.”

He’s wrong. He has to be.

“Well,” Ruby tugs a strand of hair behind her ear, self-consciously. “For me, it’s that I thought I
didn’t need others when I first arrived at Beacon. I just wanted to pick a fight and destroy Grimm.
But I was focusing on the wrong side of the balance for a Silver-Eyed Warrior.”
“Destruction rather than creation.”

“Yeah! Well,” she finds a smile, somehow, “Maria calls it preservation, what we do. We have to
preserve life.”

She still enjoys the thrill of a good adventure, of a mystery. And she wouldn’t change her lifestyle
for anything. But she’s seen too much death by now, has lost too many people, been separated for
the sake of protection, to not value the lives at her side, even the ones of strangers she will never
know.

“My mother, whom I inherited my powers from, worked for Oz. She died in the line of duty,” she
says, carefully meeting his gaze. “Her name was—

“Summer Rose,” they say in one voice.

Oscar smiles and closes his eyes. “Man, that’s always an odd experience, triggering memories.”

“Sorry,” Ruby laughs humorlessly. “I had a feeling those memories might not be too deep in your
subconscious.”

Oscar tilts his head, curious. Cute. “Why?”

And Ruby thinks of a tiny child with wings made of light. She thinks of dreams, of waking in the
shared warmth of a body achingly close. She smiles. “Well, for one, Oz seemed to have attempted
to take over her role in the absence of any other teacher. But that’s the thing... is it possible that
he’s worked together with Silver-eyed warriors before? Since he knew how to teach one. That
maybe...”

She trails off, looking aside, embarrassed. It’s a ridiculous hope, shaped by selfish attachments.

Maybe you and I are supposed to work together.

Why else would the God of Creation grant her people this power, other than to give humanity a
fighting chance against Salem’s hatred? Why else, if not to create a spark of hope in the face of
overwhelming calamity?

But accepting such a fate is easier said than done, especially sitting face to face with the guardian
of humanity’s gifts, their last true chance, someone who hadn’t had a clear plan in centuries.

And more than anything else, she doesn’t want her attachment to Oscar Pine to be caused by her
connection to Ozma’s duty.

She clenches her hand around the red hood in her hand. Her mother’s blood.

“This has gotten a lot shorter over the years, hasn’t it?” Oscar murmurs, gently prying her fist open
once more and stealing the hood from her hand to hold it up.

It’s an obvious distraction from her anger, but Ruby still appreciates it. “Yes, too many fights
flayed so much of the cloth that I had to cut it.”

It’s just barely as long as her uncle Qrow’s now. She had to redesign the top portion so it buttons
like a collar around her neck with silver clasps. The hood had been entirely separated so it hangs
with a silver chain along her collarbones.

“But I feel more at ease wearing it, so for as long as I can still use it in some shape or form, I’ll
never let it go.”

Oscar’s expression softens at her words, and his smile is as warm as the morning sun, glowing with gold. And the beauty of it makes a breath escape her lips, silent and unnoticed as the beating of her heart.

He carefully places the hood back in her hand, fingers tracing the silver chain as it falls slowly from his hand, creating a rose pattern in her open palm. “Ruby…”

His smile falls away, and blue steals the warmth in his eyes. “You told me what everyone else has been up to. Why did you do that?”

She tilts her head in confusion. She thought he had been able to figure that out. But before she can ask he looks back at her, watching, waiting, as if he’s attempting to get to a different point. “I wanted to show you that we are all, in our own way, doing our best to fight Salem. We couldn’t think of a direct plan of action, so we thought that doing what we could to unify humanity would be our best bet.”

Perhaps the gods would save them once they saw that humanity truly had been unified once more. It’s a feeble hope, the fruits of which they likely won’t bear witness to in this lifetime. And she can’t bring herself to say that aloud.

She looks up through her fringe and says instead “I wanted to show you that humanity is still worth having hope in.”

“Me or Oz?”

Ruby starts at having been seen through, and Oscar raises an eyebrow.

“Don’t be smug,” she complains, looking aside, cheeks flushing. “Besides. You don’t seem to have much faith in humanity, either.”

“It’s not humanity I don’t have faith in,” he says, and when she looks back at him he’s smiling wistfully into space. “Family affection, friendship. Look at a parent and you’ll see they would sacrifice anything for their child. Friendships, too, are powerful things. That’s why we built the schools the way we did. Sisterhood,” he glances back at her with a smile, “is clearly not to be trifled with, either. You and Yang have reaffirmed our experiences with that concept. But…”

He sighs and hesitates, agitation creeping into his gaze.

“Loyalties to concerts or ideals are never that strong in the face of misfortune, death, or the curse of bad luck. Salem has always been good at tearing down those relationships, and we have never been that good at judging people.”

And all at once he looks ancient again, tired and frightened. Alone. So achingly alone that the distance once again grows between them, a breath, an arm’s length, and then, suddenly, a wasteland.

Ruby wonders if she’ll ever find the strength, the hope, to even attempt to breach that distance, to ever lift her hand again.

We just need time to get used to the idea.

She had been hopeful and optimistic. She had seen the progress her friends had made in coming to terms with the truth, the burden of the battle. But in the time they had taken to get used to the idea
they had hurt Oscar, they had hurt Oz. Perhaps beyond repair.

And now she too feels the regret of the ages. Heavy, the weight of a world, on her shoulders.

*I’m sorry.*

Oscar exhales a long heavy sigh, and his shoulders relax, humourless smile twisting his lips as he looks back at her, green eyes vibrant with hope. “But that’s the thing... it’s always been easy to read you,” he says. “From the start. Even before I knew you, I knew what kind of person you were. And you’ve never given up, so...”

He swallows thickly and closes his eyes painfully, fear rippling across the surface. When he looks back at her his silence begs her not to prove him wrong. “Ruby, there was always a solution to the problem with Salem. The reason Jinn didn’t show us was because Oz was never trying to hide it.”

Ruby opens and closes her mouth. “But... then why didn’t he say anything? Why did he say he didn’t—“

“Because he looked at you and he saw the expression on your face. And I did the same, back in the house in Argus, and I could see the same thing... You weren’t ready to know.”

The pain of Oz’ emotions, broken attachments and scattered hopes, so obvious in Oscar’s eyes back then, as she’d done what she’d thought was right. As she’d been driven by anger and confusion and fear. It still haunts her. And the regret of that moment, of how powerless she still feels in confrontations like those; the regret she feels at not being able to guide her friends better, at being a better leader when Jaune had lost his cool in Argus.

No matter how infuriated she’s been with Oz in the mean time, afterwards.

She’ll never be able to let it go.

“Know what?”

“A Silver-Eyed Warrior can end Salem’s immortality and sever her control of the Lake of Destruction.”

And just like that she’s sitting in that garden full of butterflies again, their wings reflecting the light of the world. Maria’s words echo in her ears, patient old woman that she had always been.

*You know, you really don’t give yourself enough credit.*

She’d known. She’d always known. She’d seen the god of creation use his powers on the Grimm, she’d listened to the truth within the truth, and she’d put the puzzle together to create a full picture. And so had Oscar.

Only Ruby had been too blind, too concerned with the people around her to see, the nature of her blood getting in the way of realising her role in Ozma’s duty. And Salem has truly made it her role, now that she is the last one of her kind.

The world wobbles under her.

“Ruby?”

“One sec.”

She closes her eyes and tries to collect her emotions. Everything still trembles under her, and her
good slips from her fingers in a moment of distraught distraction.

This is why he’d come back. This is why he’d sought her out, why he’s making an effort. She is paramount to a victory she wants more than anything. The peace Oz had built, had already shown them is a shadow in comparison to what could be without Salem, and she wants that more than anything, wants to show her loved ones that vibrant world.

But there is a crushing disappointment in her chest, one too immediate and painful to let go of, knowing that Oscar had been returned to her, not for their friendship or his own attachment, but for the greater duty he shoulders.

The world trembles beneath her again.

“Uh, Ruby...?”

No flower of her kindred.

The words of the old poem shape on her lips, almost unbidden.

This is what her mother died for, too. The last rose of summer.

“Miss Rose.”

She starts out of her thoughts in surprise at the words, the different tone, the way the words break with foreign spirit in a mouth no longer controlled by Oscar Pine.

Oz tilts his head and frowns. “I realise I’m the last person you wish to communicate with at the moment, but I’m afraid we have more pressing concerns than what you and Oscar were discussing.”

Words rest unspoken in golden eyes, in-between the lines. Please don’t prove him wrong, when he has trusted you to this degree.

It’s all she needs to push ancient burdens aside. “What’s going on?”

Oz drops the hood she’d let go of back into her hands and picks up his boots from the floor instead. “It would seem the ship is under attack.”

“What?!?”

Out the window a plume of smoke is rising from somewhere below them, and the engine’s trembling insecurity makes the whole ship shake with it. Not her world, not her emotions, the ship.

Ruby wants to laugh.

“How stupid,” she murmurs, and jumps off the bed to grab her weapon. “Come on.”

Outside their cabin the panic of the other passengers is thick in the air, a reminder that other Grimm will soon be joining them. A mother with her two children nearly knocks Oz over as they exit, and Ruby grabs for his wrist on instinct.

Looks up.

Sees more gold than green, and quickly drops his hand again without a word.

“How are we going to get through?” She wonders aloud as an employee begins to give directions
for evacuation at the end of the hall.

There’s an easy solution, but she isn’t keen on broaching it...

“Your semblance seems to be the best option we have,” Oz says, and when Ruby looks back at him he meets her gaze, and she sees the hesitance.

“Do you have a plan?” When he blinks in confusion she bites back a sigh. “If you didn’t have a plan that depended on you taking control, you wouldn’t be in control right now, right? You’ve been keeping a low profile all this time, and Oscar is capable in a fight these days, so you don’t need to protect him anymore. So, do—“

An elderly man nearly knocks her over in his haste to get past her, and it’s only Oz’ hand on her elbow that saves her from an undignified stumble. “Get us to a less crowded area and I’ll explain.”

Ruby nods and holds out her hand. Oz slides a gloved palm over hers and grasps her wrist, and she doesn’t stop to marvel at the difference of feeling, the lack of happiness that sprouts when it is Oz and not Oscar. She doesn’t stop to consider the relief.

Rose petals scatter, red and green, above the heads of the panicking passengers, and it distracts them long enough for them to forget their fear. Down a hall, and then another towards the blue sky and the horizon stretching out far ahead of them, the world below them. And then back to the ship, to a platform between two staircases, empty and abandoned.

“Alright,” she gasps when they land, letting go of Oz in order to grasp the railing for support, the long distance and extra weight draining her aura too quickly. The wind rips ferociously at her hair and clothes, and it’s difficult to catch her breath here, as the oxygen is wrenched from her lungs faster than her body can make use of it. “Explain.”

“The ship is going to crash.”

It’s difficult to hear his matter of fact statement, and Ruby has turned to follow him before she’s fully comprehended his words. “How can you possibly know that?”

Oz is leaning precariously over the railing, wind howling in his ears, ripping at his white shirt and hair without garnering the least bit of attention. Above his head the horizon tilts slowly to a nauseating angle, the world cut in half in the wrong place.

“You only need look down,” he says, waving for her to join him without ever looking back at her.

Of course. Somehow it should be no surprise that this man has no fear of heights.

Ruby grips the railing so tightly her knuckles bleed with white, and looks down along the hull.

The clouds are splitting apart beneath the huge air ship, carved in half like the horizon, and the earth is slowly coming up to meet them. Golden desert lands, hills simmering with heat in the late morning sun. It swims before her eyes, suddenly, the reality of imminent death, and Ruby blinks, rubs her eyes with her free hand, before looking back down.

Her heart still feels like it’s going to come up her throat.

But finally she can see the large hole in the hull, a thousand Grimm ripping away at the metal, pulling it apart like termites splitting a tree to dust where no huntsman or huntress will be able to stop them.
“What can we do?”

“What we must,” comes the immediate response, and Oz pulls back from the railing to wave her on. “Do you have a marker?”

“Why?”

“I need you to draw Miss Schnee’s gravitational glyph for me,” he says. “We need to stop this ship, but no amount of magic is going to save those engines now.”

“And you can just do that?”

Ruby gets a look of impatient hurt for that, and she bites back the irritation that had risen unbidden. She shouldn’t be dragging things out like this, not when other people’s lives are at stake.

“Here,” she says, and finds a black marker.

With little care for the laws of property damage she steps up to the nearest wall and begins to draw the glyph as she remembers it.

“How are you going to power it? We don’t have enough dust to— and wait,” she looks back at him. “Oscar doesn’t even have a semblance yet so—“

“I don’t need dust, Miss Rose,” Oz says. He takes a quick look at the drawing of the glyph, nods, and holds up his hand.

The glyph lights up in shades of green and gold, and floats off the wall. It hovers in his palm for a single moment before scattering in golden dust. “Thank you,” he says, and waves her along up the staircase. “A Semblance is just that; the semblance of the first humans’ magical power. That means, if I can copy the technique, I can use it. And dust was never an issue, although...”

He glances back at her as they make it to the top of the stairs, locked door in their way.

Hesitant vulnerability trembles in the shadow of his lips, and Ruby tries not to feel guilty.

“Although?”

“Oscar isn’t going to be much help to you once we land. More likely than not he’s going to be pretty useless for a few days,” he warns. “He’s going to need your protection.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll be sleeping.... if you can call it that.”

Ruby nods. “Alright then,” she says, and produces Crescent Rose. “Now get out of my way.”

Oz takes a quick step back, hands up, and she directs the barrel of her rifle at the door. A clean shot and the door flies inwards, hitting the wall behind it with a clang, shocking several crew members on the other side.

“Where did you—“ the woman nearest them looks from Ruby and Oz, and then back to her colleagues. “What are you doing here?! You’re supposed to evacuate!”

And Ruby hesitates just long enough for Oz to step past her through the door, flashing something in his hand so quickly they couldn’t possibly see it. “We’re professional huntsmen and you need to tell us how to get to the top of this ship as quickly as possible, so we can attempt to slow down the ship’s descent.”
Still too stunned, and probably too relieved to hear the confidence of authority once more, they happily point them in the direction of the next staircase.

“What was that?” Ruby asks once they’re out of earshot.

“Library card.”

“You don’t have much respect for rules unless they benefit you, do you?”

“If there’s one thing the gods taught me, it’s that if we’re too obedient to order things usually fall apart with devastating efficiency,” Oz says, smiling apologetically over his shoulder. “And the gift of choice means we don’t have to follow them blindly.”

The crew’s staircases are nearly abandoned, and they only need to repeat the confrontation once more with the same result. Panic is rising in the air around them like a physical force, pushing down on their bones and moulding the minds of their fellow humans to a single goal. Survival.

“Remind me again,” Ruby says, as they reach the half-way point. It’s getting more and more difficult to get up the steps, the world tilting and gravity changing with it. “Why you’re the one here. If you share a soul, why can’t Oscar just use magic?”

“You really don’t like me here, do you, Miss Rose?”

Ruby winces at the way he’d hit the nail on the head, but before she can find a response that suits the turmoil of her own emotions, he adds “Oscar never wanted to learn magic. He—” she’ll never know how he managed to laugh stomping up the stairs the way they are “—insisted I should have a reason to participate in this life.”

Fondness creeps so easily into his voice when he speaks of Oscar. Patient and warm, and always understanding. They’re both so kind they end up breaking too easily on others. And it’s so difficult to stay angry at a person like that when they’re suddenly around again.

Just then the ship tilts precariously backwards, gravity twisting around them entirely so the ground slips below their feet. And Ruby snaps out of her reverie with a startled yell, scattering into rose petals and only just catching Oz on her way up.

It’s an exhausting journey, with her aura already as drained as is, but they make it up to the roof, wind nearly ripping them off as the hatch of the roof bursts open and they emerge through it.

“Thank you,” Oz murmurs, placing a hand on her shoulder. They sit in the opening of hatch the world flying up towards them at heart stuttering speeds.

And Ruby, only capable of gasping for air, lifts a hand to give him a thumbs up.

“Hold tight,” the old wizard warns her, as he produces his staff.

He drags it through the air in quick patterns, leaving behind light and magic the wind has no power over. And slowly the glyph comes to life in front of them. Once whole it twirls in the air and begins to expand, cutting straight through the metal of the hull and growing towards the horizon, until it has engulfed the entire ship, so the world stills, straightening, the ship coming to a near halt in mid-air.

“I doubt we’ll be alone much longer,” Oz says, voice strained. When he looks at her across the distance there is real desperation in his expression. “Can I trust you to watch my back?”
Oscar had said they had almost no magic left, using illusions as their primary technique because it required almost nothing. No matter how exhausted she is from overusing her semblance, it must be nothing to holding up the whole ship. “Of course. Just get us to the ground in one piece.”

“As you wish.”

Ruby pulls herself up onto the hull, and holds out a hand for him to take. And although he lets her pull him out of the hatch, he stays seated by the edge, hands held up and eyes closed in concentration.

The grimm are an inevitability, easily taken care of, but it’s Emerald following close behind that’s the real trouble.

She grins as she crawls out of her own hatch, green hair flying in the wind. “You know, Ruby,” she says, just loud enough for them to hear her. “You’re finally getting better at hiding.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ruby responds, reloading her scythe with a new cartridge of dust. She’s in the mood to hit something, and hard. “Maybe next time you won’t find me.”

She gets a laugh for that, scaldingly friendly. “With your new companion? I highly doubt it,” she says, and taps an ear piece. “Hey, boss. I found your big fish.”

And Cinder simmers into reality, making both Ruby and Oz start. “Excellent,” she says, voice sweet like velvet, unchanged over the years. “I got confused, thinking he’d be all alone in this bleak world, now that his little birds have lost faith in him.”

“Did you have to create an illusion just so we can hear the other half of your conversation?” Ruby asks dryly.

Behind her Oz stifles a laugh.

“Oh, but it makes it so much easier to mock your companion, don’t you think, little flower? What happened, did you finally take pity on him? As far as I know, Roses do have a habit of getting attached to shattered prophets. Must be the thorns.”

Ruby grits her teeth against her words, wishing Cinder was here in person, rather than just an illusion, so she could actually knock the maiden power straight out of her.

But for now she has no choice but to stand stock still and listen to her instead. She’s not going to break another promise.

“Miss Rose,” Oz says behind her, and when she glances back at him there is genuine anger in his eyes. “There is no reason for you to stay rooted here. Just don’t over-use your semblance.”

“Roger that.”

Fighting on a moving airship is not so different from the top of trains, so she adopts her sister’s favourite technique and propels herself forwards by the help of her rifle to slice the illusion of Cinder in half.

Emerald is quick to retaliate, but the loose shots are easy to avoid, zigzagging across the roof of the airship.

Sickle and scythe meet in the middle of the sky with a clang.
“Good to see you’ve stopped running away,” Emerald says, gritting her teeth. “Playing hide and seek with you on this ship was a real annoyance.”

“Sorry, I had other things to worry about,” Ruby says, directing her boot into Emerald stomach, and nauseatingly going right through her.

She flails for a single moment as the illusion disintegrates, nearly loosing her footing, wind tugging at her hood. Anger is boiling in her stomach. And even if it’s just an illusion, seeing Cinder towering over Oscar is enough to direct her next steps back to their hatch.

“Oh, and Oz,” Cinder says, leaning closer, a sweet smile on her face. “Just because you’ve found your bloodied little angel, it won’t stop me from taking all the magic you have left and killing you again, the next—”

“Shut up!”

Ruby cuts the illusion in two once more.

She changes the hold on her scythe, slicing through the air in front of Oz’ face, and directs her rifle right behind her, pulling the trigger.

Emerald yells out in terror and surprise, reappearing as she stumbles back, wind pulling on her clothing. Her face contorts with rage Ruby recognises from her own heart, and she throws her sickle with more speed and precision, too close to stop.

“No!”

Behind her, Oz holds up a hand, as if to ward off the weapon, and the scythe clatters against an invisible barrier. The wind catches it then and hurls it into oblivion beyond the sky.

“I’m sorry,” he murmurs.

The enormous glyph keeping them airborne shatters.

Ruby and Emerald catch each other’s eyes as reality sets in, gravity catching on. And Ruby takes two running steps forwards, rose petals scattering in her wake, so that this time her boot connects with satisfying precision, and Emerald flies clean off the roof.

It’s only Oz grabbing hold of her hand, his foot caught in the hatch, that holds them to the diving airship a moment longer than Emerald.

“Let go!”

“But—“

Ruby looks into frightened green eyes, and her anger evaporates. For the first time she recognises that he might not feel entirely as old as he pretends to. “We’re too close to the ground. They must have evacuated by now,” she says. “There’s nothing more you can do. Let go of them, Oz!”

He’s going to rip his foot off.

She can’t save them no matter how hard she tries.

They’re both going to die with the ship because he loves humanity too much.

But then Oz slides his foot away, his grip on her hand tightening, and the ship falls away under
them with heart stuttering speed, so the sky stills around them.

Ruby gathers every ounce of energy she has left, and they scatter one last time, landing strategy a scrambled idea in her mind. Survival comes before finesse, and Oz had had nothing left to guide them.

And yet, she still blacks out before they crash into the tree.

Chapter End Notes

Uh..... sorry about the long scene. I really didn't expect it to get that long when I was writing it, but there you are.

And so Oz makes an appearance, and things kind of got out of hand xD I hadn't planned for most of this to happen while I was plotting, but I realized if I was going to keep to the action plot I needed more than one "big" fight.
It was also a good way to force Ruby and Oz to interact, and to get a little closer to that part of the conflict. So I hope you enjoyed it n.n (I know that means I had to push Oscar to the side for a bit, but I promise he's back next chapter!!)

Thank you for reading! I hope you'll take a moment to share your thoughts with me! And I'll see you in four days!
Chapter 5

The sun in Vacuo is different from the sun in any of the other kingdoms. Violent and untameable, it creates a heat that is anything but comfortable, so dry the skin itches and the air becomes charged with electricity that fizzes between the living.

Ruby wakes to this heat, groggy and barely left with any shade, her entire body and very soul aching from misuse. The ground sways somewhere below her, and she closes her eyes briefly at the nausea it brings.

She carefully wiggles her toes to check that nothing is broken, and then uses one arm to haul herself up onto the branch she’d been hanging from.

Once she’s upright she pats her ribs and torso to check that she is indeed whole.

She nearly laughs when she sees Oscar lying several paces from her tree, body splayed over a bush, and wishes that she could act as if this was another of their sparring matches back in the village south-east of Vale.

But her creaking bones and aching muscles complain too violently on her way down to allow her that illusion. Her balance when she lands and she nearly stumbles to the ground on her way to Oscar.

She kneels beside the younger boy and carefully rolls him over, helping him into a sitting position.

“Oscar?”

No answer.

She pushes away his collar and checks his pulse. And relief at feeling life rushing under her fingers is so overpowering she nearly keels over in the sun burnt grass beside him.

A tear trails down her cheek unbidden, and she doesn’t bother to brush it away. Instead she rests her forehead against his temple for a single moment, allowing herself to breathe in the life that still emanates from him and reassure her heart.

Safe.

He’s safe.

A smile blossoms on her face.

But the smoke can still be seen from their tiny hiding place, old trees at the edge of the desert. They need to get moving in case Emerald survived the crash. Cinder, too, will soon be hounding their heels, and they need to have vanished before she catches their trail.

On trembling feet she manages to haul Oscar’s arm over her shoulder and drag him along down to the river that has supplied the forest with life.

They don’t get far.
Even if her limbs hadn’t trembled under their mutual weight, even if her aura hadn’t been completely depleted, there are too many thoughts whirling around in her head to keep her on steady feet for long.

Carrying a loved one whose mind is beyond her reach is possibly the loneliest thing she’s ever done. And the silence gives her too much time to think.

Salem can be killed.

No. That’s wrong.

She mustn’t think of it as killing. Maria should have drilled that concept into her by now. Her control over the creatures of Grimm must be severed, her immortality revoked.

A silver eyed warrior can do all that?

Emerald’s illusions creep into her mind once more, and the terrible monster that had towered over them all in the front hall of Haven Academy seems terribly unbeatable all of a sudden, especially with the lifeless reincarnation of Ozma hanging on her shoulder, heavy and hopeless.

Except, she had been his hope, hadn’t she? Even before Oscar had known her, he’d looked at her, had seen through her to the light at her core and he had smiled. And then he had returned and he’d stood with confidence and determination, because he’d had the answer.

Whether or not she feels cheated or disappointed, whether or not she strayed from the path, whether or not she got her hopes up, heart held out in her hands for the first time, with bated breath, only to realise that what she had dreamt was not reality, she will still press on towards that inevitable goal.

Because Salem won’t stop, because she’ll keep killing whether people fight her or not.

Because Oscar will fight her, alone for a lifetime unless somebody joins his side.

Because if Cinder, a simple, greedy Fall Maiden, has her way she will kill him, too. And even if Oz were to return, only a part of him would remain Oscar Pine, soul intertwined with so many others so that she will no longer recognise him in the mass that is Oz, a single force of will driven towards an unimaginable goal.

And Ruby doesn’t want that.

Love or not, she’ll stand in the way of anybody that will cause him harm.

So it doesn’t matter why he came back, but it would set her heart at ease to know that it was not for the light that dwells at her core.

At a crook in the river, a couple of miles from the crash, she finds a cave. It’s no larger than a bus shed, but it’s enough to protect them from the sudden rains that befall Sanus’ southern regions.

Ruby gathers enough dry wood to start a fire, and folds her hood to serve as a pillow for Oscar’s head.

Then she pilfers his scroll to search the GPS for their location. They’re still ten miles from the kingdom, at the very least, and the desert makes the existence of permanent villages immensely improbable.

But perhaps it is a stroke of luck, or fate. Ruby recognises the area on the map from one of her
conversation with Blake. At the edge of the desert by a great river lies one of the oldest settlements outside the kingdom, where the people work to push the desert back, to purify water and plant more trees in an attempt to live with their environment, rather than apart from it.

Which means that if they direct their travels towards that settlement they should be able to locate Blake and Sun.

The thought brings a ray of light into her heart again. She’s going to see her friends once more! After nearly two years of separation, she’ll be seeing Blake again, Sun again! Maybe Neptune will be with them, too!

Ruby traces her fingers along the lines within Oscar’s hand, and smiles. “We’re going to be alright,” she promises him. “Though I would really appreciate not having to carry you all that way.”

Ruby sleeps badly that night. Every sound seems heightened, now that she’s alone and aware of how close they must be to where Emerald must have crashed. Every movement within the forest feels like a threat.

And every time she manages to doze off she dreams of Pyrrha, of Penny, of searching the streets of Argus for a boy that refuses to be found.

Her fingers stretch out towards the shadow of another’s back, so close she can feel the illusion of warmth—

Ruby wakes, heart pounding a terrified beat, to the silence of an unfamiliar night, the broken moon casting long shadows from a cloudless sky, a sea of stars.

She sits there, in the silence, watching her breath tremble across her lips and forming white mists in the cold, before lying back down on her side, her head on her arm to watch a sleeping boy, clad in blue.

It’s so much easier to sleep when you have somebody watching your back.

When she’s shaken gently awake after the sun has risen, she’s too groggy and exhausted from the entire ordeal to be truly on her guard. And seeing Oscar awake again, sitting at her side, looking as much a wreck as she feels, Ruby forgets herself.

She pushes herself into a sitting position without a word and throws her arms around his neck.

“Whoa!” Oscar starts at the show of familial affection, body stiffening under hers.

“Welcome back,” she mumbles, and closes her eyes, enjoying the way his hair tickles her nose.

Oscar hesitates for only a moment longer before relaxing under her touch and returning her hug.

“Sorry, I wasn’t more help yesterday.”

Ruby tightens her grip on him for a single moment before letting go and gently pushing him away. “You two did plenty,” she says, touching his cheek with her knuckles to make sure he keeps looking at her, to see that she means it. “You’re the reason we survived Emerald’s little attempt at sabotage. How are you feeling?”

Oscar smiles briefly and touches the back of his neck. “Sore and drained. A little empty,” he adds. “Like some of me isn’t there. But that’s normal when Oz is as far away as he is now.”
“He did say he’d be sleeping.”

She wonders if he’ll gain Oscar’s memories of their current conversation, or if for once they have complete privacy. But she doubts it’s ever as simple as that. Not if Oscar has access to all of Oz’ memories.

He looks up at her through his fringe, meek and soft with exhaustion. “You didn’t happen to make up while you were at it?”

There is hope in his expression, reflected in his eyes, and Ruby hesitates. Looks down. “It’s not that simple. We shouldn’t have pushed him as far as we did; we did exactly what he feared we’d do. And I could have been a better leader in that situation, but...”

But Oz had been her ideal, in a sense. He had spoken with warmth in his voice of having trust in humanity. He had spoken with conviction of leadership. And she had adopted those ideas, absorbed them, a student with stars in her eyes, blinded by the brightness of a teacher that spoke to all her dreams.

Only the dreams had given way to gruesome reality. And Oz had proven only human.

She sighs looks up at him again, and it feels like she’s baring her soul, speaking of things she’s not had the words to express to anybody for three years. “But he abandoned his ideals. He abandoned you. Us.”

He’d abandoned her.

He’d let go the reins entirely and placed them in her hands, and she’d barely been able to keep things together.

“That’s not very easy to forgive. Or so I thought...” Ruby shakes her head. “I don’t know anymore.”

Beside her Oscar remains silent, and she can’t quite tell if he’s expecting more or simply has no intentions of speaking. “I am not going to get between you two,” he says finally. He looks away from her, eyes downcast, and scratches the back of his neck again. “You’re right it wasn’t the right way to handle the truth. Any of it. He didn’t handle it right. I didn’t handle it right. None of us did. But he... feels like me. Like a part of me. And we’re walking the same path. So I’m on his side in whatever happens. But, Ruby...”

And he smiles at her, soft and pretty and warm, green eyes shimmering with golden determination and open hearted partiality. “I know you’re not the type to carry resentment for long. You’re not that cruel. And even if I hadn’t planned on partnering up with anybody again, I’m glad that it’s you at my side now.”

And though her heart sings with relief, though the selfish part of her that adores him is also the one that has her smiling, she is not unaware of the distrust that still chills his heart. The world has not taught Oscar Pine the value of putting your life in the hands of other people and those bitter experiences creep into his attachments.

While Oobleck and the other teachers at Beacon had drilled the history and sciences of the different kingdoms into her head, Ruby’s greatest impression of what to expect from the people of Vacuo stem from Sun and her Uncle Qrow.

Anyone her uncle approved of could neither have been a stickler for rules, nor one to turn away
people asking for help. And Sun, earnest and respectful of all, but with his own code of morals had always been a perfect representation of that.

And while the guards at the front gate, skin tanned by the sun, are quick to let them in and direct them to clean water and food, they are also quickly made aware that they are outsiders.

The settlement stands at the edge of the jungle. Thick stone walls double as guard against the desert and aqueducts; water drawn up from the river as their only water supply, gurgles happily above their heads. Inside is a human made oasis with palm trees and a colourful market in the middle of a square. People in ripped jeans and with scarves covering their heads to protect them against the sun sell ripe fruit from the new fields, carved out of the desert. More than half of them sport animal traits.

The woman by the counter in front of the inn stares up at them in obvious surprise, her tail swishing with interest as she looks out past the shade of her parasol. “Where in the world— don’t tell me you came from the crashed airship!?”

Oscar and Ruby share awkward smiles at her loud voice.

“Pretty much.”

Behind them there are murmurs from the crowd.

“We already helped restock the emergency pods and sent them on their way this morning,” she informs them helpfully, smile softening at their obvious relief. “According to the captain everyone should’ve been accounted for. But perhaps we should check with the chief and have the area explored.”

Ruby and Oscar share another look.

“About that,” Oscar begins hesitantly.

“We’re almost certain that the saboteurs survived, and that they were working together with somebody on the ground,” Ruby quickly explains. “Please, I’m friends with one of the leaders of the White Fang and last we had contact she said she would be at this settlement. Could you direct us to where we might find her?”

The inn keeper hesitates, her glasses sliding down her nose. “The White—“

“I’m sure you can understand why the response to that request would be no,” a voice drawls from behind them.

Ruby and Oscar whirl to see a young man get up from his spot in the shade under a palm tree, dark hair reflecting with copper in the sunlight and blue eyes glittering with malice.

“When the ones asking are two humans, and more specifically, a Beacon drop-out playing at being a huntress, and a rich kid from Mistral with a jewel in his staff so large his ancestors must have used slaves to dig it out of a mountain.”

If Yang had been with them, Ruby reflects, the guy would already be sporting a broken jaw. It’s not always easy having a sister with a quick temper; you never get to lose it on your own.

But Yang isn’t with her, and so Ruby gets to be the one to lose her temper instead.

“If I’m right, then by your own logic your leader is a Beacon drop-out herself,” she retorts,
stepping partially in front of Oscar, who still isn’t in any shape to be picking fights. “So maybe you should find a better insult.”

“And might I point out,” Oscar cuts in from behind her, “that Beacon Academy was attacked and destroyed, which means you can’t call any of the students who had their education prematurely terminated drop-outs.”

“You know,” Ruby murmurs under her breath. “You could defend yourself as well.”

“What good would that do? Even if I told him it was from the era of the first humans, I doubt he’d believe me.”

“Good point.”

“Oi!” The man in front of them snaps. “Stop flirting and—“

“Yeah, stop flirting in public. It’s depressing,” a cheerful voice cuts across him from above their heads. “And while you’re at it, Nilah, stop picking fights with visitors!”

A blonde man is hanging up-side-down from an old street lamp right outside the inn, swinging back and forth as gravity wills it. His shirt is open, tan skin absorbing the warmth of the desert, his smile reflecting the light of the sun.

“Seriously. Pick a fight with the nearby Schnee mines,” he continues. “We could need some better workers’ rights around here. And cleaner water. And maybe a better minimum wage than the pocket wool of Jacques Schnee. Don’t take it out on allies. And you two—“

He turns sky blue eyes back on Ruby and Oscar, but before he can cheerfully berate them as well, the inn keeper has clearly had enough. “Sun Wu Kong! If you break another one of our lamp posts for your silly stunts, I’ll have your hide! Get down this instant!”

She follows this order up by throwing a broomstick at him with sniper precision, and it’s only Sun’s quick reflexes that saves him from losing his life at the end of a cleaning appliance.

Somersaulting on the way down, he lands on his feet with a flourish.

“Sun!”

Ruby only allows him to straighten up before she throws her arms around his neck in a fierce hug. And her old friend doesn’t miss a beat, laughing with delight and swinging her like a child into the air, round and round, joyful and earnest.

“Man, you haven’t grown a bit since I saw you last,” he teases, when he puts her down.

Ruby pouts. “That’s not how that greeting is supposed to go.”

“Actually,” Sun says, bending down to be face to face with her and then looking back up at Oscar who’s stepped up behind her. “Did you shrink? Because compared to Oscar you might as well have.”

“Hey!”

But she stops herself from genuinely picking a fight at the surprise on Oscar’s face. He and Sun hadn’t known each other that long, and it’s easy to forget a face in the crowd.

“Good to see you’re still around and kicking,” Sun says, holding out a hand, and when Oscar
reciprocates, clearly expecting a handshake, he frowns briefly and grasps the younger boy’s wrist in a more familiar gesture. “I know Blake and the others have been worried.”

“I...” Oscar opens and closes his mouth, fish out of water. And he suddenly looks his age, soft and childlike, gangly and unsure of his footing when faced with open hearted kindness. The idea that he’d been genuinely missed never even crossing his mind. Even after all they’d been through.

But before Ruby can feel the gravity of this revelation, of her own bitter regret, he smiles, catching on to Sun’s radiant positivity, pretty and bright like an evening star, burning away all her sorrow. “Thank you. I never meant to burden them, though.”

“What are you saying?” Sun demands, and pulls the younger man across the distance so he can throw his arm over his shoulder. “You should always burden your friends. That’s what they’re for.”

When Oscar blinks in confusion, not fully grasping such an earnest attitude, and looking to Ruby for support she can only shrug and agree with the Vacuo native. “He’s right, you know.”

Sun is quick to catch them up on the things they’ve missed, cross checking with Ruby what she already knows thanks to the return of the CCT, and starting from when she’d had to vanish offline.

“But, man, that message had us all worried, Ruby,” he says, and his smile vanishes for something genuinely unsettled. “Blake wouldn’t tell me the reason why you’re being targeted, but you should’ve heard her conversations with Yang and the others.”

The words ‘they were ready to uproot and go chase you down immediately’ and ‘they’ve really got your back’ go unsaid.

Sun, more than anybody, had always been a support on the sidelines of team RWBY. There had been an admiration in his eyes that Ruby had never stopped being grateful for, the runt of the litter that she is, and a dedication to Blake that goes beyond unselfish. His earnest wish for the wellbeing of others is a glow of warmth that never discriminates or hurts.

“I’m sorry for the short notice,” she says ruefully. “We didn’t mean to worry anybody, but they knew where we were going so it was the only way to vanish somewhat off the grid. Not that it helped much in the end.”

Sun looks from one to the other, but at the grim expressions on their faces he simply says “you can share your news once we get to HQ. There’s no need to tell us twice.”

They turn down a street of more chalk painted clay houses, flowers bursting from every balcony in every colour. The representatives of Menagerie and the new White Fang had rented a house for the duration of their stay, but that in the end so many Faunus had volunteered to help that they’d had to expand and rent at least two other houses.

“It’s a little cramped, but we should be able to find accommodations for both of you,” he says, pushing the door open to a two story house.

Oscar shuffles, still silent, at her side as they make it into the shade, and Ruby glances back at him just in time to see the shadow pass across wavering eyes.

Before she can react, however, Sun waves them on with a “it’s this way.”

They pass a large blue banner on a wall with a logo of a white panther painted on it, then before a series of open doors leading out into an unoccupied garden full of fruit trees and flowers hanging
from pots on chains. Roses too climb the walls here, protected in the shade of the buildings.

Beyond that they make it into an office lit from windows in the ceiling. The book shelves are mostly empty, only a few of them occupied by journals and notebooks, and a large map is hanging from an empty wall, colour bars cheerfully reflecting the progress of an agricultural project. And behind a large desk of pale wood sits Blake with her eyes directed at documents on her scroll.

It’s been over a year since Ruby has seen her old teammate in person, breathed the same air as one of her first friends, and she’s already changed again. Her skin has tanned from exposure to the sun for many months and she keeps her hair up in a high ponytail, out of her way as she works, so only a single strand caresses her cheek. Her golden eyes take in every sentence with renewed focus and intensity, and her ears flick with interest on top of her head, proudly displayed for the world to see.

She looks up at the sound of their entry, and her eyes widen, suddenly overflowing with summer sunshine, a smile emerging before she fully comprehends their presence.

“Ruby?”

And it’s so good to see her, to beam at a friend once more. To relive the love and kindness of people she shares a bond with, the light in her world, the reason she walks her path with steady feet.

It’s all for this; for the moment when Blake drops all formality and jumps straight across the table, to rush at her and engulf her in a hug. For the familiar warmth of people that have been missing from her life, for a hug so fierce Ruby wishes she could hide in it forever.

“You’re okay,” Blake murmurs, almost reverent, entirely for herself. Stating a reality that had only been a hope, a desperate dream until a moment ago, trembling fingers grasping at Ruby’s hood and pulling her closer. “You’re really safe.”

Ruby laughs, watery and a little unstable. “I missed you, too.”

She’s squeezed tightly for that, air forced out of her lungs, before Blake releases her entirely, smile finally back on her face.

“That’s for worrying all of us, especially your sister.”

“Oh, gosh,” Ruby breathes.

The message had been pretty sudden...

“Yes,” Blake agrees mock-sternly. “It’s a relief to know I won’t be woken by my scroll several times every other night anymore because Yang can’t sleep.”

“Sorry...”

Behind them somebody exhales a laugh, and when they turn back around, Oscar presses a knuckle to his lips and smiles apologetically. “Her sisterly affection is still overflowing, I take it?”

And for once Ruby recognises that the memories he’s referring to are not his own, gold flooding his gaze. It registers quickly on his face as well, smile falling away, and insecurity returning as he holds up his hand.

“Hello... Blake,” he says. “Long time no see.”
Blake’s smile falls, and she lets go of Ruby entirely to stalk across the room. “Oscar.”

He only gets to take one step back before she reaches him, courage entirely deserting him so his skin drains of colour and his eyes grow wide and blue with fear. But Blake places her palms against his cheeks with finality and lifts his head up so they’re face to face.

“When I said we could all use some space, I didn’t mean we needed space from you. I meant that you could use a little space from us! And not two and a half years of it!”

For every word she speaks Oscar’s eyes grow wider and wider with confusion. He stares up at Blake as if she is a returning Apathy, a monster he cannot beat or understand.

In spite of Ruby’s reassurances that they’d all realised how terribly they’d handled the truth, he hasn’t believed a word she’d said. All the violence had remained as his last memory of all their friends, and it had made him afraid, had made him silent.

“I...”

Oscar’s mouth snaps closed again, his eyes straying, blue from sorrow, and Blake’s hands fall away to give him space.

Only then does he look back up, conflict clear in his expression. And Ruby can see what he wants to say, what’s on the tip of his tongue, with no courage to find his voice.

*You weren’t ready.*

They’d hurt him.

She opens her mouth to speak, to save him from this confrontation, for being the centre of attention when he clearly doesn’t want to be. But she hesitates. And closes it again.

“Well,” Oscar says after a moment, emotions falling away and a familiar mask of leadership, optimistic smiles, replacing them, “it was for the best at the time, and it’s not like you were wrong about what you said.”

*...what?*

Ruby and Blake both stare at him in open disbelief, at the kind smile on his face, both incapable of computing his words. Right? For the best?

“Oscar—“ Ruby begins, not knowing what she means to say, but he cuts across her.

“For now we have more pressing matters to attend to,” he says, blue still dying his eyes with sorrow, and smile keeping the burden on his shoulders from seeming suffocating. “As you know, the reason Ruby had to go off the grid is because the people we fought at Haven are once again hunting her.”

He produces his scroll, walks between Ruby and Blake without looking at either, and places it on the desk. A hologram appears of a map of the area with the crash site marked and its distance to the settlement measured in miles.

“Ruby, where would you say we landed in comparison to the crash?”

Oscar doesn’t turn to meet her gaze, and the office seems to stretch the the distance between them into miles. Shadows cover the ground, long and black, like a canyon of space that can never be
crossed. And on the other side stands a boy with shoulders hunched under the weight the world borne for a thousand unbearable lifetimes, lonely and vulnerable.

“I...”

Her voice deserts her, fear and a painful attachment stealing it from her. And she closes her eyes from the sight before she looks away, looks down, and then up to Blake at her side, golden eyes wide with concern, to Sun at the door, tilting his head in puzzled curiosity.

There is more than one person who gives her strength, and always more than one star in the sky, even when the sun passes out of sight.

“Right about here,” she says, stepping forwards and plotting in the location on the scroll. “And Emerald should have crashed further along this route,” she adds, drawing a line towards the north-east. “Falling from that height she must have sustained injuries, but I’m guessing a Maiden would be able to heal something like that, right?”

“Yes,” Oscar says, absentmindedly studying the map. “But it doesn’t sound like Cinder was anywhere close to catching up to us, so it should be a few days before she’d be able to locate her follower, which would explain why we didn’t meet any unfortunate mishaps in the forest.” He glances aside for a long moment before adding, as if on an after thought, “Yes, and that would also suggest that at least she hasn’t been taught how to use teleportation magic yet—“

“Alright, hang on a sec,” Sun says, cutting him off after having stayed silent through their exchange. “As far as I remember Cinder’s Semblance was neither teleportation nor healing—“ he pauses, momentarily distracted “—in fact, I don’t think she ever used her Semblance during our semester at Beacon, now that I think about it...”

His eyebrows draw together in exaggerated concentration as he tries to remember, and Ruby feels an indulgent warmth at the ease with which he diffuses a tense conversation.

They could have used him on their way to Argus...

But Sun’s naturally radiating light falls short with others in the room.

“Whatever her semblance—“ Oscar begins, voice trembling with well-hidden agitation.

And when Ruby looks back at him, she recognises the fear in his eyes, the ability to recognise when somebody is too close to the truth. But it’s one she’d seen last in his companion, and never in Oscar.

“Not that a Semblance could do that level of healing anyway,” Sun says, almost as if he hadn’t heard him. But then he looks up, blue eyes crystallising and seeing too clearly. “So what do you mean by the word magic? And I get why Cinder and Emerald might be hunting Ruby, revenge consumes people like that very easily, but what does that have to do with you?”

“Sun, maybe this isn’t the best time to—“ Blake begins, looking from Sun to Oscar and then to Ruby for help.

But Ruby shakes her head. “It’s okay,” she says, and steps back to Oscar’s side to place a hand on his shoulder. When he looks up at her he silently begs her, eyes blue with desperation, not to say another word. “You can trust him.”

When he speaks, his voice is weak with old betrayals. “The last time somebody told us that, we lost too much.”
And Oscar bows his head, incapable of meeting her gaze.

And Ruby realises once again that she had never truly reached him, no matter how hard she had tried, that her words had not been powerful enough to sway him to once again trust them. He still thinks it is safer to carry his burden all on his own.

She had been too insecure to stand up for him back then, but this time she finds that she cannot follow him where his fear has taken him. Instead, she needs to draw him back.

“You’re wrong,” she says. And when he looks back up at her, eyes flashing green with fire, she smiles. “You didn’t lose anything you cannot still reclaim. Let Sun be the proof of that.”

The anger evaporates from his gaze, and with it the last of his strength. And Oscar looks up at her, weak and mellow, no hope left in a world that has left him alone too long.

He glances down for a moment, before looking back up, a prayer on his lips, unvoiced and for her ears only. They stun her, long enough for him to smile with bitter regret, and turn his face away.

“Sun, once you hear the truth, please do refrain from punching me,” he says aloud, and with a hint of dry humour that has Blake look down with guilt. “Blake, I’m trusting Ruby with explaining this to Sun. Would you mind showing me where I might get a shower in the mean time?”

Sun looks in confusion from one to the other, opening and closing his mouth, but both girls ignore him, sharing a look and then a smile.

“We don’t have showers here,” Blake confesses with a grin to rival Yang’s, “but there’s a lovely public bath right down the street from here. We should find you both some clean clothes before we leave.”

She holds the door open for him, pulling it closed with her eyes still on Sun, a silent communication passing between the two before it falls shut on true silence.

In that quiet space, Ruby hears fragments of the words whispered to her with the help of magic, fairy dust scattering like silver stars painting a night sky with scattered sorrow.

“—you might stray from our path again and leave me in darkness.”

Ruby inhales an unsteady break and then turns to face a friend.

“Tell me, Sun; what’s your favorite fairy tale?”

Chapter End Notes

And so Ruby gets to be the next in line to ask The Question xD

I had something a little different planned with the confrontation with Nilah; I always liked how Qrow seemed to portray Vacuo as such a FIGHT ME place, and I wanted to use it as a way for Ruby to show off in a hand to hand combat, and Oscar to sort of be the gate keeper that ensured others wouldn't get in the way of that or break it up. But in the end I couldn't get the scene to work (though Nilah turned out to be a useful character so he'll return later xD)
Whooops I was about to share my thoughts on the confrontation at the end with Sun, but I don't want to spoil how that goes so you'll have to wait until the next chapter to see~

Thank you for reading this chapter as well! And to those who commented thanks again so much for sharing your kind thoughts!! I hope if you enjoyed this chapter you'll share them with me again :D
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Lionheart had looked to Qrow back when they had first met the cowardly headmaster that had betrayed Oz, he had held accusation in his voice as he had said “I thought you’d told them everything?” And Ruby’s uncle had responded “look, there’s a lot to cover, okay? There’s a reason I quit teaching.”

And as Ruby begins to unravel a tangle of tales, recounting it for the first time, for somebody else, she can empathise with her uncle for the first time in a long time. Where do you start to tell somebody that the world they know is a replacement of another? How do you recount the tale of broken hopes and shattered loves of somebody you know, when they are still unconscious? When they have had no true say in all this? When last time, they had said no?

It’s easy to make somebody else retell that story, to listen with self-righteous greed, but Ozma’s tale is one so full of pain that the words taste of tears on her own lips. And Ruby ends up cutting corners, ends up sharing the bare minimum for the guilt, for the pain she has inflicted on another, scars she had reopened more than anyone else.

Sun puts them all to shame, kind and earnest and warm-hearted. All the blood and contamination of the world has vanished between the desert sands, and still it accepts whatever truth the merciless reality throws it. The light moves across his attentive face, darkening his skin with tones of orange, and reflecting a growing fire in blue eyes.

“So… you’re telling me,” he begins slowly once she has finished the stories of Ozma and Salem, of the Wizard and the Maidens, of Ozpin and Pyrrha. Of Relics and Silver Eyes. “That this man… Ozma… has walked the surface of Remnant, living, dying, and reincarnating to fulfill a duty to redeem humanity that he thought was an impossible quest. And you forced this story out of him without his consent? You attacked him for doing his best and empowering people who had shown him kindness and trust? And then Jaune assaulted Oscar, who is… his companion?”

Every question is spoken in a tone of mild curiosity, as if he’s questioning her on the weather. But for every word he speaks, for every obvious criticism, Ruby shrinks a little more. Hindsight is a curse that merely leads to regret, and these mistakes she has yet to make up for. The hurts she has caused she has yet to atone for.

And no matter how guilty she feels, there is still the betrayal lurking under the surface, the abandonment of ideals that she still can’t forgive.

“No wonder he doesn’t want to work with others. No wonder Oscar didn’t want to share this information with a near stranger,” Sun says. He looks up at the sky high above them, behind the glass, considering the information one more time. Then he sighs. “But, you’ve all been trying to make up for it in the best way you could. Trying to meet the requirements of the God of Light. What?” He adds when she looks puzzled. “You don’t have to explain everything. I can put two and two together on my own.”

And just like that Sun has diffused the tension in the air once again.

“Thank you, Sun,” she says, fingers digging into her elbows until her knuckles grow white. And she smiles. “But none of it matters if Oscar is still running away.”
“Hey.”

He places a hand on her shoulder and bends down a little to be sure she catches his smile. Exactly as Tai would have done it. “He’s not running away as much as you seem to think. He trusted you to share this with me, didn’t he?”

“…right.”

“So leave the rest to us,” he says, straightening and pointing at himself with a grin. “By the time we’re done putting him to work, he’ll be too exhausted to remember not to trust others.”

Blake is waiting for her in the changing room of the public bath with a clean batch of clothes for her, her usual outfit already bagged and hidden out of sight.

“I’m stealing your hood for a day or two as well,” she says, and shakes her head at Ruby’s doe eyes. “No. No, it needs cleaning.”

“But—“

“I’m just washing it, Ruby. Don’t worry,” she adds. “I’ll be careful with it. I know how much it means to you.”

Ruby still pouts, which has her friend laughing with mellow kindness.

Around them women of all shapes and ages are coming and going, chattering in low voices as they get ready for the baths, or patting themselves free of water. There are smiles and kind laughter here, serious sympathy and familial love. Faunus and humans walking hand in hand with no differential treatment to one or the other.

Life can’t be easy here, but the people support each other.

Ruby swallows thickly and lowers her head to pull her new t-shirt over her head.

She still remembers shops in Mistral with the sign No Faunus out front.

They are still so far from their goals, and the world feels more divided than ever.

“This feels… weird,” she murmurs, once dressed.

For the first time in a long time she’s in simple clothes; a white t-shirt and faded green cargo pants. Even her combat boots have been confiscated, replaced by an old pair of sneakers. The only thing that remains of her old outfit is the belt and Crescent Rose that Blake would not deny her no matter how dirty.

“You used cargo pants all the time back at Beacon,” Blake observes, tilting her head to the side, ears perking in curiosity.

“Yes, but that was to sneak candy into the cinema with Yang or Sun or Uncle Qrow!”

“So you’re the one that taught him to do that!”

“Like he couldn’t figure that out himself.”

They share a grin, eyes dancing with silly cheer and nostalgic memories, and then they’re laughing. And just like that all the tension leaves Ruby’s body, all her loneliness warming in
Blake’s company, replaced finally by the love of old companionship, all cold leaving her body in the Vacuo heat.

Blake drags her off towards a small restaurant taking up the corner of a different street and they spend the next hour catching up and reminiscing of easier times, more difficult times. Paths with clearer goals. All the hurt and the regret, all the negative emotions, are washed away if only for a moment. And Ruby breathes an easy smile of contentment as they make their way back to the house.

She’d needed lighthearted companionship so much it had become a gaping wound in her heart that had grown since they’d left the eastern side of Vale. Oscar is as good at making things difficult, as he is at making things easy. And she hopes that Sun is right.

“Do you think it was okay leaving the boys alone…?” she asks as Blake pushes the handle down.

“I’m sure,” she says. “Oscar already told me everything that happened while you’ve been traveling together, so we agreed tonight would be for rest. Sun was going to take him to the local healer tonight, so either he’s resting or they’re still there.”

“Thank you.”

“Hey. You can’t be the leader every second of the day,” her friend says, patting her arm.

And just like that her eyes are suddenly burning. Ruby hasn’t been a leader for two years. She hasn’t been a part of a group since she and Maria had left Atlas. But somehow she’d managed to carry that mantle around with her all this time, the heavy burden of always doing her best no matter what happened. As if somebody was watching over her, as if she had still had to live up to the expectations of many.

There’s always so much at stake that just being told you can rely on others is a huge weight off your shoulders, a shadow stolen from her heart.

She swallows thickly and tries to hide her reaction, but Blake sees through her and pulls her into a hug, resting her chin on top of her head and pulling her hand up and down her back in soothing motions. “Thank you so much for your hard work, Ruby.”

Before Blake leaves her alone in her room to take up the extra futon laid out on the floor for her, she pulls her back by the arm and offers her a scroll. “Here,” she says with a smile. “Use this to call your sister and Weiss. They’re going to want to know you’re alright. From you rather than me.”

Ruby beams up at her. “Are you sure you don’t want me to do that in the middle of the night to take revenge for all those times Yang has disturbed your sleep?”

Blake had laughed and waved her off, and Ruby had hurriedly closed the door behind her.

She leans against the door for a moment, smiling down at her reflection on the empty screen. She can talk to Yang again. She’d met Blake and Sun again. She isn’t as confined to inexistence as she’d been, just twenty-four hours ago.

She can’t wait to stop hiding and running away.

But for now, she can at least do this to appease her heart.

Yang nearly drops her scroll at the other end when she picks up the phone, and Weiss’ hand
trembles as she holds the little device out of reach of the waterfall of tears falling from Yang’s eyes a moment later.

“Weiss, she’s really alright!” the blonde says, shaking the other girl with real force. “Ruby is alright!”

“She’s also right there where you can see her,” comes the terse response. But even Weiss has to brush away a tear when she’s free from Yang’s tearful manhandling.

“That’s right! Ruby, I’ve missed you so much! I’ve been so worried. How could you just go off the grid like that?”

And just like how Sun and Blake had done it, Yang glows with light, with love, and seeing her across the scroll once more heals a little more of the loneliness that had crawled into Ruby’s heart over these past months since she’d begun traveling with Oscar.

“I’m sorry, Yang,” Ruby says. “I didn’t mean to but—“

“But she had an easy time tracking you now that the CCT is up again, right?” Weiss cuts her off, sharp intellect connecting the dots.

“Yes.”

“See, I told you,” Weiss tells Yang, who protests loudly in repetition of what is clearly an old argument. “Your sisterly love is shining a mile away and blinding you more than anybody else.”

“Hey, that’s cold, even for you, Weiss”

As they bicker on the other side of the screen, Ruby leans back on her haunches and enjoys the sight, a smile pulling on her lips without her consent. Silver tears stream silently down her cheeks, reflecting the glow of the screen, the light of her favorite people in the whole world.

She misses them.

She misses them so much it hurts, a physical ache in her chest.

She wants to hug them. She wants to mess with her sister’s hair and drink Weiss’ bitter coffee. She wants to practice with them, and fight with them, and laugh with them. She doesn’t want to be separated anymore.

She’s had enough of being hunted, of hiding away. And she isn’t going to let Salem dictate how she lives her life anymore. And first on the agenda is stealing the Fall Maiden’s light back from Cinder.

Ruby doesn’t see much of Oscar the next couple of days.

Sun and the other Faunus have him helping them in the fields, or in the record rooms. They make full use of his library of knowledge, memories and experiences, taking advice and updating whatever is outdated (which, according to Sun is about half of everything Oscar knows). When he comes back he eats in silence, dusty and sleepy, before slipping off to a bath and then tumbling into bed hours before anybody else.

“Did he used to sleep this much?” Blake wonders one evening, eyes resting on the closing door.

“He’s still recuperating his magic,” Ruby responds, looking down before anybody can catch her
expression. “And Oz isn’t back yet.”

Ruby and Blake join the team of capable fighters (huntsmen and huntresses may have official titles, but as her uncle Qrow has said too many times to count; In Vacuo, if you can’t fight, you most likely won’t survive) to scout the areas around the settlement and the forests to the east for Emerald and Cinder, but with few results. On Ruby’s third day at the settlement, they spend the day checking in on the crashed airship, but find no traces of corpses or survivors. Only Grimm infested, charred remains.

They return early that day, disconcerted and worried, and pass the work in the farming areas. Blake vanishes to talk to the people from Menagerie, checking reports and handling any problems that may have arisen, and Ruby is left to herself.

Oscar is easy to find in the crowd in a white shirt and dark pants, cutting the branches of a tree from a high ladder, pausing every so often to exchange quips with the people around him or take orders from the woman below him. A little girl with a golden monkey tail swings down and lands on his shoulders as if she belongs there, and Oscar takes her weight with the ease of one who has carried children on his shoulders all his life.

He laughs and smiles, and the dark circles are nearly gone from his eyes now, light and life returning to his spirit.

The next time she sees him, he’s sitting alone in the garden, eyes caught on the stars far above them. The blue shadows of a long night paint across his face in shades of sorrow and isolation.

The sight is a breath caught somewhere in her chest, stilling her heart, and giving her pause, but before she is released from its beauty he turns his head and meets her gaze. The golden light of the sun shatters the illusion.

“Ah, Miss Rose,” Oz says. “Welcome back.”

“I could say the same thing to you.”

She hesitates, and he tilts his head in question.

And just like that she understands what he means, what he wants from her, as she had always done at Beacon. A silent conversation, a person easy to read. Making it so much easier for her to get out of trouble, for an old headmaster to hold a hand over a blessed student.

But just because he wants her attention now doesn’t mean she’s willing to give it. Anger still burns in her blood, betrayal a heavy weight on her mind. She could be selfish, live in the present, and turn her back on him as he had done them all. She could be vengeful and remind him how it feels.

Selfish, heartless vengefulness is what had plunged the world into chaos and destruction. Self-righteous anger is what keeps humanity divided. Entitlement causes more harm than healing.

Ruby exhales heavily and steps out into the garden, pulling the glass door closed behind her. “We need to talk.”

Whatever social hierarchy he had instilled back at Beacon, in Mistral, has been eradicated by Maria over the years, and Ruby feels no qualms when sitting down beside him. She is no longer a student reporting to a superior with her hands clasped demurely in front of her. She will never be that again.

The evening air is pleasant, mellow and warm, no wind touching them in the small enclosure,
surrounded by the walls of the house. The roses stand with graceful royalty, red and white growing between one another.

Oz picks up a white rose from beside him on the bench and twirls it absentmindedly between his fingers. Finally, he says. “Miss Belladonna is doing some good work here. As are the people surrounding her.”

“Yes.”

“The Faunus are finally escaping their cages,” he observes, looking down at the white rose, lips twisting in a smile full of pain and regret. “It’s about time. Miss Belladonna, too, has shed her chains and turned them into strength.”

It’s as if he’s talked himself into feeling like the parent of all of humanity, watching over them and letting them learn to make their own mistakes and own experiences, but also feeling the pain of their failures as if they were all on his own body.

Perhaps that is why he had returned to the position of headmaster when he’d been reincarnated in Ozpin’s body...

Not that it changes anything. Removing yourself from humanity like that, because you’re afraid they will hurt you, and then taking responsibility for all their acts, isn’t right. It’s never going to be right.

Ruby clenches her jaw before saying.

“She talked to Oscar, didn’t she?”

A laugh, soft like a night breeze. “We are all rather good at running away, aren’t we?”

Blake, demure and kind, would have tried to do for Oscar and Oz what Sun had done for her. To be the one to pull them from isolation, when all Ruby has been able to do on their lonely journey, was wait for him to step into the bright light of friendship on his own.

Perhaps that is what she has done wrong. She had passively stood by and waited for him to get the message. But no amount of talking is going to encourage people to trust you, if you don’t follow it up with action. With understanding and acceptance. Words are nothing but air, pretty mirages and empty promises. And she has never had the selflessness to accept all that he is, to acknowledge that the part of Oscar that is Oz, eternal and fallible, is also just a human being, who needs kind words and encouragement, who craves forgiveness and trust.

“It’s time we stopped running away, Oz.”

“I know,” he says, eyes straying to the white rose in his hand, and a soft smile touching his lips, nostalgic affection directed at somebody no longer there to guide them in the right direction, with light and love. “So let me say this, once and for all; I’m sorry for lying. For keeping the truth from all of you, when you—“

“Oz,” Ruby says, cutting him off. She closes her eyes painfully trying to collect her thoughts, but suddenly she can’t hold in the thoughts that have ravaged her mind for three years, the things she had kept silent for too long. “You know that isn’t what I cared about, because I told Oscar.”

Before she can stop herself she’s up and on her feet, turning to face him and hands flying to emphasize her words. “Who cares about the lying? We all lie! I didn’t tell anybody about Penny and because I didn’t Salem—Cinder—had the chance to kill her just to create chaos at Beacon!”
Blake was too afraid to share that she was a Faunus. Yang—“

She can’t bring herself to say it out loud. She can’t voice her own disappointment in her sister. Not even now. Loyalty to family is what makes them strong, it’s what has kept them together all this time. It’s what defines Yang through and through. She’ll never betray a family member, but she had caused so much chaos and strife by not telling them about Raven.

And Ruby can’t bring herself to tell Oz that now.

Not when he’s staring at her with wide golden eyes, as if he doesn’t know how to respond. As if she’s somehow disrupted his world. If she’s really managed such a thing, she doesn’t want the first direction his mind to take to be one of resentment towards her sister.

“You were killed and you came back. And you lost a million different things. But you never asked us to consider your grief, to consider you human! You did your damndest to stay something else. And you weren’t there when we needed you, when Oscar needed you!”

And now he’s doing exactly what you did and—I can’t keep reaching out for a back that runs away from me.

The words get stuck in her throat, burning in her eyes. Pain and abandonment. Loss she never wanted or asked for. If he’d just stuck around he could have kept Oscar from leaving. If he’d stuck around, perhaps her team wouldn’t be scattered to the winds.

They would have had direction.

Ruby closes her eyes painfully. She’s forced all her feelings back, for balance, to stay safe outside the kingdoms. And now that she’s actually expressing them, she can’t keep it all down, but she refuses to cry in front of him. Not out of anger.

“Miss Rose—“

“No!” She exclaims, looking back at him. “You abandoned every ideal of leadership and trust in humanity that you taught me. That’s what I’m angry about!”

But what faces her is not a man attempting to cut her off again, or direct her towards any clean goal. Instead a boy sits amongst roses, pure like snow or dyed with blood, and golden tears stream down his face in silent reverence.

“You really are remarkable.”

And he smiles, laughs at himself. And then he dries away the tears.

“I never meant to lie to you. Or to betray your ideals,” he admits. “I never meant to become an ideal to you. Just like I never meant for you to join the fray, to die in a useless battle. I simply wanted to ensure your mother’s wishes came true, when she weren’t there to fulfill them herself; for you to grow up safe from the shadows of destruction, safe from being hunted, until you were strong enough to make your own decisions.”

Ruby doesn’t know how to handle that, doesn’t know what to say or what to feel. He is not her mother, or her parent, not even her teacher. He had done his best to make up for those things, and perhaps in the end he had grown hopes and attachments, as stalks grow before the rose.

“Oz… why did my mother die?”
He opens his mouth to say something self-deprecating again, and Ruby shakes her head. And he averts his gaze. “Your mother was the last Silver-Eyed Warrior that I or Qrow or Raven had knowledge of, and she refused to let Salem know of your existence. So she dismissed warnings and reports—“ he laughs fondly as he twists the rose between his fingers “—courageous and full of light that she was, she couldn’t stand by and let a foolish old man tell her there was nothing she could do to protect her child. And so she confronted Salem on her own…”

Ruby takes a deep, shaky breath. It’s not what she wants to hear, this truth, but it feels right. Feels like her mother. Like the light of summer. And she would do the same, in time. In her stead.

But a question lingers. And she hates to pose it, hates being back in the freezing tundras of Anima.

“If my mother, a Silver-Eyed Warrior, failed to stop Salem… then is Oscar wrong? Is there nothing I can do to stop her?”

This time, instead of looking down, looking away, instead of hiding from her, he meets her gaze and says “A Silver-Eyed Warrior has the best chance of severing her ties with the Lakes of Destruction and Creation which sustains her life for eternity. But Salem is powerful. You saw it yourself; even when I retained all my magic, I was no match for her.”

“Right.”

Ruby lifts her head. Above them the shattered moon shines brightly among the stars. The gods had left them with a conundrum, but she refuses to believe that they had intended to be cruel, to give them an impossible assignment. Why else would she hold the light of the God of Creation within her? Why would it only work against Grimm, if not to counter the havoc of destruction? If not to aide his broken prophet with a difficult mission?

“But you and my mother were both all alone when you faced her,” Ruby says, sitting back down beside him. “And we are not alone. We have Oscar. And Yang, and Weiss, and Blake. We’ve done amazing things, but we did them because we were together. So let’s try again.”

She holds up her fist in an offer. A new contract. A choice to trust and work together, on equal ground.

Oz smiles, mellow and bright, relief a breath between parted lips. “Alright. Together.”

And his fist connect with hers.

“Thank you, Miss Rose.”

Ruby frowns, and lifts her fist to knock him over the head with it. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing it as equals. No more last names.”

That gets her a laugh. “As you wish.”

He closes his eyes with a smile, and when he opens them again they glow with summer sunlight for a mere second. And then Oscar blinks up at her in confusion, the white rose dropping from his fingers.

“Oh!” he exclaims, hands flailing and cheeks exploding in a violent blush. “I’m sorry— I didn’t— what’s going— Oz! Stop doing that!”

Ruby laughs so hard she nearly falls over backwards on the bench.
“Ruby, it’s not funny!”

Before she can stop herself she throws her arm over his shoulder and leans against his side to boop his nose. “Welcome back!” she says brightly. “Want to know a secret?”

The blush still stings his cheeks, but he meets her gaze with bashful curiosity. “…yes?”

“I’ve decided to be friends with Oz after all. How does that sound?”

The brilliant smile she receives in response answers all her doubts, and makes her forget every shadow that exists in the world.

It’s not enough to care about one of them. They are both human, attached to one another. And she cannot fall in love with Oscar without also acknowledging Oz’ humanity at the same time.

She never wants to be that cruel again.

Chapter End Notes

And so the conflict with Oz ends…….

Sun is my Voice of Reason and I’m 300% convinced he had to go back to Vacuo because CRWBY wouldn't have been able to create the drama they did this vol if he'd been around. Because of that the first scene was also one I’d had a clear image in my mind of since the very beginning.

I also hope you liked the little girl talk scenes. I know this is a romance fic, and I tend to focus primarily on that conflict, but I always feel odd when I break the bechdel test in any piece I write. Also even if they’re far from each other I wanted Ruby and Yang to interact in some way or form!

As for the conversation with Oz… well, I guess it pretty much speaks for itself. As I said in the beginning this is a very self indulgent piece of writing and it has a lot of my own observations and opinions braided into the conflict. I hope you enjoyed it none the less! Drama is always a bit difficult for me to write, but I hope it hit a good balance for the readers.

Thank you so much for reading this chapter as well! If you have a moment please do leave a comment, I’m always happy to hear your thoughts!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Ruby emerges from the bathroom a couple of days later, teeth brushed free of morning breath, and hood back in place, it’s to a spectacle out in the street.

“What’s going on?” she asks the nearest resident of the Menagerie house, a girl with short red hair and shiba ears that flick at the crashes and yells from the street.

She doesn’t immediately look in Ruby’s direction, and instead continues to bounce on the tips of her toes to get a look at the commotion.

“Sun challenged that kid from—oh, Ruby,” she says, starting. “Morning.”

“Morning. So who did he challen—” she catches sight of green jade flashing in the sunlight, and she’s through the crowd in a flash of rose petals, “Oscar, kick his ass!”

As he glances her way she throws a fist in the air for good measure, and gets a laugh at the way she’d made the crowd start and jump out of the way.

But the way he swings his jade staff, twirling it between his fingers so fast it turns to a blur of green, and then up, to counter Sun’s attempt at taking advantage of his distraction isn’t entirely Oscar. Oz grins up at the other boy with the same ferocious thrill that had flashed at Ruby when he’d been her hand-to-hand instructor.

By the time they’re finished with their sparring match they’re both sweating bullets, though Sun is the only one in need of a hand limping back into the house.

Ruby falls into step with her former teacher. “You know, I think you enjoy being treated as a kid.”

Oz’ smile is a secret. “What gave you that idea?”

Ruby narrows her eyes at him, but he doesn’t give in. “It gives you an excuse to let loose and have fun without repercussion.”

He uses the towel Blake throws at him to hide his expression. “Whatever my companion’s age, I live as much as he and the state of peace will allow me.”

Ruby hums. “Fair enough,” she acknowledges. And then she grins and nudges him in the side “now give me back my half.”

That gains her an indulgent smile, knowing affection of those that have seen an attachment form for every time the moon waxes and wanes. “Indulge me for a moment, Ruby,” he says. “We need to discuss where we stand. And Oscar isn’t keen on cleaning up my mess.”

It’s a subtle hint, a reminder that just because she’s speaking with Oz, doesn’t mean Oscar isn’t listening at the fringes of their shared consciousness. But though it brings a blush to her cheeks, knowing she’d been heard giving voice her mellow possessiveness, Ruby still pouts.

And Oz laughs, ruffling her head with a gloved hand before departing for the public baths with Sun.
“Is it just me,” Ruby says, smile falling away, “or is Oz the only one going out of his way to work together with others?”

Blake hums doubtfully. “Oscar was helping us in the fields for days before Oz came back,” she says. “And even after his return it’s mostly been Oscar in control, right?”

“Yes, but there’s a difference between making an effort to get along, and making an effort to get to know others.”

She should know; that’s what they’d spent most of their journey across Sanus doing. And though it’s been days since Oscar fully recovered, it was Oz who’d started sparring with Sun.

“Well,” Blake says, tugging on her wrist. “He always was the shy one of the two, right? I’m sure he still just needs time to feel comfortable.”

Ruby allows herself to get dragged away for a quick breakfast among the rest of the residents in the house, still chattering excitedly about the display outside, and then to listen to reports from the night guard, who has—

“Nothing of significance to report, Ma’am,” the middle-aged man says, white and dotted tail swishing across the floor in tight proud patterns. “The emus are getting more courageous again, but we managed to chase them away.”

Behind him, a young woman shuffles her feet, her eyes darting off to the side. And when Blake says “are you sure there’s nothing else? Raewyn?” she jumps.

Feathers fall from her black hair as she turns her gaze back on Blake and Ruby. “Well, I—“ she begins, touching her upper arm, fingers digging into her sleeve.

“Raewyn just tripped while chasing emu,” her commander cuts in. “Her clumsiness caused her to sprain her shoulder. It could happen to anybody.”

“Is that so?”

Blake narrows her eyes, gold flashing with a warning that stuns the older man long enough for her to say to Raewyn “where were you at the time?”

The girl reports that she’d been stationed by the wall, near the corner with the fields on the other side. Easy to sneak across, so long as nobody sees you...

Blake sighs and looks up at the blue sky above them. “Even if we could find traces of them in the soft ground, they’ll all be trampled by twenty other pairs of feet,” she murmurs.

It’s a whisper of movement, a ghost under a midnight moon. Smoke between their fingers, and nothing more. Even if Raewyn’s superior seems oddly eager to keep her silent, that might as well reflect on his inability to keep wild birds at bay.

“We’ll just have to have a poke around the market today,” Ruby reassures her. “Cinder isn’t likely to let things drag on too long, and if we stay within sight it might provoke her to attack.”

“One can hope,” Blake responds.

As she dismisses the two guards, the young woman hangs back. She waits until the door gently shuts behind her before saying. “Uhm, Blake? There was a—“
The door goes up with a bang, and Raewyn yelps in surprise as Sun and Oz step through, Sun pausing what he’d been saying, startled by her shock, allowing just enough silence for the elder guard to bark her name.

She glances apologetically back at Ruby and Blake, but follows her superior without another word.

“Did we interrupt something?” Sun asks cautiously, looking from Blake to the door and back again.

Blake groans. “Sun!” She exclaims and slams her palms into the table, shooting to her feet in the same moment. “This is why we knock!”

“Geh-“ Sun holds up his arms in a flailing defence, and whines “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you were going to start without us.”

“We can’t sit around waiting for you to be ready!”

While they bicker Oz looks to Ruby, and the question is clear on his face, even before he gives voice to it. “What did we interrupt?”

“Well,” Ruby says, “it looks like Cinder and Emerald haven’t passed us by, after all.”

As Blake sinks back into her chair, Ruby quickly explains what little information they’d gained from the guards, and what they suspect. Oz and Sun both listen with silent attention, and when she finishes, the old soul nods in agreement.

“It’s unlikely she’ll pull something rash in the middle of a settlement in Vacuo,” he says, accepting Ruby and Blake’s judgement without question. “Given the general practices of the region, there are always too many hardened warriors around to carelessly pick a fight. However, with Emerald to aide her, she still has plenty of opportunity for an ambush. So it’d be best if Ruby and Oscar weren’t on separate duties. It’d be too easy to pick them off, one after the other.”

Sun and Blake share a look. “And...” Sun begins.

“You’re sure we shouldn’t make more of a plan?” Blake finishes.

A smile, nostalgia and pride in what they have become. “You always were good with plans,” he observes, and glances at the work they have achieved, are halfway through. “But more people joining in would make them aware of us knowing. Hopefully they will be emboldened by the element of surprise. Although...”

He looks to Ruby. “In case she follows past patterns, it might be good to form different teams and try to sniff her out. Just in case.”

“Yes,” Ruby says. “But make sure you don’t engage alone. No more people is going to die at her hands, and I want full range to remove that Grimm parasite from her heart, before I kick her ass.”

She slams her fist into her palm, as Yang would do it, and shares a grin with Sun.

“And we’re going to give you every opportunity,” Oz says, placing a hand on her shoulder, cautioning her gently. “Just remember why you’re doing it.”

And Ruby looks up into Oscar’s face, and she sees Pyrrha again, sees Weiss, and Jaune. And Ozpin. She won’t let Cinder lay a hand on another soul. “Not a problem.”
“I— wait— Ruby!” Oscar exclaims, stumbling in her wake under the late morning sun, its bright light reflecting off his dark hair in shades of gold. “Is this really the right time to go shopping of all things?”

Ruby pauses only long enough for him to catch up, grinning at him. “Did you really have to call it shopping? Come on, Oscar! We’ve been here for over a week and we haven’t done any exploring at all!”

“But—” He looks around them on the small street, green eyes darting to every window, every person passing them, not seeing the warmth of their smiles nor the life in their eyes. His hand tightens around Ruby’s.

“Hey,” she says, incapable of keeping her smile to herself, nor the joy that sings unbidden from her heart, an unwelcome symphony under the haunting shadow of despair. She nudges him with her shoulder to get his attention, and when she’s sure his eyes are back on hers she continues “relax and let things play out. Oz said it, too, remember?”

She adopts a solemn expression in an attempt to imitate her old headmaster. “There is no need to lose your trust in skill, when it’s been honed with care for days and years.”

Oscar snorts a laugh and holds his hand up over his mouth to hide it. “I’m pretty sure he didn’t speak in iambic pentameter.”

Ruby grins to see the smile back on his face. “With how much poetry you’ve been reading? Some of it’s bound to rub off on at least one of you,” she says. “And you’re definitely too young.”

“Hey. I’m not sure whether to take that as an insult or a compliment. And it’s only one poem, really,” he adds under his breath.

Ruby only laughs and drags him down the street.

It’s not that they don’t know most nooks and crannies of the settlement already. There are only a couple of streets with permanent residents; most of the work that comes in are from tradesmen travelling by foot, caravans and tribes that never stop moving, but need supplies, and people from Menagerie; Faunus that see value in their project. So there are plenty of people, and plenty of life, but most of them are as shifting as the sand of the desert, never the same grains flow on the wind, gone the next day.

But Ruby and Oscar have spent their days with the people in the fields and streets, rather than the things in the stores, so the little market is still full of secrets.

Ruby squeals with delight when she sees the weapons shop hiding in the shadow of the inn, silver eyes locking on unknown models and old classics that they had passed by only a day before.

She and Oscar scatter into rose petals, and she’s quick to let go of his hand as soon as they’re in the shade of the little shop to give him enough time to rebalance, even as she continues on to the nearest display.

“Look, look! They’ve got gauntlets like Yang’s! But it’s not the Atlas design! I wonder how they differ. And—” before Oscar has even had a close look at the gauntlets she’s already at a different display, rose petals falling in her wake. “Look at this sword! I’ve never seen one that curves like this! You could almost use it as a battle axe.”

The man behind the counter grins, showing teeth as sharp as a lion’s. “Now there’s a huntress after my heart. It’s called a khopesh and is one of our oldest weapons. And it was indeed developed after
the battle axe.”

He unfolds from the seat, golden eyes glittering with mischief. “Would you like to give it a try?”

“Yes!”

As soon as it’s in her hand she swings the blade down, a clean arc directed straight at Oscar. It absolutely sings in her hand. The khopesh’s smooth balance and its heavy design makes it cleave the air with as joyful ease as Crescent Rose, and Ruby smiles at the feeling.

She hasn’t used a sword in years. And this time its use is accompanied by no grief.

“Ruby,” Oscar says, gently pushing the sword aside with two gloved fingers and raising an eyebrow at her. “You realise you wield one of the most dangerous weapons ever designed on a daily basis, right?”

His eyes are dancing.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” she says, puffing up proudly, her smile widening.

“So, do you really need a new one?”

“Well, no,” she says, twirling the sword between her hands before holding it back to the owner. “But I like to appreciate other people’s craftsmanship. And you never know when Crescent Rose might break.”

The memory of her beloved scythe shattering like fragile glass between her fingers still haunts her. But it’s easy to forget at the warmth that creeps into Oscar’s expression at her words.

“Come on,” she adds, grabbing his hand and dragging him over to the case with the gauntlets and several more weapons like them, “you’re a mechanic in your own right. You must appreciate something like this.”

“I—” Oscar hesitates, and she sees in the reflection the way his eyes slide achingly to their hands, cheeks flushing, before he wrenches his gaze back up to the weapons on display. “Well, I’m more used to tractors and the like, so I can’t quite say... without asking Oz, of course.”

He glances at the owner, who’s sat down again, and Ruby catches the meaning between his words. Memories. “Well, Oz has for the most part been quite willing to share his knowledge with you, right? And that’s why he’s there, anyway, isn’t it? To aide you where you still have room to grow.”

“Where I’m meant to grow, yes.”

He looks down at the display again, studying a mechanical axe with real interest, seeming not to have noticed how tragic his correction of her words really is. He’d said those types of things before, words of aching loneliness, of despair, and then, of acceptance, rolling off his tongue like a sigh at the first warmth of spring, or a line from a poem.

I’m just going to be another of his lives.

I don’t need a semblance. I have Oz.

And Ruby wonders, not for the first time, if he really and truly feels like his own person. Oz is doing his best to keep them separated, but that doesn’t mean Oscar feels the same way.
How much of his fear of three years ago has really vanished?

Sometimes it feels more like Oscar’s the one living in the far past, as if he’s the one fearing the distant future. Not his companion.

But then he smiles up at her, and asks her to elaborate on the mechanics that propel the dust into the air, and she pushes aside her worries once more. Right now they can live in a tiny moment, and the future will come when it may.

Ruby buys more cartridges full of dust, fire and ice, and lightning that roars like thunder, even though there is no Nora to direct it at. And they are off again, out in the sunlight, moving from tiny shop to tiny shop, admiring the carps in the pond.

Oscar forgets to watch his back, as he had done all those years ago during their practice and their fights, and Ruby subtly watches it for him, keeping her eyes on the crowds and the shadows. And still his smile draws her eyes away from the darkness that hangs over their heads and stalks their feet, bright and warm and full of sunlight, pretty and boyish it opens his face in the way she remembers. The white t-shirt that he’d borrowed from Sun contrasts with skin that grows ever darker under the unrelenting sun, and hangs a little loosely on his shoulders.

Ruby wonders, in a moment of distraction, what it would feel like to draw lines between the constellations of freckles adorning his collar bone. And immediately has to wrench her face away, cheeks heating in a way that has nothing to do with the desert heat.

Oscar tilts his head curiously, hair falling into his eyes. Cute. “Everything alright, Ruby?”

“I—” a laugh escapes her, and she scratches the back of her neck awkwardly before realising what she’d done, heart skipping in her chest, “Yes!”

She’d caught one of his habits...

The thought distracts her for a moment too long, so Oscar, attentive and difficult to deter, has the chance to step close, head tilting, green eyes wide like the crowns of forest trees under an endless sky. “Ruby?”

She has touched his face before, guided his gaze up, a gentle motion, liquid moonlight on heated skin. But his knuckles against her cheek sets a fire under her skin that makes her head fly up.

“Did we stay too long in the sun?” He wonders, innocent and kind.

And she does her best to find words, to work past her embarrassment, the burn of it on her cheeks, in her heart. The wish that won’t leave, the whisper of pleasure in a simple connection. More.

“I— maybe,” she says, wrenching her gaze from his to cast about for a harbour, something to clutch at, to distract her from simple desires, unknown and heavy like liquid honey in her veins. “Maybe we both have. Look. There’s a cafe over there.”

She doesn’t notice the rose petals that betrays how fast she’s fleeing, nor the startled look on Oscar’s face, only the relentless pounding of her own heart, the reminder of mortality.

As she vanishes behind the curtain, into the cool atmosphere of the cafe, she closes her eyes painfully and curls her hand around the silver rose sown into her glove. She had forgotten that loving somebody is followed by fear.
Oscar doesn’t comment on her behaviour, though she can see the confusion on his face as he follows her through the door a moment later. Instead they fall back into the flow of their surroundings, marveling at the huge ice sculpture in the middle of the cafe, and the sun that falls through concealed windows in the ceiling. Plants accompany every seat, crawling up pillars and falling from them, gently parting the rays of the sun, diluting the light for the patrons.

Childlike pleasure returns to his face at the available selection, and the shadows recede from his gaze, as he enjoys the first taste of a chocolate milkshake.

“I haven’t had cacao in months,” he says, sighing with bliss.

“Is it really that good?” Ruby asks, laugh trembling in her voice, his own joy contagious.

Her cup of strawberry juice is cool against her hand, untouched.

In reply, Oscar holds out the plastic cup for her to try, the straw tilting to the side. And Ruby hesitates, eyes flickering to his face in surprise. But the boy in front of her smiles, sweet and inviting, as if sharing liquid bliss is the most natural thing in the world.

But the pause is enough to make him rethink his actions, to give her a choice. “Ah. I should get another straw first—"

“It’s fine.”

Oscar stills.

But the choice feels as natural on her lips, as the smile had looked on his. And there is surety in her movements as she reaches across the distance, silver gaze lowering, and fingers dragging through her hair, pulling it back, as she closes her lips over the straw.

It is a silly gesture, a girl’s dream, whispers and giggles in a dormitory from a time when she was still too obsessed with heroes and monsters to care for love and life. A kiss hidden between the lines of their actions. But there is an intensity to it that she had not expected, an intimacy that suddenly holds her captive, as the sweet, cool taste of the chocolate touches her tongue.

It’s gone too quickly, but the taste lingers as she lifts her head again, eyes traveling slowly up to meet Oscar’s across the distance.

He looks at her as if the whole world exists within her, as if she was not born to reflect its light, but holds all of it in her heart. And though she has seen a thousand smiles, though she has looked into his eyes a thousand thousand times, the affection she sees there now is scorching, the longing he does not hide a caress against her skin.

“How was it?”

“We’ll have to bring cacao with us when we leave.”

Their voices draw the world, and slowly Ruby finds that she can breathe again.

Oscar’s smile changes to a laugh, his eyes bending at the edges, lips tasting relief. He mouths the word ‘we’, but says aloud. “Thank the gods. I don’t think I could live without it on another trip.”

Her grin doesn’t feel entirely right. “Don’t tell Weiss, but I definitely prefer this to coffee.”

“Even the blasphemously sweet one she makes just for you?”
“Says the person whose favourite drink is hot chocolate.”

“I never said there was anything wrong with sweet.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying all along!”

They share a smile, then a laugh. But it doesn’t steal the taste of chocolate.

There’s a small shop full of gear for huntsmen and huntresses not too far from the cafe and they go there mostly to escape the cool, and because Ruby has an unvoiced plan in the back of her head.

Oscar eyes the racks of clothes curiously, falling behind to study something, but Ruby isn’t deterred by idle curiosity, knowing she will get her answers soon enough, and slips into a the part of the store full of coats.

They don’t really need them. Trained warriors that they are, their auras keep them warm in cold climates, and cool under the desert sun. But confidence comes from being dressed for the job, from radiating capability and recklessness, as most huntsmen and huntresses are prone to do.

And perhaps it is luck, or fate, but a green coat sticks out amongst the others, red leather shoulder guards, and silver clasps, four buttons following the lines of the lapels on one side.

“Oscar!”

Rose petals fall in her wake as she zooms back to her companion, appearing only a beat in front of him and holding the coat up with enthusiasm. “Look! Look what I found!”

He yelps, face flushing, and starting out of a reverie whilst fumbling not to drop the belts in his hands. When he turns, his eyes lock on her smile a moment too long, wide and dancing, before he turns his attention to the coat.

“I know you lost you cape on the airship, but the green really suits you, even if the design was a bit outdated,” she says, words falling like a waterfall. “I mean, there’s something very wizardly about a cape and all, but I thought something more up-to-date might be good.”

She can’t bring herself to say ‘more you’.

“Wizardly,” he repeats, and then he laughs, eyes closing with delight. “It looks brilliant,” he says, when he calms down, holding out his free hand. “Let me try it on.”

They find a changing room, and Oscar returns to it twice; once before purchase, and once after to dress in his new clothes, in clothes all his own. Green eyes glitter with an easy pride as he emerges the second time, coat giving not an illusion of strength but showing it off, falling with simple authority. A new belt hangs from his shoulder, supporting the jade staff, and three tiny ones adorning his upper arm on his right, one on his left. A last one tilts along his waist, wide and sturdy, holding up the Relic of Destruction still at his hip. The white shirt beneath the coat is new, folded and held in place by a golden button, but the pants are old, black faded under the sun, as are the boots, reddish leather that matches the pads on his shoulders.

It all speaks to experience, to hard won battles and a future stretching wide ahead of him, steady feet on a path he must walk, but with all the courage to choose it.

Ruby smiles. “It suits you.”
“One last thing,” she says, dragging him back to the isles of clothes, skin separated by dark gloves. “I thought I might borrow your expertise.”

Oscar tilts his head curiously. “I doubt there’s anything I could tell you in here that you don’t already know, but whatever answers I might give they are yours.”

Sweet words, like golden honey in her veins. And Ruby does not think that her next statement might cut straight to the shadows festering in his heart.

“The harvest is in a few weeks, just before our exam, and since we’re staying anyway, I thought I might help out, even though I’ve mostly been on patrol duty thanks to Cinder.”

Oscar stills.

He pauses very carefully where two isles cross each other, his fingers slipping slowly from Ruby’s grasp, gloves soft against her fingers. “...what?”

And she doesn’t immediately sense the danger in his quiet voice, as perhaps she should.

“Well, I grew up mostly with the fishing season,” she explains. “So I don’t know much about the harvest, but I thought there might be proper attire involved, something other than a combat skirt.”

Like pants, or shorts, or a hat to keep the sun out of your eyes, she means to say. But the words wither in her mouth at the way colour drains from his face, at the open surprise.

“You weren’t planning on staying that long, were you?” She says instead, the conclusion obvious.

“How can we, when Salem knows where we are?”

The words are spoken carefully, deliberately, a reminder of the danger that stalks their feet.

“Hey,” she says, taking a step closer to him, “we’re going to deal with Cinder and Emerald just fine. And even after that it will take time for her to realise that they’ve failed, to send somebody else.”

“And who will it be after the Fall Maiden?” His eyes flash. “Hazel? Tyrian?”

The warning is there. Old memories. Ozpin’s death. Images of Oscar being thrown across the hall back in Mistral, all the rage of the world roaring in his wake. Other images too, blood and poison staining her uncle’s skin purple, laughter in her ears she has not heard in her nightmares since the day she’d reunited with Oscar.

False security.

The shadows creep across the floor, long and dark, passing over his face.

“It’ll be okay,” she says, trying for a smile. “There are other people here. We’re not alone. We have each other, and Blake and Sun, and all the rest.”

But she sees the answers he need not voice, the trust he still hasn’t given. “And what do you plan to do after the exams, Ruby?” he asks. Already his eyes turn from hers. “Meet up with your friends again?”

Something like anger rises in her, and she doesn’t hesitate with her words. She won’t let him run away this time. She won’t let him retreat to sorrow and isolation when always, always, always the answer has been unity.
“Yes. With our friends.”

And her correction startles him.

“Our—“

“Don’t you see? We need them if we’re going to get to Salem,” she tries again. “We need them because they are the world.”

All the gold drains out of his eyes and melancholy longing is the only colour left. “I swore to Oz that I would finish this,” he says, slowly, the weight of the ages descending mercilessly on his shoulders. “That we would not have to carry the burden of duty into the next life. And I didn’t have to do it alone anymore; you were there and you were all the strength I needed in the world.”

_I only needed you._

The words are a whisper in the distance between them, a reality she had feared, and still it roots her to the spot, steals her voice away.

Only a moment of startled reality, of her heart breaking apart for him, the pain of his self-inflicted solitude and loneliness unbearable, but it’s enough for him to turn away, the distance growing with every step he takes, further and further away from her.

_Duty._

The word lingers like poison in her mouth.

---

Oscar has already vanished down a second street from the market by the time she catches up.

“Oscar, wait. Listen—“

He stops so abruptly Ruby nearly barrels into his back, the thorny stalks along his staff flashing across her vision like traces of light that might grow and materialise, sharp crystal, as he turns.

“No! Ruby. I have listened, and I have understood, but I don’t think you have,” he exclaims, all the pain of the world on his face, in his eyes, raw and aching, scars that never healed right. “I knew when I chose this that humanity breaks apart, but to have hope because humanity is good at healing itself on its own. I knew that like my predecessors I would not stray from my path, from attempting to heal old wounds, that I would lock myself in the confinement of an office or lay waste to a thousand armies. Again. Because humanity is good, because humanity is kind. Because humanity is full of life and love, and the world shines with blinding beauty, and nobody deserves to be haunted by Salem.

“But what did I find when I left my home? When I left my only family at the mercy of the Grimm, of cruel weather and the threat of starvation? Oz’ trusted old friend wanted to kidnap me, to trade my life for his. Hazel sought not my death, but my repeated death, for a crime I had not committed, as revenge for the loss of his sister. Qrow—“

Though his voice has risen with every word, it fails him now, breaks apart in his grasp like stardust, every word falling between them like a thousand pieces from a shattered moon.

But he doesn’t need to speak.

They had all betrayed him, had hurt him and beat him, for telling a simple truth, for doing what he
thought was right.

Oscar’s voice trembles. “I’ve never known my father, never had anybody like that,” he says, quiet and miserable. A humourless smile tugs at the corner of his lips, and it hurts to look at; an illusion of joy where there is none left, swallowed by the darkness. “Oz doesn’t count. We are two sides of the same coin and I know him too well. And yet...”

He pulls a hand through his hair, and looks away.

The sun travels across the sky faster here than on the northern part of the continent, days short and nights long, and as it dips behind the houses on the empty road it steals the colour from the world, misty clouds on the horizon blurring the shadows and the light.

And Ruby doesn’t know where to begin to reach for him, how to touch his pain.

Her voice feels far away, not entirely her own.

“So you’ll live a life of solitude, then?”

“You forget,” he says bitterly, the words of a god in his mouth, “I am never alone.”

A desire seizes her suddenly and near uncontrollably; to grasp his hand and tell him that whatever you do, do not let the will of gods control your life. There is a reason you are human and not one yourself, a reason why your predecessor gave away his powers. Gods are already born to everything. They may talk about creation, but look at what they created; Salem has ruined the lives of Oz and his companions for centuries, has taken the lives of his children, and hunted his allies, contaminating them, blinding them, or destroying them over and over again. Until there’d been nothing left. Until he’d locked himself away in secrecy and hollow trust.

She wants to grasp his hands and beg him, beg him not to follow in that path, to shy away from love and kindness, from humanity, when it has so much to give. When he is worthy of so much more.

But those are not the words that tumble from her lips.

Her light.

A growing star on the horizon, a new love.

Or an old one.

Disappointment and anger wells up from somewhere unseen. “No, I can see that,” she says, spite cutting her words.

A silent gasp falls from his lips, unheard, and he flinches as she steps up to him, steps into him, hands grasping the lapels of the coat that had made him look so confident.

It’s the flinch that cools her rage.

But she’s sworn never to hurt him again. And she’s going to make him see sense one way or another. “You tell yourself you are not alone, yet you refuse to awaken your semblance, because you think yourself a part of your companion. Because you think what you can give the world pales in comparison. That’s not companionship! You’re erasing yourself,” she says, shaking him.

“And you have been alone for too long, Oscar Pine,” she continues. “You’ve forgotten what it
means to give yourself to the people you love. I cannot make up for Lionheart’s betrayal, or Hazel’s rage. They were wrong and their words should not have been your introduction to the world. But we’re your friends, and we’ve seen that we hurt you. Not quickly enough, I know, but you didn’t give us the chance to change!”

Tears burn in her eyes suddenly, huge and brimming over, pouring down her cheeks before she even realises that they’re there.

“Ruby—“

She releases him as quickly as if she’s been burnt, takes a step back, putting space between them before he can follow. And tries to rub them away, to make them stop.

How had she been so stupid? For how long had her anger been directed at Oz, when it was actually Oscar leaving that had hurt her the deepest? When she had missed him so achingly that she hadn’t been able to bear it?

“Ruby, I’m sorr—“

“Hold on,” she says, turning her side to him and rubbing at the tears that seem to run forever.

Her pride will not let her fall apart in his hands. She is not that kind of person, and she has never shared sorrowful tears with another, never against her will.

“Mommy?”

A sniffle, not her own, scratches in her ears, and Ruby starts at the uncanny timing.

She can hear Oscar turning away from her, and she lets him.

It gives her a reprieve to close her eyes and inhale the soft scent of night air rolling in from the desert. To calm her raging heart.

“Hey. Where did you come from? Did you get lost?”

Oscar’s voice is a soothing balm in her ears, and when she looks up he’s already kneeling by a little girl. The child rubs at her eyes and doesn’t see the warmth of his smile, the way his eyes crinkle at the edges.

The little girl’s hair falls in dark ringlets around her pale face and there is no sign of animal traits, though, of course, she might be hiding it under her red dress.

Her sniffs fill the emptiness of the dark street, echoing where no other sound exists; not even the cheers of the market behind Ruby reaches them here.

Just the sound of the child crying, and Uncle Qrow’s story in Ruby’s ear.

“They used an illusion of a child as bait, counting on the kind hearts of Ozpin’s favourites...I had been too far to reach her, and Amber was already lost before I got to her side.”

Ruby doesn’t stop to think, takes two leaping steps towards Oscar, just as the child’s smile flashes with malice below her fist and she reaches up towards Oscar.

Barrelling into his side, Ruby scatters into a whirlwind of rose petals. The Grimm hand scratches at her shoulder, but there is no magic in her that can be stolen by greed and destruction.
They land, sliding across the sandy street, Oscar wincing below her.

“You’ve got to start warning me before you do that.”

“Get used to it. I’m not leaving you behind,” she says. And then. “Sorry. I forgot to watch your back.”

Oscar exhales through his nose. “Seems we could both do better in that department,” he says wryly.

“Like I’ll give you the chance!”

Cinder’s voice is a fraction of a warning before a fiery sun hurtles at them from her open palm.

Chapter End Notes

CLIFFHANGER BAHAAHAHAHA

And so everything is finally out in the open (well, almost everything), and I hope their argument made sense. As I said last time, I’m always nervous about writing drama and getting that level of emotional intensity across...

Oscar’s internal conflict had to be primarily one of distrusting others, and not wanting to work with others because it might cause a repeat of what happened in Argus... and I wanted to show that Ruby being the exception to that isn't entirely good either, both because it becomes an unhealthy attachment, but also because it can too easily create this kind of rift...

I also wanted the chance to mention something I haven’t really seen discussed anywhere; how many people have actually wanted to harm or kill Oscar already in the series, and the reality of his own choices weighing down on him. That his righteous soul might rebel against the unfair actions of humanity that are too often selfish or field by hatred.

but, gosh there was so much to cover in this chapter. And I actually ended up cutting it in two (so the battle with Cinder is its own chapter). Vacuo has also become such a cultural Mess at this point (seriously, I’ve ended up taking inspiration from Egypt, Australia etc etc etc) and I just hope I haven't offended anybody /frets

Thanks to Cora, Nemiko and BloomingLight for the suggestions for what they could do on the "date"! xD (also gosh, this chapter is kind of embarrassing for me; I was so embarrassed writing the cafe scene, but re-reading it it's not all that intense, is it...? I feel like I'm out of practice writing romance.....)

Thank you so much for reading this chapter as well! I hope you enjoyed it! And thank you to the people who commented on last chapter! I hope if you enjoyed this one you'll take the time to leave your thoughts! Reading them really makes my day!!

Oh! And feel free to come talk to me on twitter (STONEHILL) or tumblr (xStonehill)!! I'd love some more RWBY and Rosegarden people to talk to :D
“Up! Up! Up!”

Ruby and Oscar scramble to their feet and barely avoid the collision with the sun, hearts in their throats. It explodes just behind them, sparking embers flying like missiles from a volcano and singing the edges of Ruby’s hood. Then the shockwave follows, hitting her square in the back so the air is forced painfully from her lungs and she tumbles again, feet slipping, and rolls, grateful to her gloves for protecting her palms.

Oscar lands somewhere beside her with an ‘oompf’.

They need to get out of range, to regain their footing. Something. And quick.

“Sorry about this,” she gasps, breath barely returned to her yet, intending to take hold of any part of him and scatter.

But Oscar is ready for her this time, his hand catching hers, and Ruby falters for a second, looking up to see green directed at her.

And just like that she knows what he’s thinking, knows it’s the same as her own plan, and they scatter. They fly straight up into the air, curving like an arrow and down towards Cinder, materialising just long enough for Ruby to fling Oscar at her, before taking off once more.

He falls, speed and air ripping at his coat, his hair. Grasping his cane, he swings it down at Cinder, but she sees it coming and lifts her arm, malice sweet on her lips. The staff slams into her block with such force that the wind lifts her pretty curls.

“Nice try, boy.”

Oscar smiles, eyes dancing. “I’m just the distraction.”

“Are you sure?”

Ruby rematerialises behind her, rose petals flying past her as she slides to a halt, swinging Crescent Rose in a low arc.

Cinder vanishes with a laugh as light as bells, the blade slicing only air.

“Whoa!” Oscar flails in mid air for a single second. He catches Ruby’s shoulder, and she braces as he somersaults over her, landing with new grace and placing himself at her back, guard up.

The street is empty.

The sun drowned somewhere in waves of desert sands, descending the world into blues and greys, dyed in shades of night, and street lamps are flickering on like little eyes in the sky, a prelude to the rise of silver stars.

There’s not a whisper of life anywhere around them.

“Emerald,” Ruby murmurs, shifting her gaze.
“This is going to be difficult.”

“How did you dispell her illusions last time?”

“Ah... that was Oz.”

The tension in him changes from a hawkish awareness of the threat lurking in the shadows, to embarrassment. It’s so subtle she shouldn’t have noticed. “He’s not here right now,” he hisses, voice for her ears only.

What?!

“Excuse me?!” She hisses back.

“He was giving me... us... privacy.”

Ruby looks back at him, a dangerous impulse, but she can’t help it. Oscar stares straight ahead, eyes constantly moving, looking for a break in the illusion, but never in her direction.

She doesn’t need to ask, knows Oz has been gone before, but she hadn’t expected it to last. She’d expected Oscar’s companion to simply adopt the memories later, that there was no real privacy between them.

This gives her reason to hope.

She exhales a sigh, half amused, half exasperated. “See,” she says, turning back just in time for the full majesty of Cinder’s reappearance. “You are your own person, after all.”

It’s difficult to take their enemy seriously, when Oscar hacks and coughs behind her, embarrassed, logic broken against his will. It’s difficult not to smirk at the glow of fire, the pretty patterns along her dress that can turn lethal in seconds.

She’s too close, and, yet, not nearly close enough.

“You know, Ruby,” Cinder purrs, studying them with casual disinterest. “Salem doesn’t really want to see you dead. She would find such pleasure in your company.” Her eyes dart up then, sultry and burning. The hatred in Cinder is a living thing. “So why don’t you let me kill that boy at your side, and come with me to meet her peacefully?”

“Over my dead body.”

Ruby’s voice isn’t the only one that fills the oppressive silence with anger; Oscar had spoken in kind, his voice one with hers.

Cinder smiles a cat’s smile. It’s always more fun to play with a live mouse.

“That can certainly be arranged,” she croons. And she snaps her fingers.

This time, when Crescent Rose shatters it is not an illusion. The metal grows burning hot so suddenly Ruby yelps in pain and surprise, hands releasing her beloved weapon before she can stop herself. It glows bright orange, like a beautiful warrior had once done, stealing the red from her hair. And Ruby’s scythe, her eldest companion and most trusted weapon, turns to ash before her very eyes, carried away by a vile wind.

Ruby barely has time to heave with the pain of it, her heart shattering with her scythe, before Cinder takes its place, smile malignant and victorious.
Her touch is light on Ruby’s shoulder, a lover’s caress, but magic is power, and the world turns to flashes of colour, blue and grey. She doesn’t even see Oscar’s hand reaching out to hold her back.

“Ruby!”

As she turns her head the other way, eyes watering against the wind, Emerald appears in her trajectory, easy smirk in place and gun held up to meet her.

Ruby digs her heels into the ground, sliding to a halt just as Emerald fires.

It’s her semblance that saves her, movements fast like quicksilver, and she holds her ground, arm blocking the bullet. Her aura flashes red along her skin, covering the silver rose with blood.

And the bullet clatters uselessly to the ground.

“Nice trick.”

Emerald lowers her weapon a fraction.

“Thanks. It’s good to know I can still imitate my older sister with success.”

“Oh, yes,” Emerald smirks. “The bimbo always knew how to over-use her aura. Should have known it runs in the family.”

Ruby bristles, temper blinding her. How dare she— Emerald’s smirk widens and it stops her approach better than any soothing words from an ally might have.

She weighs her options instead. The grief at the loss of Crescent Rose is still a raw, open wound in her soul. But it can be reforged. And Emerald is keeping her focused.

And she needs that focus, needs to take the danger seriously. Oz isn’t here. And even if he were they would still be at a disadvantage against Cinder. She has to handle Emerald, and fast, or Oscar will be lost to her.

“Aww,” Emerald croons. “Are you worried about your little man, even though you were fighting?”

Ruby starts. “He isn’t mine.”

“No? Then I guess,” she says, an image flickering into existence between them of a bloodied corpse, glassy green eyes seeing only death, “you’ll never get the chance. Pity. You always were your headmaster’s pretty little pet.”

It’s not the illusion that sets her off. It’s not even the derogatory implications of the directions of her affections, so wrong and misunderstood. So cliche. But it’s the way Ruby flashes back to that day in the woods, under grey clouds, with snow under their feet; visions of Ozma turning to ash under Salem’s hands, to words and accusations of being less than human that had chased Oscar from her side. That’s what sets her off.

Never again will he hear such words.

Ruby stumbles forwards, her head down, mouth trembling with concealed fury.

From here she can only see Oscar’s still image, his quiet after a violent death. A tear drop, red as blood, trails his cheek.

She topples forwards, Emerald’s laughter in her ears.
But it’s her hands that catch dirt, not her knees, her fingers that push off, and her semblance that carries her faster than the eye can see. Her feet hit Emerald in the chest so she falls to the ground, and Ruby lands on top of her, fist raised.

“What?” Ruby says, her blood cold with rage again, with the need to protect what is finally within her reach. “Did you think I would fall over from the pain of seeing my loved ones dead? When I know that that would be the cause of their actual demise? You’re not the only one who can play a part for somebody else’s sake.”

Before Emerald can respond, she swings her hand down, intending to knock her out, to end this before it truly begins.

But in a flash silver eyes stare up at her, alive, and her mother is the one lying beneath her. It’s an illusion, Ruby knows this. Her mind screams it. But familial attachments and eternal love halt her long enough.

A knee knocks her over and Emerald scrambles out from under her, out of reach, Summer’s pure white cape fluttering in her wake. Multiplying. Distorting.

“How...” Ruby begins, crawling to her feet.

A dark skinned woman pulls off a mask of death and smirks. “Salem told me. All Silver-Eyed warriors are the same,” she says, disdain colouring Maria Calavera’s young voice. “You love each other too much, as you love life. And humanity,” she adds as if on an afterthought, before laughing, “Ironic how it was humanity that culled your people, isn’t it?”

Oscar’s distraught voice comes back to her. *People have tried to kill you!*

Betrayal. It doesn’t hurt. After all, she had always known how it dyes white roses red with blood.

“Pure white angels,” Summer Rose says, her distorted voice purring with Cinder’s usual malice, as her eyes begin to shrivel, as blood flows from the sockets and the skin blackens like the corpses at Brunswick farm. “So easily stained with their own blood for the people they try to protect, simply because it was imprinted on their emotions by a god that has no interest in your success.”

And she isn’t wrong. Just the sight of her teacher, of her mother, of her ancestors, has rendered Ruby incapable of moving. The old fear, the loss of her sight, of being hunted for simply being who she is has returned. But it’s not what halts her; it’s the knowledge that this is her family, her tribe, and she will never know them. She didn’t even know what they looked like.

Somewhere far away, down the street, Oscar is struggling with Cinder. Is in real mortal danger. And she is his only back-up, his only real chance at survival within Emerald’s illusion.

She needs to move.

But the loss of Crescent Rose, while not as lethal as it had once been, brings her only more trouble and pain.

The illusion of her mother charges forward, ghostly white in death, her eyes black sockets, mouth open in an eternal, silent scream, and Ruby barely has time to wrench her eyes form the horrifying sight, barely has the chance to think clearly—

Emerald’s one sickle catches her along the arm, meant to dig deeper, and it’s only Ruby’s aura that saves her from parted skin and searing pain.
She retaliates, ducking and twisting to knock Emerald off her feet, but her opponent vanishes, winking out of existence as she falls.

Her hand sends sand up where she lands, however, feet digging small dunes, and Ruby scrambles after her, rose petals falling in her wake. Two ghoul-like silver eyed warriors block her path, and though she knows that they are only visual illusions, that they cannot hurt her, Ruby rears up on instinct.

“You’re wrong;” she says, instead of charging forwards. “The God of Light wanted us to succeed. Or he wouldn’t have given us an ally in Oz. He wouldn’t have given Oz a tribe full of allies. He would have left us in isolation if he hadn’t cared for humanity.”

By now Emerald will have circled back to attack her from a different angle.

She tries to listen, but all she hears are the explosions and yells from Oscar’s fight with Cinder, and that only heightens her sense of urgency. It’s difficult to ignore her heart in her throat, the deafening voice in the back of her mind, reminding her that Ozpin had died at Cinder’s hands. And then it’s impossible to concentrate or strategise.

This time, when two new empty eyed ghouls charge forwards, Ruby is ready for the assault that comes where they are not, and she ducks the sickle, hand grasping Emerald’s wrist and directing it upwards. She collects her aura in her hand and rams it straight into Emerald’s chest so the other woman gasps for air.

The illusion shivers, flickering like software on an old computer, before settling back into place.

And while Emerald is down Ruby pulls a random cartridge of Dust from her bag. She’s never done this before—used Dust in its raw form—but desperate times call for desperate measures.

As she pulls the metal casing apart, however, she catches sight of the battle between Cinder and Oscar and hesitates. They’re closer than she’d thought, the heat of Cinder’s merciless magic just out of reach as she assaults the person that magic truly belongs to.

Oscar is quick, dodging her attacks at every turn, erratic movements so fast he’s nearly a blur, even without a Semblance. And Cinder grows increasingly impatient, ferocious and straining for a fresh kill.

And it’s a distraction Ruby can’t afford, an attachment that proves lethal, that slows her down and ties her up, Emerald’s shots catching her by surprise. A bullet lodges in her shoulder, just above her heart, and tears through skin.

It doesn’t immediately hurt, but is a numbness in her flesh, of being pushed, so it’s the surprise that makes her cry out, the pain only setting in as her voice dies.

She stumbles, already turning to the enemy that should have all of her attention, but her voice is a distraction to the wrong person.

“Ruby!”

Oscar pauses. Stops. Turns like a puppet on a string.

And Cinder grins, teeth flashing in malignant victory at the first real opening. She lifts her hand, fire bursting from the tips of her fingers like a storm of burning ruin that nobody can stop or sidestep.
No-no-no-no-no!

Terror for him tears through her heart and strangles any sound she might have made, blocks any deliberate attempt at saving him.

Penny flashes before her eyes.

Pyrrha and Jaune.

Blake.

An old teacher whose smile had turned to ash.

Destruction clouds her eyes and her mind, fear taking hold, and love of something as abstract as a life like smoke between her fingers, vanishing as she grasps for it desperately.

Emerald’s illusion of Oscar intrudes, beaten, bloodied, and dead.

But a miracle happens then. And it has nothing to do with Silver Eyes or old magic.

“Don’t you dare touch Oscar!”

A child’s voice cuts through the fray; youthful indignation and possessive anger slicing clean through the silence.

A barrier of frozen light materialises around Oscar, blocking out the flames and saving him from Cinder’s assault.

The smoke rises unhindered for a long moment as they all take in the shock of an impossibility; an unexpected intrusion. On the roof of one of the houses sits a small child with an expression full of fire, surrounded by Blake, Sun, and Nilah, the blue-eyed man who had attempted to pick a fight with them when they’d arrived at the settlement. They are all holding on to the child, whose Semblance makes Emerald’s illusion crackle around them like static.

Ruby stares, incredulous and incapable of comprehending their luck, but grateful all the same.

Emerald steps into her line of sight then, and before Ruby can get her guard up, she’s landed a kick on her wounded shoulder.

Pain blossoms like icy flowers through her upper body and Ruby yells with it, her voice cutting the silence, and balance gone, air parting for her back.

“Ruby!”

This time it’s Blake’s voice answering her, and it gives her just enough strength to scatter into a thousand bloodied petals, barely avoiding another attack from the sickle.

Ruby materialises a couple of steps back, fast enough to hear Oscar yell “stay back!”

But she can see neither Blake nor Oscar now; Emerald’s illusions are flashing before her eyes again, disorienting and sneering with hatred.

“You can fight all you want, little Rose,” Emerald is saying, her tone no longer mocking but hard and matter-of-fact, “but I’ll never let you—“

Crack.
There’s no real warning before the ground splits apart below the illusions, and dozens upon dozens of glowing plants shoot out from the dark, shattering the illusions like glass.

Ruby doesn’t need a second glance to know what they are; crystalline rose-stalks full of thorns, pale and green; not grown from magic, but from a soul as pure and truthful as the effect it creates.

And Ruby laughs, a clear sound of joy and light that blossoms from her heart bypassing her brain entirely.

“What?!” Emerald exclaims in outrage as the world reshapes itself around them, as she’s placed right in the open, the sounds of the market, the reality of humanity’s existence, returning to them.

Before she can say anything else, Ruby takes two running steps towards her, unafraid of the gun directed at her heart. Her hands land in the sand, and she cartwheels into the air, semblance carrying her up and round. One hand grasps Emerald’s arm and the other her wrist, and Ruby grins down at her opponent, hanging motionlessly above her for a mere second, before she throws Emerald in an arc directly at Cinder.

The Fall Maiden zips easily out of the way, avoiding her fallen comrade, but Ruby follows after, a tornado of rose petals, materialising just in time to throw the Dust in Cinder’s face and sparking it with her Aura.

The explosion of ice and snow that erupts propels Cinder into the nearest building, and sends Ruby flying higher into the air, snow falling like white roses in her wake.

She does a backflip, hanging motionless in the air for a prolonged moment to watch the plume of dust and smoke rise from the home that had become Cinder’s crater.

“Blake, now!”

“On it,” her old teammate responds, needing no further direction.

She grabs the child around the middle, and jumps from the roof. They land beside Emerald so the little girl can close her hand firmly around Emerald’s to prevent more illusions from sprouting.

Ruby lands beside Oscar, knees absorbing most of her weight, and he’s quick to grasp her elbow with a steadying hand.

“Sorry for meddling. I know you didn’t really need my help,” Oscar says, glancing down at the cartridge in her hand, “but I sure could use yours.”

Ruby glances over scrapes and soot. His new coat is matted with sand and dirt, his hair singed at the edges. But there are no obvious wounds or broken limbs, and he manages a crooked smile at his own joke.

The pain in her shoulder is a dulled ache, thanks to the adrenaline of the fight, but it seems to have no effect on the rest of her body. There is safety in knowing he’s still in one piece, in the knowledge that she’d made it in time for once. And a heavy exhaustion, a wish for sleep and peace, settles in her bones, makes her heart still with warmth.

Beautiful crystalline rose stalks had sprouted from the ground, their thorns shattering an illusion of terror that had held her prisoner. It’s an old power, an extension of his soul that’s as comfortable as a coat of new authority.

And though he’d kept it secret it’s not the first time he’d used his Semblance in front of her either...
she’d just been too blind to see it.

Ruby doesn’t know whether to laugh at her own stupidity, or to punch him for lying to himself.

But she’d promised she wouldn’t hit him anymore, so instead she reaches up and pinches his nose. “Liar,” she accuses gently, releasing him. “You’ve kept her at bay just fine.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, wrinkling his nose at her, before his eyes bend at the edges, “but I’m just the distraction.”

Ruby nudges his side with her elbow and they share a smile.

A howl of fury cuts them off, and debris from Cinder’s crater shoot into the air like brimstone from a volcano. A beam with its tail on fire rockets towards the night sky, up, up, up, before plummeting towards the ground not far from where they stand, so both Ruby and Oscar flinch.

“She’s done this before.”

“Oscar, give me your hand,” she says, taking an instinctive step between the melting rubble and the boy at her side. Her hand, she holds back for him to take. “I want to try something. An experiment.”

She can still see her mother’s white hood painted with Ozpin’s blood.

“No?” He demands. “You want to experiment now?”

But Ruby can hear him rummaging behind her, can hear the rustle of cloth. And then feel the warmth of another’s hand in hers, skin sliding gently over skin before holding on.

She’s tried something like this with Maria, has tested how far she can push her power; further than any Warrior before her, spurred on by the determination that she is the last, and she will be the last. She will not let the sufferings of others have been in vain, she will not let pain fall on the shoulders of the next generation; she will make an impossible task possible.

But again Ruby had forgotten that they were never meant to do this alone. She’d isolated herself, and run from her enemies, rather than face them surrounded by allies.

Ahead of them, the house explodes, air pressure hitting them both, and fire following close behind, so Ruby and Oscar stagger backwards, nearly falling over in the sand.

“Pine!” The screech isn’t even entirely human anymore, the sound of Grimm apathy on the wind, and when Cinder emerges from the flames, her human skin might remain unburnt, but half of it is black and culled, shrivelled in on itself. Her red dress hangs in tatters over her human shoulder, revealing all that the Grimm had consumed, like a virus crawling across her skin, her heart, her face. Until she is but a half human, the result of one who chose destruction.

“Stop hiding behind others and give me all you’ve got!”

“Sorry, Cinder,” Oscar responds, his voice steady, even as his hold tightens on Ruby’s hand. “But that is not for you to take!”

Light bursts between their fingers, bright and overflowing with life, erasing the shadows of the streets and the darkness behind the windows. The silver stars above them glow a little brighter in response, and again Ruby feels like laughing.

Ruby’s fingers slip from Oscar’s grasp as she turns to beam at him. “Your power is for no one to take,” she says.
And she sees the way his eyes widen, the bright white wings reflected there above an endless forest, no longer an illusion. But it’s his smile, his nod of encouragement and confidence in what she is, all that she is, that stays with her.

It’s so easy to fall back into the mindset Maria has taught her now, to focus on life and love. To reflect the light that rests within Oscar Pine, pure and beautiful as the world. To protect it.

And even as she looks back to the monster Cinder has become, has been for too long, that protectiveness is a balm of light that keeps her emotions from souring into anger.

_This one you’ll never touch again._

Ruby lifts her hand over her head, her mother’s silver rose reflecting the light from her wings. A scythe grows out of the night air, long and slim, with no decorations, save the stalk that twirls along all the creations of the god of light; simple and spiralling. It reflects no visible light for it is made of nothing else.

As Ruby grasps it it hums in her hand, perfectly balanced, just for her. All her own. Indomitable.

In front of her Cinder screeches with rage at the sight of the silver light. “You would dare to try that on me three times?! You’ve failed to kill me twice already, Ruby Rose. What’s the point in wasting your time again?”

“I won’t fail,” Ruby says, twirling the scythe between her hands, “because I have no intentions of killing you."

_Don’t cut her._

_Don’t harm her._

_Just sever the link to Oz’ power and—_

Ruby raises her scythe over her head and scatters into rose petals and white feathers. In the next second she’s hovering over Cinder, blade poised.

“Give it back!”

Cinder screams the horrifying scream of Apathy, red eyes glowing with the hatred she has carried too long, but there is no weakness to empower, no fear to encourage. Just confidence and trust. And the blade slices clean through her, tearing apart the Grimm parasite that had stolen Amber’s powers, Pyrrha’s light, and Oz’ soul, and corrupted Cinder’s spirit until there had been nothing but darkness left.

It shatters like coal between her fingers, ash scattering gently on an invisible breeze. And the fire of the Fall Maiden that had been encased below bursts forward, burning away all that was left of Cinder Fall.

Ruby follows its trajectory as it shoots over her head, a comet of light and heat, towards its old owner.

“Ah! Wait! No!” Oscar flails, trying to ward it off, boyish and alarmed. “I never said I wanted it back!”

But he has no magic to deter it, and it passes through his arms, straight into his chest. Golden light encases him, pulling him off the ground for a single moment, before it fades.
With a sigh he closes his eyes, knees hitting the sand.

“Oscar—“

Ruby reappears at his side, dropping the scythe to catch him before he topples forwards. It falls away like silver star dust, sparkles of magic on an inexistent wind, but Ruby doesn’t notice.

Oscar’s heart is a beautiful beat in his chest, and she smiles in spite of herself.

It had worked. The technique she had tried to perfect under Maria’s tutelage had finally worked when she’d worked with another who carries the light of creation within him.

Relief, simple and sweet, washes over her then, the last of her strength vanishing like the tide pulling from the beach at the call of the moon. They’re safe. They’re safe for the first time since they’d been reunited. Even as her soul screams at the overuse of her Semblance, even as her limbs sing with exhaustion, Ruby laughs. They’re safe.

It’s perhaps her laughter that catches the attention of the boy in her arms, for he finds the strength to open his eyes then.

They dance, fey green, an endless forest of possibility, warm with affection, even under the blue light of a broken moon.

Then he lifts his arm and smacks her across the shoulder in retaliation for an old offence.

“Hey!” Ruby complains, laughter still dancing in her voice. “You can always give it away again later.”

Around them, their friends are gathering. More people are joining them, drawn from the market by the sound of the battle. Somebody yells to check on Grimm activity, others for a medic.

Ruby barely hears them, her focus solely on Oscar, on his smile, crooked and full of humour and relief, emotions mirroring her own.

“As fast as possible,” he reassures her. “If we’re ever going to get back into the Vault at Beacon we’ll need a new Fall Maiden.”

She opens her mouth to respond, to tease him, or tell him to relax. That another generation can care about the Gods. Rest is for the weary, and once they have released Salem from her eternal life they’ll both need it.

But life always returns, and the little girl that had saved theirs intrudes with a squeal of delight. “Ruby! Oscar!”

She throws her arms around their necks, jumping higher than possible, than her stature ought to allow, smile as bright as sunlight. “You’re okay! That looked amazing! How did your hands begin to glow like that? I thought you could only have one Semblance!”

Behind her Sun is calling “Abby! That might not be—“ but it’s difficult to hear over her own and Oscar’s laughter at her contagious joy.

It doesn’t last long, however, as the stress and fear of the battle subsides, as the rest of the light trickles from her fingers, leaving a heavy pain in her shoulder, the bullet twisting cruelly under her skin thanks to Abby’s badly timed affection.
Ruby yelps from the sudden onslaught of pain, her sight abandoning her for a heart stopping moment, crumbling to the ground.

And the little girl, with her golden monkey tail is quick to jump from Ruby’s hold as she falls, onto Oscar’s arm, his free hand fumbling with Ruby’s in a failed attempt at catching her in the last moment so he stands dumbly with her lifted elbow in his hand.

“Ruby!” they exclaim in one voice.

“Oscar, I’m begging you,” Ruby says, weak from the pain caused by the awkward position. “Let go of me.”

“No,” he replies, sinking to his knee beside her, careful to keep her arm in a better position as he does so.

“Is she going to be okay?” Abby wonders, climbing from his hold.

There are murmurs from the people around them, a circle of concerned onlookers and friends that’d joined them before Ruby had been aware. Blake is at her side as well, her cool fingers brushing back her hair to unclasp her hood.

“She’ll be fine,” Oscar says, and there’s such conviction in his voice that Ruby finds the strength to open her eyes, curious to see what he’ll do.

Gold steals the blue from his gaze, and when he looks back at her, it’s Oz.

“You’re late.”

“And you’re as reckless as ever,” he retorts.

“Can’t give me detention for that anymore, though.”

That earns her a laugh. “I only just heard your call, Ruby,” he murmurs, avoiding further scrutiny by bending his head to study her wound. “This is going to hurt.”

Ruby grimaces. “I’ll deal.”

“Not you,” he says, and his hand trembles as he places it over her wound. “It’ll be easy to relieve your pain.”

His hand glows with a pale green light and as he pulls it back, away from her, he pulls the bullet lodged in her shoulder like one magnet calling another. He’s right; it doesn’t hurt. But the sounds of her flesh parting, squishy and disgusting as only the human body can be, makes several of the bystanders yell out in surprise and jump back.

Somewhere in the background Ruby can hear the sounds of running footsteps and somebody emptying their stomach. And her own twists with the queasy knowledge that she might have felt the same had she watched the bullet emerge, but she keeps her eyes on Oz’ lowered gaze instead.

The battle had started in the middle of an argument she’d had with Oscar, and she’s sure he’s at least filling Oz in on those parts...

Somehow she isn’t afraid they’ll be okay. An argument is an argument, but she’s had those before, with Yang and Qrow, and with Oz. So long as they don’t run from a confrontation, so long as they don’t slip between each other’s fingers again. So long as he won’t vanish from her life... they’ll be
okay.

Ruby doesn’t notice the bullet clatter to the ground between them, her short laugh covering up the sound.

“What?” Oz asks, peering curiously up at her.

She shakes her head. “I might be more like Maria than I thought.”

“That’s reassuring.”

Ruby shares a look with Blake, who’s still keeping her upright. “How so?”

Oz shrugs. “She was always your most capable teacher.”

She doesn’t ask how he knows, wonders if he simply trusts Silver Eyed Warriors whomever they might be. Instead she silently follows the turn of his mouth, the way his eyes still bend with quiet, age old sorrow.

When he rests his hand on her wound again it glows with gold, warmth spreading soothingly through her limbs. And when he pulls back there is no trace of Emerald’s attack left on her body.

Ruby rolls back her shoulder and lifts her head to smile at him, to thank him, but before she can do so Oz rests a hand on her opposite shoulder and leans just a little closer in a one-armed hug.

“Thank you,” he murmurs against the side of her head, his forehead flattening her hair. And Ruby feels the tears trailing through the strands, the trembling breath against her skin. A burden carried too long, alone. “You and Oscar found a way where I never could.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for having patience with this chapter! Since it's just one long scene T.T

Gosh, this one was such a puzzle! I wanted to show how Oscar and Ruby can finally work in sync, I wanted to give Oscar his faith in humanity back (and ofc it had to come in the same shape as the one that had "proven it wrong" in the last chapter), and ofc I wanted to play with all kinds of sparkly battle techniques (which are really embarrassing to me now and I just want to hide under my desk, if I'm honest).

I also really wanted to comment on the irony of Silver Eyed Warriors; that they're there to protect and preserve life (the life of humanity) but it's also humanity that kills them.

And, of course, I've been sitting on Oscar's Semblance all these chapters!! Those of you who know which sketch this fic originated from (and have caught me talking about this) probably aren't all that surprised, but DAMN do I want those rose stalks (They're on the OzCane and I want that manifestation of Oscar's devotion to Ruby T.T). So here they are, in full glory! If you squint you can even find them in an earlier chapter as well~

I hope you approve, dear reader!!
Thank you so much for reading this chapter as well! Only one more to go! If you have a moment to spare and you enjoyed this chapter, please do leave a comment! It really makes my day to hear your thoughts!!!
Tyrian’s laughter plays a sinister tune to a nightmare of broken bodies.

Ozma turns to dust under Salem’s fingers, the golden light of his spirit like magic on the wind, floating up, and round, before glowing around Pyrrha, as Cinder burns away her life with a power given only to those of noble, kind spirits. Penny lies, ripped in half on an arena floor. Her green eyes no longer speak of human life, but robotic immobility.

The image twists, sand swallowing the blood from wounds impossible to heal, metallic green turning to glass reflecting no light in the world. Oscar’s body lies broken and twisted under a black sky, night swallowing his life.

“My only light, you might stray from our path again and leave me in darkness.”

His words, trembling and full of fear, fade to silence, only to be replaced by Tyrian’s laughter.

Ruby wakes with a gasp.

She pulls the covers off of her and crawls off the futon as quickly as she can, sleep still dragging on her limbs and mind like chains keeping her down.

Only when she’s standing in the cool air of Blake’s empty room, bare feet connecting with old wooden floors, and eyes catching on the moonlight through the window, does she realise that she’s running from a nightmare that will never capture her again.

Emerald’s illusion hadn’t become a reality.

And the rest...?

Sorrow drags on her heart and Ruby closes her eyes to keep the pain at bay.

Death never happens twice to anybody but Oz and all the souls he joins forces with. And they have the tools to end the cycle now.

But it’s no reassurance and the evening’s events are returning to her with new clarity, even after just a few hours of sleep, and Ruby is flayed at the edges, her heart worn thin by harsh battles and solitude. There is no victory in strength.

Sleepy melancholy weighs her down as she dresses in a white t-shirt and green pants. Blake has spirited away her dirty clothes once more, and Ruby hopes, thought a far away whisper, an attachment frayed by time and distance, that what is left of her mother’s hood is saveable.

Even if Crescent Rose is gone, she cannot lose her hood.

Ruby closes her eyes painfully, fingers tracing the door handle.

Outside the house breathes a silent sigh of sleep, the night bringing only a whisper of dreamy wonder, starlight a gentle caress across blissful, faraway smiles.
Ruby lights a tiny candle in the kitchen, and quietly produces the cacao she’d noticed in Blake’s cupboard some days ago. Oz’ habit is one she should have picked up long ago; sweet solace from nightmares and loss, from a path of thorns chosen with a heart too full.

But a hand on her wrist pauses her before she can turn on the stove, and Oscar steals the tin of cacao from between her fingers.

Moonlight touches a melancholy smile, a caress of cool along sunloved skin. His eyes don’t stray from hers, kind and expectant, meadow deep in an eternal forest. Haven.

“Hot chocolate might have its uses,” he murmurs, interlacing their fingers and touching the knuckles of his free hand to her chin. “But it merely keeps things at bay.”

And she gets it. Ruby truly gets it. Looking up at Oscar, into green eyes full of muted understanding, subtle patience, she thinks she understands Oz better than she ever has. Kindness is beautiful and enchanting, like the gentle touch of sunlight across a smile. Everything falls away, all the pain and the confusion, under the soft pull of kindness, like ice falls at the slow urging of the tide. But it is fragile, and difficult to preserve, and she too would hand over all her power to unselfish kindness, if she had the ability to give it away.

“I know,” she says. “This is better.”

Ruby steps into him and hides her face in the crook of his neck. She settles her arms around his middle, and just breathes for a long moment.

Just one step. There had been no more distance between them. That’s all it had taken to eradicate her fear and her insecurity. A simple, selfish action.

And Oscar, sweet, and boyish, and beautiful, doesn’t flounder with surprise or awkwardness. He knows her, and somehow he’d known exactly what she’d needed before she had. And he folds around her like a blanket, a familiar old sweater, hiding her from the night and the dark. He touches his lips to the shell of her ear, a puff of joy parting her hair.

“It really is.”

Oscar is safe and warm, an offer of solace as private as the deepest forests, where a white bird might rest her wings and forget the dangers and distractions of the world.

But that too is an illusion of freedom, a false shade on the road they walk lit only by the light of creation. The only shadow they meet is the chaotic one that stalks their feet and waits at the end.

And even now it creeps into her mind, the darkness that falls in the wake of the powerful light she has to cast.

During battle Ruby might be good at ignoring the illusions of her loved ones hurt beyond repair, nightmares nothing but ghosts on the wind, smoke between her fingers, but they never truly leave her behind, haunting dreams at night and daylight phantasms. They’d held her prisoner in a wasteland devoid of life or emotion, so even her tears had frozen against her skin.

But she isn’t alone anymore, won’t be alone again for a long time, and tears slip naturally in burning trails down her cheeks into the collar of Oscar’s shirt. Ruby tightens her hold around him and exhales a breath she’d been holding too long.

For a near eternity Oscar doesn’t say a word. He simply runs his fingers through the strands of her hair and gently holds her close, so she can feel the life beating against her chest, erasing the terror
of illusions with the steady rhythm of reality.

And when there are no more silver tears falling from her eyes, he steps back and smiles, eyes glowing with the gentle warmth of pride and affection.

“Come,” he says, intertwining their fingers once more and pulling her towards the rose garden.

Ruby brushes away her tears and steps up to nudge his shoulder. Oscar makes everything easier, and walking alongside him makes the burden they carry so much lighter.

“You’re right,” Oscar says after they’ve watched the broken moon cross the sky above them, out of sight. “I was too afraid to give myself to anybody, to trust them. That was probably justified for a while, but I let resentment blind me, even though I’d received so much kindness after what happened in Argus.”

“Well,” Ruby says, averting her eyes, cheeks flushing. “I wasn’t entirely right, was I?”

She’d lost her temper and she’d made it more personal than she should have. She’d made accusations thinking she understood him to his core, when she’d remained blind to something as fundamental as his soul.

Or perhaps she too had been blinded by fear; too afraid of not finding what she’d hoped for, wished to see, that she’d been incapable of looking properly in the first place. Mortality is a terrifying thing, and she’s lost him to the passage of time already once before...

Oscar tilts his head, green eyes sparkling with fey mischief. “No?”

“No,” she says, her face flushing a deeper red.

Their attachment is the same. Affection and devotion burning like liquid honey in their veins, and yet the depth of his emotions is frightening. It has been frightening for a long time.

“Does that mean you’ll work with others again now?” she asks, ignoring his bait. She needs answers before she can give her own; she cannot become his lifeline in all of this.

Oscar’s smile softens, eyes bending with melancholy longing. “Yes,” he says. He sighs the sigh of the ages, tracing the roses as they lead him to the stars. “If there’s one thing Oz’ memories have taught me, it’s that there’s always kindness somewhere, and no matter how late we are to regain our courage, somebody will be there to aid us when we do.”

And it’s a relief, true freedom, chains that fall from her feet so that she might fly free at any moment. But she remains in her seat by his side, laughter in her voice, reflected in his eyes as she nudges him playfully.

“You speak as if you committed some great crime by leaving us for those three years.”

But the laughter drains out of him then, gravity and reality pulling on his limbs. The fairy tale is his to tell, but rarely his to live. “Didn’t I?”

Ruby thinks of her own loneliness, the imbalance his absence had created. The restless nights full of anger at Oz, and Qrow, at Jaune and all her other friends. At herself for not being able to speak her mind clearly enough to diffuse the situation. The fear for him, wondering where he was in the world, hoping he was safe, alive.
Not lost to the sands of time, or the fire of a fallen maiden.

Beyond her reach.

But she looks up at him and sees the truth; that her own grief could shatter him, that there is only one real answer.

“You followed the only path we allowed.” Ruby says. She brushes her fingers to his chin, gentle and careful, and smiles. “But you didn’t follow it far; you found your own path, and you carved it with your own hands. And you never retreated. There is no crime in that.”

Oscar takes her hand and lowers it, gaze following them down. “Then... do you think Qrow and Jaune were right?”

“No.”

Ruby pulls her hand from Oscar’s hold and places both of hers against his cheeks to make him look up, look at her. See the conviction that had been there, always.

“I meant what I said all those years ago,” she tells him, willing every word to pass beyond the quiet astonishment, the fear of her truth. “You are your own person, and they were never right.”

And still Oscar’s eyes grow wide, green swimming in an ocean of unshed tears. His lower lip wobbles, and in one quick movement he’s wound his arms around her waist once more and pulled her close, hiding his face in the crook of her neck.

“Thank you.”

Ruby smiles and gently pulls on the tips of his hair. She doesn’t say anything, but she wonders, regrets, wishes that if she’d been more confident, if she’d been more aware of her surroundings, perhaps she would have seen all the pain in his heart back in Argus and been able to stop him from running away.

Instead she says, “you really should talk to Oz about these things. I’m sure he’d be able to relieve your fears much faster.”

Oscar’s laugh is a puff of air down her neck. “Well, I did,” he admits, and when he pulls back his eyes glow with his smile, with beautiful relief and warming affection. “But hearing your voice, and knowing that you never believed it, means much more to me than hearing the facts from him.”

And they share a smile, bright like sunshine and moonlight, eyes closing with joy. They lean against each other in a garden full of roses, resting in shared warmth and watching the sun rise to a new morning.

“She what?!”

Yang’s voice cuts through the stillness of the air, static and far away, and Ruby hears it before stepping into the empty sitting room-turned-mess hall the next day.

Oscar and Blake are grinning at a scroll set up on one of the tables showing a gaping Yang.

“Oh, why do I always miss my baby sister being awesome? Oscar, by the gods, if you didn’t film this I will —“

Weiss pushes her aside with a hand over her mouth. “She’s kidding.”
“That’s true,” Yang says, bouncing quickly back into view. “Oscar wouldn’t know I’d want that footage, but Blake…”

She looks up at her partner with stars in her eyes, so Ruby almost reveals her presence with a laugh. She holds a hand over her mouth to hide it, and leans against the doorframe to watch her sister looking utterly crushed at Blake’s comment that she’d really had “other things to worry about.”

“I’m sure you’ll get the chance to see it again some day,” Weiss says, nudging Yang aside again, albeit more gently this time, before addressing Oscar. “We’re very happy to hear that you’re all safe, however. All of you. It’s been too long with no news.”

Oscar smiles, and rubs the back of his neck. “Sorry about that.”

She waves him off with a smile. “You were there when it mattered,” she says. “Now tell us of this plan of yours…”

Ruby stays in her spot in the shadow of the door, from which she can watch the meeting unnoticed and uninterrupted. Oscar speaks with demur respect, letting the others cut across him, chaotic and full of ideas. And only very slowly does he begin to relax his hold on himself; his shoulders fall and his smile widens, eyes sparkling with withheld laughter.

He’d still been afraid when he’d begun the call, old anger and unnecessary resentment the last thing he remembers of once-friends, but all that has vanished from her sister and friends, evaporated under the heat of other experiences, along with all the flaws of sheltered youthful naïveté.

But Oscar had found the courage to keep his promise to Ruby, had found the courage to trust her words, and they’ve all been rewarded for it.

His smile glows like the spring sun once again, bright and new and beautiful after an endless winter.

And when the call ends and Oscar lifts his gaze from the device to see Ruby in the door, his smile brightens, summer warmth and blinding.

“You know you could have rescued me from your sister.”

“You don’t need rescuing from Yang,” she retorts, stepping away from the door.

“He might,” Blake offers with a wry smile, “when she realises how good he and Oz are at hand to hand combat, she’ll be eager for the competition.”

Oscar makes a face. “I’ll leave that to him. Good morning,” he adds to Ruby, as she makes it round the table to them.

His hand slips down and out of sight, grasping hers in a brief touch of reassurance that makes her smile.

“I’m pretty sure we can’t call it morning anymore.”

“Your body needed the rest,” Blake chides. She glances at Oscar. “Especially when you have such bad influences around that keeps you up half the night right after fighting so recklessly.”

Oscar flushes, pulling his hand back to scratch the back of his neck. And Ruby grins, nudging him with her elbow. “She’s right. We can’t both be reckless.”
“Like I’d leave you to take all the risks.”

While she and Oscar had been sleeping off the fight, Blake and Sun had handed Emerald off to authorities from Shade. The academy is still the only real authority in the kingdom, and the headmaster there, still very loyal to Ozpin, had shown a very real interest in questioning somebody that close to Salem.

“She’s not going to find much, I’m afraid,” Oz sighs later. But then he pauses. “On the other hand she always was the craftiest of us, so I might be wrong.”

“Are you going to be letting go of the Relic of Destruction when we get there?” Ruby asks him.

They’d pushed aside Blake’s notes, to use the large desk for a private early dinner, as both she and Oscar had been starving. And Sun and Blake had insisted they needed to plan their next move.

“Only if Winter is still here,” he says. “Which I advised her not to be. But it’s been more than a year...”

“What?!” Sun exclaims, putting down his chopsticks so they clack against the desk. “You’ve been running around with that thing for over a year?!”

Oz smiles bemusedly. “I assure you, Mr Wu Kong. The Relic of Destruction is a familiar weight against my side,” he says. “It’s burden no longer haunts me.”

And though he speaks so lightly of the topic Ruby’s smile falls in quiet sympathy. Oscar had confided in her during the quiet hours of the morning, the nightmarish memories of the last battle of the Great War, of the sacrifice Oz had made as King of Vale; the choice of killing thousands of soldiers, rather than making the war drag on for another unbearable eternity.

“That’s why he never left Beacon; it was the only punishment he could think of when he couldn’t die. Confinement.”

“So, when are we leaving?”

Ruby and Oz share a look, and Blake looks up in surprise.

“What?” Sun says, mildly insulted at their response. “After sharing the fact that some creepy lady is controlling the Grimm and trying to divide the world, you thought I was just going to sit back and let my friends fight her on their own?”

“Well,” Oz amends, “my experience is that people are usually a little more hesitant to join a sinking ship.”

“As far as I can tell, the ship is sinking whether I do anything or not. And you have a plan now.”

Oz glances at Ruby, blue doubt trickling into his gaze. “It is a small window of hope Oscar and Ruby have given us, but it is entirely up to Ruby whether we’ll be going through with it, or looking for a different way.”

Had it been Oscar, she would have touched him, would have reached out and pulled him from the grief of a thousand hopeless lifetimes, gently guiding him back to a place where he can smile with ease. And she wants to do that; Oz’ melancholy is bending Oscar’s eyes isn’t new, but the sight of it always unsettles her. Yet, she cannot simply touch him now; she can only reach him with her words and her confidence.
“Then we’re going to use all that we’ve got to throw that window wide open,” she says with a smile. “There’s no need to let this go on any longer than it has to.”

And though it doesn’t erase the past reflected in his eyes, Oz finds a hesitant smile at her words. “Thank you.”

She’ll be his spark of hope if that’s what he needs, but neither Ruby nor Oscar want to see their burden move on to the next generation. They won’t have to hold up the burden of the broken moon anymore, if they can simply repair it now.

“Once the harvest is over, I’ll be transferring all our findings to dad’s office in Menagerie,” Blake says. “Then we’ll help with packing everything up and clearing out. So we should be able to meet up with the two of you once your exam is over.”

“Ilia is going to be sad to see you leave the Fang again,” Sun observes, stuffing more vegetables in his mouth.

“I’m sure she’s too busy to worry about me now,” Blake says with a soft smile. “Especially since she’ll be in charge of implementing our findings. And I want to see Yang again.”

“Yeah,” Ruby closing her eyes in quiet bliss at the very idea. “Yang and Weiss and everyone else.”

They stay for the harvest. Sweat travels down her neck under an unforgiving sun, constant physical labour much more draining than anything Ruby has ever attempted. And at night she lingers in the door to her bedroom, sharing one last sleepy smile with Oscar, too exhausted to do anything more than let her eyes stray; the world and humanity—creation—keeping their hands and their minds occupied, when their hearts wait with bated breath. For selfish reprieve.

But it’s worth it in the end; to see all the fruits and vegetables loaded into boxes, onto tables. All the colours of the rainbow. All the smiles of their success.

And as the hugs and the congratulations begin to fade, and the residents of the settlement begin to prepare for the harvest festival, the visitors from Menagerie turn to the tedious work of cataloguing all their findings; the best way to hunt Grimm in hot areas, how to instal aqueducts and use them, how to find water tunnels, expand cities and fields. Oscar joins their work, easy smile and summer warmth, folding into the crowd as if he simply belongs with people.

And it’s enough for Ruby to slip away, to nudge Sun and ask about the town’s forges, to lend her strength and her mind to the sooty work of recreating what had been lost to her, blade moulding like an old friend under her fingers, and rifle sparking to life after tireless dedication.

The old smith from the weapon’s shop watches over her, guiding her when time has caused her technique to fail, and brainstorming with her when she wants to change a part of the design. And when she’s deep in wires and programming he tells her stories from a different era; from before the other kingdoms began to meddle in the south of Sanus.

“You know, we’ve got stories of people with wings of light as well,” he says on the third day.

Ruby pauses what she’s doing, sleep deprived brain slow at computing what he’s said. “About Silver Eyed Warriors?” She says once she’s connected the dots.

“Yeah.”

He settles into the chair more thoroughly and taps his pipe against the surface of his desk. Then he turns it around and watches tragically as ash falls from its head. “You know, before the kingdoms
we know of today. When the world was divided by distance rather than warfare and nationhood, the south of Sanus was the richest place on Remnant. Our natural resources made it easy for us to defend against the Grimm, and we were therefore able to build our lives on leisure and pleasure. Or so the history books tell us.

“But you’ve seen the way the desert bends to no pleasure but her own. And how often we deal with intruders that find easy passage into our lives. So it was something else, something best kept secret today, that protected us.”

Ruby, who had begun tinkering with the last of her work, pauses what she’d been doing. “Like people who can turn the Grimm to dust?”

“Exactly. At the centre of our lives was a huge pool of fresh water. The first people who wandered here from the north are said to have found an oasis without equal. Thousands of trees full of fruit, and vegetables sprouting from the ground. Animals with meat as ripe as if they’d been born from the soil of a volcano. So here they settled, by a huge lake that glowed under the midday sun.

“But as humans thrive they expand, and so they began to work the land. The desert doesn’t offer us much hope of a rainfall,” he says, chuckling fondly as if at an old friend. “So we used the water from the lake. And for a time, nothing happened. But then some of their children were born with eyes like mirrors that caught the light of the world and reflected it back against the monsters that would break their peace and steal their loved ones.”

His voice fades then, letting her absorb the story in silence. He rummages through small paper boxes behind his counter and produces a box of tobacco which he proceeds to fill his pipe with.

Ruby returns to her work, edging the last of her family insignia into the metal, adding small branches to support the flowering rose. She checks the programming on her scroll and connects the last of the wiring.

Ruby smiles down at the product of her work, limbs exhausted under so many all-nighters. Its steel blade reflects the world like silver, and the carvings of plant life, twirling in spirals along the barrel a dedication she will spend all her days upholding.

She lifts her new weapon, twirls it between tired fingers to check its balance one last time. It’s new but old, a reflection of all her habits, yet a reminder of the different world that is to come; one with fewer enemies and more unity.

The shop keeper grins. “Now that’s a blade it I ever saw one.”

When she reaches for the red spray cans, a while later, it meets her half way across the distance and she takes it gratefully.

Oscar’s eyes bend in a smile, fingers brushing along her knuckles in a subtle caress.

She throws her arm over his shoulder half an hour later, when they’ve said their goodbyes to the shop keeper and left the paint on Crescent Rose to dry.

“...It’s odd,” she says, once she finishes telling him the story of the lake of creation. “I don’t even need to ask what happened to them.”

Oscar nods demurely. “They felt the same call, the love of humanity.”

“The need to explore a wider world.”
They share a smile.

“But what about the lake of creation? Did it dry out? Or was it destroyed during invasions?”

Oscar shakes his head. “It’s still there,” he says with a secretive smile. “The people here know where it is but they have no intentions of sharing it with outsiders. You couldn’t have picked a better place for your little experiment than Vacuo.”

The harvest festival ends in a splash of colour, a feast under the stars and music that makes even the air around them sing to the beat of their drums. Fire breathers and illusion weavers create spectacular shows that rival the greatest feats of magic even Oz could have imagined; images of fire breathing dragons diving towards the settlement to the thrill of every child, winged people dancing in its wake, counting silver stars, followed by fireworks blooming across the night sky.

Down on the ground, vendors have set up fair games and competitions, so that Ruby gets to show off her sniping skills at a stand, winning Abby the largest stuffed toy to a round of applause.

Sun and Blake show off their combat skills on a balancing pole where the winner is the one who knocked the other to the ground; Blake had taken that title, barefooted and balanced as a cat, ducking one of Sun’s high kicks and unbalancing him in the process so he’d flailed comically in mid air for a prolonged moment before face-planting in the sand.

And in the middle of the square a large sandy dance floor has been left open, where couples are dragging each other along to a bright beat, barefooted and laughing under artificial fireflies that cast a warm glow across their faces.

Ruby and Oscar circle that floor, taking their time to enjoy every stand, to gaze up at drum players with fire in their veins and thrill in their eyes, to compete at the stalls, and to laugh with their friends.

But the little girl on Oscar’s shoulders eventually grows bored.

She jumps down, somersaulting elegantly on her way to the ground. “I want to dance!” She declares brightly, and drags Oscar off.

He fumbles for a moment, but then he looks back at Ruby and lifts a finger to smiling lips, winking. His eyes glow gold, and Oz is suddenly stuck with the little girl’s enthusiasm.

Ruby laughs at his confusion from the sidelines.

It doesn’t last long however, and the old soul spends a couple of songs humouring the child, his smile growing softer and warmer with every beat. Until at last he lifts her off the ground and spins her in the air, so she lands once more on his shoulders, laughing with glee.

They return, smiles bright and blinding, two children, for once untouched by the dangers of the world.

“And now, little Abby, you’ll have to excuse me, while I spirit away my companion,” Oz says, setting her down.

And this time it’s Ruby who’s pulled from her seat by a firm hand, toes bending the sand under her as Oz drags her off.

“Uh... Oz, don’t you think this might be a little too awkward?”
Oz waits for her to regain her footing, placing his free hand against her back and grins down at her. “My dear Miss Rose, I am but the distraction.”

His eyes glow briefly with gold, and Oscar stares down at her in bewilderment. “I—“

He blinks cutely, trying to take in the situation he finds himself in, and the heat rises in their cheeks at the exact same moment.

“I guess he got his revenge,” Ruby offers.

Oscar’s smile is slow to form, and he looks like he’s fumbling with something precious, with a heart held out in his hands before he’d realised it. And she wonders with bated breath what he’s going to do, if he’ll retract it and run away.

“Yeah.”

Around them other couples are enjoying themselves, smiling and talking, swaying in sync to the music. And yet Ruby can’t find the will to move, to look away and stop tracing the way his smile spreads with sweet adoration, or the colour of his cheeks, freckles like constellations across his skin.

She could grow roots in the arms of Oscar Pine.

He makes a face then, hold on her relaxing. “He ran away,” he says.

Ruby laughs; she’d never imagined seeing them war against each other in this way, messing with the other in a way that will put them in a position to grasp happiness, fleeting and fragile though it may be. But then Oscar’s hand slides a little further along her spine, and she nearly chokes at the sensation of it.

Her face flushes bright red and she lowers her face to hide it.

“Ah,” he murmurs, hand crawling back up again. “Sorry. I didn’t mean—“

“You know,” Ruby interrupts, lifting her chin again to smile at him brief and bolder than she feels. She steps into him then, cheek resting against his shoulder. “I wouldn’t mind if you had.”

To be casually touched by another person, to know they are that comfortable with her is a pleasure all in itself, a purring warmth in her limbs. But there is a thrill that accompanies such an intimate touch from Oscar, fire and ice scattering across her skin making her want to lean closer, seek more.

Ruby watches with relish as that same pleasure crawls up Oscar’s spine at the same time as her breath curls along his neck.

But she takes mercy on him, shy that he is, and takes a step back to face him. She stretches on her toes and sees her smile reflected in his eyes, constellations of silver stars in an endless sea of green.

“You’re impossible,” he breathes, soft and pretty.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

And finally he smiles, eyes crinkling at the edges, enchanting, so it’s easy to forget their awkward beginnings, feet finding a new pattern in the sand, falling into a rhythm as old and familiar as their bond, dancing along a red string that had tied them together from the start.

“So...” Ruby says a while later, when they are back in the house, sitting among the roses once
more. “What exactly caused you to awaken your semblance? How long have you had it?”

The house around them is still, and they are mostly alone. The music from the festival reaches them here, far away, left behind for a moment of quiet privacy.

Ruby remembers the beautiful crystalline rose stalks sprouting from the ground, a silent declaration of attachment that runs deeper than the heart. But she also remembers the sparring match, the way he had used it, hidden out of sight, but somehow still it had reached her. And she wonders if it’s okay to ask, if it’s okay to pry.

But Oscar smiles, exhales a breath he’s held too long. “A couple of months after I left Argus. I was still struggling for a reason to keep fighting and I got lost in a forest,” he explains. “Oz and I still weren’t entirely getting along and he was giving me space, so he weren’t there to help me when the Grimm showed up. I tripped, and I fell and dropped the cane. And then I saw the rose stalks along the silver and I thought of you, of that day in the snow.”

She had reached for him, had touched him and acknowledged all that he was, in the centre of a storm of rage and rejection. You’re your own person. And even when he’d been far away those words had still stayed with him.

“The next thing I knew all the Grimm had shattered from existence and all that was left were these rose stalks, sprouted from the ground.”

As he speaks a slim, elegant stalk grows from the ground between them. It picks up a fallen rose on the way and raises it from the ground once more, offering it to Ruby.

She accepts the distraction with both hands, holding it carefully in her lap to give him time to compose himself. But when she directs her attention to Oscar once more, his cheeks are still red with his confession.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathes. She’d meant to simply reassure him, but her words erupt from the heart, bypassing her brain, and she smiles bashfully up at him. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

She can hear it, whispered between the lines, the words he need not speak; you are my light, the reason I can go on fighting. What makes the world worth saving.

“I was afraid,” Oscar begins. He stops, laughs, and scratches the back of his neck demurely. “It didn’t matter until I sought you out again. But I didn’t know how you’d react; it ... it felt like I was placing a heavy burden on your shoulders that you didn’t need. And I was hoping you wouldn’t see —“

His voice breaks and he stares helplessly back at her. “And yet I still feel like we can actually do this, accomplish the impossible, if we’re together.”

Oscar had come back for her. He’d returned to her side not because of the light at her core, not for some fated connection, but because he’d longed for her, as she is. But he’d been afraid of that attachment, and trusted only the words of those that had hurt him.

“We can do this,” Ruby says, putting away the rose to take his hand instead.

Her heart is light in her chest, as if it might grow wings and soar into an endless sky, simply because of his words.

“We can do this because we’re together. Because we’re stronger together,” she says. “But you’re right. We can’t shoulder this burden all on our own. We need our friends, and we need Oz.”
Oscar’s hand tightens around Ruby’s, and he looks at her, earnest and imploring. “I want to save him, Ruby. He’s wandered too long.”

“She has,” she agrees, smiling as light returns to his face. “Let’s be the ones to see him off at the edges of life.”

“Yes,” he agrees, mellow sweetness bleeding into his voice, softening his gaze. And he touches his knuckles to her chin, a caress up her jawline, fingers brushing aside strands of red and black.

And he’s so heart-achingly beautiful. Enchanting and mesmerising. Ruby wants nothing more than to lean forwards and drown in a sea of jade, to forget herself in-between the branches of an endless forest; to hold out her heart with trembling hands, trusting that he will protect it for all time, never letting it shatter between his fingers.

But she stops. Freezes. Blood rushing to her cheeks and sliver dipping away in sudden embarrassment. “Uh... speaking of Oz...”

Oscar pulls back from her, eyes dancing with mischief. “He’s still gone,” he says simply, voice trembling as if he’s trying not to laugh.

Ruby opens her mouth and closes it again. “Gone?”

“’The deepest heart of my old student’s soul is neither for me to know nor honour,’ he said, before hiding out of reach,” Oscar explains with an expression of lighthearted mockery that ruins the solemnity of Oz’ declaration.

And the sheer relief that accompanies his words makes Ruby laugh. “So we have privacy?”

Oscar’s eyes glow fae green, bright and beautiful. “For all my days.”

“Good,” she murmurs, fingers tracing his jaw in a light caress. “That means I don’t have to second guess doing this.”

Oscar gently grasps her hand, leaning forward to meet her halfway. “Never,” he murmurs against her lips.

It’s a touch, a summer breeze, soft and shy. And Ruby and Oscar part, eyes fluttering open, hooded and enchanted, just long enough to share a smile.

And it lingers, lighthearted and sweet on her lips as she leans in again, as Oscar’s fingers travel into her hair, aching and new all at once.

Oscar makes everything easier. It’s easy to smile around him. To laugh once more. To reflect the light he naturally brings to the world. To hand over her heart just like that, and know it’ll never come to harm again, and to spread wings of bright freedom with him at her side, to see the future, lit with beautiful light.

When they part again, hearts thundering away, breath trembling across her lips, Ruby presses her forehead against Oscar’s.

“I—” he begins.

But Ruby opens her eyes in response and the rest catches in his throat, as if he’s watching a miracle.
“What?”

“You’re....” he begins, cheeks flushing. “You’re doing it again.”

“How?”

They lean back, away from each other, and Oscar smiles bashfully, scratching the back of his neck. “Your eyes are glowing...”

Ruby opens her mouth, and closes it again. Then she turns to look at her own reflection in the glass doors, and true enough; her eyes are glowing faintly with starlight.

Her heart skips a beat.

“But...” she rubs her eyes. “How is this possible? There are no Grimm... and I was only thinking about—“

Her head shoots up, words caught just in time. And though her eyes are normal now, she barely notices, turning slowly to look at a smiling Oscar. Her face burns.

“Don’t be smug,” she complains, pushing him lightly against the shoulder.

“Hey,” he says, catching her hand and intertwining their fingers. Still grinning. “At least I’m not the only one who ends up getting ridiculously attached. Can you blame me for being happy?”

Ruby opens and closes her mouth. He’s right, of course. And her heart still sings with it; with the joy of Oscar’s declaration, with the warmth and summer it brings her, knowing that they’re together, that he’ll be by her side.

“I could never blame you for that,” she says, pulling on his hand and drawing him closer.

Oscar laughs and follows her, leaning into her, lips just brushing.

But he pauses, eyes sliding away.

“What—“ Ruby begins, ready to pout at whatever had distracted him.

But she follows his gaze to the rest of the small garden. And gasps.

Silver stars glow in constellations all around them, their gentle light reflecting off the velvet fabric of the roses, white and red, in a garden all their own.

“Wha—“ she murmurs, eyes wide with awe, enchanted. She pulls herself up properly to stare at them. “Are you doing this?”

“Not... entirely,” Oscar says.

He’s already looking at her, smile a sweet note in the corners of his mouth.

“I can’t do magic on my own, remember? This is...” he scratches the back of his neck, eyes straying thoughtfully. “Probably something we’re creating together.”

Not reflecting. But creating.

“I’m glad,” she says, linking their arms and nudging his shoulder, before settling in to watch the constellations of magic dancing around them.
They share a smile.

Ruby and Oscar set out from the settlement on foot a couple days later. They say their goodbyes to people that have become their friends and companions, sharing words of good luck and thanks. And Blake hugs them both so fiercely Ruby nearly starts crying in her arms.

“You’ll be amazing at the exam,” Blake says. “And I’ll see you on the other side.”

Oscar smiles bashfully up at her and extends his hand when it’s his turn, but Blake waves it away, for a hug. “Take care of yourself,” she says. “Both of you. We’ve got your back.”

“I know,” he murmurs, pulling back. “Thank you.”

Sun too hugs them goodbye with promises of following them before they know it.

And this time, as they set off ahead of old friends, leaving them behind, Ruby finds a smile for the world. It won’t be the last they see of each other, and they have a path to walk, a final goal to seek towards, carving out their own tracks along the way. Their promises leave her light footed on her own road, with courage carrying her forwards.

The headmaster at Shade smiles with amusement at Oscar’s request that she bend the rules for an old friend. “What do you think, Miss Rose? Do you think he’s as capable as one your own age?”

Ruby grins. “Well, you know what they’re like,” she says, nudging Oscar’s shoulder. “They like to show off to give humanity something to believe in.”

“Alright, then,” the headmaster says, her tail swishing with predatory interest. “Let’s give them something to hope in once again. Just don’t use that thing at your hip anywhere near my kingdom!”

Oscar laughs. “I promise.”

Determination suits him, goals and unity of mind giving him a purpose he’d never truly had. It’s a triumph all on its own.

The next morning, as the headmaster of Shade Academy steps up to the podium to speak to a crowd of aspiring professional huntsmen and huntresses, Ruby pulls Oscar aside behind a pillar.

“Shouldn’t we hear what she has to say?” He protests.

“Like we haven’t heard similar speeches from Oz and Ironwood often enough,” Ruby says, checking the hasps at the neck of her hood are still secure. She grins mischievously at him. “And since when are you a stickler for rules?”

Oscar laughs. “So?” He murmurs, leaning close so their noses brush. His eyes are dancing, molten jade, affection scorching. “What is it?”

“I wanted to make sure,” Ruby says, placing both hands against his cheeks and pushing back. His smile falls in response, mirroring her solemnity. “Who are you doing this for?”

It’s a test, a tiny one. A reassurance that he’s finally free of the burdens of the world, the accusations and rage that had been directed at him from too many directions.

But Oscar’s eyes crinkle at the edges, smile a shadow in the corner of his mouth. “Myself. And,” he adds, reaching for her hand and lifting her fingers to his lips. “To best your every score, of course.”
Ruby chokes on her own laughter at the sudden challenge, and she pulls her hand from his grip to push at his shoulder. “In your dreams, Oscar Pine!”

“We’ll just have to wait and see, won’t we?”

His eyes are dancing again, fey mischief.

Ruby extends her fist towards him, and he meets it with his own, knocking them together.

“You’re on!”
If you enjoyed it feel free to check in again tomorrow n.n and please do share your thoughts!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!