The Final Warning

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The Final Warning

by moonsandstar_s

Summary

As the year draws to a close, the Vytal festival commences, bringing the chance for heroes to win glory for their kingdoms. Yet as the first winds of winter begin to blow over Remnant, they bring with them more than the cold. Ruby must reconcile herself with her own fate. Weiss struggles to escape a legacy she never wanted. Blake cannot erase the stains of her past. Yang’s search leads her into more peril than ever—but destiny has different plans than the ones they made for themselves, and none of them can outrun fate. Team RWBY knows that in the eye of the hurricane, no peace can last forever, and the first clouds of the storm are looming dark on the horizon. The final warning is coming: it’s time to take sides.

The first chill of winter is the most deadly; it is the chill that kills more than any other. The first betrayal is the most damaging; it is the act that shatters bonds of love and trust, crushing even the strongest heart, tearing teams apart.
Do not go gentle into that good night, 
old age should burn and rave at close of day 
rage, rage against the dying of the light.

though wise men at their end know dark is right, 
because their words had forked no lightning 
they do not go gentle into that good night.

— Dylan Thomas

Blake

Fire.
The flame, the burning, the scorch. Blistering heat was all she knew. All she heard, felt, sensed... it consumed her vision, consumed her reality; this place was all that existed, truly. Fire raged around her, an ocean of boiling flame. Smoke curled into the air, choking her throat, burning... burning...

She found herself on a circle of grass that had not yet caught fire, coughing horribly as the flames swirled around her in paradoxically beautiful colors of orange, gold, scarlet. And beauty, she knew, could often kill.

“Help!” she yowled desperately, her voice caught in the gaping maw of the fire, scarcely knowing to whom she was calling for. The fire lapped hungrily at her exposed skin, and she shrank back.

“Help me!”

Suddenly, the molten flames parted like liquid.

Through streaming eyes, she looked up. Her call had been answered— a figure was sauntering towards her through the smoke, coming forth, eyes glowing like embers. Jade green eyes with rims of amber, like the light of the sun was trapped in their depths...

She realized who it was just as he stopped in front of her, sneering down as she crouched, helpless, on the grass. Behind her was the fire. Before her was a man who was crueler than any storm of nature, because nature had made it so. His baleful, pale gaze was fixed on her, and the leaping flames danced inside of it. Once, she would have been defiant; now, she only saw the bloody light of the burning forest reflected in his eyes.

“Ayran,” she tried to say, but the words caught in her throat, coming out silently as smoke. For the first time in her life, her fear overwhelmed her need to survive, and she didn’t attempt to flee as he drew back his lips and snarled down at her.

“Blake,” he said with a terrible smile. “Look at you, my pet, trapped in the very fire that once warmed you, and now has turned on you. But it matters not, of course... You didn’t even feel guilty
when you killed me, did you? No tears for your leader, for who made you what you are. You, the third defector— you will never escape me, not even in death.” He leaned closer, and she looked in horror at his face, pitted and scarred like the dark side of the moon, a cruel, gleeful grin curling his mouth. “You have never escaped, child of nightshade. And you never will, not as long as you live; your luck, finally, has forsaken you.”

She coughed, nearly blinded now by the smoke. “No,” she rasped hoarsely. “No…”

His face shuddered, shifted and changed— now it was Brian’s face, looking at her in sadness, now it was Khione’s, watching her with disappointment, and then, finally, it was Adam’s, his scarred eyes gazing upon her brightly with mirth. “You are mine, now and forever,” he said, and his voice echoed with all the voices she knew and feared: Torchwick, Ayran, her father, enemies back for years and years. It was barely audible over the fire, before it roared, louder and louder until it was all she could hear. She screwed up her eyes tightly, straining to not be blown away by the firestorm’s force battering her from all sides. “You are mine, Blake!”

Blake opened one eye with sigh of weariness as a happy yell intruded into her consciousness, ripping her away from the last threading fragments of her nightmare. She blinked, wondering for a heartbeat where she was, before she remembered: she and her team were residing at Ruby and Yang’s home on the island of Patch before the tournament. It was good in some ways - Blake's nightmares had been absent for days, excluding this latest one with Ayran’s fire - and bad in others - Ruby always served as a makeshift alarm clock, waking up at ungodly hours and forcing her other teammates up before the sun had even peeked above the horizon. They were all feeling the strain that was due with the upcoming tournament, and sparring matches had gotten ever longer while sleep was harder to come by. Ruby and Yang's father had risen to the occasion of making Blake and Weiss feel at home magnificently, and Blake got the feeling he was remembering his own days at Beacon whenever he dropped by to see their team sparring.

On the opposite side of the guest room, Weiss was still slumbering peacefully; apparently Ruby had launched her tirade of waking people up against Blake first. The leader was bouncing over her, grinning in an almost manic-fashion; clearly, being back home at Patch had revitalized her enough to give her triple the amount of energy she usually possessed. The mere prospect alone was terrifying.

“Go away,” Blake groaned, pulling a pillow over her head in a futile attempt to ward her off. “Let me sleep, Ruby— hey, quit that!” She protested as Ruby snatched the pillow and whopped her over the head with it, before drawing back for another strike. Blake yelped as it descended once more, hitting her with a thwoomp. “Yang!” she shouted, ducking another blow. “Get in here! Your sister is terrorizing me!”

A few moments later, yawning, Yang poked her head in the guest bedroom, blinking in the early morning light. “Jesus, can’t I ever wake up without someone bellowing in my ear?” she grumbled, before blinking as she saw what was going on. To Blake's horror, a devilish grin unfurled across her features, immediately killing Blake's hope that she would come rescue her from the pillow-wielding Ruby. “Keep at it, Ruby,” she said cheerfully. “That’s the only way you’ll get her out of bed.”

Blake gave her a dirty look before dodging another pillow-strike and ducking out of the bed with a grumble. Ruby instantly bounced away, beelining for Weiss, and Blake couldn’t help but roll her eyes as Weiss— without even opening an eye or giving any sign that she was awake— growled in a soft, deadly voice: “Don’t you dare even think about hitting me with that pillow, Ruby Rose. If you do, we will be going into the tournament as team WBY, and that’s a promise.”
Ruby stopped short, clearly daunted by the formidability in Weiss’s tone. “Do you mean that?”

Weiss’s eyes opened. “Wholeheartedly,” she snapped, “and I still haven’t forgotten how you blew a whistle in my ear on the first day of school, so don’t make a repeat of it, got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ruby said meekly, bowing and trotting out of the room. Her parting call echoed down the short hallway. “Dad’s making pancakes, so hurry up, you guys, or you’ll be stuck with pan-scrapings!”

Blake yawned widely, sinking back onto the narrow guest-bed, before grinning crookedly at Weiss. “Team Wooby?” she said, and Weiss gave a her an irritable glance.

“Oh, be quiet, Blake. It’s early; I’m not up for wordplay. Also, I’d advise fixing your hair before you leave the room, because Ruby— well, the pillow-hitting thing just now didn’t do any wonders for it.”

“Can’t you control your partner?” Blake grumbled, and Weiss rolled her eyes.

“Can you control yours? I think not.”

Blake cursed under her breath before seizing her clothes and heading to the bathroom with another jaw-cracking yawn. The house wasn’t anything particularly fancy— just a one-story log building with dusty square windows and three bedrooms; but Blake liked it for that, it gave it character, and she knew Yang, nor her family, wasn’t the type to try and impress. What you saw was what you got, and Blake was plenty satisfied with it.

She took a swift shower and changed into her regular outfit. Just as she had pulled on her boots, and was standing to run her hands under the tap, the door swung open and Yang walked in, yawning. She caught Blake with her hands resting on her hips, spinning her around and nuzzling her head against her shoulder. She looked at her in the mirror with a sleep-soft smile, burying her face in the crook of Blake’s neck and knotting her hands in her gear. “Morning, babe.”

One of Blake’s eyebrows arched. “Since when do you call me that? Is this the new name in a long list of pet-names? I’ll have to stop you right there.”

“I was trying it out. No?”

“I prefer my name much more.”

Yang grinned at her. “I could’ve called you something really awful, like sugar-pie snookums, or something, but I didn’t, how’s that for you?”

Blake kissed her cheek. “Thank you, then. For that, I am eternally grateful.”

Yang spun away, releasing Blake, and out the door. “Come on, Dad’s making pancakes, and they’re the best. Well, for your taste buds. I bet Weiss - you know she’s always eating diet and light products - the mere prospect of sugar will send her into an apoplectic fit.”

“Now, now. I’m sure it won’t be that dramatic.” Blake shut off the faucet, watching the last of the water swirl down the drain, before she turned to Yang. “Well, shall we go see this match? Weiss vs. pancakes and Taiyang?”

Yang hooked her arm through Blake’s elbow with a laugh. “I don’t think that’s gonna turn out well for anyone.”
Blake watched in amusement as Taiyang let out a ‘heads-up!’, before jerking back his arm with a lightning-quick movement, flipping a golden-brown pancake expertly over his shoulder. Ruby instantly whipped her plate out, catching it as it fell; she did it with a practiced ease that suggested that this was a regular activity in the Rose-Xiao-Long household.

“Ouch,” Yang said, as he repeated the gesture on Weiss with less fortunate results. Ruby burst out in laughter before hurrying over to scrape pancake off the wall. “That’s gonna leave a mark.”

“Watch out!”

Blake looked up quickly as Weiss’s alarmed cry cut into their conversation; her eyes widened as she saw that a pancake was now hurtling towards her. Blake lifted a hand, and the pancake hit her palm before sliding off, onto her plate. Ruby watched her with wide silver eyes before breaking into applause at the seemingly effortless show of deflection.

“And that,” Yang said to her father, who had let out a wolf-whistle, “is why she’s called the ninja of our team.”

He rolled his eyes at his daughter before turning back to the sizzling oven, flipping six pancakes in a neat row over on their sides. As Weiss and Ruby got into an argument about the tournament, Yang used the distraction to lean over to Blake, unheard.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” Yang whispered out of the corner of her mouth, “but I think Dad wants to talk to you.”

Blake glanced at her, startled. “Me? Why?”

“You read a lot of books, you should know this! All parents talk to their kid’s significant other, brainless. Besides—” She shot a furtive glance around them and lowered her voice so Blake could hardly hear her. “It’s not your fault at all and it’s totally dumb, believe me, but I think you remind him of Raven a little, and he’s worried.”

Blake set her fork down, feeling her appetite drain away like water swirling down a sink. She had a good idea of the answer to the question she was about to ask, but something sick in her dared her to ask it anyways, just to see if she could handle it. “Why would I remind him of Raven?”

Yang’s eyes were somber. “Raven was his partner, and she ran off on him soon after they married. You’ve run off on us, too, even if it is in the past now, and you almost resemble her a bit, with the way you look; I mean, I can’t deny that there are some similarities, even if I disagree with him, because I do… I mean, God, Blake. He’s never in his right mind when it comes to her, and neither am I. She broke his heart.”

Blake stared down at her hands, not seeing them.

“It’s true, I have run off before, but… it wasn’t my fault. I was scared, there were so many reasons… how can he think that I would be so cruel? So… like how I used to be… killing without question, in the name of goodness, abandoning everything…

“Hey, are you okay?” Yang nudged her. “Look, I’m sorry. Forget it. I shouldn’t have brought it up —”

“It’s all right,” Blake said, giving her a timid smile, though churning dread still swirled in her gut. “Don’t worry about it. Really, I should have expected this.” Yang looked hurt at the hint of bitterness in her voice, and Blake flinched as she felt a pang of disappointment flicker through their Bond. What did she expect? How is one supposed to take the news that they’re supposedly set on course to become just as reckless a person as their predecessor lightly?
But she found, as the morning bled into the afternoon, her good mood had vanished, replaced by a cold worry in her heart.

“Come on, guys! Let’s go spar to get ready for tomorrow!”

Ruby skipped out of the room, snatching Crescent Rose off a holder on the wall; Weiss followed closely after her, and Blake slid off her seat as Yang trounced to the door. They both stopped as Taiyang cleared his throat hesitantly, and turned around, his eyes on Blake. They were cloudy as a storm; Blake doubted he was even seeing her at all. *Oh, here we go…*

He looked to his daughter. There always seemed to be a lingering sorrow present on his face, a sadness, like he worried that no matter what he did, it would always, always be wrong. “Yang, can you wait outside for a moment, please? I’d like to talk to Blake, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Yang gave her a look of dread, as if she were saying, *what did I tell you?*, before she smiled. “Sure, Dad,” she replied quietly, and trotted out the door. It slammed shut, leaving them alone. Blake met Taiyang’s gaze evenly, though the sorrow there made her pity him even more.

“I will make this brief,” he said, echoing the words of Ozpin, many months ago. “My daughter is intelligent. She’s probably told you why I want to talk to you. But firstly, I would like to let you know that it sets my heart at ease to see the four of you. You possess a unity that my team did not gain until nearly two years of forced cooperation— and even then, it was an uneasy peace. This is not entirely a warning, and I’d like to thank you for keeping a curb on her… doubtlessly she and Ruby would have gotten into entirely more escapades than they did, were it not for yours and Weiss’s guidance.” He gave a half-smile, though it didn’t reach his weary eyes.

She felt her ear flick with anxiety, making her bow ripple with the movement. “She’s certainly got a lot of energy, yes.”

His eyes studied her. They were strikingly similar to his daughters: open, bright, honest. And with that same faint - almost undetectable - undercurrent of long-held sorrow. “How are you finding Beacon? The first year is always the hardest.”

“It’s been strange,” she replied honestly, “considering all the things we got up to on the side, though not without its merits, I think. I'm quite sure of my path as a Huntress.”

He nodded distractedly, seemingly not hearing her, his mind flitting from one topic to the next. “Good. That’s good.”

“Sir— Mr. Xiao Long— if you would pardon me, what is it that you wanted to speak to me about?”

He looked down at her with pale, solemn eyes. “Yes, yes, of course. Teammates are some of the only people in the world with whom you can have the strongest relationships; the strongest bonds. They have the trust of family, the warmth of friends, the love of partners. Every bond you can think of can exist within a team— and it does with yours. A bond of sisters, a bond of those who love each other, a bond of partners, a bond of opposites, and a real Bond. That being said, family shouldn’t leave each other— and nor should a team; not unless they have to, unless it’s totally unavoidable.”

“Sir,” Blake said, faltering at the sorrowful look on his face, “what are you trying to say?”

He sighed, turning away, two fingers unconsciously tracing an ugly, thick scar across his arm. “I worry… that history might repeat itself once more with my children. Because my partner once
abandoned me, I fear that in turn, my daughter’s partner might leave her. That partner is you. I
don’t think, logically, you’d leave her; I wouldn’t dream of you hurting her; but a parent can’t help
but worry about these things… and I trust you know she’s been hurt before by those she’s loved,
by people who have left her. I was one of them once. There were extenuating circumstances, of
course, but I fear that another person leaving her would damage her beyond repair. She’s suffered
many betrayals. Even one betrayal can tear a team apart, understand? A betrayal shatters those
bonds of love and trust. And my children are strong, I know they are, but they can’t handle
everything the way they think they can. They’ve both almost been killed trying to do what they
believe to be right.”

He can’t possibly think I would willingly abandon Yang without a word, like Raven did. I love
her… I wouldn’t do that… does he really believe…?

“I know I can’t assuage your fears,” she said quietly. “But I can say that I would not leave her. Not
unless it was beyond my choice. She’s my partner, and… she’s always my first priority. I would
never hurt your daughter.”

He gave her a small smile. “I know you wouldn’t. I wouldn’t stand for you for a second if I didn’t
see the way you treat her. I know that you make her happy, and that you place her wellbeing above
even your own. I wouldn’t pick anyone else to be her partner.”

Blake, humbled by the praise, blinked in surprise at the genuine warmth on his face. “Thank you.”

“I’m sure that’s enough thoroughly heavy talk for today. Thank you for speaking with me, Blake.
You should go and rejoin your teammates now.” He clapped her on the shoulder the way a father
would, and she felt a pang of echoing sadness as she remembered her own father; and realized her
entire team had entirely broken families. Blake was an orphan. Weiss had lost her mother, and her
father had clearly damaged a part of her beyond repair, making her retreat into the cold shell of a
person that was her only coping mechanism, her only defense. Yang’s mother had abandoned her
before she could even remember anything, and Ruby’s mom had died, and their father had
retreated into a depression.

None of them had that support. They really, truly only knew family through each other, because
they were a family. Blake blinked as the gravity of it struck her: Yang and Ruby were sisters;
Weiss and Ruby were some of the closest friends; Weiss and Blake were opposite as could be—a
Faunus and the daughter of a Faunus-killer; Yang and Blake were Bonded, as in love as anything.

The bonds that tie us together are tangled, intertwined forever. We’re all that each other have now.

And I’ll never leave them again. I swear it.
Ruby

It always felt especially lonely at her mom’s grave during autumn.

She could imagine her sleeping under the earth, under the piles of leaves and the slumbering grass, but that was a foolish notion. This grave held no body. Icy wind whipped over Ruby, tempered only by the warm golden glow of the sunlight; the leaves and grass of autumn swirled around like miniature tornadoes in the gusting gale.

She had not been to her mother’s gravestone, alone, in a long time. Of course, she had been here only a week ago, but she had been with Weiss then, and they had sealed their partnership in the most powerful way possible. It still felt new, Ruby knew, and she was still getting used to it—adjusting to memories that weren’t her own, pulses of emotion that Weiss was feeling instead of her, being able to feel where her partner was, at any given moment… it was enough to make anyone want to get away for a little while, to mull things over; coming here, to this place of quiet solitude, was the best for that.

It was strange, being Bonded. Strange, really, but not bad.

She felt her Scroll buzz, and checked it; a message had popped up from the contact “yangarang”, punctuated by a fire emblem; Ruby grinned, temporarily distracted from her sorrow.

yangarang, 1:16 PM: Where are u? remember our match is at 3, sis. weiss is griping at me to get u to come back to the fairgrounds, so hurry the heck up

lil’ rose, 1:16 PM: im at the cliffside altar. dad’s gonna bring me back to the fairgrounds in a little bit. & tell weiss not to worry! she can sense where i am anyways!

yangarang, 1:17 PM: ahhhh yes, i forgot. team rwby, with two pairs who have the Bond of Bonds. ruby and weiss, sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g… too soon?

lil’ rose, 1:17 PM: nooooo! oh my gosh, yang, shut up! you’re so not funny! whyyy!

yangarang, 1:18 PM: lmao, rubes, u know im just messing with u

yangarang, 1:19 PM: anyways i gotta go find blake. peace out, ill catch u later. tell dad i said hi!

Ruby stuck out her tongue at the Scroll, promptly remembered that Yang couldn’t see that, anyways, and sent back an ‘okay :D’ before closing it.

Some of her good cheer faded as she stared back down at the weathered gray stone. It had been years, of course, but still…

She missed her mom, missed her every day. She doubted that would ever truly fade. Grief was never forgettable, merely bearable, but some part of her knew that Summer would want her to move on… to not waste time mourning, grieving over her. Because being a Huntress was about being brave and moving on.
“Hi, Mom,” she began, clearing her throat, wincing at the hoarse rasp her voice held. “Sorry I haven’t come by myself in a while. Things have been kinda… hectic lately.” She stared at the stone, trying to think of what to say, trying to summon up all that the last year had held. She’d gotten into Beacon; she had found a team that had seemed unorthodox at first, but now was like a family to her; her sister and Blake had gotten together; she’d Bonded with Weiss; they’d fought actual criminals and stopped bad guys; they’d gone through adventures together…

She decided to start simple. “Dad’s here, too; he came up from Patch, and me and the team all stayed with him for a few days. He’s, ah…” She blinked down, a sudden sadness sweeping over her. “Dad. He’s still teaching at Signal, and he told me that he’s going to be on a mission soon. I think he misses adventuring with you.” She stared, forlorn, down at the tomb, as the wind swept over her with a whispering echo; it felt oddly warm, and she could almost imagine her mother watching her from beyond the sky with gentle silver eyes. “I miss you, too. We all do.”

She paused, groping for something to say, to adequately express the sheer amount of things that had occurred in the past few months. “I haven’t gotten kicked out of Beacon yet,” she offered. “So that’s cool… I think being on a team with Yang helps a lot; I keep her in line…” she chuckled. “That was a joke. I don’t think anyone could set her straight except for her partner, because they’re — well, about as smitten as you and Dad… but Yang’s actually a really great fighter! You can tell she’s learned a lot from Dad! Oh, so are Weiss and Blake. Oh— they’re my teammates! Together, we form team RWBY… and yeah, that causes a lot of confusion, with my name and all. I really love my team. You would have liked them too, I think… you would have been happy that Yang and I aren’t separated. And I wish you could have met them. Blake’s wise like you, and Weiss can be snappy at times, but I know it’s just because she’s insecure… and you might have been upset that I got Bonded to her so young, but it’s— it’s the right choice, and I can feel it.

“Anyways, I made a bunch of new friends with students at Beacon, and then I met some... let’s just say, uh, odd teachers.” She gave a small smile. “Oh! We’ve also stopped some bad guys, too! I guess it’s like they say: like mother, like daughter. Y’know, I still wonder why Professor Ozpin let me into the school early… but uh, I guess he’ll tell me one day. You know how he is. It’s funny,” she said, coming to a realization just as she said it, “the more I get to know him, the more he’s starting to sound like Uncle Qrow… aside from the sarcastic remarks and the drunkenness, I guess.”

She raised her head and turned around as a bark echoed through the air, cutting through her words. Her dad was waiting in the trees, along with Zwei; he looked sad as he glanced past her, to the tomb. “Looks like Dad’s back,” she said ruefully. “I gotta go! He's dropping me off at Beacon for the tournament match before he goes on his next mission. Wish me luck!” She looked up at the sun, trying to tell herself it was just the blazing light that caused her eyes to water, but she knew her tears, though partially from sadness, were also a mix of other emotions, too. “It was good to talk.”

She turned and jogged to her father, and this time, she didn’t look back.

Taiyang ruffled her hair affectionately as she crouched down and scooped up Zwei. He barked and promptly gave her cheek a slobbery lick, which she wiped off with a grin. “Gross, Zwei.”

“Are you ready for your match, sweetie? Hydrated? Got enough to eat? Sunscreen in case you get a desert biome? They’re supposed to be viciously hot. Do you have Crescent Rose? Oh, I forgot — where’s your sister? Are you—”

“Dad,” she laughed, cutting him off before he could work himself into a panic. “Relax, okay? I’m fine. We’re gonna kick butt.”

He smiled at her. “You sound just like your mom, Ruby. I know you will. I worry, that’s all. The
tourney’s no piece of cake. Why, in our year, we lost out to a vicious team from Atlas in the doubles round. It was your mom and Qrow— they were certainly strong, of course, but the new technology Atlas had back then, and the way they trained their Huntsmen and Huntresses, you wouldn’t believe— anyways, this one Huntress took Qrow out because she had a semblance that made her opponents see double. He thought he was drunk again and she smacked him out of the ring. Your mom put up a better fight— she even managed to take out the girl, by keeping her balance and not letting up until the girl’s Aura drained— but she was overwhelmed eventually by the other team member, and she got eliminated by ring-out.”

Ruby grinned. “Sounds fun! I’ll be sure to tease Uncle Qrow about it later, huh? Besides,” she went on, “the first matches are supposed to be easy. The four of us have handled way worse, remember?”

His eyes grew somber. “Unfortunately, yes. That doesn’t mean you’re prepared for everything, Ruby—”

“Ah, hush, you killjoy,” she said as Zwei dangled his paws and barked at a squirrel scampering away in the distance. “The Vytal Festival time of year is always going to be fun, I know it! No school, no trouble, and all the evil guys are defeated. What more can we ask for?”

Blake

“Yo, Blake!”

Blake turned as someone shouted her name gleefully, her chair swiveling around sharply with the movement. She was at a booth in the fairgrounds, one of the many shaded hotspots to watch the ongoing matches in the Amity Colosseum. The current match was incredibly cringeworthy— she flinched after watching one of the team members go down from a ship-mast with a flailing shriek of terror— and so she welcomed a distraction.

That distraction came in the form of Sun, wearing a way-too excited grin, his sun-bleached hair bouncing over his eyes as he jogged towards her and slid into a swivel-seat. She nodded in greeting at him, smiling as he flagged down an attendee and placed an order for two lemonades for the two of them.

“Sun,” she said warmly. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

He rolled his eyes at her. “‘To what do I owe the pleasure?’” He mimicked in a shrill voice that she wholeheartedly doubted she sounded even remotely like. “Jesus, Blake, I swear, you talk like a fifty year old trapped in the body of a seventeen year old.”

She frowned at him. “I’m almost eighteen.”

“Oooh, my bad, I’m off by about a month. Could you ever forgive me?” He teased, before turning as a waiter sped up to them, looking annoyed as he balanced a tray of iced lemonades on his arm. “Cheers… cough up, Blake, I haven’t got enough for these…”

She rolled her eyes, but obliged and handed him a Lien note. He paid cheerfully, sliding her her drink and taking a noisy sip of his.

“Such elegance and grace,” Blake said flatly. “Truly, I am blessed to be in the presence of such effortless politeness.”

He choked and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “Now you just sound like Sage.”
“I’m pleased,” she said. “He’s intelligent, yes?”

Sun frowned. “More of a nag. Anyways, he’s a healer-type, and you’re not, and he’s got an eight-pack, which I also doubt you have. So he remains unique, I’m afraid.”

Blake laughed. “I don’t know. I could always get a couple tattoos and mimic him, and do some serious workouts. Nora’s already got the latter of Sage’s attributes pegged, I’ve seen her in a locker room—”

“Spare me the thought,” he said darkly with a shudder - probably picturing Nora with an eight-pack, which was, in his defense, a pretty disturbing thought - before he wiggled in his chair, looking excited as a new match began on the TV perched within the booth. “Oooh, a Vacuo team versus an Atlas team, that ought be cool.” He grinned at her. “Anywho, I came here to wish you luck on your match! You’re on at three, right? I dragged along Sage and Neptune, but Scar’s a no-go for any fun outings— apparently, he and some contestants from Mistral have some kind of beef, some bone to pick with each other. So he’s not going into the Colosseum unless, and I quote, ‘it is absolutely, irrevocably necessary, and it poses no immediate harm to my extremities and bodily functions.’ Poor kid’s gotten the stuffing knocked out of him more than once.”

Blake rolled her eyes, setting down her glass as the ice clinked together. “Foreign kids are always getting into fights, because they have some ridiculous notion that they won’t get in trouble due to the fact of them being in a different kingdom.”

“Yep, it’s bull.” He yawned and checked his watch. “Oh, I forgot to say — be sure to eat at Lil’ Wong’s place after your match. It’s at the center of the fairgrounds, always crowded, you can’t miss it— his noodles are top notch, I swear; best in Vale and probably in all of Remnant. As for your fight, I really wouldn’t worry too much. The contenders in the beginning are usually pretty easy because that’s where you weed out the weaklings.”

Blake rolled her eyes at Sun as he stabbed a finger into her arm to emphasize his words, and she nudged him, enjoying the easy familiarity they had. She didn’t have any siblings, but with him, she had a pretty good idea of what having a brother would be like. “And what’s your bright idea if we just so happen to get paired up against a strong team?”

“Me? Bright ideas? You’re kidding, Blake. You’ll just be outta luck, won’t you?” He grinned amiably at her as she rolled her eyes again, before glancing over her shoulder. “Hey, here comes your girl! I’ll see you guys after your surely-remarkable victory. I’m betting on you, Belladonna!” He waved at her before whirling and jogging off after Neptune and Sage. She called a warm farewell after him before turning just in time to be tackled in a crushing embrace from Yang, nearly lifting her off her feet.

“Ouch,” she said as Yang put her down and kissed her cheek. “It’s good to see you, too.”

“I’ve been looking everywhere for you, Blake! You never pick up your Scroll, you know that? It’s always on silent.”

“Technology,” she said, trying and failing to look rueful. “It’s so unreliable.”

Yang stuck out her tongue and tugged her off the chair at the fairground booth. “Come on, you.”

Blake allowed herself to be pulled along through the shifting, shouting throng, catching glimpses of the ongoing fights as they weaved their way past booths and little trinket-shops. Her stomach fluttered with nerves; they were to go on less than two hours.
“Don’t worry,” Yang said, tracking Blake’s nervous glance to the screened fight. “We’re gonna do fine.”

“I don’t doubt you or the others. I doubt myself,” she blurted, before realizing how melodramatic that sounded; however, Yang’s eyes softened.

“You’re going to do great, Blake. I believe in you.”

She ducked her head. *It’s not you that doesn’t believe in me. It’s… myself.*

“I know you do.”

Finally, they stopped at a fairground booth with a thatched roof and a harried-looking clerk buzzing around within, organizing the jostled racks of goods she was selling. There was a bin of tickets, binoculars to use in the stadium, packaged food - but Yang did not seem particularly interested in any of these. She beelined straight for a propped-up rack on which all manners of jewelry hung - bracelets, necklaces, mood-rings, and other sorts. Blake watched as she tried on a mood-ring, the stone instantly shifting from blank black to a violently dark blue as it came in contact with her skin. Sliding it off, Yang flagged the clerk over. “One, please,” she said politely, foregoing the mood-ring, to Blake’s surprise, and indicating the bracelets instead. The hassled clerk bobbed her head in agreement and took Yang’s proffered Lien as she browsed over the jewelry. Blake watched with a raised brow, but didn’t comment. She had long since ceased to question the things Yang did— if she wanted to explain, she would do it in her own time, and not before.

Finally she selected a simple one, a heavy beaded circlet of pyrite and obsidian that fastened around the wrist.

Blake watched in amazement as she twisted it, and, with a little *click*, it came apart into two thinner bracelets, both of them identical. “That’s remarkable,” she said quietly, before looking up with an upward tilt of her lips, meeting her partner’s gaze. “Thank you, Yang.”

“I thought you might like it,” Yang said, looking slightly shy as Blake held out her wrist. She fastened it on, fingers lingering on Blake’s skin as she smiled up at her. “It fits us.”

Blake looked at the flashing glint of the fool’s gold and the dark gleam of the obsidian, and she nodded. “It certainly does.”

“Now,” Yang said, dragging her away from the booth, “to our second order of business: finding Weiss and Ruby.”

Blake chuckled. “We could just go around and ask people if they’ve seen an overexcited Vale student accompanied by a heiress who looks as though she’s wishing for an early death.”

“Oh, come on, Blake, it’s not all that harsh,” Yang said with a grin. “Weiss is really warming up to her. It’s sort of sweet, in a really uncharacteristic way.”

“Because that’s not worrying - the ice-queen *melting*. Are you going to talk to Weiss, perhaps? Give her a pseudo-blessing? Ruby is your sister, after all, and there’s that whole ‘I am my sister’s keeper’, which might apply to you two.”

“They’re Bonded partners, Blake, for Vale’s sake, not engaged.”

“Well, with the way things tend to progress along this line, I wouldn’t be surprised…” She broke off quickly, and flushed. “Not that I meant you and I - well. Forget I said anything.”
“I love when you blush,” Yang said, kissing her cheek. “It gives me a comforting reminder that I can so easily make you flustered. And if you equate being Bonded partners to being engaged, well… what does that make us? Married soulmates, or something?”

“Or something. I was joking.”

Yang laughed. “I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Low blow, Blake. Low blow.”

The crowds steadily grew rowdier as the sun began its journey from the pinnacle of the heavens down to the ground, and finally, the two of them caught up with Ruby and Weiss in a line to board an airship, which would take them to the Amity Colosseum. By then, it was nearing three o’clock, and nervous pangs began fluttering through Blake’s stomach. She wasn’t worried about the fighting, really - but the thought of being on-screen for thousands...

*Whatever,* she thought crossly, firmly pushing away her apprehension. *There’s nothing you can do but lay low for now, and hope no one notices you, or knows you…* *Please, let no one from my past see me.*

She boarded the airship with her team, absently following them to the back of the craft, where a section was roped off specifically for combatants in the tournament. She sat between Yang and Weiss, looking out the window as they discussed fighting tips and wondered over who their opponents would be; below, the fairgrounds were a colorful, bustling patch of chaos among the peaceful city.

“I don’t see why we’re worrying, to be honest,” Yang said. “Like Ruby said, we’ve faced a hell of a lot worse than some wannabes from the other kingdoms. It’s not like we’re going to actually run into any murderers or thieves in this thing.”

“True. Okay, you guys… we know our strategies, right? Yang, you go for the person who looks like the biggest threat. Blake, you try to lure away someone with a similar fighting style to you. Weiss and I will nab the other two team members. We can win this, I know it.”

All too soon, the airship pulled into a loading dock at the Amity Colosseum, and the passengers disembarked in a chattering throng, speaking of anything from making bets to admiring the structure of the stadium. Blake couldn’t help but be impressed as well at the craftsmanship - the soaring pillars, the sheer amount of air Dust that was needed to make it buoyant, the thought and beauty of the randomized biomes…

*Adam would have called it arrogant, selfish of humans to go about creating things for luxury while others were suffering,* she reflected, a bit sad, as they entered one of the tunnels that led to the locker-rooms for the combatants, *but honestly, it is only a sign of endurance and persistence that led them to create this symbol of unity.*

The locker room was empty, and it was in an atmosphere charged with nerves that Team RWBY prepped themselves to enter the combatant stage. The tense silence was filled only with the sound of bullets being loaded into chambers and metal unfolding, Dust being poured into Weiss’s rapier, the scrape of iron against steel, and gauntlets extending into combat form.

*Finally, Ruby straightened up, her silver eyes flicking over all of them. “I don’t think I need to say much,”* she announced finally, with a smile. *“You guys, we’ve got this in the bag, I know it. Don’t be nervous. I trust all of you to do your best, and even if we lose, I’m still proud to be part of Team RWBY.”*
“Amen to that,” Yang said with a nod, and they all leaned in for a fist pileup. Right as they pulled away, a low, rumbling voice resonated through the stadium, sounding like it was coming from right under their feet, making the locker room rattle, along with wild cheering.

“Now, we return from our afternoon break as we move into the evening rush of matches. Let’s hear some noise for a fight that’s sure to be a thrill… Team RWBY of Beacon versus Team ABRN of Haven!”

A door clicked open at the back of the locker room, revealing a short flight of stairs flooded with light. “This is it,” Yang said. Her voice was calm, but her eyes belied the true tension she was feeling. “Let’s go knock them out.”

They charged up the stairs into the sunlight.

Blake looked around, blinking, trying to gain her bearings in this strange new world. They had emerged onto a circular, tiled gray platform. The bleachers soared high up above them, and she could barely make out Professor Port and Professor Oobleck from the tiny box where they were commenting on the match. As she watched, she saw their opposers emerge as well - Team ABRN.

At the forefront - the leader, Blake guessed - there was a dark-skinned girl with a fierce gleam in her eyes and well-muscled arms; Blake guessed she was a brawler, much like Yang, though there was a strap of darts around her hip. Next to her was a smirking girl with a hoodie, two black paint stripes below her eyes, and a tuft of dyed hair, balancing with ease on a hoverboard the same shade of her hair. Standing behind her was a swarthy boy with a serene face and a wild-looking mohawk of bright pink hair, a gun-looking weapon in his hands. Lastly, there was a tall, lanky boy with mocha-skin and strange golden eyes, twirling a dangerous-looking feather-staff in his broad hands.

Damn it, Sun, she thought irritably as the girl on the hoverboard shot her a defiant look. This doesn’t look like a newbie team that has no clue what they’re doing to me. Although, they are from Haven… he probably knows them, he might even be friends with them. She looked up at the announcing board, where their names and Aura levels were displayed. Arslan is the brawler and leader, so Yang will want to take her, to take out the biggest threat first… Bolin’s a trickier one, we don’t know much about staff-fighting style, except for what we’ve seen from Sun - I wonder if he and Sun are friends, with those similar weapon-types… Reese looks like she might be my opponent, though he doesn’t look terribly strong, so I’m not too concerned about him, he’s probably not altogether that threatening…

Her train of thought was interrupted as the sonorous voice of Port rumbled through the air.

“For those of you just now joining us for the evening portion, welcome to the Vytal Festival tournament, broadcasting live from the Amity Colosseum!” He paused for a moment as wild cheering erupted through the stadium, ringing out into the darkening sky, and Blake felt caught up, for a moment, in the infectious excitement. Whatever troubles came her way, there would always be this event, unchanged and immovable. There would always be that unity. “Allow us to break down the rules for those of you first-timers, before we begin.”

“As many of you know, the tournament is split up into three rounds: four, of teams; two, of doubles; and one, of singles. Age and school year are irrelevant, for a Huntsman or Huntress is not limited by those things. In this tournament, the only attribute being tested is skill.”
“Correct,” Professor Port said with a gesture to the graph that popped up next to him. “The winners of this battle - teams - will elect two of their members to represent them in the doubles round, followed by the winners of that round choosing one member to advance to the final tier - singles. The remaining combatants in the singles round will then proceed to fight their way through the final bracket in the goal of achieving victory for their kingdom! The final rule of the few that we have here regards Bonds.”

Blake felt amused as she watched Weiss and Ruby exchange a glance, and she felt a pulse of excitement from Yang. Pricking her ears, Blake listened intently as he went on.

“In regards to Bonds, they are qualified as legal and fair playing ground for the tournament. However, there are two rules that must be paid heed if it is to be a fair match: they can only be used when both members of a Bond have not dropped below fifteen in Aura level, or been disqualified by ring-out. And secondly, they are forbidden without exception once the singles rounds begin.”

Sounds fair enough, she thought, although I sincerely doubt we’ll absolutely need to use ours, Yang and I. She’s too much of a powerhouse to need an extra boost of strength, whereas I… well, they’ll be lucky enough to even catch me.

Professor Oobleck broke in next. “And yes, Peter, these certainly are some spectacular spectacles on which to spectate upon. I don’t think anyone tuning in around Remnant is going to disagree with me on that!

He grinned. “Ah, why would they? Now, let’s begin the match between Team RWBY of Beacon, and Team ABRN of Haven!”

He fell silent, and the stadium grew so quiet you could hear a pin drop as the holograms to determine the biomes began to power up. Blake frowned as one biome was selected from the first hologram; one of the gray tiled floors fell away, and a hot, arid region with pools of lava and an igneous ground took its place. The second hologram finally rolled to a stop as well, and a biome with hills of ice and snow shot up, clicking into place, leaving the two teams standing in the center.

“Three,” Oobleck called. “Two! One!”

As he finished speaking, both teams rushed each other. They clashed in an instant, and Blake lost sight of her teammates as the fray overwhelmed her.

She found herself soon cornered by Reese, just as she had suspected; the Haven student had an arrogant gleam in her eyes and she leered at Blake.

“You wish!” Blake retorted, springing at her, the ice slipping and sliding under her feet.

Reese didn’t even flinch as Blake let her frustration turn her into a spinning fury of devastation, ice cracking under feet as she struck out at Reese in a blurring slash of blades. They both broke away, panting with exertion, though Reese didn’t even look fazed - but Blake looked at the board, and both of their Aura levels had dropped significantly from the battle, Reese’s more so than Blake’s.

“That stung,” Reese said. “Reminded me of a bee sting. Is that the best you can do?”

Blake bristled. “Wouldn’t you like to find out?”
Reese grinned, green eyes flashing, and Blake hurled herself forward, meeting her with a flurry of strikes; Reese weathered them with her hoverboard and spun away with a laugh, lights flickering on her weapon in a crazy pattern.

“You’ll never beat me that way!” she jeered. “What does Beacon teach you guys, huh? *Playfighting?* Do your teachers suck that much, or are you just a bad Huntress?”

Growling, anger crackling over her skin, Blake settled for a more forward attack, and this time Reese’s eyes hardened. She knew she was taking it seriously, now - perhaps she’d seen the look of fury in Blake’s eyes.

Reese snarled, wincing with pain as Blake dealt her a hard, cracking strike across the shoulder, and she returned one of her own, kicking Blake in the abdomen.

“Is that the best you can do?” Blake mimicked, feeling breathless and more taunting than she usually would in a normal battle. Perhaps Reese’s arrogance was rubbing off on her. “Does Haven not teach you to finish the blow?”

“You - wait…” she panted. “Just wait, you piece of Vale trash.” She staggered to her feet, boarding her weapon again and soaring circles around Blake. Blake took the opportunity to flip Gambol Shroud into its portable form and shot at Reese; she folded her hoverboard into twin revolvers, launching herself in the air.

But Blake’s shot had disturbed her balance, and she cried out in pain as she landed with a little *thud*, curling up in pain. Her eyes blazed with anger as Blake stared down at her, unable to resist one last jibe. “Beacon may teach us playfighting, Reese,” she said softly, “but at least it teaches us respect, too - respect for an opponent, so we don’t underestimate them and lose, much like you.”

Reese swore, clambering to her feet and wincing. She didn’t waste time on words as she hurled herself at Blake; the ferocity of her assault took the Faunus by surprise, and she barely had time to spin out a shadow-clone before stumbling backwards… right into a pool of icy water.

Drenched, she shot out, sneezing as water dripped off of her. She was sopping wet, and freezing now; she’d have to end the match quickly.

“That’s right, run!” Reese jeered, as Blake quickly formed a plan, and tossed Gambol Shroud out, using the momentum to propel herself around two spires of ice. She left a shadow-clone in between them, brow perspiring with the effort it took to keep the clone intact. Her work done, she quickly dove into a narrow crack in the ice, wedging herself so she could see the events transpiring outside her safe-cave. Breath smoking in the coldness, she saw Reese look at the clone with a cocky smirk before striking it in a wheeling-kick with her hoverboard. Blake winced, imagining if it had been her, before hurling Gambol Shroud out. She savored the look of panic and realization in her opponent’s eyes before she launched herself out, kicking squarely into Reese’s abdomen.

The Haven student went flying with a cry of fury, landing with a *crack* on the ring of hard-packed dirt outside the fighting ground, two drones of the buzzer announcing her elimination. Blake dimly heard Oobleck commenting on the cleverness of the maneuver, but she couldn’t make out his words over the throbbing in her ears.

*Looks like I didn’t need help after all,* she thought grimly, before turning and launching herself back into the fray.
She came into the fields of ice just in time to see Yang hurtling down an arch of ice, eyes burning with violet fire, and her heart swelled with pride as she flung out Gambol Shroud, feel it stretch taut, just like the first time in the Emerald Forest. And, as one, they fell in tune, and Blake - for the first time - reached in the Bond, summoned up all her power, and let go, feeling a great surge of strength leave her, and enter Yang for the final strike.

“You won! Against Arslan’s team, no less! They’re an upperclassmen team, but they’re some real jerks - you kicked their asses! Good job, Blake!”

“Thanks, Sun,” Blake said, only just having time to grin at him before the crowd swept her away, cheering at the - quite literal - explosive end to their match.

The team regrouped at the fairgrounds, all of them breathless with exhilaration from the match. Blake, however, was in a bad state; she looked like she had been dropped in the middle of a lake. Yang laughed openly at her sour expression.

“Take heed of this noble warrior, Ruby,” Yang said, turning to her sister with a solemn face, “for Huntresses are masters of precision and grace— ack!” She cried out as Blake shook herself, sending ice shards and dripping water flying in every direction. She coughed, sticking out her tongue.

“Gross, Blake!” Yang complained. “Why, if this poor, young, impressionable leader wasn’t here, I’d—”

“Get her!” Ruby yelped, springing and knocking a dripping-wet Blake to the ground. Taken aback, Blake fell, wincing as Ruby’s knee crashed into her abdomen.

“Get her, Ruby!” Yang cheered. Blake let out a yelp and shook herself, trying to throw her off, but Ruby held on with the determination of a terrier.

“Yang, quit encouraging her!” she ordered, struggling under the weight of Ruby as she pinned her to the ground, both sisters laughing gleefully. “Ruby, get off me!”

Yang was roaring in laughter as Ruby jumped off of her. “You should have seen your face! You looked pissed - ” She cut off as Ruby cleared her throat, glaring. “Um, I mean, you looked angry. Rightfully so.” She cuffed Ruby about the head. “Happy, lil’ rose?”

“Dad would flay you if he heard the way you talk,” she said with a huff before trotting off to join Weiss, both of them boarding an airship bound for the fairgrounds.

“So what now?” Blake said to Yang, climbing to her feet as Yang pulled her hair back over her shoulder. She looked stunning in the fading sunlight, her gold hair turned to red fire, cheeks flushed with the adrenaline of a fight. Blake smiled at her, wondering, briefly, how she had gotten so lucky to have her as a partner.

“I can imagine a few things I’d like to be doing, can’t you?” she whispered, with a look to Blake that made her skin tingle all over, and she let Yang take her hand and pull her along into an airship that would take them back to Beacon.

A/N: Any guesses for the mood ‘dark blue’ when Yang tried on the ring?
there's no official update schedule, by the way - this is just thursdays, for now
hope you enjoy! reviews are always appreciated c:
Chapter II - Brain Versus Brawn

Yang

“Is it wrong that I’m already a hundred percent over this whole fairgrounds-stadium gig?”

“You do not fool me for a moment. You’re just upset that you have to wake up early on weekends,” Blake said with a light laugh, nudging her shoulder. Yang wrapped her arms around her partner’s waist and dug her feet in the ground, preventing the both of them from moving.

“I want to sleep,” she groaned, drawing out the last word. Blake took her hands in her own, pulling her up to meet her eyes. They were a soft, amused gold, and Yang got that same thrill of butterflies that she always did whenever Blake looked at her like that, like the two of them were privy to some private joy that the rest of the world could not touch.

“I’m not terribly close to any of Jaune’s team, that’s true, but I’m curious to see how he’ll fare in this kind of high-pressure environment, and Pyrrha is Ruby’s good friend; we’re obligated to see them. And then Sun is on to fight with his team directly afterwards, and I promised him I’d go to see that, remember? He says we must see Scarlet’s semblance. Something about flight and piracy; I couldn’t hear him over the screeching on his end of the phone line.”

“With an offer like that, how could I refuse?” Yang cast a longing backward glance to the rumpled sheets, slowly losing their warmth as she yawned. “But, Blake, the bed, and sleeping - ”

“If I have to,” Blake said somberly, her face devoid of sympathy, “I will give up a blast of my own energy through the Bond to you. It will be like an instant shot of espresso coffee— you won’t be able to sleep after that. You’ll have to get moving.”

Yang narrowed her eyes. “Are you threatening me, Blake Belladonna?”

“I would never,” she said smoothly, her cat ear twitching behind her bow. “If it bothers you, think of it as an advanced persuasion-tactic.”

“Fine. I’m convinced, but reluctantly. You’re lucky you’re cute.” Yang grumbled, abandoning her attempts of regaining any sleep, and resigning herself to a tiresome day as she grabbed her girlfriend’s hand and dragged her out of the room.

Yang shivered, rubbing her hands together and watching ruefully as her breath curled outward in long, finger-like plumes. The icy wind that rattled the trees like bones and sent the leaves scurrying together did not help her to warm up, and even being packed in a crowded fairground, and sardined between Ruby and Blake, she still felt like she was slowly turning into an icicle.

A human-shaped icicle, granted, but still. It was autumn. Autumn had no right feeling like the depths of winter in Atlas, and she turned to Blake and voiced her discontent. “It is illegal for it to be this cold. It’s only mid-autumn. I didn’t ask for my breath to freeze to my face!”
“Stop being a drama-queen, Yang,” Ruby said, handing over some Lien to purchase a family-sized bucket of popcorn. “That’s Weiss’s job.”

“Hey!”

Yang laughed along with Blake and Ruby as Weiss frowned at them. “Well, I’m feeling pretty icy and, you know what? I’m having a flair for big words— if I wake up tomorrow in a white combat skirt, you’re gonna have to call Dad and break the news to him.”

Blake rolled her eyes and slipped a Lien note in her hand. “Please, use this and buy yourself a hot drink, or something. If you turned into Weiss, I would draw the line.”

Yang grinned at her. “You’re being so kind today, Blakey! What’s brought on this bout of niceties?”

“An overwhelming desire to not hear you whining in my ear about the changing of the seasons,” she said flatly, her eyes glittering with humor.

“Anyways,” Yang said, cuffing her about the ear, “we still need to decide who is proceeding to the doubles round. How do you want to do this? Votes, or what?”

Ruby and Weiss both exchanged a meaningful glance before looking at Blake and Yang, who watched them in confusion.

“You’ve got a devious glint in your eyes,” Yang said suspiciously as Ruby grinned at her. “I know that look. It’s prelude to something awful. What are you plotting, huh?”

She laughed at that, nodding to the two of them. “Great Vale, sis. Isn’t it obvious who should go to the doubles round? I mean, I’m decent and all, sure, but leaders don’t usually move on, and I’m younger, so I’ve had less training. And if I run into a fighter that can easily evade Crescent Rose, I’m toast. And Weiss… well.” She looked at her partner. “You’re great and all and I love ya, but the same kinda holds true for you… if someone can counter your Dust moves or has a weapon like Arslan did, that your rapier can’t really attack or defend…”

Weiss rolled her eyes, but she looked at them. “She has a point. Granted, she worded it in a very backhanded way, but she is right: you two have been working together for so long - longer, admittedly, than any of us; you both merged together right from the start. You’re seamless; you don’t need to communicate on the battlefield, and your fighting styles are so different and varied that it gives you both a better chance to win, if you run across someone who is difficult to beat. You can both adapt your skills to any given situation, whereas Ruby and I… well, ours aren’t as easily changed.”

Yang looked at Blake, who seemed to be fluctuating between shock and gratitude. “But— Weiss… I thought for sure you would have wanted to proceed. You even mentioned it once, that your father had expectations, and none of us would begrudge you wanting to move on no matter— ”

Weiss’s eyes slid away, blue darkening to storm. “My father revoked my card yesterday when I was out at the fairgrounds, and I… we’re not on the best of terms right now, I think. I’m not too eager to impress him, to tell you the truth.” She looked up firmly, eyes flashing. “My opinion stands. You both should move on.”
“Huh.” Yang felt a flutter of nerves, but she quickly shoved it away; this was an honor. “Thank you, you two. In any case, I’ll accept. And of course, I’ll fight my hardest.” She nudged Blake, who still looked startled. “And so will you.”

“Of course,” she murmured quietly, still seeming out of her element.

Ruby smiled at her. “I know you will. Both of you.”

Yang ruffled her hair. “Thanks. Now, should we hurry up before all the student sections are filled, and we miss JNPR’s epic failure or triumphant victory of a match?”

“Don’t be so harsh,” Weiss chided her. “Pyrrha will probably pull them through by the skin of her teeth—”

Whatever she was about to say after that was cut off by a cry of greeting from behind them.

“Hey, you guys!”

Yang cast a glance over her shoulder and raised her eyebrows as she saw Emerald Sustrai, leader of Team EMNC - a word Ruby had fumbled up grandly, pronounced ‘eminence’.

Ruby had become friends with her - nothing so close as what she had with Weiss, but good friends nevertheless - after hearing of how Emerald had virtually saved Yang’s life during the Grimm invasion. In Ruby’s eyes, that act had made Emerald little more than one of those heroes she so loved, someone who was a savior and protector.

Yang had met her teammates before - Mercury Black, a quiet boy with an expressionless face; Cinder Fall, a polite girl with amber eyes that were curiously like Blake’s; and a girl with black hair and bold, brilliant green eyes who had said nothing at all; Emerald had explained that she was mute, and her name was Nigella Topaz, though they referred to her as ‘Gellato’, due to her fondness for the ice-cream-like treat. They were a very diverse team, and somewhat self-involved, so Yang didn’t like hanging around them much. She much preferred her own team. And Blake. Honestly, she was lucky she’d gotten her as a partner, instead of someone else, like Cardin or Mercury.

“Hey, how are you not frozen, wearing that?” she asked, realizing Emerald was still clad in her regular combat outfit. “It’s like twenty below out here.”

Emerald gave her a smile that, oddly, didn’t seem to reach her eyes, but Yang dismissed the thought. She was probably just seeing things. “I’m excited to watch more fights, so the cold doesn’t really bother me. Warms the blood, you know. I saw your match. It was spectacular, especially against an upperclassman Haven team… I come from Haven and that’s no easy accomplishment.”

Ruby flushed. “Thanks!”

Blake and Yang exchanged an amused glance as Weiss gave Emerald one of her cold, menacing stares she was famous for. Looks like someone’s feeling a bit jealous, Yang thought with a grin.

“We didn’t get to see your fight,” Yang said smoothly, trying to compensate from the sudden chilly silence. “How’d it go?”

She smirked. “Easy. We faced up against a weak team from Vacuo. Beat ’em in ten minutes flat.
Merc and I are moving on to doubles.”

“Huh,” she commented. “After seeing the way you tore through those Grimm like paper… it’s not exactly surprising, is it?”

Emerald’s red eyes flicked across them, but after a pause, she only said, “Perhaps,” with a little nod. Then, she smiled. “Well,” she told them jauntily, “Merc’s waiting, and I had better be going. You guys have some matches to be at, yes? I’ll try to catch a glimpse on the screenplays, but no guarantees. See you!” She waved at Ruby before turning and half-jogging, half-walking off. She vanished from view as she rounded a noodle shop.

Blake swore suddenly, glancing at the glowing face of her Scroll. “We need to go. JNPR’s match starts in about fifteen minutes, and I don’t envy anyone trying to board an airship and get four unclaimed seats in that time. Let’s move!”

Emerald

There was nothing like a good dose of hatred to get the blood boiling, Emerald thought in annoyance as she stalked across the fairgrounds to where a smirking Mercury was waiting for her, propped against a tent-pole. He must have noticed the pissed-off look on her face, because his eyes gleamed arrogantly as she drew level with him.

“How’s the new pals, Em?”

She snarled at him before turning her head and spitting delicately on the ground as he snickered. “I swear, sometimes you piss me the hell off, but they just - God, Mercury, how screwed up is it that this is the hardest part of this whole thing for me? Making friends with a couple of pigeon-brained idiots? I almost want them to get hit by a bus or something. They’re all so goddamn annoying.”

He laughed low and humorlessly as they began walking, ducking their heads together as so not to be heard. “Orders are orders, kiddo.”

“I just,” she shook her head with a low growl rumbling in her throat. “I hate them with every fiber of my being, I swear.”

He chuckled. “You sound angry.”

“Nigella Topaz,” she mimicked in a low, mocking voice. “Honestly, they fought Neo before - twice, if you count the golden-haired idiot, and she almost died, if it weren’t for that stupid renegade Huntress’s intervention; if someone almost killed me, I’d sure as hell remember them.” She thought of Amber, remembered her looming over her, blotting out the sky with fury in her eyes. “Can they not recognize someone, even if she’s just changed colors? You’d think they actually grew up with feathers for brains.”

He shrugged. “It’s not like we want ‘em to see her for who she is. Not ‘till the end, anyhow.”
She sniffed. “Still.”

He glanced at her. “You get what we want?”

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously. I’m not a dumbass. It’s the emo - y’know, the Faunus kid that Adam keeps moaning and groaning about - and her partner, the bimbo. Maybe they’ll be tough for someone else, but we could take them no problem.”

The side of his mouth curled in a grin. “Nice. Now we know what we’re working with, at least. And it’ll be fun to use this to antagonize him.”

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**Yang**

By some miraculous stroke of luck, or perhaps because some deity had decided to take pity on them, they managed to find four unclaimed seats near Sun’s team in the student section just as Jaune, Nora, Pyrrha, and Ren walked out on the battlefield. Yang looked up in excitement as the low boom of Port turning on his microphone echoed through the stadium.

Sun leaned over and grinned at her. “I bet you five Lien they win in less than six minutes.”

She rolled her eyes. “An easy five for me! You’re on.”

He hummed. “They’ve got Pyrrha, you know; I wouldn’t be surprised if they actually managed to do it.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” she said begrudgingly, “but you know how these things work. Nothing’s guaranteed.”

He merely smiled indulgently in response before focusing his gaze upon the two teams, staring each other down, once more.

She glanced quickly at the other team. There was a short girl in a beanie, a broad-shouldered boy with claws gleaming on his hands, a slender boy with a forked rod of a weapon that crackled with electricity, and a dark-skinned boy with gold-capped dreadlocks, lightly holding hooked, circular saws.

_Electricity, huh?_

Yang looked down to the other team. Sure enough, Nora had a diabolical grin on her face as she surveyed the boy with the electric weapon.

*Maybe I shouldn’t have made a bet to Sun. Looks like the line up is tipped in Jaune’s team’s favor… though with Pyrrha, well, if you see that you’re matched up against her, you might as well resign yourself to losing, huh?*

She shivered in mingled excitement and as the biomes powered up, shifting into a breezy, evergreen forest and a line of jagged mountains, thunder crackling ominously above them. Here, so close to the battlefield, she shivered as a gust of chilly wind swept through the stadium, and then
she looked over at Blake; her eyes were more distant than the puffy clouds scudding lazily across the arching sky above, a thousand thoughts coming to life and dying in those amber pools. Yang sensed that she wasn’t even seeing the fight at all, really; she was staring at the brewing storm above the mountains, those same dark clouds reflected in her eyes.

Anything she might have said was cut off as the voice of Oobleck blared through the Colosseum, counting down; as he hit one, both teams flew at each other.

Every movement was blurred by the speed with which they fought, but her eyes were drawn to the scarlet hurricane that was Pyrrha; she spun through the ranks of the other team with devastating force. By the time Yang registered that someone was moving to trip her up, she had already avoided it, and by the time Yang saw she was drawing back her javelin for a shot, it had already flown from her hand and rebounded, taking down two team members in a double shot.

“Great Atlas, I ain’t never seen anyone fight like that before,” someone whispered behind Yang, their accented voice thick with awe. “But we all know Vale kids are crazy strong, Talos, like you and I, eh?”

“Shut your bloody beak, Eliás, before I shut it for you,” the boy, Talos, snapped back. Yang snorted.

“What’s that girl doing?” Ruby whispered to her, pointing to a girl that was racing away from her team and into the forest. As they watched, she leaped into a tree and vanished from view.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” she shrugged, before startling as a loud gunshot whizzed from the forest and narrowly missed Ren, going so close to him that his hair ruffled with the slipstream. His eyes widened as he touched the furrow it had left behind.

She saw Jaune’s eyes go wide before he shouted something that she couldn’t hear, but she guessed he had given an order for a regroup as everyone from his team broke ranks and charged behind a protective barrier of rocks.

“Running away, then, is he?” Sage grunted, and Sun cuffed him.

“It’s probably some weird evasion tactic, you owlish freak.”

Sage muttered something to Sun that sounded oddly like ‘ducking bass mole’; Yang snickered in laughter as Sun prodded him roughly in the side.

“What the hell?” Sun roared, rocketing to his feet in indignation. “That’s not fair! That’s cheating, that is!”

Scarlet was on his feet, yelling until he was red in the face about the opposing team being wankers, and almost all of the stadium was filled with roars of protest and other people on their feet, screaming as Pyrrha emerged briefly, struggling, before going under again under the sheer force of three attacks at once.

“She might pull through,” Ruby said desperately, her fingers white as they sank in the armchairs of
her seat. “She beat Cardin and his team that one time…”

“Yeah, but they suck!” Yang shouted, still straining to get a better view of the fight. “This is a team good enough to qualify for the tournament and she’s not at the top of her game!”

“Come on, Yang! Shade students would steal the skin off your back! Did you honestly expect them to fight fair?” Neptune spat, but his eyes were gleaming in excitement as the action unfolded.

Suddenly, the stadium swelled in a roar of cheering as Pyrrha surged out from the three fighters with renewed force, a scarlet and bronze streak of spinning fury. They pelted after her, but she was - Yang was strongly reminded again - a world-renowned fighter, and they didn’t stand a chance once her fighting blood was up.

She kicked Brawnz away with a grunt, sending him crashing, and whirled as Roy reared up behind her; her javelin whipped out and she struck the boy with a blow so fierce it made Yang wince in sympathy. There was a buzz as his Aura instantly dropped and he collapsed, unconscious.

“Great Vale!” Ruby yelped. “She took thirty-five percent of his Aura in one hit!”

“Go, Pyrrha!” Weiss yelled. Yang could have sworn she looked up and shot a fierce grin in their direction, but it was hard to be sure as she re-emerged into the fighting, and chaos commenced once more.

Ruby’s voice rose in a squeal. “Oh my gosh oh my gosh! Quick, look! Look at Nora and Nolan!”

Heart slamming, Yang directed her gaze once more to the two. She laughed loudly as she saw Nolan light up his weapon with glinting blue electricity, and slam it into Nora’s abdomen. Confusion flitted across his face as she didn’t collapse immediately, and instead, she remained still, glaring at him.

“Oh my God, what an idiot, he’s got no chance now, look at her!”

Lightning crackled on Nora’s skin, and she smiled sweetly at Nolan, clearly taking him aback, before smashing her hammer into his side. His eyes flew wide before the brunt of the force hit him and he was sent flying upward in a spinning arc, before crashing into a rock with a loud crack, and sliding limply to the ground.

“That’s for attacking Pyrrha unfairly, you idiot!” Yang heard her shout faintly before she charged back towards the fight with Jaune and Pyrrha. Jaune was mostly deflecting the sniper’s shots with his shield while Pyrrha engaged in actual combat with the team leader. As Nora approached, he turned his head and yelled something at her - Yang thought she saw him form the word ‘mountain’; sure enough, Nora grinned at him before whisking off in a peach-colored blur towards the craggy cliffs.

Yang saw Jaune shout at Ren, and immediately, he turned and sprinted off down the battlefield sector, towards the forest - he moved so fast, he was little more than an emerald-colored blur, sliding under Pyrrha and Brawnz, once more interlocked in combat.

He caught up to Nolan, who had struggled to his feet, shaking his head dizzily. They struggled briefly, but the dazed fighter was no match for Ren, who was still relatively fresh, but clearly Ren spotted trouble: his eyes rounded out.
“Nora!” he howled, throwing his head back and sputtering as Nolan clawed feebly at his throat.

“What’s he screaming about?” Yang whispered, and Blake pointed at the sniper, who had aimed her rifle towards Nora. She was still struggling to reach the summit, but if she was shot down now, they would probably lose the match.

“That damn sniper,” Yang snapped, “she keeps messing everything up.”

“It’s a good tactic,” Blake murmured, her eyes wide; she was clearly immersed in the fight.

Yang grunted. A tense silence fell over the stadium as Jaune shouted another command at Pyrrha; she quickly abandoned her fight with Brawnz, turning and sprinting towards Jaune. Yang’s eyes widened as she saw the team leader crouch and prop his shield over his shoulders, and Pyrrha sprang onto it. Jaune quickly flipped backward, sending the shield hurtling upwards, and Pyrrha with it. She flew upward, streaking through the air, Yang laughed as the shot cracked across her shield, ricocheting and missing Nora entirely as she finally reached the summit with a shout of triumph.

“My God, he used her as a deflection!” Yang yelled amidst the loud cheering. “That’s genius!”

Nora was now perched atop the mountain, and she looked like she was rushing with power as the clouds ribbing the false sky swirled open above her, letting sunlight pour through, shafting down onto her. Her hammer glinted as lightning speared down with a thunderous crack, and she glowed, crackling with pure energy.

She was flying off the mountain, then, a roar of triumph erupting from her as she plummeted towards Team BRNZ, who could only watch her in shock before she made contact. The shockwave rippled through the whole stadium as they flew backward and crashed into a rock, sending shards scattering.

Yang said a word that would have gotten her grounded for a month’s time. The fight seemed to proceed very quickly after that, one event following another in rapid-fire motion, until finally, Nora smacked the whole team into the barrier. Yang snorted as the big-screens zoomed in on their expressions— fury, pain, and embarrassment— and silence radiated through the arena at the unorthodox victory.

"Goddamn,” Talos, behind them, muttered to his companion, Eliás. Eliás responded with a chuckle of glee. "Told you they'd win. We Vale students act like we're on steroids and rainbows."

The silence was broken by the sound of Sun laughing quietly and turning to look at Yang. “Xiao Long,” he said with a chuckle, pointing at the ticking timer on his Scroll, which registered that JNPR had won in five minutes and twenty-nine seconds, “you owe me five.”

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Qrow

The Vytal Tournament was in full swing, and Qrow was drunk.
He was no stranger to liquor, to its numbing effects, the way it would loosen one’s tongue, burn away their inhibitions… but alcohol had never affected him as strongly, as peculiarly, as it had others. Perhaps his semblance soaked up the harmful effects; perhaps it was something else, but alcohol only ever made him more cocky than usual, and took away his fear. The feelings of blurriness, the fainting, the brashness that others felt - all of those were alien, foreign concepts, as inaccessible to him as flying to the moon.

This bar was no different than any others he had been to. It was, perhaps, a bit more posh than the stinking holes that served as hotspots for crime in Mistral, but it otherwise it didn’t merit much: the walls were plain, the shot glasses filmy with dust. The crunching floor underfoot had powdered glass embedded deep in the floorboards. There were stains— either spilled drinks, or blood from drunken fights. He didn’t know, and he didn’t care; he was locked here, in his own private hell… but at least he was keeping to himself, not disturbing the peace.

_Just as Oz would’ve wanted_, he thought bitterly. Spilled drinks and spilled blood oft went hand in hand, as the old saying went… but he knew his appearance would frighten anyone off. Few people were willing to try their luck against a graduated Huntsman, and any that _were_, he quickly set straight by the blade of his broadsword.

He was here to forget the mission that Ozpin had sent him on, that mission that had dredged up such terrible memories. He remembered his talk with Taiyang before he had set off, running into Raven along the way, listening to his sister, the Maiden, speak of her daughter, Yang, with such detached coldness… he remembered seeing _her_ creations of fear, the enemy’s darkness set free, remembered _Amber_…

Qrow savagely knocked back a shot of straight-up vodka; he was attempting to drive out the memory of the Maiden’s terribly scarred face… her skin melting and twisting and dripping with dark black venom… her assailant’s horribly cruel amber eyes. He had seen a lot, and he knew that people were inherently evil within, but still, the sight had been a shock, like a blow to the head. That attack had happened about two years ago, but the mission he had gone on had brought it rushing back to his mind in clarity that even alcohol could not dull, so he let the memory run its course.

He had called upon Raven, then, to deliver the Fall Maiden’s failing body back to Beacon. She was a Maiden, and so was Amber; they were tied together by ways older than time. But when Raven saw Amber, her red eyes had been devoid of emotion, completely inscrutable. She had offered no recourse on her own, and he had expected none. Raven wasn’t the type to get involved in things, not unless it was a matter of life and death.

He closed his eyes. He remembered _that_ conversation like it had happened yesterday.

_“This could be you, Raven,”_ he growled at her. _“This is a Maiden who’s almost dead, and her power is half-gone… does that mean nothing to you, or are you as empty of a heart as you would lead me to believe? Do you care nothing for Amber?”_

_She smiled indulgently, but it was as cold as winter. “Brother, you fool yourself if you think I would succumb as easily as this fool. Autumn, as well as Amber, was always the weakest season, the most divided. Of course, we could only expect her to be indisposed in her power; it was doomed from the start. Fighting with the newly-formed ice of Winter, and coupled with the warmth of Summer —”_

_“You say the name so easily, sister, as if doesn’t pain you that Summer is dead and gone,”_ Qrow said. _“But I know the truth. She lives on in that daughter of hers and her power, as ancient as the
Raven’s red eyes had flickered then, with a hint of emotion so great he wondered for a moment if there was some shred of humanity still inside of her, bottled up deep inside her where no human could ever hope to reach it. “Do not presume you can play games with me to reel me back into the webs you mere mortals play along with all your days. Life became so much easier when I realized that everything, every bond I ever made with comrades and loved ones, was temporary, just a blip of light in the grand scheme of darkness… and I have cut myself free from those ties. We are infinitesimally small, my brother, and our actions, our thoughts and hopes, prayers and dreams… all of these are but the scurryings of ants to the universe. We do not matter, beyond sucking up resources and trying to repay our debts during our time of life. For there is a balance to the universe, you see, a balance that must always be righted. It is in the push and pull of the wind, in death and vengeance for those deaths, in losing a child and, in turn, gaining another.

“You do not own me, Qrow, and you are just a flicker of light in life’s void when it comes down to it… and all lights are extinguished. Mortals, Maidens, gods, and even the creatures born of shadow. But I will take Amber back to Beacon for you, brother. Because the balance is not righted, with me owing you; in this favor, I will right the scales again. But I don’t want to hear of Summer, or her daughter, or how both of them were damned from the moment they were conceived. There are things I have left behind, blood and kin and love, when I finally accepted the truth of the universe… she belongs in the past, fading away into nothing more than a dim memory in the minds of a few, as will her child.”

He shook his head, unable to quite comprehend her crazy ideas of balance, of the skewed way she saw life and death, debts and owing. “Ruby could be normal. You never know with these things. And as for the rest... nothing gold stays. You think Yang will fall prey to something terrible; I know that well, but what about silver?”

Raven smiled, as if not believing his words about Ruby, but she didn’t acknowledge it. “Pride goeth before a fall, dear brother. She did get much of her pride from you. So silver comes full circle and bestows death and misery on the one who bears its cross. But gold is altogether a heavier burden to bear, and my child will bear it, because if she is anything like her father, then she will take the blame for everything.” Raven had stared sightlessly at her hands, crisscrossed with old scars from battles so long ago they had both forgotten them, from battles where they had once fought on the same side. “You know she searches for me, looks relentlessly, with no scruples about if she will find what she seeks, when she discovers who I am. But she is still blind in more ways than one, so ignorant of how the world really is… No. She will not find me. I have left her and the balance is in favor now, as it should be, but know this: she will become so much more than gold, because anyone with my blood is damned… as you should know very well, Qrow, for the curse of a Branwen’s blood is a terrible thing indeed.”

“You left your daughter,” he hissed, emotion finally spilling over. “That means nothing to you, does it? No tears for family? No child should have to lose her mother. No mother should leave her children. Not until they’re… not until they’re old enough, not until they’re ready to let go… until they’re ready to lose her…” He realized his voice had become a choked rasp. “No child should have to lose someone they need, whether they’re just opening their eyes to the world or they’re seventeen… no child deserves that pain.”

“It was for the best.”

“It was a coward’s way out!”

“I am not a coward!” she flashed back, hand trembling on her blade, before she took a breath,
eyes gleaming as hard as steel. “I did not come here to argue, brother. She’s in the hands of her father—”

“Tai and Summer always did have a habit of bringing out the most volatile emotions in you,” he spat, bristling. “Or are you going to pretend that, no, it was just in the past, before you walked out on us and broke the vows you made to protect your team?”

"Don't speak to me of Summer's influence when you were just as enraptured by something you could never have. Her."

He snarled. "I was heartbroken and so was Tai. And you, even if you pretend you weren't."

She scowled. “Taiyang will do what he has always done,” she said dismissively. “Ruin things.”

“Don’t you dare talk about him like that,” Qrow growled, yanking his sword out. It rang as it cleared its sheath and trembled at Raven’s throat. “Don’t you dare, Raven Branwen. Sure. Perhaps he’s a goddamn mess, but he was there. He is there. He didn’t leave. He’s not a disgusting coward like you.”

Her teeth bared in a feral snarl. “Don’t talk about things you have no idea about, brother. Don’t talk like it was my choice to leave. Don’t talk like I don’t know what path Fate has chosen for me!”

Then in a rumble of thunder and the hint of spring on the breeze, she had vanished with Amber.

Now Qrow was back in Vale, and the knowledge of what he had seen weighed heavily upon his heart. Amber was almost dead, hanging on by a thread; the enemy was drawing closer, and everyone thought the time of the storm was over, when Qrow knew that the peace they were experiencing was only the eye of the storm… We’re so much closer to war than we ever imagined.

He had spoken with Ozpin once, regarding the fragile peace. Ozpin had always been able to see through him, see into him, the way looking into his eyes made lies die in your throat, made you feel how very insignificant you were. There is a war coming, Qrow Branwen, a war between darkness and light… With a shattered team yourself, people might question where your loyalties lay. What makes you stay? What makes you fight? Who has you, Qrow?

You have me, Ozpin, he had said quietly. Until every last star in the galaxy dies, you have me.

Qrow stared at his empty shot glass, loathing the distorted reflection he saw there. That wasn’t why he was here; he wasn’t here to reminisce over the past, because that was all it was - the past; there was nothing to be done about it. He was here for two reasons: 1, to speak with Ozpin, and 2, to make sure Vincent Schnee’s daughter didn’t screw everything up.

Winter Schnee had been named in the hopes of inheriting her mother, Ivana’s, Maiden powers. But that had not transpired, and no one knew who possessed the Winter Maiden’s power now. Ivana was dead, had died giving birth to the youngest Schnee, Weiss… and Qrow knew that Weiss was on his niece’s team.

It’s so dangerous, he thought for the umpteenth time. Why the hell Ozpin thought that putting the four of them on a team together was a good idea, I’ll never know… all of them are catalysts, all of them. Yang’s a Maiden’s kid. Ruby’s got those goddamn silver eyes. Weiss could very well have the power of a slumbering season inside of her. And Blake… a Faunus, not even human… who knows whom she owes her loyalties to?
He jerked his head up as he heard a great roaring interrupt his line of thought, and he turned around slowly. An aircraft was slicing its way through the amber sky, and anger flared coldly in his chest as he saw the gaudy ribbons streaming out behind him.

*Winter,* he thought, stumbling up from his chair. *The forgotten daughter of the last season.*

*My enemy.*
Chapter III - Of Flesh and Blood

Ruby

After Sun’s match had finished up— a narrow victory, and Ruby was sure that Neptune would end up getting a lot of comments about his weird phobia of water (it didn’t make sense, his name was the name of the god of the sea)— Weiss had practically flown out of the arena. She had seen an airship sailing through the sky, and had instantly bolted. Only by having an uncanny ability to tail her had Ruby kept up.

“Slow down!” she hollered, cursing as Weiss continued at full-speed— seriously, how did she sprint for that long?— shoving past a knot of arena-goers and running on down the courtyard, to the descending airship. Ruby stumbled, breath rasping in her throat as she tore after Weiss. Her partner was a snow-colored streak as she pelted down the length of the courtyard, hair snapping out behind her like a silvery flag, and the mingled fear and excitement that swirled through the Bond was definitely an indicator that this was someone pretty important to Weiss. But who?

“Weiss, stop,” she panted through ragged breaths as her partner dodged across a cluster of people and continued at full-pelt to the looming airship at the end of the walk.

She began to slow down, but not because Ruby had told her to; they were approaching the ship. Robots buzzed around the ramp, and Ruby stared at the figure they were surrounding with a flutter of apprehension in her stomach. There was something very familiar about the proud set of those shoulders, the silvery sheen of her hair…

She looked like Weiss.

“Winter!” Weiss called, and the name brought painfully sharp memories flooding back to Ruby, memories from when they’d Bonded. Of course this was Winter, the only other person Weiss had ever been close to in the entirety of her life. Being sisters with Yang, she knew well from experience that she could never hope to compete with that kind of bond; that was shown clearly with Blake and Yang. They were close, but it wasn’t quite the same, Ruby knew, as the bond she herself and Yang shared.

Winter turned as the two of them approached. She was pretty, in the way that an ice-sculpture or a snow-bound forest might be— raw and cold. Ruby could instantly see the family resemblance. The same scrutinizing blue eyes, like they were sizing up an enemy, the same frost-white hair, and the same hard-as-ice expression.

“Weiss,” Winter said, looking behind her, straight at Ruby. Ruby averted her gaze— something about Winter’s expression was like the edge of a knife. “I didn’t expect to see you. I thought you were at the Colosseum, celebrating with your novice… friends.”

Following her gaze, Weiss seemed to become aware of Ruby— her eyes flicked to the side anxiously— and she took a half-step in front of her, as if to hide her. Annoyed, Ruby stepped out of her shadow. I don’t need you to protect me, she thought mutinously, and from the way Weiss’s shoulders stiffened, she’d felt Ruby’s pang of exasperation.

“I saw your ship,” Weiss said, too-brightly, as if to make up for the moment of awkwardness. “I
didn’t know you were coming into Vale—”

“This trip was out of my control. I received a summons. I was required for a meeting; it was completely unexpected, much to my chagrin.” Winter’s expression darkened. “Between Ozpin, the General, myself, and another… select individual.” Was that a flash of loathing in her eyes?

Weiss looked like she was going to ask more, but Winter cut her off. “How have you been, little sister? Is Beacon treating you well? Are you excelling in your classes? Making friends, and such?”

Ruby scowled as she felt a flicker of embarrassment through the Bond. “Well, um, there’s Ruby, I suppose.”

You suppose? Making a mental note to chew Weiss out privately, Ruby smiled at Winter. “Ah, hi.”

Winter looked distinctly nonplussed. “So this is the leader you wrote of. Very… underwhelming.”

Did she just mock my height? She’s getting more like Weiss by the second.

Ruby grinned at her partner. “You wrote about me?”

Weiss glared. “No.”

Winter’s eyes sparked. “You most certainly did, sister.”

“What did she say?” Ruby was thoroughly enjoying the flush that was slowly suffusing Weiss’s face. It wasn’t too often that she got to startle her partner from her perfect elegance, and when the moments did come, she savored them.

“After the initial letters cursing your name and everything about you? I believe I remember the adjectives ‘smart’, ‘determined’, ‘pret—“

“Sister, I do believe that’s enough from you.” Weiss kicked Winter in the shin, ignoring the rumble of warning from one of the guards, and Ruby wondered what Winter had been about to say before she was interrupted. “Why don’t you tell us why you’re here?”

Winter’s eyes clouded. “Classified.”

Crestfallen, Weiss blinked. “Well, how long are you staying?”

“That’s also classified.” Winter frowned. “General James would have my hide if I went speaking of such things to anyone… even family. Do not take it personally, sister; I assure you it is strictly protocol. However, seeing as I am early for the set meeting, why don’t you extend the offer of showing me your quarters?”

Ruby and Weiss exchanged a horrified glance. The bunk beds. “Winter, I really don’t think—”

“No, no, I insist.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Weiss cautioned, before pulling Ruby to the side. “Listen, Ruby, can you—?”

“I know when I’m unwanted.” Ruby winked at her. “Kidding. I’ll leave you two to talk. Should I —”

“Run on ahead of us and clean the dorm like the dickens? Yes, I think you’d better. It should be
immaculate. Winter would kill me if there was even a hair out of place. I can’t imagine her reaction to the dorm. And get Zwei out of there!”

Qrow

He could see his sister out of the corner of his eye.

That was something about blood-siblings; he could feel her presence, and he could see the dark shape of the raven swooping from the sky to perch on a lamppost. If she was here, it was a warning. A final warning, he knew that much, at least. Raven never came unless things were about to go very wrong, very quickly. He could heed that, sheathe his sword, and turn back. Or he could turn a blind eye to her silent presence, and continue on his way to pick a fight with someone who would, like as not, be the one to end it.

He chose the latter. As he continued striding onward, he saw the raven—Raven—spread her wings and lift off into the increasing wind, rising ever-higher, calling out a harsh cry as she went.

Blast you, Raven, he thought, shoving past a knot of students, stiffening as the person he was looking for came into view, in all her gaudy splendor, all that wasteful excessiveness that she had climbed over the backs of the suffering to get.

“Hey!” he barked out, loud enough to carry over the sounds of idle chatter. With almost a lazy flick of his sword, he slashed off the heads of the automaton-guards clanking on their way ahead of him, sparks flying as they collapsed with muted grinds of metal. One spark landed in his hair. Angrily, he swatted it out. Surely enough, Winter whirled at the sound of a threat, her lip instantly curling in hatred as their gazes locked.

“Hey. Yeah, I’m talkin’ to you, Ice-Queen.” He held up the gleaming chrome head of the guard, tossing it in her direction. She stiffened as it rolled to a stop at her feet, still clattering loudly in the sudden silence. “Turn and look me in the eye, would you?”

“Halt,” she snarled. Qrow flicked a piece of hair from his face, watching with a very detached sort of amusement as the younger one walked his way. He could see so much of her father in her eyes: the arrogant assurance, the coldness there, the ice.

My niece’s partner? She’s just more kin to Vincent Schnee. More kin to the most selfish bastard whoever lived.

“Excuse me, do you have any idea who you’re talking to?” she spat. “That’s my sister, and—”

“You’re Ruby’s partner, and I don’t want you getting hurt,” he growled quietly. Her eyes widened. “Move.”

He shoved past her, putting only a few feet between himself and his enemy, and he blew out a long breath. Winter’s eye seemed to twitch with unbridled fury. “You. Oh, you think you’re such a savior. Saw that gaudy ship of yours in town— I guess you’re here, too.” And not for the tournament. Always the secrets…

“I’m standing right before you.” Her left eye was definitely twitching.
He simply smiled. “So it would seem.”

“You realize you just destroyed Atlas Military property.” She kicked the guard’s head back towards him contumeliously.

“Oh, oh I’m sorry. See, I mistook this for some sort of... sentient garbage. Like the rest of your crackpot military.”

She looked at him in loathing, as if he was a piece of mud to be scraped from the sole of her shoe. “I don’t have time for your immature games, Qrow.”

_Underestimation, Winter. That’s your fatal flaw, it would seem, and your downfall. I can savor this moment. I’ve been dreaming of it ever since—_ he swallowed, breaking off the thought, but it was too late: Summer’s face filled his mind, laughing and young, a memoir frozen in time, just before she had died. Instantly, he was transported back through time, to their last conversation. Even though his mind was foggy with intoxication, her voice was crystal clear— melodic, amused, lovely.

**Summer, you know how I feel about you taking on this mission.**

_Don’t be such a killjoy, Qrow. You’re a warrior, not a worrier. You sound more like Tai every day! I’ll be fine. There’s nothing to fear._

You know there’s a lot of enemies, older than we could ever imagine, who would stop at nothing to kill you. I couldn’t bear it if you got hurt. You’ve kept your powers a secret from your children this long, remarkably, but I have a feeling— Ozpin even advised you not to take any further missions, and I think it would be foolish to ignore—

_Oh, Ozpin said this, Ozpin said that. Blast him. Qrow, he is smart, I’ll give him that, but he takes too many precautions, if you ask me. Not many know of the legend, and even less would be brutal and power-hungry enough to act upon it. Besides, to give up missions? To stay at home and wallow, never leaving, always staying? Why, that breaks every code a Huntress has. I won’t break my oath as a warrior based on a minuscule chance. And that might put Ruby and Yang in danger, as well as Tai. I can’t do that. I love them all too much._

Yang isn’t even your child. She’s my damned sister’s.

Even so, she is my daughter, if not by blood, then by love. When she is older, she’ll know. And we mustn’t give up hope on Raven, Qrow. As her brother, I thought you might know that.

_I do, Summer Rose. It’s just— curse her. She’s infuriating._

_Then you might give me a proper farewell. Embrace my children for me; I have to leave right away to get the jump on this mission. And please, Qrow, don’t fret about it. I’ll be fine—you’ll see._

Shaking away the ghostly cobwebs of memories— why was it that thoughts of her always snapped him into sobriety?— Qrow glared at Winter. “Oh, they aren’t games, sweetheart. They’re very, very real.” Fury lit her gaze, and he snarled. She was so blind. How could she not see what he was doing, goading her into making the first strike? But then again, the Schnees had always been annoyingly blind, tunnel-visioned to everything except their own future, regardless of who they had to step on to get there.

Weiss, off to his side, stared at him in stunned fear. He didn’t turn to meet her gaze. “You two... know each other?”
He ignored the question. If she hadn’t gleaned that much by now, then she had no business trying to understand such a feud. “Jesus, you Atlas Specialists think you're so special, don't you?”

“It's in the title. You—”

“Well, you know what you really are?” He swiped his tongue over his teeth, feeling a snarl coming on. “A bunch of sellouts. Just like your boss. Selfish bastard that he is.”

“I’m not sure what you think you're implying, but I've heard enough.” She was definitely furious now, her blue eyes blazing, but so was he; he needed a fight, he needed the mind-blowing, thought-numbing adrenaline of the battlefield.

“Oh I heard, too. I heard old Ironwood finally turned his back on Ozpin. The metalskulled idiot, not like it was a surprise—”

Weiss’s eyes narrowed. “Ozpin?”

Winter’s eyes flicked to her, nervousness suddenly glinting in their depths. “Weiss, it's time for you to go.”

“What—?”

“Listen to big sister, Weiss,” he said, speaking from the side of his mouth as he kept his eyes trained on Winter, waiting for her attack. “She'll protect you, I’m sure. Cage you up, hide secrets away, protect you in a way that isn’t really protection at all. Just like Atlas is going to protect all of us, huh?”

Weiss flinched, as if he’d visibly lashed out at her.

“If you won't hold your tongue,” Winter hissed, “then I will gladly remove it for you!”

“Coward.” He bared his teeth in an awkward half-way point between a grin and a snarl, and drew his sword, familiar weight settling in his hand, sun flashing blinding silver off the edges, like the glimmering rays of a full moon. “Come and take it, then—if you can.”

With a snarl of fury, she hurtled towards him, rapier swiping towards his face. He leaned back, the edge passing so close to his eyes that displaced air ruffled against his skin, and he seized the hilt of his sword with both hands, bringing it down upon her, cleaving the air in two. She recoiled, and he advanced, one-hundred and fifty pounds of raw, condensed power and muscle, barely held back behind the last shreds of inhibition he possessed.

For a heartbeat, like the eye of a storm, a calm that would be broken at any moment, their blades rang together in a cacophonous harmony, both humming with barely-suppressed power. He struck first, and she leapt out of the way. Vision spinning, he sprang after her, sunshine bending and blurring around him. He spun, catching her with a stunning blow from the side of his hilt. She retaliated with punching him hard in the shoulder, an old battle injury stinging in protest, and he swore, blasting a hole in the cobblestones as she danced out of the way. Breath coming hot in his lungs, he whipped around and slashed at her—and then she simply wasn’t there. She stood on his blade—what impudence, what cheek—and smiled that damn infuriating smirk at him. Now simply toying with her, he flung her off, and she landed on the cobblestones some distance away. He lunged, smacking her with the flat of his blade, and he gave a rusty laugh as she swore in a way that did not befit her status as an heiress.

“Getting a little out-of-practice, Winter?” he called, and she looked at him coldly.
“You entitled little fool,” she spat, tensing to spring. “May the vultures strip your flesh from your bones, you scum.”

He only smiled. “Don’t just stand there, kiddo, you might get hurt,” he said, the words barely out of his mouth before he lunged at her like lightning. Cursing, she managed to slip from his grasp at the last second, turning and fleeing.

So that’s how you want to play this? Fine. I’ve been waiting for this moment for years.

He ran after her in pursuit, scaling the pillar through the hooks and handholds, landing on a low-hanging concrete parapet.

“Stop running away!” he hollered across the windy gap. “You’re just like Vincent, upheaving every damn trouble and leaving others to choke in the dust!”

He could see her pull up short, face livid. “Don’t you dare speak of my father like that!”

While she was distracted, he vaulted himself over the courtyard, firing a bullet as he went—skewed, just so it would knock her off; he was no slaughterer—and she disappeared in a plume of white smoke. He landed, stopping with his eyes gone to slits. There was no hunched shape in the clearing smoke—no shape at all, in fact. Did I kill her? He wondered uneasily. The thought gave him a brief moment of disconcertion. Surely not. She may be arrogant, foolheaded, but she’s not weak.

He was right. Heartbeats later, a shadow flew at him, howling in unbridled rage. He sank his sword into the ground, gritting his teeth as she crashed into him, twin blades flashing past his shoulders and impaling themselves through the material of his ragged cape, narrowly missing him. They tumbled down to the ground, tussling, and she kicked him away; snarling, he flew back, skidding against the cobblestones. He regained his balance quickly, holding back his glee as he saw he’d infuriated her enough to let out her semblance, and fall into his trap.

Then his eyes narrowed as he saw a fast-approaching figure moving up behind her. If he wasn’t mistaken—and he rarely was—that was Ironwood, clunking along like a damn fool, sticking in his nose where it wasn’t wanted. But he could still play this to his advantage.

He sheathed his sword and beckoned her with a finger. Her eyes grew, if possible, even more furious, and with a yowl of rage, she hurtled at him.

Just before her sword plunged into his throat, a snarl rang out.

“Schnee!”

He could feel the cold metal of the rapier, a hair’s breadth away from where his blood pulsed. She only had to move it an inch—maybe more—and he’d be dead. The very edge of the blade grazed his skin, and yet, oddly, he did not feel the slightest flicker of fear; she yanked it away, shooting him a look of pure hate, and faced James—Jimmy, Qrow thought scornfully, always showing up at the exact wrong time…

“General Ironwood, sir,” she said.

He didn’t appear impressed. “What,” he growled, emphasizing each word with painstaking anger, “in the world do you think you’re doing, Winter?”

She stiffened. “He started the altercation, sir!”
“Actually not true,” Qrow said, enjoying the twin stares of dislike aimed his way. “She attacked first. Ask anyone.”

“Is this true?” Ironwood demanded, turning to her.

She held his stare for a moment before faltering, ducking her head. Ironwood snorted contemptuously, before swinging an electric-blue gaze onto Qrow. He was surprised by the depth of bitter anger there—and then indignant.

“And you— what are you doing here? You’ve been—”

“I could ask you the same question,” Qrow retorted, a snarl embedded in his voice. “You’re hardly necessary for anything. Really, what good are you?”

“I—”

“Now, now.” A voice broke into the midst of their argument. Qrow whirled as he heard it—that voice was one that haunted him all the time—and sure enough, it was Ozpin, looking as cool and collected as he always did, that damned unfeeling mask. “I assure you, fighting is hardly necessary, is it?”

Ironwood turned, straightening his tie and brushing nonexistent dust off his shoulders. “No.” Looking as if he would like to continue the argument, but didn’t dare with Ozpin standing there, he lifted his chin. "Winter, follow me. I will speak with you in the tower, Ozpin. Penny— let’s go.”

Smirking as the General strode off, visible anger in his tread, Qrow turned just as a dark streak plowed into his side. Grunting, he rose his arm, nonplussed as he saw it was Ruby clinging to him. As always, he was filled with a mixture of dread and fear when he saw her eyes, so brightly silver, and sorrow, as he saw how much of her mother was in her features—the shape of her face, the tilt of her head, the sound of her voice. He missed Summer more than he missed anything, more than his sister, or the easy life he’d lost forever, or peace.

“Did you miss me?” Ruby was saying excitedly.

He hid his sorrow—no use worrying her, after all, she had lost her mother and he had only lost what he had only ever dared call a teammate—and grinned. “Nope.”

“Qrow!”

He looked up. Ozpin was standing in front a hovering mass of stone as Glynda fixed the giant hole he had blasted in the courtyard. New lines were etched in his skin, testament to a never-ending exhaustion, but his eyes were bright with an almost manic energy as he glared at Qrow, and Ruby winced.

Energy of sleepless nights and debates over morality...

“He looks like someone put salt instead of sugar in his coffee,” she muttered.

“Yeah,” Qrow grumbled. “I think I’m in trouble.” This is a lovely way to make an entrance after that mission... like a damned, disgraced fool... and in front of him, to top it all off...

She smiled faintly. “You did tear up our courtyard. Just a little bit.”

He returned her smile ever so slightly. She was his niece—perhaps not by blood, but as good as—and despite the sadness she inspired in him, he loved her—if only for the fate he knew that one
day, she would have to meet face-to-face, like her mother. “Yeah, I did. Catch you later, kiddo.”

He began to walk towards the tower, veering instinctively away from the rare anger of Ozpin, but he was quickly halted by another sharp call. “Qrow,” Ozpin growled, looking back over his shoulder at him. Qrow, rarely startled, was surprised by the flinty look he saw there— the look of a man cutting his losses and weighing result against sacrifice, ready to do anything to achieve his ends and means. “You— you come with me.”
Chapter IV - The Catastrophic Four

Qrow

He could feel his colleagues’ tension, thrumming tangibly through the air as he stepped into the elevator. Their eyes watched him. He tried not to think of walls closing in around him as the mechanical doors silently slid shut. Ozpin pressed an unmarked black button near the bottom of the elevator’s panel, punched in a code, and Qrow stood stolidly as the elevator shivered once as if it, too, feared the headmaster’s wrath, and shot upward.

The doors opened after a few seconds, admitting them into the circular office. Low-lying clouds drifted past the windows, adding to the ethereal, eerie air, like they were in another universe entirely. The top of the tower looked the same as it had when Qrow had been here last; it was as unchanging as Ozpin himself. The only difference was the darkness that slammed down through it as Glynda waved a hand and the curtains fell into place, throwing a forbidding shadow over everything.

As he stepped out and walked into the office— an irate Glynda exiting the elevator on his left, an unapproachable Ozpin on his right— Ironwood and Winter immediately turned their twin stares on him: furiously blue, the only lights in the darkness.

“What were you thinking?” she spat. “No, scratch that. If you had any intelligible thoughts in that scrambled head of yours, I wouldn’t be here! You narrow-minded fool!”

On the other side of her, Ironwood looked unspeakably enraged. “If you were one of my men, I would have you shot!”

“Oh, dear, please forgive my insubordination, Jimmy.” Qrow curled his lip. “If I was one of your men, I’d shoot myself.”

“I agree that he is at fault— tremendously so,” Glynda said coolly, stalking past James and Winter. “However, your actions are hardly condonable, Miss Schnee; you did nothing to de-escalate the matter.”

“Thanks, Glynda dear,” Qrow said, ignoring the look she gave him, and Winter sputtering in fury. “It’s lovely to see you again, on my side, as always.”

“He was drunk!” Winter protested. “How was I supposed to—?”

Glynda rolled her eyes, like she had heard that before. Probably she had. “He’s always drunk.”

Qrow pulled out his flask and took a swig, feeling Winter’s eyes bore into him. With a sneer, he screwed the lid back on and pocketed it. “Glynda, I wouldn’t dream of calling myself always drunk. I have my limits.”

“Such as initiating a senseless brawl where everyone could see it?” She crossed her arms, standing rigidly behind Ozpin’s desk. Her face was as hard and strict as a statue’s. “You were foolish to draw such attention to yourself, Qrow. Especially in these times. I have little patience for such immaturity, such reckless actions.”

“You flatter me,” he muttered.
“This is no time for sarcasm!” Ironwood snarled. “Are you incapable of taking anything with the slightest ounce of sobriety?”

“Did I piss the poor General off?” Qrow yawned, trying for a bored look, knowing it would incense everyone in the room even further. He had no patience for these kinds of meetings. “So sorry.”

“They say it’s the last refuge for the imaginatively bankrupt,” Winter muttered. Qrow decided, wisely, to let that comment pass. The other three already looked furious enough, and he knew that however much he might push his boundaries, crossing them was a stupid idea. Especially in front of… who he was in front of.

“Qrow,” Ozpin said quietly, his voice immediately silencing everyone in the room. “Why are you here?”

Not much could hurt Qrow, but the trace of exasperation in Ozpin’s voice— like he was nothing more than a nuisance— cut him deeply. He remembered the last thing they had said to each other, and his words— ‘we are all poor fool’s in a pawn’s game, in the end’— and wondered, briefly, what kind of weight must be on the headmaster’s shoulders. The weight of the world, all the cities and lands and seas, and the people in it. It was enough to put a stop to Qrow’s anger towards him.

Ironwood, clearly, possessed no such sentiment. “You’ve been out of contact for weeks!” he cried angrily. “You can’t just— go dark like that in the field! For all we knew, you had died, and then where would we be?”

Qrow felt a grimace work its way onto his face. “I’m not one of your special operatives, Jimmy. I’m a damn sight better than them.”

“General,” Winter snarled.

“Whatsoever, sweetheart.” He set his jaw. “You sent me to get intel on our enemy, and I’m telling you, our enemy is already here.”

Ironwood looked distinctly unimpressed. “We know.”

His nonchalance fired a bolt of irritation through Qrow. “Oh! Oh, you know!” He spat. “Well, thank goodness I’m out there risking my damn life to keep you all informed!”

“Qrow—”

“Communication’s a two-way street, pal,” Qrow retorted. “You see this?” He yanked out his battered Scroll, jabbing angrily at a button. “That’s the SEND button!”

Winter sounded less aggressive when she spoke next, her voice quiet. “They had reason to assume you’d been compromised.”

Thoroughly annoyed by now, and feeling pissed now that she was little good for anything else now that he couldn’t beat the stuffing out of her, he glared in her direction. “And I have reason to assume you don’t need to be here. Seriously, who invited you?”

Ironwood avoided her gaze. “Schnee, we’ll discuss this incident back at my ship. You are dismissed.”

The look of absolute surprise on her face was priceless. “But— sir!”

Ironwood ground out his words through gritted teeth. “I said you are dismissed, Winter. Leave.”
Her expression hardened. “Yes, sir.” She saluted him, spinning curtsly on one heel and stalking out, giving Qrow a look of seething fury as she passed him. “This is not over,” she hissed softly. “We will meet again. And you had better pray that you do not lose the protection of them, for if you do, there will be a great line of enemies waiting to meet you in battle, Qrow Branwen. And I shall be leading it.”

Ironwood gave a warning noise. Winter continued on, the sound of the elevator doors opening, shutting, and plunging down echoing in the grim silence.

“I’ve made another blood enemy,” he thought with a barely-suppressed temper. Very well.

“Now that that’s taken care of,” Ironwood said, “what have you to speak of, Branwen?”

“Our Spring Maiden,” Qrow announced coldly, “was here. Warning me. She doesn’t come unless things are gonna go haywire real fast. You know that.”


Qrow smiled faintly, feeling anything but amused. “Did you happen to see a large raven circling the courtyard during our… scrap?” His eyes flashed to where Winter had been.

Glynda’s eyes narrowed. “That was her? Raven?”

“I know my sister when I see her.”

“I’m quite sure you do,” Ironwood murmured. “Vow-breaker that she is.”

“Do you want to say that to my face?” Qrow demanded furiously.

Ironwood simply smiled, a smile that might have actually made an impact on Qrow at any other time, it was so absolutely chilling and full of loathing. “There is simply no need to state the obvious out loud, Branwen.”

“James! Qrow! That is enough!” Ozpin thundered, breaking into the beginning of Qrow’s angry outburst. He stood up, looking like a wolf with its teeth bared as he snarled at both of them. His hair was stirred as though by the winds of an approaching storm, his eyes flashing like lightning. “A house divided against itself will not stand, not for long, and I will not have everything ruined because you are simply unable to keep from squabbling with each other like thoughtless children! Is that clear?”

“Yes,” Ironwood grumbled.

“Crystal clear,” Qrow said, locking his gaze with Ozpin, but his gaze didn’t waver, and Qrow was the first to look away.

“Now. Elaborate—if you would, Qrow—on your statement.”

He grit his teeth as the memory of the attacker, amber eyes glowing—the only feature about her he could remember—as she wrought the life from Amber, burned in his mind. “This infiltrator, this spy, the enemy hidden among the common people—she isn’t just another person with ambition gone sour. She’s the one responsible for Autumn’s condition. And she’s dangerous. Cunning as a snake in the grass. Or else we would have sniffed her out long ago. Underestimating her… bad idea.”

Glynda’s eyes narrowed at him. “What do you mean?”
“Despite what the world thinks,” he growled, “we're not just teachers— or generals— or headmasters. The people in this room, the leaders of the other two academies, we're the ones that keep the world safe from the evils no one even knows about. And we do it without pity, without respect, but still, we mess up! That’s how she’s gotten this far at all. Because of your mistakes!”

He thrust his head impetuously towards James, anger flaring as his arrogant stare lifted, unfaltering. “It's why we meet behind closed doors, why we work in the shadows. So you tell me, James, when you brought your army to Vale, did you think you were being discreet? Or did you just not give a damn?”

His lip curled. “Discreet wasn’t working. Blatancy, if it keeps the people safe, is our best course— better to be safer than sorry.” His expression grew cold. “Crime has stopped, a fact you seem to forget, ever since I incarcerated the king of it, that fool Torchwick. I am here, Branwen, because this is what was necessary—”

Furious, Qrow spat at him. “You’re here because Ozpin wanted you here.” Ironwood’s face grew very ugly, as if he didn’t appreciate being reminded of the headmaster’s wielded influence, but Qrow continued relentlessly. “He made you a part of an inner circle and opened your eyes to the real fight that’s in front of us, not your imaginary wars you create. And you bring in your soldiers, you wage a war before we are ready, and we will lose, be it on your head! You owe him. And you think that you catching Roman proves anything? Hell, we should be more worried! This is like the silence before a storm!”

Looking anything but, Ironwood murmured, “I am grateful for it. But I do not think that is true.”

“You,” Qrow hissed, “certainly have an interesting way of showing it.”

Ironwood slammed his Scroll onto Ozpin’s desk, tapping out a command. Qrow rolled his eyes as a miniature, three-dimensional map flickered to life, blue light washing eerily over his face, turning his blue eyes to steel gray. His imperious look flicked over all of them, and in the dark, flickering blue silence, his voice seemed to echo like an ancient whisper.

“The people of Vale needed someone to protect them; someone who would act. When they look to the sky and see my fleet, they feel safe, and our enemies will feel our strength.

Qrow barked out a harsh laugh, and the spell was instantly broken; Ironwood seemed to diminish against the spinning images of his army— all well and good to look at, but useless. Utterly, utterly useless. “You… you arrogant fool, James Ironwood. Do you truly believe they’re frightened of your little ships? Your military guard? I have been out there. I’ve seen the havoc they can wreak. For one who had no fear in attempting to slaughter a Maiden, your ships will seem like child’s play. I’ve seen the things she’s made, and let me tell you— they are fear.”

Ozpin stood, causing a tense silence once more. “And fear, as we know, shall draw the Grimm closer. James, the militia is a precaution, nothing more… it won’t hold the defenses. Of that, I am certain. A guardian is a symbol of comfort. But an army? An army is a symbol of conflict.” His coppery eyes looked almost gray in the light, like a silent winter sky. “There is an energy in the air now. A question, dancing in the back of everyone’s minds…. if this is the size of our defenses, what, exactly, are we expecting to fight?”

Ironwood shot him an unreadable glare before snatching his Scroll back up; Qrow frowned as he saw a flicker of darkness, almost in the shape of a chess knight, pass over the lit screen. “So then, what would you suggest we do?”

Ozpin exchanged a shrewd glance with Goodwitch. “I suggest we find our guardian. Soon. There’s no telling when the next move will be.”
He acts like this is some game of chess, Qrow thought sourly, before demanding, “So you aren’t using my niece? Or the others? The catastrophic four?” He heard Ironwood let out a snort, as if thinking derisively of Qrow’s family. “You’re mad! Another plan change?”

Ozpin looked at him, steadily. “It is not time, Qrow. Let her grow and change. This tournament, for them, is a celebration of peace. Disturbing it would be… unwise.”

Glynda didn’t look convinced. “Sir, is it really wise in the first place? To be letting them into the tournament, on-screen, that kind of untapped power broadcast for—”

“Oh.” Ozpin’s voice was brittle as a sheet of ice. “That is enough. I have already spoken with you on my thoughts about the matter.”

Her lips thinned. “Yes, Professor.”

“Now,” Ozpin said, moving around his desk, gripping his cane like it was a mystical weapon of old. “We must prepare. For this is little time left, and we must move swiftly. The guardian will grow into her place, as is only right. For her birthright heralds a legend.”

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**Yang**

“What the hell happened here?”

Yang wove through the crowds, dumbfounded as she saw scuff marks, chips in the stone, new battered markings where there hadn’t been before. She saw Ruby and Weiss, quarreling off to the side, and quickly hurried over to them, Blake at her side.

“Sis!” Ruby instantly broke away from her conversation, leaving Weiss rolling her eyes. “You’ll never guess who came here—”

“A tornado?” Blake asked dryly, looking at the disheveled courtyard.

“Blake, it’s beautiful outside, don’t be stupid.” Yang grinned as Blake looked offended. “No, it was Uncle Qrow!”

Yang frowned. “No way. How was he here? And why? I thought Dad said he was away on an urgent mission—”

“You’re right!” Ruby’s expression morphed from excitement to confusion, and her cheeks colored. “I, um, didn’t actually remember to ask him that, but in my defense, things were little… chaotic. He came here and—”

“Was completely intoxicated and began a brawl with my sister?” Weiss’s angry expression made sense now, furious on the behalf of her sister, which Yang could understand. If anyone attacked Ruby out of the blue, she would be pissed—but then again, Qrow had never done anything as reckless as that, attacking a military official. He wasn’t afraid to be aggressive, but he wasn’t stupid, either. Yang looked at her quizzically.

“He did? I can’t see him doing that. I mean, sure, he’s no pansy, but even drunk, I’ve never seen
him just walk up and start a fight. He’s got some common sense.”

“Does he.” Weiss’s expression suggested that she was thinking less-than-positive words about Qrow. Yang decided to steer clear of mentioning him in front of her from now on.

“There was a time he fell off a high-dive board and bellyflopped off the side of the pool while holding a beer,” Yang offered in a conciliatory tone. “He’s not exactly the most… elegant… individual.”

“He was hitting the happy juice,” Ruby offered, “that’s what my dad calls it.”

“Happy juice. You’re so innocent,” Blake muttered. Yang hit her shoulder, and she protested, shoving her away.

“We do not use the i-word with Ruby,” Yang warned. “She’s been at your bookshelf, Blake. Ninjas of Love, volumes one through five. If anything, you ruined her innocence. Next thing I know, I’ll find her browsing the M-sections on writing sites.”

Blake’s face suffused with red. “They’re— it’s not— I— it’s not my fault she was snooping around!”

“Back to the point,” Weiss interrupted, looking less than thrilled to hear of Ruby’s pastimes on her Scroll, “he seemed to know my sister. Personally. He goaded her into attacking him. He was completely horrid.”

“Ah, you neglected to mention that.” Yang gave her an apologetic smile. “See… Qrow’s motto is that he’ll never start a senseless fight— not in front of authorities— but he will finish one.”

“He didn’t finish it.” Weiss looked smug. “Not by a long shot.”

“He whooped Winter’s butt,” Ruby whispered to Yang. “She’s very angry over that.”

“Ruby. It was a draw.”

As they devolved into a scuffle once more, Yang looked out at the beaten courtyard. Despite her joking, the idea that Qrow would actively engage a military official bothered her. It didn’t make sense. He was, despite his faults, incredibly intelligent; she would know, as she had seen him scope out an enemy with seconds, name off whole textbooks of knowledge within minutes, talk himself out of more tight spots than a cheetah had. For him to initiate a fight with someone who was, by ranking, higher than he was… wasn’t like him. Not by a long shot.

Unless… unless Qrow and Weiss’s sister knew each other, she thought, meeting Blake’s grave gaze, and realizing that, for once, there was no comfort there. She seemed to look just as grim as Yang’s swirling thoughts were. We’re on the brink of something huge, I can feel it, or else Qrow wouldn’t have come.

The question is, what?

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**Blake**
She spotted him as soon as he walked out of the tower.

There was something about the rough, confident lines of his face that let him know that whatever else he might be, he was definitely Yang’s kin—a warrior, raw and untamed, through and through. His stride, his half-smirk, that alertness in his face—that, of all things, was Yang all over. He spotted them and veered his padding stride, like the slink of a cat, towards them. A huge sword glinted dangerously behind his back, but his gaze was trained on Ruby, and she leaped for him, clinging to him in a hug. He ruffled her hair, and she squealed. Blake smiled, and then, remembering her own family, felt a sudden, swamping sorrow, tightening around her heart.

Yang squeezed her hand slightly, letting her know that she felt her sadness, before turning to her uncle. “Qrow—what happened here? What’d you do?”

“A little brawl with some ‘soldier’ who was still wet behind the ears,” he answered smoothly, “nothing I couldn’t handle, firecracker.”

Weiss snorted loudly and rudely. Ruby let go of Qrow and swatted her on the shoulder. The Huntsman’s eyes trained themselves on Weiss, and Blake was surprised to see something very like fear there—fear that only strengthened as he swept his eyes over the four of them. He muttered something very softly under his breath; it was only with her Faunus ears, and barely, that she caught it: ‘the catastrophic four’.

Blake’s eyes narrowed, but he went on talking. “No,” he said to Weiss, “forgive my rudeness, Schnee, but your sister is fine. In trouble with the General, perhaps, but she’s fine. I think you will discover that she is too tough for my sword, with her thick skull and thick skin.”

Weiss looked far from appeased. “So why did you attack her like a heathen?”

‘Heathen’? Ruby mouthed disbelievingly behind her back. Qrow winked before grinning at Weiss.

“I do believe that’s none of your business, but if you must know, we have a history, and a lot of scraps, most of them stupid. It won’t be happening again, so you can rest your little heart about it—”

“Uncle,” Ruby said, “I love you, but please don’t be mean to Weiss. She’s my partner.” At that, Weiss gave Ruby an odd look, an emotion momentarily flickering through her eyes that Blake couldn’t put a name to.

Qrow grunted, not looking concerned with her scruples. “I’m aware,” he said in his deep, growling voice, but his eyes softened as he looked at Weiss and Blake. “So.” His fingers drummed along the length of his blade, eyes narrowing slightly. “You two are my niece’s partners, eh?”

In unison, Weiss and Blake agreed with him, exchanging nervous glances as Ruby and Yang smirked to each other knowingly, as if aware of what was coming. Blake shot Yang a glance, her eyes screaming PLEASE HELP. Thankfully, her girlfriend came to the rescue.

“She is great too!” Ruby piped up. Weiss rolled her eyes. Qrow gave a disbelieving snort, frowning in Yang’s direction. “I have no intention of chewing her out, firecracker. Too much of a waste of my time. Faunus or not, the girl’s a good one. I can see that—even if she is wearing too much emo clothing.” Blake decided to let that comment pass.

“And, well, Schnee, even if your sister is a bit—enemy of mine,” he amended hastily, clearly
noticing Ruby listening intently at the last second, “I'm hardly one to judge who is and isn't worthy by the blood they share with certain members of the family. Value is endowed to one's abilities, not their kin, so I'll judge you on your own merits, not your sister's.”

“Are you going to give us a talk about how if I treat Ruby wrong or Blake treats Yang wrong, you'll make sure we never see the light of day again?” Weiss asked suspiciously.

He gave a rusty laugh, straightening up out of his usual slouch. “Of course I’m not. I know they’re more than capable of making sure you two treat them just right, or you’ll suffer the consequences. Treat them wrong and you’re liable to be worse off for the wear. They’re very confident girls, my nieces.” Blake liked him right away; something about him—his rough manner, but caring and wise beneath—reminded her very strongly of Brian, her father. “I helped raise them, after all. Anyways, back to the present. Blake, Yang, I’ve been informed you two are going onto the doubles round. Wise decision. Not every apprentice Hunter can go on with my confidence that they won't embarrass. You two'll be just fine.”

Weiss looked offended, and Ruby whispered something to her that made her back down.

“We’re gonna whoop ass,” Yang said, and Blake rolled her eyes.

“That’s a rather inelegant way of phrasing it, but the general gist is the same, yes.”

“Well,” he advised, “you have a good couple days of preparation before the doubles start. They still have to go through many teams. Use that time wisely. Wasting your strength by passing it through the Bond is a bad idea unless it’s between that, or losing the match. Watch as many matches as you can to get a feel for whom your opponents might be.”

“Any other advice?” Yang asked eagerly.

His face became solemn, instantly erasing the humor of the past minute. “Win,” he said. “Win, or you’re done.”
Yang

After Qrow had bidden them farewell and stalked off—probably, Yang said to Blake, *to go drown himself in a vodka*, causing Blake to reproach her—they had all split up. Night was drawing on fast, a clear autumn night where the star-soaked heavens were ablaze with silver light and the air smelled of smoke and the sharp winter. Blake had headed off to the library, Weiss to the training rooms, and Ruby had gone to raid the cafeteria. Yang was flopped on her bunk bed, thumbing through her Scroll on a fighting game, when it gave a short, sharp buzz.

She paused the game and checked her messages, groaning aloud as she saw a huge group chat waiting for her. There was one only text from Sun in it—his contact picture was, by his request, a picture of him with his detective mustache on—but as she read, more began to come through. “The night never ends,” she muttered. “This should be good.”

**WuKingKong:** Yo, teams! There’s a party out on the courtyard by the Haven dorms and you guys need to come!

**Aqua-Boy:** theres rly good music too & food, if that makes u want to come, and it’s been approved by goodwitch, miraculously. so u dont have to worry about ur dictactor-like assistant headmaster busting in and screaming at us

**Wise Owl Sage:** And Neptune is dancing like a freaking goddess. Hurry up!

**Aqua-Boy:** uncool, bro. uncool

Apparently, Weiss wasn’t training after all, because a text came through from her, quickly followed by one from Blake. “So, she does manage to take her head out of a book sometimes, even in a library,” Yang said to herself. “Good for her.”

**Ice-Queen:** It’s growing late. I’m not sure that’s a smart idea, Sun. Especially with the fact that we need rest for the doubles rounds.

**Blake <3:** Is that so, Weiss? You always stay up to ungodly hours of the morning studying. It won’t hurt you to relax for once, believe it or not. Even if that may come in the form of a surely-lame party with Sun’s team.

Two texts from Sun and Ruby shot in at once.

**lil’ rose:** BLAKE IS A SAVAGE

**WuKingKong:** blake, did u just drag me AND weiss at once? daMN

**Blake <3:** Of course not. I would never do that.
**Yangarang:** FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT

**Yangarang:** and that wasn’t a drag, im not sure blake knows what that is much less how to successfully roast someone

**WuKingKong:** lmao, touche

There was a *ding* as Pyrrha logged on the conversation, and a bubble popped up as she typed a response.

**Pyrrha:** I thought it was a perfectly acceptable insult, Blake, and Yang, please stop goading them on. The last thing we need is a fight between Blake, Weiss, and Sun.

**lil’ rose:** yeah, pyrrha’s right! We all know that blake could EASILY take both of them with one hand tied behind her back :D

**Ice-Queen:** Hey! Rude.

**WuKingKong:** i should feel offended, ruby, but ill let that one go, because it’s probably true

**Yangarang:** lmfao, ruby. we’re not team rwby anymore. we’re team savage tonight, apparently

**WuKingKong:** team svge lololol

**Jauniper:** Geez, you guys are crazy. Sun, I might come, but who exactly is going?

**Yangarang:** sun- ill be there! No way im missing out on neptune’s dancing. i could get videos and use it for blackmail material or some crap

**Aqua-Boy:** Yang, I will drown you if I even SEE you take out a recorder

**Yangarang:** you can’t touch me, seaboy. ill kick ur ass from here to the sea and we all kno how much u h8 that

**Aqua-Boy:** :

**WuKingKong:** i will defend your honor, nep! i love your dancing!

**Yangarang:** I ship it omg <3

**WuKingKong:** HAHAAAAHAHA #seamonkeysforlife

**Aqua-Boy:** .... am i missing something?

**Blake <3:** … good God, you three are like overgrown children. Sun, I’ll come, if Yang’s going.

**Yangarang:** Love you, too, blake
lil’ rose: u guys are so cute!!!

Blake sent a message right as Yang did.

**Blake <3: Rubyyyyyy. Stop. Or I’ll stick that menace of a dog of yours in a blender.**

**lil’ rose : YOU WOULDN’T DARE**

**lil’ rose: AS YOUR TEAM LEADER I AM PROTESTING THAT**

**lil’ rose: HE IS AN INNOCENT BALL OF KAWAII LOVE AND FLUFF WHAT DID HE EVER DO TO U**

**Yangarang: @ruby - ofc we’re cute but im like, 100x cuter. and if you say kawaii again, I’m going to crush your Scroll. @blake, no sticking zwei in blenders. that’s animal abuse.**

**WuKingKong: if he’s in a blender, wouldn’t it be ‘animal juice?’**

**Yangarang: you, sir, are entirely effing disgusting. go sit in the corner and think about what you just said.**

**WuKingKong: :) r.i.p me**

**lil’ rose: I’m going to pretend that conversation didn’t just happen, and keep zwei by me at all times. sun - weiss and i are going.**

**Ice-Queen: And you’ve just decided that on your own, have you Ruby?**

**lil’ rose: that’s right! :)**

**Truth Ren: I shall come, if Nora and Pyrrha are going.**

**Jauniper: wow, Ren, thanks. so youll go if nora and pyrrha do but i count for nothing? bros before - well, never mind. yang would kill me if i finished that sentence.**

**Yangarang: Good, small grasshopper. you’re learning. :)**

**Jauniper: Yang, that smiley face terrifies me. I’m probably going to wake up with a shaving cream mustache, aren’t i?**

**Yangarang: :)**

**Truth Ren: Jaune, of course not. I just know you don’t need watching like someone (cough, cough, Nora) and Pyrrha needs my help to keep an eye on her.**

**WuKingKong: BROS BEFORE HOES**

**Yangarang: Sun, you better watch your back for that**
Aqua-Boy: DONT TOUCH MY BRO YANG

Yangarang: sea monkeys is alive and well

WuKingKong: indeed ;)

Tiny Thor: @ren - first of all, screw you too, and second of all, this isn’t the dark ages, we dont talk all properly on messaging. IVE TOLD U THIS

Truth Ren: I sincerely doubt you know your history. There were no Scrolls in the Dark Ages, and therefore, no messaging systems. However, if I refrain from using proper speak, Nora, does that mean you’ll cease to type in all capitals?

Tiny Thor: >:( i’m going to eat all your pancakes for that one. ALL OF EM

Truth Ren: Don’t you dare. I’ll pulverize you.

Tiny Thor: & yea im comin sun, hell yeah party!

Jauniper : Haha, Lie is lying…

WuKingKong: r u freaking kidding me? all this time, i’ve been wondering what ren’s first name is, and you’re telling me it’s LIE?

Yangarang: it sure as hell isnt ‘truth ren’, if that’s what u were thinking.

WuKingKong: ren, bruh, did ur parents hate u to name u that or what…

Pyrrha: I’ll come, of course. I can’t let Nora near sugar without attempting to at least keep an eye on her. :)

Pyrrha: Jaune, what about you?

The Scarlet Pirate: So headcount: Yang, Ruby, Weiss, Blake, Nora, Ren, Pyrrha, and maybe Jaune? Sage, Nep and Sun are already here. I’d hurry up before the night’s gone.
- scar scar 4ever

Jauniper: Scarlet, your message signature is… well its horrible. And yeah, I’ll go. What could go wrong? See you there!

The Scarlet Pirate: you wound me. also, asking ‘what could go wrong?’ is historically a way to make yourself have very bad luck, blondie.
- scar scar 4ever

WuKingKong: tbh i agree with jaune. scarlet, u suck. & teams— hurry tf up!

Yang grinned. Finally, a chance to kick back from the stress of this whole tournament gig, she thought, before looking down as Blake sent her a message outside of the group chat.
Blake <3: Meet us in the courtyard, alright?

Yangarang: okay, sugar pie snookums <3

Blake <3: why are you like this

Yangarang because i love u :)

Yangarang: be down soon

She paused, about to power off her Scroll, before changing her mind, opening up another thread and quickly shooting a message to Emerald.

Yangarang: Yo, there’s a party near ur dorms, are u coming?

Em the Gem: Thanks for the offer, but no thank you. I’m going to be resting for the doubles rounds. They’re always the most difficult. And Mercury snores, like, really loudly. I’m not likely to get a lot of sleep as it is. :/

Yangarang: lol, good luck w/ that

After ten minutes of prepping— she did have standards to meet, after all, and if she was going to a party with her smoking-hot girlfriend, it didn’t hurt to look good— she met her team near the granite fountain in the courtyard, the gentle tinkle of water meeting water and the whisper of wind ruffling the trees filling the air.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea,” Weiss announced, fixing Yang with a stern gaze. “But seeing as Ruby insists—”

“Shut it, ice-queen,” she said, roughly ruffling Weiss’s hair. She ducked away with protest and Yang grinned at her before linking her arm through Blake’s. “Well, my lovely trio, are you ready to go have some fun?”

“That’s a good word for it,” her partner murmured, but her heart didn’t seem to be in it; she absentmindedly brushed a stray strand of hair from Yang’s forehead and gave her a narrow look through eyes that seemed to gleam through the shadows. “Are you sure this is a smart idea, Yang?”

“Perhaps not smart, I’ll grant you,” she admitted, “but don’t you think we all ought to kick back, if only for one night? We’ve all just had stress, stress, stress— if it’s not us fighting, then it’s Grimm mass-invading Vale, if it’s not that, then it’s being locked in fights during the tournament, if it’s not that, then it’s going off on private missions for the good fight, and if it isn’t that, then we’re fighting off the impending apocalypse. We haven’t had a chance at all to just have a normal school party, and that’s a good experience, especially with our friends.” As Blake still didn’t look convinced, she nudged her. “Come on, Blake, I know you’d rather be curled up with a good book and some quiet, but if you come with me to this, then I’ll read to you, or something. My reading voice is lovely and melodic.”
Blake huffed out a breath. “Trying to bribe me, are you? You’re definitely not modest.”

Yang kissed her on the cheek. “That’s also true,” she said, before her gaze strayed forward, and she let out a yelp of alarm. Weiss and Ruby had already trotted away, heads bent together in conversation.

“The two budding lovebirds are leaving us behind, Blake! Come on!”

When they arrived, JNPR was already there, as well as Sun’s team; he trotted up to greet them as they walked in with fervid excitement on Ruby’s part, seeing as she’d never been to a party - Yang would murder Sun if there was anything here unfit for her. Weiss was still seething in disapproval, which seemed to amuse Blake.

“Welcome, welcome!” he said, chipper. “Good that you could make it. If you look to your left, you’ll see the food, Neptune dancing horribly, and the pool, and if you look to the right, you’ll see the plaza where all the anti-social nerds plus Sage, the man himself, are gathered. We’re placing bets on the tournament over there—” He waved vaguely behind himself—“But I dunno if it’s legal.” A worried look furrowed his brows and he nudged Blake. “I think I’m legit to bet this year. D’you know if it’s seventeen or eighteen, Blake, for betting?”

“No clue,” Blake replied, her eyes distant. She was obviously only half-listening.

“Well,” he said cheerfully, “you’re useful for literally nothing.” He turned to Yang as she roared in laughter. “What about you, bombshell? You casting votes for the tournament’s winner?”

She eyed him. “The only person I’d cast a vote for,” she said, “is myself.”

“Confident, isn’t she?” Neptune commented, appearing at Sun’s right shoulder, bearing drinks in his hand. “Not alcohol,” he added, slightly sheepish, as Blake arched a brow at him. “Goodwitch would have my head on a stake if it was. She can sniff out trouble like a bloodhound.”

Sun shivered. “Blondes scare me. Especially her.”

Clearly, he hadn’t thought the irony of that statement, because his eyes quickly flicked upward to the sun-bleached curls of his hair. “Not that I scare myself, or anything,” he amended in a conciliatory way, before glancing at her. “And… well, Yang, I think it’s no well-kept secret that you can be pretty damn terrifying when the urge takes hold of you, is it?”

Blake grunted, leaning forward with her elbows on the rickety table. “That’s putting it mildly.”

Yang nudged her before taking a drink from Neptune, and peering inside. The interior of the plastic red cup was filled with a light pink drink, ice cubes floating on the top. “Oh my God, is this a Strawberry Sunrise? Neptune, I think I love you.”

Blake scowled. Neptune winked at her. “I’ve been informed that it’s your favorite beverage,” he said, laying a hand on Sun’s shoulder, “by Sire Bananabrain here.”

“How would he know that?” Blake asked, clearly confused.
Yang and Sun exchanged a glance. “We’ve been out to drinks once or twice,” Yang said. Blake must be able to feel her sadness through the Bond and know what she was referring to. Probably she did, if Yang reckoned by the suddenly understanding look shadowing her partner’s eyes—quickly followed by guilt.

Yang was about to say something when someone yanked on her sleeve, startling her. It was Ruby. “Hey, what’s up?”

“We’re—that is to say, Weiss and I—are gonna go chat with Pyrrha, Nora and Scarlet,” Ruby said, jerking her thumb in the direction of the three. “See ya?”

“Jesus, Ruby, pick your companions wisely, huh? Weiss is going to feel so out of place. She’s the only non-redhead.” Yang ruffled her hair. “Have fun. Don’t do anything risky, okay? These parties can be pretty rough at times.”

Ruby pulled a mock-insulted expression. “Of course. I’m insulted you even had to ask,” she declared before flouncing off, dragging a harried-looking Weiss after her.

“They’re cute,” Sun said, looking after them before sprouting an awful grin that Yang associated with annoying little brothers and imminent dirty jokes, “I mean, but are you sure you guys are team RWBY, and not team HOMO?”

Yang held up a finger, drained the last of her drink, and smiled before flipping her wrist elegantly and splashing all the melting ice onto him. He yelped and danced away like he was stepping on hot coals, swearing as ice dripped down his back.

“Unfair! Unfair! What the hell, dude?” He shook himself out and lashed his tail. “This jacket was just washed too! Just washed!”

“I think you’ll soon learn, Sun,” Blake said, her eyes bright with laughter, “if you don’t want Yang to make you wish you’d never been born, you’ll treat Ruby as well as you’d treat your own kid.”

“Fair enough,” he said with an aggrieved groan, pulling his jacket off and wringing the water out of it. He struck a pose that Yang thought was intended to be sexy, but came off as trying too hard instead.

“You’re totally flaunting yourself on purpose,” Yang announced, and he looked at her in fake shock.

“What? Me? Never,” he protested, but his argument lost all credential as he shot a wink at a girl who was openly gawking at him, and she blushed.

“And that’s enough shirtless Sun for tonight,” Neptune said firmly, coming up behind him and seizing his arm. “Sorry for him,” he apologized, attempting to steer Sun away and stuffing his wrinkled jacket back over his head. Sun choked and spluttered, head popping out of the collar, his hair rumpled.

“Bro, you messed up the hair, uncool!”

As they trotted away, Yang distinctly caught the words your pecs are not cool, stop trying to show off your pecs, and Sun replied with something in a hurt voice that Yang couldn’t hear.
“Reckon he’s trying to show off?” she asked Blake, who looked nonplussed by the sight of a more-shirtless-than-usual Sun.

“If he is, he’s going about it the wrong way,” she said in an unimpressed voice, before leaning over and kissing Yang’s cheek in a rare gesture of affection. “You’re much prettier, anyhow.”

Yang flushed, thankful that it was dark so Blake couldn’t see how red she was sure she was.

She opened her Scroll as a message from Ruby - her sister, clearly, was disregarding the fact that she was less than a hundred feet away - buzzed through, and grinned. There was a picture of a scowling Scarlet flipping the bird at the camera, and a scandalized looking Weiss in the background. She’d captioned it with ‘he called me a fake redhead :('.

Yang snorted, flipping out of the tab to the screen where all her messaging threads showed. Blake looked over her shoulder, and a little pang of displeasure flickered through the Bond - Yang followed her gaze, and saw she was looking through shrewd, narrow eyes at Emerald’s name on the Scroll. There was suspicion there, too, and Yang searched further through the Bond and felt the echo of a memory from Blake: cold red eyes and a sneaky smile.

So Blake had seen the icy look in Emerald’s eyes when they’d spoken before JNPR’s match, too. Yang frowned. If Blake had second thoughts, then why not speak up about it? They shared everything with each other, every suspicion and thought, no matter how small.

Blake leaned over. She said, “Don’t trust Emerald.”

Yang narrowed her eyes. “She saved my life. You’ve saved my life too. If I can’t trust her, what about you?”

Blake’s expression didn’t change. “I would never be the one to hurt you,” she said before abruptly nodding her head in the direction of the shadowy school. “Do you know how to sneak out of this party?”

“I’ve always known how to sneak out of parties,” Yang said stiffly, because she was insulted.

“Sounds like a Mary-Sue statement to me,” Blake noted, quickly continuing before Yang could swat her. “Let’s split. It might be a good idea to get an idea of who’s here… who we might be fighting. You want to win the Vytal tournament as much as I do.”

Yang nodded, thinking of the triumph, thinking of the victory. “Yeah, I do.”

Blake gave her one last look through inscrutable amber eyes and then she was gone.

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**Blake**

She veered her way out of the cluster of students, keeping to the edge of the crowds. The loud talk hurt her ears, but it faded out a little as she weaved in and out through the crowd, finally finding a
somewhat-secluded spot by the edge of the field in front of the dorms. After a few moments, she heard approaching footsteps, and turned to see a large figure—hulking, with more scars than a weathered oak—behind her. His face was dark, head tilted as his gold-green eyes studied her. He stood a good foot taller than her, frowning.

“Blake,” he said, his voice rumbling so low it sounded like a growl. “Why are you here?”

“Hello, Sage,” she said. “I was dragged along with my team, I’m afraid.”

“You’re looking rather grim. More than usual.” He stood beside her, eyes narrowing. “Something to do with your partner, perhaps…?”

She blinked. “No, not at all. We’re doing great.”

He smiled, white teeth flashing in his dark face as his eyes crossed to where Yang was talking to Ruby. “I can tell. She’s a great person, you know. You could do worse than her.”

Blake nodded. “I know. That’s not what’s bothering me at all.” She drummed her fingers along the cold railing, watching the incredibly far-away stars. They had seemed a comfort once upon a time; now they just looked cold and uncaring, impossible to reach. “It’s something different. It’s… well, do you ever feel like forgetting the past? As though if you forgot, things would be so much easier?”

His shoulders shifted. “Every day. But you’re forgetting that the past is important, of course. It follows you like a shadow, clinging to your every move, shaping how you view every experience, coloring everything you do. Our pasts are the legacies we leave, the echoes of who we are, and they are important. We cannot forget our pasts, only learn from them. For without your past, you would not be who you are. You would not be standing before me without it. Everything that happens to someone, all their victories and sorrows and hopes and failures, rolled up into one… it’s all for a reason, you’ll find.”

“I find it hard to believe,” she murmured, “that all the misfortunes we encounter are for good reason.”

“Maybe not,” he replied. “Maybe they’re for fate.”

She hunched her shoulders as wind swept through the yard, rattling the trees, feeling an imaginary gust of rain blowing across her face, the ghost of a memory. “If that’s true, then fate is cruel.” She wondered for a moment why she was saying these things to him, when she hardly knew him, but it seemed inconsequential. He didn’t seem like he would judge her, and anyways, he was Sun’s teammate, so he could be trusted. He was a wise person, and she needed wisdom now.

Her eyes tracked to Yang, who was now glancing at her and Sage. There was a look of concern on her face, and a pang of worry went through the Bond, but Blake shook her head, indicating that she should go enjoy herself. Yang frowned a little, not making a move to come towards them, but not leaving either.

“Your partner,” Sage asked. “Are you two faring well?”

“Yes,” she responded, and he ruffled his dark hair.

“I’ve always found the connections between partners to be most curious. At times you have a thing
of such profound understanding and love, such as yours.” He nodded at Yang. “Or you can be the
greatest of friends and come from entirely different backgrounds,” he nodded again at Jaune and
Pyrrha, and then at Weiss and Ruby. “Or you can have been family long before you became
partners, not unlike your schoolmates Lie and Nora, and those bonds are the strongest of all,
stronger than steel or iron. Other times…” he gave a rueful sigh. “You have a blockhead like
Neptune, who’s only interested in the next meal and whether the girl you’re fighting has a nice set
of breasts.”

Blake snorted. “My heart bleeds for your loss,” she said dryly, and Sage thumped her on the back.

“He’s a good partner, even if he can get sidetracked often,” he remarked, before his gaze grew
somber once more. “Blake, have you thought about what partner means? It’s such a lovely word.
They are not restrained to anything. Sometimes they are family. Sometimes they are a friend.
Sometimes an enemy. Sometimes a lover. Perhaps they may be more than once at the same time,
but what matters isn’t that - your partner is the other half of your soul, the one who knows the
deepest depths and how to sound them within you, the one you can always trust. And remember
this; when you met your partner, all of you chose one another for whatever reasons. Fate had a
hand, but you made the final choice. The forging of a partnership is a sacred thing, and the
breaking of a partnership is perhaps one of the greatest sins of all.”

“I know it is.”

“It’s easy to see how you treasure her,” Sage said, “very much. You’re a good Huntress. You have
suffered much and lost much, and yet you still serve your teammates, putting their needs before
yours, willing to sacrifice all for the sake of your family. You have borne your cross admirably,
with courage and faithfulness, both hallmarks of a Huntress’s soul. No one would doubt your
loyalty to your team, or to Yang, Blake. But how far would it go?”

She stared at him. “What do you mean?”

The band of time around his neck rippled as he looked up at the night sky, scattered with distant
pinpricks of light. “You are no fool,” he murmured, “and I know darkness is coming, and so do
you. I don’t trust Professor Ozpin or General Ironwood or the rest,” he confided, regarding her
evenly. “Hunger for power has blinded them. Blinded them to the fact that we are more than
pawns. I don’t tell my team about my worries, because to take away their faith in our foundation
would make the battle already lost. Sun is courageous, but even the bravest can falter. Neptune is
loyal, but all loyalty can be tested, and fail. Scarlet is steady, but he cannot move against forces
against we know nothing about. There’s an energy in the air, Blake. Ozpin and Ironwood are
fighting. The military is flooding this kingdom. The Grimm are increasing. Something must be
happening, and they hide it from us. Can’t you feel it? Our ties, both mental bonds and physical
Bonds, will be tested. It’s my concern that they may not be enough to weather the storm.”

She eyed him. “They really did name you Sage for a reason. You’re very wise.”

He shrugged slightly, but it was still a behemoth of a movement. “I look at things in a more
objective manner, but I’m worried now. Not just for myself, but for all of them.” He gazed out at
the laughing crowd, eyes settling on his team. “If such a thing comes to pass, I fear it may be
beyond my power to keep them safe. This tournament is a dangerous thing, Blake, and however
much it may be to celebrate peace, it is a place for fights. Playfights, of course, but sometimes
plays and acts can become dangerously real. We’re in peace, but the peace between our kingdoms
has always been an uneasy one, and it would not take much to set them to war.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Atlas and Vale have never truly been at peace,” she told him. “They only
work together for benefit, but when that benefit’s gone, the peace will be, too.”

“And there are greater divisions even beyond that.” He watched Sun, and then watched her. “Humans against Faunus, kingdoms against kingdoms, souls against souls.”

“I would never fight against what I know to be right,” she swore, and he nodded.

“Your loyalty and faith has always been strong, even when it is tested often.” He watched her with the intensity of a hawk. “But what do you wish for, really? If this tournament is so perilous, what is it you wish for in the end?”

“Happiness,” she said without thinking. “I wish for happiness.”

“Just happiness? And nothing more?” His eyebrows rose. “A pretty poor wish, if you ask me. Happiness can be likened to a fire, and all fires eventually die. All your happiness can be eradicated in the swift stroke of a falling blade. Happiness is a flighty temptress, and no one person may have it forever. I don’t know if such a thing is had on Remnant, and if it is, I don’t know how one would keep it for long.”

She frowned at her feet, and felt the air change, soft as the sighing of the wind as it shifted through the creaking trees, like the breath of the night, which was a living creature.

“This kingdom knows your name, Blake Belladonna,” Sage said, and his golden eyes were as old as the ground beneath their feet, or the stars spiraling in silver coils overhead. “Make another wish.”

Blake thought of a time when a wish had been enough. A wish had given her the strength to crawl from the shadows. A wish had brought her to Beacon, brought her lips to meet Yang’s, brought her life to the light.

But now, as she thought of that, there was a new hollowness ringing in her chest. This year, she knew it wouldn’t be enough. A wish could only triumph over reality so long and tonight, it seemed, her expiration date for wishing was up. The dream was over; the time for waking had come. Her wishes had to be real and tangible. They had to be something she could keep with her always. She was tired of failing, tired of failing things and hope and people. She was tired of losing.

Now she wanted to win.

So she looked at Sage and steel flooded her veins. “I wish for freedom and safety. I wish for victory and triumphs. I wish,” she paused, and his eyes studied her, “I wish to get what I need.”

“What you need,” he mused softly, and Blake could see why he was renowned for his wisdom. “That is not something I hear often, Blake. So many people are ruled by their frivolous wanting, in mistake for need. But I have a feeling you are smarter than to confuse the two, and you will need that clarity in the arena. Because that arena is where the world’s most dangerous come to play. Very few make it out of the crossfire. Will you?”

It wasn’t a question, and she knew it. “I will track straight and true through the shadows when others lose their way.”

“Are you going to fight for that victory, or what?” Sage asked.

Blake thought of her father, standing before an oncoming war, sacrificing himself so she would live
more freely than he ever had dreamed of. She thought of the way the sky felt spinning away below her feet. She felt the newly-born storm’s breath on her face, and it carried the scent of thunder in it.

“I’m going to go farther than anyone has,” she whispered.

"Open your eyes, my dear."

Blake couldn’t help but let out the smallest of joyous laughs as she did so, excitement fluttering in her heart as her mind conjured a dozen surprises, but all of them paled in comparison to what was before her. She stared up at the fountain's glow, completely transfixed as the arcs of light cut through the dark night sky, ribbons of color flashing above their heads before disappearing back into the water. It was the most incredible thing she’d ever seen, and nothing she had imagined could ever measure up to the beautiful display dancing before her eyes. Faunus were exiled, refuted, and as such, never exposed to anything but the bleak views of the world. This, coupled with the lengths Adam had taken to bring her here, made it all the more valuable.

"Oh," she whispered, her voice a breathy sigh of wonder as she leaned against him. "Oh, Adam. It's perfect."

"Fit for a queen," he agreed, and her face flushed at the implication. He bent down to brush his lips against her temple, a low, sultry murmur humming in his throat. "Won't you remain by my side, Blake, as the head of a great revolution? Forever and always as my queen, my warrior, my treasure? Won't you promise me that?"

At that moment she would have promised him anything, anything he had asked of her. Her mind was already abuzz with the possibilities – looking at the world in all its beauty, even greater than glowing fountains, with him standing beside her – and she felt the warmth of love light her up from the inside like a torch, spreading through every part of her.

"I promise," she echoed, as if it was a choice, as if she had any real say in the matter, and he smiled that predatory smile – she didn’t know the malice lurking behind it, not yet, not while her foolish little heart was fluttering like a caged bird and she had no real reason to disbelieve in love – and nuzzled her again.

"That's good, my darling, because you could never leave." His voice grew deeper as she shrunk away, more menacing, until it battered her ears like a raging storm. "I will find you. I will hunt you down and bring you back. I will follow you to the ends of the earth and beyond, track you wherever you hide. I will pull you back kicking and screaming and lock you up where no one will ever find you. You can't leave me, Blake, you can't—"

“— can’t hear me, can you? Wake up, will you?”

Blake burst into consciousness like dropping into a frigid ocean, feeling ice explode around her, saying this is how nightmares twist your brain, this is how the blood freezes in your veins. Adam’s insane laugh rose higher and higher in her ears, and for a moment, it wasn’t Yang’s soft grip on her wrist, but Adam’s, smothering her, raining down blows on her until she could hardly think, bloodlust bright in his scarred eyes. Darkness swelled in her vision.

“Blake,” a voice came gliding out of the shadows, “concentrate on my voice. You’re here. With
me. It’s okay.”

“God,” she groaned, opening her eyes. It was late afternoon, sunlight blazing through the shuttered curtains. “What’s wrong with me? I escaped him physically, but I can’t even shut my eyes without him—”

“I can’t blame you.” Yang’s face looked washed out despite the golden sunlight, gray and old. “Not with what’s… happened.”

Blake narrowed her eyes, blinking in the piercing sunlight. Yang stood in front of it, her face hidden from view; she was a dark silhouette, with golden rays shooting out from behind her. “Yang,” she asked, “are you okay?”

“I just— it’s ever since Qrow came back things have spiraled out of control,” she muttered. “He’s my uncle; I should love him, but I don’t. Ruby does, and he’s not even her kin. All I can see in him is my mother, and he leaves all the time. He’s not like Raven. But he’s her brother. He never stays, and he keeps so many secrets. There’s a part of me that hates him, and I hate myself for it. He’s my family,” she repeated helplessly. “Why do I hate him?”

“He does keep secrets,” Blake said. “I could see that the moment I laid eyes on him. I didn’t hate him. I actually rather liked him, to tell you the truth. I think he… he reminded me of my father. But I won’t deny there are… similarities.”

“They’re hiding something from us, Blake,” Yang said suddenly. “Qrow, Ozpin - all of them. Can’t you feel it? We’re teetering on the edge of something, something huge… I don’t know how, but I’m sure of it. We’re on the brink of a disaster.”

Remembering Sage’s words with a pang of dread, Blake twisted the sheets in her fingers. “What do you mean?”

“There’s this, I don’t know, this— energy. Tension. The army suddenly arriving from Atlas in these huge numbers; the Huntsmen that are vanishing with all the Grimm out there; the fear. I’ll be damned if I’m the only one who feels this way. Hell, I don’t think Ruby knows— she’s too young to pick up on it— but even if I hate Qrow, I know him. He’s like a canary in a mine that only sings when you’re about to die. He doesn’t come back to Vale unless things are about to go to hell.”

“What do you think is going to happen, Yang?” Her fear was infectious; Blake’s ears flattened. “A war? We’re at peace with Atlas, Mistral, and Vacuo—”

“Nothing like that. I don’t know myself. I don’t think it has to do with the… the White Fang, either… at least, I hope not. I’m terrified, Blake. Something’s coming, like the way a tsunami rushes over you, or the worst storm you can imagine… and we can’t prepare,” she said helplessly. “They say being a true Huntress is about knowing how to prepare for an enemy, but how can we prepare if we don’t know what it is we’re facing?”
“And you are sure it was him?”

“Yes,” he muttered, barely restraining himself from challenging her. Do you think I’m stupid? Mercury was proud, but he wasn’t an idiot, and he knew how cruelly Cinder punished insubordination—even more cruelly than Marcus ever had. His father had used brute force; Cinder was much more clever, with ten times his cunningness and half his morality, which hadn’t been a lot to begin with. Torchwick hadn’t known that, and he was now paying the price for showing disrespect to her—he was rotting in a jail cell. Cinder could have gotten him free if she wanted; she could do anything, but she let him stay put until the end of all things. He was a loose thread, a liability—better where he was.

“Why is he here?” she snarled softly, half to herself. “He should be off in another kingdom, fooling around with a mislaid mission…”

After seeing Qrow, Mercury had run back to the dorms, exhausting himself for the first time in months. Out of breath, he’d relayed the news to Cinder—that the Huntsman who had foiled her plot with Amber had returned. She had reacted to it as furiously as he’d expected. He had been there; he knew the story. Cinder didn’t fear many people, but Ozpin and Qrow were different. They were threats. Ozpin, because he was so ancient, and had just as many means to achieve his wants as she did, and Qrow because he had severed her connection to Amber—something that wasn’t supposed to have been possible.

“What was he doing when he arrived?”

Mercury, pleased to have some information that might distract her from going into a raging tirade, dipped his head. “He got into a brawl with some… an Atlas official, I think. Her outfit looked like a high-ranked military member. I left them fighting. I thought he might… recognize me from when we attacked you-know-who, so…”

“Of course he wouldn’t have recognized you from that fight,” Emerald snapped. “My semblance worked just fine with blurring your features!”

“Silence!” Cinder snarled. Emerald gave him a hateful look, clearly blaming him for having incurred Cinder’s anger upon her, but he frowned as Cinder turned her cold golden eyes back to him. They were piercing, like she was trying to see into his mind to verify his information; to his disappointment, it didn’t appear to have appeased her. “Atlas official… what did she look like?”

“Uh…” Desperately, Mercury cast back in his memory. “White hair. Blue eyes, I think, I didn’t see her too clearly. She was pretty tall. She looked like…” He frowned, looking over at Emerald. “Who’s that bitchy chick on your friend’s team?”

Emerald, looking none too pleased at the ‘your friend’, narrowed her eyes at him. “Weiss Schnee. Watch your mouth.”

Mercury rolled his eyes at her. “Shut up, Emerald. She looked like that girl Weiss, then.”

“Of course,” Cinder muttered again, pacing like a caged tiger. “A Schnee. It must be Winter, the
daughter of winter… Ivana and Vincent’s spawn… how the pieces fall together…”

Emerald, sprawled out on the carpet, looked up suspiciously. “Who’s Winter?”

Cinder’s smile was completely cold, but the news seemed to have pleased her enough so that she didn’t comment on Emerald’s barbed voice. “She is the daughter of a dead Maiden. Incidentally, she’s also a sworn enemy of Branwen’s, too. To see them divided on themselves…” She lifted up her Scroll, and let out a noise of satisfaction. “And there is more good news, to add to it all…”

Emerald lifted her head, perhaps sensing the coiled, unsprung tension in her words, like a snake preparing to strike. “What is it?”

Cinder lifted her Scroll to display a screen with Ironwood’s logo in the top right and the tournament match-ups on it. Her lip curled in dislike. “We,” she said, “have a new access point. Ready yourselves, for tomorrow… your fight is just beginning.”

“This is literally so stupid,” he muttered resentfully, looking impatiently out at the Amity Colosseum. It was gray, gray, gray— the plainness before the biomes were selected. Not like he gave a damn. Landscape, in his opinion, didn’t really matter. He was just as likely to win in a storm as in a sunny day, and he could care less for acting and deception. Fighting and outright hostility was where the good stuff was, and he was getting really tired of having to act like a happy-go-lucky student, like it mattered about what happened in the tournament, or what happened in Vale. For all he cared, it could go up in flames, and it was getting really hard to pretend like he gave a fu—

“Mercury,” Emerald hissed, breaking into his thoughts, “stop scowling. You look like you just ate a lemon. Try to at least look interested in the part, would you?”

“Sorry, Em, darling,” he said sarcastically, eliciting a snort from her.

“You know who you sounded just like right there?”

“Don’t tell me I sound like that emo bull boy,” Mercury sighed. “He’s a pain in the ass.”

“Adam is the leader of a world-threatening organization.” Emerald sounded amused. “I don’t think he’d be pleased to hear that description of himself, now would he?”

“You think I give a single flying fu—”

“Hey! So you two are our opponents!” Mercury looked up as a girl spoke delightedly, a little too closely to be addressing anyone else. He narrowed his eyes, turning to see a short apprentice-Huntress. She was wearing shades, even though it was cloudy outside, and a lock of gradient-dyed brown hair dangled in front her face, probably trying to look cool but only looking stupid. He recognized her from Cinder’s portraits on her Scroll last night. “A bit… undersized, aren’t you?”

“I’m taller than you,” he snapped irritably.

“You aren’t taller than him,” she clarified, her voice amused as she indicated to the hulking behemoth of a boy behind her. “Then again, not many people are, so it’s no skin off my nose. This is Yatsuhashi, but we call him Yatsu, and I’m Coco.”
Emerald was the one who recovered the act, playing the perfect part of a regular student— not, Mercury thought drily, a spy and traitor. “Pleased to meet you,” she said. “Are you ready to fight?”

“Of course,” Yatsuhashi said, his voice so deep it sounded like a rumble of thunder.

Emerald and Mercury exchanged amused glances. No, you aren’t.

“I love your outfit, dear. That top… mmm.” Coco smiled winningly at Emerald. Mercury wanted to tell her she was playing a losing game, knowing how deeply loyal Emerald was to Cinder, but he refrained. “I wish I could get away with showing off that amount of skin at Beacon, but unfortunately, Goodwitch is rather… strict with dress protocol. It’s a shame. The things I could—”

“Haven isn’t.” Emerald’s voice was curt, eyes gleaming with hidden annoyance that Mercury knew only he could decipher. She shot him a glance, clearly already despising the two, which he could sympathize with. “You’re right, it would be a shame to ruin this, so I’ll try not to get blood on it.”

Mercury snorted. Typical Emerald. So cocky, acting like she’s the greatest fighter to walk in this stadium since the first Huntress that existed.

Tuning out, he cast his eyes about the arena, with nothing better to do. It was blazing hot, he was already sweating, his legs ached where they met the prosthetics, and he hated the enthusiastic stares of all the watchers on him. He knew, as much as one could know without being arrogant about it, that he was actually pretty good looking, what with his gray hair and gray eyes, and the obvious allure of being a ‘Huntsman-in-training’— even if it was a deception— and that many would be casting votes his way for victory. He hid a smirk. So much the better— the more they liked him, the more what was to come in the singles round would hurt them, on his behalf. The plan would work beautifully.

“Ah,” Coco said. “Looks like we’re starting.”

His lip curled. Idiots. He could probably defeat both of them with his hands tied behind his back. The stupid girl looked like she spent at least five hours in front of a mirror daily— and as for the boy, the less said, the better. All that bulk probably made up for no brain. And therefore, no imagination in a fight. He exchanged a glance with Emerald, their quarrels forgotten in the face of this new challenge. She looked cool and composed, but he recognized the slightest hint of bloodlust in her eyes. She hated everyone from Vale. He didn’t need to worry about her losing this one.

He heard one of the idiot teachers announcing that the ‘random’— Mercury smirked, remembering the changes Cinder had made on her Scroll— selection process was about to begin. He watched, uninterested, as they were selected— a droll-looking forest, a shattered city, blazing plains, and a geyser field. He barely suppressed his glee, looking at the confident glance Coco and Yatsuhashi exchanged, clearly thinking that a victory was in the bag. Now the fun really begins.

As soon as the word ‘one’ had left the announcer’s mouth, he and Emerald immediately exploded into action. She raced off into the forest, casting a mind illusion, deceiving the other two into thinking they had vanished into the grass fields, while Mercury ran into the broken city. He scaled a sparking telephone-pole, springing from the top onto the highest building, and he knew that the audience was watching him, wondering in bewilderment why Coco and Yatsu weren’t going after him. But he didn’t waste time on them. As soon as he had gathered himself on the highest peak in the biomes, Coco had finished mowing down the grass with her gun— what a stupid weapon, he thought scornfully, no class at all— and he made his leap.
He dropped down from the sky like a cat, hearing a furious roar from the other boy, and impact jarred up his prosthetics as he slammed into the flat of a blade. He leapt off and over before they could catch him, hearing gunfire behind him, but he was able to outrun each shot. Bullet shells exploded against his feet as he sprang up and over her gun, pouncing on the opportunity as it arose to kick back Coco’s gun, forcing the muzzle of it into his abdomen.

Everyone went still. Yatsyhashi stared at him through narrowed eyes, tense as a tiger about to pounce, and Mercury could feel the heat of his teammate’s hatred, directed at his back—his ability was starting to make her doubt, starting to make her unravel. If she clicked the trigger, Yatsu’s Aura would protect him from instant death, but he would be definitely eliminated from the fight—maybe scarred forever. Mercury half-expected her to do the unexpected, but as he predicted, she threw away her shot, and folded up the gun. Only his lightning-fast reflexes saved him from being struck in the face with enough force to crush stone.

Emerald would, no doubt, be waiting impatiently in the trees for him to make the move that would effectively separate and cripple them. Mercury flipped backward, landing on his palms with a growl of pain, and began to spin so fast the world became little more than a silver-colored blur. He felt his boots emitting shots of wind Dust—strong as a hurricane, brutal as knives—from the cartridges, and as he spun, he watched them swirl up into the air with suppressed, half-hissing, half-whistling sounds, like a deadly swarm of white birds. The other two peered up, confusion thick on their faces, but they didn’t make a move towards him. He smiled. Good—they had lost their confidence, but that would make them more susceptible to any trickery. Now the real fun began.

With a muttered curse, he sprang back to his feet, and at the same time, every shot of Dust plunged down on the two teammates in a deadly barrage of wind and smoke, blinding them, tearing at their skin. Skirting his storm, Mercury sprinted lightly around the outer ring of the arena, sneaking up behind where he knew the two would be when the smoke cleared—and when Emerald would make her move.

As soon as he could see through the whiteness, he unleashed a flurry of blows, sending Yatsuhashi staggering back with a bellow of outrage. He saw it—there in the corner of his eye—there was a flicker of silver like a snake’s tongue, and with a cry of alarm, Coco reeled back, a chain pulling tight around her abdomen. Satisfied, Mercury watched her go, yanked off into the trees, leaving Yatsuhashi alone, and decidedly vulnerable.

But he had underestimated his fury, and he didn’t see the hand coming that seized him by the jaw, lifting him up like a sack of flour, and shook him like a dog. Struggling and spitting furiously, Mercury was thrown backward, and Yatsuhashi leaped after him in anger.

*Right into my trap.* Mercury smirked.

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**Ruby**

“I can’t believe you lost,” Velvet said dully. Her face was drawn in a manner that was very unlike her, as she sat next to Coco, who looked furious. She was cleaning her wounds, and Coco winced as she dabbed rubbing alcohol on a particularly nasty gash on her forearm. Ruby had never seen the upperclassman look anything but flawless, but now, she looked terrible. A bruise was swelling
on her cheekbone where Emerald had struck her to make the final, winning strike, and she was
gashed up from the lacerating chain that had dragged her into the forest.

“Quit it,” Coco snapped as Velvet prodded at a wound on her shoulder. “I keep telling you, I’m
fine. Nothing that won’t heal without you irritating it.”

Velvet flinched, and the fury on Coco’s face melted into apology. “I mean— dammit, I didn’t
mean to sound so harsh, but— God. They seemed alright at first, but there’s something totally
screwed up about the both of them. Those fu—”

“Hush, Coco,” Fox rasped, his gravelly voice sounding unusually subdued. “There is nothing to be
done about it now. Insulting them doesn’t help.”

Ruby drew her knees up to her chest, leaning back against the wall of CFVY’s dorm. “I’ve never
seen anyone best you in a fight like that,” she said in disbelief. “No one can.”

“We are not invincible, Ruby,” Yatsuhashi said. He winced as he wiped a cloth over his eyes,
angry red burns starting to swell on the ridge of bone above his eyebrows where the geyser had
blasted him. “Even the best fighter can be outwitted.”

“Or outfoxed,” Coco growled darkly, sitting very still as Velvet wiped away blood matting her
hairline.

“You think they got their victory unfairly?” Ruby ventured, her voice tentative. “I—”

“You’re friends with them,” Coco said in disgust, “but maybe you ought to rethink your choice of
friends, Rose, because that girl Emerald is a little bit—”

“Mind your language,” Velvet murmured, finished with cleaning up Coco’s wounds. She sat
beside her, wrapping an arm tightly around her side, and their closeness briefly brought a pang of
sorrow to Ruby’s heart as she thought of Weiss. “What’s done is done. If they did come by a
victory through unfair means, let their tactics play out. They will be discovered. There is no use
fretting about it.”

“I wouldn’t fret if I hadn’t seen what I saw. Yatsu, I’m telling you, I saw you walking out of the
forest after you got eliminated.” Coco turned her head towards him, gray eyes sparking angrily. He
frowned at her. “What are you going to tell me now? I’m hallucinating? Who the hell knows?
Maybe I am.”

“No, Coco, I’m not telling you that you’re crazy,” he replied levelly, dabbing at his face. “I simply
am saying that I did not enter the forest once. Therefore, I could not have spoken to you, nor have
been seen by you in any reality. It is not any fault of yours.”

“Yes,” Velvet said. “Coco, even the smartest and strongest can get tired and see things during a
fight. It’s not—you don’t need to feel bad.”

Coco set her jaw and looked away, still visibly smarting from the humiliating defeat. “Whatever,”
she replied tiredly, with a gusty sigh that shook her shoulders.

“I think you should go, Ruby,” Velvet murmured in an undertone to Ruby. “She’s not very
welcoming when she’s in a mood like this.”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, but her mind was troubled, swirling with dark thoughts. “Yeah, sure.”
“You’re leaving?”

Winter’s face was as angular and hard as the marble around them. “Yes, little one. The General has decreed that it must be so. Besides, my presence is needed in Atlas, to rally the remaining troops…” She shook her head frustratedly as Weiss leaned forward eagerly. “No, do not ask me of it again. I cannot speak of it. I am sworn to keep this secret.”

“I’m your sister, if you could just tell me, I wouldn’t—”

“Tell anyone?” Winter asked, with a shrewd, considering look, pulling Weiss’s protest up short. “But that is a lie, Weiss. You would confide in your teammates. Gossip flies by word of mouth very quickly, and in Beacon, it would speed through the school. I do not believe you to be incapable of holding your tongue, but your loyalty to your teammates would override that, preventing you from not speaking… I cannot ask that of you. Better for you to not know.”

“That’s not fair,” Weiss muttered, knowing she sounded like a sulky toddler who wasn’t getting her way, and hating it.

Winter’s smile was thin. “Life rarely is,” she said ruminatively. “It is not fair that I must go so soon after arriving. It is not fair that you are isolated here, away from blood kin. It is not fair that Mother died. We must learn to accept the lots we are dealt in life, cope with it, and make the best with what we are given.”

“I suppose.”

Winter frowned down at her cup. “I am truly sorry. My duty is not here, sister. I was merely needed to attend the meeting with the General and your headmaster, and to oversee the transport of additional units to Vale. Our last shipment was lost to an ambush. I believe you had a run-in with its cargo, actually— however, it’s fortunate those Paladins were in the prototype stage… otherwise your team may not have fared so well.” Winter looked even more worried as Weiss looked away, a muscle flickering tensely in her jaw, and she reached out, resting an elegant, gloved hand on her own. “Weiss, do not despair at the thought of your past failures. Use them, learn from them. I will say… you have done… you’ve done well out here, sister, all on your own. You should be proud—as I am.”

As Weiss looked up, startled, Winter gave an apologetic grin. It looked out of place on her usually-cultured face. “I must be honest. It was very amusing seeing Father’s face the day you outfoxed him and left for Beacon.”

Weiss set her jaw. “I can’t wait to show him what I have learned. Perhaps then he’ll—”

Winter’s grin turned into a cool smirk. “Oh, yes? And what have you learned out here?”

Her jaw dropped. “B— I— what do you mean? I’m getting better and better with my glyphs; I’ve
“even started time-dilation!” She scowled. “I haven’t told my team of it, of my semblance— you’re wrong, when you say I can’t keep secrets, Winter; they have no idea—”

Winter made a chiding noise. “It is a small matter, that. You did not keep it a secret out of self-restraint, Weiss. You have not told your team about your semblance because they would know from then on that you had only accessed a fraction of your true potential. You did not want to invoke their disappointment.”

Weiss narrowed her eyes, furious at the statement—and even more furious that, when she looked inside herself, she found it was true. “That is not true.”

“Or,” Winter continued airily, “perhaps, it is simply because you do not wish to shatter the image of perfection that your partner, Ruby, sees in you.”

Weiss flinched as if she’d been struck. “I am not talking about that with you.”

“You have no wish to discuss your love life… or lack thereof,” Winter said. Weiss could have sworn there was a faint smile playing around her mouth. “Very well. I will leave the subject alone, but take heed that if you do not do something, that relationship will melt away like frost in the sunlight.

“So, we turn to the matter of your semblance— of Summoning, to be more precise. Sister, it is all very well and good in words, but a demonstration is in order— you lie when you claim that you cannot Summon, because we Schnees are unique. Unlike many, our semblance is hereditary—passed through blood, Vincent and Ivana, now to you and I. But that doesn't mean it will come easily. Nor should you expect it to.” She lifted her hand, palm-up. A shaft of sunlight seemed to strike it, and with a flash of blue, a glyph began to spin there, faster and faster, like a whirlpool. “Your Semblance is like a muscle. The more you practice with it, the stronger it will become. But if you only focus on one aspect of it…” She gave an elegant flick of her hand, and Weiss shut her eyes as the glow of blue became blinding, the glyph shattering outward in chilly shards. She opened her eyes, and her heart caught in her chest as she saw a Grimm by her sister’s side. But this was an inverse; it had fur as white as the driven snow, instead of a midnight-dark pelt, and its eyes were pure blue as they regarded Weiss. “If you fail to test the limits of what you think is possible, then you'll never truly grow.” Her gaze became somber, and she closed her eyes before sighing heavily. “Weiss, you must be ready. Train. Fight. Practice. You are growing, but only repetition and stretching past your limits— only that will help you to blossom, to become the warrior you are destined to be.”

Weiss bowed her head, the veins in her hands becoming very stark as her fingers clenched in on themselves. “The Summoning is hard, Winter. You don’t understand how much so. It feels as though every tendon is being torn whenever I even try, like—”

“Those you killed— they will not come back to your side easily, Weiss, nor will they do it willingly, as your enemies. The Summoning is very powerful because it turns the will of a creature into its opposite. However much a fallen foe hated you: that will turn into strength. It is not easy. But you will endure.”

The back of her neck prickled, like a cold wind had swept through the courtyard, even though the sun was shining brightly. “Yes, Winter.”

“Rise up. There is a lesson to be learned here, and I would school you before I go. After all—” She gave a little half-grin— “my teachings are very rare to come by.”
“Excellent form! Now think to your fallen foes! The ones who forced you to push past where you were, and become who you are now. Think of them, and watch as they come to your side.”

The pain that shivered through her veins, the frustration and fury, must surely be throbbing through the Bond— Weiss knew Ruby was somewhere, pacing, worrying— but all her energy was draining through Myrtenaster, going into the glyph. However, despite her best efforts, and the sweat beading on her forehead, it wobbled and shrank, before flickering and winking out entirely. Furious, Weiss let her blade fall. “I can’t!” She spat, more angry with herself than anyone.

Winter’s hand came up and swatted her on the back of the head— not hard enough to really hurt, but enough to send a jolt through her, banishing the fog of despair spreading through her mind. “Stop doubting yourself! That guarantees your failure!”

Frustration boiling over— with her sister, with her father’s imposed iron will, with her situation with Ruby— Weiss turned around, snarling. “I’m trying! Stop humiliating me!”

Winter’s eyes had all the coldness of a tundra. “If this is what you call trying,” she growled, her voice trembling with disgust, “you have no hope of winning the tournament, let alone succeeding as a Huntress.”

“As if that has any impact. I’m not even going on to the doubles rounds!”


Yes, I’m sure you’re all gung-ho for romance, aren’t you? “…Uh-huh.”

Winter frowned, as if displeased. “If they do not even let you proceed, then why don’t you just move back home? I’m sure Father would give you a nice job as a receptionist!”

The image came unwillingly to her mind: crammed into a tiny, claustrophobia-inducing desk, up to her elbows in paperwork, blocked out from the sky and sun and snow. It was more terrifying than any Grimm she’d faced. “I don’t need Father’s charity.”

Winter leaned in, eyes glittering as if Weiss had played right into her trap. “But you do need his money. You didn’t let your team know that, either? That Father has cut off your resources, revoked your credit card, done everything he can to make you impoverished—”

“I can outlast his little mind games,” Weiss growled. “How did you even know about that?”

Winter straightened, looking pleased with herself, like a cat that had caught a mouse between its claws, and shrugged, a fluid movement of her shoulders. “It’s a lucky guess, merely intuition. I may have been in a similar situation myself when I declined his offer to join the Dust company and took up a job as a military official instead. So— what have you done this time to bring down his disapproval upon yourself?”

Weiss crossed her arms defiantly as Winter circled her, looking her up and down. “That’s the issue. I’m really… not sure what I’ve done. I haven’t done anything out of the ordinary— I even went to go buy more Dust cartridges the other day, and the card came up negative.”

Winter’s eyes gleamed. “How embarrassing.”
“I know!” she said, gritting her teeth as Winter shook her head reproachfully. “Well, it was— why would he cut me off like that?”

“Perhaps so that you would stop avoiding him and call home?”

She doesn’t know. She has no idea. How could I willingly bring myself to go back into that situation, the mind-games he plays, the way he tries to control even the way I think? Weiss shook her head, but still images rushed through her mind— her father roaring at her, hissing into the telephone, the chill in his blue eyes. He had left scars on her, wounds that were still bleeding, that she was only just beginning to comprehend, realize the damage of. Winter couldn’t know that, but it still hurt.

Weiss felt her Scroll buzz. She knew it was probably Ruby, asking what was wrong, but she couldn’t bring herself to look. Furious, she drew her blade with a sharp sound of metal scratching metal, and her fury exploded out in a glyph, colder blue than it had ever been, spinning in the way her heart was spinning out of control. The fury coursed out, vibrating through her rapier, turning the edges of the glyph a bloody red, and she was lost, she—

“Weiss, stop.” Winter’s hand gripped her shoulder. There was no warmth in it. “Emotions can grant you strength. But you must never let them overpower you. Control your spirit, or you risk it controlling— and destroying— you.”

She let her blade fall, the glyph dying noiselessly. Winter looked almost pitying, the white curls of her hair licking at her throat like bands of fire, blue eyes like snow. “It sounds to me like you have two choices in front of you. You can either call Father, beg for his money back, and explain once more why you would want to study at Beacon over Atlas… or you could continue to explore Remnant, discovering more about the world and honestly, more about yourself.” Her eyes flickered with shadows, as if she was once again thinking about whatever Ozpin and the General had discussed, but she didn’t share any cryptic news.

“I won’t let him control me,” she murmured. “And I won’t beg him.”

Winter gave a sad smile. “It’s time for me to go,” she said softly. “I shall miss you, Weiss. You are growing into a strong, beautiful woman. I only hope—” She broke off. “Keep yourself well and unharmed for me. Seize life by the throat. Don’t let it slip away from you.” She hugged her, and for all the strength her sister portrayed, Weiss thought that Winter felt fragile, small, like a bird— like someone who was only portraying strength and iciness, but really was lost on the inside.

“It was really good to see you,” she murmured into the crisp material of her outfit. “I’ll miss you.”

Even then as they pulled away, Weiss had an awful feeling that she wouldn’t be seeing her sister again for a long, long time.

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**Cinder**

It was the day after the match with her charges against the fools from Beacon; it had gone just as
smoothly as she had expected. An easy win. But now…

She listened at the doorframe, a cold anger rippling through her heart as their voices rose. It sounded like they were bickering as always, arguing about things that didn’t understand, couldn’t understand. She knew Emerald held a worship for her, and she had never discouraged her for it; it made her more obedient to the plan, and kept her in line, but it was Mercury who regarded her as less of an all-powerful person.

But that was his folly, and his loss.

“But we can’t… well, you should have told her no! You should have told her she was being pigeon-stupid! Honestly, how she could think this was a good…”

“You don’t tell her no. Cinder knows what she’s doing.” Mercury’s voice was louder now, but he sounded sullen. “We’ve got to trust her.”

“We’re not trusting her, we’re trusting him, and quite frankly I don’t like it one bit… well, no! He’s been out of contact for weeks… a stupid venture, in my opinion… and you don’t even care! You just sit around…”

“Like you’re any better? Always moaning and groaning about how slow this is, how you feel we aren’t doing it fast enough…”

It sounded like they had moved away from any real decision-making and now were simply quarreling. Cinder flung open the door, her eyes narrowing as they looked up. Mercury merely looked sulky, but guilt was written all over Emerald’s face. Cinder stared at her for a second. I would kill you if word got out, if you betrayed me, she thought, even if I saved your life. Perhaps death would be a kinder fate than the existence I rescued you from, and the one you are proceeding into.

“You would do well,” she said quietly, her voice as brittle as the splintering of ice, “to keep quiet, or better yet, obey and do as I ask and be silent. If anyone had been listening at the door, if it had been anyone other than me… I will not have everything spoiled because of you two being unable to control your tongues, your foolish whims…” The last words came out as a soft hiss. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Emerald mumbled.

“Crystal,” Mercury said contemptuously, stretching languidly before rising to his feet. She drew to the side as he passed her, and their eyes flicked to meet — narrowed gray against inscrutable amber — and he was the first to lower his gaze. He padded out the door, turned to Emerald, and lifted his hand in a sarcastic farewell wave. The gesture Emerald sent back elicited a barely-suppressed noise of warning through Cinder’s gritted teeth, but she allowed it to pass; she knew she couldn’t always predict the way her charges would act; there was balance, and often, they did not act in the ways she expected, upsetting that balance. Emerald was usually predictable. She was the pawn. Obedient, if not having some bit of fire inside of her, but she’d never shown that kind of disobedience to Cinder but once, when they had found Mercury. She had the kind of charisma necessary for them to pull off the act of students from Haven, with an unmistakable air of defiant youth still running through her, that youth that had not been stolen from her— not yet, Cinder thought, not yet— she was a key figure with her semblance, but other than that, she wasn’t remarkable, and more importantly, she was discardable after phase three of the plan. Mercury was the one that warned her, the one that bit and fought and threw himself against her plans like waves crashing ceaselessly against a shore. He wasn’t a child, even if he had the face of one; he was a stone-cold killer, born with something more than lacking in decency. He had slaughtered his father...
remorselessly, and while she understood - not sympathized, perhaps, but understood - why he had done it, anyone who was as immoral as she was was a wild card. But he was necessary too; he possessed a cold, ruthless streak she recognized, and his hatred for Remnant would serve her well.

It was coming, and the final warning had already been issued. Now… all that was left to do was wait, to wait and watch, as it all burned down to the ground.

A/N: DID YOU GUYS SEE THAT HAMILTON REFERENCE DURING THE CFVY FIGHT
IM TRASH
Yang

Ruby, sprawled out on the carpet, cursed softly as she chalked down her twelfth defeat in as many minutes. Qrow barked a laugh as she glared at him. “You’re cheating.”

“No underhanded tactics here,” he said lightly. “Just pure skill.”

“Skill,” she scoffed scornfully. “Yang, you take a turn. See if you can beat this old man.”

“Old?” he echoed in disbelief. “Kiddo, don’t push it. Firecracker, you reckon you can beat me?”

“Do I reckon,” Yang said dryly, taking a seat beside him—even if she didn’t like her uncle, she wasn’t above playing at the happy-family tactic, if only to make Ruby happy—and grabbing the controller. “You’re going down.”

“Now,” Qrow said, lowering his controller, “where was I?”

Ruby smacked his shoulder. “You know where! Tell us about your mission.”

Qrow’s eyes flashed warily, and in that instant, Yang knew that whatever he said next would be a lie—his mission had been top-secret, and he wouldn’t tell them about it any detail; he would make up a lie, because he was shrouded in secrets. “Right, well… I’d come across a small village in the swamps west of Mistral. It’s wild country out there, raw and untamed, full of Grimm and rogues and thieves, and the villages weren’t more than clusters of shacks, crawling with the scum of the earth. Not a pretty place.”

Well, he’s a very elaborate liar, I’ll give him that, Yang thought resentfully, watching as more of his tall tales spilled forth, embellished with little details that made it seem true—but she knew better.

“I had my sword drawn as I went along. It was nighttime, and I could hear Grimm in the distance—hisses of King Taijitus, the eerie howling of the Beowolves. The village was bustling at night, mostly with drunks and rogues, and right off the bat, I knew something wasn’t right.”

Ruby seemed enthralled. Yang wanted to tell her not to waste her time, that Qrow had probably never been in the swamps of Mistral in the first place—he had been off working as a freelance agent for Ozpin, from what she’d heard slip from Taiyang. “What were you doing there?”

Qrow’s little self-satisfied smirk made Yang roll her eyes. “Needed information, you see—I couldn’t go around and blatantly ask for it. Subtlety is one of a Huntsman’s best tools—or a Huntress’s. You must use it wisely. Your mind is the best weapon you have, better than a scythe or gauntlets. Any fool could swing around a blade. It’s knowing how to use it, and use it well, that counts. Anyways, I was tired out from killing Grimm and fending off dishonorable people along the way, so I decided to start working my way around. I started at the biggest shack in the village—the town’s inn. It was grubby, beer staining the floors, sawdust clumped underfoot, the lights flickering and broken. Not one of the better bars I’ve seen—there were even a couple Huntsmen, if you can believe it, and I could only assume they’d been hired by less-than reputable people for less-than respectable jobs. And that’s when it happened.”

Yang, conscious of Ruby’s wide-eyed rapture, sighed and asked the question Qrow clearly was
waiting for. “And then what happened?”

“I was defeated by the mere sight,” he drawled, dragging it out, before his signature filthy grin spread over his face, “of the innkeeper's skirt length!”

The side of Yang that was wholly in favor of girls being able to wear what they wanted without having men leer at them roasted in protest. Furious at his lewdness, Yang hurled a pillow at him, and he caught it deftly, still smirking. “God, Qrow, shut up!” Her anger flamed even more as she realized he had been distracting her, and had used the diversion to slice off the arm of her game character, winning instantly.

“The mighty Xiao Long is defeated,” he gloated as Ruby burst into laughter, stretching back with a chuckle. “Best two out of three?”

“What ever. You’re such an ass.”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“Uncle Qrow, did you get in trouble with Professor Ozpin?” Ruby asked, clearly sensing Yang’s resentment and wisely changing the subject as she sprawled out on Weiss’s bed.

Yang saw something in Qrow’s face go cold, his eyes shadowing at the mention of Ozpin’s name, but he played it off without a hitch, leaving her wondering at what the nature of Ozpin and Qrow’s relationship was, exactly. “Nah, me and Oz go way back. We're cool.”

“Cool for an old guy,” she muttered resentfully. Blake would know just what to say to get him to shut his big mouth. Success. “Not funny.”

“Uncle— what are you even doing here anyway? I thought Dad said that you would be on a mission for a long, long time—”

Again, Qrow’s expression was seized by a strange mixture of fear and sadness, before he wrestled it back into a cool, emotionless mask. “Well, Ruby, a professional Huntsman is expected to get results within a small time-frame, and report them back, as well. I’m only doing my job.”

Ruby looked smug. “Yeah, I know. We’re pretty much pros, too.”

Looking distinctly unimpressed, Qrow fended off a strike from Yang in the game, retaliating with a roundhouse kick. “Oh, really?”

“Yes,” Yang said, feeling thoroughly disgruntled. She fought off her nagging feeling that danger was fast-approaching, and turned her thoughts to the positive aspects of her career— that was more her style, to hide the dark thoughts underneath sunlight. “We totally saved Vale while you were off gallivanting in Mistral—”

“Funny,” he interrupted haughtily, his avatar performing an elaborate backflip on the screen, “because I heard Vale suffered a Grimm attack after you almost managed to stop a train.” Yang flinched, remembering Blake coming out of her train-car, blood staining her face, her gun one bullet lighter after she had killed Ayran. “But, woe is you, they don't actually give out medals for almost, firecracker.”
Ruby scowled at him. “They do, and it’s called silver! Besides, we fought the Grimm, and no one died, at least. It was super hard, but—”

“And you’re forgetting, Qrow, that we helped take down Torchwick, even if we weren’t the one to handcuff him,” Yang said to him, narrowing her eyes. “He’s locked up in Ironwood’s ship, and crime’s been down ever since. That’s basically a bounty mission.”

Qrow’s scowl deepened, thick lines furrowing around his brows. Hatred flashed in his eyes at the mention of the General. “Yeah, sure— you may be acting like Huntresses, but you surely aren’t thinking like one. Yes, Torchwick has been incarcerated, and yes, crime has stopped— do you honestly believe four girls and their friends can end all crime in the kingdom? This isn’t a kids show. This is real life, and it’s a lot messier than that.”

Ruby seemed to diminish at that, recoiling and looking suddenly nervous. “I mean, I did until you said that…”

Qrow’s joking tone had entirely gone, and his voice was like stone now— hard and uncompromising. “You need to keep more alert. Especially the two of you— you’ve done a lot, stopped a lot of violence, and in turn, you have gained yourselves many, many enemies. You’re no safer than I am. Consider this: violence hasn’t dropped since Roman got nabbed; it’s stopped completely. No White Fang activity around the city at all, not the slightest whisper of trouble— does that seem normal to you, after years of rallies, protests, robberies, hijackings? This sudden silence? It strikes me as the silence just before a storm— too quiet. You see, you cut off the head of King Taijitu— Torchwick— but now the second head is calling the shots. That’s what Ironwood can’t get through that thick metal head of his— and what I can’t convince him of.”

“So you mean there is an enemy that you aren’t telling us about?” Yang demanded. “I’ve had this feeling—”

Qrow shook his head right away, stopping her in her tracks. “No. I can’t tell you that, Yang. That’s more than my job’s worth to let a secret leak that Ozpin has demanded secrecy for.”

Yang scowled. “You can’t keep us in the dark like that—”

Ruby shot her a glance, her eyes reading: I’m your sister, but I’m your team leader, too. Let me handle it, okay? Reluctantly, Yang fell silent, and let Ruby speak. “We’ve suspected that there’s another enemy out there, beyond Torchwick— Weiss has told me so. I know she talked to Winter about it—”

Qrow pushed his fingers into his hair, mussing it; his eyes were closed. “God, but you’re like your mother,” he murmured. Ruby looked stunned, as if he had struck her. “Don’t ask me about it— and I won’t lie to you. You two need to stay safe. The less you know, the better. James—”

Ruby, still looking like he had hit her when he had mentioned Summer, swallowed. Yang could tell she was pushing the pain deep down. “You... know the General?”

Qrow looked pitying, as if he regretted mentioning Summer Rose, but there was a deep, raw pain in his eyes that was hard to ignore. “Hey, I know everybody to some extent. Remember, you’re talking to a member of the coolest team to ever graduate Beacon, kid… that’s where I met your parents— well, after we got vaulted off a cliff, and let me say, we were pretty well known back in the day.”

“Sure you were,” Yang snorted.
Qrow looked offended. “Hey, we were popular. Everyone wanted to know a member of Team STRQ, and I have a number of inappropriate stories to back that up—but I’ll save those for when you’re older.”

Ruby made a retching noise. “Disgusting, Uncle Qrow.”

At that, he hauled himself up, wincing, and for the first time, Yang looked at him—really looked at him. His eyes were filled with an exhaustion that no good night’s sleep would fix. Deep lines were etched around his mouth, his forehead, and scars from numerous battles flecked his skin. He was a Huntsman, a warrior, and it was only now that she could see how much it had ruined him. He gave her a tired sort of grin, moving towards the door with a definite slump in his stance.

“Anyways, I'm too old to be hanging out with a bunch of kids. You're going to cramp my style.” He stopped in the doorway, his head bowed. The lines of his shoulderblades were wretched, exhausted, and his expression was torn with worry as he looked around. “Just remember that you've still got a long way to go. Don't think for a second that graduating means you're done fighting and learning. Every day out there—every battle fought, every mission won, every loss endured—is worth a week in this place.” His gaze clouded as he looked at them, as if he were thinking of their mirror images, two other Huntresses who had never gotten their happy ending.

*Summer and Raven.*

“You two,” he said finally, “you're going go far. But only if you keep learning, and only if you— never— stop moving forward.”

After Qrow had left, later in the night, Weiss had returned from talking with Winter. She looked oddly downcast, and she pulled Ruby aside to talk to her—when Yang queried what about, she only mentioned that Winter had said something troubling to her, and that she had left earlier than expected.

Blake was back now, too, predictably reading a book. Bored, Yang decided to talk to her.

“Hi there,” Yang said, leaning backward over her bunk bed, hair falling down in soft golden curtains around her. Blake looked up from her book, eyes widening ever-so slightly.

“You’re upside down,” she commented, her voice nonplussed.

“Thanks, Captain Obvious. I can feel all the blood rushing to my brain,” Yang told her cheerfully. Blake snorted, folding one corner of her page carefully and closing the book, setting it aside.

“Well, that can’t be good. How can I help you, before you get seriously injured?”

“I have a good idea,” she said, laughing as Blake’s expression immediately morphed from amusement to exasperation. “Wait, no! Really! Don’t give me that look!”

“Your good ideas tend to make me wary,” she retorted. “I haven’t forgotten the time you got us into a food fight and then got yourself thrown through a solid-stone ceiling.”

“Okay, first of all, that’s incredibly rude,” Yang said as Blake laughed. “We kicked JNPR’S ass, so it was all okay, anyways. Secondly, this one’s actually, like, good. It would even be Goodwitch-approved!”
“Well, I’m convinced now. What is it?”

“We should go do some sparring before the match tomorrow. Just as a refresher— and besides, you might come up with some age-old proverbial wisdom for me, like you usually do.”

“I’m not sure whether I should feel complimented, or offended,” Blake said, stretching out and eyeing Yang coolly.

“Well, let’s go with ‘complimented’. You down, or what?”

“I suppose so,” she said, stretching out, the supple curve of her spine unbending and arching in the dim light. “Let’s go.”

“This reminds me of that time we both were up here past curfew. Remember? I was trying to train you with Gambol Shroud, but you failed miserably,” Blake commented. She let out a soft laugh of amusement she shed her outfit, tugging on comfortable, flexible pants, a tanktop, and pulled her hair back. She shed her shoes and lightly swept up her weapon, padding on silent feet to the center of the spherical training room. “It’s a lot more comforting to know that we’re up here without breaking the rules this time.”

“Breaking the rules is half the fun, Blake,” Yang retorted, tying her hair back. “You goody-two-shoes.”

Blake grunted. “Maybe for you.”

Clearly, she felt secure enough to discard her bow, and she tossed it to the side with her regular combat-outfit before facing Yang with a gleam in her eyes. “Go on. Attack me.”

Yang wondered if how well they knew each other would make it an easy fight, or a hard one. Hard, she decided; she was strong enough to get in a finishing blow, but Blake was too fast to let her get close enough to deal one.

She cocked her gauntlets before grinning as an idea occurred to her, and she charged. Right before smashing into Blake, she changed course, veering to the left. Blake, who had moved to dodge her, was now in her new path, and they collided. She spun in a circle, slamming her fists in a steady rhythm. Blake backflipped, dodging them and counter-striking in a blurred, whirling storm; soon enough, Yang was flat on her back, overcome. Blake had dodged her fast and now had her pinned with an elbow at her throat. In a real fight, Yang knew, she’d be done for.

“Right,” she said, smiling up at Blake. She was half-tempted to kiss her— she was so pretty, with her hair coming loose, a flush in her cheeks, a bright gleam in her eyes— but she shook her head to clear her thoughts. “I can tell you’re inwardly gloating anyways that you got the better of me so fast, and since you’re gonna do it anyways, tell me what I did wrong that time.”

“You started off fine,” Blake said, rolling off Yang, to her disappointment, and sitting down next to her. “The charging was a sound idea— most opponents panic when someone is running right at them— but it’s a predictable move, and easy to dodge and counter-strike against. However, with your brawling fighting style, there’s not a lot of room to use finesse. People like you more rely on brute strength, and it’s always a good idea for you to take the first move— never me, though.”
“What would happen if you took the first strike?”

“It’s easy. A smaller person never moves first, or they’ve already lost. It’s a guaranteed thing—because I don’t have enough strength to tip the battle in my favor; I’ve revealed my fighting strategy; and I need finesse. I can’t rely on brute strength because I don’t have that.” Her feline ears flattened. “That’s my biggest disadvantage. Once you get me down, then I’m likely to be downed for good. But you have to catch me first, and I’m fast enough to avoid most moves that would permanently pin me. And with my shadow clones, it’s going to be tough to hold me once you’ve caught me. The doubles rounds are going to be a lot more difficult than the team’s rounds. People who are in the doubles deserve to be there; they have a victory to their name, and they’ll be harder to defeat. Every opponent is going to be drastically different. I’ll always have advantages or disadvantages. So will you. It’s just going to be dependent on who we’re fighting. We could be up against someone with a semblance that renders ours useless. We could be up against someone who has a fighting style we can manipulate easily. I’ve found it’s all dependent on chance.”

“So you’re saying that no matter what, we won’t have a guaranteed win?”

“Now you’re getting the idea.” Blake gave her a fond look. “But you and I, we have a better chance than most.”

“I know we do.” Yang rolled on her back, staring up at the stars through the glass roof. “But—it’s just a tournament anyways. We won’t be made fun of if we lose, you know, because everyone knows it’s super hard.”

“That’s right.” Blake climbed to her feet. “I talked to Sage. He expects me to get a great victory, and I swore I would. Losing would not tarnish our name too badly. But I want to win it, and so do you. Let’s try this again.”

Yang scrambled up as Blake positioned herself slightly to the right. No subtle rituals of boxing or swiping preceded the fight this time; she charged her partner straight-on, not bothering to utilize sneakier tactics. Blake leapt out of the way and Yang spun around, fists up; they battered at each other for a second before Blake caught her off-guard with a powerful uppercut to the shoulder. Yang went sprawling from the force of her blow, ears ringing, and immediately, Blake was on top of her, trying to pin her down and get in a finishing move, but Yang grinned, not at all fazed. Two can play at that game. She thrust her legs out in a back kick, catching Blake in the stomach and thrusting her backward. Her partner flew off of her with an oof, crashing into the ground. Yang instantly scrambled on top of her and pressed her elbow to Blake’s throat, straddling her hips and pressing her into the ground. Her partner narrowed her eyes, trying to look stony, but her ears were twitching in obvious amusement.

“Do you give up?” Yang asked sweetly, leaning down until she was nose-to-nose with Blake.

“I don’t give up,” Blake retorted hotly, before making another futile twist as Yang increased the pressure ever so slightly, forcing her to concede. “I will admit, however, that I can’t win.”

“That’s what I thought you said.”

Blake struggled under her weight. “Now get off me, you great lump! You’ve squashed me flatter than a leaf.”

Yang slithered off of her and helped her up. “Seems like I won that fair and square, even without your long-winded tactics. What d’you have to say to that, huh?”

Blake rolled her eyes. “It was well-earned, sure, but gloat all you want. We’re here to learn. I
wanted to mention this: every fighter has one fatal flaw that you can use to your advantage. Does that make sense?"

“A bit,” Yang replied, brushing dust from her shoulders. “Why?”

"Ruby’s speed could be turned against her if someone had the ability to dodge it, or if she was in a swampy landscape that slowed her down. If someone had the ability to hinder that speed, she’d be powerless as a normal warrior— semblances are what make us truly the protector of mankind against Grimm. Weiss’s Dust weapon is useless against someone who knows how to counter Dust. If someone can anger you enough, then they’ve got a huge advantage, because you’ll be too distracted to think clearly and win. If someone could manipulate my clones, then I would be practically guaranteed to lose.” She shook her head. “Don’t you see? Combat is complex, more complex than most people ever understand, or even could understand… it’s always a game of chance. Sometimes the scales will be tipped in favor of one or the other, but there’s no certainties, not ever. It doesn’t matter how strong or clever you are, no matter how much finesse or raw strength you have… if you squander your ability, if you take it for granted, it all can be reduced to nothing in seconds with the right person.”

“I think I understand,” Yang said slowly. “Like… like if I was fighting someone who had a semblance that could absorb strikes, my skills would be useless, right?”

Blake’s eyes shone. “Precisely! Now you’re getting it.”

Yang frowned. “So do you have any ideas on what move I could use to make sure that doesn’t happen?”

She looked amused. “There’s no magical move I can teach you so that you can beat everyone. Usually, I wouldn’t introduce this idea, but I think you’re ready… your pool of moves is relatively small, but you have remarkable ingenuity.”

Yang cocked her head, watching her partner, mystified. “What idea are you talking about?”

“It’s kind of a big idea, I suppose….” Her eyes sparkled. "Basically, the moves you use in a battle don’t matter.”

Her eyes widened. “What are you talking about? That doesn’t make any sense!”

Blake’s ears twitched in amusement, stirring her hair. “It probably doesn’t, not to you, but I have faith you’ll understand. I’ll explain it as best I can. Basically, in a battle, you can use any move you like. You could use that back-kick you tried against me earlier— remember that? You could use that move as many times as you wanted, over and over, and still win the battle.”

“There’s no way,” Yang objected. “Your opponent is going to figure that out, and expect it. They’ll avoid it and hit you with a counter-strike easily. Plus your Aura would drain.”

She shook her head. “Not so. You can use the same move over and over again as many times as you like; you just have to adapt it to the situation at hand, do you see? For example, when you charged at me, you could have simply stayed the course and attacked me. I would have dodged it, of course, since it’s a fairly predictable tactic. However, you changed it up; you moved in a different direction, hoping to confuse me, and in that process, you wasted none of your Aura. That’s what I’m talking about, Yang. It’s not how many moves you know, it’s how you use them that counts.”

Yang was starting to get a glimmer of what she was talking about. “So you— you aren’t going to
teach me any new moves?”

She shook her head. “I’ll leave that to someone who has a brawling tactic like you. I’m just going to spar with you until we match, until we’re so in tune we can predict each other’s words by the simplest move or the look of an eye. Because that’s what a Bond is about. That’s what being a Huntress is about, and having a partner. You’ve got someone to watch your back always, but it goes both ways. Our fight, it’s got to be perfect. Every strike, every move, everything has to be perfect—or we’re not going to win. But you’ve got to be prepared, Yang. We both do. We have to be ready for anything the opponent might do to throw us off guard. If we slip, if one of us has to do something… sacrifice. It means something. I would always give my strength for you.”

Yang nodded, and she moved forward. Blake tensed, ready for her attack, but this time she reached up on tiptoe and kissed Blake’s cheek.

“Thank you,” she said, and Blake stared at her, surprise on her face. Then, Yang smiled, eyes narrowing, and suddenly struck faster than an adder, striking her shoulder so she staggered back.

“Blake, I thought I had to be prepared if the opponent tried to throw me off guard?” she asked innocently. Blake stared at her, reaching up with one hand to touch her now-reddening shoulder as if she couldn’t believe it. Then, a grin spread over her own face, and she crouched, preparing for the battle of her life.

“Let us begin.”

They sprang at each other, and the sound was like that of two boulders colliding, a clap of thunder that felt as though it could have spread over all of Vale. They broke apart, both panting, both full of energy as they sprang again, colliding, breaking apart, over and over. Their battle began to shift slowly, becoming almost a perfectly choreographed dance, both of them leaping, diving, twisting, but failing to lay a real blow on the other. They were more evenly matched than anyone ever had been, or ever would be. Yang’s heart was pounding like never before; for the first time, she felt it, the power a Huntress felt, the duty that rested on her shoulders and her shoulders alone.

I’m fighting for my team. Team RWBY. I’m bringing the power of Beacon and my own together under me, uniting them into a force unlike anything seen before. I will fight for that victory until my last reserve of strength. I will not fail!

Blake had been training endlessly for many nights now, plagued by nightmares, and Yang could see the toll it was taking on her as she moved, just slightly too heavily, just slightly too slowly, just slightly favoring her uninjured shoulder over the other. And in her turn, Yang had been sleeping soundly, dreamlessly and fully, getting her rest and building her strength, storing her energy for exactly this moment.

Her eyes narrowed as she saw it, the tiniest breach in Blake’s defense, leaning too heavily on her injured shoulder. And her eyes widened as she saw her mistake, but it was too late; Yang was already in the air leaping towards her, fists drawn back. And they collided for the last time, her leap knocking Blake over. They tumbled backward and it ended with Yang sitting on Blake’s chest as her hands pricked at the hollow of her partner’s pale throat, where her heartbeat and Aura rushed.

“I win.”

Blake stared up at her, and Yang couldn’t read her gaze. Then, she gave the smallest of nods, and Yang slipped off as her partner got to her feet.
“Control, power, together…” Blake surprised her by smiling. “You’re far from the person I met fighting those Ursai in the Emerald Forest, you know. Far from the one who lets her emotion rule her… If you can channel that same power when we face down our opponent, we might actually have a guaranteed win.”

“You and me,” Yang said, feeling the powerful rush, the channel of energy and love from Blake. It coursed through the Bond and into her veins, powerful as a raging river, as soothing as the clearest stream, as strong as the most thundering waterfall. “Together we can do anything. Anything.” Together, they held the power of victory in their palms.

“Together,” she echoed. “We’re capable of moving that entire stadium, you and I.” Then she reached forward on tiptoe and kissed Yang on the lips, before giving a small smile. “I have never said it, but… thank you for all you have given me.”

“No,” Yang told her. “Thank you. Tomorrow… we’ll be the rulers of the Colosseum.”

Ruby

“Penny!”

She barely had time to call a hello before the mass of solid metal, gears, and high-tech machinery that was Penny barreled into her with a high-pitched squeal of excitement. Ruby, who could usually stand her ground, had no chance against two hundred pounds of raw machinery. She went down like a bowling pin.

Penny hauled her back to her feet with a squeak of apology. “Sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay!” Ruby grinned. “That was an amazing fight— not that Russel and Sky would ever be much of a challenge, though— but you did good.”

“Ciel tells me it was precisely four minutes, twenty-seven seconds, and thirteen milliseconds,” Penny said, tilting her head; Ruby heard a gear click into place. “It didn’t feel that long, quite honestly.”

“Never does on the battlefield,” Ruby said cheerfully, before her eyes widened as Penny’s partner zipped up to them. She looked strange— her eyes were a shocking blue, almost electric— and there was a tattoo of a tiny sun, set just between her brows. She crackled with a controlled, fervent energy, and the watch on her wrist seemed to thrum with her pulse. There was something familiar about her name Ruby couldn’t quite place. “I heard my name, ma’am?” She phrased it as a question, though Ruby knew it wasn’t.

“Oh— oh, yes, pardon me.” Penny inclined her head. “Ruby, this is—”

“Ciel Soleil.” The familiarity of Ciel’s name instantly clicked; Taiyang had forced her to take a Latin class at Signal, but what kind of parent named their kid ‘sky sun’? Sun would probably love her. “You’re Ruby Rose, hailing from Patch; leader to team RWBY. Status is questionable.” Ciel transferred her rather menacing stare to Penny. “And may cause inadvertent harm. Ma’am, I would advise you to have a better… friend pool.” Her nose wrinkled delicately, as if she had smelled
something offense.

Ruby stared her in bemusement, utterly perplexed. “Questionable?”

“Your escapades, aside from your studies, have not escaped the notice of Atlas, considering you ran in with some of their Paladins.” Ciel stared at her, a trace of disapproval on her face. “However unorthodoxly you defeated them, I cannot say…”

“Um, alright.” Ruby decided to ignore it and initiate conversation with Penny to get rid of the awkwardness. “So, er, Penny— your fight, it—”

“Ma’am,” Ciel interrupted in a rather rude way, “I believe it’s best if we move on to our next location…”

Penny looked at Ruby sympathetically, noticing how affronted she was to Ciel’s curt behavior. “May we have a minute to talk?”

Bad phrasing, Ruby thought mutinously as Ciel looked pointedly at her watch, nodded once, and slipped away.

Ruby turned an expectant gaze on to Penny, who looked slightly embarrassed at her teammate’s brisk rudeness. “So what did you really want to talk about? And what’s the deal with Ciel? I’ve never seen her before.”

“She’s only accompanying me under orders to attend the tournament, and…” Penny shifted. “The General claims she’s to protect me, but really, she’s watching me to make sure I stay in line. She’s like Blake, in a way— if Blake was ordered to spend time with you.”

“So you really mean she’s like Weiss, then?” Ruby said, trying for a light tone. Penny grinned at that, shooting her a conspiratorial look.

“Perhaps, but you and Weiss seem to be getting on just fine from what I’ve seen.” She grinned teasingly, and Ruby flushed.

“She’s really something, that’s for sure,” she agreed, before her tone sobered up. “So what’s up? Why’d you send Ciel away?”

Penny shuffled her feet, looking self-consciously at the ground. “Well, I… to talk… It’s a bit of a… dumb plan I’ve got.” She glanced around, verifying that no one important was within earshot, before leaning in. “I want— I want to stay at Beacon and continue my training, Ruby. It’s so much better than Atlas. It’s adaptive, warmer— Ozpin seems kind, and the diversity… it’s everything I imagined a combat school to be. Atlas is just a cold military base in fields upon fields of snow…”

“Penny,” Ruby said, utterly shocked, head reeling, “you know they’ll never let you do that.”

“I know.” The steely look flickered in Penny’s eyes again. “I have a plan, though.”

Just as Ruby was about to inquire as to what it was, Ciel zipped up to them again, looking thoroughly ruffled.

“It’s been precisely one minute, ma’am. We really need to be on our way.”

Penny rolled her eyes towards Ruby, and she snickered. “I’ll speak with you more later, Ruby,” she said politely, bowing her head in Atlas custom before marching off with Ciel, turning around briefly give an exaggerated look of disgust towards her teammate.
Ruby looked up as the intercom crackled on, Oobleck’s voice bursting forth. “After that decisive victory, Atlas now pulling ahead of Beacon, we now break for a brief intermission. Stretch out, get your blood flowing, buy your popcorn and poppers— we reconvene in fifteen minutes for our next match, similarly full of fire: Beacon versus Atlas!”

Ruby grinned. **Blake and Yang will take their opponents by surprise.** They were a well-oiled, seamless machine, unbreakable and indomitable. Ruby knew they had gone to train last night, and when they had come back, they seemed almost oddly in sync, more than they had ever been. She had no doubt the victory was theirs for the taking. Today had been incredibly hectic, full of back-to-back matches— first there had been Pyrrha and Nora, and they had won spectacularly, sending Pyrrha on to the singles round— a choice everyone agreed upon. Then there had been Sun and Neptune, not a very wise choice, considering they had gotten a water biome, but they had managed to scrape a victory nonetheless. And now— it was her team’s turn.

Ruby’s Scroll buzzed and began to sing out a tune. Hurriedly— okay, so the ringtone was rather childishly embarrassing, but whatever— she took the call, and wasn’t surprised to hear Weiss’s voice.

“Ruby, I’m sure that, as interesting as it must be to chat with Penny, you need to hurry back. You’ve got fifteen minutes before your sister is due on the arena court.”

“I’m on my way,” Ruby told her dryly, weaving through the crowd. “Thanks, mother, for your persistent worrying.”

Weiss’s voice sounded affronted. Ruby could hear Yang teasing Blake in the background, and Weiss reprimanded them sharply with a *there are children here, Yang, save that talk for the dorm* before returning to the call. Ruby chortled. “I am not your mother. What took so long, anyways?”

“Her teammate— you know, the one with the blue beret, right?— was being totally rude, so we had to get her off our backs. Penny told me something pretty worrying, though—”

“What was it?” Weiss’s voice sounded muffled, as if she was speaking around food; Ruby grinned. After the months away from Atlas, her rigid manners slipped up sometimes, and she had a weakness for the buttery popcorn they sold in the Festival, though Ruby knew she’d never get her to admit it.

“She said she wanted to stay at Beacon for the duration of our training years.”

Weiss was silent for a long time. Then, “Did she tell you just how, exactly, she’s planning to slip the noose and get out of Atlas? Especially with her being— well— not even human? They’ll have as strong a guard over her as they did in my case. It’s not easy— believe me, I’d know. She’d better have a genius plan.”

Ruby winced. “Uh, no, she didn’t say. Ciel butted in again.”

Weiss sighed. “Always something to cut off important information, I suppose. Well, I’d better get off. Whatever Yang is saying to Blake is making her blush redder than a cherry, and like I said, there’s impressionable kids here; they should be discussing the upcoming match, not date ideas.”

“You know what she’s probably saying— it’s flirting, and you just don’t want to think about it because you’re a good little girl.”

Weiss gave a loud, disgruntled sigh before hanging up on a laughing Ruby. She bought a bag of sour gummy worms on the way back and a refill of popcorn for Weiss, fighting her way through
the crowds and reaching the seats just in time to see Blake and Yang departing to go to the locker rooms that led up into the center stage.

Yang stole a handful of popcorn without asking, and Ruby snatched it away, sloshing some over the side. Blake hopped out of the way, nearly careening into Yang. “That’s for Weiss, thank you very much.”

“Fanks,” Yang said around a mouthful of popcorn before swallowing. Weiss looked scandalized, but she accepted the bucket as Ruby passed it to her. “No good luck wishes to us, huh?”

She crushed Blake and Yang into a hug. Yang complied gladly, but Blake let out a groan of protest. “You guys are going to do so good! I know you will. Remember—”

“— calm thinking, remember your training, don’t give in even if they have tricky tactics—”

“— and do your very best! No pressure, though.” Ruby beamed, and Yang ruffled her hair.

“No pressure,” Weiss chimed in.

“None at all. We’re the powerhouse.” Yang winked. “Besides, it’s Atlas— how hard can they be?” She snuck a glance at Weiss and snickered. “Only kidding; I know Atlas is super-strong.”

Weiss sniffed and smoothed out her skirt. “You had better.”

“Right, well,” Yang said, looking around, and Ruby could discern a hint of anxiety in her eyes, “We’re off. See you on the other side of the fight.”

“Good luck!”

“Good luck to us,” she echoed, and then with Blake at her side, she vanished down the stairs.
Yang

“You’re ready for this,” Blake murmured as they waited in the dark depths of the locker room for the sounding alarm that would announce the convening of their match, and raise them to the surface to meet their opponents.

“Coco and Yatsu thought they were ready too—”

“But Emerald and Mercury aren’t that normal, are they?” Blake wound the coils of Gambol Shroud around her wrist. “Have a little faith in yourself. You’re a warrior through and through.”

Yang leaned her head on Blake’s shoulder. “So are you. I’m glad it’s us.”

Yang fell quiet as the loudspeaker rumbled to life, echoing strangely in the depths like a disembodied voice. “Aaaaaand we are back, viewers, just in time for our closing matches of the afternoon! Barty, what’ve you got to say about this next match?”

“Well, my dearest Port, it looks like it’s going to be full of fire— pardon the pun, as one of our contestants will know that it is one, because of her, ah, semblance! I do believe this will be a blazing match -”

“He’s already started off with a pun,” Yang muttered. “Dear God, this is going to be painful.” Blake chuckled.

Oobleck’s voice shivered through the walls, full of excitement. “We have Beacon versus Atlas, and it looks like it’ll be an even match to me— but of course, the doubles rounds of the Vytal tournament are always fought blow-for-blow, and this one looks as though it’ll be one of our closest yet!”

“Right you are, Barty, right you are. Now, everyone give a big cheer for our combatants as they enter the arena!”

Yang looked at Blake as a staircase descended from the ceiling, a port opening up at the summit that led outside to the arena. The cool autumn sunshine poured in, dusty and swirling with motes, casting long planes of warm yellow light across the dim locker room and sending goosebumps racing up Yang’s flesh with the chilly air. Blake’s hair billowed in the sudden draught of wind. For all the anxiety she had displayed about the match, her expression looked like it could have been crafted from glacial ice, and anyone could see, looking at her, that she was a warrior.

“This is it,” Yang said. “The doubles round. End all, be all.”

Blake swung Gambol Shroud off of her back, the dark metal turning orange in the sunlight. “Yes, it is.”

Yang twisted her gauntlets around, watching them flash like fire. Whatever else happened, she had faith in her own hands. “Till the end?”

Blake smiled. “Until the end.”
“Then let’s go kick some butt!” Her anxiety banished, she charged up the stairs, hearing Blake right behind her, and then she was in the arena with thousands of eyes on her, the roaring and clapping almost deafening. She and Blake spanned out across their sector of the arena, and she snorted as Port launched into praise before they had even settled into a halt.

“And it’s my two favorite Beacon students, the quick-talker and the quick-thinker, Yang Xiao-Long and Blake Belladonna!”

There was a smattering of applause from the audience, strongest from the Beacon students, and Yang could have sworn she heard Ruby screaming something— either ‘Go Blake and Yang’, or ‘I like cookies’. Oobleck, up on the big screen, grinned. “An interesting duo, Port, but by far a tough one too. Bonded, too— hard to beat, especially in the doubles round. Folks, did you know that these two are the youngest Huntresses of their age to achieve such a high level of mental harmony, and to impress me thus far on their missions? Both strong and resourceful, they’ve frustrated me to no end with their shenanigans, but they’re definitely some of the closest-knit partners I’ve seen. Place your bets! Miss Xiao-Long known for her victories that pack a fiery punch, and Blake’s mind has never failed to follow suit with using the greatest weapon a Huntress has to the greatest ability: her mind! They will certainly be a difficult nut to crack!”

“Oh-ho, that’s right— and a bit of trivia for you, Barty, and for all you listeners back at home. Did you know that Miss Belladonna has never made below a ninety-five on my tests?”

“How interesting, Port! But I’ll have you know she’s never failed to score a ninety-nine on mine! I suppose it’s just because my lectures happen to be a bit more, ah, how shall we say— engaging!”

“What the bloody hell?” Yang looked over at Blake and grinned, albeit in a bemused way. “I thought you failed one of Port’s tests with a seventy! Remember that?”

Blake’s face was perfectly impassive, but there was a twitch to her lip that suggested she was suppressing a laugh. “Do you suppose they’re trying to look like they favor us over Atlas?”

“Oh, you may be right, miss-smarty-pants. Now, can you answer me what the square-root of sixty-four is?”

“Eight,” Blake answered promptly, without a hint of hesitation, annoying Yang, who had thought the square root was four. “Now pay attention; here come our opponents. Best to get a long look at them.”

“Aaaaand, now for our other combatants, the most, uh… colorful duo I’ve seen thus far! Folks from the Atlas corner of Remnant will doubtlessly know these two— always a crowd favorite, they are. Barty, would you tell me their names?”

“Of course, Barty.” Oobleck cleared his throat dramatically. “We welcome to the Amity Colosseum: Neon Katt and Flynt Coal!” A huge roar of approval thundered through the stadium, and Yang rolled her eyes. “Miss Katt is renowned for her defiance to the traditional Atlas method of rigidity and discipline, while her partner, Flynt, is definitely a— a musical prodigy! Why, he can play a waltz to make a tear come to your eye!”

“I was expecting a sword or mace or something— not an instrument for a weapon.” Blake’s eyes widened almost comically as the locker-room hatch opened in front of them, admitting two Atlas students. “Well, it’s a good thing I went over that ‘expected-the-unexpected’ approach, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Yang said in awe as she saw their opponents zip out of the port leading to the locker room, “by God if it wasn’t. Blake, would you look at them?”
When they’d been told that they would be fighting Atlas apprentices, Yang had expected someone similar to Weiss as she had been when they’d all first met— cold, volatile, dressed in military white, unfriendly and, while good in combat, somewhat predictable. These students met none of those expectations— except, perhaps, unfriendly. The Neon girl had a gleam in her eye that Yang didn’t like— challenging and taunting at once. The boy was dressed in something that Yang might have seen at a band concert, not a combat-field, and he was carrying a trumpet. He looked more like an eager little freshman on his way to a musical audition than a trained Huntsman. As for the girl— the less said, the better. She looked like she had been vomited straight out of a pride parade and into the arena.

“I wish the boy had a cello instead of a trumpet,” Yang forced out between gritted teeth, seeing no viable way to defeat such an obscure weapon. “Then I could take it and beat him over the head with it.”

“Absolutely not,” Blake said. “That’s a terrible idea. Cellos are delicate instruments, and doing that would make the strings go out of tune. Besides, don’t you know they have an endpin at the bottom that’s probably as dangerous as a spear?”

“Stop geeking out over orchestra and pay attention, Blake.”

“Hello there,” the Atlas girl sang out suddenly, sliding to a stop about five feet away. Yang groaned as she saw the girl’s feet were clad in roller-skates. What kind of Atlas students…?

Blake was silent as the stars, so Yang took up the initiative. “Hi,” she ventured warily.

Neon sneered at her, not even responding to the friendly overture; her lip curled. “Ew, what are you? Ken Barbie’s sidechick? With the trashy outfit to boot?”

Blake’s jaw clenched, a brief pang of anger passing through the Bond, but she didn’t intervene on Yang’s behalf, perhaps well-aware that Yang wouldn’t thank her for trying to be protective, like she was some damsel in distress. This girl could talk all she wanted, but the battlefield was where the real scores were settled. “That’s some real talk, coming from someone who looks like a twelve year old’s fanfiction OC,” Yang said airily. “Or like the lovechild of a female Harambe and an ugly rainbow.”

Blake choked on a laugh, and beside Neon, the guy— Flynt?— looked like he was barely holding back a snicker. Neon looked furious.

“Me? You look like a plastic bimbo baby prosti—”

“What are you going to do? Beat me with your baby glowsticks?”

— with a boob job and the fakest-ass hair extensions I’ve ever had the disgrace of seeing.”

“Okay,” Yang said in a hiss, her hands twitching into fists, “okay, now you’ve really pissed me off.”

Neon smiled sweetly, flicking her tail over and tweaking Yang’s nose. “You’re fat.”

Blake did look furious at that, a muscle jumping in her jaw. Before Yang could snarl a reply, the loudspeaker crackled to life— clearly, Oobleck and Port had no idea what was going on. “The match will commence in three!”

Neon spun around in her skates. “It’s not like you’re just chubby. You’re fatter than a hippo.”
“Two!”

Yang’s sight misted red. “Shut up!”

“One!”

Before she could charge forward to beat the living crap out of the Atlas upstart, Flynt raised his trumpet, and Yang instantly clapped her hands to her ears as she was assaulted by a horrible wailing. It sounded like the chorus of the damned, and from the way Blake let out a muffled little yelp, it was doubly worse for her, with her Faunus ears.

Oobleck was warning us, Yang thought dimly, her mind scrambled by the piercing noise. He was warning us with that comment about his music. Well, the professor had been right about his tunes making tears come to her eyes, but it wasn’t in a good way. She cracked open an eye just in time to see a colorful streak blaze towards her, light smashing down over her vision. It was blue as ice, and where it touched her, a freezing chill seized her skin.

Those damn glowsticks. Swearing in a way that would have gotten soap in her mouth for a month if she were still at home, Yang forced herself to take her hands away from ears, and hurled herself at Neon, while Blake, pain written across her face, went after Flynt. It wasn’t easy, though; Yang was assaulted by a barrage of wind from Flynt as soon as Neon was within hitting reach. The sneaky little bastard had coated the insides of his trumpet with wind Dust. Blake’s words came back to her all at once:

That’s what a Bond is about. That’s what being a Huntress is about, and having a partner. You’ve got someone to watch your back always, but it goes both ways. Our fight, it’s got to be perfect. Every strike, every move, everything has to be perfect—or we’re not going to win. But you’ve got to be prepared, Yang. We both do. We have to be ready for anything the opponent might do to throw us off guard. If we slip, if one of us has to do something… sacrifice. It means something. I would always give my strength for you.

Now it’s my turn. Feinting and dodging a strike from Neon, forcing her mind to endure the pain of the screaming noise, Yang summoned a burst of energy before flinging it through the Bond towards Blake, feeling tiredness instantly weigh down her veins. On the other side of the arena, in the dunes of the desert, Blake threw a stunned look towards towards Yang, but her eyes were brighter, thrumming with energy. Yang thought she could see her mouth shape a shocked exclamation, but she couldn’t be sure.

“No, Blake!” Yang shouted. “Don’t worry about me! Take him!”

“Like she could,” a sneering voice said in her ear before chilling pain slammed into her shoulderblade. Neon had sneaked up behind her and punched her in the back. And from the new heaiveness and the coldness there, she’d left something like snow—or ice. “I honestly wouldn’t count on it. For a Faunus… well.” Neon smirked. “The less said, the better. Honey, she’s not that impressive.”

“Are you this annoying to all your opponents?” Yang shot back, swinging her fist back before the last word left her mouth. Caught by surprise, Neon lurched back, and the ice shattered off of Yang as her hand made contact.

“Sorry, no, you’re a special kind. It’s a shame, really.”

An echoing howl of pain pierced the air. Yang paused in time to see Blake backflip out of a shadow-clone and kick Flynt squarely across the jaw before he could throw his Aura up in guard.
“Not that impressive, you said?” Yang asked sweetly before her fist flashed out in a crushing blow, throwing Neon back into a dilapidated building, where she collapsed, groaning. But she hauled herself up quickly, and before Yang could move, she had begun to glide around on those infernal skates again.

“Never miss a beat, never miss a beat,” she was muttering furiously.

The lesson Yang had learned flashed back to her again: people who are in the doubles deserve to be there; they have a victory to their name, and they’ll be harder to defeat. Every opponent is going to be drastically different. I’ll always have advantages or disadvantages. So will you. It’s just going to be dependent on who we’re fighting. We could be up against someone with a semblance that renders ours useless. We could be up against someone who has a fighting style we can manipulate easily.

*If I can shatter her unbroken rhythm*, Yang thought, an idea beginning to take form in her mind, *if I can win…*

As Neon shot past, Yang tried to stick out her foot to trip her, but Neon gracefully hopped over it and spun out of the way, now snickering.

“Oooh, sneaky! I’m impressed— maybe you do have some brains in that blonde head of yours! But it takes more than that to trip me up!”

“I am lot more,” she said. “I’m the whole package.” Her vision misted red, and Neon grinned slyly.

“Flashy eyes, huh? And you called me a Mary-Sue? What a semblance— more like what a joke!” She had lunged forward on her words, and Yang, taken aback, didn’t have time to react before Neon had smashed her— encased in ice, as well— through a city wall.

Snarling, Yang smashed her way out of the ice and stone. “Get back here!” she yelled. “Fight fair!”

“I am fighting fair, hon, don’t you know that in battle, anything and everything goes?”

A blast of pain hit Yang straight in the chest, like the breath had been punched from her lungs. *Blake.* She had done so well on Flynt to lower his Aura, she’d fought ridiculously well— but his semblance, just like Blake had predicted, was too much for her to handle. She scowled, very aware of the flickering, failing strength on Blake’s side of the Bond, but Neon’s taunts—

Neon smiled sweetly. “Oops, looks like your partner is in trouble— too bad you can’t get over there, huh? Too bad you’re too slow…”

Yang threw a wild-eyed glance over her shoulder in time to see Flynt hurl Blake to the ground, kicking Gambol Shroud out of her reach. Her Aura was low— so low that any shadow clone she made would be weak, insubstantial, and transparent. She hit the ground, and Yang felt the shadow of pain, rocking through her shoulder just as Blake’s hit the ground, taking the brunt of the damage.

Torn, Yang hovered between the sneering Neon and helping her partner, but as she watched, Flynt had turned away, evidently deciding Blake wasn’t worth the effort, and his hard gray eyes settled on Yang. He split into four again, raising his trumpet, before a flooding resolve of anger sang through the Bond.

Yang looked at her partner.

Blake’s eyes met hers, steely and uncompromising as gold, and Yang knew what she was going to
do a second before it happened.

She kicked off from the ground, almost in slow-motion, flying through the air before the whole of her weight crashed like a boulder into Flynt, knocking him down. The both of them disappeared into a spinning geyser of flame and spitting smoke, and Yang felt energy crash anew into her veins, and Yang’s heartbeat staggered as she realized Blake had given up the last shreds of her strength, sending it through the Bond, before disappearing into the fire. The scoreboard gave a loud, shrill beep, and Yang’s heart seemed to turn to ice as she saw that Blake’s Aura was completely depleted, and the injuries she must have sustained to that—they were unthinkable. Without Aura, you were mortal. Without it, you could be hurt. Without it, you could die.

Sacrifice, Blake had said. It means something.

“What’s this?” Oobleck sounded stunned. “It appears we have a double knockout on our hands—Port, what’s the reading?”

“Medics, on hand in the wings for Miss Belladonna!” He shouted. “Well, this is certainly a shock—in fact, it looks as though her Aura has been completely depleted! She sacrificed herself to take out Flynt!” Then he paused. “Wait a minute. What’s this?”

Yang, shaking with shock and fury, turned her eyes to the scoreboard. The ‘0’ beside her partner’s name seemed to burn in her mind—followed by the sixteen next to Flynt’s, adding insult to injury—burning into fury that turned her blood to fire. Nobody hurt Blake and got away with it. Nobody could cheat her out of this victory. Her vision seemed to turn red, and Blake’s strength turned from quiet ferocity to vengeful, consuming fire, like a lion roaring—she was an inferno—she would win this.

She could hear the professors commenting—something stupid, something about her anger—but all the energy in Blake was in her veins now, and she felt invincible. Her semblance exploded. Fire rippled across her skin, licking into flames at her hair, crackling around her vision. She saw back in time to another event, when Blake had flung herself in harm’s way just to give Yang a chance, throwing away her shot just so Yang had one more opportunity.

So you’d sacrifice yourself for me, would you?

Flynt’s trumpet went off, but she barely paused to hear it. She could only hear the roar of fire, reaching to the sky, sparks whizzling by. She was lifted by the wind Dust, flying through the air like a star burning out of orbit, before she hurtled to earth—towards Flynt—and her clenched fist came out, solid gold gauntlets knocking Flynt unconscious, as she clasped her hands over the lips of his trumpet, sending all the energy rebounding back upon him. She heard the beep of the scoreboard as he was eliminated, and her fire lessened.

“And that, folks, is the benefit of a Bond!” Oobleck sounded gleeful. “It’s better than an espresso coffee to give you superhuman energy!”

Yang barely paused to roll her eyes before she turned to Neon, who was gliding along the arena tiles, smirking at Yang.

“So you took out Flynt—boo, he only had one point of Aura left that mattered—and what now? Gonna waste your time?”

“Is it a waste of my time? On you, yeah, probably,” Yang spat. She fired two shots at her, but Neon skated nimbly out of the way—right into Yang’s path. She had employed Blake’s words, her tactic—
Basically, in a battle, you can use any move you like. You could use that back-kick you tried against me earlier — remember that? You could use that move as many times as you wanted, over and over, and still win the battle; you just have to adapt it to the situation at hand, do you see? For example, when you charged at me, you could have simply stayed the course and attacked me. I would have dodged it, of course, since it’s a fairly predictable tactic. However, you changed it up; you moved in a different direction, hoping to confuse me, and in that process, you wasted none of your Aura. That’s what I’m talking about, Yang. It’s not how many moves you know, it’s how you use them that counts —

—and Yang careened into Neon, a screech of fury tearing its way from her mouth, imagining how this enemy had caused her girlfriend to go into the fire, eliminating herself. Neon hurtled away, right into the place where Yang wanted her to go: the rocky, unstable sector of the arena. The place where keeping a beat was hard.

And just as she had predicted, in the cold, mind-numbingly clear haze of battle, she watched Neon screech in fury as she tumbled over a cairn of rocks, rolling down a sloping hill full of jagged rocks. Yang walked over as she collapsed, clutching at her torn clothes.

“I win,” Yang said softly, before firing the last shot from her gauntlets.

With a beep that jarringly broke through her beat, Yang eliminated her.

Yang didn’t wait around to bask in glory as Oobleck announced her victory, or gloat over Neon’s fallen form, still sputtering swearwords. She turned and pelted towards the fiery sector, looking for Blake. She spotted her right away; a dark, unmoving form on the reddish rocks, and Yang’s heart staggered a beat.

Blake had managed to haul herself, singed and smoking, out of the lava, and collapsed on the edge of the pool. As Yang ran over, she lifted her head from the ground, and blinked unsteadily. Her face was covered in fine white ash and soot, but the crooked, soft smile she gave when Yang collapsed next to her was enough to make her want to cry. “You did it,” she murmured, voice rough from smoke. “I knew you could. You were brilliant…”

Yang bundled Blake up in her arms, using the pads of her thumbs to wipe away the soot from Blake’s eyes. There were misty tears blurring her gaze, and she knew it wasn’t from the smoke. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

She coughed, and a plume of smoke shimmered up from her clothes, resettling. “I feel like hell.”

“Your entire Aura is gone,” Yang said shakily. “Blake, you scared the hell out of me…”

“Oh.” Blake’s eyes opened again, and the slightest of crooked grins curled her mouth. “Now that you mention it, that could have some unintended consequences.”

“Damn you, Blake,” Yang said. “This is the second time you’ve sacrificed yourself for me. It’s getting to be an annoying habit.”

A hint of exasperation, followed by tenderness, shimmered in her eyes. “Did you expect me not to?”

“Out of the way, please, miss.”

Yang looked up, startled, as three people appeared beside her, looking in concern down at Blake. One was tall, dressed in the white scrubs of a medic, one was Sage — he had a gifted hand at healing wounds of the Aura, didn’t he? — and the last one was a student with shaggy, gradient
brown hair and slanted gold eyes. Yang recognized him vaguely, before remembering he was an upperclassman from Beacon— Talos, she thought his name was. He was a healer, too, like Sage.

“Good fight,” Sage said to her, before crouching next to Blake and raising his brows. “Blake, this wasn’t quite what I had in mind when I challenged you to go the distance. A win would have been sufficient, not throwing yourself into a literal pool of lava, idiot.”

Blake coughed as he muttered something under his breath, pulling out a handful of sparking green Dust from his coat. “Ugh. I hate being predictable.”

“No, you just have a flair for dramatic exits.” Talos grinned before looking at Sage, who was running his hands, which now were faintly glowing with green light, over Blake’s form. “We should move her to the medic office before trying to restore her Aura. Dr. Snowcroft, can she walk?”

“No, my boy.” The medic shook his head. “Better to carry her. We don’t want to risk permanent injury with her Aura depletion.”

Sage finished whatever he was doing with Blake and shrugged. “Ah, yes. Bad news, but good news as well.” He twisted around to glance at Yang. “It’s nothing I can’t fix in a good ten minutes. A simple Aura drain isn’t anything to fuss over.”

“And… bad news?” Yang asked hesitantly.

Sage snorted, gesturing to the fine layer of ash that had settled on her clothes. “Washing her gear is going to be hell for you.”

“Holy cannoli,” Ruby said in awe as Yang trudged wearily out of the arena. “Well, that was fun to watch. Where’s Blake?”

Yang sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose between her forefinger and thumb. “They took her to the medical office to patch her up before sending her on her way. You guys can go, if you want, but I’m gonna wait for her.”

“Nah, we’ll wait with you,” Ruby said, waving away her protest. “She is our teammate, too, so she’s our problem as well.” She gave a sly grin, before her eyes narrowed. “Speaking of problem, Yang, here comes one now.”

“Oh God,” Yang muttered as she saw Neon, looking very pissed, fighting her way through the crowds to Yang. Preparing for the worst, Yang shoved Ruby behind her as Neon arrived.

“What do you want?” she asked bluntly.

“Nothing, except maybe an explanation.” Neon leered at her, tail lashing with malice. “It was just luck, blondie. A win by luck. That’s so not cool. You know how you won?” She looked disdainfully at Yang, eyes flicking from her feet to rest at chest, and her disparaging comment from earlier in the match rang in Yang’s ears, making her heart light up with anger. “Only because your idiot of a partner— what even is she, anyways?— decided to throw herself out of the competition. She probably did more harm than good for you, blondie. Lucky you two are Bonded, is all I can say, because she’s the weakest fighter I’ve ever encountered. Doesn’t even deserve to be here!”
Finally processing what Neon had said about Blake, Yang did what her father had told her to never do—she reacted with anger.

Her fist flew out, and Neon, taken by surprise, squeaked as Yang’s fist caught her on the jaw, and dropped her like a sack of potatoes. She collapsed noiselessly, an angry red mark forming on her made-up face. Yang was surprised—Neon’s Aura must have still been low for one punch to knock her out. Good riddance, she decided.

“No one insults my girlfriend,” Yang snapped down at her unmoving form.

“Oh my God, Yang! You just…” Weiss, who had fought her way through the crowds to Yang’s side, looked appalled, one hand over her mouth. Yang wasn’t sure whether she was mortified or impressed. “You—”

“Knocked her out with one punch?” Ruby looked like she was fighting back either laughter or tears—maybe a mixture of the two. Her silver eyes shone with stunned disbelief out of her pale face. “Yang, I can’t believe you—”

“Yo! What did you do to her? Homocide is totally not legal, blondie!”

Yang looked around as Flynt came barreling out of one of the gateways into the arena, trumpet in hand, his voice hoarse from the way she had sent all his noise rebounding on him. He crouched beside Neon, twisting around to gape up at Yang, his eyes bright with shock.

“I didn’t do it,” Yang said automatically. “Kill her, I mean. She had it coming!”

Incredibly, Flynt’s shoulders shook with a laugh. “Unbelievable.” He stood up, brushing soot off his clothes. Ash was smudged around his face, making him looking dirty. “Jesus Christ, well, she’ll be mighty pissed when she wakes up—but I don’t think you’ve made too much of an enemy. She bounces back quickly, Neon does. I think she admires your… flamboyancy.” He eyed her. “Tell your partner that was a gutsy move there at the end, to throw me in the kettle like that.” Then, surprisingly, he grinned. “I dig it.”

“You had better get your partner to a medic,” Ruby replied as Yang’s eyes widened. “My sister’s punches pack a lot of power.”

“Eh, she’ll be okay. She loves new battle scars. She’ll heal up.” He hauled Neon up, hooking his hands under her arms, and gave a chuckle. “See you on the flip side. Try not to maim your opponent in the singles rounds, will you?”

Yang snorted. “I think I’ve got a handle on it, thanks.” She looked to the side and groaned inwardly as Team SSSN came out. Scarlet and Sage looked taken aback as Flynt dragged Neon away, but Sun and Neptune exchanged equal looks of glee.

“That’s Yang through and through!” Sun shouted excitedly, bouncing up and down. “Tough as nails and more badass than you, probably!”

“Shut up, Sun,” Yang said, shaking the hair from her face, and he grinned at her.

“Gladly, your Highness.”

“Yang, what in hell—”

Yang whipped around as Emerald’s shocked voice reached her ears. The Haven Huntress was trotting towards her, her teammate—Cinder, Yang thought—walking sedately at her side. They
couldn’t be more different, she thought— Emerald, burning with kinetic energy, all sharp planes and angles, and Cinder, like her name, the last ashes of a fire, blurred and smudged and indistinct.

“She deserved it,” Yang said by way of explanation, unapologetic as she stared defiantly at Flynt, dragging Neon away, before looking back at the two. “Hey, Em. Hello, Cinder.”

“Well met.” Cinder’s voice was melodious and purring, like the stroke of a cat’s paw. “And congratulations on your victory.”

“Good job,” Emerald joined in, grinning at her over Cinder’s shoulder. “Thought you were gonna lose for a moment there, but you pulled through.”

Cinder glanced at her teammate through glowing amber eyes. “It was a remarkable fight. Foolish perhaps, at the end, but well earned.”

Her eyes slid past Yang’s shoulder, looking at something behind her; Yang glanced to see Ironwood and Ozpin walking along the edge of the Colosseum, clearly arguing about something. She looked back, and her eyes widened as she saw fiery hatred shining from Cinder’s eyes, a hatred as old and bitter as time, before it was gone so quickly that Yang was sure she must have imagined it. Cinder smiled again.

“Good day,” she said quietly, before nodding to Emerald, turning and walking off.

As she watched them walk away, slightly puzzled, Ruby prodded her before shouting in her ear. “Yang! Blake’s back!”

Yang whirled on her feet. Her eyes instantly flew to a single figure in the crowd. Blake, who had finally come out of the medical office, looked confused as she saw people buzzing around and pointing interestedly at Flynt struggling to get Neon on an airship. There was a bandage wound around her upper arm, and a smudge of soot on her cheekbone that made her look even more endearing. Yang caught her gaze, and Blake’s eyes shone like stars. Her mouth shaped something, but then Yang was running towards her, heart beating in her throat. It could only be described as jumping, the way she hurled herself into Blake’s arms and possessed her lips. Someone whistled but Yang didn’t care because Blake— her Blake— was spinning her in a circle and kissing her back and this girl was hers.

Blake pulled back, flushed and ruffled and worn, but she had never looked more beautiful to Yang. The autumn light fell through the slats in the roof above in warm splashes of mingling saffron and tawny, lighting Blake’s skin to a living gold. The sky above was impossibly blue, the air smelling of smoke and the coming winter, and everything seemed possible.

“We did it,” Yang said, her hands still linked around the back of Blake’s neck. “We did it.”

Qrow

“You know he’s making you look like a fool who’s too scared to act,” Qrow said softly as he entered Ozpin’s office. It was empty, save for the two of them, and the great loneliness stretching between them. Of course, anything between the two of them had been doomed from the start, but it still was painful.
“His heart and intentions are not malicious.” Ozpin didn’t turn around. “Let him believe he holds the power. It will calm him.”

Qrow snorted. “I see. Well. Onto business, Oz… I checked on Amber, and she’s fading fast. Heartbeat is slowing, slowing… Have you chosen the next vessel for the power yet?”

Ozpin did whip around at that, brows slashing down in a rare expression of anger. “She is not a vessel. Don’t slight a sacrifice like that. The one I have chosen… it is a sin to waste so much potential, life, energy. She is a person.”

Taken aback, Qrow fell silent.

“She is close to your niece,” Ozpin said, and there was almost a grudging tone in his voice. “She’s strong. Stubborn. And she has ambition. All of these combined will spur her through the process.”

“Just tell me who it is, for Vale’s sake!”

Ozpin’s lip quirked up, but there was no humor in it. “For Vale’s sake, is it?” he whispered. “Very well. For Vale’s sake itself... It is the fighter, I believe you know her. Pyrrha. Pyrrha Nikos.”

Qrow thought for a moment before putting the name to a face— a tan-skinned, tall Huntress-apprentice with determined green eyes and hair that was, most ironically, the color of autumn.

“You’ve chosen her, eh? Someone who might be noticed if she’s cast out of the public eye? Won’t her friends miss her?”

“Indeed they will miss her. But as you know, it can’t just be anyone: she is the only one I have seen that will do as such a host to Amber. They have to be flexible in spirit, strong in body, and spacious of mind. She fits all of those... and she is my last option.”

“Pretty damned awful option, if you ask me.”

“‘For not all that is holy is pure,’ he quoted, ‘and not all that is pure is holy.’” His eyes were shadowed. “Do you truly think me fool enough to waste life without need? That I want to rent apart her soul and use it only as a vessel to hold a season?”


“What is that?”

Qrow looked out the window. The sun was going down, edging the distant mountains in gold, setting off the hazy purple hues. One mountain in particular— he knew what lay sleeping there, a beast that must never wake, the father of darkness, that winged terror. Ozpin had told him about it once— a knobby head, white as bone, streaked with scarlet, and its eyes, dark and hard as night. Wings that could cover the moon, veined with bloodred lines, claws as long as butcher knives. Qrow wasn’t scared of the Grimm; they were thoughtless— but this one was not, and it was far more than just a Grimm. If Salem was the mother of all that was selfish in the human heart, then the dragon was the father of darkness. The mountain where it slept seemed to pulse scarlet with the fading light. “You are forgetting what it is to be human.”

“Qrow,” he said helplessly, “hasn’t the day long since passed by when being human meant being good and noble? Think of this: you have emotion— when your sister, the maiden of spring, left you, you felt much. You felt sorrow because your blood-kin was going away, possibly forever. You felt anger, because she shattered the vows of a team. You left a helpless sort of relief, for she could not poison the minds of Ruby and Yang. All of these, I have long since ceased to feel in their
entirety. Not entirely, of course, have I lost the influence of emotion. Flickers, perhaps. A touch of
grief, of loss, of anger. Every experience is sharp in my mind because of this, and I know that
humanity is falling down into a darkness that will snuff out the fire they blaze with so brightly. We
cling to Remnant like pine trees clinging to survival on the bleakest mountain slope. Salem, she
knows this. Humanity is the greatest light. It burns like a fire. But fires can be extinguished.
Especially when the foundation they hold is unstable.”

Qrow grunted. “You sound like you’ve already given up.”

Ozpin looked up sharply. Bars of light from the warm, tawny dusk fell across his gaunt face, dust
motes dancing between, swirling down like tiny stars. There was something very ageless about his
face. “I have not lost hope. Time—”

“Time’s golden wings,” Qrow mused, “they speed you along too quickly, for you do not have hope
in our survival.”

Ozpin bowed his head, hair falling forward over his head, silvery and lank. “I do not presume to
think it is any particular emotion that has taken hold of Remnant,” he murmured, “but I am
frightened. I do not know what lies ahead. When the time comes to do battle with the enemy, I fear
it won’t be enough.”

“You’re going to fight her,” Qrow said. “Is that what you think?”

Ozpin ran a hand along his cane. It looked so unassuming, so innocent, but Qrow knew it was more
dangerous than any weapon he could craft— brimming with ancient energy, and the power to slow
time. “It’s what I know,” he said simply. “It makes sense, does it not?”

A beat. Then, “I think— I mean. Ozpin, come on. This is insane. You can't fight a Maiden. You are
strong, granted, but the raw power of a Maiden—”

“If it comes to that— if, mind you— I’m aware. I can’t stand against a Maiden, of course. Even
one bent on a dark path.” His eyes burned. “But I can slow one down. Everyone must make a
sacrifice for a better future. Now it’s my turn.”

“Oz,” Qrow said helplessly. “You can’t…”

Ozpin looked out the window. He looked suddenly very, very old, and not at all strong. “But
Qrow,” he murmured, “in the end, we all must make a sacrifice that terrifies us... and in the end, I
must.”

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A/N: Hamilton reference again because I’m trashhhhhh !!!!

the plot thickens. thickens GREATLY oh no
“Look— no, Dad, she’s fine. Yes, I know. Yeah, it was stupid. Yes— are you even listening to me?”

Taiyang’s amused voice came through the Scroll, crackling and slightly tinny-sounding. ‘I just want to make sure everyone is alright, my little sun-dragon. Surely you wouldn’t fault me that.’

“No, it’s not. You need to stop going online and believing what you read. Well, regardless to her unhealthy eating habits—I suppose I can’t control those, halfway around the world— give her my love. And good luck in the singles rounds, honey. I know you’ll do spectacular, just as you’ve done so far. Tell Blake she was wonderful.’

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad. And of course, you have to say Blake’s wonderful. She did jump into a pool of lava to save my ass, after all.” Yang hung up before he could scold her further about swearing, and sat up from her bed, dropping her Scroll. With a brief moment of indecision, she pulled twenty Lien from her wallet, stuffed it in her boot, and then she dropped down, catlike, from her bed and landed right in front of Blake, startling her from her bed as she looked up in alarm. “Yang, what do you want?”

“Not even a round of applause for my Spiderman entrance?” She grinned. “Taiyang gives his greetings, by the way.”

Blake raised her hands and brought them together once in a single clap, sarcastically. Yang snorted. “Okay, now you’re just being an ass.”

“Forgive me.” Blake looked like she was about to go back to reading, so Yang, executing a perfect karate-chop swipe, swatted the book out of her hands. It flew across the room and disappeared under Ruby’s clutter, probably never to be seen again, and Blake shot up, jaw sagging in an almost comical display of disbelief. “Yang! That was my favorite book!”

“That was Ninjas of Love, that’s not a book, that’s a porno.”

Blake glared. Yang smiled sweetly and went for it. “Do you want to go on a date?”

Clearly caught-off guard, Blake tilted her head quizzically. “A date?”

“Yeah.” She held up a thick wad of Lien notes and then gave another smile, coyer this time. “Typically, a boring thing you’ve got to remember for a test, but in this case, an offer for a night of romance with me.”

Blake held up a hand, eyes amused. “If I say no, I’m sure I’ll never hear the end of it… so sure, I’ll go.”

“Great,” Yang said. “Meet me down by the lobby in two hours?”
Blake looked stunning.

Yang, leaning up against the edge of a pillar and texting Sun about what was greater: Scarlet’s hair or Neptune’s, noticed Blake right away, the way she did whenever she entered a room. She put her Scroll away, greeting her girlfriend with a little smile, but she was unable to stop her heart from skipping a beat when Blake stepped fully into the light, only a foot between them. Luckily, she was wearing good clothes for what Yang had in mind— an olive-colored tank-top and dark skinny jeans. Her hair was glossy and shone like a bird’s wing in the dimness, tumbling down her back and shoulders in crooked, crimped waves. Her eyes were the color of the sun right before it set, blazingly bright to look at, but beautiful, too, and her smile was like the edge of the moon, mesmerizing, and Yang wanted to kiss her so badly it almost hurt.

So she did. She leaned in without really thinking about it, tilting her head and capturing her lips slowly. Blake let out a little gasp against her mouth, like she was surprised, before giving in and kissing her back; Yang wound her fingers through the thick waves of Blake’s hair, enfolded in the way she moved, her sound and touch and feel— the slight roughness of her chapped lips, the way Blake’s hands ran down over her spine, each ridge of it, soft and pressing all at once, the warmth of her breath.

She wasn’t sure who broke away first, but Blake let out a little noise of laughter. “I thought you might be saving that until we were actually out on the date, Yang.”

“I couldn’t help myself,” Yang admitted sheepishly, taking her hand, shivering a little with nervousness. She wasn’t sure Blake would ever stop making her feel this way, this combination of delirious happiness and equal disbelief, that she had managed to get in a relationship with such a knock-out. “You look wonderful, by the way.”

Blake flushed slightly, hand squeezing with the barest hint of more pressure, and Yang was so in love with her that it made her feel like she could fly right up to the moon, run across the ocean, do anything. “Nothing compared to you. You look beautiful.”

“I’ll be paying,” Yang warned, “so don’t even think about trying to short me out of it, got it? My treat.”

“Well, when you put it that way…” Blake’s thumb brushed over the back of her hand in a way that made shivers run up Yang’s spine, anticipatory and thrilled all at once. “Who am I to argue?”

“So,” Blake said carefully, “where, exactly, did you say we were going?”

Yang glanced back. “Sneaky, Blake. You see, I didn’t say.”

She gave a frustrated huff. “Can’t you tell me?”

“That’d ruin the surprise. Just you wait.”
After about ten minutes of walking, Yang heard loud noises, and by the way Blake’s head tilted, she heard them too. After five more minutes, light showed on the horizon—not sunlight, but the harsh golds-and-reds of artificial lampposts. And after five more, Yang came to a stop at the edge of a huge, flat field. In the field was a conglomeration of lights and machines: Ferris wheels, rollercoasters, fair-booths, carnival games, mechanical swings and carousels and spinning cups—everything that you could imagine, a huge line winding away through the field to the ticket booth. The thick scent of kettlecorn and caramelized things floated through the heavy night air, drifting towards them. The spinning lights reflected in Blake’s eyes, and she tilted her head as the faint screams of riders and calliope music came towards them.

Blake

“Okay,” Yang said as they hopped the fence, unwilling to brave that long line that looked like it would take a good two hours to get through, “this isn’t criminal activity, because you know they’re hauling in thousands of Lien every night. Two more kids that don’t pay won’t make a difference.”

“Tell me that when the cops haul you out,” Blake grumbled, dropping down from the top of the barbed wire. They had landed behind a kettle corn booth, and they booked it out of there before the attendant there noticed them and called security. “Anyways, isn’t this a little… unconventional?”

Yang pulled a face. “I don’t know what you’re on about. Taking your girlfriend to an fair is in like, every movie ever.”

“Yang, I’m pretty sure it’s a boardwalk you’re thinking of, not a carnival.”

“No, I’m positive. Plus this is way more fun than a casual date. What do you want to do first?”

Blake’s gaze flitted over everything. She was filled with a deep, welling dislike for all the human contraptions, before a pang of even greater self-disgust shot through her. How could she still feel that way? She wasn’t part of the White Fang; this was ridiculous, for her to not admire human ingenuity.

“Hey.” Yang’s hand slipped into hers, and her face was suddenly serious. “If you really want to leave—”

“No. I’m fine. It’s just… unexpected.” Blake looked around again, forcing her darker emotions down and focusing on the part of her that was happy to be with Yang, no matter where it was—even here, standing on a spit of flattened grass between a restaurant and a dart-throwing booth. “Um, let’s go there.”

She wasn’t sure what everything was. She had never been to anything resembling this before: something made purely for thrills. The only outings she had ever been on had been for school, or for the White Fang, and she felt as out of place as if she was in a foreign world. The dirt track wound away in all directions, filled with people—she saw a few Faunus here and there, but none, as she guessed, had ever been in the White Fang.
Alone and apart.

It turned out she had pointed to what Yang said was a carousel. There was a long line, and a booth to wait in with a TV displaying Vytal reruns, so they settled in to watch a rerun of an Atlas team, team RVER, against a Vacuo team, team AJCT.

“Look at that,” Yang said, laughing as a student face-planted in a patch of mud, swearing like a fiend. Professor Port looked appalled at the words that were flying from his mouth. “Oh, God. This is painful to watch.”

Blake frowned, looking down at the scarred countertop. Her finger traced an image of a heart and two names that someone had scratched into the varnish with a keychain, and she was sure the look on her face and the sadness in her heart must have drawn her partner’s attention more surely than anything, because before she knew it, Yang had drawn her into a hug.

“I promise you,” Yang said into her ear, “everything’s going to be okay, no matter what I’ve got to do to make that true.”

Yang

They had gone on almost every ride in the park— the carousel, a roller-coaster (which Blake had hated but Yang had loved), a rocking ship, spinning teacups, bumper-cars, electric swings, and finally, at around eleven at night, Yang looked up at the last ride they hadn’t gone on: a flashing circle made of great metal struts, seats dangling at regular intervals with frilly roofs and two people inside each.

“A Ferris Wheel,” she said.

“It looks rather dangerous.”

“Pretty much everything in this entire park could kill you, Blake, and that’s all you’ve got to say?”

Blake looked apprehensive as she gazed up at the wheel, blue lights spinning in her eyes, and Yang sighed. She had been more than distant the entire night— silent and unresponsive; she was there physically, but mentally, she could have been miles away. It didn’t take a genius to guess what she was thinking about, or why— but it still hurt that even now, Adam was driving a wedge between them, because Blake refused to let go of the idea of who he had once been. There was no way to bring it up without starting an even bigger fight between the two of them, but Yang didn’t know what else to do besides let Blake work it out on her own. She herself couldn’t relate to that kind of problem… and it hurt to wake up every day, carrying a part of Blake’s burden through a heavy Bond.

I don’t know how to fix us.

Deciding that it was better left alone, Yang took Blake’s hand. They wended their way through the line, finally making it to the front and managing to get a seat on the Ferris Wheel.

“It’s safe, Blake, I promise.” Yang gripped her hand tighter as the wheel started up with a strain of
calliope music. Blake looked anxious, her knuckles whitening as she grasped the bar and looked down at the concrete, which was steadily sailing away from them.

“I know it’s safe. I’m with you.” Blake’s smile was wry, barely there, but it was there, and that was all that mattered. Yang, beaming, sat back and folded her arms, watching her.

“That’s disgustingly sappy. I always knew you were a hopeless romantic.”

“What can I say? This kind of environment must bring it out in me.” Blake looked upward, towards the sky, her eyes reflecting the scattered stars there. A deliciously cool breeze wafted through the air, stirring her hair, and making something lonely and more powerful than anything Yang had ever felt rush through her veins.

“The world is so beautiful,” Yang murmured. “It can be so beautiful, sometimes. And yet, Qrow and Ozpin… something bad’s coming and they won’t tell us, and— Blake?”

Blake had turned her eyes away from the night sky and was watching her, something very strong in her eyes. The Ferris Wheel had slowed down, reaching its peak and putting them at the summit of the sky; the world spread out all around them, tiny lights webbing out across a dark land. Yang felt like she could reach out and grasp the world in her hand, but her focus was riveted on Blake now. Her gaze was intense, like looking directly into the sun and being blinded. “If something truly is coming,” she said, “if our impending fate is falling, then all I want to do is spend every day with you that I can.”

Blake moved her hungry mouth to Yang’s. If their kiss before had been soft and muted, like the color of the sky when the sun fell, this was like an inferno crowning a forest. Yang swore she felt sparks where Blake’s hands touched her skin, curling around her jaw, a symphony of movement. She was breathless—burning—

“I love you,” Blake breathed against her mouth, and Yang pulled her close, their foreheads touching, unable to see anything but Blake’s eyes, the fire that crackled there. “I never thought I would be worthy enough of this, but— when the end comes to the end, I’m so lucky to have met you.”

“You’re talking as if you don’t have any hope.” Yang moved her hands down to Blake’s shoulders. She could feel the fluttering race of her heart.

“I’m sorry.” Blake moved away, her shoulders sagging, and there was a raw pain in her face that was hard to ignore. “I haven’t been honest with you. I know I’ve been distant, and I’m… I apologize for it. It’s just…” She shrugged. “There is a part of me that doesn’t know how to move on.”

Yang nodded towards the shimmering skyline. “People tell you to let go of bad memories, Blake, but personally, I think you should hold onto all memories. Hold onto them… but don’t let them change you, or how you feel about the life you’re living right now. Don’t dwell on them too much and pass over the present in favor of what’s in the past. I’ve never forgotten the bad memories of Taiyang and my mom, or of when Summer died and we found out, because those helped shape me. They’re important, even if they aren’t good. And for you, the truth is: one day, you have to learn to let go of Adam. I know you loved him. There’s a part of you that still does, and as terrible as it sounds, probably always will love him, or at least the memory of him, because first loves never really die. Holding onto a bad memory is okay, Blake. But there comes a time when you have to let yourself live your life, to stop grieving, and learn to let go and move on. A memory is just that—a memory. And you shouldn’t… you shouldn’t let it prevent you from making new memories—better ones. You aren’t a bad person for moving on, and you aren’t trying to pretend it never
happened by letting go. Constantly dwelling on it only hurts you, in the end. Does… does that make sense?"

“How is it,” she answered softly, “that when I’m lost, you always manage to find me?”

They were circling back towards the ground now, the gentle night air whispering between them. “I’m your partner,” Yang managed to say around the sudden lump in her throat. “Whatever you are, I’ll always try to make you happier.”

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**Qrow**

“‘That’s bullshit!’”

Qrow frowned down at the blurry bottom of his shot glass before transferring his stern gaze to Taiyang. “I would’ve thought it was hardly something to be objected to.”

Taiyang, clean-shaven for once, his sleeves pushed back and his eyes clear and cold with disapproval, slammed his hands on the counter. He had an apron on, and was cooking, so he didn’t exactly look the picture of dangerous. “You want to know something?”

“Oh, I’d be delighted. Tell me, what should I know?”

Taiyang brought down a steak knife, erratically chopping up a cut of beef. He didn’t look up, but there was an unhinged ferocity in his movements that was worrisome. “I used to think you were different from Raven. But I can see her in you now. That same callousness and indifference to anyone but yourself. The way you’re looking at me. You really don’t give a damn what happens to yourself, do you?”

“My life isn’t important, Tai.” Qrow slid the shot-glass away. “Truth sucks, but it’s called the truth for a reason.”

Tai slammed the knife, point-down, into the countertop, where it stuck, quivering ominously. “Okay. Sure. So, hypothetically, let’s say your life doesn’t matter? If you die on this fool’s errand for Ozpin, spying out some enemy or another, where does that leave the people that care for you? Where does it leave Ruby? Yang?” He glanced upward, blood spattering his fingers from the cut of beef. There was an anguish in his eyes that took Qrow by surprise. “Where does it leave *me*?”

“I have to go,” Qrow said at last, swallowing with difficulty. “We’re running out of time. Spring’s daughter, Winter’s daughter. Two opposites, yes? Ozpin teamed them together intentionally: they have power that’s potentially catastrophic. Amber’s comatose and Summer…” Qrow shook his head. “I’m not touching that subject with a ten-foot pole.”

Taiyang’s eyes were bright with pain. “Then go,” he said raggedly. “And I wish you luck on your journey.”
“Get out and stay out! We ain’t servin’ your kind here, Huntsman!”

Qrow staggered out from the bar, his lip bleeding, a fierce headache welling up behind his forehead. He’s started a fight, and, for all the odds stacked against him— twenty to one— he hadn’t done half-bad.

He spat out a mixture of salvia and blood, feebly shaking his head to clear the hair from his eyes, and immediately regretting it as it opened up his wounds again, sending fresh, warm blood coursing down his arm.

Think, Qrow Branwen. As if from another lifetime, Ozpin’s voice came to him, years and years back— when Qrow had been just a student at Beacon, with Ozpin as his unofficial mentor. When you’re at a dead end and there seems to be no way to proceed further, look to the sky and go up.

Qrow closed his eyes, picturing the world smaller, from a bird’s eye view, and he imagined himself spinning and shrinking, contained into a feathery prison. He let out a hiss of pain as his body contorted, bones melting and fusing, his world shaking and shrinking. When he opened his eyes, he was a crow.

He took a hobbling step forward, before letting out a harsh ‘cark!’ at the bar that had thrown him out. With a few tentative flaps of his wings, he tucked his feet beneath himself and rose into the high wind, letting the night carry him up beneath the stars.

I need to find the White Fang’s operations, to seek out the girl who attacked Amber.

We’re running out of time...
Chapter X - Nightmares Upon Reality

“We need to talk to you two.”

Yang lifted her head from Blake’s shoulder as Weiss’s sharp voice cut through her consciousness, embarrassed to have been caught dozing. She’d fallen asleep curled up beside Blake, and she looked up from her book as Weiss and Ruby planted themselves on either side of the bed, making it very squashed.

“Can I help you?” Yang said, her scorn instantly ruined as her jaws parted in a gaping yawn. Ruby grinned.

“Well,” she began, glancing at Ruby as though this was a speech they had rehearsed, “You both did well in the doubles round, and you won a decisive victory, albeit an… unconventional one.”

“You sound more like Winter every day,” Yang muttered, earning a glare from Weiss as she went on.

“As we know, there’s any number of different people you might have to fight in the singles now… Sun, Pyrrha, Penny, Mercury— I asked Emerald about it, and they’re sending him on— Eliás, from Team TEAL— and then two students from Vacuo and Atlas, respectively named Robin and Lionel. So that’s seven respective opponents you potentially have to go up against in combat, and you won’t have randomized environments to hinder or help you.

“Team TEAL let him represent them? I would’ve thought Talos or Amber, even Leah, would go on to singles— but Eliás? He’s like, so short and scrawny, I didn’t think he’d be that good of a fighter. That’s unexpected.” She shook her head. “Sorry, go on.”

“My point is that we— Ruby and I, that is— we think it would be smarter for you to proceed to the singles round, Yang. Not because we think you’re a better fighter than Blake— far from it— but you have the most flexible fighting style of us all.”

“You’re a powerhouse,” Ruby offered. “And we’re the last team that needs to send in our choice for who’s gonna fight in the singles round.”

Yang, taken aback, swept her gaze across the three of them— Weiss, looking resolute, Ruby, her eyes shining, and Blake, unable to hold back a small smile. “You told them to pick me, didn’t you?” she accused her girlfriend, eliciting sounds of protest from Weiss and Ruby, but Blake didn’t look fazed at her accusation. “It makes sense, doesn’t it?” she replied evenly. “I mean, you can handle anything. You could beat any of the people that Weiss named with one hand tied behind your back, with the possible exception of Pyrrha. I couldn’t. You’ve got to go on.”

“The power of RWB compels you,” Ruby added, laying a hand on Yang’s arm. “In all honesty, we’re great. We know we’re great. Weiss could shish-kebab someone with Myrtenaster, I could slice up someone with Crescent Rose, Blake could— oh, help me out with a cool analogy here. What could she do with Gambol Shroud?”

While Blake looked annoyed, Yang perked up. “Oooh! She could tie someone up.” She leaned close and whispered a sentence nearly identical to that one in the shell of Blake’s ear, making her blush furiously, and Ruby looked horrified.
“Yang, that’s nasty. Only innocence in this dorm, please. Anyhow—”

“— we want you to go on to the singles round,” Weiss finished with her typical no-nonsense demeanor. “In no uncertain terms.”

“Can’t we have an official vote or something?” Yang complained.

“How would that even work? Don’t you understand how unanimous agreement goes? We all agreed. Anyways, don’t you know it’s an honor to go to the final tier in the tournament? Especially for a brawler like you.”

“You really want me to go on?” Yang squared her shoulders. “Ruby, I know you’re okay with it—you don’t like attention anyways—and Weiss, you’ve said that despite your dad being a total fuckwit—sorry, Ruby—you don’t want to proceed, but Blake, I would have thought…”

“There’s no one I trust more to get a victory. And to be honest…” Blake smiled. “Yang, you know you want this, okay? Don’t let your doubts ruin it. You’ll do excellently. You’re Ruby’s sister, you’re Taiyang’s daughter, you’re my partner, and—”

“Blake Belladonna, you had better not exclude me from that little spiel.”

“— and you’re Weiss’s friend,” Blake finished with a roll of her eyes. “We all want you to have your moment to shine.”

“Well…” Yang shrugged. “When you put it like that, who am I to disagree?”

Weiss gave a sniff, and Ruby hopped up from the bed, skipping towards where her Scroll lay charging. “Now, now that’s decided, we’d better send in our letter of confirmation to the arena supervisors that Yang will be our choice for the singles tier.” She picked up her Scroll, and frowned. “I have a message from… Oobleck. And Port. Weird.”

“Well, tell us what it says,” Yang said, in a tone that conveyed it should have been obvious. Ruby scowled at her before clearing her throat and reading aloud:

“This is an automatic message send to Team RWBY, Team TEAL, Team SSSN, Team JNPR, Team EMNC, Team PECE, Team ROBN, and Team LYRE. Please do not respond. Hello, students! We have the pleasure to inform you that, if you receive this message, it is because your team has advanced with victory through both the four on four tier, and the doubles tier. Now, you must prepare for the upcoming singles round, less than three days away, to bring honor to your team and your school. Ultimately it is up to your team leader to decide who shall proceed to the singles tier, but it must be a member who has fought in the previous two tiers. A meeting between all the selected students who will be competing in the final round shall be held in the cafeteria of Beacon today at 2:30 PM. We have already received selections from Teams TEAL, SSSN, JNPR, PECE, AND LYRE. Teams RWBY, ROBN, and EMNC still are required to inform us no later than 12:00 PM of their selections, or they will be disqualified from the tournament itself. Happy fighting!”

Yang yelped. “It’s eleven thirty-seven right now! Ruby, send in the damn thing! Tell them I’m competing for us!”

“I will, chill! You’d better go get ready for this meeting thingy!”
Yang walked in to the cafeteria, slightly self-conscious, but she remembered that she had earned her way here, and her confidence returned.

She was the last one to arrive. All the others had already taken their seats, and as she entered, she took it all in with the sharp eye that only a Huntress had.

Teams TEAL, SSSN, JNPR, PECE, LYRE, ROBN, and EMNC had picked out a mixture of the expected and unexpected, and Yang recognized them all. Eliás from TEAL, Sun from SSSN, Pyrrha from JNPR, Penny from PECE, a kid named Lionel from LYRE, a boy named Robin from ROBN, and Mercury from EMNC. Yang shivered and shut the door behind her, moving forward.

The Atlas student named Lionel was sitting at the head of the table, looking stiff and angry in his white combat gear. Robin, the Vacuo combatant, was on his right, looking coolly bored. Sun and Pyrrha chatted animatedly, but Yang noticed that while Sun seemed laid-back and cheerful, Pyrrha had a very somber air about her that seemed out of character, her eyes dark and her replies short and muted. Penny sat near the end of the table, watching the others, and Mercury looked annoyed, probably at being stuck here with students he had made his distaste of very clear. Eliás from Team TEAL sat near him, drumming his fingers on the table with a nervous energy, his black hood pulled over his head, his amber eyes bright with anxiety. Yang, with a brief moment of hesitation, sat beside Eliás, across from Pyrrha and Sun.

“Now that we’re finally all present,” Lionel said dryly as she sat, “And I thank you, Xiao-Long, for making us wait until the final day to send in your affirmation that you would be your team’s combatant, and additionally, to be the last to show up— we can proceed to the meeting.”

“Sorry,” she chirped, shrugging carelessly. “Places to go, people to see, things to do— well, more interesting people than some of you, I mean, and definitely more fun things to do.”

Lionel’s face darkened in anger, and Yang winced as she realized that she’d made an enemy of him as easy as that. Eliás snorted in amusement, before he nudged her, his amber eyes unusually bright in his dark face. Something about him— his dark, curly hair, hanging about his face, his bright gold eyes— couldn’t help but remind her of Blake, and she warmed to him instantly. “Don’t bother the lion dude,” he whispered. “He acts like he’s got a stick rammed up his rear-end; no need to make it worse, huh?”

“I assume we all know how the singles round works?” Mercury said sarcastically, cutting off Lionel as he opened his mouth to speak once more. “Is this meeting really necessary, except for the idiots who haven’t been paying attention?”

“It won’t hurt anyone to go over the rules once more to ensure safety and fairness,” Pyrrha pointed out gently, drawing a dirty look from Mercury. “Surely that’s not too much to ask?”

“Pyrrha’s right,” Penny agreed, clearly trying for an upbeat tone. “I’m sure I don’t know all the rules by memory. I am from Atlas, after all, and Vale’s quite a bit different!”

“Well,” Sun announced, sitting back and folding his arms over his chest, “I, for one, feel like this meeting’s stupid, but I’d like to say that I fear for the person who fights me, that’s all.”

“Yeah,” Eliás drawled, putting his feet up on the table. “Those abdominal muscles sure are killer, aren’t they, mate? I have abs too— under a layer of fat.”
“You say *mate*, do you? I think you and my partner Scarlet would get along fabulously.”

“Back to the subject, please!” Lionel banged his hand on the table furiously like a judge slamming his gavel, stopping the idle conversation in its tracks. “You chatter like a nest of jackdaws, all of you! Ridiculous! If you can’t even focus on a simple meeting, how do you expect to focus in a fight? Against me? Against anyone?”

“Arrogant prick,” Sun muttered, but he fell silent. As Lionel launched into a long-winded explanation of the rules, Yang zoned out, and her gaze flicked around the table as she pondered who she would be matched up against. It was random, so there was no preparation, obviously, but it was a good idea to rule out who would be an easy opponent early on. She knew she could take on Sun— she had sparred him so often, so she was familiar with the nuances of his style, and additionally, he was pretty easy to beat, because a staff was flimsy against her gauntlets. Robin, the Vacuo kid, looked easy too— he had a bow and arrow, which didn’t stand a chance against her straight-up style. Penny might be harder to triumph over, because of her wire-strung daggers. Eliás didn’t seem difficult— he was so short and scrawny, and didn’t seem very focused— but then again, she had no clue of his fighting style, and to his credit, he had managed to get to the final tier. The Lionel kid didn’t seem like anything much, beyond his high-tech gear that would probably fail him as soon as he even tried to fight her gauntlets. Robin, the Vacuo kid, looked easy too— he had a bow and arrow, which didn’t stand a chance against her straight-up style. Penny might be harder to triumph over, because of her wire-strung daggers. Eliás didn’t seem difficult— he was so short and scrawny, and didn’t seem very focused— but then again, she had no clue of his fighting style, and to his credit, he had managed to get to the final tier.

She was broken from her thoughts as Sun raised a tentative hand. “So, I— uh, I hopped a shipment boat and came to Vale way early, because school was boring me. I came before my team and I missed a lot of the technicalities of the singles round… what exactly are the rules on the arena itself? Is there environments or what? Is it just like the previous tiers?”

“Quit being new to this,” Eliás complained. “It’s annoying me.”

“I can’t *quit* being new at something.”

“You know, logic has a brother. His name is *shut the hell up.*”

Lionel pressed two fingers to the bridge of his nose, his brows furrowing. “Can we *please* get back to the subject at hand? To answer your question, Wukong, there is no environment in the final stage. There is just you, a circle of gray tile, and your opponent. And of course, the cameras. A small ring of tiles will raise itself like a plateau off the floor, and if you fall off of it, you are automatically eliminated by ring out. It’s a very small fighting space, intended to make you stay on your feet lest you get eliminated.”

“Cheerful,” Sun muttered, looking annoyed. “What the hell are we supposed to do, sprout wings and fly if we fall off the damn thing?”

Lionel didn’t bother answering, and Eliás raised a hand. “Excuse me, Mister Big-Tough-Atlas-Guy?”

The Atlas Huntsman closed his eyes, breathing out heavily. “Yes, Snowdon?”

“If we, like, trip and fall off the tiles onto the ring-out area, will we be disqualified?”

Lionel’s cheek twitched, a muscle jumping irritably in his jaw. “You had better pray, apprentice, if you ask such a stupid question again, that I won’t scream at you. To answer, if you truly possessed
such clumsy reflexes and tact, you would not be in the singles tier at all, so rest assured that specific incident is highly unlikely to occur.”

Eliás slumped back. “Killjoy.”

“Are there any other questions?” He looked around. “No? Excellent. Now we can proceed to—”

“Hey, how come you’re running this meeting, dude?” Sun leaned forward, cutting him off. “Show of favoritism from the ol’ Ironwood? Or do the headmasters just think you’re that much of a washout that they trust you to run the show?”

Lionel drew himself up stiffly. “Quite the opposite, I assure you,” he replied, his tone cool as ice. “They— Ozpin, Ironwood, and Glynda alike— were of the wise opinion that none of you would be fit to keep such a meeting calm and running smoothly. And they were right. With merely twenty minutes of observation, I’ve gauged your personalities and I agree with them. You, Wukong— you don’t take anything seriously enough. Xiao-Long, you’ve got it worse; you’re too confident, and to be honest, you’re on a no-good path to becoming a slut. Black’s a cruel bully— probably inherited it, I’d guess; Polendina’s dafter than a brain-dead squirrel; Nikos has the worst case of starry-eyed optimism I’ve ever seen. Snowdon, you’re an idiot who can’t even think for yourself, much less act on anything. Robin, you don’t speak at all. That’s why none of you are running this meeting, because none of you are fit to do so!”

Immediately, seven voices raised in furious outrage against Lionel. Sun and Mercury looked about five seconds away from knocking Lionel’s ass into next Tuesday, and Yang was inclined to agree with them— the thought of decking this pasty little cracker of a boy was immensely appealing, especially after insults that had clearly struck close to home for them all. Mercury looked more pissed-off than he had ever been, and his gray eyes fairly spat fire.

“I won’t go into your issues, Lionel,” Pyrrha snapped suddenly, quieting the rest down. “Because then, we’d be stuck here all week.” Yang, who had never seen her display any sort of retaliation towards an insult, goggled at her. Without a word, Pyrrha shoved herself out of her chair, making its wooden legs screech against the floor, and she stormed out, slamming the cafeteria door soundly behind her.

“Good going, Atlas asshole,” Eliás snarled. “Insult everyone and then tell yourself that you’re suited to lead anything? Yeah, right, what a joke! I’m leaving. I hope whoever you fight knocks your ass six feet below. In fact, I hope it’s me. Because I’d love to smash in your ugly mug.” He wheeled around, trotting out with an air of barely-suppressed rage.

“I take plenty seriously, you son of a priss.” Sun said coldly, whipped his tail across Lionel’s face in a stinging lash before he turned to go, looking back at Yang with a hard expression in his eyes. “Let’s go, Yang. This meeting’s over. Penny, you coming?”

“Yes,” she said in a subdued voice, casting a hurt glance at Lionel, who looked stonily outraged.

“Leave then, Vale fools,” he said angrily. “When push comes to shove, then we shall truly see who is the strongest.”

“Well,” Yang said, slumping down with a groan and resting her forehead on her knees, “that was the most un-fun thing I’ve ever gone through. I feel grateful for Weiss now, though. At least, even
if she’s from Atlas, she’s not an ass.”

“Do you want to tell me what happened?” Blake pressed a kiss to her temple, tucking a strand of hair behind her hair. “I don’t suppose the meeting went well, with the way you’re acting.”

“It was shot to hell. The singles rounds will be vicious, if they’re anything like what happened.” Yang fell quiet for a long moment before saying in a more subdued voice, “I’ve never seen Pyrrha get so angry.”

“Who was there? And why would she have reason to get upset?”

“It was me, Sun, Penny, Pyrrha, a kid named Eliás; you know him, from that upperclassman team — Mercury (that’s Emerald’s partner, Blake, if you don’t remember) — a Vacuo student named Robin, and this rude little prick from Atlas, named Lionel. He started the trouble. He was acting all holier-than-thou, flaunting how he was the best-loved of all of us, how he was stronger and smarter, and at the end, he completely flipped a switch and yelled at us. He basically called Sun a shallow moron, he called Eliás an idiot, he called Penny stupid and ignorant, he called Mercury cruel— and though I kinda see how he got that conclusion, he also said Mercury got his cruelty through inheritance, which seemed to touch a nerve— he called Pyrrha a stupid optimist, and he called the other kid too quiet. Which was actually true. But still, unnecessary.”

Her eyes were narrow. “He said all that to your faces?”

“Yeah. Shocker, I know.”

Blake’s ears flattened. “Forgive me for saying it, but… we got lucky with Weiss. Humans can be selfish and loudmouthed… though Atlas has a tendency to be the worst of them.”

“No. I agree with you. Even if it’s a little harsh.”

“He called you all those names, you say. Then what happened?”

“The boys— except that one quiet kid, Robin— almost flattened him to a pulp. Pyrrha got pissed, insulted Lionel, and stormed out. Eliás did the same. I didn’t see what happened to Mercury— I’d guess he probably threw a few punches after I left— and Sun, Penny and I left together.”

Blake let out a long sigh. “That’s… troubling. Especially with the singles round coming up. A bit of friendly competition is good, but what he said sounds like a bitter grudge against all of you, and on the battlefield those can turn into something much more dangerous. The Vytal tournament is intended to be something to provide students an opportunity to let loose, not—”

“— not to take out prejudice on others,” Yang finished grimly. “I don’t know who I’m going to fight, but damn it, after this meeting, I’m scared, Blake. I’m not stupid. I know I’m a good fighter — as much as I can know that without being arrogant about it— but these people are all scared, and they’re lashing out in different ways, but mostly through anger. You know why? It’s because there’s some god-awful thing coming and my so-called uncle and our headmaster are keeping it all hush-hush, and everyone can feel their tension. Especially because Ironwood’s bringing in so much military equip. That meeting shouldn’t have been so tense. But it was.”

Blake shifted, a glint of anxiety in her eyes. “Have you got any idea of who you would like to fight?”

“Sun, maybe,” she said, and shook her head. “Wait, no, not him. I don’t know. I mean, it would be nice to fight him, but it wouldn’t be a challenge because we’ve fought before. Pyrrha… I couldn’t beat her. I know that. She’d use her semblance so that none of my strikes actually hit her. Eliás and
that Robin kid seemed nice enough, and not that fierce, but I don’t know their fighting styles at all, and Penny… those wire-daggers won’t be too good for me. I’d like to fight Lionel, but like you said, it’s not smart to fight someone you hate.”

“What about Mercury?” Blake asked.

Yang gave a little noise of displeasure. “He annoys me. Smirking little bastard. I guess if I had to fight him, I could, but I wouldn’t like it.”

Blake hollowed her cheeks, lips thinning. “I know you’ll do well— it’s why we picked you— but I can’t help but worry about these things. It’s as Sage said.”

“Sage? He’s so quiet, I thought he was more made of muscle than brain. Did he give you advice?”

“He’s actually one of the wisest people I’ve met, aside from Ozpin, maybe,” Blake muttered. “He reminded me of my father, almost…” Her eyes clouded, and Yang felt like she’d been slapped.

_Nice going, idiot, now you have to navigate this tricky kind of topic…_ But, as it turned out, Blake was talking again, so Yang went quiet.

“He told me this, and I haven’t forgotten it since: ‘This tournament is a dangerous thing… however much it may be to celebrate peace, it is a place for fights. Playfights, of course, but sometimes plays and acts can become dangerously real. We’re in peace, but the peace between our kingdoms has always been an uneasy one, and it would not take much to set them to war… that arena is where the world’s most dangerous come to play. Very few make it out of the crossfire.’ The way he said it implied that he shares our concerns of something awful impending.”

“You would think,” Yang said, angrily nudging the carpeting with her boot, “that after stopping a freaking freighter train and a flood of Grimm in a city, we might get at least a year of peace. But ohhhh no. We gotta deal with this aggressive Atlas crap and a damn mystery apocalypse before we — Blake?” She looked up, concerned. There was a very strange look on her partner’s face, a worrisome look.

Blake was staring at the ground. “I didn’t believe him really,” she mumbled. “Sage or my father. But all that leads us to war is our own hearts. Our own ignorant, foolish hearts. I read a book once that said it all. ‘It seemed clear that wars were not made by generations and their special stupidities, but that wars were made instead by something ignorant in the human heart.’ And it is. That Lionel student you met… he’s just another example of it… him and Adam and all the rest who help in waging these types of things.”

“Blake, I—” Yang sat up straighter. “Lionel is just another stupid, bullying kid. If he doesn’t get his priorities straight, well, then that’s all he’ll ever be. And Adam’s chosen his own path— we can’t change that. But don’t think that way about Sage. Or your dad. Or either of your parents. Don’t ruin what good memories you have by dwelling on the bad ones.”

She let out a long sigh. “It’s hard,” she admitted. “I mean… I can remember Brian and Maria, so distantly… what do you think they would have done if they had more time, if Ayran had not taken them from me? Do you think they’re proud of me?” Blake frowned down at her feet, and Yang remembered her words vividly, before their first kiss: _I don’t know who I am. I look at myself in the mirror and I see Brian Belladonna, but I act like a Huntress and talk like a member of the White Fang—like Adam… the blood in my veins is not perfect. This guilty blood, of a Faunus turned traitor._

“You parents did something right, Blake,” she said. “They did something incredible. Not for me,
but for our whole team.”

Her ears pricked and she looked over at Yang curiously. “What’s that?”

“They made you.” Yang took her hand. “And that’s not all. They’d be so proud of you, and if there’s… if they’re still out there somewhere… they’re still proud. They would have fought against prejudice just like you, and been there to guide you. But don’t forget that despite whatever you’ve lost— even if your parents are gone— you’ve accomplished so much on your own two feet. Taiyang used to say that all our stories were still unfolding… and they are, yours and mine. All your victories and strength, your sorrows and joys— they are part of a story, your story, whether it involves your parents or not… but you must have inherited the courage that I know they had from what you’ve told me.”

“My parents,” she sighed quietly, half to herself, eyes studying the stars. “I know it’s been so long— I can barely even remember their faces anymore— but God, I miss them. Them, and Khione, though she’s never checked on me once since that day in the infirmary. I wonder what happened to her… and I wonder if their spirits are out there somewhere.”

Yang touched her shoulder lightly. "I'm sure they're waiting for you," she said softly, "more eagerly than you could ever know."

"My father, in his letter— you know, the one he wrote to me before Ayran killed him— he wrote like he knew he was running out of time. He must have known he was going to die for knowing too much about Ayran’s ambition.” Blake's amber eyes looked over; Yang knew they were a mirroring echo to her mother's. “The White Fang was a monster by another name, and they knew it, but still, they left me there.”

"They left a legacy. They were heroes in a way—"

Blake looked almost sad. "Thank you, but I know they made mistakes, and it's too late to fix those. I can only live my own life, and hope that when my time is up, that I've done enough, perhaps even more than they expected."

It wasn't much to console her old grief, but that had to be enough, coupled with the knowledge that Blake's parents were watching over her, in the stars, doing their best to protect her even though they could no longer stand by her side.

(The setting here is, in my imagination, like the kitchen in RWBY chibi. ^^)

Ruby

“Do you think we made the right decision?”

Ruby looked up from where she was careful pouring chocolate-chip cookie batter to resemble
Crescent Rose, and scowled as one drip oozed off, making it seem as though the scythe had a lump attached. “What do you mean?”

They were both in the community dorm kitchen for the first-years, and it was empty, the faint smell of take-out and pancakes lingering in the air. Weiss was idly playing around with her semblance, making glyphs appear and disappear in rapid-time. “To send Yang on. I love her to death, but sometimes I worry. Everyone going on to the finals, with the exception of our friends, will try to make her lose her temper.”

“We’ll have to hope she gets matched up against someone like Sun or Eliáš then,” Ruby said, feeling faintly uncertain. “But I trust my sister. She’s not dumb. She can keep her cool if she tries. Do you really think we should have done something different?”

“I don’t think we made the wrong decision really,” Weiss sighed after a while, abandoning her attempts at whatever glyph-work she was trying to accomplish. “I know for certain that what they did in the doubles rounds— Blake throwing herself in lava— I could have only done that if I was feeling stupidly reckless. And you… I don’t think you’d have coped well under Flynt’s unusual choice of weapon. It’s just…”

Ruby sprinkled some extra chocolate chips over the cookie batter and stuck it in the oven, turning the temperature up to 350. “I love Blake as much as I love Yang and I don’t wanna insult her fighting skills, but yeah. I don’t think she would have done too well in the finals round. She probably wouldn’t have wanted to fight Sun because he’s her friend, Pyrrha’s too hard to fight if you have a lot of metal in your gear like Blake does, and Penny is somewhat her friend. I hate fighting friends. And about the others… well. I dunno about them too much. I’ve met Eliáš once and he’s not too bad. And Mercury is Emerald’s partner, and he seems pretty decent.” She felt a flash of misgiving as she remembered Coco’s match against them, and how Coco had declared her hatred toward the both of them. “But the others from Atlas and Vacuo are unknown factors, and Yang handles the unknown better than Blake does, so that’s why I chose to send her on— it’s not just ’cause she’s my sister, you know.”

“You’re shrewd, you know that?” Weiss sat upright, narrowing her eyes. “I used to think Ozpin was an idiot for making you team leader, but it’s obvious why he did it. You’re the most tactical of all of us— except maybe Blake. But she doesn’t have the courage you do for being a leader.”

Ruby felt herself flush slightly, and she busied herself with cleaning up spots of batter that had spun off from the wooden spoon. “Thanks, Weiss, but where’s all this niceness coming from?”

She snorted. “Nice? Don’t get too ahead of yourself. The Vytal festival tends to make people either nice or snippy. Lucky for you, it’s the former for me.”

“I wouldn’t have thought you knew how to be nice when we first met.” Ruby looked up to find Weiss watching her with a gaze so unreadable and intense that it made her swallow and look away.

“Anyways,” Weiss said, turning around and resuming her glyph-work once more, “what do you think about upcoming events?”

“I dunno. I’m just really worried about whatever’s gonna happen in the future, after Qrow and Yang being all weird around me.” Ruby scraped the burnt parts off the pan and dumped them in the sink, turning on the faucet and running water over her butter-streaked hands. “They were acting all quiet and ominous. Especially recently.”

Weiss fixed Ruby with a rather stern look. “Of course they were,” she said. “Surely you’ve realized what’s going on?”
Ruby, slightly embarrassed, stood on her tiptoes to put the pan away, frowning. “Well, yeah! I’m not dumb, Weiss. I know they’re worried that something’s going to happen soon— something that’s bad. Qrow said so. He said that after we jailed Torchwick, crime-things are quiet— too quiet. He has a point, I guess, but part of me can’t help but think he’s just being paranoid. I love him, but is there any real evidence to back him up, besides crime being too quiet? Or am I not thinking like a Huntress, to say that?”

Weiss’s face creased with worry, and a pang of disconcertion flickered through their Bond. “I know my father and I’ve met Ironwood many times. They were allies,” she insisted. “Ozpin’s not an idiot. I seriously doubt he’d have let the General just use Vale as a resting point for an entire military. The kingdoms aren’t at war though— and Grimm invasions aren’t as bad, after we took out Torchwick as a threat. So that’s why I’m so uncertain as to what’s going to happen.”

“What do we even know something’s gonna happen at all? There’s no evidence. Besides Yang and Qrow worrying, and the General being… General-ly, I mean.”

“It’s not like I want there to be something coming, Ruby.” The faintest note of anger crept into Weiss’s tone. “Face it. We’re Huntress apprentices. We have a duty. We chose to be guardians.”

“I know we did.” Ruby sighed, swinging herself up to sit on the edge of the counter, sudden anxiety making her swing her feet back and forth like pendulum. “Obviously.” She paused. “Um, this is totally off topic, and random, but— do you think… listen, I’ve been meaning to ask… and I haven’t told Yang or Blake or anyone really…”

“Yes?”

“After we graduate Beacon.” She hesitated. “A lot of teams split up and go their own ways as solo Huntsmen and Huntresses. But… a lot of them stay together forever if they can. Like my parents did before my mom died and Yang’s mom… left.” She hedged around the word warily — everyone on the team knew of Raven and how she had abandoned Yang, but Ruby was willing to bet that Blake knew the most of all, seeing as Yang told her everything. “I think we ought to consider what we all want to do after we graduate.”

Weiss looked taken aback. “How long have you been thinking about this?”

“Um, well.” Ruby gave a sheepish grin. “A while, actually.”

Weiss was silent for a long time, so long that Ruby thought she wasn’t going to answer, before she looked up. “After graduation from Beacon, my father plans for me to return to Atlas, to work as a receptionist or a lone Huntress to keep Grimm and White Fang off the freight train deliveries of Dust. I never wanted to do that— I still don’t. But I don’t want to join the military like Winter… and I don’t want to be alone. I doubt if Blake does either. I know that you and your sister will never part ways, nor Blake and Yang… and if I could be a part of that— if we all could be— I’d love that.”

“What?” Ruby felt a dizzying rush of relief go through her. “Do you mean it?”

“I do.” Weiss sheathed her rapier, standing up and brushing down her skirt. “I’ve got to go. I have a test in Remnant Civil Studies tonight, and I’d like to get some reviewing done before I take it. I’ll see you around.”

She sashayed out, and as soon as the door slammed behind her, Ruby leaned back against the counter with a groan. Being around Weiss lately had become like having a lot of sugar— it left her buzzing with energy, but she knew it wasn’t good for her. Clearly, Weiss had only just begun to
reciprocate the feelings of deep friendship between the two of them. Anything more was highly unlikely, and Ruby knew it. She hadn’t pried into the Bond to find out the details of how Weiss felt about her— that felt like it would be an invasion of privacy— but still, it was pretty awful. Was this how Yang had felt before she and Blake had gotten together?

As if on cue, the door flew open again, and Yang trotted in, looking tired but cheerful. “Hey,” she greeted her with a huge yawn.

“Hey, sis.” Ruby bit off the edge of her cookie and wrinkled her nose, spitting it out. Amazingly, she had tasted better school food than that— no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t seem to get the fluffy sweetness that her dad always incorporated into whatever he baked. “Where’s Blake at?”

“I was with her in the library about an hour ago, but she went off with Sun’s team to go teach Neptune how to swim, as far as I know.” Yang flopped on the couch and inhaled deeply before breaking into a cough of disgust. “Smells like hell in here. What’ve you been doing?”

Ruby shoved the plate of burnt cookies behind her back and spoke around a mouthful of crumbs, waving a hand vaguely at the supply cabinet. “Cleaning, not cooking.”

“Yeah, and my name’s Neon Katt.” She gave a deep, heavy sigh, ruffling her hair. “That meeting did not go well at all. Atlas kids can be total pricks. Gives me an idea of whose ass I’d like to kick in the singles round, though.”

Ruby crossed her arms. “Oh really? What happened?”

“Penny was quiet, Pyrrha got snippy, Sun almost punched someone, Eliás got angry, Mercury was snarky, Lionel was a total jerk, and Robin was quiet.” Yang slid further down in her seat. “So basically like every day, except with an added dose of tension with the people we know. I don’t think Ozpin or Ironwood’ll be too pleased about it, though.”

“Oh well. Sometimes that’s how it goes. The singles round is in a couple days though— are you ready?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” Yang twisted around backward to lean over the couch, giving her a devilish grin. “But enough about me. Let’s talk about other stuff. I passed a certain ice-queen on my way in here. Things going well between you two?”

“Fine!” Ruby circled restlessly. “More than fine. Great. Weiss is great. She’s brilliant.”

“Cut the crap,” Yang said, looking distinctly put out at Ruby’s rambling. “You have a big-time crush on her, sis. At least when I was crushing hard on Blake I admitted it to myself. I mean really, it’s so obvious.”

Ruby flung the rest of her cookie in the sink. “You don’t need to tease me about it,” she said sulkily. “It’s not like it matters. When you were crushing on Blake, it was obvious she liked you back, anyways.”

“What, you think Weiss doesn’t like you?” Yang shook her head. “Damn, Ruby, do you need glasses or something? She likes you plenty.”

“You think so?” Her voice was higher with hope.

“I’m positive.” Yang stretched out before looking darkly at her gauntlets. “But I’d better go catch a few Z’s.” There was a hint of uncertainty in her tone that made Ruby do a double-take. “After all, I’ve got a big day soon.”
AN: This is probably my favorite chapter. For those who are curious/confused about the teams mentioned in the message earlier in the chapter: Team TEAL, Team EMNC, Team ROBN, and Team LYRE are not official team names in the RWBY-verse. Team EMNC is, as I’ve mentioned in a previous chapter, composed of Emerald, Mercury, Neo—though they call her Nigella, for purposes of their disguise—and Cinder. Team TEAL is an OC team of mine that I insert into the story as a little easter egg and Eliás himself is the dude from 3x6 in the singles-round lineup with the black hood, dark skin, and orange eyes—though I picture him as having curlier hair, a mischievous personality, and a shorter stature. TEAL is composed of Talos Ashcroft (Aforementioned in a previous chapter as well as in TYWOTW), Eliás Snowdon, Auburn Black, and Leah Green. Team PECE is Penny’s team, with P(Kenny) and C(iel). Team ROBN is the team of Robin, the second guy in the lineup shown in 3x6. Lastly, Team LYRE is Lionel’s team, and I picture Lionel as the Atlas man in the lineup in 3x6—he is the fourth guy in the lineup. Hope that cleared up any confusion. If you have questions, ask in the comments! Thanks!

PS. I didn’t intend for Lionel to turn out as such a shady character but I’ve long-since learned that my characters have an annoying habit of doing what they want, when they want. Reviews always welcome!
“No, really, I heard it’s a *great* carnival. Yang and Blake went the other day and she says it was awesome!”

Pyrrha suppressed a smile as she saw Ren let out an exaggerated sigh, turning to look at an overexcited Nora. “If it was Yang and Blake *together*, I hardly think their opinion of the fair would have been accurate, seeing as it’s unlikely they paid much attention to their surroundings.”

She gasped, mouth rounding to an ‘o’. “That’s an *inappropriate* implication, Ren!”

He gave a rare, crooked grin. “In any case, we’ll have to judge it for ourselves. Per your request.”

Pyrrha turned away from their conversation and glanced at Jaune, who was walking beside her, looking distinctly put-out at the chill in the air. “Are you sure this is smart?”

He shrugged with a little shiver. “Probably not, but the Vytal Festival doesn’t come to Vale often, and neither does a carnival, so we might as well go have fun while we can. It’ll be good for you to have some fun before the singles round, and Nora really wants to go, so who am I to argue? Besides,” he said with a laugh, “we all know you’re going to whoop butt in the final round. You said that no one looked particularly challenging, right?”

“With the exception of Yang and Ruby’s friend, Penny,” she answered, “no, not really. I’ve fought the others before— Sun and Eliás and Mercury— and won fairly easily. It’s the Vacuo student and the rude Atlas one that are unknown factors, but I’m not particularly concerned.”

He grinned. “‘Course you’re not. You’re a powerhouse!”

A warm glow spread through her chest, banishing the chill of the icy autumn air, and she bumped her shoulder with his. “Thanks.”

He trotted ahead to talk to Ren, and Nora fell back next to Pyrrha in a companionable silence. She looked around. The yellow curls of the leaves rattled to the ground like coins, swirling together and blowing away. Autumn was in full swing now, and Pyrrha was starting to regret her choice of armor. It looked nice and all, but it did absolutely nothing in the way of protection against the knifelike wind, and she shivered violently.

“Are you cold?” Nora asked. She looked gleeful when Pyrrha nodded ruefully. “Oh, that’s great. That’s good. Excellent, really! Listen, I know a way you can, you know, *warm up*…” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively in Jaune’s direction, and Pyrrha, with a mental sigh, shook her head reproachfully at Nora. “Hey, there’s nothing better— besides hot chocolate with a double dose of caffeine, of course— to warm you up than a good ol’ snuggle buddy! Believe me, I’d know!”

“You *know*? But Ren doesn’t strike me as the snuggly type.” Pyrrha glanced ahead to where Jaune and Ren were walking side by side, bickering animatedly about some combat tactic. “I can’t see him snuggling with you.”
Nora’s eyebrows drew down in a deep, tragic pout. “Well, no, he hasn’t, especially since the hair incident, which is completely ridiculous, because he looked spectacular. At least, that’s what I thought, don’t you agree?”

“You shaved $R + N$ in his scalp. Of course he was upset. That’s about as far from a subtle hint as I can imagine—”

“— and he still didn’t pick up on it! I’ll have to try something a little more obvious.” Nora scowled at the ground, and Pyrrha made a mental note to keep all the shavers from the boy’s side of the bathroom in their dorm under lock and key.

“Please don’t. Ren worries about you. In fact, we all do. No need to go causing more trouble.”

“Eh, things could be worse, you know, in the ‘causing trouble’ department,” she retorted, ever chipper. “I mean, I found out my semblance by sticking a metal fork into an electrical outlet. It’s a great party trick. Popular with the kids, you know.” She skipped ahead before turning around with a diabolical grin. “Anyways, so how’s stuff going for you in the romance department?”

Pyrrha shivered, not from the frigid wind. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nora looked at her like she was an idiot. “Don’t act like you’re not stupidly in love with noodle-boy up there,” she said, waving a hand at Jaune. Pyrrha clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Hush!” she hissed. “If he hears you—”

“And turns out to like you back— then things get real interesting,” Nora said with a huge wink.

She sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead. “Jaune has always been inexpressibly normal, and perhaps even ignorant, in others eyes,” she said, “but his normalcy makes him special in mine, and he isn’t ignorant. He can get sidetracked, but his heart is true.”

Nora squealed. “That’s so cute!”

“What’s cute?” Pyrrha’s heart stopped as Jaune and Ren glanced back at the two girls, looking confused. Nora, however, came through, smiling beatifically at them both.

“Oh, nothing,” she said airily. “Just some of the contestants from the tournament.”

Jaune grinned. “Who exactly do you think is cute from the tournament?”

“Pyrrha, of course,” Nora said. “I mean, have you looked at her?” Pyrrha noticed a dark red flush stain his cheeks, but he covered it up by laughing nervously.

“Well, yeah, of course I have,” he blustered, “but in terms of beauty, I don’t think we should be judging—”

“Nora, that’s completely wrong,” Ren interrupted, cutting off whatever Jaune had been about to say. “Personally, the best-looking of them all is definitely Sun.”

“That's biased, and incorrect. You’re just saying that ‘cause he has abs,” Nora fired back.

“On an aesthetic level, he’s definitely the best-looking. Blond hair, broad shoulder, open shirt, and all that. He simply a high-grade version of Jaune.”

“Hey!” Jaune protested at the exact same moment that Nora howled in laughter. “Ren! What are we now, Team HOMO? I thought that was Team RWBY’s role, not us.” She sniffed in fake
haughtiness, brushing past them both.

Pyrrha choked back a laugh. “Don’t let Weiss or Yang hear that, Nora.”

“Like those bunch of softies could stop me! I’m a power machine and they’re just cuddling up to their partners,” she said.

“Yang made it to the singles round. That isn’t exactly soft.”

Before she could say anything else, the unmistakable voice of Professor Goodwitch cut sharply through the air, stopping them all in their tracks. “Miss Nikos?”

Why is Professor Goodwitch outside? I haven't ever seen her outside class hours, and I don't think I'm in trouble. Her mind rapidly flying over any incidents she could have caused and coming up blank, she frowned. With a hesitance in her step as if she were about to step on a landmine, Pyrrha turned around. “Yes?” she hedged warily. Glynda didn’t usually bother the students outside of class hours, unless they were in trouble or… unless they were in trouble.

“Don't look so terrified,” she said sternly. "Headmaster Ozpin wishes to speak with you tomorrow at ten in the morning, and he expects punctuality. The meeting will be over before the singles round begins, so you don't need to worry."

Pyrrha blinked, exchanging an uncertain glance with Jaune. “But I have my Remnant Civil Studies class at ten, Professor.”

Her green eyes shadowed with something Pyrrha couldn't understand. "He shall inform Professor Oobleck you will not be present. You will not receive a grade for the day's work, and it will not impede your final marks."

"What are you doing?" Nora hissed, nudging her. “Go on, say yes, before she blasts you into cinders.”

“O… okay,” Pyrrha stammered. “I'll see him then, I guess. Thank you, Professor.”

“Excellent,” Goodwitch said briskly, before turning and striding off.

“Any idea what that’s about?” Ren asked.

“No,” she said uneasily, “but I guess I’ll find out tomorrow.”

Adam

It had been weeks since Cinder had visited, and Adam knew that when she did come next, she would be here to check upon how his forces were swelling so they could attack Beacon alongside the Grimm and Torchwick. With the numbers of new Faunus joining the White Fang dwindling
and dwindling, Adam was acutely aware of how terrible her wrath would be if her needs weren’t met. This many Faunus were a lot, but they weren’t much, when you compared them against the apprentice Huntsmen and Huntresses— and the grown ones.

Tossing and turning, he pondered the situation, thinking over and over possible solutions until he realized he was thinking in circles. Giving up the endeavor, he closed his eyes and banished the thoughts to the farthest corners of his mind.

Sleep did not come for a long time, but finally he drifted out of that half-awake, misty realm between consciousness and not-consciousness, and fell into a deep dark.

The first thing he became aware of was a deep, crushing coldness. Adam had never felt so cold. He felt as though if he moved at all, he would shatter like a delicate film of ice, and the very air seemed to be driven from his lungs with a slow, withering chill. He wasn’t afraid of the dark, but this had a menacing, downright horrible feel to it, and it didn’t seem like his ally— it seemed like his enemy, everyone’s enemy. Gradually, he became aware of a shape separating itself from the stillness and slowly walking towards him.

It was Blake. She stopped inches from him, silent as the shadows, and he watched her coldly. Any fondness, any semblance of possession he might have felt towards her had long since withered away. “So you are here. Are you finally ready to face what’s right for the Faunus?”

Blake stepped forward, cold eyes raking over him, her expression as hard as stone. The dream had stolen any sense of detail from her face, and he felt like he was looking into an ever-changing, shifting mask, much like his own. “You had your chance to talk ethics before you ran me out. For it was your fault. This has gone far beyond wanting equality, Adam. Now, you are merely out for revenge on mankind itself.”

He narrowed his eyes. “So maybe that’s right. Even if it is, you, of all people, have little chance of swaying what is right for the Faunus. I am the leader of the White Fang now. Why do you want to speak with me if it’s so futile?”

She simply watched him, pricked feline ears twitching with irritation. “It wasn’t my idea, I assure you. It was a matter of fate. You see, Adam, many souls believe in a single ‘line’ of destiny—a direct road through life, shaped by Fate’s will. That is not the case, of course. A person’s destiny is made up of many roads, and while they might align at distinct points, or weave back and forth between the stars, they are not forged by the likes of Fate, and as such it cannot hope to alter their course; only warn the people of Remnant of their presence.”

She paused and drew her hand through the air, two images flowering in the wake of her movement. One image depicted a tall, broad-shouldered Faunus boy with sturdy features and gleaming dark eyes. His face was peaceful and content, and behind him, a sea of Faunus and humans intermingled peacefully, lights shining in their eyes. Beside the boy was a dark-haired girl with amber eyes, and beside her was another girl with hair as light as spun gold. The image seemed to radiate a sense of warmth and calm, like sitting next to a hearth, and he could catch the faintest whiff of honeysuckle and sunshine, of a place where he could run free and equal…

The other image drew his gaze like a raw, open wound. It shone with an unnatural light, red and glowing. He saw fire and blood, swirling smoke and corpses of humans and Faunus alike. He saw lights extinguished as darkness swept down from on high. He saw lightning split a purpling sky and he saw Blake, her eyes huge and full of grief in her pale face as she cradled with girl with gold hair, and his stomach surged with nausea as he saw that one of the girl’s arms was merely a bloody stump. He saw himself, blood staining him head to toe, and watching the bodies around him without a shred of remorse in his eyes.
He saw himself, dead on the ground, a black blade sunken deep in his chest. Blake stood over him. Her hands were black with blood - with his blood, and with a jolt, he realized that the blade in his chest was Gambol Shroud, her own weapon. She was crying, and he saw her sink to her knees, weeping over his dead body.

And he didn’t feel a thing.

Blake’s voice brought him back, ringing with clarity.

“These lines are yours. Soon, they will converge to form two distinct paths. One will lead to mankind's destruction if you so choose; the other, your salvation. That is why I’m here — because your wicked plots may someday save two lives, if you make the right choice. Two lives: one life who you changed forever; my own, and a life that you have touched in ways unbeknownst to you yet; my partner's. Your ultimate sacrifice may save us. You have the potential to atone for your sins, Adam. And so — I’ll give you a warning.

“With this final warning, I give you the reminder to remember betrayal, Adam, you who I once dared to call my partner.” She was no longer in front of him, and her breath hissed horribly in his ear, but he could not turn around to look at her. “I give you the memory of hatred and pain, for these are your legacies. Think on what you have seen tonight, and remember the hot sting of a friend turned bitter enemy, the one you trusted to be a partner outed as a soul who cares more for glory than the lives of his campmates. Remember the fury as you realize that the one you loved was nothing more than a greedy liar. Remember this pain when you choose your future path, Adam, and remember me.”

With a flash of light as brilliant as blood, she was gone.

He turned and the dream changed.

He was standing on a vast cliff, looking down at a vast sea of Faunus marching across a barren plain. The light from the sliver of the sun was red and the sky was choked with smoke, creating a grim aura, and the masks of his men gleamed listlessly. The White Fang never crafted new masks, he knew; they only pulled them from the fallen souls who had given their lives in service, but they never told new members that. If they knew of the blood that had once stained their paths, they would never walk it.

Suddenly, he became aware of a huddled, unmoving mass blocking his path. He bent down and ran a gloved finger along the motionless shape. It came away sticky and black with blood, and Adam’s eyes went to slits as he saw it was Julian, the peace-loving leader of the White Fang that had preceded Ayran.

Julian’s eyes suddenly snapped open. Adam dropped him with a sharp cry of surprise. The former leader’s eyes were black as night, the irises and the whites completely dark, and empty as tunnels. “Julian?” Adam growled, and the leader fell limply lifeless once more, a thin trickle of blood spilling from his slack mouth. Adam tossed the body away in disgust. “You always were weak, Julian… always soft on humans, soft on invaders. You never knew that we must mark our history in the blood of our enemies to ever gain ground. You and Ayran both were too flawed, but I am different. I shall rule them! I will bring us to a glorious new dawn!”

Beware, the wind seemed to whisper. Beware, Adam Taurus. The price you must pay for glory may outweigh the result.

Adam spun around as a shadow fell over him, turning the light to shadow in an instant. Ayran’s twisted, hulking figure loomed in front of him, blotting out the light of the stars. His eyes shone
down with the light of blood-hunger, and as Adam watched, blood began to pour from his skin, gleaming red. Adam stared up without fear.

“You are dead,” he hissed. “You let yourself be murdered by that traitorous, spineless piece of scum! Blake killed you!”

The figure, as he watched, shrank and shrank, until it was nothing more than a wisp of smoke, as insubstantial as wind, before vanishing.

He felt the world shudder around him before light blazed up in bloodred colors and he —

woke up, panting. There was a sheen of sweat on his forehead, and he tore off his mask, rubbing his face. The scars over his eyes twinged with memory of an echoing pain, and he let out a long, low breath. He could feel his heart throbbing in the veins on his wrist, and he scowled at the corners of the room. The sunbeams only reached far above his head, and down here, it was dark and gloomy.

Was that a dream? It felt so real. Wherever she is, Blake must be alive, living her traitorous life. Does she forgive me? For what? For wanting a better world free of the parasite that mankind is? There is nothing to forgive. Only revenge against what she did to me. That is all that matters, for her to know. She took everything from me. Ayran, the life we had, herself, the White Fang’s respect, how it used to be. She took it all.

“You may have forgotten what you swore once to me, but I will never forgive you,” he hissed, gripping his sword, staring into the darkness, which seemed to be full of twisting, writhing shadows. “You betrayer.”

Two light knocks on the door interrupted his train of thought, and he he snapped his head towards the sound, wondering irritably who was coming to call on him this early in the morning. His men were at work from before dawn until after dusk, but he was not to be disturbed until the sun was at its peak in the sky — so why was someone knocking on his door when the dawn had just barely peeked its head over the horizon?

He readjusted his mask, sheathed his sword, and stalked towards the door, flinging it open. A little deer Faunus stood there, fairly shaking in her uniform, her terrified green eyes widening up at him. “I have a m—message, s— sir. I’m very s— sorry to disturb you, but there’s an important v— visitor here that wants to see y— you.”

“Yes, get on with it,” he snapped, and she shrunk back. “Who is it?”

“C— Cinder Fall, s— sir. In the main hall. She l— looks pretty angry, I might hurry—”

He brushed past her without a word, and she let out a terrified squeak. Feeling a pang of utter disdain, he left her there, and marched down the winding warehouse hallway. As he went, he looked around at his organization, his people, with a pang of satisfaction. The warehouse was filling up every day as more Faunus flocked to join the rebellion — flocked to join real, organized power, with a solid goal and a plan.

Of course, with Cinder treating the lives of them so callously, his surety in everything was dwindling…

He shook off those dangerous sorts of thoughts, and resumed watching his inheritance from Ayran with satisfaction. This warehouse was the main one, of course, connected to several smaller units, and it was by far the grandest. Adam had done a lot since that thieving little coward Blake had
murdered Ayran; he had renovated and perfected and made the White Fang so much greater: a seamless, well-oiled machine. He had gotten rid of that stupid throne of bones. He had abolished Ayran’s foolhardy promotion system, and established his own unique way where everyone could rise to a higher rank, provided they fought hard to earn it. His people obeyed his every word, predicted his moods, followed his orders to the tee — things couldn’t be better. He passed one sector where a higher-up member, a wolf Faunus with two long white fangs, was training the newest lackeys, and nodded in approval as the wolf smashed a puny bird Faunus into the ground. A roar of glee rose up from the spectators.

As he strode along, people hurried about their business, carting around Dust crates, weaponry, and the like, and he smiled. This was power: seeing people following your orders and bowing to you — a real, tangible control. As he passed, members deferred to him, murmuring their good wishes and blessings, and then scurrying out of the way.

*Just as they should be.*

He emerged at last into the main floor of the warehouse, where high-up windows allowed weak, dusty sunlight to slant across the earthen floor. The air in here had become colder since autumn had taken a sharp turn from ‘end of summer’ to ‘beginning of winter’, and you could feel the chill — especially now, as the weak dawn sunlight did nothing in the way of warmth.

He stopped, feeling a sharp warmth pass over his skin in exact contradiction to his thoughts, and turned to look at the shadows clustering near the edge of the warehouse.

Cinder was waiting for him there, her eyes on him — that must have caused the sickly warmth — and just as the little deer had predicted, she had a very ugly look on her face that made his blood run cold. Cinder never was in a good mood, exactly, but he certainly preferred her usual icy demeanor to this brooding, storm-cloud rage of a mood.

At least when she was cold, it meant that she was satisfied. An angry Cinder was an unpredictable Cinder — and he hated unknown factors. Not that it was about to scare him. He didn’t get scared, especially of a human, even if Cinder was an entirely different kind of human.

*She’s a snake,* he thought furiously. *A manipulative, cold, calculating snake, striking in the exact right spots to get what she wants. Typical human trash...*

He went across to her, just slowly enough to give her reason to be annoyed, and stopped. “My lady Fall,” he said, letting his voice drag out into a condescending drawl. “I trust all is well? Why are you visiting here, and especially without your little... friends?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You may have friends, Faunus, but I merely have allies and patience.”

“Mercury and Emerald, then,” he elaborated, not bothering to conceal the note of scorn in his voice. “Surely they’re off doing something to aid you, if they’re your allies and nothing more, other than gallivanting about for their own amusement?”

She narrowed her eyes. “You may have friends, Faunus, but I merely have allies and patience.”

“Surely they’re off doing something to aid you, if they’re your allies and nothing more, other than gallivanting about for their own amusement?”

Her eyes flashed. “They are doing their jobs, which is far more than you can claim. The war is upon us in less than two weeks time, Taurus,” she said softly, before sweeping her eyes around the warehouse at the bustling Faunus. “Ironwood has every scrap of his military patrolling Vale, Ozpin and that cunning Huntsman of his are always on the lookout, and despite my plans, nothing can be simply left to chance, because chance often spoils even the most carefully laid of plots. The Grimm Wyvern won’t wake for this little amount of bloodshed, you know. It will take more brute force than this to ruin both Vale and Beacon. It shall only wake when suffering, loss and pain, grief and fear, are at their peak — when the blood that soaks into the ground is so strong that it can wake the
dead. I come here, expecting to see more, and this pathetic show is all you have to offer me?”

“It is.” He met her gaze evenly, but fury worked its way through his chest. “But that’s through no fault of mine. We would have many more Faunus were it not for that ginger fool, Torchwick. He panicked; he started the train weeks too early; Faunus died, and we lost the advantage of the subterranean Grimm as well as over two hundred Faunus, and Ayran, who died— was murdered— in the tunnels.”

“Ayran was never an advantage,” she snapped, seeming more on edge than usual. “If you prove to be following down the same path as your predecessor— you are of no use to me, Taurus, if you are not up to complacency. Remember that.”

“And you are of no use to me,” he retorted sharply, “if you do not give me what I want. You’re using my men, some of whom will die, for a human-made war, and I’m letting you—”

Cinder smoothly raised her hand, quick as the darting strike as a snake, and made an odd twisting motion with it. As she did so, a white-hot brand of fire wrapped around Adam’s throat, making him choke, and it vanished just as quickly, leaving a burn that screamed in howling pain. He gagged, gasping for air as the pain dulled to a stinging throb that was equally unbearable.

“You would do better,” she murmured, “to hold your tongue, my little ox. And to remember whom, exactly, is doing the letting in this scenario.”

Eyes streaming and his heart screaming for vengeance right then, right away, he looked up, gasping for breath. She had made him look like a fool. She would pay for that, too. “So perhaps I don’t have enough men to satisfy your cause, Fall. What of it?”

She tilted her head, and her smile was enough to make even him feel the slightest chills of fear. “Perhaps a little reminder is in order, Taurus,” she mused slowly, “a reminder of what you may gain, should you heed my wants, and a reminder of what you will lose, should you disregard them.” She began to pace, heeled boots clicking against the stone-and-earth floor. “Let us imagine a likely scenario in which you satisfy my needs. Picture this: it is the end of the Vytal tournament, and the fools are celebrating, thinking of their fragile peace, and gloating of how they have conquered the wild Remnant and made it civil. But then they get too lazy, and that’s where it all begins to topple. The Spring Maiden’s daughter cripples Mercury. As a result, kingdom morale plummets, attracting every single Grimm within a twenty-mile radius. They shatter the defenses; Ironwood unleashes his military; the robots get hijacked and turn to our purposes; everything descends into a beautiful, glorious chaos. The Spring Maiden’s child remains in her room, isolated due to the overwhelming hatred of the kingdom, directed towards her. Her partner— Blake Belladonna, was it?— travels to the room, only to be intercepted by you, and you shall kill her. Is that right?”

He narrowed his eyes. “How could you possibly know that?”

She lifted her chin. “I make it a priority to know the motives of my allies. Yours is vengeance. Hardly a complex thing.”

He ground his teeth together. “And the worst scenario?”

“You do not provide me with enough men; Belladonna gets away; we fail; you do not exact your revenge.” She looked at him with cold eyes. “Let that be your motivator, Taurus. I will return within a quarter moon’s time. Do not fail me then.”

Then, in a flickering flash of fire, she was gone.
Chapter XII - In Love and War

*Yang*

“Hey. Hey, wake up.”

“Ughhhhhh.” Yang groaned, blinking up groggily as a hand shook her shoulder. Weiss was standing above her, holding a mug of something that steamed in white curls in the chilly air of the dorm. “Why did you have to do that? It’s eight o’clock, that’s way too early to be up.”

“Normally— for you, anyways— it is. But you’ve got your big day today, remember? The singles round. We all need to be in the stadium by one, so I figured I’d wake you up earlier so you could have some downtime and be very awake.”

Yang looked at the mug in her hand. “Is that tea?”

That tugged a smile out of Weiss. “No. I know you’re not Blake. Not coffee either— we don’t want to get you too hyper and have you crash before you need the energy. It’s hot chocolate. Whip cream on top too.”

“Give it,” Yang said fervently, taking it and downing a sip. It was perfect— not too sweet and not too thin, but creamy and with the perfect amount of thick chocolate, and with a dollop of whip cream. “God, I love you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but Blake and Ruby made it, not me. Blake told me to tell you to be dressed by ten and meet her in the library. I’m off— Pyrrha wants to spar me right now for an hour before she has some meeting with Ozpin, at ten, and then our team and hers are going to head down to the Amity Colosseum together.”

“Thanks for planning my day, mother.” Yang set the mug down and wiped a mustache of chocolate off her top lip. “Better go meet Pyrrha. And I’d leave all your metal accessories behind, if I were you.”

Weiss glanced at her wrist in consideration before nonchalantly removing a chain-link bracelet. Yang gave her a coy grin.

“I haven’t seen you wear that bracelet before. It looks pretty. Who’s the fella that gave it to you?”

Weiss turned a shade of pink. “Ruby did.”

“So that’s the way the wind is blowing!” Yang said, delighted. “Well, if you must know, you have my blessing, Weiss.”

The pink color in Weiss's cheeks strengthened as she fiddled with the hilt of Myrtenaster. “What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said dryly. “Ruby plus you equals— well, what happened with Blake and I? It’s just taking you a while longer, that’s all.”

“I’m leaving,” Weiss said with as much dignity as she could muster, and she turned, all but fleeing the room. Yang called after her, unable to resist one last tease.

“If you see my sister, remember to tell her I said hello before you do anything else!”
It was ten o’clock at last, and Yang was dressed for combat. Her vest was secure around her shoulders, her gauntlets inactive but ready to spring into action, her boots freshly polished and wiped for traction.

That wasn’t to say she didn’t look good, too— she was going to meet Blake, after all.

She found Blake in the library, and to her surprise and pleasure, there was someone already sitting with her. Yang had always privately been of the opinion that Blake needed to socialize more, seeing as they’d be at Beacon for the next three years, and it seemed she was following up on that advice. She also recognized the kid: it was Talos, Eliás’s partner. As she walked up, she could hear him chattering to Blake.

“… so he’s like, freaking out or whatever, he came back to the dorm and was like ‘oh my god, Talos, what the hell am I gonna do, she’s going to flatten me like a bug and then stomp on me, I’m screwed.’”

Yang stopped at the edge of the table and sat in the chair next to Blake, giving her and Talos a greeting. “Who’s freaking out about what?”

He grinned. “Eliás. He’s being a weenie because he thinks he might have to fight you today. His whining was getting on my last nerve, so I knocked him out by putting three sleeping pills in his grape soda.”

“That’s very paradoxal, and I’m gratified that I strike so much fear into the hearts of men.”

“Eliás isn’t a man. He’s a boy. A weak boy, too.”

She laughed, and turned to Blake. “Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

Blake smiled. “Ruby insisted on adding whip cream and some chocolate chips to the top.”

Talos stretched. “Right, well, I’m off. Eliás ought be up in one hour and I’ve got to give him a pep talk. You two lovebirds don’t forget the time you have to be in the arena.”

“It was nice to talk to you,” Blake said at the same time that Yang retorted, “Says the guy who basically drugged his partner.” Talos laughed before trotting off.

“Guilty as charged, he is,” Yang said, turning back to Blake. “God, I’m nervous.”


“Anyways,” Blake continued, “I know you’re nervous. I’ve been feeling it through the Bond all day. Talos asked me if I had an ant’s hill down my pants because I was squirming so much.”

“There’s a downside of the Bond,” Yang sighed, resting her cheek on her palm. “You get the bad along with the good.” She looked up curiously. “I’ve always wondered,” she said, “ever since you brought it up— ever since Raven and my father— how do you break a Bond?”

Blake’s knuckles whitened on the table— she didn’t look suspicious of Yang asking, but she did look sad. “You… you speak words. Just like how you make a Bond. Except opposite.”
“Can you tell me what they are?” She realized that sounded more suspicious, so she quickly explained. “Not that I want to break ours—trust me, I’d tell you if I did, but I love you and I meant what I said when I said I wanted to be Bonded to you, and that we were forever—but I’m just curious: what did my father go through when his broke? What did you?”

Blake sighed. “I can’t say it aloud, obviously,” she explained, ”because I don’t want to activate it. I’ll write it down. But it’s unwillingly that I do it. These are words that were never meant to be spoken, let alone written—and crueler words were never spoken.”

She picked up a pen that was lying on the desk and pulled up a sheaf of parchment. With a somber glance at Yang, she began to write.

After she had finished writing it, Yang scanned the paper. There it was, looking somehow very inverted and wrong in Blake’s neat, cramped handwriting; as the words of making a Bond were comforting and warm, the words of breaking a Bond gave off an oddly sinister, chilly air.

“I renounce everything I have ever told you. I revoke our Bond. For in promises broken and vows deceived, this Bond stands for a trust that no longer exists. In Death, all Bonds are split; in Life, a fire has been extinguished, and this connection stands no longer. I revoke the soul I share and rescind words of hope that were spoken; I give up the recourse of that which a Bond entails. For though it is in passing that we achieve immortality, living forever is a dark path. No one may live eternal, so it is that lingering, old ghosts are resurrected. I take back my soul and by my own shoulder protect my own. I offer this up now; this ossified Bond I shatter, never to be renewed again.”

“That’s awful,” Yang said with a shudder. An image formed in her mind: Blake, crumpling on top of a freight car as the agony of a breaking Bond tore through her. “Bonds are forever. Or they should be. Why would there be a thing to make them... breakable?”

“In some cases the relationship becomes not one of love, but of control and fear.” Blake voice was bleak, eyes cold. Yang wondered if she was thinking of Adam. “Or in others... sometimes, people simply fall out of love, and no longer wish to be Bonded.”

“That’s so sad,” Yang murmured. “We’re different. You know that, right?”

Blake looked at her. Their faces were close, and as easily as one might take a breath, Blake was kissing her, fingers winding into her hair. It was soft and sweet and chaste, and Yang felt her nerves tingle with more energy then the cup of hot chocolate had been able to yield.

“Of course I know it.” Blake drew back, her hands settling on Yang’s shoulders. They were curled into each other now. “And I know you’ll be brilliant today.”

Just as she was leaning in to kiss Blake again, Yang’s Scroll lit up with one new message from an unknown number, followed by four more... in all caps. Grumbling, she reluctantly pulled away from Blake and opened up the messages.

- HEY GIRL!!! :DDDD

- THOUGHT I’D LET U KNOW
- SINCE THE MATCH IS TODAY (AND I GET TO KICK LIONEL’S ASS, DUH)

- MY TEAM PLUS SUN BC HE’S LIT, ARE MEETING AT LIL’ WONG’S FOR THEIR BREAKFAST BUFFET RN FOR SOME PRE-MATCH GRUB

- IDK IF U WANNA GO BUT YEAH! LEMME KNOW!

“Who is this,” Yang said, “and why do they not understand the concept of punctuation, and lowercase letters?”

Blake rolled her eyes. “Says the girl who quad texts pictures of Pepe to the team group chat at all odd hours of the night.”

“Touche, my feline friend.” Grinning at her, Yang shot back a response on her Scroll.

- who are u, how’d you get my number, and why do u not understand the concept of proper texting?

Another response swiftly followed.

- aw, i’m seriously wounded that i’m not at the top of your contacts. :( it’s your fav smol boi eliás! and i got your number from my teammate, amber! she has the numbers of, and i quote, ‘every girl in this school who’s hotter than a july day on steroids’.

- she knows u aren’t single tho! so ur safe :D

Yang looked at Blake, who looked torn between amusement and the slightest hint of jealousy. “You wanna go?”

She shivered. “After trying to teach Neptune to swim and seeing Sun’s team’s persuasion tactics, I’m not sure I do. But I’ll go if you go.”

Yang shot back a text of agreement and glanced at the time—it was 10:17 now—before turning off her Scroll and turning back to Blake, who was just watching her.

“What?” she asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Blake’s head tilted. “Do you know when I first realized I had feelings for you?”

“Uhhhhh, was it yesterday? I hope not.” Yang laughed as Blake’s ears flattened. “I don’t know, I guess I haven’t thought about it. It kinda just happened. I thought you realized it when you kissed
me, but I guess not, now that you ask, so when?”

“It was a long, long time ago.” Blake held her hands as gently as if they were something precious. “When we were walking by the docks just before we met Sun for the first time— do you remember? The sky was clear blue, the air was all salt and coldness, the wind was blowing the waves against the shore, and Ruby and Weiss were walking ahead of us— and you turned to look at me and I realized. I realized that there were some things in life you couldn’t control, tragedies and heartbreaks and loss. But there were also good things beyond our power to change— like falling in love with someone.”

Realizing that the relative emptiness of the library was the perfect environment for this, Yang leaned forward, capturing Blake’s lips with her own, before pulling back as she realized something. “Actually,” Yang said, “that means you had a crush on me before I had a crush on you because I didn’t have feelings for you until the disaster that was a food fight.”

She rolled her eyes. “Technicalities.”

“Well, miss-romantic, technicalities aside, we’d better go meet Eliás before he thinks we got caught up doing unspeakable things to each other in the library.” Grinning at Blake’s expression, Yang got up and trotted out the door.

---

*Eliás*

Anyway here’s an Eliás chapter as a bonus, because I need to add more words, it’s nice to see another POV observing Blake and Yang, and he’s adorable. Refresher: Eliás’s team is Team TEAL (Talos, Eliás, Amber, and Leah.)

Eliás, plate crammed with muffins, boiled eggs, waffles, and grapes, slid into the huge booth his team had reserved. Leah, over in a corner, picked at a little bowl of oatmeal. Talos and Amber had twin plates of classic breakfast: bacon, eggs, and toast.

“Your plate doesn’t go together,” Talos said as he sat down. “You need protein and carbs to give you energy for your match, not this crap.” Talos slammed down a protein drink in front of him, and removed the grapes from his plate and ate them himself, eliciting a huff of disapproval from Eliás.

“The food here is shit.” Amber poked unenthusiastically at a plate of bacon, scrambled eggs, and limp toast, though privately, Eliás thought she was just saying it to have something to complain about. “When are the little buggers going to arrive, anyways?”

Talos stretched, lean arms stretching over his head. “At their leisure, I suppose. Eliás?” He turned a bright gold gaze on his partner. “Are you feeling well for the match?”

“Give me a heavily carbonated grape soda and some chocolate cereal and I’ll be ready to fly to the freaking moon, man.”

“Unless you fight Yang,” Amber said flatly, examining her nails. “Then you get your ass beat into
“Anyone who fights Yang gets their ass kicked,” Sun said brightly around a mouthful of banana pancakes.

“Helllooooo!”

The four of them turned around in perfect unison as Yang’s bright voice rang out through the little diner. She made her way through the crowd, trailing a tired-looking Blake behind her. But then again, Eliás thought, Blake always looked tired. Looking put-together and prepared in a way Eliás knew he didn’t.

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“Helllooo!”
familiar with it, so allow my colleague and I to explain the rules.”

“Thank you, Port,” Oobleck said. “It’s quite simple! The primary rule, and the most critical, is that another rule has been struck it out, as it were. In the previous rounds, teams and partners that originated from the same combat school were not permitted to fight each other. Now, however, it is entirely possible for two Hunters from the same school to meet each other in combat— Beacon versus Beacon, Atlas versus Atlas, and so on. Secondly in the singles round, much like real life, we allow our Hunters no time to prepare. Mimicking the hands-on stress of combat, they only find out who their opponent is at the same time you do. However, to allow visibility for our viewers, the biome-aspect of the arena has been retracted. There is just the opponents, and gray tile they fight on!”

“We now begin the randomized process to select our first fight. Everyone give a big round of applause for our first duo!” Port finished, pressing a button. Up on the big screen, a blur of photos shot past, and Yang’s heart slammed in her throat. She was confident and all, but she did not want to be the first contester to fight. All her doubts came rushing back all of a sudden, and it was all she could do not to look like a total wimp— she was on national television, after all.

As if some deity had heard her prayer, the photos began to slow and stop, and Yang let out a breath of relief as she saw Sun’s photo up on the screen, followed by his name, and the second photo slowed and stopped to reveal Eliás. She glanced over to see Sun and Eliás giving each other appraising glances.

“It appears we have our combatants! Sun Wukong of Haven and Eliás Snowdon of Beacon Academy, please step to the center of the arena. May all other combatants please exit the arena floor to the marked off seats in the student section!”

Yang gratefully joined the line consisting of Pyrrha, Penny, Mercury, Lionel, and Robin, following them as they briskly trotted across the gray tile, marching up a flight of stairs to a row of eight plush arena seats. She took her seat at the end of the row, letting out a relieved sigh, and training her eyes on the middle of the arena floor. It was a good view— exactly level with the circle of gray tile that was slowly rising up in the air, framed with white spotlights— and she could see Eliás and Sun circling each other warily. Sun didn’t take a lot seriously, but that didn’t show in his fighting skills— he was actually a pretty good Huntsman, which was evident now, seeing as he had made it to the singles round, and held the fort down during the four versus four round when Neptune had chickened out. She honestly didn’t know who was going to win this fight.

“The match will commence in three… two… one!”

No sooner had the last word left his mouth then had Eliás sprang forward quicker than the pounce of a cat. Yang caught a glimpse of his weapon as he pulled it from underneath his gear, and she suppressed a smile: his weapon was an electrum whip, and the hilt was made of a dagger. That would be hard to fight, if you weren’t good at staying on your feet.

As the fight progressed, Yang realized that her earlier prediction of Eliás being weak was completely off. As soon as Sun spun his staff around to sweep the scrawny boy’s legs out from under him, Eliás flung out his hand, and a dark gold shockwave rippled out, sending Sun flying backward. Up on the board, Sun’s Aura dropped by thirteen, and Eliás retracted his hand with a crooked little smile.

“And it appears we have an early use of semblance, Barty!” Port called out, seeming surprised. “For those viewers who aren’t familiar with our Beacon upperclassman Mr. Snowdon, his semblance originates from the idea of an earthquake. It sends what resembles an electrical shock radiating out, causing any who encounter it to stumble or even take a terrible fall, temporarily
losing the use of their legs— when they aren’t prepared, that is. Perhaps not the most gaudy of semblances, but certainly hardy and effective! Oh, and it appears Mr. Wukong has recovered. The fight resumes!” He lapsed into a tense silence.

Eliás charged towards Sun, his whip snaking out and trying to catch hold of Sun’s torso. The audience roared as Sun backflipped over Eliás, deflecting his strike, and kicked him in the back, making him faceplant. Eliás Aura meter dropped by nine. Now it was 87 to 91, but they still had a long way to go.

As Eliás regained his feet, they really went at it hammer and tongs, locking together in a flurry of jabs and swipes, Sun’s staff spinning in a red blur and Eliás whip striking out like flashes of lightning, so rapid that even Oobleck couldn’t keep up commentary with it, before disengaging to feint charges. Now Eliás was at 86. Sun was still at 87.

As they watched, Eliás’s whip flicked out like the tongue of a snake and curled around Sun’s ankles, making him crash to the ground. His Aura dropped by seventeen. A low murmur of ‘ouch’ ran through the arena, and Port mentioned something about hard hits, but Yang couldn’t hear it, she was so concentrated on the fight at hand. *Maybe I can learn some tips…*

As the whip flicked towards Sun, who was still on his knees, clearly in pain, he looked up through narrowed eyes, and pressed his palms together. Two transparent, ghostly copies of his own body crouched in front of him, taking the hit and shattering into golden shards.

“And now our other contestants semblance is revealed,” Oobleck announced. “Our very own Sun Wukong, leader of team SSSN, has a unique semblance— named after himself, in fact. Via Sun causes two copies of himself to appear, both of which may do whatever he wishes: fight or take a hit, but only for five seconds at a time.”

The semblance had been cool, but it had chopped Sun’s Aura down by twenty-eight, and now he was now at 42 while Eliás still had 86. That was where things began to speed up for real— Sun’s staff snapped in half, forming what Yang fondly called ‘gun-chucks’, while Eliás deflected his blurred strikes fast as he was firing them, until all she could see was a storm of red and gold that both boys vanished into, the sound of yells and gunfire emitting from the center. Both their Auras were decreasing steadily now, and as they whirled in a spitting, slashing tornado of violence, they were drawing close to the edge of the tile.

39 to 80.

Eliás punched Sun in the stomach, sending him staggering back. Now they were less than five feet away from the edge.

25 to 74.

Sun smashed Eliás in the chest, regaining another foot of tile.

19 to 55.

With a final heave of effort and a yell that echoed through the arena, which was now so loud you couldn’t hear yourself think over the screams of the crowd, Eliás sprang up in a spinning roundhouse kick, slamming Sun in the chest and sending him stumbling back, where he fell over the edge just as his Aura gave a loud, shrill beep as it dropped below the fifteen-meter mark.

That ended it. Sun plummeted like a stone, crashing to earth in the ring-out section and collapsed, groaning, as the cameras zoomed in on him. Eliás didn’t look too good either— he was bruised and
flushed—but the victory on his face erased everything else. As Yang watched, three people barged past her, heading into the arena itself—probably his team, Talos, Amber, and Leah.

“Eliás Snowdon of Beacon wins!”

Eliás swung himself down and helped Sun up. Yang smiled as they both clapped each other the back, and a loud roaring filled the stadium, applauding for the match.

“What a way to kick off the finals!” Professor Port roared. “Now, we cut for a short intermission—stretch your legs, buy your popcorn—before resuming with our remaining contestants: Mercury from Haven! Yang from Beacon! Penny from Atlas! Robin from Shade! Lionel from Atlas! Pyrrha from Beacon!”

Yang looked over, down the row of the other contestants. Pyrrha looked expressionless; Lionel looked angry…and Mercury had a look in his eyes so cold it scared her.

*I can only hope I don’t fight him.*

---

A refresher for you readers—a Bond allows each partner to feel the other’s feelings (Especially fear, sadness, and love), to know where they are at all times, and to share one another’s pain. At the initial moment of creation, the initiator of the Bond has their memories shared with their partner, but not vice-versa. Stronger Bonds may also yield the ability to share memories, but not vividly. When a Bond breaks, both parties feel every mental and physical pain that has been endured by their partner since the Bond was conceived. Bonds are typically only made between partners of combat schools, spouses, and between teams. In rare occasions, they will be made between siblings or parents to their children, but this is not common, seeing as it’s a very intimate bond that the child will not want to share with their sibling/parent as they grow older. Naturally, no child wants their parents to know where they are at all times, or what they’re feeling every moment. Bonds are only recommended to be made after the age of sixteen, due to the flighty teenage mind and the fact that maturity may make them regret it (Though in some cases, as of Ruby and Weiss, if both parties are mature, it can be done earlier than sixteen.) No one can have more than one Bond at a time. Finally, each Bond’s strength varies, depending on the relationship between partners. I.e. Blake and Yang’s Bond is incredibly strong and flexible, while Weiss and Ruby’s is fairly new, and not as strong or in-tune.

**Words to create a Bond:**

With this, I give all of my light up to another. I place my trust in my other half; I do this willingly, so that there may always be someone to aid in my darkest hours. I release my strength to show a way through the darkness for my other half; through this, we may become one. I share my soul, and bare my heart to my partner. To the promises that are unbreakable, the Bond that is tempered by fire, I give all of myself to another. For it is in passing that we achieve immortality. Through this, we become a paragon of virtue and glory to rise above all, infinite in distance and unbound by death. I release your soul, and by my shoulder protect thee.

---

**Words to break a Bond:**
I renounce everything I have ever told you. I revoke our Bond. In promises broken and vows deceived, this Bond stands for a trust that no longer exists. In Death, all Bonds are split; in Life, a fire has been extinguished, and this connection stands no longer. I revoke the soul I share and rescind words of hope that were spoken; I give up the recourse of that which a Bond entails. For though it is in passing that we achieve immortality, living forever is a dark path. No one may live eternal, so it is that lingering, old ghosts are resurrected. I take back my soul and by my own shoulder protect my own. I offer this up now; this ossified Bond I shatter, never to be renewed again.

Also, the next four chapters all happen over the course of the same day, fyi.
Chapter XIII - The Secret of Autumn

Qrow

“Today’s the big day, eh?”

“Yes. She should arrive here in—” Ozpin checked the clock on the wall— “roughly half an hour.”

“Right, and how d’you tell a student that you’re about to wreck their goddamn life in, oh, I dunno, ‘roughly half an hour’?”

“That’s enough backtalk from you.” Ozpin lapsed into silence for a long moment before speaking again, swiveling his chair towards Qrow with a displeased gleam in his eyes. “I don’t know where Glynda and James are.” He sounded more annoyed than worried. “They should be here by now.”

“Ah, I’ve been back-talking since the grand age of seventeen when we met, Oz. You should be used to it. And as for Glynda and Metalskull, she’s probably scolding some poor student and he’s putting his weak soldiers through their rounds. Don’t worry about it. He’d be too callous for this anyways. At least the girl knows you.”

Before Ozpin could reply, the elevator doors gave a cheery little ding!, and Qrow hitched his hands in his pockets, leaning back against the pillar. “Good luck with this, old friend,” he muttered. “You’ll need it.”

The doors slid open after a moment and Pyrrha, Ozpin’s choice for the Maiden’s power, walked into the silence of the office. At first glance, Qrow thought she looked promising. The important thing to inherit the power successfully was strength of mind, but having a strong body didn’t hurt. She looked smart. Humble, not ambitious. A hair unsure of herself, maybe, but that was fine. He could see why she was famed across Vale for her strength; there was a way of carrying oneself that spoke of strength, and she clearly had mastered it: shoulders drawn back, chin tilted up, chest thrust forward in a confident manner, well muscled and had her weapons close at hand. He wondered briefly why she wasn’t the leader of her team, but then again, Ozpin had never made a wrong choice thus far in naming team leaders.

“Hello, headmaster,” she said, stepping forward into the light. She didn’t even seem to notice Qrow was there, to his annoyance, and she walked forward uncertainly. “Professor Goodwitch informed me yesterday evening that you wished to speak with me.”

“Dear Glynda.” Ozpin wrapped his hands around his mug, instantly making the switch into the warm headmaster that Qrow barely knew. Ozpin had personalities layered upon personalities, deeper and deeper as they went, and there were a thousand secrets within each fold of his complex lives. “I must thank her for putting up with me all these years, because I don’t know anyone else who could. Please, Miss Nikos,” he added gently, “take a seat. You are not in trouble, so there’s no need to look so frightened. You’re at the top of your classes and a contestant in the singles tier of the Vytal Tournament. Rest assured, I am pleased with your progress. It comes as no surprise that they’ve chosen you to move on to the final round of the tournament— your performance was exemplary. I am pleased that we have the honor of sending forward three remarkable students from my academy: yourself, Miss Xiao Long, and Mr Snowdon.” Ozpin’s eyes flicked briefly to Qrow
at the mention of Yang, but Qrow refused to respond to it.

“Thank you, Professor Ozpin,” Pyrrha said as she sat down, clearly still uncertain but seeming less ill-at-ease, “but I would have never made it this far without my teammates.”

_Time to cut the lies._ Qrow cleared his throat. “Personally, I think it's the other way around. Not much could obstruct a world-renowned Huntress from proceeding in the tournament.”

She turned around, getting up from her seat with nonplussed expression on her face. “I’m sorry, but I don't believe we've been introduced.”

“No, we haven’t,” he growled, thoroughly put-out by now. “Name's Qrow.”

Ozpin lifted a placating hand. “It’s all right, Miss Nikos. Qrow is a trusted… colleague of mine. He is, as well, kin to your friend, Ruby. They share the same rather stubborn streak. Ignore him.”

_You old bag. Of course she'll ignore me._ Still, Qrow admired the subtle cleverness in mentioning Ruby; that was bound to make Pyrrha more at ease, knowing that Qrow wasn’t some random stranger, and that they had some connection, however vague.

Pyrrha looked at him uncertainly for a moment, as if wondering why he was there for the meeting, before she looked back to Ozpin. “Professor, if you don't mind me asking, why have you called me here?”

A half-smile crossed Ozpin’s face, but it seemed brittle, wavering with sorrow. Qrow knew he was the only person who could truly see how torn Ozpin’s smile was, the anguish that lay behind it, because he was about to shatter this young girl’s beliefs in her world. “Please, take a seat,” he said. When she did, he leaned forward. “What is your favorite fairy tale?

Her head tilted. “What do you mean?”

“Fairy tales,” he said, “stories from your childhood. Surely you must remember _some_ of them.”

“Well,” she said, clearly put-off, but still unknowing of what was to come, “there's _The Tale of The Two Brothers, The Shallow Sea, The Girl in the Tower_...”

“What about the tale of the four seasons?”

“Of course I know that one, but why—”

“Be at peace.” Ozpin inclined his head. “Tell us the tale, Miss Nikos, and leave nothing out.”

_So he’s playing that kind of game._ Qrow narrowed his eyes as Pyrrha, obliging to Ozpin’s wishes, hesitantly launched into the tale that was as familiar to him as his own hands.

“Once upon a time, ages before my father or my father’s father was born, there were no seasons. In that Remnant, the world was not visited by the nurturing sunlight of spring, the colors of fall, the harsh snows of winter, or the warm rays of summer. There was simply the sun hanging in the sky, and each day was as long as the next, year after year. No winds stirred the air, and no snow fell. The sunshine was simply there, and nothing changed as mankind toiled through its unchanging months.

“In this time, there lived a callous old man who refused to leave his home. He did not care for Remnant, and time had hardened him as it will wither away everything. One day, the man was looking out his window at the unwavering sunshine when he saw four figures walking up his
garden path— (the garden was empty, with no seasons to tend for its care)— and these four figures each bore a basket in hand. Angry that strangers dared to intrude upon his land, but more curious than upset, the man rose from his chair and for the first time in many, many years, he opened his door. However, when he did so, the still air and sunshine that he was expecting to feel was not there. He was instead greeted by many different scents and sounds: the honeysuckle and warm breeze of spring; the lazy sunshine and warmth of summer; the woodsmoke and brisk wind of fall; the scent of ice and snow of winter.”

_Honeysuckle and warm breeze._ Qrow thought. _Raven is more like a nightshade plant and a wind to freeze your heart._

“As the four figures walked up the garden path, he could see that the four of them were all young maidens, barely older than seventeen. The four of them were as different as one could be. The first girl was tall and willowy, with long brown hair braided with live flowers and green reeds. Honeysuckle stems trailed from her shoulders. The second was shorter, with flowing blonde hair like sunshine. The third carried a basket filled with fruits and hams, and she was lovely, with hair all the colors of falling leaves. The final sister was stern, with short white hair and an icy blue cloak.”

“Who are you,” asked the man, “and why have you trespassed upon my land?”

“We are sisters,” Winter said in tone that was cold and soft-furred like frost. “And we are the four maidens,” said Spring in a voice clear and sweet like a running stream. “I am Summer,” said the third sister, a lovely maiden with a voice that reminded the old man of warmth and love, “and these are my sisters, Spring, Winter, and Summer.” The final sister, Autumn, inclined her head. “We have come very far to see you,” she finished in a voice that sounded like long-lost kin and nights by a cozy fire.

The man was bewildered, but as the sisters worked their magic, he could see how very dull and lifeless Remnant was, without the turn of the seasons. The sisters bestowed gifts upon him, gifts of incredible power— not in physicality, but in spirit. Winter understood his reclusive nature and urged him to use his time in solitude to reflect and meditate. The second, Spring, brought him fruits and flowers, tending to his crops and revitalizing his garden. Summer warmed the man's heart, convincing him to step outside and embrace the world around him. And the fourth and final sister, Autumn, begged him to look at all that he had, and be thankful.

“As a return for their kindness, the man granted the maidens incredible powers, so that they would continue to help others all over the world. They graciously accepted, and promise to share their gifts with the people of Remnant until the end of days.” Pyrrha dipped her head as she finished. “Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. The four Maidens and seasons.”

Ozpin’s gaze was chilling with how grave it was, but his smile held. “Would you believe me if I told you that one’s been around since I was a boy?”

She gave a little laugh. “You're not _that_ old, Professor.”

Ozpin’s smile fell at that, his good-humor vanishing to a mask of stone, and his eyes _were_ that old — old as the seasons. “Well, would you believe me if I told you it was true?”

She tensed, her gaze flicking from him to Qrow. “I beg your pardon?”

Ozpin leaned forward. “What if I told you that the tale you have just told me is not merely a tale? That there were four maidens existing in this world, that could wield such tremendous power, without Dust— without a semblance? That such magic existed?”
Qrow narrowed his eyes as Pyrrha visibly stiffened. When Ozpin had told him that the Maiden legend was actually not a story, but the truth, he hadn’t had so much trouble believing—an open-mind and an intelligent mind went hand in hand—but he hadn’t liked it. Stories were meant to stay contained within their own world. When stories and reality bled together, that was when things got dangerous, and he had lost Raven, his own sister, to that same blur of real and unreal. *My whole life has been screwed over by the Maidens, and now, it’s recurring in the next generation.*

Ozpin gave him a warning glare, clearly indicating that anger was too plain on his face. With difficulty, Qrow rearranged his expression into something that probably resembled a hangover instead of indifference.

_I hate the fucking Maidens. Ivana Schnee, Raven Branwen, Pyrrha Nikos. All of them have connections to my nieces. Well, let no one say that fate doesn’t work in funny ways._

“Yep,” Qrow said, eager to break the ringing silence. “First time hearing it’s pretty crazy.”

She looked like an animal backed into a corner, shooting him a wild-eyed gaze. “Why are you telling me this?”

“We are telling you, Pyrrha Nikos,” he said, “because we believe that you are next in line to receive the Fall Maiden’s powers.”

“I— what? Who’s ‘we’?”

At that moment, the elevator gave another ding, sliding open to admit Ironwood and Goodwitch into the office. “Congratulations,” Qrow muttered to them so Pyrrha couldn’t hear. “You’ve missed the whole damn thing, idiots.”

Glynda shot him a gaze sharper than flint, but Pyrrha’s startled cry impeded the looming argument. “I— who are you?” she said, standing up now as she looked between Qrow, Ozpin, Ironwood, and Glynda. “What do you want?”

“We’re the same teachers you have always known,” Ozpin objected calmly.

“Except we have a part-time job,” Qrow rasped.

“We are the protectors of this world,” Ozpin finished, looking back at Pyrrha beseechingly. “And we need your help.”

___

*Pyrrha*

It turned out that she had been completely naive to expect that Ozpin only wanted to meet with her for a scolding, or a reward.

She followed them as they filed into the elevator. Ozpin refused to say where they were going, only that she would be safe, but there was an unspoken ‘for now’ at the end of his sentence. As she stepped into the crowded elevator, wedging herself between Glynda and Ozpin as the doors slid shut—two headmasters she trusted, but now seemed like complete strangers—she couldn’t shake
the clinging feeling that she was sealing herself into her own coffin.

She believed Ozpin, of course. She wasn’t one to cling stupidly to her beliefs when they were contradicted so thoroughly. The headmaster didn’t joke around, and she knew when someone was being serious, and the look in his eyes had been terribly somber. As the elevator plunged silently into darkness, all she could think of was the Maiden story, how it had colored her life in tiny ways that she hadn’t even paid attention to before now. Intermittent memories flashed through her mind —

*Her mother swept a lock of short red hair behind her ear, smiling down at Pyrrha gently as she read the Maiden legend from a large storybook, out into the darkness full of candlelight and possibilities. “And the Spring Maiden spanned out over the world, spreading her gift through budding leaves and gentle rains upon a farmer’s field…”*

*Her father, sparring with her just before she had become too old for such stories, and stopping to look out the window as the first freezing snowflakes began to fall from heavy gray clouds. He had sucked in a breath, cheeks hollowing, and said, “It’s snowing outside, Pyrr. The Winter Maiden is back.”*

*Her graduation from Sanctum. She was valedictorian of her class, and she had humbly accepted the applause for her achievements—it was a wonderful occasion on a blazing summer day. Her combat-teacher had embraced her, whispering in her ear how well she had done in school, and as Pyrrha had broken away from the embrace, someone in the crowd had called, “The Summer Maiden is brutal today with this sunshine!”*

*Ren and Nora talking fondly together as the team walked through the fairground, and Pyrrha had been laughing at a joke Jaune had made as Nora lowered her stick of cotton candy to bat at an orange leaf that spiraled lazily down through the air. Jaune had smiled and said, “Well, Nora, it looks like the Autumn Maiden’s arrived in Vale now…”*

She was broken out of her whirling memories as the man behind her took a sip from his flask and promptly gave a loud, hacking cough. She curled her lip as the smell of whiskey drifted through the air. What was his name— Qrow, had he said earlier? He and Ozpin had seemed close, exchanging glances filled with meaning that she couldn’t even begin to decipher.

Her guess on his name was confirmed as the General of Atlas— another legendary figure—cleared his throat and said in a tone laced with poison, “Qrow, perhaps you should cut back on the alcohol for such an occasion.”

“Perhaps you should shut up,” Qrow snapped back, and Pyrrha flinched.

“Ozpin says he’s kin to Ruby, but he’s nothing like her. Nothing her discomfort, Glynda laid a conciliatory hand on her shoulder.

“Where are we going, Professor?” she ventured, looking up at the adults crowding around her. Goodwitch’s eyes were filled with pity that made the dread in Pyrrha’s chest even heavier.

“A vault,” Ozpin answered after a long, tense silence, his tone grim. “A vault below the school.”

No one spoke again as the elevator traveled further into the darkness, and as it plunged down and down, Pyrrha couldn’t shake the feeling that they were traveling down the maw of some terrible creature, rising up to swallow them.
After what seemed like an eternity, the doors opened again. Air rushed in, but it wasn’t fresh air—this had a musty, damp taste to it that made her lip curl in disgust. Ozpin filed out, closely tailed by Qrow, and then Ironwood. Lastly, Glynda stepped out, waiting to the side for Pyrrha. As she followed them, all her fighting instincts kicked into high gear. She scanned the area, at once taking in everything: the slippery floors, the shadows in which one could hide, the flickering braziers that could be used as a weapon in a pinch— before she shook the thoughts away. She wasn’t safe, strictly, but no one was going to attack her, if what Ozpin had said was true.

“You are in no danger, Miss Nikos,” Goodwitch said gently. “I understand this is a great deal to comprehend all at once, but we are no less trustworthy than we were before, and no one here will harm you or do anything without your consent. I can promise you that.”

“I know.” Pyrrha swallowed and looked around. “That doesn’t make me any less nervous about what’s to come, after what he told me. I have so many questions. How is a fairy tale like that real or even possible?”

She sighed heavily. “I disagreed with him on his method of revealing such information to you. I thought a more gradual approach would have been better. Unfortunately, my opinion was overruled by Mr Branwen.” She shot the man named Qrow a dark look. “He seems to agree with Ozpin on most everything, at least publicly, but— that is not of your concern. As you said, you have many questions. All will be made clear to you when this is over.”

Forcing down her complaint of ‘why me’— even if this was all crazy, she wouldn’t whine— she walked forward, head bowed. “I still don’t understand. Ozpin says I’m next in line for the Maiden’s powers. What do you mean by that? What did he mean? I’ve never thought the legend was true, so… how could I…”

She flicked her crop irritably, but the irritation seemed more directed towards Ozpin. “Simply, the Maidens have been around since the dawn of time, because the seasons have always existed. The first part of the fairy tale, explaining that there used to be a Remnant that was without spring, summer, fall or winter— that is just a legend. But the Maidens themselves are not. However, a Maidens power hosts a mortal body. The Maidens change, just as the seasons do: no two falls or winters or springs or summers are ever exactly the same, even though they bear similarities, much like humans. When the host for a Maiden’s power passes away, the power immediately is released by her body and seeks a new host. This guarantees that no one holds onto such a powerful thing forever, and that the seasons are never lost.”

Pyrrha looked up at her warily. “That makes sense, I suppose. How does the power choose?”

Qrow gave a loud, dry laugh. “Through a tangled mess of idiotic laws that no fool could ever comprehend.”

Glynda made a growling noise. “That’s enough, Qrow.”

He made a little hrmphing noise. “Don’t get your panties in a twist because I’m telling it like it is, Glynda.”

Closing her eyes and breathing out heavily through flared nostrils, the professor continued. “Initially, when the powers were still newly discovered and much of the laws were shrouded in mystery, there was only one certainty of the transfer. The powers only were passed on to young women, just like the four original Maidens. However, mankind grew curious and pried into the mystery, and it was discovered that the selection process was increasingly— intimate.”
Confused, Pyrrha shook her head. “What do you mean specifically?”

“It is still uncertain to us, because the process is intangible and thus difficult to analyze,” she explained, “but as we understand it now, when a Maiden dies, the one who is in her final thoughts is the first candidate to inherit her power.

Qrow turned his head to look at through her narrowed, cold eyes. “Unless, of course,” he said contemptuously, “it’s a man, or a woman too old to inherit the power. Then it goes to someone random, and our job gets much more difficult, as we must find this poor fool of a mortal who’s just been blasted with a power they don’t even know of, and can hardly understand, and explain to them that a fairy tale is actually real, and now they’re at the center of it.”

Pyrrha shivered. “That doesn’t explain why you’re telling me all of this now. The way you’ve been speaking makes it seem like the Fall Maiden is still alive, and yet you say I’m the next candidate for her powers— but that won’t happen until she dies, if what you’ve been saying is right, so why tell me now? Why not wait ’til I’ve graduated?”

Qrow looked around over his shoulder, and the expression on his face was definitely something Ruby must have learned from him: guarded and blank, but with a hint of tension underneath his eyes. “Honestly, we’ve run out of time to put this off. The Autumn Maiden is… her condition is, well, fragile. And besides, I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but things are getting a lot harsher out in Remnant, a lot more dangerous. Tensions are high. Grimm are growing stronger, more prevalent. It won’t be long before this peace we have will be shattered by a single breath, and we have to do everything we can to prevent it.”

A breath sucked in between her teeth. “You're not... talking about a war, are you?”

It was Ironwood who answered this time, his voice heavy with resignation. “Not in your sense. That is, not a war between nations. A war between darkness and light itself— nature and man.”

Qrow gave a huff of breath, his tone now sharper than ice. “That’s enough. You can have all the details your pretty head can worry about once we’re sure you’re our candidate. For now, all you need to know? You worried about how you could possibly inherit the powers when you didn’t even notice the Maidens existed— well, here’s your answer. For the first time since the dawn of Remnant, a Maiden was brutally attacked and maimed, and her assailant succeeded in wresting a portion of her power away. Now she’s…”

“Qrow.” That was Ozpin, his voice quiet but still weighty. “That is enough for now. Let her decide for herself without your fear mongering.”

“Old bag,” Qrow muttered, but he didn’t speak again.

A deep, grim silence fell over the group, leaving Pyrrha alone with her thoughts. She looked around. She had only ever seen Ozpin and Glynda in a regular schooling environment, and she had only seen the General in front of a backdrop of armies. Seeing them stalk through the shadows broken only by torchlight… the only one who didn’t look terribly out of place and unfamiliar was Qrow, and that was only because she didn’t even know him.

A fairy tale has come to life, and somehow, I’ve been caught in the center of attention again, when all I ever wanted was to be left alone to follow my own path... a destiny should not be played with like a toy.

She heard a sudden humming in the air, like an angry swarm of bees, and her eyes detected a glow in the hallway ahead. After a few moments, it began to lighten, and they finally arrived in a huge
There was a girl lying in a glass case, dressed only in two white garments, exposing the rest of her dark skin. Her eyes were closed, and the only indication that she was alive was the faltering beat of her heart displayed on the screen, beeping at intervals, and the faintest rise and fall of her chest. That wasn’t what startled Pyrrha; it was the huge, ugly scar that spread across her face like a spiderweb. A burn mark, by the looks of it. Her upper mouth was completely burned away, revealing her teeth, which were bare in a horrible grimace. Her left eye was completely turned to ash, so there was an empty socket gaping in her face, and her skin looked like candle wax, dripping down her cheekbones, twisted and horribly wrong.


For the first time since the dawn of Remnant, Qrow’s voice rang in her head mockingly, a Maiden was brutally attacked and maimed, and her assailant succeeded in wresting a portion of her power away.

Pyrrha suppressed a rising tide of nausea and looked up at the adults in horror. “How is she still alive?”

Ironwood looked somber, like he was attending a funeral. “With state-of-the-art Atlas developments, we have managed to stabilize her—for now, that is. She will never regain consciousness. This coma… she is virtually braindead. Her life force is there, but it’s dwindling away day by day; this is only a temporary fix, and there is of course much about the situation that is unknown to us. Much of it is… unprecedented.”

“What do you mean?” she ventured cautiously. “If she dies… you said the power moved on when the mortal host expired. So won’t it just move on to the next host, then?”

Qrow gave a raspy laugh, looking at Ozpin. “Look who’s been listening. You were right, Oz.”

Ozpin bowed his head. Something in his expression chilled her to the core, and he looked up, his face pained. “Yes, Miss Nikos, that’s correct— under normal circumstance, that is. But this is far from normal, and it’s beyond anything we have ever dealt with; the delicacy of this situation is tremendous. You see, it’s almost certain Amber’s last thoughts before she passed into her coma were of her attacker, thereby ensuring the attacker will have a good chance of inheriting the remainder of the power when Amber dies. And if Amber wasn’t thinking of the attacker, it’s still likely that the power will go to seek out its other half, and we will lose any chance we had of keeping the rest of it safe from her—the assailant.”

“How do you know her attacker was a woman?” Pyrrha realized the question’s ignorance as soon as she said it. “Well, if she wrested the power away, I’d guess that’s obvious she was female…”

“That,” Ozpin said, “and Qrow here was the one who saved Amber from complete death. He fought off her attacker and brought her back to Beacon just in time.”

Pyrrha lifted her gaze to the huntsman. His posture was lazy, his face bored, but his eyes were full of a terrible pain. “And a damn lot of good it did us,” he growled. “This is our last shot.”

His words suddenly sparked a furious flame in her heart. “So if this is all true,” she snarled, stalking forward to stand in front of Amber’s prone body, “if this girl is so important— why keep it a secret from thousands of innocent people who deserve to know the truth? And if we’re teetering so close on the brink of such a terrible war, why keep it a secret?”
It was Glynda who stepped forward, having been silent the whole time. “From what we understand,” she said softly, “it used to be common knowledge, known all over Remnant. The Maidens were worshipped and respected… and everyone knew of who caused their crops to grow, the snow to fall, the sun to shine. It was a time of wonderful magic… but of terrible fear and terror, too.” She closed her eyes, as if physically pained, and Pyrrha narrowed hers.

“Excuse me?”

Qrow snorted, as if his optimism about her intelligence was starting to fade. “How do you think legends and fairy tales get started? Even the craziest ones come from somewhere— be it reality, or a drunken dream… everything’s got its roots somewhere. Well, the Maiden story is rooted in reality, so…” He uncapped his flask, taking a swing, and the smell of sharp alcohol filled the air again. Clearly, the crushingly quiet atmosphere and tension hadn’t affected him, or he was deliberately choosing to ignore it. “Where d’you think that came from, eh? You think the Maidens were always shut-up in the dark? That mankind never knew who really caused the seasons to change? No. Not at all. They used to be revered, Nikos, all over Remnant. But that time’s over. Now’s the real tough part, all the secrecy.”

“When the Maidens were widely known,” Ironwood explained, “there was violence and bloodshed as those hungry for power hunted them in the hope of inherited their strength. Success was rare, but the thought of such illimitable power was tempting to even the best of people. After all the bloodshed, people banded together, and thus, a brotherhood was founded in order to protect both mankind and the Maidens. They chose to remove the Maidens from the public eye, allowing their existence to fade away into legend… and thus, the violence ended, and a secret was a born. A secret as lethal as the cold of winter or the heat of summer. Now that you are privy to it, you are required to uphold this secrecy, or you risk terrible danger to the order of the kingdoms, and to life itself.”

“The things we’re telling you go against hundreds of years of human history and religion,” Glynda murmured sorrowfully. “All stories, all existing within the same world, but this is the truth. As you said, you wished to expose this truth to all the common people, but that would be disastrous. No one would want to believe us. It would cause an uproar; it would cause disorder—”

“It would cause widespread panic all throughout Remnant, more contagious than any disease,” Ozpin said. “And we all know what that would bring to clawing at our Kingdom’s walls. Which is why we would like to—”

“No. I’ll do it.” The words tore themselves out of Pyrrha, swift and leaving no room for regret, even as she looked at Amber’s horribly mutilated face. “I’ll… I’ll do it. After all, if you believe that this will help humanity in such a huge way, and if I’m the only one… I can’t refuse. I will become your Fall Maiden. It’s my duty as a Huntress to protect the world, no matter how.” Fear made her words sharper then she intended as she snapped, “That is what you wanted, isn’t it?”

Ozpin sounded as reluctant as she felt. “It… it is. But given Amber’s delicate condition, it isn’t so simple as speaking a few painless words and having the transfer be done and over with. We cannot risk losing the power to the assailant, Miss Nikos… so we must do everything we can to ensure it will go to you as effectively as possible: it will not be natural. It will be… it will be painful. Not everyone could endure it, which is why we chose you, for your strength. General Ironwood can explain the solution we have come up with.”

Ironwood’s blue eyes flashed in the darkness. “Atlas has been studying Aura rigorously; from a scientific standpoint, of course— how it works, what’s it made of, how it can be used. In the past years, we have made… significant strides. And we believe we’ve found a way to capture it.”
“Capture it,” Qrow rumbled, “and cram it into something else. Or in your case ... someone else.”

Horror filled her. Aura was one’s soul; more personal and intricate than anything. “That’s—”

“Classified,” Ironwood snapped.

“Wrong!” she cried. “You can’t just take someone’s Aura without their consent and cram it onto someone else; that’s their strength, soul, memories— who they are!”

“It’s better this way, terrible as it is. Better for Amber’s Aura to pass on to you, a kind and peaceful individual who will only use it for good, then for it to go to her assailant. When she dies, it will be better off this way— she would make the same choice if she were here to say so,” urged Goodwitch. “After all, desperate times call for desperate measures.”

Ozpin sighed, shoulders slumping as if they carried the weight of worlds. “And these are indeed desperate times. Since we cannot imitate the natural transfer to grant you the Maiden’s abilities, nor can we give you all of them (because they are split, Miss Nikos, with her assailant’s attack), we shall have to do this instead. It is our only option. The transfer of her Aura will give you her soul and everything that carries— and the Maiden’s powers are infused with the soul. This is our best chance we have for a transfer.”

“Her life would become, in a sense, intertwined with yours— inseparable, as necessary as the air itself, and lethal if you were to ever separate,” Qrow added. “The question is... what’s that gonna do to your Aura?”

*Two complete lives merging. Amber’s Aura would take over mine, erasing my soul and memories and everything that makes me me...*

Ozpin seemed to sense her indecision, for he bowed his head, backing away from her. “You have an important decision to make, Miss Nikos, and bear in mind as a final warning that there is no guarantee that this will work. And there is only the slimmest of chances that you will be the same person if it does, for Aura-merging is not a process that I would imagine the soul could easily survive. But take heed of this: we will need your answer at the end of the Vytal festival.”

“But that’s in less than a week...” Pyrrha trailed away, shivering, knowing complaining would do no good. She turned away miserably, placing a hand on Amber’s glass case. Her face— the raised scars, the melted skin like candlewax, the gaping holes on her lips and cheek... *And the soul of this girl will reside in my body if I choose it. If I choose the world over myself. It has to be soon, because when Amber’s body dies, and the power leaves to the assailant...*

Ozpin’s final words seemed to mirror her own fears and uncertainties as he spoke finally, his voice quiet and deafening all at once in the dark cavern rippling with unfeeling blue light. “The assailant that attacked the Fall Maiden has made their first move,” he whispered. “And there's no telling when their next move will be, or who it will devastate when it comes.”

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A/N: This is the ‘big thing’ that Ozpin, Qrow, and the others have been worrying about, and the thing that Sage, Blake, and Yang have all been worrying about without knowing what it was. Big battle next chapter. Hope y’all are ready for bumblebee angst, which, I'd imagine, is what you’ve prepared for.
Chapter XIV - Falling Flame

Yang

After Eliás had battled it out with Sun and left the arena with his team, amid applause from the stadium and surprisingly a good-natured acceptance from Sun’s team about their leader’s loss of the match, Yang looked around with a heavy sigh. There would be only one match left today— the final matches of the regular singles were scheduled for tomorrow, to give the fighters some rest—and now, Yang knew she would be fighting either Lionel, Robin, Mercury, Penny, or Pyrrha—three out of the five of them were opponents she had been dreading.

Goddamn it.

She twisted around in her seat, frowning. Mercury seemed to be lost in his thoughts, and Penny—Yang knew she wasn’t actually human, but whatever, she had a soul, which was what counted—was fiddling with a gear in her elbow. Pyrrha, however, caught her attention more than the rest. Yang didn’t like to brag, but she was pretty perceptive when it came to people’s emotions. It came with the whole having grown up in a shattered home, and the ability was useful in a lot of spots. Pyrrha’s face carried a heaviness that Yang had never seen before, her eyes full of pensive dread.

“Pyrrha,” she said uneasily, “are you okay?”

The other girl jerked, as if startled out of her thoughts. “What? Oh, yes. I’m fine.”

She’s lying. “How did your meeting with Ozpin go?”

Pyrrha looked as if Yang had slapped her. “What?”

“Your meeting,” Yang said slowly. “Jaune came by the dorm earlier this afternoon and told us you were in a meeting with Ozpin.”

“Oh— oh, yes, sorry.” She fiddled with the gold bands on Miló and Akoúo. When she spoke, her voice was too high, too strained and bright to be real. “He wanted to give me advice and congratulations on making it to the final round, and he just wanted to say it to me because I have so much pressure, you know, from being world-wide known. Just in case you were wondering why he didn’t call up you or anyone else.”

Deciding that she was definitely hiding something, but unsure of what exactly it was, Yang decided to drop it. Prying was never the way to go when trying to wrest potentially emotional information from someone.

“Well,” she said amiably, “if you want, let me know what’s bothering you, okay? We’re not besties or anything, but Ruby pretty much worships you, so anybody who’s earned my sister’s respect has earned mine, too.”

Pyrrha let out a long sigh, and didn’t answer.
“Now, with our brief intermission over, and the conclusion of the match between Eliás and Sun also done with, we move on to our second and final match of the day.” Port’s voice boomed through the colosseum, and Yang shifted her feet in anticipation from where she stood in the lineup of six in the center of the stadium. “We ask you to respectfully refrain from videos, pictures, and to enjoy the show!”

Yang looked up, stomach churning, as the board began spinning their pictures in rotation. A flash of Pyrrha’s face— her own— Penny— Mercury’s scowl— before it began to slide to a stop.

Yang saw two names appear on the board, a flash of gold and gray, and her stomach seemed to turn to a block of ice as Port bellowed out,

“Yang Xiao Long and Mercury Black!”

Time seemed to go by in flashes, the clock jumping by in odd spurts: she saw Pyrrha, Penny, and the rest walking off— then she was in the center of the stadium— then Mercury was across from her, a calculating expression on his face— then time slowed and she could think clearly again.

Trying to hide her uncertainties, she gave him a cool look. “So, it’s you and me, huh? You’d better not go easy on me, or we’ll have another easy win. Don’t quit on me like you did with Pyrrha back in the school sparring matches.”

Something very ugly flashed across his face. “You only wish,” he muttered. Yang felt a shiver of fear, and as she stared into Mercury’s malignant gaze, she feared she saw the first dark clouds that would eventually unleash the storm of war.

No sooner had the parting call of “one!” left Port’s mouth then had Mercury leapt forward, roundhouse kick swinging straight for her face. Yang dodged out of the way, all her skill and instinct flowing through her. She feinted, lunging for him, and landed two blows on his chest before he kicked her in the stomach, knocking her backwards.

Everything faded to a distant blur: this was all that mattered, her and Mercury in this tiny circle of an arena floor— it was all that existed, and every energy inside of her was primed on one thought: I have to win this. I will win this.

With a snarl, he pounced, and she went down as they spun around in a lashing whirlwind of punches and kicks. Each kick that Mercury landed on her only made her punches on him more forcible, and he grunted in pain as she punched him in the spot that she had twisted Junior so many months ago.

Slowly, though, she could feel herself gaining an upper hand as she managed to dodge most of his strikes, and he began to lose ground as she pushed him towards the edge of the arena. With one final punch, she sent him over the edge, and he fell with a screech of rage.

Exhilarating glee flooded her. I overestimated him this whole time!

Her glee quickly evaporated as she saw him come backflipping back up over the edge, his boots emitting puffs of air. She scowled. Wind Dust in his shoes so he could have another shot if someone actually managed to knock him over the edge. I’ll knock him off as many times as it takes!

Before she could actually follow up on that vow, Mercury backed away from her and began to perform a maneuver she recognized from his vicious battle against Coco and Yatsuhashi. He did a handstand and began to spin, wild and untethered as a hurricane, great bulky puffs of white spitting out from his shoes.
It’s that damn wind Dust.

She looked up and the word that she said would definitely be censored out on the live-tape of the match that was broadcasting all around Remnant, only having time to wince before the clouds of wind Dust plummeted down upon her.

Fury lit through her veins as she remembered how Mercury had tried to blind Yatsu, how he had gloated over his victory, how he had been arrogant at the meeting—and the look of coldness in his eyes at the beginning of the match. She knew he wanted a victory, and he thought he could get as easily as that—against her?

I fought Flynt and Neon. I fought Grimm in the city. I fought with everything I had—no way in hell is Mercury going to beat me this easily!

An intense blaze of heat erupted around her, and the wind evaporated. She saw Mercury stalking away, thinking he had won, and she shouted at him. “Hey, asshole! Turn around and face me! You haven’t beaten me yet!”

His eyes flew wide in shock as she flew at him and they broke out into a whirling storm of kicks and punches again, except now, Yang could feel unlimited power burning through every strike.

The next moments of the fight went by in a burning haze of red. She was only aware of Mercury barely posing a threat as she tore into him, intent on her victory.

One final punch ended it, as he went flying backward with a grunt of pain, his Aura burnt down to zero. He lay there before standing up with a cough, giving her a look from furious gray eyes.

“Yang Xiao Long takes the victory!” Port shouted, as the stadium erupted into joyous screams, most of them emitting from the Vale section where people were seated. Spinning around, Yang saw Blake and Sun jumping up and down in their seats, yelling out her name in glee. Ruby was in a similar position, hanging half out of the seats themselves and calling out her name in excitement.

Yang tossed a “better luck next time,” over her shoulder, thinking in scorn of Mercury’s derisive attitude and how, hopefully, this might give him a taste of loss and temper out his arrogance.

Suddenly, an icy chill ran down the back of her neck like ice-water, followed by a low, sibilant hissing noise. Even though Mercury was several feet away, she heard his snarl right in the shell of her ear. “There’s not going to be a next time, you Vale fool.”

She turned around and saw him.

A silver streak was hurtling towards her, and her mind froze as she remembered the time when she was only six years old, when she’d almost killed herself and her sister by dragging them out to the Grimm-infested forest in search of her mother—when the Grimm had flown at her mercilessly. Without thinking, she punched him a second before his kick landed, and staggered back as she heard the crunch of shattering bone.

Instantly, Mercury collapsed to the ground with a strangulated howl of pain that chilled Yang’s blood, but the screams of outrage from the stadium drowned him out. “That’s what you get, you little bitch!” She spat. “Why would you try to attack me like that?” He moaned in response, curling around his leg and shaking.

It was only after looking around that Yang realized that people were looking at her, not him, and that the screams for blood and arrest were for…they were for her.
But he attacked me, she thought desperately, feeling like a tiny leaf caught up in a thrashing, storming river. He attacked me! I was just defending myself! Why are they calling for me to be arrested and not him?

Yang’s heart leaped to her throat as she saw a squadron of Atlas soldiers pouring forth from the arena doors, followed by a brown-and-green streak that quickly pelted towards Mercury, resolving itself to be Emerald. Emerald gave Yang a look of pure hatred, and she felt her breath begin to come shallow and slow, black spots dancing before her eyes.

Oh God, what’s happening? What did I do? I was just defending myself!

The soldiers surrounded her, rifles staring her down with dark black barrels, and she spun around in wild confusion. “No!” she shouted. “No, this wasn’t my fault! He attacked first! I was just defending myself!”

A soldier looked up from his gun, eyes narrow slits of suspicion. “Stand down, Xiao Long, or things will be getting much worse than they already are.”

“It wasn’t me!” she snarled.

His gun didn’t waver from where it was trained on her face. “You’re causing a scene. Mood’s already bad enough. Do you want the Grimm here, girl? Stand down.”

Mercury let out another chilling cry of pain, and Yang saw medics rush onto the scene. Yang’s heart sank in pathetic relief as she saw that Talos and Sage weren’t among them, but the relief evaporated as she remembered that they were doubtlessly watching from their seats.

“You don’t understand,” she pleaded. “I——” She stopped as something terrible caught her eye.

She looked up at the big screen that usually displayed Port and Oobleck’s faces as they commented on the matches. What she saw there turned her blood to ice. She didn’t see Mercury flying at her in abject fury, nor did she see herself acting in self defense— she didn’t see anything that she knew had happened, the things she had seen with her own eyes— they weren’t happening up on that big screen.

Instead, she saw herself turn on Mercury as he was defenseless and vulnerable, and land a blow to his leg that had enough force to kill.

Nausea surged in her throat as she watched him collapse with a scream of agony, and when she turned her eyes away from the screen to look at the soldier, yet another blur of color flashed in her peripheral vision. This time it wasn’t Emerald, and Yang shrank backwards as she saw Blake, sprinting across the stadium floor.

She did not come for Yang, though. Try as Yang might to catch her eye, Blake wouldn’t look at her at all. She stopped besides the soldier, he turned the gun onto her instead.

“Back off and get that gun pointed somewhere else,” Blake growled, her voice low and resolute, every word harder than iron. “Now. It’s not a toy. You could hurt her.”

“Get out of here,” the soldier hissed. “Is everyone determined to cause a scene today?” He swung the gun back onto Yang, the edge of it hitting her forehead, and Blake’s eyes flashed. She punched the soldier in the stomach— rash move— and his expression grew very ugly as he spun back around towards her, butt of the rifle hitting her face.

“I said back off,” Blake snarled, and Yang couldn’t help but notice her bow was pinned flat to her
“Crazy bitch!” the soldier shouted, and Blake reached out and smacked the gun out of his hands. It went skidding and Yang never saw it again.

“Don’t you ever touch her again like that, you hear me?” The soldier didn’t answer and she snarled at him. “Do you hear me?”

“Yes,” he muttered furiously.

No sooner had Blake stood down the soldier and he backed away then she turned around, her face drawn tight, eyes bright with terror and unimaginable pain. She said something, but it was lost in the sudden noise that rose from the stadium. The crowd was surging out of their seats now, total chaos reigning over the stadium, and Port’s voice urging for silence was drowned out by screams and threats.

“Yang,” Blake whispered, snapping her back to the present. “God, Yang, how could you do this?”

Before Yang could even think of anything to say through the buzzing in her mind, the sound of snapping bone echoing like gunshots in her ears, the crowd poured into the stadium, screaming in disbelief and fury, crashing like a tide among them. Yang reached out for Blake with a cry of pain, and their fingertips brushed for only a moment before she was ripped away from her, carried on a surge of the people she had grown up with, those who now believed she was a monster.

“Blake!” she shrieked, not knowing if the way her heart felt, like it was splitting in half, was Blake’s emotion or her own. “Blake, please, help me! I didn’t do this! You know I didn’t! You have to believe me!”

But Blake heard her, and didn’t answer her cry.

There was a fleeting moment where everything was still before Blake vanished amid the crowd. The Bond— Yang felt it shiver, almost shake, like it was cracking right in two, as if the sheer horror from Blake had shattered it. Yang was pulled away from her, powerless to go back. As she was carried away, she looked back, and there was a single point of stillness in the seething crowd, dark and unmoving: Blake, her eyes looking as though she was watching everything she knew crumble to dust, and the look was entirely directed at Yang, every bit of it. To make it all worse, Yang recognized it: that look was familiar. That look had appeared in her eyes whenever she talked about Adam.

The devastated betrayal in her face was the last thing Yang saw before the soldiers surrounded her, and everything went dark.

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**Blake**

As Blake trudged up the stairs, she felt as if she had fought a great battle and had lost.

Every part of her ached, and the nightmares that had plagued her for so long now had new material to incorporate within them, because *Yang had turned into Adam*. It didn’t seem possible, but how
could you deny what you had seen with your own eyes? Yang— gentle Yang, who only got furious when someone threatened her hopes or her family, who had stood beside Blake for months on end without complaint, who had taken everything she got in life with a quiet strength— had suddenly turned into a monster that Blake didn’t know, and it felt like her world had been flipped upside down. A world where Yang was no better than Adam was a world in which Blake was as vulnerable and helpless as a dying person.

Somewhere in the stadium, a baby was sobbing, thin wails rising into the still, shocked air. Oobleck and Port were conferring rapidly and anxiously up in the announcer’s box, some of their words echoing through the stadium through the microphones— ‘reckless’, ‘senseless’, ‘Grimm’, ‘Ozpin’. People had begun to leave, muttering darkly amongst themselves about the cruel Beacon Huntress who had attacked a Haven Huntsman unprovoked, and Blake felt each word like a stab to the chest.

As she reached the row of seats where Ruby was staring into the distance with a look of complete and utter disbelief in her eyes, and Weiss had her head in her hands, she collapsed into a chair, tears prickling her eyes.

After a pause, filled with the mutters and shouts of other arena-goers, Ruby voiced what they had all been thinking silently. “This can’t be happening,” she whispered. “Yang— my sister— she would never hurt someone like that, not her—” Her voice broke off in a choked breath, and Blake was reminded more forcibly than ever that not only was Ruby Yang’s best friend, but she was her sister, and she was only fifteen— way too young to deal with this.

*I’m too young for it. We all are.*

Trying to reconcile the image of a Yang who read fairy-tales to Ruby so she would fall asleep faster, who helped Weiss study with flashcards and encouraging words, who kissed Blake before she went to sleep every night and whispered her thoughts and fears and hopes and dreams to her when the night was still and silent— to try to match that Yang that Blake knew and loved with this one who had attacked Mercury so mercilessly, was more than she could comprehend.

“Blake,” a voice said in her ear. She turned and there was Sun, a mixture of horror and shock in his face, before he wrapped her up in his arms, hugging her tightly. She sensed distantly that he was seeking her comfort just as much as she was seeking his. “How the hell can this be happening? She would never…” His voice died away. *She would never hurt someone like that. But she has.*

“Where did they take her?” He asked, his voice whisper-quiet. “After the soldiers surrounded her?”

“I heard Ironwood say,” Weiss murmured shakily, “that she would be transported back to the dorm and set under a guard.”

“For her own protection,” Sun spat angrily, “or for others protection from her?”

Blake stumbled away from him, her heart caught in a tempest of warring disbelief and stunned anger, and the worst part was that she didn’t know who her anger was directed towards. She could only summon one thought: *I let her get under my skin.*

For the first time ever, Blake turned all her focus away from her Bond, closed it off so the thoughts and emotions in her head were only her own. It felt like ripping out her lungs, leaving her gasping and choking for air. Part of the anguish and confusion in her mind evaporated— those must have been Yang’s— but there was still plenty leftover, enough to make her head reel, send her thoughts spinning. This pain, mental, was almost enough to measure up to what she had felt when Adam had
broken *their* Bond.

“We need to get you three out of here now,” Sun said, breaking her out of her thoughts. “People are starting to look angry at you too—as Yang’s team you won’t be finding a lot of friends here.”

“That’s right,” Sage said, appearing behind Sun. He looked shocked, but appeared to have shaken off his shock enough to take action, which Blake envied. “Let’s go. We’ll walk around you.”

They made it back to Beacon after hopping an empty airship that the pilot let them use, for just the three of them, as a token of sympathy. Ruby was silent as stone on the flight back, not looking at either of them, not even responding to Weiss’s gentle prompts of talking.

Blake felt, at once, a mixture of chilling numbness and thoughts that drowned out everything: at a time like this, they got so loud that she cried out for them to leave. They scattered like birds, startled out of their trees, before landing again where they were. After a while, she just had to let them sing, and they sang with images of Yang—her fight and her victory and finally, her eyes redder than Adam’s sword as she shattered Mercury’s leg.

They arrived in the courtyard of Beacon much too soon, but there wasn’t any time to talk: as soon as Blake set foot on the weathered stone, she saw Professor Goodwitch hurrying up to them, looking uncharacteristically frazzled.

“Miss Belladonna?” she said. “The headmaster wishes to speak with you.”

Blake closed her eyes. “Now?”

“Now,” she affirmed. “And please—do hurry. Time is of the essence.”

Glancing miserably back at her team—now minus Yang, and virtually without Ruby, as she looked more distant than the stars—Blake nodded and began to trudge off, before Goodwitch spoke again, her voice softer with sympathy. “And, Blake?”

She looked around silently.

“I would watch your back as you head to Ozpin’s office. Many are upset with the actions you took in speaking to an Atlas soldier so disrespectfully, and you’ll not find many friends from now on.”

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*A/N: Mercury’s emotions were all staged. Obviously he was trying to lose.*

*New POVS next chapter with some Arkos. ‘Destiny’ isn’t until after that and damn is it a sucker punch to the chest when you read it.*
Chapter XV - The Second Meeting

Chapter Summary

This is a shorter chapter, so sorry about that. We're getting real close to the end of Volume 3 and close to what happens after that, which is a big chunk of the plot: that's when the real fun begins.
Hey, it's our favorite man, Ozpin!

Blake

The ride up to Ozpin’s office was completely quiet. Blake had never experienced such silence, and she was glad when she finally arrived at the top of the tower.

Ozpin had his back to her when she entered, but as she approached carefully, he swung his chair around and examined her closely. “Thank you for arriving so soon,” he said. “We both know why you are here, so I am somewhat relieved that you got here before some might have harassed you on the way.”

She nodded.

“So, please, sit down, Miss Belladonna.” Ozpin clasped his hands over his mug and regarded her thoughtfully.

She sat, and he withdrew another mug from below his desk, pouring a dark liquid into it. The smell of apples and something else wreathed through the air, and she looked at him suspiciously. She had always thought he drank coffee, but apparently, not today. “I don’t drink cider. Sir.”

His eyes twinkled, and he pushed the cup towards her. “It’s tea, actually. I believe that the least a teacher can do is keep stock of his students drinking preferences to keep a wide variety of them in the school cafeteria. A good drink can always refresh the mind for studying and learning, and I’ve found it’s a lot more interesting than paperwork and transcripts. Miss Schnee and I share a fondness for dark coffee from Mistral; you, however, are alike Professor Goodwitch with your affection for mint and apple tea. A strange combination, I must confess, but to each their own.”

She took a sip. It was too hot and a little overbalanced with the mint, but she wasn’t going to tell him that. “Thank you, Professor.”

“I find this is reminiscent of a talk we had a long time ago,” he said. “Do you remember?”

She remembered it well. His voice echoed in her head.

“I despair that the temporarily-bought tranquility in Remnant is not something that will last forever.”

She had stared at him. “Do you mean— war?”

“There are forces that even we do not know of at work; agendas and plots set in motion.” He had
looked sad. “I do not say this lightly. Secrets are powerful. Sometimes they may even hold the power to destroy us. But take heed of this, too; truth is a deadly weapon, and we must be careful how we use it.”

“Yes, Headmaster.”

“Miss Belladonna, you would do well to speak. Sometimes, we don’t say the things we need to say to those we hold close... and often, we never get to. Fate has a way of tearing people apart. There’s some things that no weapon in this world can fight. No amount of trickery or deceit will change what honesty can. Blake, are you sure there is nothing else you wish to tell me?”

She snapped back to the present as he spoke again. “You told me then,” Ozpin said, “that you had nothing else you wished to tell me. Now, under entirely different circumstances— and you, I believe, as a much-changed person— I will ask the same question.”

Blake stared into her cup. The person she saw staring back from the dark depths looked exhausted, eyes dull and lidded. Her throat closed, and she fought back a sob. “I... it’s just... Professor, everything’s gone wrong. I don’t know what to do now.”

“Yes.” He closed his eyes, suddenly looking very weary as he set the mug down. “That brings us close to the subject I was hoping to speak about, of Miss Xiao Long and Mr Black. Have you spoken to her since the— incident?”

“No. She was escorted to the dorm by the General’s soldiers and I came right here after Professor Goodwitch asked me to.”

“You haven’t shared words, then,” he concluded. “And your Bond? Have you been able to glean any emotion from her? Injustice? Revenge? Anger?”

“Just anguish and confusion, but...” Blake flinched. “I blocked off her connection. It was too much.”

“Bonds can sometimes be more trouble then they are worth,” he remarked. “If it was too much for you to handle, then she must be going through the unimaginable. I would encourage you to put yourself in her shoes, so to speak. Was this behavior precedented?”

“No,” she said immediately. “Not at all. I just... I don’t know why...” Blake looked away. “She claimed, right before the soldiers took her away, that she didn’t do it. She said I had to believe what she said. That it wasn’t her.”

Ozpin’s eyebrows rose. “And do you?”

“I— I don’t know what to believe.” Blake’s ears flattened. “Before today, I would have said it was a fool who didn’t trust what they saw with their own eyes, and I would like to think that I can trust my own senses... but Yang has never lied to me, not about something like this, and I trust her more than anything. When faced with head or heart, I’ve always chosen heart, but... I don’t know what to believe now. Her, my heart, or what I saw with my own eyes, my head? I know she’d never lie, but this is... so close to home.”

“So you think she’s not lying or crazy? That she’s being honest, or she’s just mistaken?”

In answer, Blake gave a wordless shrug, and his face softened with sympathy.

“Keep in mind that seeing is not always believing, Miss Belladonna, and sleight of hand is a common enough trick among many with little honor.” Ozpin examined her over the rims of his
glasses. “This strikes me as a very difficult choice for you. Allow me to ask a question. Has your partner ever lied to you with the intention of cruel deception? If not, have your eyes ever deceived you?”

“No to the first question,” she whispered, throat tight, “but yes to the second.”

“Then I encourage you bear that in your mind when you choose who to believe.” Ozpin dipped his head to her. “You may go now, back to your dormitory. I believe the General will be waiting there to speak to you all. His harshness is well-merited for public eye, but don’t let it weigh on you too much, for we do know that this is a highly unprecedented situation, and as ever, this will pass, too. The best of luck to you, Miss Belladonna.”

Dreading meeting the General and his reprimands towards Yang—and dreading seeing Yang even more—Blake nodded silently, rising to go. Each step felt heavier and heavier as she trudged towards the door, feeling like cinderblocks were tied to her feet.

Just before she pressed the ‘down’ button on the elevator, Ozpin called to her. Bristling in a mixture of fury and sorrow, she turned around, and he bowed his head.

“Know this: I will not tolerate hatred in this academy, but many things I don’t tolerate happen behind my turned back.” His eyes glinted and she wondered if he knew about the bigotry towards Faunus that went on in Beacon, how she and Velvet had endured years of cruel comments. “Negativity is running high within the kingdom’s walls, especially in Beacon, as so many knew Miss Xiao Long, and regard this as a grievous betrayal on her part. I would watch your back as you go back to your dormitory. You won’t find any friends in this crowd, not as someone so close to a person whom many now to believe to be a cruel savage.”

She nodded miserably. “Yes, sir.”

As she stood alone in the elevator, the only sound in the air of the gears humming faintly, she grit her teeth. Thoughts of Adam flooded her mind—

“Oh, quit your whining— it’s just another human who thought Faunus were trash. He’s dead now, but he was an ally to the Schnee Dust Company, so it doesn’t matter. Don’t you see, Blake? This just another strike on the right side of the war: our side, for redemption, okay?” He had wiped blood off his hands—

—and then it was Yang with the darkness in her face. Her eyes flashed red with fury as she lunged forward and—

—he stabbed the human, snarling down with bitter force as blood gushed out, his eyes glittering with fury as—

—she broke his leg with merciless cruelty and he collapsed with a scream so similar to—

—the human’s as he died, Adam’s sword protruding from his neck.

Blake’s fingers curled into a fist and before she could stop herself, she had punched the elevator door, earning nothing but an intense flash of pain up her wrist and the tiniest of dents in the flawless metal. Now a mark of her pain would be available to whoever walked in here.

How can this be happening? Is my fate to relive Adam over and over until it kills me or drives me mad?

The doors slid open, and Blake fled the elevator, hating the small space and the whirling memories
enclosed within it, but they didn’t leave her behind as she scurried down the hallway, breath coming quick.

Ozpin had been right about one thing, at least: as she made her way through the hallway to her dormitory, heads popped out of doorways, glaring menace at her. She saw Cardin and Russel look out from their dorm, both of them sneering as Cardin said, “Your partner’s a psycho bitch, and she should be in jail like you.”

Ordinarily, Blake would have spat back a reply just as sharp, but she lowered her head and walked on.

*I don’t know how I can look her in the eyes now.*

On the way back, she opened up the Bond again, and there, in the middle of the hallway, fell to her knees in agony with the tide of emotion that crashed over her.

*Yang is falling apart.*
Chapter XVI - Nevermore

**Blake**

When Blake reached the dorm, true to Ozpin’s word, there were two stone-still Atlas soldiers standing on guard. Blake let out the tiniest sighs of relief as she saw that they were just robots; she didn’t have the energy to deal with more judgmental strangers she didn’t know, let alone military staff.

They blocked the door leading into the dorm with rifles as she approached, and she stopped as one of them clicked, “Access here is prohibited. Move along.”

However, before she could do anything, the door behind them swung open to reveal Ironwood, who looked at her suspiciously before recognition filled his gaze. He nodded to her and looked at the robots.

“Stand down for now,” he ordered. “Let her in and continue your guard.”

They both executed salutes, bringing down their rifles as Blake walked past them and Ironwood uneasily. He shut the door.

Blake had expected to see crying—from Ruby, definitely, and certainly for Yang. But for all the three of them talked or moved, they might as well have been statues. Yang was just sitting there on Weiss’s bed, staring at the floor as though it might crumble any second, and she was shaking all over like a leaf. Blake moved to go to her before remembering the red of her eyes, and, flinching, she went to go sit next to Weiss, who was perched on the edge of Blake’s bed.

“What did Ozpin want to talk about?” Weiss muttered as Ironwood locked the door.

Blake closed her eyes. “What just happened in the stadium.”

Weiss fell silent as the General finished locking up and turned around to them, his gaze flitting over Weiss, Blake, and Ruby, and coming to a stop on Yang. To Blake’s surprise, he didn’t start yelling. His voice was quiet.

“I’m sure,” he began, “that this was all a misunderstanding. First of all, make no mistake that, despite the circumstances, the action of intentional violence—one that completely violates the tournament’s regulations—will not be tolerated. Mr. Black is being flown back to Haven as we speak. He simply broke his leg, but…” Ironwood sighed. “It is still terrible, what happened. I’m sorry, but you’ve left us—collectively, by the wishes of the people—with no choice.”

Yang lifted her head for the first time, Ironwood’s words appearing to have sparked any scrap of fight she had left. “But he attacked me,” she insisted, just as she had before the soldiers took her away. Blake felt like she was about to vomit, remembering Adam saying those exact words so many times. “He attacked me, I saw it!”

Ironwood frowned at her. “You can say so all you like, but the fact remains that video footage and millions of viewers say otherwise.”

Ruby stood up, her face still miserable. “My sister would never do that. She would never attack someone, no matter what. If she said so, I believe her and that’s that. There’s nothing else to it.”
“I agree,” Weiss said, glaring coldly at Ironwood. “Even if that contradicts my own eyes, I know more than I know anything that Yang’s gentle; she’d never go after another student, especially so cruelly. Besides,” she added, standing up and bristling, “I’ve thought, and Winter has implied to me before, that something disastrous is coming—and very soon. Doesn’t this strike you as a little suspicious? We think bad things are coming and then Yang, who’s been outspoken about that theory, gets herself... reviled by the entire world like this?”

A flinch passed through Yang’s face before vanishing so quickly Blake wasn’t even sure she saw it, but the stab of anguish that stabbed through the Bond told her otherwise.

Ironwood’s eyes flashed and Blake thought she could see panic in them, before he quickly recovered. “Miss Schnee, whatever your sister told you, I can assure you that all is well in Vale. The two subjects of the future and the present are unrelated—we’re discussing Miss Xiao Long’s actions; any concerns about the future are irrelevant. No, this incident has nothing to do with whatever suspicions you might have about the future.”

Weiss didn’t appear moved. “Is it really? Then why do you have your entire military resting here? You must think something’s coming too, because you wouldn’t bring them here otherwise.”

Ironwood sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, addressing the whole team when he spoke, and ignoring Weiss’s statement. “You are all… highly temperamental individuals. Normally, that would be a lauded quality in a warrior, but now, it simply does not look good in your favor. Because Mr. Black is a Haven student, and he admittedly is not the most peaceful individual, I know you’ve never liked—”

“Don’t you dare imply that she attacked him because she didn’t like him personally,” Ruby snapped, her voice fiercer than Blake had ever heard. “Don’t you dare say that about her!”

Ironwood seemed to give up, blinking around at them before addressing Yang. “I will not lie to you. From what I have heard and seen preceding the incident, I know you are good students—all of you. And you, Miss Xiao Long, are no different. The staff presiding at Beacon are well aware that you would never lash out in the way you did, but that is under normal circumstance. What I personally believe, as well as what I hope this to be, is the result of prolonged stress and adrenaline, teaming up to take a toll such as this. Most people are unaware of the battlefield’s dangers: when you are fighting, your judgment can become clouded in an instant. Sometimes you see things that simply aren't there, even after the fight is over.”

Yang lifted her miserable gaze to him. “But I didn’t—”

“That’s enough!” he snarled, clearly catching her off guard. “It doesn’t matter whether you attacked him intentionally as an assault, or whether it was truly just an accident. The world witnessed you attack an innocent student: they have already drawn their own conclusions, and the damage is done. Now you most cope with the aftermath—perhaps you might regard this as lesson, because all Huntresses and Huntsmen must know how to deal with what comes next. I regret to inform you that you are disqualified from the Vytal Festival tournament.”

Blake felt like he had dealt a physical blow to her chest as she remembered all the nights of training, wondering and worrying, encouragement and hope for the tournament. All of that was wasted now, thanks to this. Complete, devastated silence filled the room. Ironwood left quickly, as if desperate to escape the bad mood, and Blake heard the guards departing with him.

She was reminded of once, when she was very small and had been with Adam, a devastating storm had ripped through the land, rattling the windows in their panes, shaking the walls. She had been terrified at the moment it happened, but the next morning, the aftermath had been worse. The
stillness and silence and having to move forward had scared her more than the storm itself. Having to face the devastation, and the consequences of reality, was more terrifying than any tragedy—at least while you were living through tragedy, your mind was only focused on survival. But healing from it was far more difficult, and now, here she was again—except this time the storm was her partner and this betrayal, relived all over again.

Yang’s voice was subdued when she spoke, but it still cut Blake like a knife to the chest. “You all believe me. You…you have to believe me. Right? I…”

She trailed off, voice wobbling, and Ruby jumped in, squeezing her tightly with one arm. “Of course we believe you, Yang. I love you, I know you’d never do what he said, okay? No matter what.”

Weiss nodded firmly. “You can be a bit outspoken at times, but at heart you’re the gentlest of us all. You have no capacity to be so ruthless. I believe you.”

In the wake of their assurances that they believed Yang’s claim, Blake’s silence was more noticeable than ever, and instantly, Ruby and Weiss’s eyes both bored into her, twin stares of angry silver and blue.

“You’re Yang’s girlfriend, she needs your comfort now more than ever— but Blake couldn’t bring herself to just believe Yang over what she had seen with her own eyes— what was so familiar to Adam— just like that.

Now Yang was looking at her and there were tears standing in the rims of her eyes, threatening to fall. She didn’t plea again, she just watched Blake silently, before saying one word, the simplest word of all, her name. “Blake.”

Every precious moment they had spent together where Yang had said her name—from Yang introducing Ruby to embracing her on the cliffs of Forever Fall to their first kiss to their first fight, where after, they had laid together, bare and without boundaries under the sheets, so close they were almost one, and Yang had whispered her name over and over—rushed through her mind. Do I trust Yang, or my past?

“I want to believe you,” she choked. “I want…”

“You can’t be serious!” Weiss’s outburst drowned her out. “Really, Blake, after all that she just went through, that’s all you’ve got to say? You want to believe her?”

Ruby looked similarly upset. “Blake, I love you and all, but you can’t seriously be thinking of believing what Ironwood said? Yang is your partner. You can tell she’s not lying, can’t you? She’d never lie to us, and especially not to you.”

Blake could feel Yang’s confusion, fear, and misery through the Bond, and as she searched, the tiniest flickerings of something else flashed through to her: a desperate honesty. Blake gave Weiss a pleading look, and she seemed to understand what Blake was asking.

“Ruby, let’s wait outside so they can talk alone,” Weiss announced, hopping off the bed, grabbing Ruby’s wrist, and all but dragging her out the door.

Once they were gone, the door clicking shut behind them, a ringing silence enveloped the room. Yang didn’t look up. She was staring at the floor, not yet crying, but she was close to it, Blake could tell. She could feel the pain she was in, as bitter and cruel as a knife.
It felt like they’d had this conversation before. About Adam.

Except then, Blake had been the silent one. “Yang,” she said finally, her voice soft and heartbroken. “Oh, Yang. What happened out there?”

“I told him, I don’t know, I don’t know,” Yang said, trembling. She banged her palm against her forehead. “I know what I saw! I saw Mercury flying at me like he wanted to kill me, so I defended myself. That’s it! I would never have just attacked him unprovoked. You know I wouldn’t.”

“That’s not what we saw, Yang,” Blake told her gently. “We saw him just standing there, and you wheeling around to break his leg.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” she cried out in torment. “I… Blake, you… you have to trust me, even against your own senses. If I don’t have that, I’m… I’m lost.”

As Blake looked away, Ozpin’s words echoed in her mind. Has your partner ever lied to you with the intention of cruel deception? If not, have your eyes ever deceived you?

Yang had never lied to her in the intention of hurting her, never. She had never hurt someone who didn’t deserve it. It was part of the reason Blake loved her. But her eyes—Blake’s eyes had deceived her more than once; with Adam and with every part of her life. And if she, a Faunus, could make humans believe that she was one of them, who was she to believe so adamantly in what she had seen, when it went against everything she knew Yang was at heart?

“I believe you,” she whispered finally. “I have to believe you. Otherwise nothing in my world makes sense.”

Yang didn’t appear as if she had even heard Blake. She began shaking even more violently than before, collapsing into tears. “They all hate me,” she sobbed. “They all think I’m someone I’m not, Blake, and I lost us the tournament. I lost us everything.

“Disqualification doesn’t matter,” Blake said. “It’s just a festival and we know that you’re a brilliant fighter. Let’s move on from that.” She lifted her hands, wiping the tears away from Yang’s cheeks with the pads of her thumbs. “Hey. It’s going to be all right.” She hesitated, remembering how—so long ago, it seemed—Yang had argued with her on the cliffs of Forever Fall, had told her that promises weren’t always broken. “I promise.”

Yang closed her eyes and didn’t respond.

“Let’s take a walk,” Blake said. “Okay?”

But Yang was silent. If she had any opposition to the idea, she didn’t voice it, and she allowed Blake to silently pull her to her feet, leading her out the door and into the hallways. Ruby and Weiss were gone, probably to go smooth things over with the other teams they were friends with. The whole time they walked, Yang didn’t speak a word. When Blake took her hand gently, she gave a jerking start, as if frightened of something that Blake couldn’t see.

As they walked along in that stifling silence, Blake afraid to even breathe too loudly, she noticed eyes peeking out of doorways—some accusatory, some pitying, some simply scared—so many of them that Blake thought they must surely be met with some scathing words or someone attacking Yang verbally, or Blake for holding her company when so many thought her a violent savage, but they made it to the courtyard unchallenged.

Once they were there, Blake led her to the fountain. The gentle spray misted her face, the night wind cold on her skin.
Yang began to shiver uncontrollably as she looked at her reflection in the water, her eyes galaxies away. In the dimming light, the bruises on her skin formed a halo, decorating her collarbones, darkening her face. There was still a gash on her cheek, bloody and open, but she didn't move to touch it. It was as if she couldn't feel it, as if she wasn't there at all. Blake felt another stirring of terror. This wasn’t her partner that she’d fallen in love with, nor was this the Yang that had been so strikingly similar to Adam. This was a Yang she didn’t know, one who seemed to be buried and silent as death itself.

"Yang, say something. Anything."

She didn't respond. The shadows seemed to gather around her, and her empty eyes were the greatest shadow of all; they were dark and clouded, completely unrecognizable, like she was dead in every way except the way that mattered. Something inside of her had broken, even more than the world’s faith in her.

"Yang, you're scaring me."

She just stood there, shaking, her hands balled into fists, utterly quiet as she looked at her reflection and her reflection looked back at her. Something terrible in her face made noiseless tears slide down Blake's cheek.

"Yang," she begged. "Please."

Yang said, "I'm fine."

And then she just crumpled gently to the ground. She was as vulnerable and defenseless as a broken-winged bird, hands clutching her side, pulling her face to her knees, so far beyond misery and crying that Blake didn't know what to do. She was bleeding out from some mortal wound inside her, but Blake couldn't heal her, couldn't save her, couldn't keep her. She crouched beside her, enveloping her in her arms, and Yang shook and shook but still, no tears came.

"Blake," Yang whispered, and in that one word, Blake heard unexplainable agony. She was running a hand through her hair over and over again, running strands through her palm and releasing it, ceaseless. "Blake. Help me. Help me," she cried, unraveling at the seams, but Blake didn't know how.

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**Weiss**

They had told Jaune’s team of Yang’s claims, and they had all believed that Yang wasn’t responsible, whatever had actually happened. Weiss had noticed Pyrrha looking more despondent than usual, sitting by herself at the back of the dorm and staring at the window, but she hadn’t questioned it. She was probably nervous about her upcoming fight in the singles round: anyone would be, after witnessing what had happened today.

After they had assured Ren, Nora, and Jaune of Yang’s innocence, Weiss and Ruby had headed off to the community kitchen, which was thankfully empty, and taken refuge on one of the couches. Ruby was angrier than Weiss had ever seen her, and it was starting to fray her at the edges. A Bond was all well and good when there was happiness or excitement; when it was this dark anger and
sadness, it felt like carrying a stone in her chest.

“My own sister…” Ruby closed her eyes and let out a deep breath before letting out a frustrated cry and throwing a cushion against the wall. “I hate this! I hate the stupid people judging her and that this is happening at all!” It smacked the wall and bounced off with a thump, and no sooner had it hit the floor than had Ruby burst into tears.

Awkwardly, Weiss leaned over and pulled her into a hug. “It’s okay, Ruby,” she whispered. “Pull yourself together. We have to be strong for Yang.”

She sniffed angrily. “I’ve heard horrible things, with the people that are talking behind our backs,” she muttered into Weiss’s sleeve. “Calling her… I don’t even want to say.”

“Don’t think about it,” Weiss advised. “We believe her, and that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah, okay. You’re right.” Ruby sat up and pulled out of Weiss’s embrace. She felt a twinge of disappointment, and firmly quashed it, seized by the fear Ruby might notice it through the Bond.

“Do you—” Weiss began, but then she was cut off by the sound of the kitchen door clicking open.

She looked up, expecting to see some sneering student, but it was just Blake.

She looked hollowed-out and empty, the lines around her eyes more pronounced than ever, her posture slumped with true exhaustion. She had to be taking this really hard. Weiss knew, vaguely, why she had been so reluctant to believe Yang at first—the subject of Adam, while it wasn’t a secret, necessarily, was treated like you might treat a bad grade on one of Oobleck’s test: you didn’t talk about it, and Ruby and Weiss knew better than to bring him up, however offhandedly. But they all knew about him, how he had been a controlling, psycho freak. Apparently, Yang’s behavior, whatever the reason, had reminded Blake of that former partner, and frightened her.

“Where’s Yang?” Ruby said immediately, pouncing on her sister’s absence. “Why isn’t she with you?”

Blake ran a hand through her hair, letting out a deep, pained breath. Her voice shook slightly. “I took her for a walk and then back to the dorm. Qrow was there. She’s talking to him now, so I left them for privacy.”

“Are you okay, Blake?” Weiss asked gently. “None of this can be easy for you.”

Blake’s eyebrows drew down in a miserable expression, and she stared at her feet, not meeting either of their gazes. “I’d like to get out of here… maybe go to quieter shop in town and get some tea, in a place where it’s empty and silent. I don’t want to be in Beacon right now, to face all these people staring and whispering when they think I can’t hear.”

“I’ll go with you, then, because we’re all together on this, but I’ve got to go after a little while, because Pyrrha’s match might be tonight in the stadium, and I swore I’d see it,” Ruby replied instantly, followed by agreement from Weiss. As they left, Weiss exchanged an anxious look with Ruby.

What happens now?
Chapter XVII - A Game of Chess

Chapter Summary

Happy Holidays, everyone!

Yang

“So,” Qrow said as she sat down on her bed. “Firecracker, why’d you do it?”

Yang stared at her feet, but she didn’t see them. All she could see was Blake’s frightened gold eyes, and the dark barrels of guns, and the sound of shattering bone ringing in her ears. “You’re here,” she said, not answering him. “Why are you here?”

“Well, I’m already in Vale for Oz, you know, so I had to stop to talk to you at some point in time… just wish it wasn’t under these circumstances, but what’s done is done, and you can only move forward. All you can ever do. I’m here because you’re my niece, and I ought to hear your side of things.” Qrow let out a rustling sigh of breath, and she was mildly surprised to hear him begin to unscrew his flask full of whiskey before apparently rethinking, and putting it away without drinking from it. “I know that we’ve never been close, kiddo. And I know you’ve never forgiven me for a lot of things, nor should you. Never forgiven me for being the one to deliver the news of Summer’s death. Or not doing more to help you and your sister out when Tai was… absent-minded. And I know you’ve never exactly been fond of any of my problems, and how I’m close to Ruby when I’m not really her blood-uncle.”

She stiffened with surprise as he went on.

“But there’s more to it than not liking me for those reasons, is there?”

Yang shook her head, throat impossibly tight. “You shouldn’t be here, Qrow,” she said in a thick voice. “Raven was never here for me, and you’re her brother, so why are you?”

“Heh, I thought so. There’s the real crux of the matter.” He began to pace the room. “You’re right. I am your mother’s sibling. But I never asked for that. Raven and I have one thing that’s very different between us.”

“Really?” He seemed to miss the anger in her voice, or maybe he was just ignoring it.

"Yeah." He stopped pacing. "She cares nothing for Remnant, but I do."

She swiveled around to look at him, eyes wide. “So now, after all these years, you want to tell me about her?” She laughed bitterly. “Now, when I can’t even care about why she left me, because all I can think about is about how I got us disqualified! That’s when you want to tell me?”

He looked stung by that. “I figure that now is when you need it the most,” he growled.

She laughed harshly. “Yeah, now’s definitely when I need it— when the whole world hates my guts and my own partner doesn’t even trust me anymore! I don’t want to hear about Raven now.
You couldn’t have told me when I actually wanted to hear about it, could you? What’s the sense in that?”

“Now’s when you need some sense knocked into you so you don’t become swallowed by your own self-pity,” he snapped. “You can’t afford that. Sure, something terrible happened, but if we all let ourselves get bogged down in grief when we got hard knocks, where would the world be? You’re part of a team, and they need you to be strong.”

“Maybe I’m tired of being strong!”

“Then you aren’t Yang. Not the one I’ve known, and you sure as hell aren’t the one that Ruby or your team knows.” His eyes narrowed. “You’re an empty shell.”

At that, her anger evaporated, leaving her drifting in a vast sea of loneliness and misery. Her words tangled in her throat, coming up broken and choked. “Qrow, I… everything’s gone wrong. I was supposed to win the tournament and go on to graduate and everything was supposed to be okay, and now…”

His eyes flickered with sympathy. “Nothing’s ever perfect, firecracker. That’s a lesson you’re learning the hard way—in fact, it’s a lesson you’ve been learning your whole life. You know life usually deals the worst cards to the best people, and bad people get away with things without their karma. But that’s the way it is, and there’s nothing we can do to change it, except changing our outlook and accepting the world for how it is.”

All Yang’s former suspicions that something bad was coming had been lost in her own sorrow, but now they surfaced again. “Could this be the result of… one of those bad people?”

His forehead wrinkled. “No, Yang,” he said, his voice even softer than before. “We all saw you break that boy’s leg. That’s on you and you alone. Perhaps you’re lying, or perhaps not—”

“I’m not lying!” she shouted. He lifted a hand in consolation, waiting for her to be quiet.

“But,” he continued, “maybe it really was all an accident on your part. God forbid I ever agree with Ironwood, but… you probably just imagined him coming at you, and retaliated in your turn. And that’s not your fault, but there is a consequence for it. Now you’ve got to deal with how it affects your life from now on. The real question you should be asking yourself is: how can I mend things between my team and I?”

Yang flinched away from him. “Blake doesn’t trust me anymore,” she whispered. “I mean, she forgave me. And she believes me, I know she does, but she saw me behave in a way that I never wanted to, and now she doesn’t trust me, and I can feel that through the Bond, and it hurts.” She hunched her shoulders down. “It hurts so bad.”

He sat next to her. “Having a partner is never easy,” he remarked, “and having a Bond is one of the hardest things you’ll ever do. It’s not just you anymore. You’re responsible for two hearts instead of one. But Blake— is that it?— she needs to realize that you’re hurting just as much as she is. Probably more.” He ran his hands down the ragged material of his pants, smoothing them out with a deep breath. “But that’s not what I came here for.”

“Then what is it?”

The edge of his mouth jerked downward in a half-frown. “Depends,” he said. “You want to wallow in your own self-pity, or get up on your feet and do something to change how you feel?”

Yang gathered a handful of the sheet in her fist, angry at him. “It looks like I haven’t got a choice,
“Oh, we always have a choice,” Qrow murmured. “I think you proved that, if anything.”

She flinched and he went on, voice smoothing over as if he hadn’t broken stride for an instant. “What happened may not have been your fault, but you did it, and what’s done is done. The past is the past, and there’s nothing we can do to change it, no matter how much we wish. All the wishing in the world won’t change what happens. But you can change what will happen by learning from this, and growing strong. You’re a tough one, kiddo, and you shouldn’t let this get you down.”

“How am I supposed to move on?”

“Who needs you more? Your pity—or your sister, partner, and teammate?” He stood up, looking her directly in the eye. “Think about it, alright? I’ll see you around, firecracker.”

Pyrrha

Pyrrha slumped back against the wall outside of the cafeteria. The lip of the window was digging into her neck, but she couldn’t bring herself to move.

*By the end of the tournament, we will need your answer.*

She frowned down at the cracked cobblestones as Ozpin’s parting words echoed in her mind. The days when her biggest worries had been how to act around Jaune, and who would recognize her in public, seemed very far behind, and very trivial. Now there was so much more to lose sleep over: Amber’s dilemma, her own choice on the matter, and now, newly, Yang’s fall from grace. Ruby had *said* Yang believed it wasn’t her fault, and Pyrrha knew sometimes you could hallucinate on the battlefield, so she believed her, but it still was worrying.

*I thought Beacon was going to be just normal school, with some disagreements among us all, not this... bitter distrust and hatred. Ironwood said war was coming, and it looks like we’re already splitting up among ourselves. Yang’s—she went after Mercury, and before today, I’d have said she wouldn’t hurt a fly, but that’s not true anymore. And even disregarding what Yang did, there’s still so much to worry about. My singles round is probably tonight, and... I have only days to figure out what I choose. My own fate, or the fate of all of Remnant. If I do choose to merge my Aura with Amber’s, and I lose myself... that’s like walking into my death, in a way. It’s easy to say fighting is courageous, but that would be the bravest thing of all, to walk into your death and know that you’re choosing to die for the greater good... I’m not that brave. I’m not brave enough to believe in destiny, that this is all going to happen the way it should no matter what happens. And if I do choose to save Remnant by agreeing to Ozpin’s proposition of merging Amber’s Aura with my own, is that the right choice, anyways? My soul would be erased. I’d be leaving behind Nora, Ren, my family and all the friends here I’ve made at Beacon...*

She closed her eyes in pain as a grinning face with hair bright as sunlight flashed in her mind’s eye. *I would lose Jaune.*

On the surface, he could be infuriating, and she *knew* it. He could be stubborn, full of himself, and
self-centered, too wrapped in his own shortcomings and pain to see others’ problems. He had chased Weiss’s heart way back in the first semester for a few brief days, ignoring how she obviously didn’t return his affections. He had let himself be bullied around by Cardin’s team. But she could see past that: to the part of him that had apologized to Weiss for his pigheaded behavior behind closed doors, who had owned up to his mistakes by coming to dance with her at prom, who had stayed up countless nights to better himself in training, helping Ren cook, helping Nora study, learning Pyrrha’s advice with unending patience. To the part of him that saw her for her, not some glorious Huntress who was untouchable. He had only ever known her as Pyrrha, plain and simple. And she loved him for it; she knew she did.

And if I told him that Ozpin wanted to thrust me into an untouchable position of power, what would he think?

He would turn into a person just like everyone else: one who thought she was flawless and untouchable, on a pedestal of her own. If people admired her so much for simply being a good Huntress, how would he react to her being a Maiden—a figure literally out of a legend? With that knowledge, it would destroy any easygoing relationship between them, and she would lose him as surely as anything.

Before she could think on it any further, she heard footsteps approaching her, and she opened her eyes to see Jaune frowning down at her, a puff of pink cotton candy held in his hand. “You’re looking like you lost a dollar and found a penny.”

“How,” she said. “Is that a pun? Because I might fight Penny tonight in the singles round?”

“No, sadly, I’m not Yang on the pun level.” He sounded mildly pleased. “It was actually unintentional. But here,” and he brandished the stick of candy towards her. She took it with a sigh. “I figure that we all could use some sugar to get us going right now. Things are kind of… yikes.”

For a moment, she panicked, thinking of her own dilemma and wondering what he knew, before she realized what he was talking about Yang. “You’re thinking of her? Her voice sounded so drained, and she flinched. “Yang, I mean? And the whole incident?”

“Ruby says Yang didn’t do it.” Jaune nudged a mound of fallen leaves with his toe, lines of worry creasing his brow. “I dunno. I’m more worried about Blake. I’m not her friend really but… I’m friends with her friends, so I guess that makes us more than acquaintances. Did you see her? How completely wrecked she looked?”

Pyrrha shook her head, eyes cast down at her hands. I’ve been worried about other things.

“She doesn’t look very good, but I guess that’s obvious, considering Yang and Blake are Bonded. I feel bad for her. She’s got to be taking this hard.” He sighed. “I don’t know what to think. Ruby was my first friend here, and I know she wouldn’t be lying about this, but…” Then he looked sharply over at her. “But enough about that.”

Pyrrha slumped down further.

Jaune’s gaze softened. “I know I said Ruby was my first friend, but… Pyrrha, you were the first person here at Beacon to really believe in me, you know? Even when I didn’t deserve it.” She opened her mouth to talk, but he went on, his voice lowering. “Weiss saw me back in the Emerald Forest and she… she left me to hang there, but you… you wanted me to be your partner. No one’s ever trusted me like that, not even family. When I told my mom and dad I’d been accepted to Beacon, they thought I was joking, and even after that, they told me not to expect too much, not to be too sad if I had to quit. My own family… and they didn’t believe in me.” He sighed heavily.
She looked at him pityingly. “I’m sure they only were worried for you,” she murmured, and then her eyes widened a fraction as he reached out, just barely, and placed his fingers over hers. It was very chilly outside, but Pyrrha didn’t notice how cold it was until she had the warmth of his hand on her own. It was rough, almost like sandpaper, but she could feel his pulse jumping in his wrist.

“And here I go again,” he said. She thought his voice sounded a little uncertain— maybe that she hadn’t reacted to him placing his hand on hers? She just looked at him encouragingly, and he went on. “Here I go again, talking about myself, when I shouldn’t be. I’m not blind, Pyrrha. I know aren’t Bonded or anything, but you’ve been so sad-looking for the past few days, before this whole Yang-thing ever happened. I’m not a star-warrior, but I’m perceptive, I guess, and you’re obviously really torn up about something, so… I won’t ask what it is because if you haven’t told me, it’s not my business, but how can I help you feel better?”

She stared at him for a moment, completely stunned, before a spark of warmth flared against the icy dread in her chest. Whatever her choice was about Amber, wherever her soul went… at least she had this moment, here with Jaune. It would always be hers, and nothing could take that away from her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, leaning into the curve of his body and resting her head on his broad shoulder. “You’re already doing it, just by being here and supporting me.”

They were silent for a long while, sitting there curled into each other as his thumb traced wobbly circles over her palm. The autumn wind whistled through the trees that were slowly becoming bare, the leaves now almost completely gone, revealing branches starkly black against the sky, smooth as bones. As two leaves, redder than blood, whisked playfully across the cobblestones, Pyrrha frowned, remembering the terrible scars disfiguring Amber’s face— and remembering the choice she still had to make.

“Jaune,” she whispered.

He stirred. “Yeah?”

At that moment— with the autumn leaves frisking together on the ground, with the wind whistling tunelessly above their heads, she realized two very stark things at the exact same time. The first was that, in only days, no matter what she chose, she would be condemning either Remnant— by choosing to not be a Maiden and letting the rest of the power fall into the assailant’s hands— or the five people she loved most in the world, her family and her team, by choosing to be a Maiden and losing her soul forever.

And the second? She realized with a sudden pang as sharp as a knife that to love him was to be cruel to him. Because… because if she did choose to be the Maiden, then she would as good as die, leaving him alone.

*I can’t do this. Not to him— and not to me.*

She pulled her hand away from his sharply, startling him into sitting up, and she curled in on herself, feeling suddenly very fragile and small— nothing like the strong Huntress that she knew she could be, the Huntress that was somewhere inside of her. “Do you believe in destiny? That our lives are guided from the moment we take our first breath, that somewhere out there, our future awaits, and we simply don’t know it? Even if that future is something that we never expected?”

Silence fell between them for a moment, so thick it could have been cut with a knife, before he sucked in a breath. “I’ve never thought about it,” he said. “I guess it’s a good idea— to some people. Personally, I’ve always thought you could change your… your destiny, though. What’s life
and freedom without the choice of being able to decide your own fate?”

Pyrrha’s eyes stung with tears. That was not what she wanted to hear at all, and as she looked back at him, Amber’s face and Jaune’s swirled together in her imagination, both of them pleading her for something. Stay, Jaune’s eyes pleaded her. Help me, shrieked Amber.

But I can’t choose both!

She hunched her shoulders. “In my mind, destiny… it’s not some fate that’s been decided before you took your first breath, where you walk along a single path, your every choice already predetermined. It’s not a changeable thing, though. You live your life, but in the end, there is one final goal that you work towards… that’s what I think.”

Jaune sounded bemused, and slightly surprised. “Okay, I can see that, if that’s what you believe. But— why?”

Anguished, she looked back at him. “Well… what would you do if you were living your life, feeling as though you had everything accomplished and your future was bright… and then some huge obstacle came along? Something you never expected, and something you couldn’t ignore… something that made you choose between your destiny, or your entire world.”

“Like— like what?”

She plunged on, her voice straining with tears in its intensity. “Or what if you could save your world in an instant, but the price was your soul and your whole life, and your destiny?”

He reached towards her, alarm in his voice now. “Pyrrha? You’re not making any sense.”

She scrambled to her feet, suddenly filled with the need to get away from him, from her decision, from the world itself. “None of this makes sense,” she wailed. “None of it, none of it at all, and it’s his fault!” Ozpin’s. “This isn’t how things were supposed to happen!”

She heard him get to his feet as well. “Pyrrha… please, look at me. I’m sorry if I upset you! I’m just trying to understand what’s bothering you so I can help, maybe.”

A bitterly cold wind gusted through the promenade in front of the school, raising goosebumps all over her skin, and she wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly struck cold with the knowledge that this wasn’t going to go away, not ever. “Jaune, I’ve always thought I was destined to become a Huntress, to help Remnant and the innocent against the Grimm. To be a hero for many when they could not do it themselves. And over the years, over my time at Beacon… it’s become clear to me that my feelings were correct. I am a Huntress, and I want to be one more than anything, but…”

She looked at him, eyes blurring, and she faltered in her resolve. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

His gaze flooded with a pity she did not want. “You taught me how to be strong, Pyrrha, and of course you can be a Huntress. You can do anything you put your mind to,” he said warmly. “If you think it’s your destiny to save Remnant, then no matter what, whatever you feel, nothing can stand in your way.”

She stared at him, shell-shocked, and her tears did overflow then. So that is my answer. I can’t let my love for life or my team stand in my way. I have to give it all up, and become the Maiden.

“Pyrrha?” He moved towards her, his voice filled with shock. “No, why are you crying? W— what did I say?”

“Stop,” she choked out.
“I—”

“I said stop!” She whirled around, her semblance pulsing as she knocked him backward and he fell down, blinking up at her in terror. “It’s… it’s… you can’t be near me anymore! All you’ll get for it is pain… I’m sorry. I’m sorry it has to be this way.”

Blinded by tears and the thick sense of shame and anguish threatening to drown her, she turned and ran.

Ruby

Night had fallen outside, and the mood inside Beacon was bleaker than Ruby had ever seen it. Between Weiss's worry, Pyrrha’s strange sorrow that they had all noticed within the last day, Yang’s predicament, Blake’s grief over her girlfriend’s situation, and the overall attitude of the kingdom itself— like the quiet before a storm— she felt like she was going to go crazy.

_One day at a time_, she told herself. _We’ll get through this one day at a time._

Poor Pyrrha had it worse off: she had a match tonight, and no one was eager to go into the stadium after the tragedy that had happened just yesterday. Ruby was alone now, walking towards the fleet of airships designated to transport people to the Amity Colosseum. Yang was alone in her room— maybe still with Qrow— and Weiss and Blake had gone off to go get tea and coffee together in the fairgrounds.

News of the incidents succeeding the tragedy that had occurred between Yang and Mercury had slowly filed in, but the general gist, Ruby understood, was this: Grimm attacks had spiked up. The tournament was delayed because Yang had been disqualified and Mercury put out of commission, but it would still proceed with Pyrrha, Lionel, Sun, Eliás, Robin, and Penny. Mercury, Emerald, Cinder, and Nigella had flown back to Haven to be with Mercury’s family.

And finally, and most devastatingly, Yang was reviled throughout most of Remnant.

Ruby shook off her dark thoughts with a twinge of shame— there were already plenty of those to go around— and caught up with Jaune as she walked outside, looking to catch an airship to the stadium. He stood just aside a long, winding line that led into one of the larger airships; shivering slightly from the cold. He looked oddly subdued, his hair hanging over his eyes, which were filled with a hopelessness that she hadn’t seen since the days when Cardin had set his team upon Jaune to bully him.

“Hey, Ruby,” he whispered.

“Hello, Jaune,” she replied sadly, sticking her hands in her pockets. “Everything’s a mess, huh?”
“You could say that.”

“I hate this,” she sighed, flinging her hands in her pockets. “I hate what my sister’s going through. She doesn’t deserve it.”

“I’m sorry about Yang. I really am,” he said, joining her in the line slowly filing into an empty airship. “I believe you, what you say about her. I know she’s a good person. But it’s still… everything’s awful. Everything’s gone wrong. Fighting an Ursa is easier than dealing with all this.”

Ruby looked up at the stars, floating in the sky beside a great, milky moon. She tried to imagine Summer Rose looking down from them at her. But the stars only looked like tiny fragments of ice sparkling in a distant blackness. Pretty to look at, but useless. Utterly, utterly useless.

She was torn from her bleak thoughts as Jaune patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. “Pyrrha went ahead of us to go to the stadium on her own,” he went on. “And… well… I hate to ask if you’ve noticed, but have you—”

“ Noticed that she’s been looking sad for the past few days? Yeah, I have.”

“Yes.”

A long silence stretched out between them as they entered the airship and took two seats near the back, perched by the wide windows.

“I talked to her yesterday,” he muttered, “and she’s all torn up about something, but she won’t tell me what it is. Ruby, she’s really hurting inside.”

“There’s something to be said about this year.” Ruby laughed bitterly. “Just as we thought we’d figured it all out after getting the jump on Roman, the pillars of both our teams collapse.”

“Hey,” he said, his voice slightly angry. “Hey, don’t think like that. When you have nothing left, you’ve got to have hope. That’s something no one can take away from you. We need to try to fix this mess with Yang, and to cheer up Pyrrha, not mope about it.”

“You’re right.” Ruby straightened up, looking at him critically. She hadn’t noticed it much, but he really had changed from the baby-faced, lame boy that she had met outside of Beacon on her first day. He’d lost a lot of his round-faced youth, and he looked more intelligent, with the sharp eyes of a Huntsman. “Hey, you know what?”

“What?”

“You could see if being the first to congratulate Pyrrha after her match helps to cheer her up. You know, she really likes you, Jaune.”

He fiddled with his thumbs. “I could try it, sure.”

“I mean it. So,” she said in a lower voice, “when were you going to tell me that you and Pyrrha have finally started moving out of the ‘just-friends’ range?”

Jaune’s eyes flew back to her, wide and slightly panicky. Despite the somberness of the evening, she had to laugh as he gasped, “How did you know?”

“Come on, Jaune. I may be denser than a rock sometimes, but I’m your friend, and it’s totally obvious. Plus, Nora says she caught you guys having a moment the other day.” She smiled at him as he blushed, confirming her thoughts that Jaune had finally begun to reciprocate Pyrrha’s crush
on him; that was all she needed to know. “I’m glad you got over Weiss, at least. Pyrrha’s good for you. She’s sweet, and she really supports you. You’re great for each other.”

“I… I don’t know about all that just yet.” Jaune’s cheeks pinked. “I’d like to support her, too, in whatever way I can. I don’t like seeing her unhappy.” Then, he gave her a mischievous grin, which was heartening to see, after his earlier dismay. “And of course I’ve gotten over Weiss. She is yours, after all, isn’t she?”

Ruby lifted her chin. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re Bonded and yes you so totally know what I’m talking about. You have a crush on her. Yang knows it, I know it, we all know it.”

Ruby sighed, abandoning the approach of denial, and looked out the window, pressing the tip of her nose to the glass. It was bitterly cold, and her breath left a steaming circle on the glass: autumn had begun to fade into an ice-locked winter. Weiss would enjoy this type of weather: brisk, cold, clear. “She’s really something, isn’t she?”

“If you follow down the path of Blake and Yang,” he said cheerily, bumping his shoulder with hers, “you’re golden. Just whip out some compliments, a dance with her, and a Bond, and that’s all you need to get the girl.”

“I don’t think I’ll be taking relationship advice from you, Jaune.”

“That’s probably a smart move.” She snorted as he looked distinctly put-out, before he peered out the window as bright lights suddenly flooded through the airship. “Hey, we’re here! That went by quickly.”

They reached their seats quickly— Jaune was surprisingly good at getting a crowd to clear out of his way, with his reputation as the kid who vomited after leaving airship-flights— and Jaune left to go sit with Ren and Nora. Ruby found a seat alone, painfully aware that, the last time she had sat in one of these seats, she had watched her sister shatter her entire world with one strike from her gauntlets.

Pyrrha, Penny, Lionel, and Robin stood at the center of the stadium, far apart; she could see from the tension in their postures that they were, at the very least, nervous for what was to come. Thoughts buzzing, Ruby cast her eyes about the stadium. The crowd seemed appeased, nothing like the wild fury they had exhibited when Yang had…

Ruby shivered, brushing the thought away. It’s done. Qrow said we can only ever keeping moving forward. That’s what I’ve got to do.

She looked around. The arena had unconsciously separated into sectors— Vale, Vacuo, Atlas, and Mistral— and she frowned as her eyes snagged on one figure sitting in the front of the Mistral crowd. Ruby’s jaw dropped, eyes going round as moons as she saw the girl. She was far away, but everything about her was unmistakable: her glittering scarlet eyes, her dark skin, her dyed hair swept back over narrow shoulders.

Emerald.

“We’re heading back to Haven,” Emerald had said after the medics had loaded Mercury up into an ambulance air-ship. “Going to see Mercury’s family so he can heal now; after…”

She had winced and so had Ruby.
“I’m sorry, Emerald,” she’d whispered. “I don’t know why she did that, I don’t know what she was thinking, but… I’m sorry for all of this. I hope Mercury recovers soon.”

Emerald had dipped her head in acknowledgement, but her face was still cold as ice, and Ruby didn’t blame her. “I appreciate your apology. I’ve got to be going now before the ship takes off without me on it. Goodbye.”

She had disappeared after that into the airship’s back doors, departing from Vale forever.

Or so Ruby thought. Her mind reeled as she saw Emerald sitting there, legs crossed, eyes narrowed. If Emerald had left because Mercury had been hurt, but she was here now… what did that mean?

The answer was there in the back of her mind. If she reached for it and formed it into a conscious thought, it would overwhelm her, because Yang had been telling the truth.

Ruby scrambled up out of her seat, darting down the aisle with her heart thudding loudly, blood roaring in her ears so that the applause of the stadium seemed very far away.

She could hear Port welcoming Lionel, Pyrrha, Penny, and Robin onto the stage as she scurried down a back aisle, and out through a maintenance door that had a warning symbol plastered over it. Shoving through the metal door, she took a deep gulp of air, thoughts spinning.

Oh, Weiss. I need you here to help me make sense of this.

As she bounded down the hall, a door swung open on the right, and a figure emerged into the light. Ruby blinked, prepared to jump to her own defense as to why she was in a maintenance hall where she wouldn’t be, before she recognized who it was.

Mercury?

He stepped back, his eyes narrowing as he saw her, his expression hardening. She looked at him, completely stunned, any words she might have had blown out of her mind.

Emerald is here and so is he... so that means... that means...

He’s not hurt at all!

In that instant, staring into his eyes, she knew that it had all been a lie, that Coco had been right, that he and Emerald were the traitors, that Yang had merely been set up to take the blame for a crime she didn’t commit. In that instant, she knew that they had lost— that Yang and Qrow and Weiss had been right; something bad was here, happening right now. In that instant, she knew they’d all been played for fools, right into a trap, despite all of Qrow’s tricks and Ozpin’s evasions.

In that instant, staring into Mercury’s eyes, she knew that someone was going to die.

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A/N: Changed up some of the Arkos scene, namely the end, because Jaune didn’t deserve to get slammed into a wall so hard that the wall broke. Plus, reality actually exists in this fic where it doesn’t in the show itself (gravity, the limits of the human body, etc.) No human could feasibly survive that without breaking their spine + Jaune needs to be unbruised and whole for what comes
later in the fic.
Chapter XVIII - When the Snow Falls

Chapter Summary

....This might be the longest chapter I've posted to date? It's around 7,000 words. I could have cut it into two, technically, but I didn't bother. Consider this my Christmas gift to you guys ^^

Close to the scene everyone has been waiting for - 3x11 - and then the good stuff after 3x12. Reviews will be very appreciated (trying to outrank TYWOTW in comments, and it has 700, woah) so jot down a thought or two when you're done. Happy Holidays! <3

Also, Sun’s eyes are totally grey, Volume 4 can get out with this electric-blue nonsense. I love grey eyes. Plus the whole blond-hair blue-eye dude is so overdone. In my opinion, he looks way cuter and noticeable with grey eyes.

Ruby

Mercury let out a low hiss of impatience, drawing her back to reality, out of the hateful depths of his eyes. “So you finally put all the pieces together,” he said. “After all this time. But it’s too late, little rose. It’s too late for you, just like it was too late for your idiot sister.”

“She didn’t hurt you at all, did she?” Ruby spat. “She never broke your leg, never attacked you unprovoked. I knew something was wrong about the situation. You just… you set her up!”

He didn't look impressed. “Are you just now figuring that out?” Mercury sneered. “You really have no idea of the things that exist in Remnant, do you? You may act a hero, but you’re just a little girl, blinded to reality by your hope for the good in everyone. You made this too easy. Befriending me and Emerald— welcoming us in!”

“Emerald’s in on this too?” Ruby was struck by a horrible thought. “You— you set up Coco and Yatsuhashi too! I knew something was wrong with their match; you made Coco see things, she thought Yatsu was in the forest when he wasn’t, and you made Yang think you were attacking her. You’re all traitors! You knew this would happen. What do you want? Why are you doing this?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Mercury growled. “It’s too late, you know. For you— for all of them. And especially for your friend. What was her name? Penny?” He laughed, an ugly, grating laugh. “I don’t think a metal-girl is going to fare too well against your friend with the polarity semblance! Isn’t a shame that you won’t be able to save her just like you weren’t able to save your sister?” His voice twisted into a taunting sneer. “Or just like you weren’t able to save your mother!”

At that, Ruby’s fury exploded, flashing through her veins like a thrill of liquid fire. With a screech, she threw herself at Mercury, her semblance’s power flooding through her as she shot forward in a blast of petals redder than blood. But she saw his eyes glint with satisfaction as she hurtled towards him, and she realized— too late— he had been goading her, and she had played right into his hands by attacking first.
His foot came up and his kick connected with her temple. Pain erupted out from the center of her head like someone had smashed a knife into her skull, and she flew backward, collapsing to the cold, hard ground. Stars swam behind her eyes.

“Idiot,” he snarled. “This is what you deserve! Emerald always hated you, and your kingdom is full of soft-headed fools just like you. You didn’t pay attention until it was too late, and now, this is your price to pay.”

He lifted his boot, and she realized, distantly, that he meant to kill her.

*I can’t fight him. Not without Crescent Rose. I’ve got to run.* The haziness vanished from her mind as her thoughts came back in a horrified deluge. *I’ve got to stop Penny and Pyrrha from fighting before someone dies!*

She dived out of the way, rolling as a lethal blast of Dust exploded behind her, singeing her cape. Scrabbling to her feet, she summoned every scrap of strength she could muster, and flew down the hallway in a spiraling blast of petals, her eyes blurring with tears of fury and desperation.

*Please, don’t let me too late to stop them!*

She shot out of the hallway, feet skidding as she rounded the corner, but she was not greeted by the typical cheering or booing as people watched a match between two combatants. All that met her ears was a horrified, empty silence, devoid of breath or words, and the slow grinding of gears as the raised platform descended to earth. The match must have just ended.

With the dim sense of a horrid premonition, Ruby took a few steps forward so she could see the full scope of the arena, and she lifted her eyes.

There was Pyrrha, stiller than a statue, her head bowed, and across from her, lying stiller than death—

No,

Ruby’s mind screamed. No! This can’t be happening! I was so close to saving her!

This is your burden to bear, sweetheart.

Her mother’s voice echoed in her ear, one of the faintest memories she had; every day, Summer’s familiar face faded from memory just a little bit more. Look, my darling one. My little Huntress, my Ruby. I know it is difficult. But you must face what is hard, or it shall overcome you.

She looked, a deluge of terror and misery crashing over her like a tidal wave at the sight that greeted her eyes. A smoking, sparking pile of metal laid in the center of the arena, two glittering knives protruding from the center. To anyone else, they would see a destroyed metalwork project. To Ruby, it was the corpse of one of the best friends she had ever had. Penny’s eyes were dilated. They didn’t even look like eyes anymore—just two dull, lifeless gems.

The silence of the arena broke into a cacophony of caterwauling and screeching.

“That girl Penny wasn’t even human—”

“Pyrrha Nikos? The star girl? It can’t be; she just slaughtered her opponent—”

“—we’ve had enough bad happenings here after what happened with that Xiao Long student!”

Ruby’s chest felt like it had caved in, and she fell to her knees, sobs wrenching out of her lungs. I’ve lost so much already! Why is this happening?
As she shook, her ears filled with the cries from the stadium, a waft of warm air ruffled her hair and a familiar scent, one of copper and oil, brushed over her. Ruby lifted her head in horror.

*Penny! I’m so sorry!*

*Too late, came the silent reply. Too late.*

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**Yang**

It was creeping close to eight now, and the sun had fallen a while ago. With the approaching winter, each day dawned shorter, colder— and, Yang thought sourly, *bitterer.*

Qrow had departed the dorm around an hour ago on the grounds that he needed to talk to Ozpin. Since then, Yang had lounged listlessly about the room, alternating between watching out the window, and lying on Blake’s bed, not having the energy to crawl into her own.

*Painful,* Yang thought. It was painful - and more than that. She was confined to this room, because everyone in the whole damn school thought she was a psychopath. Shivering, Yang buried her face in Blake's pillow, scent wreathing around her. Jasmine and wildflower shampoo. It was almost like Blake was here, except Yang knew she was alone, more alone than she had ever been, and not just physically. She could barely sense her girlfriend through their Bond, just a dum, humming sense of numbness. Not that it mattered.

Aimlessly, Yang picked up the TV remote, flipping through the channels until she reached the one broadcasting the Vytal Tournament. She caught a glimpse of footage displaying the scene from the other day, and she flinched; turning on the TV was like willingly inflicting pain upon herself— all the news stations were showing was footage of her shattering Mercury’s leg, and speculating negatively on how that might shed light onto Beacon’s teaching processes.

She had stumbled upon the middle of the match, and to her surprise, she saw that Pyrrha and Penny had been matched up. Port and Oobleck were providing running commentary on it, but as Yang watched, she saw Penny lift her arms, knives rising in the air.

Yang recoiled in horror as she watched Pyrrha's face bead with sweat, and she lashed back with enough polarity to send the stadium reeling.

“No,” she whispered aloud. “No, Pyrrha! What are you doing?”

Powerless, Yang watched as Penny fell, slashed open by her own knives, as Pyrrha staggered back, as the stadium erupted in stunned cries of fear. She flinched as she remembered her own outcasting in the stadium, how she had been the inspiration for those stunned cries when she had broken Mercury’s leg, but this was worse, this was so much worse.

*She just killed Penny,* Yang thought numbly. *She just— oh God, oh no…*

Her first instinct was to open her Scroll and to call Blake— but Blake was out on the fairgrounds; she wouldn’t be able to hear Yang’s voice over the babble. Before Yang could think of anything else to do, the TV screen began to glow red.
A loud babble of wails and shrieks blasted from the speaker as citizens from the stadium cried out in fear. Yang’s fingers clenched in on themselves as a bloodred light spilled out onto the carpet of the dorm, the Vytal festival symbol overtaken by a black chess piece over a scarlet backdrop. All of the screen was swallowed up by it, and real life: Pyrrha and Penny’s scattered remains, the night outside, the pressing silence of the dorm—all she could see was that redness surrounding the chess piece.

Like blood. Like the blood when I...

Yang bit her lip so hard that she drew blood as the thought of Mercury, screaming in agony, jumped into her mind, but before she could react, a furious voice rang out of the speakers, drowning out Oobleck and Port, and Yang’s eyes flew wide in recognition.

It was Cinder.

“This is not a tragedy,” Cinder began, snapping Yang out of her shock. “As you watch what has happened, know that this is not a senseless act of violence. It is not an accident. People of Remnant, this is the result of what you have done, of what happens when you place your faith—your aspirations, hopes, and safety—into the hands of men who claim to be our guardians. But to place so much power into the hands of those who are merely mortal is folly. This is an idle dream. The men you know as Ozpin and Ironwood are nothing more than men, and should not be revered, but seen for who they really are. They cling to their power and secrecy in the name of peace, while the Grimm tear through the streets and humans wage battles among one another. Is this peace? What you see before you, is it righteous?” Her voice rose, power surging through it. “No! You see one girl from Atlas, murdered by another paragon of virtue from Beacon! But this wasn’t a little girl. This is a synthetic robot, created in the dark and secret, made by Ironwood. I ask you, what need would Atlas have for a soldier disguised as an innocent little girl?” Her tone lowered into a sinister purr. “I don't think the Grimm can tell the difference. So we must ask ourselves: was this little robot girl intended to fight the Grimm, or to deceive and kill humans who might be taken in by her?”

_Penny would never hurt anyone. Never._ Yang lurched away from the TV, heading to the window and taking deep breaths of the icy night air, letting it sear her lungs, but it didn’t drown out Cinder’s insistent voice, what she said next. “And what, I ask you, is Ozpin teaching his students?”

Yang froze, her knees shaking.

“You all watched as one of his pupils turned onto her opponent and tried to kill him.”

Yang sank to the floor, shaking like a leaf, her breath coming in short pants.

“Huntsmen and Huntresses are honor-bound to dictate themselves with mercy and justice, but I have witnessed neither. I do not know why Beacon would resort to such means to gain victory: attempted murder, and tonight, a real death. Perhaps Ozpin felt as though obliterating Atlas in the tournament would encourage people to forget the near-tragedy, barely averted, when Grimm flooded the streets of downtown Vale only months ago. When the known criminal Roman Torchwick was let free to terrorize the streets to do as he pleased. Or perhaps this was his message to Ironwood—to a man who has inundated Vale with an entire military without reason—of who was really in charge. Honestly? I haven't the slightest clue as to who is right and who is wrong. But I know the existence of peace is fragile on Remnant, a light that is threatened by the shadow of the Grimm, and the leaders of our kingdoms are not light, but rather, shadowy themselves. They care nothing for our safety, but only what can be gained from our ignorance!” Her voice rose to fever
pitch, fury in every syllable. “Our kingdoms are on the brink of war, yet we, the citizens, are left in the dark!”

She remembered Cinder’s glare at Ozpin, the icy hatred in her eyes. Never had Yang imagined this, and she could form only one senseless thought: Cinder betrayed us. She betrayed us all. And then another thought struck her with the intensity of a lightning bolt. If Cinder’s a traitor, then that means her own team is in on this! They’re traitors too! Mercury and Emerald and Nigella… Fury quickly boiled her blood. Mercury. He lied. He lied about being hurt! He just framed me for… for this speech! I knew it!

Her attention was quickly diverted as Cinder’s voice lowered, compelling in its intensity. “So I ask you, citizens of Remnant. When the first shots are fired, who do you think you can trust?”

The screen flickered before turning back to a peaceful, calm blue that was violently in contrast to the current situation, but Yang didn’t hear anything as she stood up except the roaring of her own heartbeat.

Get a hold of yourself. Take stock of the situation… Penny is dead. Pyrrha and the teams are all in the stadium. Cinder, Mercury, Emerald… they’re all traitors, but I’m innocent. I must be.

Then a loud roar shattered the silence and her thoughts, and she spun towards the door as a high pitched alarm began to wail, coming from the TV and the real world. Yang’s eyes went wide as moons as she realized what both sounds were. That’s the roaring of a Grimm and that’s the threat alarm! But how are Grimm in Beacon? The… the defenses… She gasped as she realized. The defenses bordering the kingdoms must have been killed. But if they’re dead, then no one is here to protect us from the Grimm except… except ourselves!

Just as the alarm reached fever pitch, a Grimm burst through the door in an explosion of splinters and shards, lunging for her with lightning fast claws. Red eyes alight with hate, it swiped at her, and she dodged.

Yang didn’t think about fighting it. There was no point wasting energy fighting now when there were obviously more Grimm to come. She ducked under its bulky black body and rolled, casting her eyes frantically about the room as she went. Her Scroll was on her bed; she snatched it up, made sure Zwei was out the door, and ran, slamming the remains of the door behind her.

Ruby

When Cinder’s speech was over, Ruby’s sadness had burned away to an emotion she had never felt before. Had never had cause to feel before. It was the hunger for vengeance— Cinder had betrayed her, betrayed them, and because of it, Penny was dead.

Cinder killed her, she thought, crouched on the floor as she shook. This is her fault. Hers. Not Pyrrha’s.

A dark, smoldering fury kindled in her heart, and began working its way through her veins, but it didn’t lessen as Cinder finished her speech and panic began to flood through the stadium. It grew hotter and more violent, and she welcomed it.
She stood up just as an alarm began to peel out its wailing terror, and citizens began to flee, streaming out the allies and screaming as they went. She looked up, flinching as a voice blared out the threat level, and saw what had scared them all: at the top of the stadium, the film of the blue barrier that guarded against air raids and Grimm was faltering, because a huge Nevermore was swooping over it, attacking with talons and beak.

“The barrier…” she murmured, and then her eyes widened. If the Nevermore broke it, people would die. Ordinary citizens couldn’t hope to stand up to a Grimm. She closed her eyes, her heart beating fast, each thump like the beat of a war drum. She wasn’t seeing the Nevermore swooping down upon Pyrrha, and she didn’t consider that she was weaponless, powerless. Instead, she saw all the Grimm and faceless enemies that plagued her for so long, bearing down upon the innocents, the loved ones she had lost— Penny, Summer Rose.

Normal people can’t fight a Grimm, but I can. I can’t let Pyrrha die.

She darted out of her sheltered alcove just as the Nevermore pierced the barrier, plummeting down and crashing into the stadium floor.

Her eyes fell upon Penny’s swords. Most of them were gone, spun off and fallen from the center stage, never to be seen again. One remained plunged through where Penny’s heart would have been, if she was human. If she wasn’t a synthetic machine.

If Penny was human, she might still be alive… or she might not be, and her death would have been more gruesome than it already was.

Tears stung her eyes, hot and bitter. It was so unfair, the way people were taken from you before you ever had a chance to save them, when you were powerless to the whims of fate. Helpless. Again and again. She couldn’t help Penny now. Her friend was gone forever, spirit departed to the same place Summer Rose’s was, and Ruby couldn’t change that. But she could stop another death — right now.

Ruby snatched up the sword, yanking it from Penny’s fallen form, and looked at her one last time. May you find peace, friend. You... I hope you can be happy now.

In a burst of speed, she hurtled across the stadium, wind lashing at her face with icy cold claws. The rushing black wall of the Nevermore rushed closer— closer— closer—

She felt the sword strike its greasy feathers, plunging into the massive body of the Grimm, going deeper— flesh— and then bone, and gout of black blood fountained out from where she had rammed the sword into its body, covering her to the wrist with ichor that felt and smelled like rancid oil. The Nevermore shrieked, whipping away from Ruby, leaving Pyrrha untouched.

It fixed beady red eyes on her, shrieking in rage, and Ruby’s voice came out raw and scraped hollow with tears. “Leave her alone!”

The great head dipped down, the white skull mask glowing in the gathering night. It let out a low, threatening sound, before ruffling its feathers and taking wing again, circling around for another attack. Ruby turned around. “Pyrrha, get out of here!”

Jaune was farther behind her, struggling to his feet, and Ruby only had time to hurl a paring shot of “go!” over her shoulder before the Nevermore was bearing down upon her again, the great beak opening wide again, lined with rows and rows of flashing jagged teeth that could tear her to shreds with a single bite. She flinched, eyes closing.
I stand here or die trying.

A loud crack rang out, louder than a gunshot, followed by more of them until the air was rent with shaking sounds, followed by a loud scream and the hiss of smoke. Ruby opened her eyes in astonishment to see the Nevermore skidding to a halt only inches from her, so close she could reach out and touch the cruel curve of its beak. She didn’t. Backing away, she saw what had stopped it.

Rocket lockers had pinned it to the ground, all over its wings and spine, and students were swarming up its back like ants.

Sun and Sage and Scarlet and Neptune, Ren and Nora and Flynt and Neon, Coco and Velvet and Fox and Yatsu, Talos and Eliás and Amber and Leah… all of them clung impetuously to its spine, bristling and looking, while still shocked over Penny’s death and Cinder’s speech, courageous.

They looked, Ruby thought with a pang of something like sorrow mixed with hope, like heroes. They drew their weapons, swords and whips, guns and staffs, rapiers and… scythes. Ruby shook her head. She needed Crescent Rose on hand, and needed it now, but no sooner had the thought come then had the Nevermore shaken off its tormentors and risen up, sending students tumbling down its back like they were no more than pests.

“Get Pyrrha and Jaune to safety!” Sun shrieked from where he stood atop the Nevermore’s head, his eyes glowing with excited fervor. “Get down to the—” His sentence was broken off as the Grimm twisted around, snapping at him, and he bashed his staff over its eye, swearing all the while.

Ruby turned to Pyrrha, who was watching the fight, but Ruby got the sense she wasn’t really seeing it at all. Her gaze was glassy and shell-shocked. Jaune had disappeared from where he’d been behind her, and as Ruby glanced behind her, she saw that he had joined the onslaught of fighters trying to kill the Nevermore. Good.

“Ruby,” Pyrrha said, tearing her back to the present. “I…”

She held the tiniest scrap of Penny’s clothes in her hand, a torn shred of cloth. Ruby stared at it, a hundred memories crashing over her and receding just as quickly, leaving her heart heavier than lead.

“I'll help you find Blake, if it means anything to you. If it makes you happier. You’re my friend. I want to.”

“I don’t have very many friends, Ruby, but if I did, I would want them to talk to me about things, you know?”

“I want to stay at Beacon, at your school, with you - with my friends.”

“I’m not a girl. I’m not even human. I was made, and I don’t have a soul.”

“Thank you for being my friend, Ruby.”

“I’m sorry,” Pyrrha choked out. Tears were spilling down her face. Clearly, this— along with whatever had been plaguing her before the match— had doubled up to make her cry, which Ruby had never seen her do. Pyrrha was strong, stronger than oak. She simply didn’t cry, but here she was, sobbing fit to break her heart. “I’m so, so sorry, Ruby. I didn’t mean to… I… I—”

Ruby steeled herself. “Don’t be,” she whispered. “It’s not your fault. You were just manipulated
into it, that’s all. A piece in a game of chess. Like Yang was.”

*I sound like Qrow.* Feeling slightly better, as if a fraction of warmth and light had been returned to her—Qrow was her idol, after all—she took a deep breath before letting it go. Her eyebrows knitted together before springing apart again in realization. “Yang was framed in a match too,” she muttered. “And… and Cinder was talking on the microphone. She’s a—”

“Traitor,” Jaune’s voice came from behind Ruby, weary and curdled into a tired hatred. “She is. A traitor to all of us.”

They had succeeded in killing the Nevermore, Ruby saw, and she stumbled away from where Pyrrha and Jaune were talking to each other in low, urgent voices, conversing rapidly to put together the pieces of the puzzle: Cinder’s betrayal, Yang’s attack, the Grimm, the speech, and Penny’s death.

Suddenly exhausted, she slumped, pressing her hands into the sides of her skull. Pain bounced around her brain in jagged shards, and she didn’t know who to grieve for first, or if she had any right to be grieving at all. She needed to find Weiss. She needed to find Yang. She needed to find Blake. She—

“Ruby!” In the brief moment of quiet, Sun bounded over, propping her up on his steady shoulder as she swayed on her feet. “Hey, don’t go passing out on me!” His hand clasped her arm, and she looked up at him. Concern glimmered in his gray eyes. “We need you here. Yang’d kill me if I let you get hurt. Are you okay?”

She wavered for a second before steeling herself. “No. But I will be.”

“You don’t look okay, that’s all. Do you need anything?” He didn’t let her go, holding her up as if she was a child, still worried, and she shook him off with a twinge of irritation.

“I can stand up, Sun. I’m not hurt or anything.” He let go, and she reached in her pocket, rummaging around until she fished out what she was looking for: her Scroll. She opened it up. Miraculously, it was still functioning, despite how Mercury had shot at it, even though the screen was darker and spiderwebbed with cracks. She punched in her rocket locker code, jumping a little as it smashed into the arena floor seconds later, popping open with a hiss to reveal Crescent Rose, which glimmered like blood in the strengthening starlight.

“Hey!” A shout rang out from Sage, startling her as she removed it from its holder and popped it into its full form, the blade hissing as it cut through displaced air. “There’s more Grimm coming. The sky is full of them. The kingdom’s defenses must be down!”

Eliás sprang nimbly onto one of the lockers, swearing loudly as he got a glimpse of whatever lay beyond the arena’s walls. “We’ve got bigger worries than that,” he told them all grimly. “Look up there.”

They all looked up in unison. Ruby was glad of Crescent Rose as she saw dozens of Grimm standing like dark sentinels on the edge of the arena, but these weren’t the typical Grimm—not Beowolves or Ursai or Nevermores. They were tall, their heads bone-white and jutting with cruel-looking horns, their four-legged bodies pronged with spiky, black-feathered wings. As she watched, one lifted its head to the full moon, and gave a long, unearthly wail, that sounded like a mixture of a bird’s call and a lion’s snarling roar.

“Well, it’s a whole flock of them, so you better remember their weaknesses real fast. I remember that their underbellies don’t have plating, but that’s it. What do we do?”

“We fight,” Ren replied. “What else to do?”

As she watched them, Ruby’s heart suddenly climbed to her throat in realization. So all these months— all this time— we’ve been fretting over the big ‘thing’ that was going to happen, the secret that Qrow and Ozpin were hiding, the premonition that Yang had of disaster. And this is it. I’m sure of it. But this is just the beginning. Cinder triggered a mutiny. The kingdom’s defenses are down, the military is unleashed on the kingdom, and every single person across Remnant is feeling badly because of Penny— She took a deep breath. It’s here and I’ve got to face it. Tonight is going to be terrible. I just need to survive it. I will. I have to. And my team— oh, I’ve got to make sure they’re safe!

However, just as the first of the Griffons dived down into the stadium, claws outstretched as it shrieked, a gunshot rang out and it crashed to the ground, twitching. Blood spurted out from the gaping hole in its belly before it went still and faded into dark smoke. Stunned, Ruby whirled around to see Oobleck standing there, looking stern.

“Students.” He lowered his gun, worry creasing his brows. “You all need to go. It is no longer safe here. Board an airship and return to Beacon. It should be safer there, but…” He’s shook his head. “I don’t know. I just know you can’t stay here.”

It was a sign of how much the night had already hurt them that none of them argued. They all took off, one after the other: Sun, Neptune, Sage, Scarlet, Ren, Nora, Talos, Eliáš, Amber, Leah, Fox, Coco, Velvet, Yatsu, Neon, Flynt… disappearing into the depths of the stadium. With a last glance backwards at the rocket lockers, standing like silent sentinels, Ruby went after them, leaving Oobleck alone in the dark stadium, filled with swirling, shrieking Griffons.

Outside the stadium, it was like someone had flipped a switch, turning it from autumn to winter in one clean change. Snow was falling, and the air was so cold it felt like a knife to the lungs whenever you breathed in.

Ruby’s grip on Crescent Rose was stiff, ice-locked; her fingers were numb, and they didn’t feel like a part of her, just lumps of ice. The pack of students skidded to a halt outside. It was deathly silent outside— all the citizens had been evacuated, and they were the only ones left. Breath smoking, Ruby halted, looking out across the sky.

“You should have already left this place.”

A deep, grave voice came from behind them, and along with the others, Ruby spun to see the General striding out from the dark shadows of an alley, his face weary. “You should have left with the other citizens,” he repeated. “It’s not safe for you here. Not in the skies, nor on the ground.”

“We’re Huntsmen and Huntresses,” Jaune pointed out, his voice hard as flint. “We’re not regular citizens.”

“Huntsmen and Huntresses in training,” Ironwood corrected him flatly. “Your place is to go home and survive tonight. Pointless sacrifices… your school, and your duty, doesn’t ask you for that.”
“What’s going on?” Ruby already knew, but she asked anyways, some part of her that still needed comfort wanting to hear the answer from an adult. Ironwood’s face softened fractionally.

“An individual posing as a student, the one we all heard making her speech, has gone rogue, using Torchwick to commandeer my fleet of airships, releasing Grimm all over Vale. The White Fang is at Beacon as well. It appears not as though they are trying to take over the kingdom. Rather, they seem to be bent on wreaking destruction. So I’m going to regain control of the sky.” His mouth thinned out as he raised his gun. “But there is no place for heroics. You can fight for your school, your kingdom… but if I were you, I’d save yourselves.”

He turned around with one last look flooded with graveness and headed into the yawning mouth of an airship, lights glowing like eyes through the darkness, leaving the group standing there, alone in the night.

“I don’t know about you,” Sun said, breaking the silence as the airship whirred, gearing up to take off, “but I’m no coward, and I’m not abandoning Beacon. Whether it’s my school or not.” His gray eyes swept over them. “I’m going back down there to fight, even if I’m the only one.”

“As will I,” Sage said, followed by somber agreement from Scarlet and Neptune.

They all gave their words, Team TEAL and CFVY and JNPR and Flynt, all of them, until the only ones left were Neon, Pyrrha, and Ruby.

Sun’s tail lashed, and he looked at them through narrow eyes. “What about you?”

Neon flashed him a look of spite, her tail switching side to side just as irritably as his was. “Don’t go getting all high and righteous on me, Wukong. It’s not my school, and I could care less for the idiots in it, but I’m not scared. I’ll fight, if only to get you off my back.”

Ruby nodded, not really seeing him as her mind flipped around with a hundred different thoughts. “Yeah, I’m coming to fight too. Of course.”

“Pyrrha?” Jaune stepped forward, his face uncertain. “Are you…”

“She deceived me,” Pyrrha said, her voice hard and clear. “Cinder tricked me into… into what I did. And Beacon is my home. To not fight would be to betray everyone that has sheltered me and all the vows I have taken. I’ll come with you.”

Sun’s expression was relieved; despite how tough he had acted, it was obvious that he was just as frightened as the rest of them. “Okay. Good. That’s great. We’ll— we’ll board an airship to Beacon and then fight when we get there. Let’s go!”

They all ran after him. As she went, Ruby heard Jaune and Pyrrha murmuring to each other, voices concealed in the clatter of weapons and breathing.

Pyrrha spoke first, her voice hushed. “Jaune, I’m sorry for hurting you the other day.”

“What? No, no, it’s okay, I don’t care about that at all.” Pause. “I just... I'm worried about you, Pyrrha. Not me. What about you— are you okay?”

“Everything tonight was just a shock. It’s moving so fast, like a flood. It’s hard to keep my head above the water, Jaune, but I’ll manage.”

“You seemed so sad. And then you almost let the Nevermore kill you—”
“I… I’m sorry for it. If there’s a chance to explain everything, I swear I will. But tonight, we’ve got to fight.”

“I just want to make sure you’re alright.”

“With you here,” she said grimly, “I will be.”

Ruby ducked her head, heart shuddering with pain. The way they had spoken, both of them hesitantly but so tenderly - there was a question waiting to be asked and answered there, but neither of them, it seemed, was eager to broach the subject first. Just as Ruby felt about...

She broke off the thought as quickly as it started. *I hope Weiss is okay.*

They entered the airship, filing down the aisles and taking seats as it took off. It was warmer inside, but not by much, and Ruby trailed after Sun as they both went to the front of the airship, not taking seats and looking out at the unforgiving night sky.

He was silent for a long while, his mouth working, eyes dark with fear for what lay ahead. She noticed idly that he had taken out his staff and unfolded it, and the acute reality of what was happening suddenly slapped her in the face with the force of a real blow. *My kingdom is under attack. We could die. Actually die tonight.*

“Ruby, I’m sorry about Penny.” He looked over, face sagging with a new weariness as he touched her shoulder briefly. “I know you two were close.”

Ruby swallowed back a rising lump of grief. “Thanks, Sun.”

They were quiet, looking out at the night. Ironwood’s ship, Ruby saw, was far ahead of them, soaring up into the sky with its headlights blazing, guns at the ready. Sun looked over, about to say something, when he was interrupted.

A bloodcurdling scream echoed faintly through the air as the ship exploded right in front of their eyes. A great plume of billowing black and gold fire erupted into the night like a star going into a supernova, and a blast of heat shivered through their ship.

“The General was in that ship!” Sun let out a choked gasp. “Oh, hell. Ironwood—”

“Is burning alive right now.” Eliás came up beside them, his face pale and full of terror, but Ruby could only stare in stupefied horror at the fiery mushroom cloud of smoke and ash in the sky.

The General, whom her uncle had hated. The General, who had a hand in the creation of one of the best friends she had ever known. Of Penny… Penny, who she couldn’t mourn someone who hadn’t died: Penny had never been alive in the strictest sense of the word.

Ruby watched, separated by transparent glass, barely aware of Sun letting out a horrified little noise, as the ship went up in flame and plummeted through the cold night sky. There was a visceral, frightening beauty in the sight, like a star falling to earth, but as she watched, cold fear chilled her veins. A single shape that looked horribly human glowed in the fire before turning to char and vanishing on the bitter winter wind.

“The General is dead,” Sun said, stunned fear in his voice. “But how? Who made the ship explode like that? No one else was in there with him except the… the robots…” His face paled as he realized. “No. No, oh God, don’t tell me that the woman over the loudspeaker in the stadium managed to get a hold of the entire mechanized military to turn against us.”

“She did,” Eliás snarled. “She must have. That’s more we’ve got to fight, alongside the Grimm.
What else will tonight bring?"

Ruby’s Scroll suddenly gave off two short, sharp buzzes. In a daze, fingers fumbling, she checked it, fingers slipping against the cut glass where Mercury had shattered the screen. It wasn’t a message, or a call— it was a pulsing, dark red notification, only activated when a teammate’s life was in danger, sent automatically from their Scrolls. At the same moment, Ruby’s Bond shivered like an electric shock had gone through it, filled with terror and fury.


“What is it?” Sun demanded as she stared in horror at her Scroll, before his eyes caught Blake’s name and he stiffened. “Ruby, what’s happened, is Blake okay?”

“Blake and Weiss,” she managed. “Something bad must have just happened back at Beacon.”

There was ice in her veins. As she read through the alert, checking Blake and Weiss’s locations to see that they were currently moving rapidly and haphazardly over the courtyard— surely engaged in battle— she expected the ice to melt, to give way to horror and concern. But it didn’t. It just grew colder and colder.

*I have lived through the death of my mother. I have watched my sister be framed for a crime she didn’t commit. I have seen my best friend killed by my other friend. I watched the General die.*

*Now it’s my turn to look death in the eye like they did because it will not end this way. It won’t. I won’t let it.*

She didn’t think about being brave, or risk to her life. She stuffed the Scroll in her pocket, checking that Crescent Rose was attached to the holder on her hip, and she took off, nearly flying down the aisle to the door, tearing past Fox and Eliás and Scarlet, who let out startled cries as she passed. Sun shouted something after her, but she didn’t stop to listen as she sprinted out the doors.

She stopped at the edge of the airship, only for a dizzying heartbeat’s moment. She was a Huntress, but even she felt fear. The sky was so wide… and the way down was so far.

The stars were twinkling like a hand had swept her up into heaven and freed her among the countless white lights, and she was up so high. Even though she believed, knew, that her mom was watching her from some land beyond, some afterlife full of light and love— that wouldn’t save her if this all went terribly wrong.

*I’m doing this for them. My team and the people I love. Whatever happens to me… I have to try to stop him. This all began with us, Torchwick and I. Now… I’ve got to end it. Mom, wherever you are, please keep me safe.*

With that thought, Ruby took a deep breath before leaping.

The solid ground was ripped away from her feet and the night sky wrapped her up in its arms, shooting her upward like a cork popped from a bottle. She knew flight for an instant, the feeling of wind buoying her up, bringing tears to her eyes, freedom and weightlessness at its most pure, and then she was falling so fast that the earth and sky tumbled in and out of her view in a dark and light blur. Then shock jolted up her legs as she slammed, just barely making it, on the edge of the Amity Colosseum. She wobbled on the edge, falling to her knees and gasping in air, before rising shakily to her feet and looking around. The airship with her friends was already a speck of silver, fading
away into the night.

She was alone in the arena.

The first time she’d visited, it had seemed like a place of fun and wonder, excitement and glory. Now all it would ever hold in memory was pain and death— her sister’s downfall, Penny’s demise, the place where she had first realized Cinder was a traitor to them all.

Now that night had fallen and no one was here to man the stadium’s cheery appearance, it appeared decrepit, abandoned. It was like a scene from a horror movie— eerily dark, eerily silent— the shadows looming and dancing on the walls like black flames. She shivered before warily moving forward, summoning up her courage, and breaking into a flat-out sprint.

It was completely devoid of life as she ran on, through twisting aisles and dark passages. The only sign of deviation from the unrelenting darkness was what she saw when she passed the broadcasting room. Sparks flew from disconnected wires and hastily-formed connections. So that was what Mercury had been doing in the room— hacking the equip so Cinder could relay her message. Not that it mattered now.

Finally— finally— she reached the broad circle of the main stadium. This place of nightmares. She closed her eyes for a second, seeing the light fade from Penny’s eyes, Yang looking up in sheer terror, and two hot tears streaked down her cheeks.

_I loved you both and I let you down._

Shaking the thoughts away and focusing until everything was sharp and clear, she started towards her goal. The rocket lockers were still in the middle of the arena, dark black feathers scattered around. The skull of a dissolved Griffon lay, bleached-bone white and shining bright in the moonlight, lay near the shadowy crevices of the corners. The professors were gone— Ruby was utterly alone.

She reached the locker, and as she paused, hand on the number-pad, a dizzying flood of sheer terror throbbed in her chest.

_Am I really doing this? Am I really crazy enough to get on a rocket locker and go flying off to who knows where in the sky, risking my life for the tiniest chance I could disarm Torchwick... even kill him?_

_Do I have the heartlessness to kill someone at all?_

A pang of fury shook her suddenly, and she knew that wherever Weiss was, something to anger her had just occurred. _I’m not crazy. I’m a leader for my team, my family... and I have to. I’ve got to it — for her._

She hooked the serrated blade of Crescent Rose around the top of the locker, wiggling it around to make sure there was no chance it would slip and send her plummeting to a certain demise, before hooking her feet into the locked trigger and wrapping icy cold fingers around the handle. Fingers shaking, she punched in a number, one that would send it flying back to Beacon, and gritted her teeth.

Her cry was lost in the uproar of deafening noise as the locker shot upward like a cork popped from a bottle. The bitter iciness of the wind scoured at her face, feeling like a live creature that was digging its claws into her flesh, peeling back her eyelids and lashing into her.

She forced herself to cling tighter to the shuddering locker, looking around in the night sky. The air
smelled of bitter ash, still floating around in papery scraps like snow, from the explosion of Ironwood’s ship.

*There!*

She saw an airship gliding serenely through the sky, drawing closer and closer by the second. Tensing up, Ruby stared at the night flying around her, beneath her. Cinder had set it all up like a chess game, carefully putting everything into place, before making the final devastating move to crush everyone. She had counted on everything— the military, Ozpin, the reactions of the people, the Grimm.

But she hadn’t counted on Ruby.

She looked at the glittering dark ship rushing towards her, red landing lights flashing like the eyes of Grimm in the shadowy night. She could see the flicker of movement at the dashboard— Torchwick, who didn’t know she was coming, who hadn’t counted on her, either.

She thought, *I am the catalyst. I am the unexpected.*

Then she leapt.
oooh boy, here goes 2017.

As Blake stormed out of the teashop, Weiss in tow, her mind was a dull buzz of fury and fear.

_Cinder has betrayed us all._

She burst out of the double doors through the thick crowd of milling, whispering people, snarling at them to get out of the way, but the instant her foot hit the threshold, she reeled back.

Outside was complete and utter chaos. The distant beating of war drums echoed through the air, and shrieks rose into the night, alarms wailing their shrill cries as panic began to set in. Smoke smothered the air, and fires burned brightly in the dark night, reflecting off the glittering shards of broken glass that were scattered along the paths. The fairground was erupting in riots as Grimm tore through the streets, and people took advantage of the confusion to steal before fleeing the danger.

“We have to get back to Beacon,” Blake choked out, and Weiss let go of her with a muttered curse. Under other circumstances, Blake would have been startled— Weiss had never sworn before— but now, she couldn’t see or hear anything but the chaos erupting in violence around her.

Suddenly, Blake saw a flash of white and the whir of beating wings above her head. She dropped to the ground, feeling the talons of a Nevermore swoop by her hair, snagging a few strands as it flew off, pulling back up into the shattered night with a high pitched scream of fury. She remembered another time when a Nevermore _had_ caught her, swooping her into the sky above Mountain Glenn. She had been lucky not to die then, but this fate almost seemed worse.

“Blake!” Weiss’s voice sounded in her ear, broken by tears. “We have to get out of here before we get hurt; we don’t have our weapons!”

Blake looked up and felt her heart drop down to her stomach as she saw a student rising into the air, screaming and writhing in the talons of the Nevermore that had swooped down on her. As she watched, the bird gave a loud, unearthly shriek before snapping the student around in the air with a vicious jerk of its talons. With a sickening crack, they went limp and didn’t move again.

“Let’s go!” Weiss snarled, pulling her along, but Blake stopped short as something occurred to her, piercing through her thoughts like a dazzling strike of lightning.

_Yang is back at school._

“We need to go to Beacon _now_,” she whispered.

“No! We need to catch an airship to the stadium; Ruby is in danger!” Weiss shouted hotly. “You saw what happened; it’s too risky for her to be there. I’m not leaving her—”

“We can’t get an airship, the skies are full of Grimm, for Vale’s sake—”
“That doesn’t matter if she’s in trouble. We need to go now before it’s too late!”

Blake squeezed Weiss’s hand, stopping her and looking directly in her eyes, which were a frightened blue. “Weiss, stop. She can take care of herself; she’s our leader. She doesn’t need protection. I know how you feel, but you’ve got to trust her. We need to get to Beacon before people die!”

Before Yang gets hurt.

“People are already dying,” Weiss snapped, but her face was stricken, and Blake realized that her anger was fueled by fear. Weiss had never seen someone die, and tonight, after watching Penny be slaughtered so brutally… it didn’t matter that Penny wasn’t human, or that her death was unintentional. It had to be frightening. Blake was used to death; she had killed for Ayran, she’d killed Ayran— but Weiss hadn’t seen someone she knew directly die in front of her eyes… and tonight she had.

Opening up her Scroll, Blake punched in her rocket locker’s code, and Weiss followed suit. She put her Scroll away, waiting; each second stretched on with an agonizing slowness, so that every minute seemed like an eternity filled with the screams and cries of people running through the fairgrounds. As they waited in a tense, prickling silence— amid the shrieking and wailing of the townsfolk— Blake’s Scroll began to buzz sharply in her pocket. Fingers shaking, she ripped it out and focused on the glowing screen. Blake’s heart almost seemed to crack with relief as she saw it was Yang calling her. Even if her partner was still heartbroken, and broken, in more ways than one ever since the fight with Mercury, Blake pushed all those thoughts aside to focus on the present. She could hear Weiss in the background, opening up both rocket lockers and retrieving their respective weapons, but Blake was only focused on the Scroll in her hand, and she waved Weiss away as she anxiously pressed Gambol Shroud into her palm, Myrtenaster gleaming a dangerous silver in the other.

She put it up to her ear, plugging the other with one hand, pacing anxiously over the broken glass. “Oh, Yang, thank God you’re alright. Did you…”

“Hear Cinder’s speech?” There was a rustling and the sound of gauntlets cocking as the bullets loaded into their chambers on Yang’s end. Her voice shook slightly. “Yeah, I did. She betrayed us, Blake. And that’s not all. If Cinder betrayed us and Mercury’s on her side, then I never really harmed him… this was all part of their plan!”

“You’re innocent.” Blake’s heart jumped into the top of her throat. “That means—”

“You all were tricked. Or… I was tricked. It doesn’t matter.” Yang paused. “I’m getting out of Beacon, Blake.”

She’s not like Adam; she’s not. Blake’s mood became more somber as she glanced around. “Alright. Good. Don’t worry about what Cinder did right now. Your safety is my concern, not Cinder’s betrayal or whatever Mercury did.”

A sigh. “Yes, I’m safe. I’m on my way out of the dorm now. Are you still with Weiss at the fairgrounds? Are you safe?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Are you okay? What is happening at Beacon?”

There was a long pause of hesitation, and Blake’s ears pricked, straining against her bow. She could hear Yang’s bated breath, and a dizzying surge of panic shot through the Bond, nauseating her. She clasped the Scroll more closely to her ear, her voice a growl when she spoke. “Yang,
what’s happening?"

Silence from Yang's end of the line. The tightness in Blake's chest, the one that she had thought of as one end of a cord tying her to Yang, had pulled so taut that it was strangling her heart. Every breath felt like it was prolonging strangulation. Holding the Scroll still, numb, she stumbled away from Weiss, pushing through a knot of screaming citizens near a shattered storefront, and passed to the front of the fairgrounds. All she could think of was air, getting air into her lungs to breathe, getting away from this chaotic crowd of panic, so she could hear Yang and recover.

She pushed past the fairground gates and half-tumbled out into the night. Out here, it was more obvious that the weather had declined, and a mixture of rain and snow battered her viciously as she sloshed her way off the main path, into the surrounding grass around the fairground. For a moment the pain in her chest eased, and she straightened up with a heaving breath. Sleet was sheeting down, soaking her hair and clothes. She gasped, her heart stuttering with a mixture of terror and desperation. Was this just the Bond affecting her? She had never felt anything like this, even when Yang had been at her worst after the fight with Mercury, even when she’d been injured and Blake had ached with her pain.

The Scroll slipped slightly in her hand, reminding her that it was there. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Yang spoke, her voice barely more than a breath. “Blake, I… it’s the White Fang.” Her tone gentled. “I can see members of the Fang outside, releasing Grimm into the school. There’s one in the dorm right now. I had to get out of there. They’re here, causing all of this.”

The cord snapped.

For a moment everything went white, the world around her bleaching through as if with acid. Blake jackknifed to her knees, hearing Weiss running up behind her, calling her name out in concern. She turned around, waving the heiress away, but she felt like she was shattering. When the spasms had passed, she staggered to her feet and blindly away from her teammate, as if trying to outrace her own pain. Blake’s heartbeat seemed to drown out every other noise, each thump separated by an ocean of strangling silence. *The White Fang has followed me to Beacon. If they're here—*

*Adam cannot be here. He can’t. I...  

“Where are you?” Blake asked desperately, struggling to form the words.

“Heading outside. I have two working arms, two weapons, Blake, and I’m not going to let this slide past me, okay? You need to concentrate on fighting, too. I’ll be alright.” Yang seemed like she was trying to convince herself. “Please, don’t risk yourself.”

Blake’s breath came in shallow huffs. “I’m coming there, I don’t care if there’s White Fang members, you have to be safe—”

“No,” Yang snapped instantly, making Blake freeze. “Don’t play the hero, Blake! You need to stay alive, okay? Don’t risk yourself trying to come save me. I’ll be okay. I know you’re worried after what happened, but I’ll take care of myself.”

“Yang, I love you,” Blake whispered. "Please... you know..."

Yang must have realized what was scaring her so much, for a burst of pain flickered through the Bond. "Adam," she said hoarsely, her voice wavering. There was a long silence, and then Yang relented, her voice filled with so much emotion that it said all the words she could never say, the Bond trembling with so much anguish that Blake thought surely she must voice it or die. “I love you, too. Stay safe, Blake.”
The line went dead with a long crackle, and Blake felt her eyes filling with hot tears. She scolded herself—now, of all times, wasn’t the time to be weak; she had a mission to accomplish, and she would see it through to its end. Beacon couldn’t be hurt; it was her home, dearer to her than any place. The place that had opened its arms and offered her refuge after her desperate flight from Adam and Ayran. Now, she had to fight for it as it had fought for her.

Please help us, she prayed, lifting her eyes to the sky, blinking up at the stars completely obscured in a thick pall of smoke and bitter winter clouds. Mother, Father... Yang believes that you watch over me, to make sure I’m safe... so now I need help. You have to make sure my school, Yang, and my team is safe. Can you hear me? Please... watch over her, too.

As if in reply, the first freezing flakes began to fall.

They ran. They ran fast and far, Weiss never more than a step behind her, through the night, the starlight fading more and more each minute as the clouds obscured the sky, the snow falling more thickly.

And as they went, a scene of terror unfolded around them.

Cinder’s speech obviously was intended to trigger a ripple effect, but instead of a ripple, it was like a tsunami that only got worse as they proceeded further into the kingdom. The widespread destruction was already more than she had expected. The Grimm had obviously broken through the kingdom’s defenses—something that hadn’t ever happened in the long, violent history of Remnant. The military soldiers, despite how long they had been in Vale, were being cut down by the sheer numbers of Grimm like they were little more than a child’s playtoys.

After they passed a broken-down home where the door was ripped off its hinges, the dark, putrid stench of Grimm fouling the air, Blake heard a child—one that sounded no more than six years old, by the sounds of it—squalling in terror, screaming for his parents. “Momma! Daddy!”

Fearing the worst, Blake moved forward, before stopping and glancing sidelong at Weiss. “Should we go in? What if there are more Grimm inside?”

Weiss was already moving into the home. “It’s a child, Blake, we’re Huntresses,” she snapped. “This is our duty.”

She picked her way into the shadowy home carefully, and Blake shone her Scroll for light. They passed two corpses on the way in, bleeding out from the Grimm attacks, and Blake clenched her teeth, looking away. Those corpses could have been anyone.

They went down a hall before Weiss gave a little shriek and rushed into a room on the right. “Blake! Come here, quick!”

She followed Weiss, albeit more warily, and her eyes widened. The child they had heard screaming was lying on his back in the middle of the home, and Blake’s Scroll-light caught the gleam of a dark and oily stain on the floor, one that was slowly spreading. Blood.
She gasped as she saw that the child— young, no older than she had been when Brian and Maria had died, one after the other— had a gaping wound in his chest, torn open by a Beowolf. She recognized the wolf’s long, dark hairs all over the carpet, and it was long gone from the wreck of the home, having already fed on all the negativity. A worm of hatred opened in Blake’s chest, growing live and hot, like a tiny flower of flame. Cinder did this. Her actions killed this child, and God knows how many else!

Then her anger was snuffed out by an ice cold chill of fear. Every second we waste is a second that Yang could be in danger.

Weiss was crouched next to the child, her body trembling as if with cold. The windows of the room were shattered, and cold air poured in, snow mixing with the blood on the carpet. White and red. Blake couldn’t bear to move forward, feeling as if she were caught in a terrible nightmare from which she could not wake up.

“Momma,” the child whispered, blood bubbling from the bloody cavity of his chest, his voice little more than a broken wheeze. “I couldn’t fight the Grimm and help… I’m sorry, Momma…”

“Stay awake, please,” Weiss urged the little boy, her voice scared and shaking, so different from her usual composure of stoic strength. “Don’t close your eyes! We can help you…”

But it was too late; as they watched, he grew quiet and turned his head away with a quiet sigh, something in his eyes flickering and dying before they stared sightlessly up at the ceiling of his ruined home. Another casualty of Cinder’s actions, Blake thought, stunned. Another person we failed to save.

“Those corpses we passed on the way in,” Blake whispered in horror. “His parents.”

Weiss had already gotten up and fled the home. Blake followed, mind numb with shock, and she saw Weiss stagger to the side of the road, gagging. Blake heard her retching in the bushes before she stumbled back to Blake’s side, her eyes glassy and horrified. “I’ve seen a lot in my life,” she said hoarsely. “But I can’t believe what I’ve just seen.”

“Three lives— gone just like that,” Blake murmured, not mentioning that, as one of Ayran’s lieutenants and the partner to his trusted second in command, she had seen all that and worse.

Weiss straightened, her face hard with anger. “It’ll be more if we don’t hurry. We need to get to Beacon,” she repeated, before taking off in a streak of white.

Leaving shadows and glyphs behind, they sprinted even faster this time, running until Blake’s breath came harsh and hot in her throat. By the time they reached Beacon, the time had crept to around ten, and Blake skidded to a halt next to Weiss, Gambol Shroud bearing a comforting weight in her palm. Usually at this time we’d all be in the dorm. Weiss would be practicing her glyphs on the ceiling or studying. Ruby would be watching videos about scythes or people wiping out with their weapons. At this time, I would be curled up in bed with homework or a book. Yang would be beside me with that stupid dog of hers and Ruby’s, tracing words onto my skin...

The snow was falling even more thickly now, and Weiss suddenly gripped her arm. “Cinder must have busted Torchwick out of jail somehow,” she said in a horrified breath. “Look at the sky.”

Blake looked, but she didn’t feel anything; too many shocks to her system at once had left her numb and cold like icy water. The stars above were blotted out by airships whizzing overhead, but these obviously weren’t military regulated. The doors opened even as she watched, releasing Grimm into the dark night. Torchwick must have commandeered the fleet for his own; somehow,
he had hacked them, turning all the Paladins and Atlesians soldiers to the wrong side. Atlas was
gone— was the *enemy*. The only ones left to protect Beacon…

“We,” she said aloud, breath smoking in the bitter cold. “We’re the only ones left.”

“We’d better get going.” Weiss’s face was pale with fright, but she didn’t voice the fact that they
could very well die within the hour. “There’s still students inside without weapons, and we need to
find Yang, too. The Grimm are in the school, she said—”

“I know the White Fang is here,” Blake said bitterly as Weiss’s voice faded in discomfort. “You
don’t need to protect me.”

Weiss laid a hand briefly on Blake’s shoulder. “I know I don’t.”

They took off into the fray within the courtyard. Already, it was thick with brutal fighting; the kids
from the arena were here fighting the Grimm, but they weren’t having much luck with it. It was
like a Bosch painting of hell, filled with screaming and fighting, corpses lying half-eaten in the
snow, the thick stench of Grimm corrupting the area. Snow and blood coalesced in the pockmarked
ground to form a frothy pink foam, and Blake shuddered. *Cast into hell.* Grimm, robots, and White
Fang members alike thronged through the courtyard, and the Huntsmen and Huntresses in training
were barely able to suppress the tide.

Blake threw herself into the fray, not bothering to stop and engage an opponent. She struck out at
random, bashing a White Fang lackey over his head, stabbing a Griffon through its spine, slicing
off the limb of a Paladin. Her only thought was that she had to find Yang, had to find her before
someone else did.

*If the White Fang is here, so is Adam. He would never let the Fang here alone when he could so
easily get revenge on the humans, on me…*

Blake’s thoughts ran so quickly, so dark, that she was tunnel-visioned to everything around her.

If she had looked to the right, she would have seen Yang struggling on her way through the thick
of the fighting too, but she couldn’t, and she didn’t. They missed each other by mere feet, Blake
going towards the cafeteria as Yang battled her way towards Weiss.

Blake headed for the cafeteria, and the stars, the stars to which she had prayed for her parents’ aid,
twinkled overhead as if in warning, but she didn’t see them.
Chapter XX - Fallen Angels and Risen Demons

Qrow

“This is ridiculous,” Qrow snapped, swinging his sword around to lop off the head of a Beowolf as it crept up behind him. “I knew Ironwood’s little play soldiers wouldn’t be able to hold back a tide of Grimm, and I was right, and here we are—”

“Did you want to be right?” Goodwitch spat, ducking around and about, dodging a lashing King Taijitu, in a similarly precarious situation. She was surrounded by Grimm—they both were. Two Hunters weren’t sufficient enough to hold back this many all at once. They could buy Vale some time, but not a lot, and Qrow knew it was only a matter of time before they were overwhelmed.

“Of course I didn’t want to be right.” He turned, narrowing his eyes as he saw a Griffon trying to sneak up on him. Backflipping over its low, lean body, he leaped up behind it, scissoring the head off of the Grimm and riding its body to the ground as it faded, hitting the ground in a roll and stopping in a low crouch. For a moment, a flash of euphoria sung through him. This was where he belonged, killing Grimm on Ozpin’s orders, protecting his kingdom and his family. Being a Huntsman. It was what he trained for, and he wouldn’t give it up for the world.

“Impressive,” Goodwitch said, jerking him back to the dark reality they were in, “but you’re not here to impress Ozpin as usual, Branwen, you’re here to fight alongside me.”

He rolled his eyes, annoyed that she had popped his brief happiness like a balloon. “Killjoy. This night is too hellish for my tastes, Glynda, so I’m not trying to impress you. God, I could really go for a good whiskey right now.”

“You don’t have your flask on you, do you?” She looked surprised as she noticed how he was only armed with his broadsword, barely distracted as she turned around to cut down a Creep bounding towards her with a bellow. “Don’t tell me you’re actually sober.”

“Believe it or not,” he growled, slamming the sword into the ground for balance, “I am. Probably not for the better, though, because this sight is damn well unpleasant enough as it is without clarity.”

“You haven’t changed a bit from the same boy who walked into Beacon.” Looking annoyed, she sent out a pronged lance of violet light, making three Nevermores plummet from the sky, shrieking as their skin was stripped from their bones. “Arrogant to the last. What would you prefer, Branwen, a little tea party?”

“I’m a Huntsmen, not a dainty little lady.” Scowling, he spun around, light sparking silver off his sword as he slashed the throat of a Beowolf. “Do you think any other environment would make me comfortable?”

“Only you would be comfortable in the midst of carnage like this.”

“Carnage is alright, but this isn’t a regular battle,” he said angrily, stabbing a Grimm through the skull and stepping back as a spray of black ichor fountained out. “It’s betrayal, and with the involvement of the Maidens and deception… well, there’s too much magic at work tonight for me to be comfortable.”

All the bad things are coming out to play. The Fall Maiden’s assailant, Ironwood’s military, the Grimm, that blasted criminal Torchwick, and God knows where Raven is, but I’ll hope she doesn’t
make an appearance. That’s the last thing we need. They had both raced up to Ozpin’s office after Cinder’s speech, and he’d sent them here, as if they were just Hunters and nothing more. He’s going to fight a Maiden, and I’m stuck here.

Stuck in the city while Ozpin risks his life.

“Watch out!”

He spun around, wild-eyed, just in time to see a Grimm’s claws swiping for his face, faster than the eye could follow. Before he could react, a blast of hot copper light exploded over his head, and the Grimm fell, screaming in agony as fire devoured its flesh.

“Fire Dust?” Qrow asked hoarsely, watching as the bones turned to ash, crumbling in the bitter winter wind. “Well. I’m sure we could all stand a bit of warmth tonight, Glynda. Smart choice.”

“I don’t approve of Dust use excessively, but if it saves lives—” She broke off as a low rumble shivered through the air, and her eyes flashed up to meet his. “Did you feel that?”

Qrow straightened, looking around, before staggering as the earth heaved and shook around them, rubble crashing to the ground. A Creep shrieked as a stone gargoyle plummeted from a roof and crushed it, a gout of black blood spraying out in a fan across the cobblestones.

The air began to shudder, shaking with the roar of wind, chopping and unsteady. He gritted his teeth, standing up on the shivering earth with his sword planted in the ground for balance, and threw a glance towards Glynda. She said something that he couldn’t hear, her words lost in the growing swell of wind.

Suddenly, a scream split the night.

They looked up in an almost comical unison as a black shadow streaked overhead, giving another unearthly roar as it flashed past, intent on the glittering spire of Beacon Tower. Qrow caught a single glimpse of a gaping maw lined with hundreds of slavering teeth, batlike, blood-colored wings lined with veiny dark cords, terrifying, red, hollow eyes—but the eyes of the Grimm were mindless, filled only with seething rage and hatred against humanity, and no intelligence. But the eyes of the wyvern were hot with a hatred that spoke of intelligence and revenge—this Grimm was no more a like a regular Grimm than an eagle was like a fly.

The wyvern. The negative emotions from Vale; they woke it up.

“This was Salem’s plan!” Qrow shouted over the roar of the wind. “We’re scattered; there’s no way we can get through this. And Ozpin, up in the tower—” Qrow’s eyes widened. “He’s going to fight the Maiden’s assailant and the wyvern,” he breathed out in realization, his voice nearly lost in the howling storm. “He knew about the Maiden, but not the wyvern! He can’t hope to stand up to two of the strongest things on the face of Remnant. He’ll die! We have to go back!”

Glynda seemed to snarl at that, whipping around to take down a cluster of Grimm. “We have orders from him to protect the people, Qrow,” she snapped. “Here, in the city. Vale and nowhere else.”

“But Ozpin—”

“Ozpin trusted you!” She thrust her lance upward, sending out spirals of white light that lit up the sky with the brilliance of the sun, banishing the shadows of the Grimm that threatened all around. “He trusted you to keep the city safe. He knows what he’s doing, and he knows his own choices.” Her voice lowered. "He's not a fool, Qrow. You knew him - better than any of us, perhaps. You
know that."

“No. I don't care about valor or self-sacrifice, don't you get it? I can’t let him die.” Qrow began to struggle to his feet, blood run unchecked down the side of his face as he propped himself up on his sword, every muscle in his body screaming in pain. “I can’t. I won’t.”

“Qrow, you have to let him do this! We need you here or more people are going to die. He always wanted to save innocent lives. He’s not a coward. He knows about Salem, about the wyvern and the Maiden’s assailant, he knew all of it, he was prepared for this possibility—”

Qrow shook his head impatiently, scattering scarlet drops of blood. “But he was counting on being able to transfer Amber’s powers to Pyrrha; he’s lost that now; there’s not enough time to do the transfer. He’s on his own.”

“This is the way it has to be.” Her eyes were full of pain and he wondered if she had known about his feelings all along. She must have, by the way she was looking at him, with pity he had never wanted, had never deserved. “Don’t let that sacrifice be in vain, Qrow. Let him go.” Her voice dropped to a pained whisper, one he felt reflected in his heart. “Let him go.”

He stumbled, the hilt of his sword digging into the skin of his chest, right where his heart was beating. I’ve lost everything, he thought. My team. Summer, and Raven to the Maiden’s powers, and now Ozpin too…

Ruby

She landed on the very edge of the airship with a thud that reverberated up through her bones, and teetered wildly, arms pinwheeling as she fought not to be hurled off the side. Wind scoured the whirring ship, and she staggered forward a few paces, falling to her knees and retching as the tension and nausea from her wild flight through the air took their toll.

Just as she got to her feet again, clutching Crescent Rose like a lifeline, the air began to pulse like a heartbeat.

No, Ruby thought, puzzled. Not a heartbeat. A… wingbeat.

She turned around and yelped in fright, a yelp was torn from her mouth by the vengeful storm as she saw the cause of it. A shadow—a Grimm—was swooping towards her, but no Grimm she had ever seen or studied about was this big. Its wings blotted out the stars, huge and bat-like, lined with blood-red veins. Its head was cruelly shaped, with sharp horns, its eyes glaring scarlet fury through the night.

It disappeared, hellbent on some distant location, and she squeezed her eyes shut tight as she realized its destination—Beacon Tower, each thunderous wingbeat winging it closer.

Nobody could stand up to a Grimm that big, she thought in horror. Nobody. Nobody could. And if it’s heading to Beacon… towards the Tower… They’re in trouble! Qrow and my team and Ozpin and all the rest… and the airship in the sky with my friends!
The wingbeats faded, leaving her alone with the wailing of the wind and the Grimm. Ruby shook her head to clear it, before pausing as she sensed something, something wrong, like someone unseen was watching her. Tensing up very slowly, she turned around.

She heard the girl before she saw her— heard the clicking of footsteps, even above the shrieking, howling storm of snow and Grimm. Shaking, she raised her eyes, blinking against the tempest of snow and wind flung in her face. A short-statured girl was standing there, looking coldly amused as she stared down at Ruby, who recognized her instantly, even though she had seen her only twice: this was the tricolored girl who had aided Roman Torchwick; who had almost murdered Yang.

She remembered what Ironwood had said. An individual posing as a student, the one we all heard making her speech, has gone rogue, using Torchwick to commandeer my fleet of airships, releasing Grimm all over Vale. But Cinder couldn’t have freed Torchwick if she was making her speech— and Torchwick had been in Ironwood’s ship, locked up, just as they had handcuffed him last year in the Grimm attack on the city.

“You broke him out of jail, didn’t you?” Ruby gasped, words ripped from her mouth by the violence of the storm. “Torchwick. Out of Ironwood’s ship. He shot his ship out of the sky, and it’s your fault! Torchwick killed Ironwood!”

The girl’s eyes narrowed and she made an odd movement of her hand, a slicing downward motion. 

She’s mute, Ruby realized, before hardening her heart and sweeping Crescent Rose in front of her. “Get back. I mean it. I’m here to fight Roman, not you. I will hurt you if you get in the way.”

She smiled. Ruby, caught off guard, stared at her before she saw that the girl was looking over Ruby’s shoulder—at something behind her. Too late, Ruby remembered one of the first lessons she had ever been taught as a Huntress.

Look behind you, Ruby.

“Well, well, little Red.” She whipped around and froze as Torchwick smiled down at her, having snuck up in the howling storm. The barrel of his cane was trained right on her forehead, his finger on the trigger, and in the half-light, his eyes gleamed with a feral green shine. “Are you really in any position to be making threats?” He hissed. “I think not.”

Qrow

Qrow plunged his blade through the skull of a Griffon so viciously that it crunched through the bone, blood spurting out in a black gout that coated his hands up to the wrists in a shining, dark glove. It screamed, but he was whirling away as it faded, killing everything about him, hardly aware of anything except the icy-fire of adrenaline, the sort of high you could only get in a fight.

He laid into the Grimm with a savagery that wasn’t unfamiliar, so to speak, but he had never felt such fury while in battle with Grimm. He didn’t hate them, because they were, to the well-trained Huntsman, an insignificant threat on their own. You couldn’t hate something that was mindless.
But his fury with everything—at his own helplessness, at Ozpin’s self-sacrifice—made every blow he landed twice as hateful, twice as forceful, acquitting himself especially well, every part of him numb, as though locked in ice.

The wyvern had gone, already flown overhead, and he and Glynda were fighting for their lives once more. The tide of Grimm had receded, but only barely, and he wasn’t sure why. Most Grimm didn’t process danger—only some were smart enough to do that, like the Mammoths and the Father Grimm—they just hurled themselves right into the spot where other Grimm had been slain, launching themselves into death like lemmings. He supposed that the Grimm had figured out that to come here was die on the point of his sword, or perhaps they’d been drawn to Beacon by the greater number of negative emotions there. Either way, the battle had begun to lull, allowing him to take a few breaths and recuperate, if only slightly.

Just as he bent over the hilt of his sword, panting, he heard a noise—an odd clicking, followed by a low humming that was oddly sinister, one that sent a chill like ice water trickling down his spine.

He turned around slowly.

An Atlas soldier, the mechanical ones, which had been battling against the Grimm alongside he and Glynda—however poorly—stood there, gun trained directly on the spot between Qrow’s eyes, an eerie red glow, like the Grimm’s gaze, emanating from the blank hollow of its eyes. He knew instantly what had happened.

“Glynda!” he hollered, using his sword to deliver an uppercut, sending the soldier toppling to the ground in a squeal of gears and sparks that swarmed up like a host of fireflies in the glowing dimness. “We’ve got a bit of a problem!”

She turned around and swore—an unusual occurrence—as she saw that the Atlas soldiers were all marching towards them in a uniform line, their eyes bright red. “Ironwood’s military—”

“No. Humans should be okay, but his robots are hacked by the enemy. Bad as the Grimm now, or worse.” Qrow crouched, bristling, his sword barred over his chest.

“What do we do?”

“What I’ve been wanting to do for years.” A smile that more resembled a snarl flitted across his face. “Chop those bastards into tiddlywink little pieces.”

The battle recommenced, now a furious whirlwind of howls and screams and flashing claws. He and Glynda fell in, back to back, a slashing storm of silver metal and bright lances of light. He casually stabbed a Beowolf in the spine as it hurled itself towards him, and it staggered into Glynda’s reach, yowling. She seized it in a web of violet light and it disintegrated, screaming.

“Qrow, we can’t keep this up forever!” she shouted, but he barely heard her, his ears full of the hum of battle. “My energy—”

“I don’t think we’re doing too badly,” he growled, twirling his sword around so that the starlight sparkled silver off of it, “all things considered.”

After that, it was chaos. She got torn away from him, leaving them both to fight alone. Slowly—very slowly, so much so that he wouldn’t have noticed it if he wasn’t an experienced Huntsman—the battle began to slow, and stop, until the only noise was the ringing in his ears and his own harsh breath. The storm had lulled, snow now coming down in gentle, beautiful flakes that contrasted sharply with the terrible carnage all around him, and the wind was little more than a
whisper in his ears.

The street was empty. Atlas soldiers lay around like badly-jointed dolls, some still spitting sparks. The Grimm, of course, had all faded away when they died, but the air reeked of something burned, like scorched sugar and toast, a sharp, lip-curling stench. Black ichor pooled in puddles on the street, turning to ice at the fringes in the bitter coldness.

In the brief lull that followed, his adrenaline faded, leaving his exhaustion free to hit him like a ton of bricks. He became painfully aware of how ragged he was, covered in blood and grime, wounded all over. He didn’t want to be here; he wanted— no, needed— to be back where he belonged, protecting Ruby and Yang, protecting Ozpin, protecting Beacon, his only real home.

“Qrow!” Goodrich’s voice was unmistakably frightened. “Qrow, come here. Quickly!”

Thoughts scattering, he turned around, eyes narrowing, before his stomach dropped into freefall as he saw what had scared her. She was standing over a pale form, and as he strode over, the darkness receded just enough so that the form resolved itself into a more definite figure. A corpse. A corpse that lay face-up, expression frozen in one last snarl of defiance, weapon rolled slightly away from their outstretched hand. It was a boy, no older than seventeen, his short brown hair ruffled by the bitter night wind.

“Cardin Winchester,” she murmured, her voice shaking minutely. “A first year student. We should have been watching him, Qrow—”

“No. I’ve seen much worse in my career. Especially on my missions for Oz.” His heart giving a constricting squeeze at the name, Qrow grunted, using the toe of his boot to nudge the boy’s body. He was undeniably dead, flopping away from Qrow’s touch. “Besides, a Beacon kid should’ve been able to look after himself. This was bad luck - bad luck and nothing more, and no one can prevent turns of luck. His Aura must have just run out. You think a Grimm killed him?”

“No,” she said sadly. “No, he was a strong Huntsmen. No Grimm could have really hurt him, not fatally. Besides,” she crouched down, fingers gently brushing over a spot on the small of his back where blood slowly spread out, staining his clothes, “there’s this. A bullet hole. One of Ironwood’s guards must have shot him in the back. He couldn’t have seen it coming. No one deserves a death like that. Not even a boy like him, bully and simple as he was.”

Qrow turned away as he heard a howl in the distance, indicating that more Grimm were on their way. “Well,” he said, the ice already flooding his veins once more, “undoubtedly, you’ll see more death tonight.”

Ruby

As soon as she saw the barrel of the gun and the gleam of his eyes, her training kicked in. She ducked, sweeping her foot around and catching Torchwick on the feet, sending him down, but then
the girl was attacking from the other side, stabbing at Ruby, backflipping over and weaving around and around in a colorful blur. She lashed out with Crescent Rose, driving them both back, where they circled her, snarling like predators.

“So,” Ruby panted, “so this was your goal all along… not the White Fang and not getting Dust…but this!”

Torchwick’s green eyes held an ugly glitter. “Give it up, Red,” he said, his voice almost a croon. “Don’t be a fool. Everyone at Beacon tonight is as good as dead.”

Fury still burning white-hot in her veins like open wires, Ruby brandished Crescent Rose again as the girl tried to sneak around her back and launch an ambush, sending her reeling away. “But why?” she spat. “You don’t get anything out of the Grimm ruling Remnant, you don’t get anything out of destroying Beacon… why not get out of here, go to Mistral, where thieves belong? Why ally with Cinder, why all this? What could you possibly gain from destroying the world you live in!”

Torchwick threw back his head and laughed, actually laughed, a harsh sound that sounded detached and insane in the shrieking storm. “The naïvety of the innocent,” he said. “Oh, but it never fails! Let me tell you something, darling. You’re asking the wrong questions. It’s never about what there is to gain, not to the criminal… but how far I have to fall.”

With that, they both attacked, rushing her from both sides. Ruby activated her semblance, hurtling out of the flanking maneuver in a flurry of rose petals whipped away by the vicious wind.

“Run and hide, run and hide, little Red!” His voice came from somewhere behind her, gleeful in the shadows. “You can’t escape me!”

*Can’t I?* She thought grimly, before whipping around and slashing her scythe at him. He lurched back with a scream, and she saw blood well up blackly from a shallow wound she had slashed across his chest.

“You bitch!” he snarled, shooting at her. She wasn’t fast enough to dodge it, and it crashed into her, her Aura rippling throughout her system to deflect the strike, but she still cried out as a sharp pain bloomed out from the center of her chest.

And as she backed away, shaking away the pain, out of nowhere a blinding pain smashed into her left temple, and she saw Torchwick’s cane darting back from his strike before blackness crashed over her in an agonizing wave. She staggered, her foot going down to find purchase, and it found only empty air.

Her hands slammed onto the edge of the ship just in time as she slipped and fell off the side, and she dangled, feet kicking out over the void. Nevermores swirled and shrieked below her, and she fought off a dizzying, white flash of panic. She was thousands of feet above the ground; if she fell, she would die.

Torchwick stood above her, a slow grin spreading across his face as the girl came to stand beside him. “Back where we started,” he said, looking down at her, shadows moving over his face. Ruby’s fingers were growing numb, and she knew it was only a matter of minutes before she plummeted headlong to her death. The thought felt oddly slow, and she felt blood seeping out from the spot where his cane had struck her temple. A curious mixture of panic and adrenaline throbbed through her, and then, suddenly, Weiss’s face flickered behind her eyelids— not as Ruby had seen her last, drawn and worried as she and Blake had left for the fairgrounds, but when they had Bonded, her face bathed in a golden glow, an odd softness in her eyes, her hands warm and slender in Ruby’s. All those memories that were not Ruby’s own, all the emotion that did not
belong to her. She remembered the surety of having another heart close to yours in spirit, the warmth of love that never wavered.

Torchwick’s face, above hers, loomed like the moon. “Any last words, Red?”

_There is always a way out._

“Yes,” she said, her voice coming out in a way she didn’t recognize, harsh and scraped raw with hatred. “Goodbye.”

With that, with her last burst of strength, she surged upward and yanked on the girl’s knife, unbalancing her and making her stagger away from Torchwick, the silver light of the blade slashing away as she stumbled. That one step was all she needed. The wind did the rest, tearing her unsteady balance and hurling her off the edge, and Ruby hauled herself up off the brink and onto the steady ship as the girl went plummeting into the dark void of the night as Torchwick let out a scream of sheer rage and fury. She looked back for one wild-eyed instant and saw the girl disappear into a fleet of sharp-taloned Nevermores, her screams of agony floating back through the night as they tore her to pieces. Ruby cried out as the ship bucked, sending her to her hands and knees.

“No!” Roman howled, and Ruby collapsed on the edge, one hand clutching with white-knuckled fingers on Crescent Rose, the other splayed on the ship. For a moment, she pressed her cheek to the icy metal, breathing in and trying to control the wild thump of her heartbeat. Then reality stepped in, and she rolled to the side with a cry of alarm as Torchwick’s cane slammed down where her head had been a second before.

“You!” he snarled, his face looming crazily above her. “You killed her!”

Ruby staggered to her feet, swinging Crescent Rose around in a wide arc, moonlight bouncing off the blade. “I don’t care what you say, or what you think,” she said, a dark emotion she had never felt before coursing through her veins. “I will stop them, and I will stop you. Even if I have to kill you too!”

His eyes glittered with a dangerously unhinged glint, and he didn’t reply, only lashing out at her as gunfire spat out in golden explosions from his cane. There was a disjointed fury to his movements, a wild ferocity that would destroy him. Blind rage was never good in battle, and it was his undoing.

“You have spirit, Red,” he hissed, swinging his cane around and barely missing her as she ducked to avoid it, slashing out with Crescent Rose. “But this is the real world! It’s cold, it’s cruel, and it doesn’t care about spirit— you want to be a hero? Then play the part and die like every other damned savior in history!”

In that moment, she saw it, the tiniest gap in his defenses, where he favored his left arm over his right, trying not to open up the wound she had gashed across his chest. She saw the opening, and with the quickest of darting strikes, she lunged forward and stabbed him in the chest.

He lurched back with a choked cry, the faintest sizzling noise on the air telling her that his Aura had expired completely. Her strike wasn’t fatal, but he staggered backward, and, knowing that it must be done, feeling oddly detached from the sudden ice in her heart, she used Crescent Rose to help his fall.

He slipped off the edge with a final scream.
She watched him fall into the dark night, his scream fading as he plunged down, down, down, his hair the only part of him she could see, like a spark fading to darkness. As she watched, a swooping Nevermore snatched him up with a screech of triumph that didn’t drown out his dying scream, and Ruby turned away with a shiver of fear so she wouldn’t see his death. She wondered, briefly, why she felt so conflicted—she had done the right thing; Torchwick would have fired on the school, maybe even killed more people—before she realized. He was the first person she had known, in a way, that she had killed. She had killed Grimm, but this was different. Torchwick had an Aura, a soul.

Behind her, the ship—already beginning to tilt into a nosedive as it registered the death of its pilot—was tipping over, and Ruby knew she wasn’t safe yet.

_It looks like I have to make the flight again. Except this time, it’s the last._

With one final prayer and a glance back at the dark night rising, she shouldered Crescent Rose and leaped off the edge, into the abyss of darkness, leaving the ship, the Grimm, and the spot of the slaughter far, far behind her.

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**Weiss**

She and Blake had split the instant they entered the courtyard, and now she was fighting for her life, desperately trying to quash the terrible fear rising inside of her.

She knew Ruby was fighting, but where? Her Bond had been electric with pain, adrenaline, and fear the whole night—all unmistakable signs of battle. Weiss was getting better and better at reading Ruby’s emotions, but she couldn’t make head or tail of the coldness that had suddenly emanated from the Bond.

“So, watch it!”

She jerked backward just in time to avoid gunfire spitting out from the gun of an Atlesian-Knight, and she stabbed it between the joints of its back, sending it down in a shower of sparks. The sparks scattered hungrily, seeking fuel, and she shivered as they caught on the limp corpse of a White Fang member, long dead. Their horns were red down to the base with blood, and a bloody slash gaped in their throat, ragged flaps of skin fluttering slightly in the screeching gale. As she watched, the flames caught, devouring their body in a shroud of dancing golden flames, smoke belching upward.

*A pyre.*

She leaped away from the burning body, the reek of charred flesh already thick on the air, and reengaged in the battle, her heart pounding fit to burst. She could feel a heavy pressure at her temple, pressuring her, but she had no idea if it was her own or Ruby’s.

Leaping back into the battle, she looked around, scanning for anyone who might need help. Neptune and Sun were going toe to toe with a league of knights, but they seemed to have the matter
well in hand; Yatsu and Coco were acquitting themselves especially well, laying into White Fang members so angrily that their hands were coated in red up to the wrists; Team TEAL were circling a pack of Ursai, taunting them; then Weiss saw Velvet, cornered by a furious White Fang member. She stood there, blade to blade with him, one who looked furious as the blue light of her weapon rippled over his masked face. “I know you,” he growled to her as Weiss approached. “You’re a Faunus. You should be with the revolution, with the White Fang. You weren’t courageous enough to join!”

“At least I was courageous enough to recognize that true progress isn’t made through fear.” She struck out, and the member dropped their blade with a scream. “Now it’s your turn to run.”

She stabbed him through the arm and he turned to flee, running straight into Weiss, who sent him flying away with a glyph. He crashed into a stone and fell off the side of the courtyard, and Weiss turned away, seeing Velvet, who had her hands on her knees and was bent over, panting.

“Thanks, Weiss,” she said through broken breaths. “I’m so tired… never fought this many before…”

Out of the dark, behind her, a Grimm suddenly lunged, white claws flashing forward as its huge jaws gaped, ready to crush her skull. There was no time, no time to shout a warning, to do anything except watch in horror—

And then, suddenly, an intense surge of power let loose in her veins like a firework going off, the pressure evaporating from her skull as it rushed outward, through her veins, into her palms, into Myrtenaster itself, and it exploded from the razor-sharp tip in a blinding white glyph. Weiss’s eyes were forced shut as a huge explosion of white made her stagger back.

Weiss peeled open her eyes, and let out a cry of alarm as she saw what had happened.

The shimmering, intricate glyph for Summoning lay upon the ground, undulating and shining like the moon itself had fallen. The Grimm lay on the ground, impaled through the back by a massive, white, translucent sword. She could hardly force herself to do it, but she lifted her eyes, gazing up at Velvet’s savior, and her own, and what she saw took her breath away.

It was the knight. The one she had killed, the one that she had been forced to kill to gain entrance to Beacon by Vincent’s precedent. It stood there, looking down at her, and Winter’s voice echoed in her mind.

“Excellent form! Now think to your fallen foes! The ones who forced you to push past where you were, and become who you are now. Think of them, and watch as they come to your side.”

Weiss watched, and watched, her heart in her throat, blood rushing in her veins like ice. And as she watched, the knight gave her the tiniest of nods before it faded away into shimmering nothingness.

“Weiss,” Velvet said softly, stunned speechless, her eyes huge and terrified.

I Summoned it, she thought, staring at her hands in shock. They were unchanged, but they felt different, somehow, stronger where they gripped Myrtenaster. I actually Summoned it.

She gave Velvet one look before tumbling back into battle with a new confidence flooding her veins. She saw a team she recognized vaguely— Team TEAL— all of them teamed up to take down a Paladin. Talos was up on its head, bashing into it with a glinting gold sword, while Eliás and Amber circled in furious blurs around its clawed feet, their whips flying. In the middle, Leah yelled a war cry before stabbing a spear into its mainframe, electric blue sparks flying out from the
contact point.

“Go! Get out of here!” Talos yelled at her as she paused. “We’ve got it covered!” Roaring in defiance, shaggy hair whipping around his face, he backflipped off the machine and landed on the ground. Confident she was leaving them in safe hands— their own— she turned and pelted off.

Weiss didn’t really know when the battle ended, or when a lull came. All of a sudden, she was blade-to-claw with a slavering Beowolf, and then she stabbed it through the heart. It keeled over with a wail, dissolving into a thick cloud of black smog. When it faded, no other enemies lunged forward to take its place, and Weiss realized that the battle had come to a standstill as everyone paused to lick their wounds and regroup. The Grimm had retreated somewhat, to the farthest reaches of the courtyard, realizing that they were only being killed like lemmings by the furious Huntsmen and Huntresses in training. They were mindless, but their instincts could preserve at times, it seemed.

For a moment, she felt a flicker of hope that they might all survive tonight, that it would be okay despite the impossible odds, before she realized that everyone had gathered in a circle besides two shapes— two shapes that had not faded, as the corpses of the Grimm did.

Two bodies.

She walked over slowly, dreading what faces she might find, of who had died, and her breath caught in her throat as she saw who laid there, surrounded by a solemn circle of their peers.

Fox and Neon lay side by side, their eyes staring sightlessly up at the sky, glassy and reflecting the stars. Weiss felt sick as she looked at them, at the wounds that had taken both their lives. A bleeding slash gaped in the side of Fox’s neck, and Neon was so gashed up, so bloody and mutilated, it was impossible to tell which wound had stolen her chance of living.

*Life, Blake’s voice whispered in her ears, is far from a fairytale.*

“We need to bury them,” Weiss said, her throat impossibly tight.

“We can’t. The ground’s too hard, we don’t know how long we have until the next wave of Grimm comes, and we don’t know why this happening,” Sage growled. “I knew this would happen. We’ve got to go find the teachers and other Hunters.”

“We can’t just leave them here for the Grimm,” Weiss protested.

His eyes glittered at her. She could recognize fear behind them, and she knew he was Blake’s friend, somewhat— but she couldn’t suppress a burst of fury at him. She wasn’t feeling very reasonable, not now, and her fists curled as he spat at her, glancing towards the burning body of the White Fang member, “Do you want to build them a pyre?”

Her teeth clenched together. “Go to hell, Ayana.”

“Do your job, Schnee,” he shot back. “You didn’t fight in this battle to perform funeral rites.”

She lifted her hands, a black glyph forming between them. “How about I crack open your skull like a bird’s egg?”

“You don’t want a look at what’s inside my head, Weiss dear.”

“Stop it, you two!” Sun snapped, stepping between them. Weiss’s anger evaporated as she looked down at the two bodies, and a thick sense of shame overwhelmed her. Two of her peers had been
killed, and here she was, arguing like a little schoolgirl who hadn’t got her way. “What the hell is wrong with you? Weiss, it’s okay, we can bury them, and we will. Sage—you stand down. The last thing we need right now is to be fighting between ourselves. Isn’t there enough negativity already?” He cast a glance around the courtyard, where the Grimm circled.

“I’ll help you bury them,” Velvet said sadly, gently weaving her between Sage and Weiss, who were still bristling. “Oh, Fox…”

The snow was falling more thickly now, flaking their still bodies with white. Weiss took Neon’s body, while Velvet took Fox’s, placing a gentle kiss on his forehead between his brows.

In the brief lull of battle, they dug two shallow graves just outside the fountains of Beacon, just under the Latin inscription on the bases: *Libertas perfundet omnia luce.* Freedom will flood all things with light. With the shadows growing thicker and more dark by the moment, it seemed to be taunting them all. In the distance, a Beowolf was keening, the mournful wail rising high, like the anguished chords of a violin singing its agony into the night, a pain that would tear your heart apart. Weiss let out a deep, shuddering breath.

They laid the bodies in the graves as the snow built up, but she barely felt the cold. Her hands were dappled rust-red with Neon’s blood, and she shivered, wiping them off on her gear. Sage, however reluctant he must have been to watch the sending-off of those who were dead, while he dealt with the living, stepped forward and asked grudgingly, “Do you remember the words before you bury them?”

Weiss gave him a stern look, which he ignored. Velvet looked at him, confusion on her face.

“The… words?”

Sage frowned at her. “When a person on Remnant dies— Faunus or human— it’s custom to speak a requiem. A final prayer as they go on their way to the afterlife, as it were. I don’t know the words myself, but…”

Weiss cleared her throat, remembering his words about the pyre. “I do,” she said. “They were spoken at my mother’s funeral.” *Winter made me memorize them, so I would never forget Ivana.*

“You know the requiem?” He looked at her and there was the slightest hint of a challenge in his eyes. “You wanted to bury them. Then you must speak the words.”

Weiss looked down at the two open graves with a feeling of dismay blotting out her sorrow; *she* was to speak? She hadn’t been particularly close to either of the deceased. She’d only spoken to Fox in relation to their schoolwork, and she had never spoken to Neon at all, except to see the time when Yang had knocked her unconscious. That seemed lifetimes away now.

Feeling like a cluster of thorns was stabbing sharp spikes in the back of her mouth, blocking her voice, she looked down and cleared her throat.

*From Dust we came, and to Dust we must return. One day the earth will dim; the light in the sun will flicker and die, and the moon will sigh and roll over, keeping her back to the world. Our shadows will say farewell to our bodies, and go their own way in the darkness. But today is not that day. Though we have two less hearts than we did yesterday, though we are two souls lighter, two absences heavier, today we still stand, and fight. But your fight is done with. Shut your eyes on this earth. Place your feet upon the pathway to above, when auras flicker and die, you shall lend us light, whence you return to the stars. Death is not the end. Death is but that one last journey that we all venture on in the end. We bid you farewell, not forever, but until we meet again. May you find shelter where you sleep. May the waters run clear and the comforts leap into your arms. May*
the sun shine down upon you, may the rain fall softly upon your skin, may you find peace. Your battle is over, brave warrior, those who fight in your stead share your blood, your memories, your love, so that your spirit may never die. Hail and farewell, Fox Alistair, Neon Katt, now and forever. From Dust we came, and to Dust we must return.”

Weiss backed away as their teams began to cover up the scant graves, suddenly conscious of the tears pooling in her eyes. She hadn’t been particularly close with either of them, but she knew, with a sudden sharp, aching pain, that she had been lucky it wasn’t someone she cared about lying there. It could have been Blake, or Yang, or Ruby…

Ruby, she thought. Where is she? I’ve got to find her.

I have to make sure they’re safe, but it might already be too late.

A/N: ....Sorry if you were a particular fan of Torchwick, Neo, Fox, or Neon. They’re definitely dead.
A/N: READ THIS PLS.

This is it, folks. The big 24, and the scene most of you have been eagerly awaiting from the moment TFW came out. As some of you know, this chapter—this scene, really—has been in production long before The Final Warning was even a concept or an idea; this scene, and my interpretation how it would go in my universe for these two fics, existed before Things You Wrote On the Walls even ended. This is the oldest and best chapter from this work. It's a whopping 8k words. This is the shining example of my favorite of scenes, the one that has been written, rewritten, edited, played with, reformed and reshaped like clay, beta-ed—everything you can possibly do for a passage of writing.

My request is that if you are reading this—leave a comment! I do not care if it’s simply a comment telling me your favorite sentence, something that stood out to you, a word of praise, or, if you’re an overachiever, I love reviewers that analyze chapters with their own thoughts (and I definitely make note of them, to give them a gift of their choice later on!) Just leave me something to let me know I’m doing something right, at least.

On that note, here is Chapter 24 and 3x11!

Blake

She had not noticed the stars, had not prayed again, and thus, clouds rolled in from the east, roiling banks of snow clouds that smothered the starlight.

Blake paused once she had made it out of the thick of the fighting in the courtyard, breath rasping harshly in her lungs. Each lungful of air she took seared her throat, it was so cold, but she welcomed the clarity it gave her. She clenched Gambol Shroud tighter, imagining she could feel its heartbeat, but she knew it was just her own frantic heart, racing against her ribs, pouring all her anxiety into the Bond. *I must find Yang before it’s too late.*

She moved forward, over broken glass that lay glittering on the pavement outside the promenade of the cafeteria. Someone had punched out the windows of the massive room, and within, the tables lay haphazardly amid slabs of stone. It looked like a hurricane had torn through the cafeteria and left it in a terrible mess. She looked closer, squinting; there was a shadow moving in the back,
near the pillars. It was a broad-shouldered figure with a head of bright hair, but the firelight, undulating with shadows on the walls, confused Blake’s eyes. Frowning, she leaned forward, Gambol Shroud at the ready, in case it was an enemy—a White Fang lackey, perhaps, or a robot solider. “Yang,” she called. “Yang— is that you?”

At her voice, the shadow spun around, still crouched down. Their face came into view, and Blake staggered back, her breath punched out of her chest in sheer astonishment.

“It’s been too long,” said the figure, straightening up and looking directly at her with a slow, lazy grin uncurling across their face. “You have forgotten what I look like at a distance. I did not think you would. But you always were so terribly bound by your own desire, Blake, that it blinded you to reality.”

The firelight fell fully across its face— his face— the narrow shape, the curve of the mask, the rise and fall of his scarlet hair, like the rise and fall of fire, the burning inferno that had made him what he was.

Adam.

In what could have been eternity or only seconds, every memory that mattered rushed through her mind: the mission of Forever Fall, drifting away from him on a traincar, a shattered Bond, shooting Ayran in the skull, Yang’s face as she broke Mercury’s leg, and then Adam’s voice, in all those nightmares she had endured every night. In all that time, she had never thought she would see him again, had never dared to imagine it. For better or for worse, once she had cut the cord on a train that had separated them forever, it was over. She would only ever have to see him again in nightmares.

Except he was here, and that had been an illusion. A beautiful, terrible illusion.

“You hesitate, my love?”

At the sound of his voice, her bones went cold, and the trees whispered with a terrible, mocking laughter. He cast a flickering, looming shadow to spill over the broken rubble, right up to the walls. Blood splattered his chest and his weapon was drawn, shining scarlet.

“You’re here with them, aren’t you? Here with Cinder’s attackers.” She hardly recognized her voice when she spoke, and she didn’t know why it was steady and firm, when she was shattering inside. “It’s me you want dead, Adam. It always has been. You have no quarrel with the students of Beacon. Why are you doing this?”

“I have every quarrel with them!” His amusement fell away, replaced by an embittered, snarling loathing. “They’re human, all of them, your team and your partner! You and I were going to change the world once, Blake. You promised, do you not remember? And you turned your back on that promise so easily, do you remember that? We were destined, pet, destined to light the fires of revolution, destined to blaze at the head of the ranks, and you gave it up. For what? For this? For them, humans who will talk to you and work with you and even sleep beside you, but will never consider you equal to them?” He swung his blade up, lashing out at the body of the student beside him, planting his heel on his chest. “You’re a fool, and you always have been. Equality is never going to happen, not in this world. But superiority shall, and you will not be a part of it. I gave you every chance, Blake, and you ran away, because you are a coward, and have always been one. I will be the one to triumph alone, with my own fire, my own revolution. Consider this the spark.”

She wasn’t aware of jerking her own sword out, fury igniting her blood. She only felt a white-hot surge of hatred towards him for bringing the two of them to this, and she felt power arc through her
as she sprang forward, broadsiding him just as his blade plunged down.

He howled in rage as he was thwarted, and she drove her fist into his face with all the force she could muster, feeling the bones in his nose splinter. Blood gushed out, creating a grotesque scarlet mask. He retaliated with a snarl, planting his foot in her chest, and she crashed backward, rolling with his weight as they tumbled through the dust and blood. He roared, battering her with all the unbridled rage of a hurricane, and she could only barely withstand the onslaught, agony— more than she had ever felt in her life— splitting her skull.

She raised her blade just in time as he drove downwards with his. They met in a fiery clash of metal, screeching and spitting sparks, and she realized why he looked so shocked and furious all at once: this was the first time they had clashed in any true, physical way with hatred and enmity. The first time she had ever dared to fight against him.

“I’m not running away,” she snarled, ears pinned flat against her head as she drove upward with every ounce of force she could muster, muscles trembling with the strain. “Not this time, Adam.”

There was a very ugly look on his face, like an animal that he had thought was tame had suddenly turned on him, and bitten him. “You will,” he spat, his sallow skin drawn tight, his eyes glinting bloodred in the firelight. “It’s all you know how to do.”

She felt pain explode through her as he suddenly reared back and slammed his heel into her abdomen, thrusting all his power into the blow; he had grown so much stronger in her absence, and the force of his kick tossed her backward as easily as if she were nothing more than a rag-doll.

She skidded across the floor with a yowl of pain, feeling the broken glass open up gashes in her skin as she hit a slab of rock and crashed to a halt. A flicker of movement flitted through her peripheral vision, and she snapped her head to the side, horrified as she saw a Creep. Its beady eyes fell upon her, filled with mindless rage.

With a snarl, it charged towards her, only to be intercepted mid-leap, broadsided by a streak of red that crashed into its side. Blake’s eyes rounded as she saw Adam sink his sword in its neck, black blood splashing across his skin as the Grimm squealed before collapsing, and fading. He had saved her— had he come to his senses, after all, and changed his mind?

She realized she could not have been more wrong as he turned towards her, snarling, like a tiger with its claws out.

“You came woefully unprepared for this, I’m afraid,” he cackled, sheathing his blade and spitting a stream of blood to his right contemptuously. “Now you’ll pay, my dear.”

She swore at him, and he grinned, a grotesque sight.

“But not before you suffer for your betrayal, pet,” he said, his voice soft with a frost like the first creeping, killing chill of winter. He came before her, his eyes twinkling as if she were nothing more than a show, a display for him. “How does it feel, knowing that your entire life has led up this moment? Every thought, action, word, has been to bring you to here and now? That you are mine to use, to discard as I please?” He crouched close to her, a mad, Chesire-like grin spreading across his face. “You were never Ayran’s, you know. You were always mine. And this was always my fate! You lied! You said I had a choice! But there never was one. I would never have let you go, I would track you down to the ends of the earth to make you pay for what you did.”

She was chilled as she remembered her dream.
I will find you. I will hunt you down and bring you back. I will follow you to the ends of the earth and beyond, track you wherever you hide. I will pull you back kicking and screaming and lock you up where no one will ever find you. You can’t leave me, Blake, you can’t, you can’t—

Her response was to summon up all of her flagging strength, to arch her neck and spit in his face. He drew back with a snarl, lifting his hand as if to strike her again before lowering it, not wanting to risk killing her.

“Now I am going to explain to you what is going to happen, so you may know the pain you are going to feel… and the pain you are going to cause.” He crouched beside her, and she could feel the heat of his semblance blazing up around him, could feel how he wanted her—to play with and destroy her—and it sickened her. “Your team is enamored with you, aren’t they? They believe you are good. That you have not killed and lied, just as I have. But I know the truth, Blake, and I know you have murdered and stolen, that you are just as damned as any common criminal. But you are worse. You are a traitor, a turncoat, with a foot in two worlds. You murdered a man who gave you everything, who once believed in you—"

“Ayran wasn’t a man.” She curled her lip, and the skin on Adam’s face tautened in anger. “He was a monster.”

“Monster or not,” Adam said, “he took you in— took you into the arms of the White Fang, gave you everything, gave us both everything— and you murdered him, Blake!”

“He killed my parents!”

“He should have killed you too. And you got your revenge, didn’t you? Yet still, you aren’t satisfied… because your heart is dark, dark as night. Don’t deny it!” Adam’s eyes narrowed. “Truth always triumphs, pet. Now, I am working with a human to ruin this human monstrosity of a place, and she ordered me to stick to the course, to not go after anyone in particular. But I have found a way to circumvent this, my dear, because I would never truly ally myself with a human.”

He’s gone insane, she thought in horror, seeing the unhinged glint in his scarred eyes, the mask looking like a raw wound. He is really, truly insane. Oh, Adam…

Perhaps he misinterpreted the sorrow on her face, because his eyes narrowed menacingly. “Are you hoping for a savior, my darling? You pray in vain, I am afraid. Not even your precious team—cowardly good-for-nothing humans— can help you now, not while you and I are cloaked in these shadows. And you will not be joining them ever again, my dear, for it’s awfully hard to reside with a team when they are dead.” His eyes shone with madness and glee, his voice growing exultant. “I shall go forth, Blake, and kill them one by one. That little team leader of yours, the human who slaughtered Roman Torchwick so mercilessly? I’m going to come back and gut her, I will torture her until she is begging for death. The brat Schnee, I’ll make sure she dies as painfully, as well, as she deserves. Perhaps I’ll kill her with Dust, how fitting would that be, that she perishes by what gave her the undeserved title she bears now—"

Blake felt her heart hammering away in her chest, a choking feeling in her throat; there was so much pure terror within her that it was impossible to express it. She had passed from mere fear into something much, much more, and dimly, she wondered if her own traitorous body would overload from her fear and fail her now, when she needed it most. She saw her team, the people she loved most in this world, flash before her eyes—

Ruby, laughing at a joke, silver eyes sparkling, before her face became solemn and pale; Ruby, who was like a little sister to her, who had faith in her from the very beginning; Ruby, who had lost so much but still held hope in life and love—
then Weiss, smiling her small smile, her blue eyes glimmering with warmth. She was one of Blake’s best friends, opposite from her but amazing just the same, someone she would trust to have her back through anything; Weiss, who bore her cross with such quiet dignity—

and finally, Yang, the one she loved more than she could ever imagine loving anything, her sun and stars; Yang, who’d been through hell and back for those she loved; Yang, who burned with a quiet fire that could never be extinguished for long; Yang, who was in danger now because of Blake’s past, because every damned thing had come back to haunt her, as he had always promised it would…

She was afraid. She knew the Bond had to be overloading, and she knew Yang would surely be coming to see what was frightening her so horribly, but she couldn’t come now, she couldn’t, Blake was powerless once more…

Adam was still talking. “— and your partner, the gold-haired one? I’m going to track her down, and I’m going to break her. I’m going to break her spirit in the way you should have been broken long ago, and I’m going to make her hate you, make her see the real you. And I will kill her before your eyes, so you may know true pain, so you may know, really, what you have caused, what is your legacy, that despite your foolish dream of changing the world, the only mark you will leave is hate and pain and betrayal, like you did to me—”

She stared up at him, a slow paralysis creeping through her, a disbelief, because this could not be happening, he could not be here, not again… and she couldn’t move, couldn’t escape, because the instant she showed defiance, she knew he wouldn’t hesitate to show her the true meaning of pain.

*Do not go gentle into that good night—*

“And at the end,” he snarled softly, leaning closer so she could see the dark light gleaming in his pupils through the mask’s eyeslits, “You will die too, Blake, after all the pain you have caused.”

*— rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

Blake turned her head away, unable to go on looking at his cruel face. The very thought that she had once loved him, had once loved this person, this monster who possessed such boundless cruelty, made her feel a sickness like she had never felt before. All she could see was him. Adam. Once, he had been her closest friend, her confidante, her ally against the harsh world. Her partner, her mentor. Her one source of warmth against the coldness of discrimination. The Faunus who had always been able to make her strong. The boy who had guided her through the tempest of her childhood. The Faunus with so much determination who had helped her get back on her feet, all those years ago.

Traitor. The boy who had turned his back on her without her even knowing. The Faunus who had plotted with Ayran to slaughter all of mankind, to bring mercy to its knees. The one who had worked behind her back to manipulate her. The one who had not cared how many had to die if he could achieve his wants. The one who had allowed himself to be bewitched by the promise of power. The Faunus who had denounced humanity after being spurned, and had sought to take everyone down with him.

Her chest felt impossibly tight, and she fought for every breath, as she imagined a dying person might. He was gone. He was truly gone, and any trace of the person he had once been had died many, many years ago. The one who stood before her with such hatred in his eyes was not Adam, not anymore than she was Blake of the White Fang. Both of them had been changed in
incomprehensible ways, altered by destiny, and she did not flinch as he raised his blade to slash at her again.

“Go on,” she said softly, not moving to protest as she closed her eyes. “Call me traitor, if that helps. Strike me again, if that will make you feel better. According to you, I deserve all of it and more. Do your worst, Adam. Knock me down, bloody my skin. Be the monster that should have struck me, not mankind. Fix fate’s wrongs.”

He stared down at her, momentarily stunned, a slow-burning fury, mixed with an emotion she didn’t quite recognize, broiling in his eyes. But before he could speak, or move to deal her another blow, a desperate scream broke into his words. A scream that made Blake’s eyes shoot open, made a jolt of terror race through her, so great it nearly stopped her heart.

“Blake!”

He swung his head up triumphantly, eyes landing upon her. “So the thought of your death does not make you cower,” he snarled. “But I think hers will. And now, Blake, I will make it my mission to destroy everything you love… starting with her.”

---

**Yang**

Yang sprinted through the ruins of the school, her lungs screaming for release, screaming for air, but she didn’t dare to stop. Didn’t dare to do anything but frantically track the thread of light that connected her to her partner, telling her where Blake was, telling her of the fear lighting up their Bond.

There was a visceral, pounding terror infusing every fiber of her being. She had been talking to Weiss when it had hit— asking her where Blake was— and then out of nowhere, like lightning, horror had lit her up from the inside out, and she had taken off running, not even bothering to tell Weiss where she was going, even as the heiress cried out in alarm behind her. But Yang knew the fear was not her own. It was Blake’s, and Yang knew that there was only one thing in this whole world that could make Blake that scared.

*Adam.*

---

**Blake**

“Get to your feet, my Blake.”

“Make me,” she invited, swallowing a wince as he prodded her sharply. “If you can.”
“Oh, I will,” he purred, and she drew back her lips in the beginning of a snarl. “Oh, Blake. You used to be so staunch, so firm, so strong… truly a warrior of the White Fang. And who are you now? Not quite a human, not good enough to be a Faunus… you’re weak. You have become so weak, so emotional, my love.”

Fury crackled through her, blindingly sharp. “I’m not your—”

“And shut that mouth of yours,” he snapped, backhanding her across the face; a hot explosion of pain radiated out, but she would not give him the satisfaction of letting him know he had hurt her. She met his gaze with blazing, defiant amber eyes. “It’s always gotten you in trouble, hasn’t it? You’ve always had too much of rebellious streak, too much of a disregard for who was really in charge. Just like that damned father of yours. Well, that’s why he died. It’s high time it was burnt out of you.”

_Burnt_. She swallowed a shudder. Yang’s call… she was coming now… and Blake had no idea what she would do when that moment came. _I would die right now, Yang, if you could survive safely and never witness this, never witness what he wants to do to you and Ruby and Weiss… please don’t come. Please, please, don’t try to play the hero, for once, please, let me… let me go…_

_Let me go…_

“Blake! Blake, please, where are you?” Her voice was incredibly close now, and Blake’s resolve crumbled as she saw her partner enter her view from the farthest side of the building, picking her way recklessly through the rubble. Adam’s teeth glittered in a wild smile, all sharp teeth and blood, as he saw her, and some part of Blake, some detached part that wasn’t crouched here in the shadow of her oldest nightmare, wondered if Adam could see himself in Yang. They possessed the same fire, the same strength, the same unkillable drive, the same inability to let go of Blake. Twin sides of the same coin, Adam in the shadow, Yang in the light. They were alike, more alike then either of them realized, and Blake had known it all along.

Yang finally saw her, and her eyes widened; she saw the blood on her face, the shadows of bruises, and the fear in her expression. Her eyes grew furious as she saw Adam, and she launched herself towards the two of them.

“Stay back!” he barked as Yang hurtled forward, leveling his sword so the tip of it brushed Blake’s throat. It stung like the coldest kiss of a snowflake, before warming as blood welled up from the barest nick of the blade; he took a visible breath before calming himself. “Take another step closer, Huntress, and she dies.”

Yang pulled up short. Her eyes flashed across to Blake; they had never been so full of terror, and the Bond… Blake regretted it, for the first time, she regretted being Bonded. This couldn’t help anyone— because the fear there mixed with her own, until it was almost unbearable. She met Yang’s eyes, her heart thudding so hard it felt like it would burst. _Do as he says_. Blake knew Adam was bluffing— he would not kill her yet, not before he had his revenge— but Yang could not call that bluff, or he would kill her as easily as anything. Right now, she was a bargaining chip, that was all.

He began to pace as he spoke, all the while keeping a line between the two of them, his sword hanging loose at his side. Blake knew that didn’t mean anything. He could explode into deadly action in between one breath and the next if he wanted to, and she watched him as warily as she would watch a bloodthirsty panther.

“You have no idea,” he laughed humorlessly, shaking his head as he paced, broad shoulders rippling with muscle, “about my Blake, my dear, do you, Huntress? I’m sure she’s talked at length
about me, but was any of it the truth?” He looked from Blake to Yang, still grinning. “Oh, you see me here, threatening her. Now put a name to my face. She has never been able to shut up about her nightmares, so you should know me well.” His voice dropped to a mere hiss like the crackle of flame. “Do you know me, Yang Xiao Long?”

Blake’s breath caught in her throat as Yang ran one hand down her gauntlets.

“One of course I know you. Adam Taurus. Leader of the White Fang.” Her voice was remarkably steady, lilac eyes touched with the barest hint of red; Blake couldn’t tell if it was her semblance beginning to activate, or the reflection of the bloody flames. “But I’d prefer to call you coward. From Blake’s descriptions, you look just hideous as she made you sound. Wearing a mask to hide your ugly face—”

Adam’s face twitched, contorting for a moment with anger, before he controlled himself. “Mockery is the product of fear,” he said. “And you are very, very scared, human. Only a fool would not be. Of course—” He swung around to face Blake, all the while keeping his sword drawn — “You’d know her fear, wouldn’t you, can’t you feel it, running through your veins, doubling your own?” His voice trembled with loathing. “Because you Bonded again, didn’t you, even after ours—”

“Our Bond is broken,” she spat, cutting him off.

His mouth thinned out. “Broken as you will be, Blake. All in due time. And as our Bond is dead, so shall your new one die, too. Do you remember when Ayran said I would become leader of the White Fang, by your hand? That came true when you killed him, killed him without mercy, just as he killed your own father. Do you truly believe yourself invulnerable to the circle of balance? Our Bond broke because you left me. What goes around comes around, my love, and I swear, Blake, by the end of tonight, you will leave her— your Bond with her will be over, and you will break it.” He looked at Yang. “Willingly.”

The words she snarled back made him hiss in anger, before he roared with mirth, though his face still looked like it was carved from stone. “Oh, she has spirit, this one! Blake, why am I not surprised that it is her you’ve chosen, over me? And why,” he went on, his voice becoming chilled, “is it she that will die tonight, and not you?”

“Then come threaten me, not Blake,” she said, and her voice was remarkably level, clear and measured, but her eyes burned with something Blake had never seen before— something that scared her even more than Adam’s words. She had seen Yang’s fire and spirit— that fire had never burned Blake, had never burned anyone with the intention to hurt. But this looked like an inferno, a blaze that would kill everyone in the world to keep a single person safe. “It’s me you want, not her. I’m her partner, not you. You claim that humans are the evil ones, but you’ve turned into something worse than a human. Your jealousy has warped you, just like Blake told me it had. You don’t want Blake out of some pretended sense of justice, you just want her to suffer because she had the nerve to say no to you. I know why you’re so obsessed with her. Because she was the one thing you thought you had total control over that ever turned around and bit you. You thought you owned her and you didn’t. No, I don’t know you, Adam. But I know your kind. I know the people who think they own others. But you don’t own Blake— you don’t own a soul. And I will never let you hurt my partner again.”

His mouth twitched into a scowl. “Humans,” he spat, and Blake thought she could hear the shadow of a little boy, a Faunus trampled at a rally gone wrong. “Arrogant little scum, every last one of you.” He said it with all the coldness of the bitterest winter, all amusement fled from his voice, so it was hard. He turned back to Blake, and she flinched away as he ran a hand over her face,
considering, before he dealt her another lightning-quick strike across the cheek. She shuddered, her adrenaline leaping in her veins, burning the pain away.

Yang was ashen, shaking on her feet, and though her eyes were leaping with scarlet fire, they were cold as ice. All the fear was gone from them. All that remained was hatred and rage. “If you dare touch her again,” Yang spat, voice hard with chilliness, “I swear I’ll make you regret the day you were born, you filthy bastard.”

“You see! That is what a human would do, jump to threats and violence as persuasion. Mindless cruelty is all you know. This is your legacy. Whereas mine…” He leaned over and drew a possessive hand over Blake’s cheek. She staggered away, spitting at him, and he roared with laughter, reveling in his element of sick cruelty. “Mine,” he whispered, “is so much greater.”

“Let her go,” Yang snarled, sounding like a wolf, and Adam glared right back— Blake thought that they looked like two wild, mad creatures standing each other down.

“Come and get her,” he invited mockingly. “If you can, human. Before she dies.”

Then Yang’s eyes locked with Blake’s, and she saw the anger— not cold indifference, not icy detachment, not chilly aloofness— crackling within them. Every time they had discussed Adam, every heartbreak, every nightmare— they had all led up to this moment, this final confrontation.

You cannot cheat nightmares. In the end they will have their own.

Something rumbled in the back of her throat, a low growl at first, but by the time she turned away from Yang and threw herself at Adam, it had transformed into a roar worthy of a lion.

Chaos erupted around her. She heard Adam screech with fury, his sword pricking her throat, only to be torn away as a shape flew over her. She blinked hazily as a howl of pain— Adam’s— rent the air, and she heard Yang’s shriek of anger as metal clashed against flesh. Then red light suffused the air, sharp as a knife. They were both fighting against him now— but Adam could fight armies alone.

“Yang, no!” Blake screamed as she unsheathed Gambol Shroud, watching him swing up his sword so the moonlight caught it, glowing silver against red. “His semblance— move!”

But Yang, now sporting a bloody gash on her temple, wasn’t fast enough. Blake hurled herself forward, feet slipping against the rubble, and flew into the path of the downward arc of his blade. She only had time to close her eyes and brace herself before he struck, screaming in fury at her defiance. She curled up, but nothing— no pain, no shattered Bond, no battles fought— could have prepared her for the agony of the blade slicing into her flesh.

She screamed, screamed as the blade sank deep into her side, bypassing any bone or muscle or sinew. It ripped and tore before withdrawing, and she was screeching like a mad animal, as soft lights exploded behind her eyes, like stars behind rain-torn clouds. She went to her knees, coughing up blood, wondering how it was possible to feel this much pain without dying, and she doubled over, the world receding to the barest flicker of flame as pain, feeling just like fire, flooded her veins, devouring her alive. She thrashed, trying to put out the flames, wondering how no one could see the burning, as the world swam before her, as she was only hanging on by a thread…

Blake!

Let me go, she thought dimly, aware her struggles were growing weaker, her spasms fading. Let me
go, let me fade, before he comes back into...

And then came the scream. It was a wordless, painful lamentation, like a bird crying as its wings were torn off. It was the scream of pain deeper than the soul. It was Yang’s scream as she felt the agony singing like a wailing chorus through the Bond, and Yang’s pain as she saw—what she thought was—Blake’s death. But she was alive, if only for the moment.

*If I die, Blake managed to think, so be it. I will die. But not without making Adam pay. I owe Yang and I will not go into the dark with that debt unpaid.*

---

**Yang**

As soon as she hurled herself at Adam, in the thought that she was going to attack him for hurting Blake, for bringing down his sword and stabbing her with it, she knew she was going to die.

She thought she knew hate. She thought she had known what Blake had gone through. But nothing could have prepared her for this—this absolute creature of pain and terror and hatred. His eyes were full of hideous glee. His sword swung down.

And made contact.

Later, the memory of pain would still make her flinch. Later, she would forget the way flame ripped through her veins. But now—this was real, and death had taken her in its grip and was shaking her around and around and would not let go.

She was fire, she was blazing as brightly as a star, burning herself up in the descent. She saw Adam’s eyes, now as cold and expressionless as a winter wind, before he smiled, and it was a thing of terror. The strike that blazed through her now was a pang of pure anguish so great that she thought it would stop her heart. It ended in a jolt of pure terror, and a flash of light red as blood.

Now she was falling through the air, her body weeping blood tinged with fire, the ichor of angels. Weightless. Someone was screaming, and she wondered briefly who it was, until she realized it was coming from her own mouth, rising high as the uncaring stars. As she fell, all she saw was Blake’s terrified eyes, dilated with pure animalistic fear, staring behind her at something she couldn’t see. Yang saw Blake’s lips shape her name in a scream, but all she could hear was her heartbeat, roaring in her ears.

Then darkness slammed down around her.

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**Blake**
She found herself staggering to her feet, lurching into Adam’s path as he advanced upon Yang, who was lying on her side on the ground, curled up, body half-hidden from Blake’s sight. Pain flooded through the Bond in crashing waves, a pain more acute and crippling than she had ever known, leaving Blake gasping. The pain almost drowned her: she was as helpless as a child against it.

But then it all cut off. The pain, the emotions, everything, leaving Blake more alone than ever. She had been Bonded with Yang so long that she had forgotten what it was to be alone, but the feeling of absolute solitude was more crippling than ever, like someone had cut off some essential part of her… and then she realized the magnitude of it. If Yang’s side of the Bond was gone… if the pain was gone, if the feeling of her was gone… her aliveness and the feel of her and her emotions were gone, and the Bond felt dead… But how could that be, if Yang was okay? Surely she was just stunned. She would get up any second…

“No,” Blake muttered as Adam drew aside, casting Yang’s body into the light more fully, as she saw the pool of blood that was slowly ebbing out from her body. “No, no, no.”

“Yes,” he whispered as Blake saw what Adam had done, why his sword was wet and red with blood, why his eyes finally glittered with triumph. “She’s worthless now. What is a Huntress without her weapon?” He began to laugh loudly as Blake finally saw what lay there. “What is a human with a hand to inflict pain?”

Yang’s eyes were closed, her face so pale she looked like she were already dead. She was unconscious, the only mercy that the night had yielded. And next to her…

“No,” Blake choked. “No, you… she’s not.”

She could not comprehend it; her mind simply could not accept was it was seeing. Yang was a burning flame, bright and invincible. She had never been seriously injured, not beyond repair, because that was impossible. But there she was, lying there, and her arm… Adam stalked around to the other side of Yang, looking down at it, at where his sword had come down and sliced it off, as easily as one would take a breath.

There wasn’t a shred of remorse on his face, only a cold satisfaction, the face of a wolf after it had made a kill. “This is your payment,” he snarled at her prostrate form. “A partner for a partner. A weapon for a weapon.” Then he turned his face down, and spat on her. “The only mercy you get, human, is that you won’t be alive to watch Blake die, too.” He raised his sword again, preparing to kill Yang in one motion.

He didn’t even get as far as lifting it before Blake had flew at him, fury blinding her with tears. Her hands wrapped around his throat, a scream bursting forward from her throat. He staggered backward. “You!” Blake screamed. “You did this! You ruined my life and hers! It ends here!” She punched him the face so hard his head snapped around, bones cracking. “I should have killed you when I killed Ayran!”

She thought she had known anger when she had attacked him earlier. That was nothing compared to this. Something had unlocked inside of her, flooding her with a fury that lent energy to her strikes. They both fell, punching with kicks and screams, but this time, Blake had one thing to match him: now her strikes sought his death, and her strikes were her final stand. She had killed Ayran, and she had never wanted to kill Adam, but she had never felt this much pure rage—this could only end one way— if he was too strong, she would die in the darkness.

Yang hadn’t been able to touch him for one reason, and one reason only.
She didn’t know Adam.

But Blake had grown up beside this boy, trained beside him, slept in his bed, eaten the same food. She knew his thoughts and hopes, fears and dreams, the way he thought, the way he fought, the way he moved. She knew Adam, and that was his undoing.

*You think we can never be equal?*

“You think you can kill me?” he cried, his breath hot against her ear. “After everything?”

“After everything,” she screeched, “you deserve it.”

He roared in agony as she kicked him squarely in the face, knocking his mask off to the side, his nose crunching as the bones broke. In retaliation, he smacked her away and she fell down on her back, just like she’d been when this first started. He raised his sword, intending to stab her through the heart. But he moved just too slowly, from where Yang must have injured him earlier, and again, as Blake slipped out from the reach of his blade, Yang had saved her life in the smallest of ways. Adam was on the ground for a moment, vulnerable—the briefest of moments—but it was enough.

There was only one thing for it.

*Goodbye, Adam.*

With a gut-wrenching cry of pain, she threw Gambol Shroud, feeling it as it left her hand. The air seemed to turn to syrup, time slowing to a crawl, as it spun end over end like a dark star. Adam’s eyes widened, scars stretching grotesquely, the firelight shimmering on bulged skin. And Gambol Shroud—her blade—her faithful blade that had been by her through everything, had linked her and Yang time and time again, and had saved her life, did not fail. A good blade.

She watched, motionless, as time seemed to speed up again and the blade sank into Adam’s chest. He stood there a moment, staring first at her, and then, as he looked down at where the blade stuck out from between his ribs, blood oozing out weakly, it was like he was a puppet, and someone had cut his strings.

Adam fell.

He fell, crumpling to his knees, a bubbling, broken wheeze exhaling from his slackened mouth. He clutched weakly at the hilt protruding from his chest, and Blake could not stop herself from walking forward towards him as he struggled on the ground, a powerful monster reduced to a feeble shell. She felt like she was in a dream and nothing she said or did was really happening.

She took his head into her lap. It made her shudder to touch him, but she sat there, straight-backed and numb, as his glazed, scarred eyes slid over the fire-lit walls and then came to settle on her face.

“Bl…ake.” He looked up at her, gasping shallowly for breath, those gray-gold eyes, marred with scars, piercing into her. In answer, she picked up his mask, placing it over his eyes. “Your blade has… true aim. Just like… like with Ayran. I taught you how to… use it. I never thought it… it would kill me…"

Her voice was choked with emotion as she wiped blood away from his chest, but it kept coming and coming, a ceaseless tide, drowning, drowning just as Yang had drowned in her pain only
yesterday, what felt eternities away. “You’re not dead.”

“No… don’t touch me… I can’t bear it if you touch me.” He raised his hand and lifted it up, placing it over hers, where her hand was on the gash in his chest. “Heart,” he whispered. “You threw to pierce my heart, and you did… just as you have every day since you left me.”

He’ll blame me until he’s dead, but I’ll never regret leaving him. He had turned into a monster. Another flare of anger bloomed to life inside of her. “I—”

“It was… not supposed to be like this. I trained you, Blake, and I trained you to throw a blade… straight and direct… I know you.” Blood glistened at the edges of his lips, a grim sneer twisting them. His voice was ragged. “No, I’m not dead yet… but you aimed to kill. And your aim… was true. There’s not much time left.”

She didn’t try to argue. She knew where she had thrown her blade—if she hadn’t hit his heart, she had hit something else vital, maybe even punctured his lungs—and she could recognize the smell of death creeping in on the air, lingering in the way his face was getting grayer and grayer. She knew how to recognize death, because she had grown up with it.

“I’d like to say I regret a lot of things,” Blake whispered. “But I don’t regret this, Adam. I can’t. And I never will.”

He coughed, and a thick spool of blood rolled out from the corner of his mouth, his face pale and waxen-looking. “You killed Ayran,” he said hoarsely. “I didn’t… think… I would die by your hand… too.”

Blake bowed her head, hot tears stinging the edges of her eyes. Here she was, sitting—beaten but not broken—in a room in the academy she loved, alive while two of her partners were dying around her. “I didn’t want it to end like this. I don’t forgive you, Adam, but I don’t think you wanted it to end this way either…”

He turned his head slightly, his face pale in the light. He must be very close to the end now. “Two paths,” he whispered. “Two destinies. *One will lead to mankind’s destruction; the other, your salvation. You have the potential to atone for your sins.*” His face contracted with pain, skin going taut. “But I never could atone for what I did… who I became… and neither could you. And you—you shouldn’t. So I shall… give… a final warning. *Run,* Blake. *Run… away.* The White Fang… will hunt you down. Because you killed me. This is their revenge, their way. If you are with the human… they will kill her too. Run. Run away from Vale and… never return. That’s the only way your team will be safe and survive. You’re… a danger to them. As you have thrust a blade in my chest… so they shall to you and to Yang. My death will not bring you peace, but only pain. The White Fang is a creature of vengeance. That is what… I made them.”

“No,” Blake hissed.

“I have chosen my path.” His eyes glittered. “Rage at the dying of the light, Blake, even now… I cannot change it… and going gently into that good night… death was never gentle, not with either of our parents or our fates… and neither was I…”

“Adam,” she whispered in horror as he turned his head away, exhaling a low breath, his chest’s movement falling into stillness. “Adam, no.”

But it was too late; his body was going cold, and when she shifted, he—his corpse—rolled off of her. She could recognize the eerie stillness of death on his face.
Blake’s head spun, black spots dancing before her eyes— from blood loss, or from loss of the heart? In all her nightmares, in every worst dream, she had never thought of Adam dying— or that she would kill him. She hadn’t dared to imagine it. She had wanted her revenge, perhaps, had wanted him out of her life. But not gone from the world forever. Even now, it seemed unreal. A world without him was like a world without night, or snow, or rain. A world that was uprooted from the center. Death had erased the lines on his face, softened his skin, made him younger. Hands shaking, she took off his mask and closed his eyes gently. He did not deserve her forgiveness— not after everything he had done— but she owed something to the boy he had once been, the boy who had saved her, brought her up after Brian and Maria died. Not to Adam, leader of the White Fang, but Adam Taurus, the boy who had loved her. Who had taught her to fight and how to survive.

“Goodbye, Adam,” she whispered.

He had died… and his last words were a warning to her. Not of reconciliation— she hadn’t expected forgiveness from him, nor had she forgiven him for all his crimes— but of a promise.

_The White Fang will hunt you down, because you killed me. This is their revenge, their way. If you are with the human, they will kill her too. Run. Run away from Vale and never return. That’s the only way your team will be safe and survive._

“But first,” Blake whispered to the empty air, “I need to get Yang to safety. Then… I will run.”

_I didn’t know it when I took my first breaths, when I became Adam’s partner, when I walked into Beacon, when I sought out Yang in the forest… but my duty is to protect her. I have been made to protect her. Only in death will I be kept from that duty. And to do that… I have to get her to a safe place, and then, because my presence ensures danger, I…_

The answer came to her through her whirling thoughts like a shaft of lightning striking through the clouds.

_I have to go. I have to go and never come back. I have to leave Beacon, leave the city, leave Vale entirely._

_This is… this is goodbye. To both of my partners forever._

Numb— not quite comprehending what had happened, her emotions all locked in ice, except for the sense of urgency, to get moving, to get away from this place— Blake stood, taking the last steps away from Adam’s body. Each one felt like it carried her a mile, but she didn’t look back once.

Several feet away from him, sheltered underneath a broken table, was Yang’s body. Fear mixing with a horrible dread in her chest, Blake stood over her, heart in her throat.

_Was she already dead?_

She could live in a world with a dead Adam, but not a dead Yang. Adam’s death could shake the world. Yang’s would shatter it.

Her breath rustling out of her throat, she leaned down, touching Yang’s shoulder, not daring to touch the wound that Adam had caused her. “Yang,” Blake whispered, holding her partner’s face. She was unresponsive, her eyes flickering as if in dream— or something else, behind her eyelids. She felt slack, like a badly-jointed wax doll, her skin no longer burning with that inner fire, but cold as ice. “You can’t die. You can’t. I still need you.” _I will always, always need you…_

But Yang didn’t move at all, and she was as still as a statue. Heart splintering in two with agony,
Blake closed her eyes briefly, leaning down to rest the top of her head against Yang’s chest. Tears stung at the corners of her eyes like white-hot pinpricks. Her heart pounding, she sat floating in the darkness behind her eyelids, resolutely trying not to think of Yang. But her face appeared against the blank screen of her closed eyelids anyway, not smiling at her but looking sidelong, and she could see the gold of her hair, the uneven curl at the corner of her mouth, and the sparkle of her eyes. All the marks and flaws and imperfections that made up the person she loved most in the world. Yang. She could almost hear her voice, too, saying her name, the way she had whispered it in the classroom so many months ago when she had told the tale of her mother, over and over again. Blake. Blake. Blake.

The words became almost like a heartbeat, an unbroken rhythms, before Blake’s eyes flew wide as she realized what she was hearing was a rhythm, the simplest, most beautiful tune of all: the beating of Yang’s heart.

A/N: Eyyyyyy Bonds ‘turn off’ if one person is unconscious. Don’t think I mentioned that, haha.

Please, please leave a comment!
Chapter XXII - Fight and Flight

Chapter Summary

Keep up the comments, and we just might top TYWOTW (which has 699 comments)! If we do reach that goal, I might have a special bonus for you guys....

Pyrrha

The night had almost been too much to process, but now that they were standing outside of Beacon Tower, it hit her full-force like a ton of bricks. They were right at the base of the Tower, standing beneath the battlements, while a war raged below them in the vault.

I’ve killed Penny. Beacon is under attack. The defenses have failed, and a Grimm wyvern is set on the Tower. Amber is dead, and Cinder possesses all the powers of the Fall Maiden. Ozpin is gone.

She swayed slightly on her feet, breath coming fast and shallow, and then Jaune was there, one hand steadying her. “Pyrrha!” His voice was panicked. “Stay with me.”

She took a deep breath, smoky air billowing out from her mouth in the frigid air. The stars whirled overhead, and her vision focused until she could see again, and the ground felt steadier under her feet. “I’m okay, Jaune,” she said, her voice sounding far away. Every nerve of her body felt stretched taut, tension ballooning between them. She knew part of her tension wasn’t just the suppressed feelings—she had felt Amber’s soul enter her body, however briefly, and it had changed her. For the slightest of instances, she had felt the edges of a thousand souls, all the Maidens from the dawn of time, whispering in her mind, not sleeping but barely awake. She had felt fire and smoke, the briskness of winter and the heat of summer combined, pure power thrumming through her. It had been the most exhilarating thing she had ever experienced, and the most painful in her life, because as the power and ambition had flowed into her veins, her own soul had been pushed out. When Amber’s soul had withdrawn, yanked out by Cinder’s arrow and the cold hand of death, flooding into Cinder instead—Pyrrha’s soul had returned to her body, but she had been changed by the experience, and she knew it. She had tasted raw, elemental power, and for Cinder to possess not even a quarter of it, as Pyrrha had tasted, but the whole thing...

“She has to be stopped,” Pyrrha said aloud. “If Ozpin doesn’t stop her... Cinder has power, enormous power. She could summon the wyvern here to the Tower. She could summon the Grimm, make a ruin of Vale, of Remnant.”

Jaune’s blue eyes glittered at her in worry. “How is that even possible? She doesn’t control everything!”

“She could—if she killed Ozpin and took all the Maiden’s powers.” Pyrrha took a rattling breath, one hand on Miló, the other resting on Akoúo. “She could control this whole world.”

“The... Maidens? I don’t understand... what?”

Pyrrha looked nervously at the Tower, imagining the battle raging beneath their feet, all the power
of autumn reckoned against Ozpin. He would never be able to withstand such an onslaught, and she shifted on her feet, anxious to get going, to do something. “Jaune, we can’t—”

“No, listen. Pyrrha.” His face was hard with anger—not at her, but at the situation, at the sheer injustice of it all, and she could have almost wailed aloud in pain. “Down in the vault. That’s the decision you were worrying about, wasn’t it? That’s what made you so sad for so long. Whatever Ozpin was doing with that girl in the coma and you, and the orange light…”

She stared, caught off-guard. “How did you…?”

“I know you,” he said simply. “What was it? Why were you in the vault, why did Ozpin ask you to go, just… all of it. Why?”

She clenched her teeth. “We don’t have time to talk—”

“Pyrrha.” His voice dropped to a whisper, and she realized, with a swift, sudden shock, what tonight must look like to him—how she must look, chosen by Ozpin, forced into her role. “Please.”

Giving up, deciding that an explanation would be swifter than an argument, she let out a deep exhale of breath. “You remember the legend of the seasonal Maidens, Jaune, don’t you?”

He looked confused, as if it was irrelevant. With a burst of bitterness, she wished it was. “Yeah, of course.”

Ever-conscious of how little time there was left, she rushed out the words, stumbling over them in her haste. “The legend of the Maidens is true. All of it is true. There are four Maidens on Remnant, and they can wield magic without Dust, and they’re incredibly, incredibly, powerful. Ozpin knew it, the General knew it, so did Goodwitch and that Huntsman, Ruby’s uncle. I was called to Ozpin’s office about a week ago, remember? He told me all of this, but he told me that there was a girl—”

“The girl in the vault?” Jaune was paling visibly as she went on.

“Yes. Her. Amber is her name. She is— was—the autumn Maiden, but she was attacked a while ago—attacked by Cinder. Cinder wants her powers. She only managed to steal half of them before Ruby’s uncle saved Amber, and Cinder escaped with half the Maidens’ power, leaving Amber in a coma when she fled. Amber wouldn’t live forever, though, especially not in a coma, so Ozpin wanted to use me as a… a vessel for the rest of the power, so Cinder couldn’t take it by default when Amber died. But that didn’t work out, because Cinder struck tonight, setting up the tournament to fail, having Grimm destroy the kingdom’s defenses, and to engage Vale in battle while she went down to the vault to steal the Maiden’s powers. She wants the power of it, I guess, wants the sheer strength it will give her… and now she has it. She has the Maidens’ power.”

His eyes were as round as moons, his jaw sagging open. “That,” he said with apparent difficulty, “is one of the craziest things I’ve heard.”

She took a heaving breath. “You have to believe it.”

He shook his head, still looking faintly stunned. “Of course I believe it; I just saw it with my own eyes, and I trust you. But… what are we going to do now?”

As soon as he said, a loud noise ripped through the air, like shattering stone mixed with an echoing scream. The ground shook violently under their feet, and they both fell to their hands and knees as the stone bucked under them, the very air vibrating with a deafening roar. When it subsided, Pyrrha
looked up, and her heartbeat seemed to stagger as she saw what was there.

Within the transparent windows of the school, like a comet returning to the heavens, a blazing orange streak was hurtling upward, towards the summit of Beacon Tower. They were far away, but as they watched the streak bear upward, fire emanating from its shape as it shattered floors and windows, Pyrrha knew who it was.

Cinder.

“But Ozpin was fighting her,” Jaune cried out. “If she’s gotten out…”

“She killed him.” Pyrrha set her jaw. “There’s not much time left.” She turned to Jaune, before a thought occurred to her, and she frowned. With a sudden, striking realization, like a sunbeam parting the clouds, she recognized what she must do. There was no one left to save Vale, no one to hide behind. No Maidens, no Ozpin, no heroes to save the day…

Except for me.

The thought came with a faint echo of surprise, and oddly enough, she didn’t feel dread, only an unwavering resignation as the answer came to her. There is no one left to fight Cinder, no one who could hope to stand against her.

No one except me.

“Go,” she said suddenly. “You need to get out of here. Get to the city— tell Qrow and Glynda what happened. Before it’s too late.”

He sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth. “But… what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to fight her,” Pyrrha said quietly. “Don’t you see? This is the only way, I have to do it. Not out of a sense of responsibility, or because Ozpin thought I would fight Cinder… but because I love Remnant. I love Vale. I love Beacon, and all of you… and she’ll destroy it, if someone doesn’t stop her. Jaune… if I don’t come back…” She swallowed. “When I don’t come back… don’t grieve. Just… live. There’s no one to make pay. There won’t be, not after this. The only way you could possibly make it all okay is… be the best person you can be. Don’t let it warp you, change you… see the beauty in life.”

Jaune looked shell-shocked, and he reached out, holding her hands between his. “Pyrrha,” he said, whisper-soft. “Please…”

“There is a poem,” she said. “‘Do not stand at my grave and weep. I am not there. I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow. I am the diamond glints on snow. I am the sunlight on ripened grain. I am the gentle autumn rain. When you awaken in the morning’s hush, I am the swift uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight. I am the soft stars that shine at night. Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die.’” She gripped his hands tightly. "I'll always be with you."

His eyes shimmered brightly, and then, in a mutual sort of understanding, they both leaned forward, and they were kissing. Her chest feeling as though someone had clawed a hole in it, she cradled his face between her hands, the face she knew so well, kissing him as if the world were collapsing around them— and it was, wasn’t it, in a way? All they knew, all she had ever known, was irrevocably changed. And she found herself savoring every sensation, every thought and touch and sound, for she knew— almost certainly— that they would, very well, be her last ones. For ever. It was one thing to have the uncertain threat of death all around you. It was quite another to
walk into your own demise, knowing that you would not return, and accepting that you would die, you must die, no matter what.

And she was choosing the latter.

This, she knew, was her fate from the instant Professor Ozpin had summoned her and told her knowledge that changed what she knew forever. The boyish lines of Jaune’s features were resettling into harder, more angular shapes, and his face was wet with blood or tears, soot streaking his cheeks. He tasted like salt, a cacophony of blood and tears and pain. And their very first kiss was the first kiss of goodbye, of farewell, an adieu, because she didn’t think she would see him again— she could feel it, deep inside, where she could feel her heart breaking and falling and crumbling. Adieu. What a tragic word it was. Not quite a ‘goodbye’, not an au revoir. Not a see you again, someday, for we will certainly meet again— but adieu, a goodbye. A requiem. A final, ever-so-final, parting of ways.

She pulled away. He was crying as well, tears carving clear paths down his cheeks, and his eyes— beautiful blue, and heartbroken— rested on her.

I love you, she thought. But I have to do this. You understand that, don’t you, that this must have always been my fate? The words were there, choking in the back of her throat like tears, but as they tumbled to the front of her mouth, they came out differently.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, an infinite tenderness in her voice. “I will never forget what you have given me.”

He clutched at her hands harder, tears streaking down his face. “Isn’t there another way? Pyrrha, you don’t…” His voice faded away. They both knew that it had to come to this, that she was the only one who was strong enough, but he was shaking his head, backing away from her. “I can’t let you do this. I can’t let you die, Pyrrha. I won’t.”

Hating herself for it, knowing it was the only way, she summoned a burst of polarity to her hands, knocking him backward into a rocket locker. The door clattered shut, locking him inside, and his blue eyes glittered out from the shadows, now panicked.

“Pyrrha! No, please! I can’t lose you, please…”

“You won’t lose me,” she said gently. “I will always be in your heart, Jaune. You can go on. I know you.”

With that, she dialed in a location, shutting her ears to his pleas, summoning the warrior inside of her, the one in tune with sacrifice and blood and fighting.

Destiny.

The locker shot away into the night, spitting blue fire, and she watched it vanish in a glimmer of sapphire the color of his eyes. Suppressing a thrum of pain and regret, she turned, and began to walk towards the Tower, towards her fate, towards her destiny… towards her demise.

Jaune
He staggered from the wreckage of the rocket locker, his knees singing with pain, all his limbs watery and shaking. He could taste salt on his lips, could barely stand, but he numbly wrenched his Scroll from his pocket, thumbing in a code on the shattered screen. Weiss’s face sprang up, a diagonal crack running down the glass just over her eye, and the garbled dial tone rang out in the air.

She picked up on the third ring. Once, many weeks ago, he would have been all fumbling hands and nervous words, but he could only laugh at the memory of how he had once felt for Weiss—and how dearly it had cost the person who he was close to losing now.

He could hear the roaring of Grimm in the background, because everything was going to hell, and he could hear Ruby’s scythe taking down one after another. “Weiss!” He cried, clutching the Scroll like a lifeline—and for Pyrrha, it was—“Please, you have to stop her!”

“What?”

“Pyrrha!” he shrieked, his heart in his throat. “She’s going after that woman at the top of the Tower. Cinder! She thinks she can sacrifice herself to buy us time, but she doesn’t stand a chance!”

“Jaune, what are you talking about? Where are you?”

“Don’t worry about me!” He stumbled, his shoulder slamming into the side of a building. He could feel tears streaming down his face, hotly blurring his vision. “Please—please, you have to save Pyrrha. I can’t…”

“We will,” she said urgently. “Are you okay?”

Sorrow exploded out from him, his voice a harsh cry. He could feel the Scroll leave his hand and he collapsed, harshly choking on his sobs. *I cannot lose her, I can’t—just as I realized how she felt, how I felt, it was always there… Why was I so stupid? Why did I wait… why, why, why…*

He looked up, seeing what was in front of him. He’d landed in the city, right in the middle of the battle of Grimm. Somewhere across the sea of darkness, there were other Huntsmen.

He had to help now; he realized that. He couldn’t be the coward anymore, the one who stood idly by while other people sacrificed themselves to keep him safe. With a grimace, he unsheathed his sword in one fluid motion, watching the moonlight dance across the blade, and wishing fervently that things were different. He could never make it back to the Tower... but there was someone who could, and all he could do was pray - pray, and use the skills that his partner had instilled within him.

His sword felt different in his hand. Firmer. Stronger, somehow, like he’d finally grown into it. Like he understood it now, and he and the warrior inside of him were balanced, as one—at a cost. But the price was too much to pay.

He pictured her weeks ago before she had turned into the sorrowful person he had just been torn away from—her eyes laughing, her face encouraging, and always—always—loving. It was all he had missed and all he had never seen.

He saw the raging sea of Grimm, tearing through the streets. There were only four Huntsmen there to suppress the tide of darkness. Once upon a time, it would have scared him. But now he only felt
cold. He lifted his sword, swaying a little on his feet, and took a step forward to confront a snarling Ursa. The sight of its mindless, hate-filled red eyes made him cower, before he steeled himself, a similar snarl taking over his features.

This is not how it ends.

He pictured his partner’s dying— dead?— face, and let his fury loose.

Pyrrha

Upon entry into the Tower, after sending Jaune to the city, Pyrrha found that she had been right. Cinder had defeated Ozpin. The broken elevator, still streaming smoke from its shaft, stood as a testament to her victory. She had gained the Maiden’s powers after murdering Amber, and used them to propel herself to the top, to the office, the summit of the Tower. Pyrrha knew that, from there, she would be waiting to make the final claim for triumph over Vale. She would try to get the Grimm wyvern to do her bidding, and it could destroy a building with the merest lash of its tail. Pyrrha couldn’t even begin to imagine the destruction it would wreak if it were to actually try on Cinder’s will. She had already won against Ozpin, and she had no clue that Pyrrha was there, at the base of the Tower, of how she was ready for this, for her fate.

She didn’t know that there was only one soul waiting to stop her.

Pyrrha stepped into the elevator, skirting the smoking hole that gaped in the center where Cinder had shot through. With a glance upward, swallowing past the fear in her throat, she reached out, feeling, with her semblance, all the metal in the elevator. Then, with a mighty surge, she yanked it up and felt herself shoot skyward like a cork popped from a bottle.

The elevators flew wide open as she reached the top, torn apart by the centrifuge, and she burst through them without hesitation, seeing Cinder standing there with her back to the doors. Every bit of training and power surging through her fingertips, Pyrrha hurled Miló out of her hand like a javelin, aiming straight for the Fall Maiden, for Cinder, for her final opponent.

The first thing she became aware of was four pairs of glowing eyes, the color of fire, resting on her — Cinder’s eyes, and then, behind her, the eyes of the Grimm. The wyvern. It was curled around the Tower in a horrible imitation, a mockery of a bird on its perch, but as she exploded into the office, guns blazing, it took to the air with a shriek and a buffeting sweep of its wings.

Cinder snarled, ducking out of Miló’s path with a sinuous ease, like a snake. “Fool,” she hissed. “Ozpin is gone. He holds no power over you, and the powers were never yours, this isn’t your fight —”

“You’re wrong.” Pyrrha’s voice was flat and cold as she stared at Cinder. Every nerve in her body humming with an eerie calm, she pulled Miló back to her grip with a flash of her semblance. “For every soul you hurt tonight and every destiny you manipulated in your own hunger for power, it is another reason for me to fight. You played with fate as if it was yours to control… mine and Penny’s and all the people who suffered tonight because of you. So I ask you: how can you think that destinies are for you to meddle with? A true warrior knows that destiny is never defined, and I
choose my own path. *This* is what I choose, and you’ll never take Vale or another person’s fate as long as I live!”

Cinder’s lips curved upward, as if Pyrrha’s words were amusing. “You remind me of him a bit,” she said, a strange note in her voice, like a purr. “The same unfailing faith in your own will. The same belief in the eventual triumph of what was good.” The smile fell from her face. “But Ozpin’s beliefs didn’t save him in the end. His arrogance came to nothing. His strength didn’t save him. Nor shall yours.”

Pyrrha struck, then, flashing her spear out as Cinder summoned a burst of flame to dance in her hands, giving her face a ghostly, haunted look. She knocked Miló away with a snarl of anger, but Pyrrha summoned it back, and they stared at each other, each sizing the other up. They both circled each other, like hawks, like two predators locked in some ancient hunt. The distant shrieking of the wyvern echoed through the Tower, and then, as one, they struck, and Pyrrha could almost imagine a clap of thunder echoing through Vale as they smashed into each other.

Fire scorched Pyrrha’s back as she landed several hard strikes, and she flipped back, using the force to launch herself off the wall, feet planted firmly on Akoúo’s center. She flew forward like a bullet shot from a gun, the shield backed by her weight, but Cinder blocked her with a shove of her arms. Pyrrha’s chest heaved as she fought for breath, and then she gasped; Cinder was hovering in the center of the Tower, actually *hovering* in midair, like some magic levitating trick, but twisted, horrible and wrong. Fire burned under her feet, the awful beauty of autumn’s fire emanating from her eyes, golden glory blazing forth in the shadows.

“You see,” she rasped, “this is the power he promised you, the power he lied of, what he kept smothered and shrouded in secrecy, what was never yours—”

Snarling, Pyrrha charged, cutting off Cinder’s words mid-sentence. With a flick of her fingers, Cinder spun around, her hand flashing out as she sent forth an arc of fire that dived forward like a snake, spitting sparks. Forced to dodge it, Pyrrha rolled to the side before crying out as another stream of fire shot towards her. She jumped over it, landing on both feet, planted apart on the ground. She looked up, eyes streaming from the heat and smoke now curling through the room, but her whole body felt as though it was made of ice. A deep chill settled in her veins.

Six balls of seething, shifting fire had formed behind Cinder, casting a deadly red halo of light across her hair, a net of scarlet dancing across her skin. With a laugh lost in the roar of the flame, she flung them forward, and Pyrrha whirled and danced, barely avoiding them. She screamed aloud in frustration as she saw Cinder had moved yet again, the fire still shivering beneath her feet like a compass point.

Another stream of fire dove forward from the Maiden’s hands, a thick band of writhing lava, and this time, Pyrrha, with a muttered prayer, grasped Akoúo and thrust herself forward into the midst of the fire, knowing Cinder wouldn’t expect it.

The minute she hit the roaring, spitting inferno, her Aura shivered with the effort of keeping her skin intact, but she could still feel the flame licking her skin, singeing it, as it spilled past Akoúo’s edges and spattered against her. Every pain she had ever endured, times ten, twenty, a hundred—every fight—nothing had been so hard as this, and her breath *burned* in her lungs, like acid, the smoke blinding her. She slammed into Cinder and immediately capitalized on her proximity, using Miló to assault Cinder with a flurry of slashes and jabs until her arm was streaming bright-red blood, tatters of skin hanging off her arm, mixing the reek of coppery blood with the sharp scent of smoke. Cinder swore loudly, grabbing Miló, her hands wrapping around the blade. It was clearly painful—her teeth bared in a rictus, a terrible grin of agony, but she powered through, blood
welling from her hands and running down Miló’s glistening golden length as she seized the blade and pulled it towards her, forcing Pyrrha to move with it, until her back was to Cinder. With a howl, Cinder kicked her right in the spine, sending her to her knees. Another kick sent Pyrrha crashing through a spindly table into the stone wall of the office.

Groaning, she struggled to her feet, the cold adrenaline of battle surging through her veins. She was bleeding now, but by no means beaten, and as she stared at Cinder, stared into her fiery amber eyes, she was struck by a feeling of power, illimitable power. She didn’t think for a second she could win this—not she, mortal as she was, reckoned against the pure power of a season—but there was only one thought in her head: *I am doing this because I have to, and it will be enough.*

*It has to be.*

Cinder flew forward, dipping low to the ground before skyrocketing upwards, taking Pyrrha with her. They grappled briefly in midair, each strike sending a shockwave through Pyrrha’s Aura, and a brief flash of terror flickered through her. What if she couldn’t do it? What if her sacrifice was in vain, and she couldn’t cripple Cinder enough to stop her, what if she couldn’t save the Tower, or Vale, or her friends, or any of it?

No, she thought fiercely. *It is enough, because I am strong enough! I was the candidate for the Maiden’s powers. I will stop her!*

She delivered several hard kicks to Cinder’s face, making her screech in pain and release Pyrrha, who plummed the floor like a dropped stone. Landing on her heels, she upturned Miló, throwing it at Cinder, who deflected it with a wall of fire that roared up out of nowhere. Pyrrha called it back to her side, charging forward in a run as Cinder landed, and used the momentum to flip the Maiden’s body over and slam her into the floor.

But she underestimated the strength of the other woman, and Cinder did a back-hand-spring, landing on her feet. Desperate now, Pyrrha hurtled forward again, slamming her shield into Cinder’s skull as hard as she could and crying out as Cinder delivered a retaliating, stabbing blow to her abdomen, but she did not recoil from it. Pyrrha hit back just as hard, making the Maiden stumble, and as she staggered back, Pyrrha smacked Cinder’s hand with the blunt end of her spear, and then ducked around to slash her other hand with the blade. As Cinder hissed in pain, Pyrrha spun around and stabbed at her stomach.

She retaliated, scorching a blaze across Pyrrha’s arm with a spear of fire. Crying out in pain, Pyrrha gritted her teeth and snapped around to attack again, but Cinder was quick, too quick; she reached out and gripped Pyrrha’s shoulders, dragging her forward like she weighed no more than a rag doll. Still holding on, her fingers digging into Pyrrha’s shoulders hard enough to draw blood, Cinder performed a backflip, knocking her into the air. Pyrrha righted herself midair, hurling her spear towards Cinder, who dissipated six fireballs to knock it away. A look of surprised annoyance flashed across her opponent’s face as Akouo quickly followed Miló, nearly bashing her across the forehead, and she ducked it. Pyrrha summoned both her weapons back as she fell from the air, hands pulsing with polarity.

As she landed, Pyrrha launched herself towards Cinder and put her in a headlock, tackling her to the ground. They turned in midair, grappling like two wild animals, fighting to be the one on top, and as they smashed into the ground, a cloud of dust plumed up around them.

Pyrrha took advantage of the thick swirling silt to tighten her grip around Cinder’s neck, feeling her swallow against the blade as she choked with the applied pressure.

“Get up,” Pyrrha rasped, her voice sounding horribly strangled as she staggered to her feet, still
squeezing her grip around the Maiden’s throat. She could feel her heartbeat under her palms, the age-old bloodlust of the warrior, the urge to drive down on that heartbeat until it ceased to be. “Get up, or I will kill you.”

Cinder got to her feet in one fluid motion, not struggling against Pyrrha’s grip on her neck. “Kill me as you killed another tonight?” she whispered, laughing coldly. “Or does a body without a soul not count?”

“Penny had a soul,” Pyrrha spat. “It’s you who doesn’t.”

At that, Cinder stopped laughing, and they both paused, at a standstill, both seeking a way out of the position. Cinder suddenly stiffened, and Pyrrha turned to look at what had caught her attention.

The wyvern had been circling high above the Tower during their battle, and now—at her bidding, perhaps?—it circled around and suddenly shot forward, veering up at the last second and barely avoiding hitting the summit. Pyrrha turned back to look at Cinder, who had begun to shift her position during Pyrrha’s distraction.

There was a smile on her face, a cold, quiet, amused smile, like they both shared a mysterious secret, and she did not struggle against Pyrrha’s tightening chokehold. Her hands were curled gently across Miló, holding it as one would hold something precious—not gripping as they had before, so that the blade cut and sliced at her palms and drew blood. She was barely resting her hands upon the metal this time, but Pyrrha realized what she was doing moments before it took effect, and she was too late to stop her.

Miló snapped into unusable quarters of metal, just as Pyrrha had done to Penny, destroyed parts of what had once been whole and functioning. The edges were still glowing with superficial heat, and the pieces of her broken weapon clattered to the ground. Pyrrha staggered back as Cinder took advantage of her distraction to elbow her in the chest before hurling her body backward. She went flying, hitting the back wall with a loud cracking noise, her skull slamming backward and sending waves of darkness lancing across her vision. Sliding to the ground, she let out a low moan, her vision hazy. But even with the darkness, she could see an emerald glow suddenly suffuse the room, followed by a great ripping sound, the noise of stone being rended from stone. Blinking away agony, she looked up, and gasped.

She was not met by the sight of the circular roof, but rather, the great expanse of the snowy night sky, filled with a mixture of wind-torn shreds of cloud, and stars. There was a crashing noise from far below her, and she knew it was the roof—cogs, gears, and stones—hitting the ground, followed by the CCT’s transmitter. The wyvern had hit the tower, and with it, it had knocked off the roof of the office, and the CCT transmitter.

A burst of sheer terror exploded in her chest. No. No, no, no… I failed! The Tower… Ozpin said the Tower mustn’t fall, and it has…

But she could not continue the train of thought; Cinder was staring at her, fire bubbling up from her bloody palms once more. Pyrrha sensed she was not about to strike; she was waiting, so the first move was up to her. Staring up at her, seeing the power that she so obviously held and controlled with ease, Pyrrha felt doubt thrum through her. She had never been afraid she might lose a fight—never. But tonight was a night full of new experiences, and pain was making her movements sluggish, slowing her blood, clouding her mind.

“This is folly,” Cinder said, shaking away blood from her arm impatiently, as if the wound Pyrrha had inflicted was merely an annoyance, a pest. “Star-child. Did Ozpin make you believe you were special? You were only ever a pawn in his game and mine. The only difference is that I am honest
enough to admit it to you.”


Cinder smiled. “Even for one like you, the pinnacle of virtue, the strongest of Huntresses, you who manipulates fate even with your semblance… to fight a Maiden is to die.”

The only fate I ever controlled was my own. “You fought Amber once,” Pyrrha whispered instead. “When you were mortal, as I am. They told me. And you lived.”

Something like surprise flashed over her face, before cold cruelty replaced it. “A weak Maiden, such as Amber,” she growled, “had no mastery of her incredible powers, no chance, no chance of winning against someone like me. It was only right for me to possess them; I would use them in far more powerful ways than she could have dreamed of. And if I beat her without the powers, on my own merits… what exactly are you expecting to do here, when I am far more powerful than any mortal has ever been?” Cinder lowered herself to the ground, her amber eyes glowing. “If you leave now, there is a chance you could survive, child, but if you do not, there is none. Do you truly believe that tonight will go down as anything but the first tragedy of Remnant, the night a Huntress child died, the night Vale succumbed to what was stronger than it?”


Cinder smiled. “That’s a chance you could take,” she said. “But listen. They have come to Vale now, those who create the shadows between the stars. They are drawn to places of slaughter and sorrow. Can you see?”

Pyrrha looked out the windows, and so did Cinder, seeing the wyvern circling high above them, a great black shadow that blotted out the stars. All sorts of Grimm fell from the length of its body, Taijitus and Beowolves and Ursai and Griffons, howling as they tasted the blood and misery in the air…

While Cinder was gazing out the window, Pyrrha struck. She lunged for Cinder, driving downward with her weapon, pinning her and burying the metal in the flesh near her shoulder. Blood bubbled up from the wound, turning her red dress redder. With a shriek of rage and pain, Cinder kicked her off, flipping to her feet with true fury now burning in her eyes, fire spitting sparks from them.

She shot up into the air, her lips drawn back in a terrible snarl as she flung barbs of fire at Pyrrha, one after the other so quickly that Pyrrha could not dodge them. The office was ablaze now in a whirling inferno, fire crawling up the walls, racing across the floor.

Pyrrha rolled out of the way of two rapid-fire blasts of flame thrown her way, but she wasn’t quick enough as a third blast of fire smashed her in the chest, sending her tumbling backward. With a scream of agony, she slammed into the wall before springing to her feet as the floor beneath her caught light, embers spilling out across the ground.

If I can distract her and make her think I’m doing something other than what I am…

It was a longshot, but it was the only thing she had left. Using one hand, muscles trembling with the strain, Pyrrha concentrated on using her polarity to raise every ounce of heavy metal in the office. While she did so, she squinted through the rising wall of flame, lifted Akoúo, and with a deep breath, flung it through the rippling orange wall.
Cinder backhanded the shield away with ease, smirking at the apparently weak move and at the same moment, Pyrrha swiped her own hand through the air and sent every bit of metal toppling on top of Cinder, burying her under a shining pile of silver and gold.

A scream of rage echoed from its center, and Pyrrha’s eyes widened as it began to glow red-hot, like a massive ember. The metal began to melt and fuse, and then, with explosive force, one of the cogs exploded outward, bearing down upon her. Cinder erupted from the center of the melted metal, swooping upward like an angel in flight, and still the gear was coming, flipping end over end. She turned to flee out of the way, but she was not fast enough, and it slammed into her side, knocking her backward. It crushed her under its weight and she hit her back against the broken pillar of the office with a scream, sliding to her knees, barely managing to stay conscious as a black, jagged wave of darkness flickered across her vision.

And with all the strain she had put on it— using her semblance, not being fast enough to avoid heavy hits from Cinder— her Aura buckled and shattered. Pyrrha staggered, gasping under the sudden fatigue that overwhelmed her.

Cinder’s teeth glittered as she bared them, breath rasping harshly in the sudden silence. Pyrrha thought she might be laughing— laughing at the foolish Huntress girl, throwing away her life to buy her kingdom time. “Foolish girl,” she repeated. “Do you honestly think you can win?”

With her Aura expired, everything seemed fuzzy, her limbs suddenly weighed down by heavy exhaustion. She was mortal now. Every strike to hit her would leave a wound. She fought for breath, struggling to her feet, the question bouncing through her skull— but she already knew. Miló was gone, and only Akoúo was left now; she knew she couldn’t win. That wasn’t the purpose of it. She kept fighting anyways, because she had to. For Amber, for Ozpin, for Beacon, for Vale, for the world, for Jaune. She didn’t stop, wouldn’t stop, down to the last breath, even when she knew each breath could be her last.

“No,” she breathed, before running before and flinging Akoúo out before her, one final stand.
Chapter XXIII - The Brightest Star

Chapter Summary

This is a pretty short chapter, but they'll start climbing in length. One that's coming up is over 12k words. All in all, we'll be hitting around 200k in total word count by the time this is over. I haven't watched the finale yet, but for those who have, here's an extra RWBY treat! :)

Weiss

As Weiss stared down at Yang’s broken body, Sage standing over it and frantically weaving a green net of light around to heal her, she couldn’t even feel shock, or horror. She only felt numb, a deep chill slowly seeping through her veins, freezing her heart. Her team was broken, with what had happened, and tonight… the damage had already been done. It was irreversible.

The battle, and the digging of the graves, was over. Ruby still had not returned. Pyrrha and Jaune were both missing, and no one seemed to know where they were. Blake had stumbled out of the cafeteria a little while ago, bloody and gaunt, with a strangely hunted look on her face, but Weiss had barely noticed that… because in her arms, she held Yang, who was unconscious, with only the stump of an arm left. She’d been carrying her bridal style, like some cruel parody, and Yang’s blood— or at least, so Weiss had thought— had been all down her skin, flaking rust-red, though there seemed far too much blood covering Blake to have come from Yang, and far too much of it to just be her own, either.

She had refused to say what happened, who had attacked Yang, and so, unable to confront the reality of what had occurred, Weiss had stalked off the far recesses of the courtyard to wait in silence for Ruby, trying to silence the storm within her mind.

Ruby, she thought longingly, not for the first time that night. Ruby, where are you?

Then, as if the mere thought had brought reality about, a small shout pierced the silent night, and the sound of running footsteps echoed like gunshots behind her.

“Weiss!”

Weiss turned, barely able to believe it, her heart leaping in her chest - and there she was, there was Ruby, running across the courtyard, looking thin and pale and frightened, her hair a disheveled mess, blood streaked across one cheekbone, but she had never looked so much like a miracle to Weiss, a small miracle, the ones you kept close to your heart.

She was so beautiful, Weiss thought, so precious to her. And yet, she might die too. Might befall the same tragedy, like Yang.

Ruby leaped at her, almost knocking her down with the force of her embrace, her arms going around Weiss. She was crying and laughing all at once, her body shaking, and Weiss gathered her
close, allowing herself one small, precious moment to let herself feel what she hadn’t dared to feel for so long.

“Where were you?” Weiss whispered into Ruby’s hair, her voice muffled, not trusting it to hold up steadily if she spoke louder.

Ruby hesitated, as if taken aback, and she let go, stepping back to meet Weiss’s gaze. “I… do you not know? I thought with the Bond and all, you’d have…”

Weiss cursed herself silently. “I thought… I don’t know. Sun came back with everyone from the arena, and he said you had jumped off… I was afraid to verify it myself.”

Ruby let out a small huff of laughter, but it sounded wobbly, as if all the stress and terror and grief of the night were finally catching up to her. “Verify. Listen to you. Proper as ever, even in the middle of all this.” She reached up to touch her own cheek, fingers gently running along the drying streak of blood. “I saw Torchwick’s ship,” she said, something guarded in her voice. “Did you?”

“Of course. He released a cargo-load of hacked Atlesian-Knights into the courtyard, and Grimm as well. I’d assumed someone had broken him out of his cell. Maybe Cinder.”

Ruby looked away, her mouth working, before she glanced up and blurted out, “I killed him, Weiss.”

Weiss’s eyes rounded as she felt Ruby’s anguish mixing with her own stunned fear. “You… killed Torchwick?”

“Sun told you I left the airship,” she murmured with a feeble shrug, “but he didn’t know what I did. I used my semblance to leap the gap and make it to the arena… I took a rocket-locker and rode it up into the sky before falling on top of the ship he was on. I battled him and… I almost died. I was hanging off the edge, into the sky, with one of his partners pointing a knife at me, but I thought of you and Beacon and my sister, and all I had to lose… so I reached up and knocked her off the edge, and I battled Torchwick… and I won. I got him in the chest before knocking him off the side of the ship. A Grimm got him and killed him.”

“Ruby,” Weiss said gently, feeling her terror and self-loathing at the thought that she had murdered someone, “you shouldn’t feel bad. He would have killed you, and he wanted Vale to fall. You did your job as a Huntress.”

“I know,” she said softly, but she was still trembling softly.

“I don’t think any less of you for it,” Weiss murmured.

“That’s not what worries me, Weiss.” Her silver gaze darkened, a flash of anguish going through it.

Weiss frowned, bemused at the sadness flowing through the Bond, at the expression on her partner’s face. “Then what are you—?”

“I— I saw my sister,” Ruby burst out, stammering, her throat bobbing as she swallowed. “Over there. Her arm… and Blake. I… what happened?”

Weiss shook her head mutely, thinking to herself that she ought to have guessed that was what had been bothering her. Ruby and Yang were close— closer than most siblings, closer than she had ever been with Winter. “Blake won’t tell us. She’s just been sitting there… like a ghost. Whatever happened… I don’t know and I’m afraid to ask her.”
“The White Fang was here,” Ruby said slowly. “She had that old partner in the White Fang… do you think, possibly, that he could have been here tonight and…?”

“Oh, no.” Weiss shuddered at the thought. “If it’s true… poor Blake. I can see… if he was her former-partner and they were on bad terms… he must have taken revenge on Yang.”

“Well,” Ruby said, “she’s safe now, as safe as she can be. I think that we need to—”

She never got to finish her sentence, though, because at that exact moment, her Scroll let out a sharp beeping noise—the call tone. Weiss’s brow furrowed. Father? She thought quizzically, remembering his early incessant calls, but it couldn’t be him; he never called at night, when he was busy with clients, or paperwork, or drowning in a drink. It was someone else, but who? She rummaged in her gear and fished out her Scroll, and surprise filled her as she saw Jaune’s picture bouncing on the screen. It was testament to how much she had changed that she didn’t feel annoyance, but worry for him.

“Jaune!” Ruby looked terrified, which startled Weiss. “Ren and Nora said he was missing, along with Pyrrha. Weiss, answer it, quick, he could be in trouble!”

Fumbling, she swiped right to accept the call, and almost dropped it as an avalanche of noise blared out from the speaker, followed by someone screaming frantically.

“Jaune!” Ruby cried, bringing Weiss back to the present as she held her hand in her own to press her ear to the speaker. “Jaune, where are you?”

Jaune’s voice came back in a terrified cry, muffled and broken. “Weiss, please, you have to stop her!”

Weiss stared at the lit screen. “What? What?”

“Pyrrha!” he shrieked back. His voice was full of anguish. “She’s going after that woman at the top of the Tower. Cinder! She thinks she can sacrifice herself to buy us time, but she doesn’t stand a chance!”

“Jaune, what are you talking about? Where are you?”

“Don’t worry about me!” He was screaming now, and Weiss and Ruby exchanged horrified looks. “Please— please, you have to save Pyrrha. I can’t…”

“We will,” she promised, knowing she might regret it, but saying anything to calm him down. “Are you okay?”

A noise like cracking stone and yelling went through the speaker before the line went dead, and Weiss turned her Scroll off, fingers shaking as she stuffed it away. Ruby’s gaze had gone flat and cold. It was the look of a warrior about to go into battle, but somehow, it looked very wrong on her face.

“We have to go,” she said. “Pyrrha can’t fight Cinder. If she does, she—” Ruby swallowed, losing composure, and for a moment, Weiss could see through her cracks in her armor to the fear and uncertainty that lay beneath. “She’ll die,” she said more calmly. “We have to hurry, now.”

They both took off at a flat-out sprint, streaking across the courtyard, past the lumps of dirt shielding the bodies of Fox and Neon, past Yang and Blake, who was now lying flat on her back and speaking to Sun, a bloodstain slowly spreading across her torso, past the sparking shells of robots, past broken slabs of stone. They ran past the fountains and the entrance to the school,
drawing their weapons, coming to a halt just outside the west side of the Tower.

Weiss looked up.

She could see two figures within the office, engaged in a fierce battle, and the roof had been blown off, exposing them to the stars. A ring of fire burned on the east side of the broken office, lapping flames skyward. The wyvern Grimm was circling overhead, like some specter, its red eyes glowing horribly as it shrieked triumph into the night. It was clearly Pyrrha and Cinder, but Weiss had never seen a fight like this one. They moved with the speed of demons and the brutality of Grimm. She could tell right away that this wasn’t a spar or some mock-fight; it was a fight to the death, and if they didn’t hurry to alter it, there would be one clear outcome.

“Ruby,” Weiss said, feeling strangely calm as her partner tensed, readying herself to sprint up the Tower and intervene. “Ruby— wait—”

Her silver eyes flashed back in mild surprise at Weiss’s reluctance, a pang of confusion tautening the Bond. “What? Weiss, we can’t wait. Pyrrha can’t wait—”

“I’ll let you go up there, but I…” Weiss flinched, lowering Myrtenaster so that its tip scraped the ground. “Ruby, I need to tell you…”

Ruby turned around, looking alarmed at the note in her voice, Crescent Rose planted in the ground beside her. Looking at her— the determined set to her jaw, the dance of her silver eyes, the girl she was, even if she was gone in the face of battle— she knew, as clearly as she knew that she was to be a Huntress one day, that she loved her, more than she could ever have imagined loving anyone. Words swelled on her tongue and then, with a sudden blooming of do-or-die courage, she let them go.

“I love you, Ruby,” she burst out, ignoring her own fear, ignoring the way Ruby’s eyes widened. “I have for a while now. I don’t know if you feel the same, but I’ve been dancing around it for a long time and trying to pretend it wasn’t happening because there was just too much to sort out, too much to do… but I don’t think I’ll ever be finished with all of that. It’s always one thing after another; that’s just how life is, and I don’t want to be like Jaune or Pyrrha and have everything slip away from me while I’m not looking. And I don’t know what’s going to happen to us, if we’re going to die tonight, or you’ll be killed up there, or if this is all going to fall, or what… all I know is that I love you, and even if you don’t feel the same way, I had to tell you, just in case I never get another chance.”

She stopped, her chest rising and falling in shallow, fast breaths. It was clumsy, it wasn’t perfect, but it was honest, every bit of it. Ruby stared at her, silver eyes wide.

Then they crashed together, colliding like two waves on a stormy shore, thunder and snow swirling above their heads, and Weiss was kissing her. It was clumsy, unpracticed, and it was the most painful thing she had ever done.

As a child, she and Winter had talked about their weddings, about romance, playing at adulthood, wondering how they would fall in love, and which boy would steal their hearts away. Weiss hadn’t expected this at all—not this, not this pain. It was clumsy, and it felt as though she was cracking apart at the seams, every bit of careful self-control and poise she had learned falling away. The kiss felt like someone had taken a knife to her heart, digging it right into the very center, where it hurt the most. It was a kiss in the shadow of a goodbye, all flickering sparks and fire, a burning coal in the middle of an icy world of snow and storm. She tasted salt on her lips. Salt, she thought. And then, oh. She pulled away, opened her eyes, and saw, with a faint, distant sort of surprise that Ruby was crying, her silver eyes brimming with tears. Crying the way you might if you wanted
something, but it was something you could never, ever, have.

“No, don’t say anything. I can’t— I can’t bear it if you say anything.” Weiss bit her lip, running her hands down the sides of Ruby’s face. Already, she had lost the childish roundness of it, leaving behind only angular bones and hollowness. “Ruby, I… you have to save her. You have… you have to come back. Cinder’s up there, but… God, please stay safe.” Her voice dwindled. “You have to stay alive.”

Ruby took pause at that, not looking at her, twisting a strand of Weiss’s hair in her fingers as if it was something precious. Then she raised her eyes up, and Weiss flinched. There was something very old in the look— something ancient and full of a terrible grief. “I’ve never regretted Bonding with you,” she said, her voice sinking into almost a whisper. “Not once. And I never will. Never.”

She turned and took off, streaking off across a roiling sea of Grimm, leaving a wake of petals red as blood behind her, going up the side of the Tower like a warrior into battle.

Then she was gone.

And even then, some part of Weiss knew she had lost Ruby— the Ruby she had fallen in love with, the innocent, optimistic one— forever.

Pyrrha

Cinder’s eyes widened as Akoúo swooped towards her, and she raised her bow with a look of unadulterated fury, letting an arrow fly free. For a moment, Pyrrha was filled with exultant, desperate hope— Akoúo was right in its path; surely it would intercept the arrow— and for a moment, it looked that way. Her shield crashed into the arrow, shattering it midair.

But the shards floated for a second before condensing together and continuing their path, zipping through the air as a red-hot arrow that found its mark and sank into Pyrrha’s calf.

She cried out, staggering a few paces before falling to her knees. The agony that spiked up her leg told her as surely as if the words were spoken that the arrow was poisoned with something— acid, perhaps, or something to do with the fire abilities she possessed. It felt like the blood in her veins was slowly heating up, boiling, making her fevered. Sweat began to bead on her brow.

“It’s unfortunate that you were promised a power that was never yours to begin with.” Cinder’s voice floated around her, above her, beneath her, inescapable and creeping down the back of her spine. “But take heed of this— I will use it in ways you could never have wielded it, and find solace in the knowledge that you fought well.”

Cinder was suddenly standing in front of her, and Pyrrha glared up at her, refusing to cower, even now. Her eyes glowed as she lifted her hand, shards spinning up to coalesce into a dark, curved ship of a bow and arrow.

“Any last words?” Cinder looked at her along the bow’s length, the arrow pointed directly at her.
Pyrrha met her gaze, her back straight and strong, her heart thumping loudly in her chest, as if it was aware that any second, it would cease. “In the end,” Pyrrha said, her voice calm and echoing in the emptiness of the night, “it is you who will burn. It is you who will die the meaningless death. Not I. I am not scared.”

Cinder’s eyes flashed with something that looked like a mixture of guilty shame and anger, and she lifted the bow, aiming it directly for Pyrrha’s sternum.

Right before she heard the snap of the string as the arrow flew free, the clouds parted to reveal a single, bright star, shining through the snow clouds. It looked like an eye, a silent sentinel, watching her, guarding over her. A guardian. But not a Maiden. Not what had plagued her for long. Snow was falling, gentle flakes of ivory stroking her face with whisper-soft kisses. She closed her eyes briefly, taking in a deep breath of the sharp winter air.

*Autumn is gone, and they don’t need me anymore. In the end, it will be okay. I will make it okay. It’s okay. It’s okay.* That mantra repeated in her ears, and she opened her eyes, meeting Cinder’s icy amber gaze without wavering. Without faltering. Cinder had won the battle, but Pyrrha knew she had won the war, and as Cinder met her gaze, a look of horror filled it. Pyrrha wasn’t afraid of dying, but Cinder was.

In the end, you couldn’t cheat death. It would have its own.

In the end, it would all be okay, but Cinder could never say the same. *I take this victory by my shoulder. In passing we achieve immortality, and I will face the end with my head held high. I choose to be a Huntress. I choose my destiny. I choose the life I’ve always led—courage, and love, not hate and fear, as Cinder has chosen. Let me die, but I will face it unerringly. As a Huntress. I choose to be a Huntress, not a Maiden, and I choose my path.*

Her heart was full, not with hatred or fear, but with the same emotion that had walked her through her whole life— the emotion that was her pillar, the one that defined her legacy, and always had. A strong, loving strength — a strength that didn’t crush and hurt, but gave light and warmth.

Jaune’s voice whispered in her ears, filling her with certainty. *Destiny is your choice.*

Her eyes shifted up to the star, and it twinkled brightly. Still the snow fell, and still, Pyrrha held on to the image before she heard the twang of the string. It almost sounded musical, and she barely felt the impact as the arrow struck her in the throat, half punching her body around and making her collapse, a gasp ripping out of her mouth as a fiery pain consumed her, but it all felt distant. Everything felt very, very faraway.

Her hands hit the ground, but still, she looked up, the tiniest of smiles on her face.

*A choice. My choice.*

The world shrunk to a tiny dot around that bright star, the brightest star, a sense of peace filling her as everything went very silent, before winking out to darkness, like the curtain falling, signaling the end of the act of a play.
The glyphs burned beneath her feet, almost like glue, giving way and pulling her back in with a comforting security, and she ran—ran as if she had never run before, her breath feeling like fire in her lungs as she raced up the side of the Tower. The Grimm wyvern was circling above her like some massive bat, but she couldn’t be scared, couldn’t cower in wait, not if someone’s life was in danger.

She reached the summit, hardly aware of the dizzying drop below. The last glyph burst beneath her, giving her one final shove, and she shot upward like a cork popped from a bottle and plummeted, rolling over a broken slab of scorched stone and coming to a stop in a pile of dusty rubble. Heaving broken breaths, she looked upward, knees stinging from her landing, and blinked as her eyes slowly homed in on two figures before her, one kneeling, one standing. One with a weapon, and one without.

Twang.

What she saw made no sense to her eyes, like a bizarre nightmare from an illogical fever dream with no logical setting. Pyrrha was on her knees, and she was choking and gasping, her hands splayed in the dust, her green eyes dimming and fading as they looked up at the sky, locked on some distant point Ruby could not see and she was slumping over and not moving anymore and there was Cinder standing over her with a bow and arrow and blood on her hands and her amber eyes filled with triumph—

Ruby closed her eyes, a distant humming in her ears, a pressure suddenly throbbing behind her eyes as the scene sank in, replaying in her mind.

Too late, a voice whispered again, and then it was not Pyrrha's face that Ruby could see, filling her mind, but Penny's. Too late.

She saw the arrow sink into her chest, and the gasp that came after sounded like a deafening roar in her ears, louder even than the snap as the arrow flew free. In her mind, she watched again as Pyrrha slumped over, her breathing slowing, stopping in awful, broken heaves, her green eyes slowly losing their light. They were fixed on a point in the sky, fixed on a single glimmering star, and for the fourth time in the night, Ruby watched, helpless and confined another person she knew die by Cinder’s plan. Pyrrha’s body shivered once before going still.

With a noise like ashes brushing together, she turned to a bright, shimmering gold, flames dancing over her body, and she became dust, simple dust that crumbled away in the unforgiving wail of the wind. Cinder’s eyes—deep amber, like the fire—were hard and cold as she dropped the circlet that had once laid over Pyrrha’s head.

Unable to comprehend it, Ruby stared, Pyrrha’s face tattooed on the backs of her eyelids, unable to go away. Then it became overlaid with two others—a paler face spattered with freckles, green eyes that had never been alive, and another, long-faded: a round face with kind silver eyes and choppy dark hair.

Mom.

A screech tore from Ruby’s chest, coming straight from her heart itself as it split at the seams with the pain of seeing Pyrrha collapse. A roaring pressure exploded inside her mind, and the last thing she was aware of was a blazing, burning, icy coldness raging through her body, contorting it, lifting her up in the air and flinging her limbs out, arms and legs akimbo as her back arched with the inferno of power erupting out of her skull. Pure, concentrated pain, stronger than she had ever
known it, gripped her head, taking everything, every pain— every scar, battle wound, grief over all she had lost— multiplied by ten, twenty, a hundred, until she was screaming, her voice swallowing up all other sounds in the winter night.

She thought, *I will die here*, as the conflagration burst out of her eyes, the ground whitening and blazing up, roaring through the Tower and blotting out the sky.

She was not afraid.
Chapter XXIV - Aeternum Vale

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: Any similarities coinciding with Volume 4 of RWBY from here on out are coincidence; all of this was written before it premiered.

A/N: End of the last chapter has not occurred yet; we have gone back in time a bit. This scene with Blake occurs right at the time where Pyrrha is battling Cinder, right at the time Blake took Yang from the ruins of the cafeteria and brought her to the now-empty courtyard. The chapter title is in Latin, for those curious.

Blake

She would never have described her partner as anything other than strong, confident, beautiful, but none of it applied as she stared down at Yang’s prostrate body, looking oddly vulnerable and small, and it was all her fault that she was lying there at all. Sage was bent over her, and she had never been so thankful for his gifts in healing as she was now. He had stabilized her after her sacrifice in the doubles round of the tournament… now, it seemed, the shoe was on the other foot, with Yang having made the sacrifice.

The battle of Beacon was over. The Grimm were mostly gone— dead, or fled back to the wild. At the appearance of the Grimm wyvern, all of the White Fang had scattered, and now, thanks to Blake, they were leaderless. But, like a hydra out of some terrible myth, they would grow another head, another leader, and they would pursue revenge on Blake, thanks to Adam’s influence.

She looked up at the stars and wondered where on earth she could possibly go now.

As soon as Sage finished weaving the last flickers of green light around Yang, he turned around, his face grim. “She’s stable for now,” he growled. “At least, physically. I’ve gotten her heart rate up to a higher range, but not so high she’ll bleed out from it, and narrowed the veins around her arm so she won’t lose anymore blood from there. I can’t do anymore, Blake. The rest will have to be mental healing.” His eyes were dark with exhaustion. “When the airships arrive, you need to go. Get her out of here. I don’t know where, but somewhere safe.”

Patch, Blake thought. Back home, where she can rest and heal and forget about me entirely and what I’ve done to her…

“Hey.” He caught her gaze, his golden eyes concerned. “Blake, it wasn’t your fault. Be grateful she’s alive. We already had to bury two tonight. Thank your lucky stars he didn’t get her in the
heart, or any closer to her chest, or she’d... she would be gone.”

“Will she remember what happened to make her lose her arm?” Blake could barely get the words out. She didn’t think she could bear it, if Yang remembered Adam. My fault, my fault, my fault. But it’s almost time for me to leave.

He shook his head, swaying slightly from fatigue. “Who can say?”

Blake opened her mouth to say something before a jagged bolt of amber flashed across her vision, and her eyes widened as a wave of exhaustion hit her full force, making her stagger. She knew what it was instantly: her Aura, under the pressure of what she had gone through, had finally expended its last drops of energy on keeping her standing.

Instantly, she went to her knees with a low groan, her hand falling away from her side, sticky and warm with seeping blood. The wound suddenly burned, fiery with pain in such a terrible way that she knew it would scar. All her energy was gone, with her Aura down, all her defenses, allowing her to feel the extent of her wounds full-force, brutal and bloody. “Blake!” Sage’s voice was yelling in her ear, and she rolled on her side with a choked gasp of pain, unable to see anything but blackness behind her eyes, a deep blackness with stars swimming around. “You idiot, why didn’t you tell me you were hurt?”

“Can’t… my fault…” she croaked, her voice sounding very distant to her own ears, her heartbeat feeling slow and heavy. Everything was remote and far away as the stars, Sage’s frantic golden eyes, Sun suddenly appearing above her with an expression of panic on his face, someone screaming in the background. She reached out blindly, seeking warmth, and her hand brushed Yang’s. She grabbed it, squeezing it, knowing it was the last time she would ever have a chance to touch her, this girl she loved, this girl she always would love, until the day she died, the girl who she would never lay eyes on again after tonight, because to be near her was to bring down death upon her. At the touch of her hand, memories flooded her mind like some fever dream, vibrant in color, whirling through Blake’s mind and spinning away just as fast, like a book caught in a high wind—

— flying from tree to tree in the Emerald Forest, seeing a flicker of gold in the undergrowth beneath her—

and seeing her new partner grinning at her in a manic excitement, as if there was nothing they couldn’t do, no limits and no impossibilities, never the ‘I can’t’, but always the ‘I can’, of a life unfettered by nightmares and unbound by fear—

— and a rope of fire twining up her wrist as a Bond settled into both of their souls—

— and the wind stirring her hair and the moonlight making her smile seem as though it was aglow as she walked up the steps, offering Blake her hand for a dance—

— and her bare skin against Blake’s, her smile lighting up the room as she held her wrists lightly, scattering kisses down her collarbones—

— and the way she looked when she was asleep, her mouth half-open in a smile—

— and her eyes blazing doubly red in the reflection of Adam’s sword before they went dark —

Blake jolted back into consciousness as a burst of energy suddenly flooded her veins, a low humming through her body letting her know that her Aura was within a safer range, even though it was still low. The world swam into shaky focus, colors and lines sharpening in her vision. Sage
was sitting across from her, his hands fading with green light, his face pale and wan with utter exhaustion. Sun crouched beside him, one hand on his shoulder.

“Get to an airship, buddy,” Sun murmured, rising and helping his teammate as he staggered to his feet, swaying slightly as he gripped his sword. “Get a bit of rest, find some food and water and a medic. Then try to go find Neptune and Scarlet and get them together. Head back to Vale, and see if you can help out there— get citizens out and help repair.”

“To hell with that,” Sage mumbled, stumbling away like a drunkard, his voice slurring and fading as he ambled off into the throng of people waiting to board airships. “I’m finding a nice bed and never waking up again.”

Sun watched him go before turning back and crouching beside her once more, a respectful distance away, and he reached out and lightly stroked the place where her bandages were with a look of pain on his face. “God, Blake, who did this to you? And where did all this blood come from?”

Words bubbled up in her throat and rushed out before she could stop them. “I killed someone,” she blurted, and instantly wished she could sew her mouth shut as his eyes rounded.

“I— what?” Sun’s jaw sagged open in an expression of honest surprise, his hand dropping away. “Killed who?”

“Adam. I killed him, Sun.” She shivered, but she knew it had nothing to do with the icy night air. “I… he was about to kill Yang and I fought him and I just… I couldn’t let him go, not after what he did, not after everything… it had to come down him or me, and I picked…. I picked me.”

He looked from her to Yang in astonishment. “So he’s the one that—” He gestured vaguely with his arm. “Christ, Blake… so she lost her arm because… he wanted revenge because she’s your… and because he’s not your partner anymore, he took it out on her. Was that what happened?”

She nodded, curling in closer to herself, but she knew no amount of hiding could banish the thick sense of shame in her chest.

“Oh, Blake,” he whispered, rocking back on his heels and looking completely lost for words. “I’m so sorry.”

“I am too.” Mouth working, she turned her head away, but the only thing that lay in the other direction was Yang’s unconscious body, and Blake couldn’t bear to look at that, either. She turned her face upward, towards the sky, the shredded scraps of wind-torn clouds slowly blowing away. Stars shone feebly in the gaps between, pulsing silver in their myriad of constellations. The storm was finally over. Dawn would come soon.

*I prayed to you,* begged you— *and you didn’t keep her safe!* She accused the silent stars, accused her parents, who were watching from wherever spirits went. A deep sense of betrayal throbbed in her chest. *This happened to her, and not to me… I’m the one that deserved it, not her. Why couldn’t I have been the one who paid the price? Adam is part of her story now, too— but I have the bigger role. It was my fault, I left him… why didn’t he hurt me worse, instead of her? Why?

But deep down, she knew the answer. *Adam knew hurting Yang would hurt me far worse than any injury he could ever give me,* she thought dully, before Sage’s words rang in her mind, almost as if he was there to speak them aloud: *Be grateful she’s alive. We already had to bury two tonight. Thank your lucky stars he didn’t get her in the heart, or any closer to her chest, or she’d be gone.*
So you didn’t save her, Blake thought. You didn’t keep her unharmed. But you… but you kept her alive. You let me have the strength to do what needed to be done. To kill a part of my past I never would have been able to get over. You kept my team alive when others weren’t as lucky… and that’s all I can ask for, isn’t it? Mother, Father, I don’t care where my path takes me now, as long as it’s away from Yang, so it keeps her safe from whatever misfortune my presence will bring… and let her heal. Please… don’t let this be the end of the Yang I know.

Blake realized Sun was speaking with a detached, clinical interest; she glanced at him, her ears slowly flattening as his words sank in. He looked calm enough, but his tail was lashing side to side in obvious agitation as Blake observed him quietly. “You know how Yang is,” he insisted. “Even after everything she’s been through, she had the courage to stay happy and alive; she’s strong, stronger than you realize. She’ll get through this. But if you leave, if you leave her alone—” He broke off his words, pain etched in every line of his face. “I don’t think that’s a scar she’ll be able to recover from. Not now, and not ever.”

“Don’t you get it?” She shouted, suddenly furious at the world itself, her voice jarring and harsh to her own ears. “It doesn’t matter how I feel, and she’ll never recover anyways! Not from this, not when it’s my fault, Sun! Don’t belittle that by saying things that don’t even apply when you don’t know… don’t know what happened, what she sacrificed, what she did for me…. and I don’t belong here,” she repeated blindly, whispering, unable to hold onto anything but that one truth. “I don’t belong anywhere, if all I bring is pain.”

“You belong right where you are,” Sun said, his voice husky with concern. “Wherever you are at any given moment, that’s where you belong. No place can give you any sort of meaning. You’ve gotta find it yourself. And you can’t blame yourself for what’s happened just now, it’s in the past — that’s all it is, the past. I never meant to belittle what you had with Yang— what you still have. I can’t fix it, I can’t imagine what you’ve just been through, and anything I say will fall short of that. But Blake… you can’t just give up. You can’t run away, throw away everything that’s happened because you don’t know what might be coming next, what you might have to put up with. Yeah, the future’s uncertain for you. It’s uncertain for all of us; you’re no different. We can’t all just run away, give up on trying to get to a better place… a happy place.” He shook his head. “Not everyone can have a happy ending, that’s true, but you can give your damnedest and hope you get it, Blake. And maybe it won’t be what you thought it was. Maybe yours isn’t being at Beacon and being a Huntress or whatever. Maybe it’s not getting a fancy title alongside your team and isolating yourself from being a Faunus. Maybe that’s not what you’re meant to do. Maybe you’re destined for different things— maybe you’re supposed to go off with Yang and come to terms with losing the life you had, and figure everything out from there. Who knows? I can’t pretend to, but I do know that none of those will happen if you just give up, if you just run away. Yeah, there’s no guarantee that everything will turn out okay if you try your best, but there’s no chance whatsoever if you don’t try at all.”

I wish I could stay more than anything, doesn’t he see that? I love Yang more than I love life. I love her so much it hurts… and that’s why I have to go. That is why… I have to leave everything I love behind. Because everyone I love will die, and… if Yang died, if she were killed because I was selfish enough to stay… I would die, too. A world without her in it… that’s not one I could stand to live in, not anymore, not after so many losses… I was such a fool, to truly believe we would make it, in the end. A cowardly, blind fool. She is too light, too gold, too warm, to stay with me… and the White Fang… but she’s not light anymore, really. She’ll never be light again, not with the shadows I’ve cast her into. And it’s my fault, my fault.

I can’t be without her. And yet, I cannot be with her.

She turned away from Sun’s gentle words, his desperate pressing for her to be okay, her eyes
prickling with tears. “You’re like the brother I never was lucky enough to have,” she choked, “and I’ll never quit being thankful that you weren’t hurt tonight, too. I’m so sorry for everything. Everything. Sun, I… thank you. For being there for me for all this time. I hope… I hope you’ll find peace when you go back home.”

His gray eyes clouded over with a deep, aching sadness. “Blake, don’t. You have nothing to be sorry for. Nothing that happened tonight was your fault.”

“Goodbye, Sun,” she whispered quietly, clutching a hand to her side and rising to her feet, beginning to slowly walk away. She cast one glance down at Yang’s body, and a jolt of pure, unadulterated pain went through her.

Goodbye, Yang Xiao Long. Hail and farewell, until we meet again, someday in another life.

Sun was crying out now. “Blake, wait—”

She took each limping step slowly, waiting for her strength to gradually return, and even as Sun tried to follow behind her, she didn’t respond, and even as he tried to convince her not to leave, she set off in the direction of the lands beyond the fallen Tower of Beacon, and did not look back once.

Weiss

She saw Ruby streaking up the side of the Tower, and she began to slowly back away, her face still flushed, lips still tingling with something that felt like frost and fire.

“Weiss,” a voice called out. She turned to see Velvet limping towards her, having sustained a bad leg wound from fighting so many of the White Fang. “The professors are calling us to board the airships; they want us to leave before anyone else gets hurt.” Her eyes were full of grief, and Weiss felt pity go through her. Velvet had lost a teammate, and Weiss couldn’t begin imagine how she was feeling, how you could cope with that kind of loss. “I think your teammate Yang is already on board on the one back to Patch.”

“Is she okay?” Weiss felt a flicker of hope go through her.

Velvet shook her head slightly, and Weiss’s flicker of hope was doused in a flood of worry. “She’s still unconscious. I saw Sage stabilizing her, though,” she added, “so I wouldn’t fret too much.”

“I suppose that’s all I can ask for,” Weiss murmured. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for helping me during the battle.” Velvet gave her a nod, her brown eyes filled with surprise. “I didn’t expect it.”

Weiss looked away with a pang of shame. “I’m not my father,” she began, and then she broke off with a frown as the ground seemed to give the slightest ripple under her feet. “Did you—?” She said in confusion, and then broke off as her sight shattered into waves of black, the world around her exploding into pure, unbridled agony.

She collapsed to the ground with a scream as her heart gave a twist, flipping over in her chest. As
she fell, a white-hot pain jabbed her in the face, right between her eyes, as if someone had taken a poker out of a fire and stabbed her with it, and she screamed again, curling up in the fetal position on the ground, agony washing through her like an ocean, but she was unable to drown. No pain she had ever felt could compare to this.

But there was a distance to the pain, and she knew it wasn’t her own. The Bond was fluttering, and her eyes snapped open. That could only mean—

“Weiss?” Velvet shook her shoulder frantically. “Weiss, what’s wrong?”

“My heart— it felt like someone just grabbed it and twisted— and my head, my eyes—” Her voice rose as realization hit her with the force of a truck. “Ruby!”

At that exact moment, right as she stood up, the ground was ripped from under her feet as the entire world lit up a blinding white. Velvet screamed once, reaching for her weapon, before everything dissolved into a terrible, crushing chill, the world around them erupting into a white that shone with the brilliance of the sun, brighter than daylight. Weiss staggered and fell, landing on her hands, as the light slowly faded from the air as quickly as it had come, and the chill dissolved into the regular coldness of winter. Her eyes throbbed, blue spots dancing behind them like she had stared directly into the sun, and a terrible ringing blared in her ears.

“What was that?” Velvet cried, her hands bloody and scraped where she had tumbled down and used them to stop her fall. Weiss shivered, pain still throbbing behind her eyes, before she realized something.

“My Bond,” Weiss whispered hoarsely, voice trembling. “It’s… it’s gone.”

It was as though an emptiness had suddenly yawned inside of her, like some terrible black abyss. It felt like a raw wound, one that was especially noticeable in contrast to what it had been before— because a sense of security and trust, and a place of always humming-emotions, that she had never really been aware or conscious of had filled its spot only moments earlier. Before the chill of the white light… and that meant…

“Oh,” Weiss said, one hand coming up to cover her mouth as her eyes flew wide. “Oh my God. No — Ruby—”

At the exact moment she spoke her partner’s name, someone roughly seized Weiss’s shoulder and spun her around. Snarling, she ripped out of their grasp, her head spiking with pain as the world swam in a triple-layer before her eyes.

It took a moment for everything to sharpen into focus, but she recognized the person in front of her in an instant, even while everything was hazy and indistinct. She was barely conscious of Velvet backing away with a sharp intake of breath— not a sound of shock, but a sound of fear— because she had never, never expected to see him tonight, not here, not at Beacon.

“Father,” she whispered.

Vincent Schnee stood in front of her, his broad shoulders, cut sharply in a white business suit, stark against the shadowy night. His blue eyes were colder than the stars, and they traveled down her body with a look of clear disapproval. He was silent, but his mere presence, the way he held himself and his expression, let her know the fury that lay beneath the surface of his apparent tranquility.

“How are you—” She managed, before her voice failed her. Confused, she looked wildly towards
the landing docks and saw her father’s ship there, a cold ice-blue machine with polished windows and glimmering chrome that all looked terribly incongruous with the carnage that surrounded them. *But of course he’s here*, she thought with a detached fear. He had heard Cinder’s speech. He must have boarded an airship here before she had even finished… and he’d arrived at exactly the wrong moment, right when everything had shattered at the precise moment it seemed they would all survive.

"Father," she said again, by way of greeting, painfully aware of the stinging wounds she sported, how disheveled and wild-eyed she must appear. To him - he, who believed that poise and perfection were the pinnacle of virtue - this would look like one of the greatest insults. She sheathed Myrtenaster quickly, ignoring one of the first lessons she had ever learned: wipe the blood from the blade to prevent rust. She could do it later, but not now, with his cruel hawk eyes locked on hers. She hated that she looked so much like he did.

"Girl," he said coldly, ignoring the desolation around them. He had never called her ‘*Weiss*’, not even ‘*daughter*’ - always ‘*girl*’. Probably a side-effect of his resentment of her; he’d always blamed her for Ivana's death. She’d always longed to scorn him for it: how could she help that her mother had died giving birth to her? "You look... different. I did tell you that your choices would never have a fruitful outcome. This..." The contempt in his eyes, not the horror she’d expected, jarred her. "This mess does not strike me as a great shock, I must admit."

Rage gripped her. "I - there was no way anyone could have foreseen this, Father." *That our friends betrayed us... I admit I never liked Emerald or her team, but I never thought...*

"Regardless," he continued callously, ignoring her words, "some fortune has, at least, emerged from this reckless stupidity that transpired tonight. I hear that scum, that witless fool Ozpin is missing. However, do not think me heartless. I grieve for the innocent children who died, girl. That Faunus teammate of yours, did she perish?"

*Blake's alive... but Ruby, oh, God...* No. She couldn't think of that, or she would crumble. She was a heiress, Ruby's ex-partner—*ex-partner*, she thought with a flinch; but first and foremost, she was Weiss Schnee, a warrior tough as steel. She endured and moved forward.

Fury engulfed her. "She is alive. As is her partner. They are my *family*, more so than you are, and I am not leaving them. Not that it's good news to you. I threw myself in the line of fire to save a Faunus, Father. Maybe if I died, it would have knocked some sense into that selfish head of yours. I heard that General Ironwood survived an explosion this night. He seems to have changed greatly. I do wonder, does that make him, half-mechanical though he is, more human than you?"

She'd never spoken to her father so carelessly, and it was freeing, seeing his face morph from coldness, to disbelief, to rage. His expression was tight with anger. "You will *not* speak to me like that. As it is, it is unsafe here. Nothing fit for you. I was a fool to allow you to pursue such a dangerous career." He curled his lip. "You recklessly endangered your life for that... that *creature*. Very well. I can tolerate mistakes in the midst of this ruin. That reminds me... What befell your... partner?" He said it like he was thinking of another word besides ‘*partner*’, and Weiss staggered.

"I... I'm not saying. Not to you."

"You are coming with me, girl." The coming winter seemed to gather in his eyes, two condensed spheres of ice and snow. "Back home, where I can watch you, keep you safe from harm."

"Keep me *safe*?" Weiss shouted, poise crumbling. "When have you *ever* kept me safe, Father? I learned more of the world and the monsters that dwell in it than I ever learned from you; at least with you, I knew that family wasn't mutually exclusive with love! You *never* let me be free - "
“You claimed Beacon would help you.” He made a great show of looking around. “Instead, this is what I find— ruin, death of students. It’s luck you weren’t killed yourself, not any skill you claim to have gained from this riffraff ‘academy’. For you to be here, running amok like some ruffian in a hopeless endeavor to heal this place, will plague our family name. It will bring ruin on the company. This is for the good of us.”

Her face heated. “You can take the good of the company and shove it up your—”

He seemed to snarl. “You are my daughter. A fact you seem to forget, in this childish fit of yours!”

“So? Just because I’m your daughter doesn’t mean you own me! The only thing you want is to control me, to cripple my wings and smother me with the girl you want me to be! You are not my father. You don’t deserve to be called that.”

He bared his teeth, but before he could get out a word, a flurry of commotion broke out behind Weiss. She whirled to look and saw Blake determinedly limping away from the airship-docks—where was Yang?—with Sun chasing after her, yelling out for her to stop. However, even in the midst of Blake staunchly ignoring him and him persisting in chasing after her, they both must have sensed two pairs of eyes on them—Weiss’s fearful ones and Vincent’s furious pair—because in an almost comical unison, Sun and Blake turned to stare at them.

Their faces both immediately filled with recognition and then, surprisingly, hatred. But of course they would hate my father, Weiss thought again, almost tiredly. Vincent made life a living hell for the Faunus on Remnant. And once, I thought he was right.

Blake, her countenance torn, turned away from her path and began to make her way towards Weiss, Sun flanking her right side. They both came to a stop beside her; Blake looked shell-shocked and haunted, but still angry, and Sun was looking at the man with pure loathing.

“They’re boarding Yang on the airship now,” Blake said, and Weiss thought she could see her shudder at the name. “I…” She shook her head, seeming as if she was steeling herself, before looking at Vincent with cold, dark eyes. “Weiss, do you need some help dealing with… him?”

Vincent seemed taken aback, drawing himself up and looking contemptuously at Blake’s bow, which was torn and bloody from the night’s carnage. “Little girl—”

“She’s not a little girl, actually,” Sun seethed, his gray eyes furious. “Her name is Blake. And she’s been through a hell of a lot more tonight than you could ever dream of, you bigot, lording over your cosy office in Atlas while Faunus suffer because of you and your company!”

The pure amazement and disgust on her father’s face as he looked at Blake and Sun, both Faunus, both bristling at him, made Weiss feel sick to her stomach. “Help,” Weiss said, speaking around the growing lump in her throat, “would be pretty spectacular right now, Blake.”

Blake’s throat bobbed as she swallowed. "Regardless of whether you’re her father or not, I’m Weiss’s teammate, Vincent Schnee, and I’ve sworn an oath to protect my team, however I—” She faltered. “However I can. I’m sure you saw the carnage of tonight; I know you heard Cinder’s speech; you can see what your daughter and what everyone around you has been through, fighting for their friends and school, some of them dying for it…” She cast a forlorn glance at the two graves by the fountain. “Those circumstances would elicit sympathy and compassion from a normal human." Blake fixed narrowed eyes on Vincent. "But you are not a normal human, are you?“

Her father, ever-composed in his white Atlas uniform as she had always known him to be, seemed
to be— unraveling. "You are quite a fine one to talk, Faunus girl— I demand you leave this instant. I have every right to speak with my child— alone."

"‘My child’? She's your daughter, you selfish prick!” Sun whirled on him, his lip half-curled back in a snarl. Weiss doubted if he was even aware of it. “You’ve always ordered us to leave, always ordered the Faunus to hide away in the dark so you didn’t have to see them and know that there was more to Remnant than rich bigots like you—”

"Faunus scum," her father snarled, "always poking your muzzles in where they're not wanted—”

“How dare you talk to us like that. How dare you stand on the grounds of Beacon after innocent people have died for it and act like you’re not a part of this too!” Blake shouted, her voice ringing off the pillars and stones around them. Vincent actually flinched back as she got up in his face, her ears pressed flat to her skull, teeth bared— he flinched, barely a ripple in his expression, but it was there, nonetheless, only growing as her voice rose in volume. "I grew up in the White Fang and everything that led me here today was a product of the hatred humanity holds towards my kind— a hatred that you encouraged and tolerated! I grew up stealing and hurting people just to stay alive, and yet I turned out less of a monster than you! I don’t know how you produced your daughter. She has none of your evil, none of your prejudice. You can take her lawfully, true enough. But heed a final warning: you take her, but you won't keep her. You cannot contain Weiss. She isn't that kind of person. You smothered her once— she won't let you do so ever again, and that’s no one’s fault but your own.” Blake’s voice lowered. “And God only knows that you’ll learn your lesson this time.”

He got over his shock, glaring at Blake as he spat at her, “Is that a threat?”

"No," Sun growled. "That's a promise." He looked at Vincent in disgust before striding off, kicking up puffs of grit in his wake.

Vincent cast a suspicious glance between the two of them, Weiss and Blake, his eyes hard. “I expect you in the airship in ten minutes, Weiss.” His voice regained its cool composure— the voice of a businessman deciding how much ‘leash’ to give his daughter. “Do not be late, or I will come out here after you. And you will not find me as forgiving this time around.”

He swept off in a flurry of white, leaving the two teammates— Faunus and daughter of their oppressor— staring silently, devastated, in his wake.

“Blake,” Weiss began, before everything that had happened before she saw her father plunged back into her mind. “I—”

Blake’s amber eyes had lost their anger and were filled with a puzzling mixture of haunted sorrow and terror. “Weiss, your father— I’m sorry if I overstepped myself, but after tonight—”

“What? No, no— never mind him,” she said, her mind flurrying with hundreds of thoughts that came and went quicker than snowflakes. “Blake, the Tower— Ruby was up in it when… when Pyrrha and Cinder were fighting, when that white light covered everything— and my Bond was just flooded with this pain, like—”

Blake’s expression filled with horror as Weiss’s words hit her. “Ruby was on the Tower?”

“Yes, she was,” Weiss said uncertainly, taken aback by the stunned fear in her face.

“My God,” Blake whispered, her voice trembling. “We can’t lose another teammate. Not tonight…”
Weiss stared at her. “Lost? You can’t mean that— Yang’s not dead—”

“For what happened to her, she might as well be!” Blake burst out, before inhaling deeply and closing her eyes, counting to three as she recomposed herself. “I… but—that’s not the point right now. Are you sure Ruby was up there when the light struck? And your pain in the Bond… do you think she’s…?”

“I let her go up there,” Weiss snarled as it all sank in, the pain, the Bond being empty, the truth of it all. “I let her go up there all alone, and she—I sent her up there to die. She went alone, and I expect she died alone.”

Blake’s expression was sharp with pain, and something else that Weiss couldn’t make out. “No, that—that can’t be. Ruby isn’t dead. Your—your Bond would have shattered if she was; you’d be unconscious, no one can stand that type of pain without passing out… it’s too much, too much for anyone to bear.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I’ve experienced it, Weiss; I’ve had one break before, remember?” Her face twitched with a grim expression as she added, “You wouldn’t be standing right now if you’d gone through a breaking Bond. The body reaches a breaking point with pain, and trust me… you and Ruby have both had a lot of pain in your lives.”

“But our Bond isn’t… active, or anything, Blake, I felt it. There was a huge pain in my head and then that silvery light—and then that chill—and then our Bond just… went away, melted like dew in the sunlight. Like it never existed.”

Blake shook her head, looking mystified, but somehow distant, as if the night had shattered her in more ways than one. There was blood all down the front of her outfit, now dried to an ugly rust-brown; Weiss wondered where it had come from. “Not broken. As I said… you couldn’t be conscious right now if your Bond was broken. Too much pain from the both of you. Something’s happened to Ruby,” Blake added. “God knows what, but…I don’t know if she’s okay, Weiss. I just know she’s not dead.”

“She must be unconscious, then,” Weiss whispered. “My Bond is off because she’s… unconscious?”

“It’s a possibility,” Blake exhaled, before her eyes clouded. “Mine is out too, with Yang and… and what happened. But Ruby—she’s not… she’s not okay, Weiss. Something happened up there with Cinder and Pyrrha and her… that light…”

Weiss closed her eyes, a fresh sense of grief sweeping over her, leaving her gasping and helpless. It seemed like ages ago that she had left the fairgrounds with Blake—years upon years. “My father is taking me home,” she said. “Back to Atlas.”

“The land of the ice and snow and the cold of heart,” Blake croaked. “But it’s not home to you anymore. Sometimes I wonder if any of us really have a home at all.”

“You could… you could still stay,” Weiss murmured, desperately clinging to any scrap of comfort she could. “You could go to… to Patch, or help with Vale, or…”

“No. There’s no place for me to stay anymore. Not after what I’ve done.” And Weiss found, upon looking at her teammate, that however awful her night had been, nothing could have amounted to what Blake had gone through. Her eyes held a sadness, a quiet belief that nothing could ever be
alright again, so deep and haunted that Weiss knew she could never find the right words to mend the holes in Blake, the whistling loneliness that yawned between them. "Hail and farewell, Weiss Schnee," she said softly, clasping Weiss's hands between hers. Already, they felt ice-cold and angular—not human at all. "If we meet again, I hope that it is some time, less miserable than this, in a world where we are not decreed to meet suffering at every turn."

"Blake," Weiss said helplessly, "Yang would never blame you for getting hurt."

Blake gave a bitter smile that already seemed ghostly, like she was becoming part of the shadows gathering in the courtyard. Night had fallen, well and truly, and the stars that sparkled above seemed more like chips of ice scattered across an uncaring black expanse than stars. "If I believed that," she murmured, "perhaps I would be able to live in a lie, but it is my fault. Tell her—" Blake faltered, shaking all over. "I'm sorry. This life... it meant more to me then you will ever know. I wish you luck, Weiss... there is no one who can match you for bravery." She looked her in the eyes. "And, perhaps, you should remember that you've grown... maybe too much for your father to confine you anymore."

She turned—a fluid, not quite human movement, and gave Beacon one long, lingering look. There was such grief in her eyes that Weiss felt surely she must voice it or die; but this was Blake, and she had never let her emotion spill, not when she blamed herself. She whispered a farewell before she leaped into the shadows, following trails only she could distinguish, leaving behind the only world she had ever loved, running to a destination only she knew.

"Blake," Weiss whispered, but there was no one there to hear her. She was a Schnee; she didn’t cry.

But she wasn’t her father’s daughter anymore, and tears spilled in hot succession down her face. It felt like an ending, sad and bittersweet, where everyone but the one who needed it most got a happy ending. An ending, miserable because it was the end.

“Don’t forget,” she whispered brokenly—to Ruby, to Yang, to Blake, “to remember who we were.”
Chapter XXV - Flight of the Coward

Chapter Summary

Really hoping to pull forward in reviews, guys. Things will start diverging from canon a /lot/ here. Please leave your thoughts!

Also, for full experience, I would HIGHLY recommend listening to this song while you read. There aren't a lot of lyrics; it's mostly instrumental, but it really captures the feeling. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0ZoogU8I8I

Blake

She disappeared from view, leaving Weiss, Sun, and the school behind.

She bounded her way from step to step, past the desolate courtyard, past the school that was now an empty shell, one that would only ever hold ghosts of what she had once loved, past Vale itself, and her feelings grew and grew. A wave of choking emotion rose up inside of her, clamoring in her mind, and something inside her splintered as the wave finally did crash over her, darkness closing over her head and constricting her throat, pulling her downwards into bottomless grief.

And she ran.

She bolted, taking off like a shot, away from Beacon, away from Vale, not caring where she went as long as it widened the distance between her and what she had done. She ran, taking off over broken slabs of stone, over corpses who had died not long ago, her entire body humming with the knowledge, the confusion, pain, and fear of knowing that what had happened to the one she loved had been her fault, that her mere presence was to bring death and pain.

She ran, fast and far, past buildings, past places she had once loved. She stumbled, going down in a tumble as she tripped over a corpse, and nausea rose in her throat with a sudden, lashing surge, because the corpse could have been anyone, could have been Adam, could have been Yang. She rose to her feet and fled. She ran, heart torn asunder, her very soul crying out with the raw sky and pouring rain. She ran, the ground blurring past under her feet. She ran, knowing she could not escape the truth of what happened… no matter how much she ran, she knew she would never leave it behind.

Snow had begun to fall again, white flakes flurrying past as dawn slowly lifted its head above the horizon. But in her mind the snow was not snow, but the softness of Yang’s hair, and the light of the moon was the light of Yang’s eyes, and the wind whistling in the alleys was not the wind, but Yang’s voice calling out brokenly, blindly, for her, keening a song of inexpressible grief into the night.

You were right, she thought, staggering to a halt and going to her knees, fingers clawing at her temples, as if she could claw out the memories. Her voice cracked as tears finally streamed down her face, reality hitting her with the force of a semi-truck. She wasn’t Blake, a warrior, strong and proud— she was just a seventeen year old girl who had watched someone she’d once loved die and
another nearly die because of her, and she was broken because of it, hardly able to contain her own
grief. You were right, you were right, you were right... I’m only a coward and I’ll only ever bring
pain and hurt to those I love...

Ayran had been right, in the end, and so had Adam. She had never, never escaped him or the White
Fang, and even in death, he was hunting her. And as she took flight through the bleak streets, her
eyes were blurred, with her speed or something else... she could not tell.
She made it out of Vale, past the school, past the city, into a rough, untamed wilderness. Out here,
she was on her own, unprotected from the Grimm, from the White Fang, but this was the way it
had to be, ever since she had cut the cord on a train car and sealed her own fate.

She collapsed, finally, sure that she was far enough away to rest, to get a grip of where she was and
her physical status. She slumped in a sheltered grove of trees, crawling beneath their welcoming,
open branches, burrowing into the dead leaves for warmth. The bitter wind sloughed through the
trees, rattling the branches above her head like bones, bringing tears to her eyes.

Hands shaking, she lifted the hem of her shirt, and almost passed out at what she saw there. Sage’s
abilities to heal were extensive, but they could only do so much, and it was obvious. The wound on
her abdomen, right above her hipbone, where Adam had stabbed her, was edged with ragged scraps
of skin, blood still oozing sluggishly out of the wound. It was a dark red color around the edges, a
bright scarlet in the center; the sword had gone straight through the skin on the side of her body,
surpassing her organs and bone, but piercing flesh and muscle, and it hurt worse than any physical
wound she had sustained thus far.

But it’s nothing compared to what Yang has lost, she thought ferociously at herself, gritting her
teeth as the night wind stung it. This is what you deserve, your penance, and even then it’s only a
fraction of what he did to her, because you were there. He only harmed her because of you...

As she lay curled up there, in the darkness and shadows, their faces, the faces of those she had
known, swam before her eyes, too quickly for her to grasp—

Sun, his face lined and weary, blood streaking his hands, churning gray eyes dark. Dark, with the
promise of storms to come, of tornadoes and twisters and hurricanes—

Pyrrha, her eyes slowly glazing over and fading, hollow and empty of light, like some essential
spark had fled from her—

Ruby, silver gaze blazing with a ferocious light, cold as chips of ice, her face as hollow and drawn
as an angel plummeting from the sky with its wings burning up—

Weiss, tormented, a fractured coldness in her expression, filled with clouds that would unleash the
first storm of war—

Yang, her face calm, eyes closed; as Blake watched, her eyes snapped open, fiery as the sun, her
expression twisting into one of hatred and loathing, and she struck out at Blake, snarling—

She jackknifed up, out of the hollow in the leaves, and retched, trembling, though her body had
nothing left to give her. All the poison was within her mind, within her very soul, and there was
nothing she could do to fix the mess she had created. I’ll run, she thought dully. I will run, because
it is what I do the best, always leaving behind dust and shadows in my wake. I will run... because
the White Fang can never catch me.

We are what we are, Adam, and I am never to be kept for long.
She was more exhausted than she had ever been after navigating along the coast of Vale, now miles away from the city and school, and from the towns on the outskirts. She had scavenged from the city after she left, taking nonperishables and Lien, bandages for her wounds, medicines and matches. Everything she stole was taken from the people who had died in the attack, people who would not be coming back for their supplies and notice that a few were missing. She knew how to survive on her own; she always had. She had run away from the White Fang, hidden her identity, survived, got an education, kept herself on top of things— she knew how to survive.

She walked along the coast of the sea, shivering against the brutally icy winds that knifed off of the waters, looking out at the high waves that slapped the shore like blasts from artillery guns. The sky was a mottled gray, and she pulled her cloak closer around her— a heavy black thing, made from the pelt of some animal, with a silver buckle; she had found it in a broken-down home on the very outskirts of the city.

_I need to get moving faster_, she thought. _The attack’s completely wrapped up by now, and they’ll be sending students back home if they haven’t already, looking for survivors in the city and keeping track of who died and who lived… and the White Fang will be on my trail._

But she hadn’t really left much of one, if she could help it. She had disguised her scent with pine, and walked in streams, when she could stand it, but the water was so bitterly cold that she couldn’t keep it up for long. She had tried to keep to the edges of towns, so no one would see her, but still, the fear of being caught by the White Fang dogged her, hunting her persistently and relentlessly. As long as she kept them running after her, she kept them distracted, and she kept Yang safe. The minute that protection failed— the minute she was caught— Yang was in danger, and that was a thought that she could not stand.

_Only by disappearing and keeping them hunting me can I save her in a way I could not save her before. It was my fault she got hurt; I must ensure it does not happen again._

Suddenly, a thought struck her, prominent as if someone had placed it directly in her mind, and she froze dead in her tracks, heart beating violently in her chest.

_But she’s not safe, you careless fool, because you’ve done nothing about your Bond, and she’ll know where you are at all times because of it…. she might even try to follow you, and get herself killed!_

“You idiot!” she hissed, berating herself for such an ignorant mistake. She should have broken it the moment she fled Beacon, should have been smarter. Now, she had a tether, following her at all times. Who knew what Yang would do? Blake didn’t have any clue any more, because she would have changed. Changed after Blake’s departure, whether she liked it or not.

But then, suddenly and chillingly, Adam’s words rang loudly in her mind, sneering and taunting. “What goes around comes around, my love, and I swear, Blake, by the end of tonight, you will leave her— your Bond with her will be over, and you will break it. Willingly.”

So he had been right on one count: Blake had left Yang before the night was over, and she shivered at the prospect of having him be right on the other prediction as well.
It must be done, she thought in anguish, trying and failing to push those needling words out of her mind. It must, do you understand? It doesn’t matter how I feel about it, but I have to… I have…

But as she stood there, shaking, her hands in fists against her sides, something stopped her. Try as she might to summon up the will to do it— to speak those words— ‘I renounce everything I have ever told you. I revoke our Bond. For in promises broken and vows deceived, this Bond stands for a trust that no longer exists. In Death, all Bonds are split; in Life, a fire has been extinguished, and this connection stands no longer. I revoke the soul I share and rescind words of hope that were spoken; I give up the recourse of that which a Bond entails. For though it is in passing that we achieve immortality, living forever is a dark path. No one may live eternal, so it is that lingering, old ghosts are resurrected. I take back my soul and by my own shoulder protect my own. I offer this up now; this ossified Bond I shatter, never to be renewed again’— she just could not do it.

“I can’t,” she whispered brokenly, falling to her knees in the middle of the track, overwhelmed by self-loathing as she covered her face with her hands. “I can’t.”

It was more than the fact that she loved Yang, loved her more than life itself, and it wasn’t the fact that she didn’t have the courage to do it, and it wasn’t the fact that she didn’t mean the words that were used to break a Bond— she could never mean those words, truly, could never mean that she didn’t want to be a part of Yang any longer. It was one plain, simple fact, speaking out in her mind in a small, sensible voice: haven’t you hurt Yang enough? What will she do if you break your Bond with her? It might kill her, break her spirit irrevocably— even more than you already have.

Practically choking on her grief and self-hatred, she rose to her feet, wiping the tears from her eyes and continuing down the track. There was nothing she could do about it now— nothing she could do, really, except to keep running, to put as much distance between them as she possibly could. The more distance, the more Yang would be unable to follow after her. It was the only solace she had, the faintest glimmer of light in the darkness that had engulfed her life, and she clung to it desperately.

She fell asleep that night in some abandoned farm-shed miles away from the nearest town. The inside was warmer than it was outside, but it was still freezing, and her breath plumed out in front of her in a silvery cloud that dissipated as soon as it appeared. Pillars of rotten wood held up the rickety roof, and limp straw was scattered all over the floor. Walking to the farthest corner, and settling down there, she wrapped her cloak tighter around herself and took out an apple, stripping it to the core in seconds. She had no appetite— hadn’t since the previous night when her life had been torn apart— but she had to survive. A feral, animalistic need to live, to press on despite the fact that she didn’t have anything left to live for, really, kept her going, and she didn’t fight it. Her life was as good as forfeit, but if she could lure the White Fang away from Patch, it was worth it. Rustling her cloak closer, with a sigh and a shiver, she slipped into sleep.

She was not surprised when she found herself, what seemed like moments later, a beautifully colored dream.

She hadn’t expected them to go away, and she had known they would be ever-present and even worse after she had killed Adam, no matter how pretty and unmalicious they appeared to be at first glance. Such was the laws of her nightmares, awful as it was. She had to ride it out and wake up the next morning… but when she saw the slim, beautiful figure of the warrior stalking towards her, a part of her didn’t ever want to wake up.

Blake was in an empty clearing washed in silver moonlight, the slightest chill emitting from the shadows, and with a sudden awful pang, she remembered the light from the Tower, the silver light that apparently had swallowed up Ruby, the sister whose fate, after what had happened last night,
she did not know. A forest ringed this clearing, and it was from this forest that the warrior was walking out of. She slowly padded out from between the slender elder trees, their branches bent towards her like the arms of old friends, weaving together their strong protective boughs, and as she emerged into the ethereal light, exposing her gaunt face even further— though she had already known who it was; she would know her face anywhere— Blake’s heart broke in two.

“Blake,” Yang whispered, her barely-audible voice full of longing, as she stopped, several feet away, and as Blake looked into her eyes, they were absolutely and completely heartbroken.

Blake fell to her knees, barely feeling the impact; it had all the soft, padded edges of a dream. But the clarity of Yang’s eyes was very clear, as was the remote look she saw there, as if she were a million miles away, untouchable though she was right there.

"Yang." Blake forced the words out as if they were shards of broken glass, scraping her throat, making her choke on regret. "Are you... are you... Do you hate me now?"

"I could never hate you, Blake. Not any more than I could hate a part of myself." Her eyes slid away, not meeting Blake’s. "There’s an absence now," she murmured. “It’s weird; it’s inside of me, it’s like... our Bond isn’t broken. It’s asleap, it can’t be woken by me alone... It’s empty. It’s not like something that is shattered— it’s something that’s melting away... and it’s because of you.”

She looked towards the sky, and the frosty light of the moon reflected back within her eyes. "I know what my father feels like now, at least. To be abandoned by someone you love like nothing else... but that doesn't matter. Something inside you is hard to explain, Blake. Something beautiful, but something broken, too. Maybe you've been singled out for a special destiny. Special torments. And maybe that destiny doesn’t leave room for me."

“Destiny—”

Yang spoke softly, but it made Blake break off her sentence immediately. “I’ve realized something. Between the months I might have come to know you, but I don’t own you. That much is clear.”

“No, Yang, that’s...” She trailed off.

Yang paused. "I loved you. I set you free. You left and did not return. What should that tell me? I take it hard, but it's hard to take, knowing you left voluntarily. I'm falling behind, always falling behind, seeing you always in the distance but never able to reach you..."

"I loved you," Blake said hoarsely, crawling forward. "You must know - I loved you more than I thought I could love anyone." She half-turned away, eyes stinging. "Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," she choked. "My fault, my own fault, my own most grievous fault."

She felt Yang’s hand touch her cheek, guiding her face towards hers. Her eyes were impossibly sad. When their foreheads rested together, the night whirled around them, and the stars died. They were in the heart of the darkness, utterly alone. The only light came from the pinprick of white that was the moon, illuminating them in a spotlight of silver.

"I should have been injured, not you. I'm sorry," Blake breathed. "I'm so sorry, Yang."

"Blake," Yang whispered, the name in her mouth like a cry of senseless grief, eyes shining bright and broken,"if you ever loved me at all, then why did you leave me?"

Before Blake could speak, the dream surged around her, spinning furiously, leaving her staggering. It swirled wildly like the heart of a maelstrom, forces tearing at her like she had been thrust into a tornado, and then it upended, heaving, sending her plummeting into a maw of
blackness. A great wave of shadows descended on Blake’s vision as she plunged down—

down—
—down—
—down—
into darkness

into the shadows of a heaving ocean of Grimm
into the echoing space of heartbeats
into endless tunnels and twisting passages
into swirling nightmares and broken vows
into agony worse than any breaking of a Bond
into the cries of the dead and the wails of the lost
into chilling ice and freezing rain
into the blazing light of lilac eyes and golden sunlight hair
into warm laughter brushing by her ear before it faded into nothing
into the lamentations of phoenixes
into the mournful songs of crickets
into the shining light that sank in darkness
into the void

into complete and utter
silence.

And Yang was torn from her -
rent apart and scattered into a thousand glittering shards
blazing away like a golden comet's tail as agony tore through Blake, making her twist and writhe
she screamed Yang's name, but nothing answered, just howling wind spiraling away, as fire rocked her to the bone
bubbles and life wrenched from her jaws to flood the abyss
unnamed stars flashed behind her eyes in the inky depths. Faces swam before her, too quickly for her to grab—
— and not one of them was Yang’s.

Blake awoke, a scream dying in her throat, the sharp coppery taste of blood filling her mouth. She
remembered the dream in sharp detail, and, her body turning traitor on her, she turned and retched. Sweating shivers made her back arch as her body struggled to expel all the poisons she'd accumulated. Swearing, she rolled to her feet and burst out of the shed, starting off down the broken dirt path that wound away in front of her.

What use was it to pretend that she was fine— or for that matter, to pretend that Yang was better off now? It was all Adam’s fault, but it was hers as well. She missed Yang, missed her with a gnawing ache that was almost physical. For what was the happenstance with that which was lost and broken, she knew that their paths were unlikely to ever intersect again. And if they did, it would never be the same. Broken hearts never healed the same way. Blake was no more the girl who had met Yang in the Emerald Forest then Yang was a girl of light.

*I am sorry,* she thought, looking up at the blue sky, filled with wispy cirrus clouds, which was slowly clearing as the brisk wind pushed the snowstorms away. *There’s no forgiveness, not for what I’ve done… but maybe there’s one more thing I can do before I disappear into the wilderness of Remnant for good.*

And with that thought in mind, she drew a pen and sheet of crumpled paper out of her pack of supplies, and slowly, carefully, began to write a letter.

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**A/N:** *Looks like Blake feels as though her presence is almost like Qrow’s is, in canon: misfortune to those she loves around her. It’s not her actual semblance, of course— she’s got the shadow-clones— and Qrow’s semblance isn’t misfortune in this universe, (it’s turning into a crow, here) but it’s an interesting parallel I noticed after completing this chapter. Those two have a lot in common (like being my favorite characters, haha.)*

*For those curious, or simply geographical nerds, I would mark her as being roughly 30 to 40 miles away from Beacon at this point in time. Girl runs fast and covers a lot of ground when she wants to. And as we know, dreams are not necessarily a reflection on reality, nor is dream!Yang in this chapter a true reflection of how she feels in real life. In the next chapter, we turn back to her story after the events of the Fall of Beacon.*
Chapter XXVI - Nevermore (Reprise)

Chapter Summary

Ahhhhh, this is one of my favorite chapters. All comments would be really appreciated, guys - there's a lot of content to speak about in this one!

Yang

A powerful stench pervaded her consciousness.

Someone’s bleeding!

She surfaced to wakefulness with a slow, syrupy feeling, as if she was being yanked from a pool of mud, twisting and writhing like a fish hauled out of the water. Her surroundings swam into existence hazily, spinning and shifting and blurring. She felt like someone had twisted her inside out, dunked her into a blazing fire, and pulled her out again. Every part of her ached dully. She was moving, boarded on some aircraft, of that she was sure— she could hear muffled wind rushing past her and the whir of gears.

But what had happened?

There was a narrow aisle to her side, further reassuring that she was, indeed, on an airship, and she was propped up on a cushioned leather seat. Was that Sun sitting beside her?

Yes, it was. A violent bruise was blooming on his cheekbone, cracking and swelling it. But there was a strange expression on his face, an expression that was like stunned fear and sorrow and disbelief, all mixed together and magnified until he seemed like a stranger. His hands gripped his knees like he was afraid he might break apart at the seams.

“Sun,” she said. Her voice sounded foreign, her tongue thick with salty blood, and her head swam. Pain throbbed through her entire body, but it felt distant, disconnected, like she was floating alone in space with stars sparkling in the distance. “What’s— where are we?”

He looked relieved, spinning around to place a hand on her knee, breathing out a muffled exhalation that she realized was a prayer of thanks. “You’re alive,” he whispered, enfolding her in a tight-gripped hug before letting go. “You’ve got Sage to thank for it; he saved your life, Yang, with his healing semblance, he gave it everything…” He trailed off, looking down at his feet with a mixture of dread and misery in his eyes. “It’s not all good news, though.”

She struggled to sit up and found she couldn’t; her body simply wouldn’t cooperate with her, so she slumped back, still trying to sort out everything internally. Her memory still felt fuzzy; her thoughts slow, like they were embedded in molasses. “Sun,” she said. “Sun, what’s happened to me? Where’s my sister? Where’s Blake?”

His eyes were shiny, shiny like lights, and it took her too long to realize that it wasn’t light in his
eyes at all, it was tears. He was crying. Tears welled up in his eyes and streaked silently down his cheeks, one after the other, and Yang had never seen Sun cry before. That scared the hell out of her. Sun didn’t cry; he was tough as nails, able to bounce back from any sadness like elastic. She struggled to sit up once more and gasped as a bolt of pain stabbed through her. He shook his head and swallowed, wiping his eyes roughly.

“No— don’t sit up, Yang, you’re bleeding…” He reached out one grimy hand, as if to touch her, before shrinking back as if he couldn’t screw up the courage to do it. Yang felt a thick sort of wetness on her face— she knew it was blood— and she raised her hand to wipe it away, only to find that nothing happened. She tried again, feeling an unfamiliar weightlessness on her right side. As a Huntress, she was familiar with her own body, where each limb was at all times, of her own balance and strength. Something felt wrong, terribly wrong. She frowned, trying to raise her hand once more, and nothing happened. She looked down at her arm.

It was gone.

Just as she drew breath to scream, with all the force of a hurricane, a gale of memories smashed back into her mind in full-color.

Blake screaming her name—

— Adam’s insane laughter bouncing off the walls—

— the flicker of red metal, a sword, slashing down in a deadly arc with light sparking off the blade; the moon itself was slicing down like a scythe—

— fire coursing through her veins, into her heart, and she was shattering—

— there’s pain and then it—

— the flash—

— “Yang, you can’t die, you can’t, I still need you—”

— flash—

— Weiss’s voice, quavering with doubt. “You’re telling me someone was able to hurt her like this? A White Fang member? The leader? Why would he—”

— flashing blurred lights and screams—

— “No, I don’t know where Ruby is. Sun says she jumped off the ship and made it to the edge of the arena—”

— exploding silver light—

— the faintest echo of her sister’s final scream—

— the flash—

— fade to black.

She was in the present now, and the slow-state of her thoughts was gone, leaving everything outlined in sharp, agonizing reality. Her injuries now throbbed with the full force of their extent— her insides were scrambled, bones bruised, numerous wounds dotting her body— and her thoughts spun too fast for her to hold on to. But there was one thought that arched in her mind and stayed
there like a bullet to the brain: deadly, impossible to ignore.

“Sun,” she snarled. Her voice shook like a leaf. “Sun, where is she? Where’s Ruby? Where’s Blake?”

“Yang, please, calm down—” He reached out as if to touch her on the arm, a comforting gesture, before he saw the bloody stump and recoiled, paling.

Her voice rose to a scream. “Where are they?”

Sun’s apparent calm dissolved, exposing the true anguish he had been hiding, and he exploded, screaming right back at her. “Ruby’s gone! Nobody knows what happened to her after she went to the top of Beacon Tower! Weiss’s father went batshit crazy and took her back to Atlas! And Blake — she’s gone!” he shouted, his visage of solidarity fracturing, revealing the desperation behind it. “Yang, she’s gone! She ran— I tried my hardest but she ran— she left.” He gave a terrible sort of hiccuping noise, shaking all over. “She’s gone,” he repeated before dissolving into awful, heaving, brokenhearted tears. “Gone, gone, gone, and she’s not coming back…”

Yang blinked once, twice, as his words settled in. A deep chill flooded her veins, like she had been doused in ice-water. Darkness whirled behind her eyes, and for one terrifying moment she thought she would pass out; the thought was welcoming, almost. The darkness of oblivion would be comforting now, because the world she knew and the world she trusted as whole and unbreakable had given way under her feet, plunging her into a horrifying maelstrom of pain and fear where nothing made sense, and she was utterly, utterly alone.

And as she was left there, standing alone in the aftermath with the pieces of her life scattered all around her, she could only feel numb as reality sank in, left holding one piece of emotion and not knowing what to do with it: not sorrow, not disbelief, not anger.

She felt betrayal.

Blake is gone, she thought, but she couldn’t make herself believe it. What am I supposed to do with that? She’s— she’s gone, she left me, even after swearing she loved me, would never leave me… she left Beacon… left our team, left me… and she’s not… she’s not coming back…

“Yang,” Sun broke into her thoughts roughly, on his feet as he paced the aisle. “I mean— you have to know what happened after you…”

Her broken voice burst out of her throat, icy and furious, startling her as much as it did him as anger suddenly surged up in her stomach, hot and bitter, twisting everything up within her. “Know what?” she snarled. “I don’t want to know why she ran. Let her run! Let her go and leave us all behind! Because if she did… if she did love me, if she cared… she wouldn’t have gone! She would be here, next to you, telling me all this for herself! Don’t you get that? She didn’t give enough of a damn to stay after everything…”

His gray eyes were round with horror. “Yang, that’s not—”

“I don’t care, Sun,” she growled, turning away from him and looking out the windows of the airship. “I just don’t care.”

“Yang—”

“Leave me alone. Don’t you get that? I don’t want to know her reasons. I don’t care.”

She heard him walk to the front of the airship, his breath hitching unevenly, as if he was holding
back tears still. She clenched her fist in her lap, and fought off another wave of dizzying blackness. She couldn’t succumb back to unconsciousness, not now, even if she wanted to. Rage electrifying her veins, she turned to the Bond, feeling a distant, sharp sort of grief, but it felt— taut. Strained, like a cord that had been pulled too tight. *Because my other half is running away and straining it with every step she takes, fleeing like a coward,* Yang thought with a cold, bitter amusement, every part of her filled with a icy detachment that she wasn’t used to. *Bonds aren’t meant to withstand so much distance, are they?*

*Well, let’s see if it can stand some more. I’ll finish what she started.*

Summoning up every scrap of her will and anger, she reached deep within herself, feeling her Bond, the shape and emotion of it—the pain, the love, the sadness, the anger—and, with one last wrench of fury, she shut it down.

She shut it down, not breaking it, but turning it off, blocking off Blake from her thoughts, her mind, her *heart*— and with a last splintering sigh, the tautening cord inside of her snapped, untethering her from Blake, leaving her stranded, on her own and drifting and *alone*. Pain—not the screaming agony that accompanied the breaking of a Bond, as she had seen with Taiyang when Summer had died—but pain nevertheless, flashed through her. Everything around her turned pitch-black for a heartbeat, and she knew pure terror before the world bleached back into focus. A great emptiness yawned inside of her chest, and she realized she had grown used to it, so familiar with having Blake’s emotions in tune with her own, that being separated like this felt like she had sawn off one of her limbs.

*Fitting,* she thought with a sense of hollow amusement, before she burst into tears.

All the anger leech out of her, and she bent double, sobs wrenched out of her like they were being pried out with a knife. *Blake,* she thought. *God, Blake, why did you go… why did you leave me, leave us… after everything we went through…*

She realized that a sharp pain was digging into her hipbone, and, fumbling with her good arm, blinking away blurriness from her tears, she fished out her Scroll. The Screen had cracked, a spiderweb of white lines splintering out from the center, but there was a glow still emitting from it. She could hear Sun still weeping behind her, but numbness flooded her system like ice. There was one message lying there on the screen, sent *seconds* before the Tower crashed, one single message from Blake, three words, and they sounded like last words, more final than death itself.

*Everything must go.*

The wave did crash over her, then, her misery bursting its banks, and she broke, shattering, shattering over and over and over.

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*Blake*

After sending her letter, somewhere in the wilderness of the untamed forests of Remnant—not on a train-car as she flew away from Adam, but running—Blake Belladonna fell to her knees as a spear of agony blazed through her chest. The string tethering her to Yang snapped in two, and
curled in on herself with a scream as her body lit on fire with pain.

*History repeats itself,* she thought, having time for one last glimpse of Yang’s furious grief before pain overwhelmed her as the Bond shut down, and she blacked out.

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Qrow

He burst through the gates of the courtyard in a full-stride sprint, his sword clattering against its sheath. Huntsmen had finally arrived in the city to help Glynda suppress the tide of Grimm, which had already begun to lessen, and he had left as soon as they arrived, hellbent on getting to Beacon.

But on his journey, half a mile away from the school, the world had gone pure silver, a bone-crushing chill sweeping over the land and receding as quickly as it came. He knew what it was in an instant, and he was up and running, even more desperately this time, before the last of the silver had faded from the air.

Ruby, he thought, his thoughts scattered. *Not now. This was too soon for you to find out about your power.*

He barged past clusters of worried professors and swarms of panicked citizens cramming themselves into the airships, noticing how much *colder* the air had gotten the minute he’d entered the courtyard, as if it had dropped several degrees. His breath smoked out in front of him, and he took a moment to scan the courtyard with the sharp eyes of a trained Huntsman, taking everything in within seconds, not even stopping to look around.

He couldn’t see his niece, nor could he see his niece’s team, or Ozpin— or the battle at all. It seemed to have subsided and stopped entirely, all the Grimm slinking away to lick their wounds. Robots lay in sparkling, smoking heaps upon the ground, the bodies of slain White Fang members dotting the spaces between them. The stones were stained red, and the blood of the fallen had frozen into rusty-red puddles.

He skidded to a halt at the base of the Tower. Nothing came out of the shadows; the living had utterly abandoned this place. Scanning the place once more, he saw the shattered remains of the CCT’s transmitter, the faintest auras of green light shimmering around it, and he swore loudly, more out of fear than anger. The one thing Ozpin had been truly afraid of had transpired, because without one transmitter, none of the ones around Remnant would work. Without one, the others fell.

*To be truthful, I find the limitations somewhat poetic,* Ozpin had once said. Qrow closed his eyes, a pang of pain echoing in his chest.

“No time to worry about it now,” he grunted to himself, striding forward and skirting the rubble so he could crane back his head to peer at the jagged remains of the Tower’s summit.

As he did so, a jolt of shock flashed through him. The enormous wyvern - the Father of all the Grimm - lay there, curled around the top of the Tower, its red eyes closed by scaly black lids. Its tail wrapped around the Tower, coming to a pointed end near the windows of the middle, and its head was half draped across the top. That wasn’t what had frightened him, though: the entirety of
the beast’s body was covered in a thick, white fur of frost and ice. Jagged icicles dripped from its skin. It was clearly dead.

Ruby lay up there, he was sure of it now; only her power could have killed the Grimm like that… but God knew what state she was in, and God knew what else lay up there.

“I’m coming, Ruby,” he growled. “Hang on just a little longer…”

He closed his eyes, backing away and steeling himself. Becoming the crow was never a painless process, but it had never hurt so much as it did now, tonight in this desolate wasteland amid the snow howling above his head, and emptiness below. He closed his eyes, imagining it, feeling the wind beneath his wings, his bones melting and reshaping, becoming smaller.

For a moment, time seemed to stall, and a burst of sheer panic shot through his veins. Why was the shift halting?

He knew why: he was too jittery, too panicked, too much of a human with all his very human emotions to devolve into a bird of prey, which only had need of one feeling: clear-minded clarity that came with unawareness of human emotion. He needed clarity— clarity to save his niece, to save Ruby, helpless at the top of the tower. He had always been filled with the need to protect her at any cost. She was Summer’s daughter, and though the day had long, long gone when he had loved her, Ruby was here. Alive. But if she was still breathing at the top of the Tower, she wouldn’t be for much longer, not after expending so much of her spirit and strength on the burst of silver light he had seen. It had spread for miles; Ozpin had once told him that the silver-eyed warriors could control their strikes, to something as small as a flash of silver, but no power was meant to be so huge. Undoubtedly, Ruby had burned out every scrap of strength she had in unlocking her power and unleashing it for that big of a radius. She wouldn’t have known what was happening at the moment of release, as the silver light took hold of her body and her mind fell unconscious, but would she remember it if—when— she woke up? He and Taiyang had kept it that way, raising her best they knew how, keeping her in the dark of her massive power, power that came from something as meaningless as the light in her eyes. Now, it seemed, the choice had been taken out of their hands by the light raging in a conflagration through her body, killing anyone at the top of the Tower, freezing the Grimm wyvern where it perched on top of the stone monolith.

And Ozpin…

They had battled in the vault, and Qrow knew it, so if Cinder had made it to the top of the tower, Ozpin was gone. Not dead, perhaps, but gone. He would have fought to the last breath. He would never have let Cinder go unless it was that, or vanish forever, his soul— disappeared.

For a moment, the thought of Ozpin gone— solemn eyes dulled forever, all those words of wisdom lost, his unmoving certainty killed— was enough to make Qrow collapse, his heart constricting as though choked off by an invisible hand. Then he took a deep breath, gripping his broadsword, his other hand balling into a fist, the veins on the back of his hand standing out in ropy knots. Clarity, he told himself, pushing everything back down, hardening his heart as he gazed at the shattered peak of the Tower, his red eyes narrowing. Control your emotions, or they will control you.

Then, all of a sudden it happened, and in a whirl of darkness and agony, the shift ate him up and spat him out in a new form, small and dark and beady-eyed. He landed on the ground, talons splayed, and then with a single-mindedness he welcomed— the thoughts of Ozpin, Ruby, even of the immediate Grimm in his vicinity all feeling very distant and far-away, as though they belonged to another person— he spread his wings and beat them experimentally. With a throaty shriek, he lifted off into the air, battling furiously against the storm as it battered him back. Beating his fluttering wings with the wind, he struggled higher, closer and closer to his destination.
He hovered over the top of the Tower, and then, he became who he was again in mid-air, all of what made him Qrow tumbling back together and hurling him out of the crow’s body. He landed roughly, smashing into a slab of stone that was smeared with blood, and he rolled to his feet with a grunt, planting his sword in the unstable ground to give him purchase.

The first thing he noticed was that the whole ground was covered in a mixture of odd, golden-colored dust and frost, layered thickly over everything. Ice hung heavy from broken slabs of cement and glass, and, frowning, he looked around. He was the only conscious thing here, standing in the ruins of Ozpin’s office, and for a moment, it was almost too much to bear. There was his desk— his chair— and he was gone forever.

Control the grief or it controls you. Repeating it to himself, he moved forward, before he realized where the dust had come from, the only thing it could be.

The Fall Maiden possessed the power to summon all the fire of autumn and use it to burn her victims to the ground. With a sudden, awful pang, he remembered the girl, Pyrrha, as he had last seen her, standing in the vault and accepting her own fate. His mind put two and two together and he shivered, staggering away from the dust and the sickening implications of it. That wasn't ash or dust. That was... that was...

He looked down and saw flecks of charred bone among the ashes, and his stomach turned, bile surging in his throat. He had already seen one student die - the boy with the bullet through his spine. Now here was another, and it was almost worst.

Forcing himself on, he walked forward, rounded a block of stone, and saw the Maiden laying there — no, not the Maiden, Cinder. Her body lay on the ground. She had been flung on her back by the sheer force of the silver light, her arms thrown out to either side of her, like an angel fallen from the sky. One of her arms was gashed up and bloody, and bruises colored her skin— Pyrrha had fought her admirably, then— and a thin film of frost coated her skin— the light from Ruby’s body had frozen everything on top of the Tower. In addition to the winter storm, it was bitterly frigid up here, and Qrow’s breath plumed out in front of him in a smoky white cloud as he crossed over the ice and broken stone to her body.

She was dead, and he could tell that, as he crouched beside her, she had died the instant the light had hit her. Her mouth was open, but no breath clouded out, and the pulse in her neck was absent. A last expression was frozen upon her face— one of pure fury, and yet, somewhere in her vacant eyes, filmed with ice, he could see a hint of fearful pain, and even regret.

He could not say he was sorry for her, not after seeing how she had brutalized Amber, but he could not suppress a pang of pity. What had led her to ally with Salem, the mother of all darkness? Desperation, perhaps, or simple ambition. Who knew where this woman’s spirit was heading? Not to the ranks of the stars, that was sure.

The Fall Maiden’s spirit must have fled her body to another host, someone random, certainly. She had died instantly— there would not have been time to think of what was happening to her or to Ruby, much less about anyone in particular. The thought almost brought him relief. With the release of Autumn’s spirit, things could go back to normal, and with Cinder dead, Ozpin’s sacrifice…

It wasn’t in vain, Oz.

Looking around, Qrow saw a faint glint of silver, and he ground his jaw together. I’ve had enough silver to last me a lifetime, he thought, before the moonlight parted a hole through the clouds and
struck it fully, a shimmering, slanted beam of white.

Ozpin’s cane.

He took several hesitant steps forward before reaching down and picking it up. The faintest of emerald gleams shimmered around it—a ghostly imprint of its owner’s Aura. The second Qrow’s hands made contact, he felt something like warmth go through him, filling his veins with a calm glow—warmth, and a strange tranquility that came with knowing everything would turn out as it was supposed to in the end, no matter what happened.”

“And this was how he felt,” Qrow murmured. “This was how he felt before he died.”

For a moment, he felt like collapsing and wailing his grief to the raw, snowy sky like he was a little boy again. Swallowing, he tucked it away beneath his cape, fingers lingering on its patterned surface for a heartbeat, before he turned back to his task. He weaved through the puddles of frost, dust, and blood, leaving Cinder’s body, the wyvern’s, and Pyrrha’s behind.

He came around a heavy pile of melted machinery and stone, and there she was.

Ruby Rose, silver-eyed warrior, daughter of Summer Rose, his niece, and the one who had nearly been torn apart by what was inside her, what she could not help. The one who had killed three people tonight and witnessed the death of five, and the crippling of another, who had so much to wake up to, and so much grief to confront on the path ahead of her.

Her face was turned upwards towards the moon, her scarlet-touched hair fanned out around her, like the breath of the Grimm had stirred it where it lay. Her eyes were closed, and the thinnest layer of frost covered her body, like a translucent white veil. Her arms and legs were thrown wide, like an angel that had been hurled out of the sky, and her face did not give the slightest twitch of consciousness as he stepped forward, each crackle of his foot on the frost sounding like a gunshot in the stillness. It was absolutely unmoving, and the only sign of life was her chest rising and falling ever-so-shallowly. Utter silence, broken only by the whistling tune of the wind, lay about her, a silence that felt wrong to break—almost sacred, as if even the stars and storm itself were paying heed and tribute to the monumental act of sacrifice and power born from grief that had been committed here, a vow as unbreakable as the earth.

He came forward regardless, and scooped her up in his arms. She felt so fragile, so breakable… but he knew that was as far from the truth as one could get. She had her mother’s strength and courage, and the sheer bravery that was unique to her, and her alone. She was not his daughter—there was no doubt she had Taiyang’s blood, his obstinate courage and optimism—and he wasn’t related to her, not by blood. He was a bastard, rogue, a runaway, a Huntsman who was only ever destined to be on his own, but as he stood there, with a strange feeling of protectiveness flickering his chest, he felt, for a heartbeat, what it might be like to be a father.

“I’ve got you, kiddo,” he whispered. “I’ve got you. You’re going to be okay.”

Yang

She wept.
She wept for the loss of her sister, for the death of innocence. She wept for the terror and fear that had swallowed the partner she'd once known whole, the monster of nightmarish loss and unthinkable pain that had consumed Blake. She wept for Weiss's suffering and trials, for the fact that she was headed into a nightmare when freedom had been right within her grasp. She wept for the void inside her that Blake had fled from and left in her place, an emptiness that no Bond could ever hope to replace. She wept for Pyrrha and Penny, for Ozpin and Summer Rose, for Raven and her own team, and finally, for all the nameless lives lost in that terrible, hellish night.

*Everything must go.*

She wept until every part of her ached, every fragment of her soul and heart was wrung out. And then she looked outside to the shell of a kingdom where she had played as a child, to the rain sweeping the broken city, to the withering earth that held no body, none at all. The storm had leech the earth until all that remained was darkness, sunken and colorless, an alien land. The terrible night had finally passed, and a dawn that held no light was drawing near.

She thought of all she had gained and lost, all the love now turned to ashes, of her mother and sister, her father and uncle, her teammate and friends, and her first and last love.

*Everything must go.*

She thought of them, and wept.

And then presently she was looking out the window at the drizzle of the dying night, the windshield wipers in full action, but unable to cope with her tears.

*Everything must go.*

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*Pyrrha*

Winter had finally arrived, and wind and snow howled around her.

She was dreaming again. Dreaming of him. The storm raged around her, drowning out Jaune’s voice. And yet her heart was easy. Somehow she knew that he would be safe, he would find shelter from the cold.

Behind her, shadows lingered and the night had fallen, but ahead of her, she knew there was a place where warm sunlight broke through the snow, and family waited. Autumn was finally over. The promise of her own destiny beckoned her forward, unending and forgiving. She was back on
her own once more, alone as a Huntress, and somewhere, she could hear voices calling her name.

But this time, she knew they were welcoming her home.
Chapter XXVII - Shackled to Silver

Chapter Summary

A/N: Our death count (definitely dead and gone, not coming back, at least not in this fic— though I still believe Pyrrha is ‘surviving’ in some form in canon, as the lifestream post-V3-finale stated that Pyrrha and Cinder shared the same fate, but that’s a moot point) so far is Pyrrha, Cinder, Neo, Roman, Cardin, Fox and Neon.

Hah, Neo and Neon, what irony.

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Ruby

She was drifting alone in darkness, completely alone, save for the faintest golden light shimmering far, far ahead of her. She could remember nothing, not even her name, just that she was… here.

Alone. Unbound.

Wherever this was, this aimless place, in the peaceful, undulating dark that did not ask anything of her. She just existed, untethered and floating, allowing oblivion to rock her to peace.

But the golden light ahead of her beckoned suddenly, calling her name, forcing her to pause and put her thoughts into actual being. She wasn’t supposed to be here! She was needed elsewhere, and she knew it dimly. She was needed back in the world of light… no, that wasn’t right. She was needed awake. She had a name. She had a body. She was— she was—

The thought escaped her, leaving her frustrated and weak, and she sank back into the calming shadows. Who was she? Why did she need to leave her warm, sheltered darkness?

The light shimmered brighter, as if irritated at such a question. Urgency flooded her, pushing away the engulfing shadows. She knew she had go back, but... the call of the darkness was seductive, promising nothing but inky oblivion. That sounded like a welcome relief, after what had happened. She remembered pain, a pain so intense that it had nearly torn her body to shreds. And she could remember grief so great that it had shattered her heart. She didn’t want to feel that again. She didn’t want to risk that pain.

The faintest shadow of agony fell across her awareness as she looked at the golden light, making her recoil. She wasn’t willing to experience the grief that consciousness brought, and she knew that being in the light could bring hurt. Being awake and aware of yourself could hurt, because you opened yourself up to emotions, and those could be violent and agonizing. Inside and out, in the mind and on the body. She just wanted to succumb to this peaceful, warm blackness.

But it beckoned more insistently, refusing to take no for an answer. She had to go back to the light. Had to go back to being alive.

I am Ruby Rose, she thought.
Shrinking inwardly, she reached for the light, bright whiteness enveloping her, her head pulsing with an agonizing pressure, and she burst back into consciousness like shooting up from the depths of the ocean to the surface, light dazzling her eyes, a throbbing, dull pain spreading through her body as she blinked once, twice, and her surroundings swam into sharp focus.

Fairy lights. Scarlet pillows. Quilted sheets. Sunlight streaming through the window onto golden floorboards. Her head feeling as though someone had driven a railroad spike through it. A dusty mirror, reflecting a pale, wan girl with chunks of scarlet, dark hair going every which way. A messy bookshelf lined with Grimm figurines. A chair across from her with a figure, slumped over in fitful sleep. And her mouth, tasting as though something had crawled within it and died.

The latter was the thing to kick her back into full wakefulness, and she opened her mouth once or twice experimentally, grimacing at the taste. At the movement, the pain in her head became more insistent, pushing at the edges of her skull and making her eyes throb, vision going double for a moment. A bright pang of white— no, silver— crossed the edges of her vision, and she let out a tiny groan of pain. It was this that made the figure across from her, sleeping in the chair, jolt upright as if he had been touched with a taser.

“Dad?” she whispered.

“You’re awake!” he yelped, and she shrank back with a flinch.

“Not so loud, please…”

“Right, right, of course. I’m sorry.” He half-fell, half-jumped out of his chair, going to his knees by her side, and looking at her with wide, worried blue eyes. “I just… I can’t believe you’re awake. I was… I was…” She noticed his eyes suddenly fill with tears. “I was so worried, Rubes. We all were.”

She smiled weakly as he gently pushed the hair out from her eyes, his hands infinitely gentle. “I’m okay, Dad.” She studied him, drinking in the unique comfort that only a parent’s presence could bring. The last time she’d seen Tai, he had been bringing them— her whole team— back from Patch, and they had been laughing and talking after leaving Summer’s grave. She’d never imagined reuniting under these circumstances, and tears welled in her eyes, brimming over and streaking silently down her cheeks.

He let out a choked laugh and wiped them away. “Only you would say you were okay after taking a brush with death. Scratch that— not a brush, you smacked right into death, punched it, and came out okay.”

“I know it.” She groaned and settled back against the mound of pillows propping her up. “I feel awful.”

“Anybody would,” he said, looking guarded all of a sudden, “after what happened to you.”

She blinked, casting back in her mind’s eye for the memories of the Fall of Beacon. She remembered watching Penny die, jumping off the side of the airship, hopping onto Torchwick’s, killing him and Neo, seeing how Fox and Neon had died, Yang lying unconscious in the courtyard, kissing Weiss, streaking up the side of the Tower, and then nothing at all, except a dull, static-sort of buzz.

One event stuck out in her mind more than the others, and she felt cold under all the sheets. She looked away from her father, hoping he attributed the sudden flush in her cheeks to fever, or
something. She could think about Weiss, and what had happened, later. Another, far more urgent question, pressed on her mind. “Dad… is Yang… is she okay? Is she here?”

His gaze darkened. “She’s… back here, yes. One of your friends was with her on the airship— Sun, I think— and helped her back home, a couple hours after the battle ended. She’s… alive, and conscious, but in what mental state, I… I can’t say. I do know that she’s furious at… at everything, Ruby, and rightly so, with the whole ‘leaving-without-a-word’ thing, since that reopens some old wounds… but you know that already.” It was one of the first times Ruby could recall him voluntarily bringing up Raven, and she absorbed it in a silent, stunned state. They never talked about Yang’s mom. Their family was screwed-up in its own special way, but the family they had now— her, Yang, Tai, and Qrow— was what they held close, and they didn’t bring up the things that had happened in the past. Except, it seemed, now things were all different. Nothing was the same when the world had been spun on its axis, and her reality was twisted into pieces. “Ruby,” Taiyang coaxed, his tone soft with worry, “say something.”

“Why isn’t she in here?” Ruby wavered. “This is our room, we— we share it, and I… is she…?”

His knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge of her bed. “She asked to be in the guest room,” he murmured. “She won’t talk to me… won’t talk to anyone about what happened to her. She hasn’t spoken in days.”

Ruby’s world spun, and she swayed, feeling her father reach over to steady her. “Oh no,” she mumbled. “Oh, Yang.”

“I’m not going to lie to you,” Taiyang said. “She’s… it’s pretty bad. I’ve… I’ve never seen her like this before.”

“How is she?”

“Angry,” he said, a muscle flickering in his clenched jaw. She got the feeling he was angry— not at his daughters, but at the world itself, really. Angry that he hadn’t been able to save either of the women he loved, and now, he hadn’t been able to protect either of their daughters. “Closed-off. She won’t let anyone go near her. She’s been sitting alone in her room for the past three days.”

Ruby’s eyes bugged out. “I’ve been out that long?”

He nodded. “Three days in which I got absolutely no sleep, I’ll have you know. Not a wink of it.” He gave her a wavering smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “But you’re awake now, which is… more than I’d hoped for, I’ll admit. I love you, Ruby. I was so scared you wouldn’t be the same when you woke, but I’m glad to see you’re fine.”

“And you said Sun brought Yang back here,” Ruby said, fighting off a wave of exhaustion that surged up inside of her. She was determined not to succumb to the seductive promise of rest until she knew what had happened while she was unconscious. “Where did he go?”

“He went back to explore the town around central Patch until they can get him an airship back to Mistral. He said he didn’t want to stay here, not if Yang didn’t want him to, and I don’t blame him. Things have been… tense around the house. It’s all just really— chaotic right now, Rubes. It’s the aftermath of one of the worst attacks in Remnant’s history, next to the Great War… things are going to be messy for a while.”

“Isn’t it always?”

Ruby and Taiyang both looked up as a rough voice broke into their silence. Her eyes widened,
sending a fresh bolt of pain through her skull, as she saw that it was her uncle. He leaned against the doorframe, his face looking more haggard than ever, the bags under his eyes very starkly pronounced, the shadow of a beard all along his jawline. “They’re always messy,” he said again. “We should be used to it, shouldn’t we?

He was rolling something between his hands, almost absent-mindedly; Ruby doubted if he was even aware he was doing it. With a jolt of mild surprise, she realized it she recognized it: slender, silver, emblazoned with an curlicued pattern of budding leaves: Ozpin’s cane.

“Where did you—” She began, and then broke off as she saw Qrow and Taiyang exchange a glance that she was very familiar with, having grown up under her uncle’s tutelage and her father’s guidance. Tai and Qrow had both been her parents after Summer’s passing, really, and with Qrow in and out of the house so much, they had developed a nonverbal communication that she’d quickly picked up on. She recognized that look: it was the one that said, *How much do we tell her?*

“What?” she said, her voice sharp. “What is it?”

“It’s nothing,” he said, tucking away the cane under his cape with a furrowed look of grief, and straightening up. “Tai, you ought to go check up on Yang. I passed her room. Make sure she eats something, doesn’t matter what, as long as you get something in her. She’s looking gaunt.”

“She hasn’t been eating in days,” Taiyang said, but he obliged, lumbering to his feet. “But I’ll try to feed her. I’ll see if I can get her talking. Did you talk to her?”

"I'm the last person she'd want to talk to," he replied, his voice heavy, "among some others."

"You're probably right about that." Taiyang's expression shadowed. "I'll go see her."

"Be gentle. Don't press her. She’s taking everything that happened hardest.” There was an undercurrent of despair in his voice, along with an unspoken *something* that she could see flash in his eyes when he said ‘everything that happened’. “I’ll… talk to Ruby.”

Taiyang flashed him another look— this one was an expression Ruby often saw them exchange, one that said: *be careful*— before he leaned down, dropping a kiss on the top of her hair before striding out. “I’m glad you’re okay, sweetheart,” he murmured, the relief stark in his voice.

*Of course he’s relieved*, a needling voice, in the back of her mind, whispered. *After Summer, he would be worried.*

“I am too,” she said hoarsely.

“I’ll make you some cookies and milk,” he said, tossing the words over his shoulder, before exiting, gently swinging the door shut behind him.

“Hey, little rose,” Qrow murmured, drawing her attention back to him as he walked forward and brought Taiyang’s chair around, sitting in it backward, so that his folded arms rested on the arching back of it. “How are you feeling?”

“Like someone backed over me with a Bullhead, reversed it, and backed over me again,” she croaked. “I ache all over.”

He let out a soft snort of amusement. “At least you haven’t changed after what you did,” he said, red gaze clouding over. “I was worried about that.”

“What?” she said. "What's that supposed to mean?"
He blinked at her, an expression of wariness abruptly erasing the relief on his face. “Do you… what do you remember, Ruby? Tell me everything you can recall from the Fall; don’t leave anything out.”

She shivered, suddenly cold despite the mound of blankets she was buried under. “I… I remember Penny dying in the arena.” A fresh wave of grief swept over her. “I remember killing Torchwick and Neo… and that Fox and Neon died… and Yang’s arm… and— I remember Ironwood’s ship crashing in flames—”

“I wouldn’t worry about him; Ironwood’s alright,” Qrow said with a half-smile that curled crookedly on his face, “if you can believe it. His thick skin saved him. Old Metalskull’s survived worse than a ship crash, and he’s safe— back in Atlas, with the remnants of his military intact there.”

Ruby felt a pang of relief. “I remember… fighting in the courtyard.” *I remember Weiss telling me she loved me,* she thought privately, but he didn’t really need to know that, did he? She could think about it later, sort out how, exactly, she felt after everything that had happened. “I remember going up the side of the Tower, and… and…”

With a sudden shock, the static-cloud of fuzziness that had engulfed her mind and blocked out her memories lifted, letting them come back into her mind’s eye in full color, full pain, full sight. They flashed through her mind in quick succession, and she sank back against her pillows, assaulted by what she had forgotten and what she knew she would never, never be able to forget from this point forwards. A mixture of shame, at having forgotten, and sheer misery, swirled through her.

*Cinder, her amber eyes alight in triumph. Pyrrha, an arrow protruding from her chest. The world going whiter than a star into supernova…*

“What happened, Uncle Qrow?” she demanded. “What happened to them after I—”

Qrow’s gaze lowered and slid away as he saw the look on her face, and that was all the answer Ruby needed. “They’re dead, Ruby,” he said roughly. “Both of them.”

Hot, angry tears welled up on the rims of her eyelids. “I was too late,” she snarled, more furious at herself than anything, but her fury, she knew, was just misery and guilt by another name. “Too late to save Pyrrha. If I had just been quicker, I could have—”

“Don’t say that,” he snapped. “Don’t blame yourself. There was *nothing* you could have done to make sure everything turned out perfectly. Life doesn’t work out that way. You damn near killed yourself with what you did, Ruby, and you killed Cinder with it. She would have wrought much more havoc if unleashed after she defeated Pyrrha; you kept that from happening, kept even more of your friends from dying if Cinder hadn’t been stopped. You saved Vale, you hear me? No sacrifices on that night were in vain, thanks to you. Not your peers who died, not Pyrrha,” and here let out a pained huff of breath, fingers running across the back of the chair, “and not Ozpin.”

“How?”

The lines on his face more strained and pronounced than ever in the pale winter sunlight, he looked up at her though his ragged hair. “You’ll have to be more specific. How *‘what’,* exactly?”

“I remember seeing Cinder k—kill Pyrrha,” she said slowly, taking a shuddering breath, “but I… I can’t remember anything after that, just… the whole world going white, and my head *hurting,* like it was about to burst…”
“Ah,” he murmured, a bitter smile twisting his lips. “Ah, so you do remember… I was hoping…”

“Hoping what?”

Silver eyes met red, deep pain reflected in both. “It’s a long story, Ruby,” he replied wearily, “a long legend, in fact, and it’s definitely not a pretty little fairytale, once you look at its implications, even if it seems nice enough at first. It’s filled with pain, and uncertainty, and it is a story that connects to you in ways you don’t know yet, ways that have been determining your future since the moment you were born— and ultimately, it’s a story I should have told you a long, long time ago.

“This is the right time, I guess, where it’s all culminated into the unavoidable. It’s a tale that you’ve known bits and pieces of throughout the span of your life, things that have been hinted at to you, but I’ll try to fill in the gaps between those bits of knowledge so it all makes sense, like a puzzle finally being completed. If you want to hear them, that is.” He frowned. “I’ll warn you: once you hear it, your old life, your old worries… those will seem miniscule. You’ll be thrust onto a path that will seem dark, and shadowed, and terrifying… but you have light to get you through it, now. Ruby, you’re strong. Stronger than you give yourself credit before. But everything changed the night Beacon fell, and whether you like it or not, we’ve got to change with it, or we won’t survive.”

“Don’t treat me like a little baby.” She glared at him, annoyed at the grating pain in his voice. “If I lived, as Dad said, ‘smacking into death’, I think I can handle a little story.”

“I see you haven’t lost any of your acid wit,” he said, rising from his chair and meandering towards the window, “that’s good. But it’s not a little story at all. And it doesn’t have a happy ending, not really. The first is a story Ozpin told me, one from a very long time ago.”

“You and Ozpin were close, weren’t you?” she asked. “Did you— I’m sorry, Uncle Qrow. I wasn’t… I didn’t know him very well… but he reminded me of you. He reminded me of you a lot. He was kind, and he was smart. I’ll never forget him for how he encouraged me to succeed.”

“Yes,” Qrow said finally, his voice hoarse. “He wanted you to succeed, Ruby. He was proud of you, in some ways. I think he’d be proud of you now. But he died trying to stop Cinder. I don’t know when the end came for him. But I remember how he would fight like all of the Huntsmen in the world, for what he believed in. That’s how I’ll always remember him.” He stared out the window, his back to her, but she could faintly see his face in the glass, and his eyes closed in pain at her words, hands gripping the windowsill as if he were afraid to fall. Pity engulfed her at his expression. She had only ever seen Qrow look so wrecked, so torn apart by grief, one time many years ago. On the day he had brought back the news about Summer. “I was… close to him. As close as one could be to someone like that.”

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, uncertain of how to comfort him.

I’ve known— I knew,” he corrected himself, voice ragged, “I knew him a long, long time.” He paused, weighing his next words. “Longer than your parents, even.”

“That’s years and years you’ve known him… at least two decades, right? Is that why you have his cane? To remember?”

He turned to stare at her, his gaze hard— not quite menacing, but something in there let her know that further questions in that direction would not be welcome. “Remembering isn’t always easy,” Qrow said very quietly, “as you’ve just seen. It can be painful to remember. But we always have to learn from memories, you see, and with what’s happened… Ozpin is gone. He sacrificed himself to buy Vale time, just as your friend did. It seems we both have a responsibility: to make sure they
aren’t forgotten, or that their sacrifices aren’t taken for granted.”

Ruby flinched. “Tell me the story,” she murmured.

He glanced at her thoughtfully. “When you first applied for Beacon— or rather, when you were ambushed by Torchwick and met Glynda—you met Ozpin, didn’t you? He took you and talked to you, and accepted you to Beacon. Even though you were only fifteen years old, and the strict age to enter was seventeen years old. Glynda was more dubious about it. But Ozpin was eager to let you in. So eager he overruled her immediately without a word of protest. He didn’t have a single qualm about breaking his rules like that, just for some random fifteen year old girl. Isn’t that all correct?”

“Hey, wait a second!” she burst out, sitting bolt upright and ignoring the spike of pain it induced in her head. “How could you possibly know that?”

He grinned broadly at that, the edges of his eyes crinkling. “If you had looked out the window of his office, you’d have seen a sharp-eyed crow listening in on your conversation that night. I heard everything, and I’m sure he knew I was there.”

“You used your semblance to eavesdrop on us,” she accused him, crossing her arms mutinously and sitting back. “That’s—”

“Eavesdrop is such an ugly word, don’t you think?” he mused. “I prefer gather potentially valuable information. That’s much better.”

“That’s four words, Uncle Qrow.”

“Doesn’t matter. In any case, it paid off. He knew I was there, so he laid off easy on you, and gave you entry to the school at fifteen— virtually unheard of around these parts.” He whisked around, cape swirling out behind him, and directed a piercing stare her way. “Regardless of the circumstances, do you truly believe Ozpin let you into the school— a prestigious academy; takes incredible skills to be granted entry— because you beat up a few half-trained goons with faulty guns, and ran off a cowardly thief who would have fled, regardless of whether you were there or not? Or that he let you in— you, a simple fifteen year old girl— simply because you were my niece, and I was listening in?”

“You know, I thought so at first,” she answered honestly, “but now that you’re asking me… no, I don’t think so.”

“You’re right.” He paused, running a hand over the bristles on his chin. “He wouldn’t have accepted you to Beacon, two years below the age-limit as you were, simply because you were somewhat talented with swinging around a scythe and you had a uncle who was pals with the headmaster. He’d have let you finish up at Signal, and then apply to Beacon, if that were the case. So what do you think it was?”

Deciding to let the comment about being somewhat talented slide, she narrowed her eyes in confusion at him. “I— I don’t— I don’t know why. That’s all there was that was noticeable about me, surely…?” There was a realization burning the back of her mind, malleable and unformed, and she did not want to reach for it, terrified of what it might reveal when it shaped into fully-realized form.

“The night you met him,” Qrow said darkly, “he told you something. The very first words, if you would. What were they?”

She frowned, suddenly feeling chilled, and cast back into her memory. Everything about that time...
was stark, tattooed in her mind forever, because it had been one of best nights of her life. She remembered the headmaster’s kindly face, Glynda looking disapproving, and then with a mild pang of satisfaction, she pulled the words out of memory’s clutch. “He said… he said I had silver eyes. I thought he… well, I don’t know. I guess he was just trying to make conversation.”

Qrow rolled his eyes. “Or because he thought you were odd-looking?”

“You have got to stop guessing my thoughts like that.”

He didn’t look amused. “He didn’t mention them for any trite reason, or because he wanted to make small talk,” Qrow informed her. “He was commenting on them to discreetly let me know that he knew who you were, and whose daughter you were, as well. Oz knew Summer Rose. She was a student there too, after all. He was also caught off-guard— now, that doesn’t happen often, let me tell you. Oz is— was— a hard man to surprise.” He swallowed, his eyes darkening with grief. “I am about to tell you a legend, Ruby, and you have to let me finish it through to its end, no matter how many questions you have. Above all, you have to believe it, every word of it. I swear by anything you hold sacred that nothing I say following these words is anything but the truth.”

“O— okay,” she stammered, startled by the sudden sharp edge of solemnity in his voice.

“You’re special, Ruby,” he said quietly, but his words sounded eerily loud in the silence that followed. “Not special in the ‘daddy-loves-his-little-angel’ sort of way. You’re special in the same way your mom was.”

She blinked at him, puzzled, but mostly— afraid. There was an expression on his face that she’d never seen before, one that mixed equal parts relief and anxiety, fear and grief.

Qrow continued, pacing the room. “Back in the dawn of Remnant, when the world was misty and half-formed, as you know, there was Dust. Man was born from Dust, which you’re also aware of. And out of this mist that covered Remnant, four things emerged, each with a different purpose to which they would work to achieve their means: to create, to destroy, to bring forth light, and to fight back the shadows which constantly threatened Remnant.

“These were four things brimming with the energy of life when Remnant was but an infant world. Can you guess what they were, Ruby?”

“Mankind,” she said slowly, turning the words over in her mouth before she spoke them, “and… and the Faunus also count with mankind, I guess… and Dust… and the Grimm. I don’t know what the fourth is, Uncle.”

“I don’t expect you to know.” He paused, the edge of his mouth curling down in a deep frown. His words had the ring of a tale told many, many times, and she had a striking vision of Ozpin telling him this same story. “So I’ll tell you. Mankind and the Faunus were born to create, with their self-awareness, ingenuity, and endurance. The Grimm were made to destroy everything mankind created, so that humanity would never become arrogant and presume what they made was meant to last forever, and so that they would know how fragile life truly was, and what a gift it was to be able to do what they were able to do. The Grimm also were made so Hunters could come about, but that’s another story for another day. And Dust was made to bring forth light to Remnant. This is why we return to Dust when we die, so our bodies may become part of an unending cycle to light the world.”

“You said there were four,” she said. “Mankind and Faunus were intended to create, Grimm to destroy, Dust to make light, and another— one to ‘fight back the shadows that threatened’. Who was meant to do that?”
“There was a special breed of warrior, different from everything around it— different from man, Grimm, and Dust,” he said softly. “This breed of warrior was different, you see, because it was alike everything else in some way. It owed its connections to the other three from which it had been born alongside. This special breed of warrior had the soul and mercy of mankind and Faunus— had the energy and light of Dust— and the strength and endurance of the Grimm. These warriors were the fourth thing made at the dawn of Remnant, intended to banish the shadows from the world. They were the perfect Hunter, designed to beat back the Grimm and protect that which was good.

“These warriors were all marked by one single, pointed trait: only they had them; only them, and no one else. Anybody with this trait was a warrior.” He looked at her fiercely.

She knew what he was going to say a second before he said it, and with an awful pang, she was not at all surprised as he looked directly at her, and said, “The one thing these warriors all had in common, Ruby, was that they had silver eyes.”

As if in answer, her eyes gave a pulse— not of pain, but of a sudden awareness, as if someone she loved, and had not seen in a very long time, had called her name. A warm glow suffused her body, and as if his words had unlocked something within her, she became sharply aware of several things pulsing inside of her: her soul, her mercy, her energy, her light, her strength, her endurance, and the capability she had to use it to whatever terms she wanted: to darkness, or to light.

“Oh,” she murmured, voice very quiet. “You mean... I... I'm not...?”

“It’s a lot to take in,” he said, “but it’s true. These warriors, you see, were made to kill the Grimm, as you can guess. Because Grimm were soulless creatures of malice, of darkness, drawn to negativity. The warriors were light, with souls, intended to protect mankind and the Faunus.”

“And you think I’m...?” She trailed off faintly, vaguely wiggling a hand to indicate the sheer scope of the thing, and he quirked a smile at her.

“Well, take a look in the mirror, and consider this… you killed a Grimm, larger than the likes of any regular beast, in one blow, and you shattered a woman who was able to kill two of the strongest warriors on Remnant— and you’re here, safe in bed, with the worst to happen to you being a mild headache and a three-day… well, a coma. But you’re alive.” He paused. “You’re alive, Ruby. You walked to the brink of death, and came back… and there are four other people who did not do the same. Were it not for your heritage, we would have lost you. You would be another casualty mark along with your other peers who were murdered, and we would not be having this conversation.”

“I remember it now, really,” she said. “I remember seeing what happened, and a pressure building inside my head, and then white light— it felt like fire, so cold it was hot— just bursting out of my eyes, and then I must have blacked out. I— I don’t remember anything at all after that.”

“Black out you did,” Qrow told her quietly. “I found you amid the rubble at the top of the Tower. Everything up there was shattered, and frost covered it all. The coldness of that light stopped the Grimm’s heart, and it was so devastating in itself that it killed Cinder the moment it touched her. Hell, you almost killed yourself with that blast. Unlocking the power expended so much of your energy that it exhausted all of it, and had to draw on the reserves of your spirit itself. If you’d unleashed even the slightest bit more of the power, you would be dead. I’m not telling you this to scare you, Ruby,” he added gently, forestalling her protestation as she opened her mouth, “but you have to know how big this is. And that you mustn’t underestimate it, or yourself.”

She gaped at him, the importance of his little speech finally clicking. “So I’ve got this power,” she
said, her voice slowly increasing in volume, “a huge power, one you and Dad— don’t tell me he
doesn’t know; you would’ve told him right off, because my mom had it too— knew about my
entire life, and neither of you thought to tell me about it?”

“Ruby—”

“You lied to me my entire life,” she hissed. “My. Entire. Life. You made me think I was someone I
wasn’t, and now you’ve only told me the truth when it’s unavoidable. Who does that? What kind of
a parent hides that sort of secret from their own child?”

“You aren’t my child by blood,” he said levelly, “regardless of whether I’m a parental figure to you
or not. I don’t morally owe you that sort of honesty. If you asked me to prioritize your feelings, or
your safety, I would prioritize your safety every time. Believe me when I say this: knowing about
your power would not have helped you, Ruby. In the long run, it would have caused you far more
hurt than harm. You would have been isolated, separated by the unescapable knowledge that you
were fundamentally different than everyone else.”

“You lied, Qrow,” she repeated coldly. “Both you, and my dad.”

“We did,” he said steadily, and somehow that soothed her anger more than protestation or or
explanations or excuses would have. “There’s no excuse for it. We lied. And I’m sorry for it, I’m
sorry that that’s how things had to go, but they did, and nothing I say or do will change that. But
you know now. You know what you are. There’s no other secrets. No other hidden truths. I’ve told
you everything— everything I know, everything Tai knows, everything Ozpin told me.”

“Promise?” she whispered.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” he replied, and the honesty flickering through his eyes made her
believe him more than anything. Suddenly exhausted, she sank back against the pillows, before a
sudden thought struck her so fast it felt like she had been brained with Magnhild.

“Where’s my team?”

“Your team,” he said hoarsely, turning around as if he’d been expecting it. An expression of guilt
and sadness crossed his face as he inhaled a deep breath, cheeks hollowing out. “I… you shouldn’t
worry about it right now. You need to rest, not learn more after everything I’ve just told you—”

“I’m their leader,” she said sharply. “I have a right to know. And it’s more than that. I care about
them— so much, Uncle Qrow. Weiss is my partner, I— Yang’s my sister, and Blake’s one of my
best friends in this whole world… I can’t not know. I need to know, whether it’s good or bad or—”

“It’s not good news, Ruby,” he whispered.

Her heart sinking, she blinked at him, and with a soft swear, he jammed his hands into his pockets
and turned his back to her, unable to look her in the eye. “Vincent Schnee has legally sworn his
daughter back into the manor at Atlas,” he said. “She’s gone. She can’t come back, not without
breaking the law, and I don’t think that’s something she would dare to do.”

Forcing out the next words, though her heart was shattering in her chest, Ruby asked, “And
Blake?”

“That Faunus boy, Sun… he says she vanished after the last of the airships took off from Beacon,”
he said. “She disappeared into the wilderness beyond the Tower, and efforts to track her down have
proved fruitless. No one’s seen her since.”
“But Yang,” Ruby said desperately, her voice very small, grasping at any shard of hope she could find, “Yang would have… she would have been able to track her down… their Bond… wouldn’t she? We could still…”

Qrow scrubbed his face with both hands, his tired voice emitting from between his fingers. “Yang,” he said quietly, “has shut down her Bond, and she refuses to speak to either me, or your father, about what happened to her three nights ago. Blake, for better or for worse, is gone, and unless she comes back voluntarily, I would advise you to… bid your goodbyes. Without the CCT, there’s no chance of tracking her down, and with the attitude in Vale right now, I’d say we had a better chance of flying to the moon than of reaching her.”

“How is Yang?” Ruby asked, afraid of the answer. “Dad said she’s… not okay. At all.”

“I won’t lie to you. That’s the understatement of the century.” He paused, raking a tired hand through his hair and disheveling it further. “Well, she’s finally reached her breaking point. The toll from being framed at the tournament, being abandoned by both her mother and her partner, losing her arm, losing her fighting style, losing her team, losing her whole world that she was used to all in one strike…” He shook her head. “Tai is losing sleep over it, but what can I say? It’s not unexpected. Everyone’s got a point where they just can’t bounce back. Everyone’s got a tipping point, when it’s too much, and you go over the edge. Nobody is unbreakable. Some of us just break a little more easily than others, that’s all. She’s endured so much— I’m just surprised that this is what it took to make her give up. You can try to talk to her if you want, but… be gentle. She’s not in a good state of mind right now.”

Ruby covered her face with her hands, complete despair and failure making her stomach sink. She felt desperate to return to the darkness of oblivion, where nothing troubled her— not missing teammates or injured sisters or latent powers, but she would never do so again. This was reality, and she had to face it.

She peered up at him through a haze of confusion, fear humming through her whole body. “Qrow…”

He blinked down at her. “Yeah?”

“I— what happens now?”

He looked bemused, and then bewildered, and then simply lost. “I don’t know, Ruby,” he said softly, shaking his head. “I… I really don’t know.”

“I want answers,” she forced out through gritted teeth. “Why Cinder attacked Beacon, why Roman did, why Pyrrha had to die— I need to know, or I’ll never make peace with it. I’ll never be able to make peace with what happened! Emerald and Cinder were my friends, and they betrayed me. I can’t be okay with that without answers and explanations, don’t you get it?”

He inclined his head. “Cinder and her crew— they claimed they were from Haven, if you remember,” he said. “I can’t hold you back anymore, you know, and I wouldn’t want to. You’ve grown. Perhaps, if it is answers you seek, that is where you might find them.” He nodded to her slightly before bowing out of the room, and his last words came in softly, just before the door clicked shut. “I’ll see you out there, Ruby.”

She laid there after he left, her entire body aching from the effects of what her incredible power had done, letting the icy chill run through her veins, numbing her from the inside out. The aftermath had finally sunken in, truly, and for all she had pretended to be okay when Taiyang and Qrow had been around, she wasn’t okay in any sense of the word. She abdicated her sense of calm, letting
everything rush through her, all her pain and fear and confusion, relinquished the control and let it
crash through her with the force of a tidal wave.

Two of her friends were gone, they were dead, they had been erased entirely, and part of her
wished for the same. The entire Fall of Beacon and what had happened afterward had broken her
down, bit by bit, piece by piece. Everything she knew was a lie. Her mother wasn’t just her mother,
but the wielder of the same power that had almost destroyed Ruby atop the Tower; her sister was
not the light sister she knew anymore, but someone calcified in regret; her friends were dead; her
team was gone; and she had killed three people remorselessly. There was no such thing as happy
 endings, not even if you tried as hard as you could, not even if you made up for your wrongs, not
even if you redeemed yourself. There was nothing but pain and betrayal and loss, in the end,
whether it was caused by fate or destiny or some other power she could barely imagine. Everything
she knew and believed had been wrong, had been shattered entirely, every attempt she had
undertaken to save those she loved had been a failure seeped in lies, every choice she had made
had caused things to grow worse.

There was nothing left to do. All her life, she had always had a path forward, even when things
seemed terrible. When her mother had died, Ruby had seen her path as becoming a Huntress. When
Yang had been framed, Ruby had known that she had to lead her team with confidence and
certainty. When Beacon had begun to fall, Ruby knew she had to try and kill Torchwick. But now,
she could see nothing, no options left, no path forward, nothing lying in wait except a deep,
unending darkness that promised nothing but pain and fear.

There was nothing left for her here, or Beacon, or anywhere in the whole world. That was
abundantly clear. Weiss was someplace Ruby could never reach her, Blake was missing entirely,
and Yang was— mentally— somewhere more distant than the stars. Ruby lay there, and let
memories overwhelm her, running over her head like waves, and she let the world fade away as she
succumbed to the silver that had been coloring her life in ways she had never noticed before.

She creeps down the hallway on barefoot, sticky toes, the floorboards creaking slightly and
bending with her weight. She flinches. It’s not far to the kitchen, and once she’s there, she can nab
as many of her father’s snickerdoodle cookies as she wants, and abduct them to her and Yang’s
room for them to share. Her sister won’t be mad; she’s sure of it. No one can say no to her dad’s
baking. She’s just got to make it past the slightly ajar door of her parents’ bedroom—

“We won’t be able to hide it from her forever,” Taiyang’s voice says suddenly, floating out from
the door. Ruby freezes in the shadows edging the hallway, pressing her back to the wall, and hopes
that he won’t emerge from the room and spot her. “Summer, you know that we won’t. Qrow says
it’s only a matter of time, but Ozpin says we’ve got to wait—”

“And since when, pray tell, have Qrow and Ozpin ever agreed on anything, hmm? They’re like an
old married couple; they bicker all the time, and you know it. Except they lack the rings and the
relationship.”

He sighs heavily, and Ruby leans forward, despite herself, curious as to what they’re talking about.
She’s never heard her dad sound so tired—and, for all the world, defeated. He’s usually vibrant,
always ready to play a game or tell them a story. “It’s not funny. I’ve never trusted him, but this is
something I can’t help but worry about.”

“Him, or Qrow?”

“Either of them. Oz has always been… secretive, to say the least, and Qrow… sometimes I get the
idea that he’s content to follow Ozpin’s lead in prioritizing ‘the greater good’ more than he is to
look out for the best interests of his family and team.”
“Tai, they’re both good people, despite whatever they do. Remember that. I know you’re worried about her—believe me, I’ve been worried since the day she opened her eyes. I’ve never wanted her to endure what I have, with something she can’t help, that lures her into trouble like moths to a flame… but really, there’s nothing we can do in the end.” Summer’s voice becomes fierce. “I won’t let my daughter’s memories be marred by us burdening her with what she can barely understand, do you hear me? She has the right to a normal childhood, just as much as Yang does, and I won’t let that be taken away from her, no matter what.”

Ruby surfaced from the memory, her heart beating loud in her chest, memories twining together and connecting and revealing her past in a new, frightening light. She had been marked out, outcast, from the moment she opened her eyes. From the moment she murdered three.

Alone, she thought. I am completely, absolutely alone now.

And so, alone in her room with the wavering winter sunlight striping across her childhood bed, Ruby finally allowed herself to cry.

A/N: Haha, kudos to you if you caught the little ‘stark’ reference when Ruby was noticing Qrow’s appearance, when Taiyang left the room, and when Ruby was remembering her chat with Ozpin.

I know it all seems depressing rn, but there is a happy ending, cross my heart and hope to die. Honest. :)


Chapter XXVIII - Alone and Apart

Chapter Summary

Let's get to 465 comments for this one - we're getting awfully close to the mark, and if you guys manage to push us over it, I'll have more bonus content for you, one way or another!

Yang

The sun was setting outside, rays of tawny fire spilling across the great white drifts of snow. The trees clawed at the steel gray sky, and birds called mournfully outside her window. Yang had been lying here for what seemed like forever, though she knew dully that it had only been four days, so long she’d memorized the cracks in the walls, the peeling paint, the smudged glass.

She was numb.

An ice had settled in her bones, wrapping around her heart, tightening each day. She knew—distantly, very distantly, like an echo that she had long-forgotten—that the world was still going on, that reparations were being made, that life went on. But not for her. She had lost so much: Penny, Pyrrha, Ozpin, Weiss—Blake—and in this, a part of herself had died, too. So many people had left her, that, at this point, she couldn’t pick up the pieces anymore. Her fight had drained, her fire snuffed to ash. She couldn’t break out of this kind of vicious cycle.

Blake is gone, Taiyang had said, almost hopefully, not dead, not missing.

Not dead. But gone.

That seemed to be the case with everything; that it was all gone, forever out of reach, and yet so tantalizingly close. It was a joke, really. Yang knew what had happened. No amount of optimism from her father, or encouragement from Sun, would change reality. Only months ago, she had sat here in this very room with Blake before the tournament. And in this very house, she had offhandedly mentioned how Blake was like Raven, in some ways—and now, apparently, she was exactly like Raven in the way Yang had never wanted her to be.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” Yang had said, on that day all those months ago, “but I think Dad wants to talk to you.”

Blake had looked taken aback. “Me? Why?”

“You read a lot of books, you should know this! All parents talk to their kid’s significant other, brainless. Besides, it’s not your fault at all and it’s totally dumb, believe me, but I think you remind him of Raven a little, and he’s worried.”

“Why would I remind him of Raven?”
"Raven was his partner, and she ran off on him soon after they married. You’ve run off on us, too, even if it is in the past now, and you almost resemble her a bit, with the way you look; I mean, I can’t deny that there are some similarities, even if I disagree with him, because I do… I mean, God, Blake. He’s never in his right mind when it comes to her, and neither am I. She broke his heart."

“History repeats itself,” Yang murmured aloud, her voice gravelly. She knew Blake had abandoned her as carelessly as Raven had seventeen years ago. And, despite her father’s words of encouragement, she knew that others had died— Pyrrha, Penny, Cinder, Cardin, Roman, Fox, Neon— leaving emptiness in their wake. She had felt a flicker of guilt when he told her— remembering how she and Neon had quarreled— but it was quickly buried by numbness once more.

She knew that it must be selfish to mourn for herself in the midst of tragedy, but she couldn’t help it. It felt like a punchline to a cosmic joke, that everything important had been somehow taken away: Raven, vanished; Blake, run away; Weiss, taken; Ruby, a shell of her former self. And her own physical form was now ruined; her weapon, her arm. Gone. It was gone. They said that those who lost a part of themselves could feel the missing part, sometimes, giving phantom twinges of pain. Yang supposed it was true. She could feel the hollowness of where her heart used to reside, as well as her arm. But her heart hurt worse, by far.

Her sister didn’t give up. Despite everything, she still forged ahead. Yang knew it took a lot to break her. Underneath her innocent exterior, there was a warrior tougher than steel. Ruby didn’t give up— and Yang knew she’d been forced to grow up. They all had. The fifth time Ruby visited her, Yang forced herself to look away from the window, to associate, to forget about the fading sensation in her right half.

To forget about the fading sensation in our Bond.

Ruby walked in, just as she thought it. There was something different about her sister’s gait now; she had used to walk around in a trotting, stomping manner, but now there was a hesitance and fear there that almost hurt Yang. They’d all been changed by the Fall of Beacon, in some ways that they were only just beginning to comprehend.

“I brought you a sandwich,” her sister said brightly, failing to hide the undercurrent of anxiety in her tone. “Turkey, remember? It’s your favorite, and Dad and I thought maybe you’d be hungr—”

“Put it down on the nightstand.”

“Oh,” Ruby said, deflating like a balloon that had been punctured. “Okay.” There was a gentle clatter of glass against wood as she set it down clumsily, skirting the bed to sit at the footboard, the bed sagging slightly under her weight.

There was a long silence, before Yang heard Ruby let out a rustling breath from her lungs, shifting around. “Are you ever going to talk to me, Yang?”

“Talk about what?” she asked stiffly. “If you want to talk, talk. No one’s stopping you, are they?”

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it. I’m done having one-sided conversations with you. You can’t pretend nothing happened,” her sister snapped. “Look. Look up here at me. In the eyes.”

Yang looked, and flinched as Ruby’s eyes met hers. They were bright, angry silver, and she had heard Qrow and Taiyang whispering about them, late into the night— she had heard what her sister had done, what she was capable of, how she had killed three people. How Ruby wasn’t just Ruby
Rose, small and simple, but a girl straight out of a legend. Much as she missed Blake, the reality of her sister’s power scared the hell out of her. The idea that Ruby wasn’t just Ruby anymore was more frightening than anything. “I’m looking.”

“You’re worrying me and Dad,” she said without preamble. “And you— Yang, you know there’s a huge difference between healthy mourning, and cutting yourself off. You’re not living. You’re just a shadow, sitting here, not doing anything to fight back against what happened—”

“Maybe I’m done fighting,” Yang snapped. “Don’t you get that? I fought Mercury, and I got framed. I fought for Beacon, and it fell. I fought to find my mother once, and I almost got you killed. I fought Adam for Blake, and I—” Her throat closed up, constricting all the words that had welled up inside of her, and she choked on them, tears streaming down her face. “Even after trying my hardest and doing my best, I still lost her, too…”

The bed creaked as Ruby came over and hugged her silently, her arms going around Yang as she sobbed, because she had forgotten that, without a Bond, there was no outlet, nowhere for her emotions to go, and they were drowning her, clamoring in her mind and threatening to send her spiraling into insanity. “Oh, God,” she croaked. “She’s gone, she’s gone and she left me here and she’s not coming back…”

“I’m not Blake,” Ruby murmured, “and I’m not going to lie, or anything… I don’t know why she left. But what I do know, and what I’m sure of, is that Blake loves you.” Her voice was soft and sincere. “I know that as much as I know that my name is Ruby Rose. Don’t ever think she doesn’t. The way she looked at you, the way she said your name… I know what love looks like. I saw Mom and Dad, and I remember that. I always will. I remember how she would do anything for you— anything, anything you ever wanted— and sometimes, when I woke up the middle of the night and looked down at your bunk bed, she was awake, just lying there and playing with your hair and looking at you.

“And she loved you, sis. I’m not saying this to hurt you, Yang. I would never do that. But you need to know the reality of it; she didn’t leave because she didn’t love you. That’s not to say she doesn’t still love you— but what you should remember is that while Blake was, and is, a huge part of you— she’s not all of you, okay? A part of you existed before you ever met Blake, before you ever knew her name, before she was ever important to you… and a part of you should exist after Blake, because you’re more than just Blake’s Yang.” Ruby’s hand squeezed on her shoulder, insistent. “You’re so much more than that. You’re my sister, my best friend, and you’re a fighter. I’m not saying you should forget about her… but separate yourself from what you’ve lost and don’t let it consume you. Don’t repeat what happened with Dad. When Raven left and Mom died, he… he shut down. I can’t stand it if you do the same thing.”

Ruby ran her hands through Yang’s hair, calming her wrenching sobs to quieter, broken sniffles. “I lost my partner too,” Ruby continued quietly. “And do you know what happened before I saw Pyrrha get murdered?”

“What?” she asked, her voice flat, without inflection.

“Weiss kissed me,” Ruby said abruptly, making Yang straighten in shock. She sounded calm, but there was a tension like live wires running underneath her words, and when Yang looked over in astonishment, she saw that her sister’s hands were clenched into white-knuckled fists on top of her knees.

“Well,” Yang breathed, her exhale hoarse. “That’s unexpected.”

Ruby looked thoughtful, something flickering in her silver eyes. “Is it?”
“I knew she had feelings for you, and I told you as much,” Yang said shortly. “You didn’t believe me. Why so shocked now? Of course Weiss would have done something; she knew you were running up to the Tower’s top and risking your life… she’s not the type to stand idly by, you know. I wouldn’t think it was a big thing out of the blue.”

“Because she also said something else,” Ruby told her. “She told me that she loved me.”

Yang’s eyes widened. “Did she?”

“Yeah,” Ruby said, looking Yang in the eye and squeezing her single hand between her own. “And I think that if someone loves you, that’s worth fighting for.”

There was a long silence. Ruby seemed to be struggling to formulate the right words, before she said, “Dad always told us that love is the most powerful force on earth. That no matter what, love would find a way. Even after Mom died, he believed that, you know? And he has a point. Love is worth whatever it might cost you, in the end. So many people have lost the people they loved, and they were left behind. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “Jaune lost Pyrrha. Dad lost Mom. Qrow lost Ozpin. You lost Blake, and I— I lost Weiss.” Her eyes brimmed with tears. “I know it can seem impossible, but we can’t lose ourselves, too.

“Yang, I understand that you’re grieving, and that’s okay. You need to grieve, or else you’ll never heal right, you know? But you and me— we can get through this, no matter how hard it is, no matter how much we feel like just giving up. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through, really, but I can get an idea. I’m never going to be your innocent little sister anymore, and you’re not going to be the overbearing older sister… we’re new people now, but maybe, just maybe, we can keep going. But we can’t do that at all if you don’t talk to me, and at least try to start healing.”

“I lost everything because of one stupid decision,” Yang whispered, her voice trembling. “If I hadn’t charged in there like an idiot, like some sort of savior… I could have saved Blake, and myself, and I could have killed Adam for touching her. Ruby, I… I’m afraid if I make another stupid choice like that, I won’t be able to heal, or to come back— not ever.”

“You’re scared,” her sister whispered. “I’m scared too. Qrow told me I almost died on top of the Tower because of—”

“I know about your eyes,” Yang croaked. “Qrow came in here and told me even if I didn’t talk back to him… he just came in here and said it and left…” Her voice abruptly hardened. “So, it’s a legend, and you’re the subject of a legend. Your power wasn’t enough to save everyone. It was only enough to keep you alive, and to murder Cinder. That doesn’t do anything—”

“Yang, that’s not the point—”

“—it’s a legend!” she shouted, twisting away from her sister, rage bubbling up inside her as she made as if to grip the bedpost before realizing she couldn’t do it, because her arm was gone, further igniting her anger. “Legends don’t help anyone; they didn’t help you or me! They’re just stories made to explain people people who don’t understand themselves.”

“Tell me if this isn’t real,” Ruby said, glaring down at her, and Yang could almost feel the frost and coldness from her gaze, like dark, cold water had filled her heart to the brim, and was trickling over, sending a chill through her veins, weighing down her stomach with dread. “Because everyone in Vale that night felt it. Like it or not— and trust me, I’m not sure I like it at all— I’m separated from all of you by something as simple as the color of my eyes, because I’ve got the power to destroy even the strongest with only a look. If you want to sit here and give up, I can’t stop you, because that’s what you’re determined to do. But I’m going out there to fix my world, because I
have a duty to protect Remnant, no matter how I might feel about it.” She rose from the bed, and Yang noticed, detachedly, that her sister had gotten taller and leaner, her gaze holding a new, haunted shadow. As she turned to go, she whisked around, scrutinizing Yang through narrow eyes. “And maybe do a little considering about why Blake ran away, and what Adam was to her.”

Yang flinched.

“You’re not the only one who’s scared to death of what comes next. You’re not the only who who has no idea what she’s doing or how to move on! And trust me, you’re not the only one who lost everything that night.”

With that, she left the room, the door clicking shut behind her.

“What do you mean she’s gone?”

Yang lifted her head dully as two loud, quarreling voices intruded upon the silence enveloping her room. It sounded like her father and uncle were right outside her door, bickering with each other.

“Well, she’s damn well not hiding under the bed, Tai. I mean her room is empty, and there’s a trail of footsteps leading away from the house. She’s gone. She left a note saying as much—”

“You told her about Haven, didn’t you?” There was the sound of displaced air, a thud of impact, and a scuffle, followed by a loud crash and a flurry of swearing. “You— told her— and she— left! This is all your fault!”

Yang slid out of her bed and fought off a wave of dizziness from hunger and lethargy, slowly padding to the door, and peering out. Her eyes widened in mild shock as she saw what had happened. Taiyang had caught Qrow off-guard by tackling him to the floor. The thudding noise had been Taiyang tackling him, the scuffle had been the moment where they both fought to stay upright, and the sound of the crash had been when they’d hit the ground and continued to scuffle there. Tai was lobbing clumsy punches at Qrow, who was easily avoiding them, a look of irritation on his face. That annoyed expression convinced her that the argument wasn’t out of hand.

“Well,” she said drily, making her father pause mid-punch, “I wasn’t expecting to see this, Dad. Mind telling me why you’re using this old bird as a punching bag?”

Taiyang clambered off Qrow and got to his feet, still looking pissed off, and Qrow straightened up, dusting himself off.

“He let Ruby run off on some idiotic mission for answers,” Taiyang hissed, seething betrayal throbbing in his voice. “Your sister is gone, already fled Patch on a boat, and it’s his fault!”

“Ruby’s… gone?” Yang stumbled back, her heart giving a constricting pang, but neither of them seemed to notice; they were still bristling in fury at each other.

“You knew this would happen,” Taiyang accused him. “You knew she’d run off because she felt responsible, like she feels responsible about everything—”

“I won’t lie to you,” he said. His face was flushed an angry red where Taiyang had slapped him. Yang remembered what Ruby had said to her last night— Dad lost Mom. Qrow lost Ozpin— and
she frowned, brows knitting together. Grief expressed itself in different ways, and if this was the outlet they had—beating up on each other—she didn’t think it was a very good one. “Yeah, I did think that. But I also know that she’s not some pansy. If you ever want her to heal right, Taiyang, this is the only way it’ll happen. Staying here will just break her. She needs answers.” His gaze softened and he looked between them both, Taiyang and Yang. “And that’s something you both should understand.”

Yang flinched away—the comment was barbed, no doubt he was hinting at the time he had saved her life after she’d endangered it with her stupid hunt after her mother—but Taiyang just looked more enraged, his blue eyes nearly black with anger. “You let a fifteen year old girl run off without supervision into the wild? She could get killed by Grimm, or by some rogues, or— or God knows what else—”

“The Grimm don’t pose a threat to her,” Qrow said irritably, “and they never have, as you damn well know—and now she knows, too. And she’s not alone. I can tell you that with certainty.”

“What do you mean?” Yang broke in. They both looked startled at her intervention, their eyes flicking to the bandaged stump of her arm, and her mood blackened. “Stop staring at me like I’m an injured animal and spit it out,” she prompted, the faintest hint of a snarl embedded in her voice. “Ruby’s gone, but I doubt she went alone. So who’s she with?”

“I think you know them,” Qrow said, looking wary. “Those kids, the team of the girl who died. Team JNPR. Scrawny blonde boy, a girl with a hammer, and a boy that rather reminded me of your Blake.”

“She’s not my Blake,” Yang growled, eyes narrowing, and he seemed to realize he’d made a mistake, an expression of guilt shadowing his face. “But—so she went with Jaune, Nora, and Ren? How the hell did they get to Patch? I mean, she told me she was leaving, but I thought she would—”

“Ruby told you she was leaving, too?” Taiyang stared at his daughter, his eyes filled with betrayal, and Yang backed away. “Am I the only one who didn’t know my own daughter was fixing to leave?”

“I’m going out there to fix my world, because I have a duty to protect Remnant, no matter how I might feel about it,” Yang quoted, lifting her chin and eyeing her father right back, a bitter, twisted voice in the back of her mind, egging her on, even though she knew what she was about to say would hurt her father. “That’s what she said to me. I didn’t know. I suspected, sure, but who’s going to listen to me? I’m just the crazy girl, or so the world thinks, after I almost killed Mercury.”

Taiyang looked like she had slapped him in the face, but he fell quiet, his mouth working.

“None of us think you’re crazy,” Qrow informed her drily, “but if you keep up the dark comments, we just might.”

Yang flipped him a gesture that heavily relied on her middle finger, and Taiyang scowled, before whirling around and jabbing an accusatory finger into Qrow’s chest. “Why don’t you use your semblance to go after her, or— or stop her, or something? Anything!”

Qrow barked a laugh, roughly knocking Tai’s hand away. “Why don’t you trust your own daughter?” His voice lowered, and he shoved his face forward, a vein standing out in his neck. “Is it because of Summer? Is that it? Are you so controlled by your fears that you can’t even realize that your own daughter is not Summer Rose?”
“Watch your mouth,” Taiyang snarled back, his eyes smoldering with fury.

“Watch what? The truth? Or are you so scared of it that you can’t admit it to yourself?”

“God forbid I try to protect her!” Taiyang exploded, his voice bouncing off the walls. “God forbid I try to protect her from meeting the same end as Summer did!”

“Dammit. Taiyang,” Qrow whispered. “I miss her too, more than you’ll ever know… but Ruby isn’t her mother, do you hear me? She’s not.”

Yang left them to argue and trudged back into her room, slamming the door behind her. She fell into her bed, taking a deep breath, before it hit her, and she sucked in a sharp breath.

Ruby’s gone, she thought blankly. She’s really, really gone… gone for as long as she can stay away… Blake, Weiss, Pyrrha, Penny, Ozpin, my mother, the school, my sister… it’s all gone. Everything is gone.

And there in the emptiness of the desolate room, snow beginning to fall outside and obscure the footprints of her sister’s flight from home, Yang succumbed to her tears.

“Can I come in?”

She didn’t reply as her father’s quiet voice rang into the silence, and he took it as a yes, moving into the room with a hesitancy borne from the days of her cold silence, her dead stare out the window. “Yang, sweetie,” he said softly. “I know you’re hurting. It’ll probably hurt for a long time. But I understand, honey, you know that I do.”

She looked down at her hand dully, and he sat on the edge of the bed, letting out a long sigh.

“Qrow’s gone,” he said finally. “He shifted and left a few hours ago to follow after your sister. She’ll be alright, you know. She’s strong, stronger than either of us really realized… she’s got the heart of a lion, your sister. She won’t let her grief stop her.”

Yang opened her mouth to speak and was greeted by a stale, brittle puff of air. In a brief, flitting moment of terror, she wondered if she’d been silent so long that she had forgotten how to speak, but in a moment, she realized her fears were unfounded. “Is that an insult to me? Because I’m letting my grief stop me? You of all people should know that everyone leaves me eventually,” she said hoarsely, looking bitterly outside the window. “Raven. Mom. Qrow. You. Ruby. Weiss.”

“And Blake,” Taiyang said gently, and she caught his glance of worry as her hands tightened on the sheets, knuckles whitening. “You must spill your emotion, Yang, or it will drown you. Not acknowledging it won’t change the fact that it happened, believe me.”

“What do you want, Dad?” She snapped, feeling thoroughly put-out by his dodging the issue. “I told you that I don’t—”

“A letter came in the mail today. There’s no sender address, but…” He shrugged weakly. “I think we both know who it’s from. And you deserve to know.”

Her head shot up so fast that her neck popped, and she took a deep inhale of breath, the world suddenly spinning around her, as if tipped on its axis, sending her sprawling. “Can I— do you have
Wordlessly, he held out a folded piece of paper. The front of it was scrawled in loopy, spidery handwriting that was hard to read, but Yang would know that sleight of hand anywhere. She’d spent its countless hours with its owner, watching those words move across the page as their writer frowned down at them, and she’d seen them in class, on little notes of sweet nothings left lying around for Yang to find, of essays and books and—

Yang took a deep breath to steady herself, and reached out with her shaking hand, gripping the paper. The edges were timeworn and ragged, but all she could see was Blake, Blake’s face, as if it was tattooed on the backs of her eyelids. Her slightly lopsided smile, genuine like Yang had seen it in the Emerald Forest. Her burning amber eyes that glowed in the night, the way they were dark like syrup in shadows, and glowed like fire in sunlight, flecked with gold and rich brown. The barest hint of freckles dusting the bridge of her nose. The way the edges of her eyes crinkled when she grinned. The seriousness of her expression. Her raven-black hair with just the slightest touch of brown scattered through the strands. The white scar on the edge of her jaw from when she was very little. Her expressive ears, always pricking or flattening with the rise and falls of her mood. Blake’s terrified face, bloodied lips shaping her name, before everything went black as Adam struck. The face Yang loved more than any other in the whole world, the face she would know even if she was blind, and the face she would never see again. Thoughts clamored in her mind, threatening to pull her down and drown her, and a flurry of shadows raced through her mind.

Clutching the letter so tightly she was afraid it might tear, Yang looked up at her father. “Dad, go,” she whispered. “Please.”

“You need to be alone, I got it.” He gave her a wavering smile, brushing back a lock of her hair and tucking it behind her ear. “I’m always here for you, sweetie. If you need to talk, just call me, okay?”

With that, he padded out of the room, and Yang, her hand shaking, fumbled with the letter, a mixture of pure anxiety and anger at her arm— only having one was still so, so hard— racing through her, and with a quiet flutter of paper, the letter opened to a cramped page full of words. Blake’s voice, small and matter-of-fact, began to talk in her ear, and still, Yang could only see her face, and now she knew why they called it heartbreak, now she knew why people wrote songs and cried and tore themselves apart with the agony of love lost. Pain burned in her chest, something uniquely horrible, and nothing could douse the blazing agony in her heart at the thought of Blake, her voice, her face, her eyes— her.

“Yang,” the letter began. “My love, my light, the dearest to my heart.
I don’t know where this will find you, or when. I would not blame you, if I were you, if you ripped this letter to pieces without reading it, for what I’ve done is unforgivable. I know that. I was given a letter from a dead man once, and now it seems cruel to do the same to you, for the Blake you knew, and the Blake I was— she is dead, surely, back in the ruins of Beacon. Except my father was driven to do what he did by a quiet courage. My motives aren’t nearly as noble as that. Fear is not noble. Fear is for cowards, and a coward is all I am.

The most painful goodbyes are the ones that are never said, never explained, and I’d never wish more pain upon you than I’ve already caused… so I hope this is an adequate explanation. It pains me more than anything to have left you, to not be by your side. And it made me want to die when you almost did perish for me. For we all have lost everything for one another. That is a sacrifice I could never ask you to make for me, and it is a debt I will never be able to repay. Parting from you makes every other pain I’ve ever suffered seem like a drop of rain within an ocean. Leaving you in
the shadow of ruin that I brought upon you makes me want to give up, to lay down my weapons and surrender to what darkness has been haunting me ever since I saw your light die. But it is not just about you or me, and we were fools to think it was, ever since we first Bonded. We are all extinguished, for now. And I am afraid, most of all. I’m scared, Yang. I thought I knew fear before… but I didn’t, not really. What I feel now: this is fear. This is what makes your blood turn to ice. It makes everything uncertain, like you’re hovering before an endless abyss. So I chose to turn and walk away, preserving myself—and in some other ways—you, as well.

I don’t know where I’m getting the energy to keep going on, much less to write to you, but perhaps it is knowing how ashamed you would be if I didn’t that drives me on. I want to be with you, Yang, but how selfish of me would it be to remain by your side when my very presence would only bring you to destruction? How selfish would it be to love you when to love you is to kill you with my past?

So we lived in a dream for a while, in happiness and—I know this more than anything—in love. But the poison was still there, waiting to rip us apart, to tear us away from each other: Ayran, Adam, the ghosts of the past, Roman and Cinder and all those with darkness in their hearts. But we managed to pull through, until now. How cruel is it, that it was I who succeeded in dividing us, and how ironic is it that—out of the one Bond I have lost and all the people I’ve let go, that this is by far the hardest thing I’ve ever done? I’m sorry. I am so sorry. As in regards to all else, you must believe me when I say that. I will never stop regretting that I had to go. Never.

Maybe it was too much. Our Bond was strong. I can’t help but be focused on you when we’re together. If you’re in the room, I want to be next to you. If you’re gone, I think about you. You’re who I want to talk to. In a fight, I want you at my back. When we’re together, the sun is shining. When we’re apart, everything is in shades of gray. I hope you’ll forgive me someday for turning our worlds into shades of gray—at least for a while.

Yang, you promised me something once, on a day that seems like an eternity ago. On the cliffs of Forever Fall, when you first extended that olive branch and we became friends, you promised you would never leave me. And now I’ve taken that choice away from you. So—hate me. It would make it easier for you to move on, and I would never wish to cause you more heartbreak then you have already endured. And I would hardly blame you if you did hate me already. I won’t be so arrogant as to ask for your forgiveness. But should our paths ever cross again, know that I loved you, and still love you, more than I ever have loved anything in the duration of my life. You were not the first dream of my heart, Yang. But you were the most important, and you are the one I will never forget. You were the only dream I was unable to stop myself from dreaming of. There is a part of me that wants you and will always, always want you, no matter what.

Three words don’t really mean much, but they are all I have. I love you. I’ve said it before. But it’s not enough and it never will be enough. I love you more than I have ever loved anything. I love you like I love the sun and the stars and every beautiful thing in life. I love you catastrophically, and I cannot untie you from my heart, blood, mind, flesh, or soul. And isn’t there some law in life that says love must be given freely, and that it must not be selfish? And isn’t it selfish to want to stay by your side, whatever cost it might take, whatever you might owe to heaven or to hell if I were to do so?

I believe that once, we were a fairy tale, you and I. And I was the idiot who was foolish enough to believe I could escape my past so easily, with barely a whimper. There’s always consequences—always repercussions—mine are just a little later in coming, that’s all. You gave so much of yourself to me—too much, I know that, so much more than I deserved. Because this is a fairy tale no longer, and happy endings are nothing more than a myth. I was told that, once. I didn’t believe
I couldn’t believe it. But I believe it now—after I saw you lying on the ground, unconscious, wounded because of my own folly—I have no choice but to impose exile upon myself because if I can give my life to one last cause, it is to protect you. You are not safe with me. Everyone I love will die. I destroy everything I touch. That’s my legacy, Yang. That is who I am, no matter how I might try to deny it. I have nothing to show for the life I have lived, nothing except failure and pain.

And I have nobody in my life who’s better off for having known me.

We are all ashes right now—ashes and fires that have been doused to nothingness. The CCT has fallen. Penny was destroyed. Pyrrha has died, too young. All these people who were my friends have suffered. Weiss has returned to a nightmare of her own. Your sister, who I began to love as my own flesh and blood, has grown up, but I think you know that already. I saw her silver light explode from the tower that night, Yang, and she is on a path none of us can venture down. We are all separated…and I do not think it is possible to be united again. Not without all hurting each other, and I have hurt you more than I ever wanted to. More than I ever could forgive myself for.

So what do I ask of you? I’m not sure I’m allowed to ask anything of you…but please, for me…live. Live on, and survive. That is all I want out of this life, out of this life and all the lives I may ever have. There is happiness before a tragedy…there must be happiness after tragedy, too. Goodbye, Yang. I am so lucky to have known someone who was so hard to say goodbye too…and I realize it now. I had everything with you, and I will never, ever stop being thankful for it.

Always yours,

— Blake

Yang wasn’t aware of the letter falling from her hand, of the cry that worked its way up from some visceral place inside of her, her hand scoring red lines against itself as if she could tear out the grief inside of her. All she could feel was the way everything inside of her felt like it had been shattered, the way she now truly knew the meaning of heartbreak, because what she felt before was nothing compared to this, nothing at all, for she could not be angry at Blake. At Blake, the love of her life.

She was gone. And now, Yang knew for sure, because even that slightest flickering flame of hope had been extinguished, she was never coming back.

The reason it hurts so much is because our souls are connected.

Blake loved her, still did love her, with a quiet sort of fierceness, and that fierceness and the pain of silence had nearly killed her. She loved me, Yang thought, really, truly understanding the depth of it for the first time, and the last. Enough to leave me, enough to put my safety above however she felt, above all the pain it brought her to even think of letting go…

And then: Blake loved me more than she loved her own life.

And it was true, wasn’t it? Blake had been completely destroyed by Adam, all the parts of her that Yang loved had been scattered. Even if she met her again, which was more unlikely than her magically regrowing an arm, Blake would never be the same. She had given her life up, her whole life and who she had once loved, to save Yang, when she could have just given up, let her die, and kept every part of herself intact. Blake had loved her enough to leave behind her home, her friends, her dream of becoming a Huntress, to keep her safe…
Yang pushed herself up, half-hiccuping on a sob, and tried to fold the letter again. She struggled, anger bubbling under her skin as her useless stump of an arm wiggled slightly, before she flung down the letter with a frustrated scream that dissolved into hot, furious tears. She cried, hot, angry tears that gradually subsided into misery and quiet keening, a keen of grief that felt like it wrenched straight out of her bones, pain wracking every cell in her body.

Hours passed, and the sun fell outside; the log cabin in Patch grew dark as the fires died and night settled in. The house that had once held a laughing mother, a doting father, and two innocent children was now empty, devoid of everything except a broken man and his broken daughter. Miles away, over the violent ocean, a crow was struggling against the buffeting gales of bitter winter wind, and in the house, the broken man slept, troubled by dreams of his daughter. But one girl lay awake long into the night as the shattered moon kept sentinel over an even more shattered kingdom, her eyes searching the darkness for someone who was not going to come back.

There were only two three-word phrases tattooed on the backs of her eyelids, one after the other.  

I love you.

Everything must go.
Chapter XXIX - The Aftermath

Yang

For the next three days, she lay there. Every inch of her body was numb, the dark tide of icy grief washing over her every second. She was drowning, but she didn’t even have the energy to pull herself to the surface; it felt easier to just swim down.

Because what was the point any more? What was the point of trying, if all you got was pain? She had tried—she had tried so hard, and she had poured all of her soul into the trying, so much so that now, she was empty, completely devoid of any spirit. She had tried to find her mother, and failed. She had tried to win the tournament, and failed. She had tried to save Blake, and failed. And all of those failures had resulted in someone else getting hurt—her sister, the world, herself, Blake. She had nothing left to give, no scrap of spirit, and she felt almost like a corpse as she laid there, with no thoughts, no dreams to haunt her head, except the unshakable image of Blake’s face as she had seen it last: amber eyes terrified, her mouth shaping Yang’s name, and then utter darkness.

Suddenly, a loud popping sound shot through the room, like a gun going off. She jerked her head up as the window creaked, snapped inward, and a large mass of teenage boy and monkey tail tumbled through and landed in a groaning heap on the floor.

It was Sun.

“Jesus,” he said, lifting his head to glare at her, his tail flicking side to side in mock-irritation. “You couldn’t have laid down a pillow or something to break my fall?”

“I thought you were in Patch waiting for an airship to take you home!” She snapped, drawing the covers up around her as he hauled himself to his feet, groaning and checking his extremities. “Why the hell are you here?”

“Easy, easy!” He held up two hands. “I’m here to check up on you. And I’m glad I did. You look like death. And it smells like heartbreak in here.” He squinted at her. “Wait a second, is that the shirt you were wearing like, a week ago when I dropped you off here?”

“I haven’t had much energy to do the laundry what with everything that’s been going on, idiot,” she said, wiggling her bandaged arm stump at him with a scowl. He let out a sniff, and she kicked the covers off and rolled onto her stomach, glaring at him through a tangle of dirty hair. “You do realize that this technically constitutes ‘breaking and entering’?”

“No breaking here,” he said, ever-chipper. “I just unlatched the window.” Then he blinked as her words registered. “What do you mean ‘everything that’s been going on’?”

“Ruby’s gone, or hadn’t you heard?” She ground her teeth together. “Jaune, Nora, and Ren came by and picked her up and they’re off to Haven, or whatever. Looking for answers, I suppose.”

His eyes widened. His mouth forming an ‘o’ shape. “Wow,” he said faintly. “That’s, uh… that’s pretty hardcore of her. I guess… I can understand that. Cinder wasn’t from Haven… but it’s the only place she’d find answers, huh? It’s her only lead.”

“You’ve still got to explain why you decided to climb into my room,” she told him, tipping her head to the side. “I like you and all, Sun, but we were never best friends, and if my own sister ran off on me, I doubt anyone would stay, let alone a boy who happened to be friends with the girl who
abandoned me.” Bitterness was thick in her voice. “You saw Blake after I passed out, didn’t you? Is that why you’re here?”

Something in his gaze shadowed and he looked away. “I— yeah. I… I saw her before she vanished.”

“Before she ran away,” Yang corrected him flatly.

“That’s not what happened.” His face tautened in anger, and his hands balled into fists. “Don’t call her a coward in front of me. You have no clue what she did after you blacked out, do you? And you didn’t want to know, remember? I tried to tell you, that night on the ship.”

She let out a heavy, harsh exhale. “So maybe I made a mistake, shutting you up that night. I should have listened, I guess, but what does it matter? They told me she left. You told me she left. That’s all I know because no one’s been telling me a goddamned thing!”

Sun's eyes were angry. "Nobody told you what she did? Only what she didn't do?"

Mutely, Yang nodded.

"Those prejudiced idiots—” He broke off, throwing himself down across from her. "Okay. Fine. I'll tell you." He leaned forward, hands clasped, white where the bone strained against skin. "She did this. She threw herself, wounded terribly, in front of that White Fang member to shield you from death. Blake killed Adam because he hurt you. She killed a man who was stronger than the both of you combined, a man who she loved once with all her heart, a man who she could barely look in the eye, but she found the strength to do it after he’d threatened you. Then, Blake carried you, bleeding and unconscious, out of there. I saw her lay you down and scream for help. She didn’t stop until Sage came and gave you a tourniquet. She almost blacked out after he finished healing you up; she collapsed, there was blood everywhere, and she wasn’t moving. I… I almost thought it was too late. Her Aura was totally drained, and Sage almost passed out, expending all his energy to keep her alive. I about had a heart attack, but all she could do was ask about you, to make sure you would survive. I wanted to get you both on a hospital airship, fly you back to Vale, but she talked to me. She told me that it was all her fault. ‘She’ll never recover anyways, not when it’s my fault.’ That I didn’t know what happened, what you sacrificed, what you did for her… and then she said she didn’t belong there. Not if all she did was bring pain.

“We talked to Weiss and her father— total dick about everything, but that’s to be expected, huh?— and she seemed like she’d be okay there for a bit, and she talked to Weiss right before her father took her away… and then Blake left, but the way…” He swallowed, apparently summoning up his will. “The way she looked and what she did isn’t something I’ll ever forget. She murdered the leader of the White Fang to save your life. She chose you. Her eyes… I’ve never seen them so haunted, not even when she was working herself to the bone before the dance.” His voice rose in volume, jarring to her ears as he bristled at her. She had never seen Sun livid before, but he was right now. “Blake did all that for you— she saved your life and I don't think she would have done the same for herself, even— and you have the nerve to call her, to my face, a coward?"

Yang looked away, and Sun's voice gentled. "Yang, believe me, I get it. I know how much it hurts. She left you. She left me, too. But she loves you. There's no way she doesn't— not after what I saw that night. You know how much Adam hurt her. She's scarred inside and out. The fact that she not only stood up to him, but raised her sword against him for not only you, but for the sake of Beacon itself... and she killed him. She killed him to save your life. Don't you get that?” Sun flicked his tail around, lightly switching the side of her wrist. “She killed someone she once loved, who once was everything to her, just to save your life.”
Yang looked away. Adam’s face filled her mind. Once, he had not been her demon— only a half-remembered shadow from Blake’s past. But now, she knew, she would never stop seeing his face in her own nightmares, would never forget what he had done to her. She and Blake shared a demon, one that was dead, and Yang couldn’t decide if it scared or infuriated her.

“Don’t let that sacrifice be in vain, Yang,” Sun said softly, before he shook his head. "Anyway, what will you do now?"

Yang stood up, looking out the window, unable to face the gentle pressure of his gray eyes on her, pleading with her to make a decision. The dark shadow of a raven’s wing swept over the setting sun, black over blood. Night was coming on fast, the stars blotted out by clouds thick with the promise of snow.

Raven left the ones she loved, didn’t she? She gave up on them. She gave up on herself.

I won’t be my mother.

Yang felt tears silently sliding down her face, pooling as they fell, and the floorboards creaked as Sun came to stand beside her, his tail flicking agitatedly from side to side. "I should have died," Yang whispered. "I would have died. But she gave everything up for me. She was running out of time, but she still gave it up for me. If I… I would have never been able to do it, Sun. I never would have been able to kill someone I loved once. No matter how much they hurt me, or someone else. I’d always remember the past and what they once were. But she did it because she wanted me to stay alive above everything, no matter what the cost was… she wanted to keep me alive.”

"What are you going to do?" He asked her again.

A crazy, half-formed idea was beginning to spin into her mind, forming from the glimmerings of hope. It was the sort of idea that the old Yang would have had: something that was absolutely insane, but a plan that pulled through on sheer guts and determination, unable to fail because she simply would not let it. It was the spark of inspiration that the new Yang hadn’t felt in a long, long time, and she reached for it hesitantly, as if reaching out towards an open flame. Fire had never scared her before, but now, she knew to be cautious. Knew how it could hurt her, if left unchecked. The out-of-control inferno had hurt her once, but she couldn’t let that happen again. "I have a motorcycle around the back of the house,” she said slowly. “Here are the keys. Can you bring it around to the front?"

Sun looked surprised, but he nodded, taking the keys and padding silently out of the room.

Sun

He hadn’t admitted it to Yang, but when he had tumbled into the room and seen her face, he’d gotten a bad scare— one of the worst he’d had in a long, long time. Sure, he’d joked about her looking like death, but damned if there wasn’t a kernel of truth in his words. She was so thin, so tired-looking, in a way he had never seen her before, in a way he’d never expected, or wanted to see her. Yang was always, always the happy one— the one who chased optimism, who joked and laughed and made things okay. To see her this broken, this damaged— he began to understand her anger at Blake, just a little bit. What right did she have— did anyone have, really?— to break someone else so thoroughly?

He had only chased after Blake in the first place because the sight of a Faunus in Vale— a
relatively conservative place— had made him more comfortable. It had been a mistake to stowaway and get there earlier than his team. He didn’t know how close he would get to Team RWBY as result of his actions. And Yang— he had thought she was an idiot at first, one who was just going along with the flow, kind of like him. But she wasn’t; she was the pillar of her team, the smart one, the strongest. And seeing her this way was scary. She was none of those things now. All the time he had thought she would heal here, at Patch, even though Blake had broken her heart...

He had learned the truth too late.

Though she was lying in her bed, Sun could see the bags under her eyes and the shadows chasing each other within them, and he’d been willing to bet that she hadn’t gotten any real sleep at all since the Fall of Beacon. Snatches of rest here and there, sure, but definitely not a single wink of true sleep. She looked slightly less miserable after he’d left the room, but the haunted look was still on her face, and he knew she was a slave to her own fears in a way the old Yang never would have been.

God, she used to think she was invincible, like nothing could really hurt her that badly, and now... it hurts to see her this way. I saw her scared after she and Blake had their first fight, and she came to me, but that... that was nothing compared to this fear she has. She’s more than bent, she’s broken.

Why did Blake leave? That’s what I don’t get, no matter how much I try to understand it... Blake loved her a lot, she really did, everyone could see it... why run? Why flee? I understand that she must have been scared out of her wits, and that she believed she was dangerous to Yang, but why? The danger had passed by then, after she killed Adam, there was nothing to threaten her, so why...?

Or was she scared of something else entirely?

As he was submerged in thought, he nearly ran headfirst into a man as he rounded the corner. He withdrew with an apology, looking up; it was Yang’s father, he guessed. He could see her in him— the brightness of his hair, stubborn set of his jaw, the shape of his face.

He seemed surprised to see Sun in his house. To his credit, he did not immediately lunge for a bat to swing at him— a reaction Sun was wholeheartedly used to, with his background as a part-time thief. He looked at him in confusion, before his expression cleared with recognition. “Wait a moment, I recognize you. Sun, right? You dropped Yang off here after... after the Fall... but we didn’t talk at all; you left right away. You're one of my daughter's friends, I think... how did you get in the house?”

"Yeah, I am. Well, Yang’s, at least. I haven't talked to Ruby much— I’m sorry that she left, by the way, and if I run into her out there, I’ll try to help her out. And I, um, your windows were unlatched, but I figured Yang might not want me to be knocking at her door with how she’s been feeling, so...”

"I see.” He frowned down at Sun's outfit. “So were you invited here by her? She never mentioned anything of the sort to me.”

Seized by an unfamiliar urge to button up his shirt, Sun gave a sheepish grin, scratching his head. "Ah... I, er, came to visit her. Patch is nice and all— don’t get me wrong!— but it’s not really my scene, you know? I like the tranquil-forest-setting as much as the next guy, but I’m a desert sort of person at heart. Exploring was cool, but kind of boring, and if I brought Yang back, I figure I owe her a check-up, at least. She wasn’t too frightened by me popping in. At least, I hope so.” He flushed as he realized he was babbling.
"Well, you'll find her in her room, son, not out here." Was it Sun's imagination, or did he sound amused? Thoroughly annoyed, he tried a different approach.

"Yes, sir. She, uh, asked me to bring her cycle round front..." His voice sounded pathetically feeble, and he cursed himself. "Sorry. We talked some stuff out; she’s… not healed, yet, but she’s a great deal better than she was a couple hours ago, and now… I think she’s got an idea. She's very determined. It's a better sight to see than her sadness, at least."

“You’re not telling me everything. She's leaving, isn't she?” Those words, especially the last four, seemed to be wistful and heartbreaking in a way that made Sun feel curious, and Taiyang didn't seem to be seeing him at all; his expression was distant, looking at some faraway past. "Chasing after her sister and—"

"Her partner." Somehow, the prospect of hearing Blake's name out of this man's mouth— no doubt he would say it in that disgusted, edged tone, especially after Blake had abandoned his daughter— made him cringe. "I'm gonna help her. Figure I'm obligated to, and all that. It's the right thing to do. I owe her."

"Better to have someone with her alone, then, I suppose." He shook his head. "I've learned I can’t stop my daughter... and after what happened, I don’t want to. Go on, then. I'll go have a word with her."

"Of course," he murmured. "Thanks, Mr. Xiao Long."

"Good luck, child." His eyes grew dark. "You'll need it."

Yang

“Sun tells me you’re leaving, Yang.”

“Of course he did.” Crouched on her knees, Yang let out a sigh, closing her eyes as she heard Tai come into the room with his heavy tread and circle around to her front. She had been fumbling to tie the lace on her combat boots, and her father leaned down in front of her and finished the knot where she couldn’t, his hands inexplicably gentle as he looked up at her in sorrow. “I… I think I am, Dad.”

“What happened?” he asked. “You’ve been… I’ve been scared, seeing how badly off you were the last week. What changed your mind?”

“I did,” she said. “I changed it myself.”

“It wasn’t the letter from Blake? Or Sun talking you into it?”

“Partly, sure,” she said, tying back her hair and frowning at the floorboards, “but it’s more than that. The letter helped me understand that Blake never left because she wanted to… she left because she felt she had to. It doesn’t mean I’ve forgiven her, or anything... but now, at least, I have to know why. And Sun helped me understand too, in a way. I need to find out why she fled. Because no matter what I lost at the Fall, I can’t let it change me forever, or turn me into someone who’s bitter and pessimistic. I’ve got to find out why she had to go, why she felt the way she did, or I’ll never make peace with it. I’ll always be wondering why. And I've done that - Dad, I've done that my whole life. I can't do it anymore or I'll go mad.”
“You think I’ll let you go off like your sister, and you’re right,” he informed her, sitting back on his heels and regarding her thoughtfully. “Technically, yes, I can keep you here… but I’m not going to.”

She goggled at him. “Really? I would’ve thought…”

“That I don’t trust you? That I don’t think you can do this?” He smiled, but it was full of misery. “I know how strong you are. I raised you. I know you can do whatever you set your mind to… but I don’t want you paying another price so great that it almost kills you. You have to do it, though; I know that now. Find her, Yang. Find them both. I lost my team because of my mistakes, and theirs… I don’t want to see that happen to you, too. No one deserves that.” He held out his arms. “Come here, then.”

She stared at him for a moment, shocked, before going into his embrace, and he held her close, stroking her hair and whispering as she swallowed, fighting back a wave of tears.

“You’ve always had a habit of biting off more than you can chew, and trying to save everyone, rushing into danger heedless of the cost you might have to pay, with only the mind of saving others and not yourself…” Yang flinched, her arm giving a phantom echo of pain. “Ruby ran off because she thought it was her responsibility, her duty as a Huntress and daughter of Summer,” he continued, “and because of what Qrow said, that she had to save everyone… and now, you are doing the same.” He stroked her hair, holding her in his strong arms like she was still a little six-year-old again, when the worst thing that could hurt her was a scraped knee or a careless word. “Yang, promise me this: play the hero if you must, but don’t force me to bury my daughter.”

“I love you, Dad,” she whispered, voice muffled against the rough material of his vest. “But I’m scared. So, so scared.”

Sun walked in after her father departed the room, looking windblown and slightly pleased. “I’ve never revved up a motorcycle before,” he said. “That was fun. I almost wrecked your mailbox, though. I don’t think your dad will be too happy about the state of the lawn.”

Yang smiled weakly, before it fell away, replaced by a worried frown. “Sun, I… I need to get to the airship port, if I’m going to get anywhere… and I can’t drive there on my own. Not with one arm.”

“I’ll drive you there, don’t worry about that, okay?” He gave her a half-smile, weary at the edges. She noticed the dark circles under his eyes, how his fingernails were ragged and bloody, bitten down the quick. Sun’s kinetic, ceaseless energy suddenly seemed very fake, and exhausted shadows chased each other through his expression. “I owe you that much at least.”

“You’ve changed,” Yang commented as he walked over and dropped the keys into her outstretched palm, not looking at the bandaged stump of her right arm with poorly-hidden pity or judgement as so many others had, and would. “I used to think you were just an annoying Vacuo boy who only wanted to get into Blake’s pants and had no regard for others, but… you’re a good person, Sun. I… what makes you want to help me?”

He stared up at the ceiling, as if seeing into some distant past. “There was a time when I had feelings for Blake, sure,” he said, “but I think the Fall of Beacon changed us. In ways we haven’t admitted to ourselves yet, in ways we’re only beginning to comprehend. That’s okay, but we can’t let it change us forever.”

She let out a quiet breath. “I guess so.”
“Are you all packed up?” He frowned, looking at the duffel bag she’d slung over her shoulder. “Never mind; I see that you are. In that case, are you ready to ditch this place?”

“I need to write a letter to my father,” Yang said. “I can’t… I can’t tell it to him face-to-face, everything I want to say to him, everything I need to explain…” Then she wiggled her arm; she was dominant in her right-hand, and her left hand was all she had left. “But I can’t write it myself.”

“Just say the word,” Sun said eagerly, using his tail to pop open the latch on her drawer, rummaging around inside for a pen and paper. “I’m the next Shakespeare in the literary world. Just ask my professors.” Then, he let out a yelp and flung out something past his shoulder that went flying and hit the shaded window with a smack. “Jesus, clean up your pigsty, Xiao Long! I didn’t need to see that.”

She scowled irritably as she saw it was an unraveling camisole. “It’s a bra, Sun, not a severed head.”

“Whatever,” he said crossly. “I’m the one that goes around with my breasts uncovered, not you.”

She snorted. “You tell yourself that next time you walk by and approximately zero girls start drooling over your bare chest.”

“That hurts, Yang. That really hurts.” He flung himself down in the chair, having successfully located a paper and pen. “What do you want me to write to him?”

She sat down next to him, on the edge of the bed, relaying the words as they came into her mind, and Sun wrote them down, only interrupting to bid her to pause for a moment as he caught up, or to ask how to spell something, and for that, she was grateful.

“Okay,” he said after a long minute once she’d finished talking, setting down the pen and wiggling his hand. “Gosh, that’s a lot to write. I’ve never written that much before outside of a school essay. Want me to read it over, see if it sounds good?”

She nodded, and clearing his throat, he began.

“Dear Dad,

By the time you read this, I’ll be really far away— I’ll be on a mission of my own, and I’ll be safe. Trust me on that. I’m sorry for leaving you by yourself, and I’m sorry for making the past week filled with so much pain, for both of us. I know you know I’m leaving, but I want you to understand why I’ve left… and I don’t want you to come after me. It’s my choice to do this, and to do it alone; I know I can handle it. If I could handle losing all I have and still survive, I can handle this.

“I’m heading off on my own for a number of reasons, but Dad—if there’s one aspect in which you and I are exactly alike, it’s that we’ll both stop at nothing to make sure those we love are safe. I know you think I’m just heading after Blake… but there’s a lot more to it than that. I’ve got to put my team back together again. And that’s what I’m doing. I’m going to make sure those I love have me by their sides. I love you, but I know you can cope without me, because I have faith in you, as my father. I know you’re strong. But I don’t think my team is quite so strong yet, that we can be splintered and still remain standing alone and apart. So I’m going to bring us back together again.

“You said, a long time ago, that I burned. It’s my semblance. I burn both inside and out. And after what happened in the past weeks, I was extinguished, in a way. But it’s not like that anymore. I have a balance now. It’s a choice: to abandon everything I’ve come to know at Beacon, or to make an effort to keep it. I’ve got to choose the latter, or I’d never forgive myself, and probably never
stop wondering, too.

“And as for the past week and my moping about, well, it won’t do any good to pretend I haven’t lost a lot. You never would tell me about Mom, and I, in turn, almost got killed trying to find out more about her. Blake didn’t tell me why she felt she had to run away, and she, in turn, has lost my trust. Weiss didn’t cut her ties to her family, and she, in turn, is now roped back into being with them again. It’s like a balance, and all our actions trigger another event to happen. My actions to run away on a mission are part of making the balance equal. I owe my team. You know about debts, too. Your team is broken, and I can’t let the same thing happen to mine. My team and yours are awfully similar: RWBY and STRQ, two colors. Both with siblings, both with two who love each other... and just as your team met a tragic ending, mine is heading down the same path. But I’m not letting that happen. Team RWBY will survive, I swear that, at least.

“It comes to this: should I be selfish and mourn over something so minor, when so much has been lost, or should I pick up my feet and keep moving? A Huntress would put her family and the wellbeing of her kingdom above whatever personal loss she suffered. And I am a Huntress, just like you said when I was a kid. So I’m doing what’s right, in a way. It’s time for me to put my loss behind me... and keep moving forward. If Ruby, my baby sister, can come back from having her entire world flipped upside-down in a matter of minutes, then I am able to do the same. I can’t expect her to do something so hard if I can’t— or won’t— do it myself.”

“Thank you for being there for me and Ruby in the last week.”

“Yes,” she said once he had finished. “Yeah, that sounds... it sounds good, I think.”

“I’ll drop it in the mailbox on the way out of here, then,” he said, rising from the chair, and as he did so, the reality of the situation sank in, making Yang recoil with a sudden, terrible fear. Was she really leaving the safety of Patch on a journey that was almost guaranteed to fail? She couldn’t even put on her own clothes properly, let alone fight, if she got into trouble. There was so much danger out there, and she barely had a plan, let alone any idea of what would happen. And when had she become so scared?

“Yang?” he said, looking worried as she shrank back, breathing shallowly. “What’s wrong?”

“Sun,” she croaked, looking up at him. “Are you really— are you really going to do this? It’s not your job, to come with me, to do any of this...” You’re drowning, you’re sinking, you’re crazy, and it’s not his responsibility to pull you back up.

But he nodded, to her surprise. “Yeah. Of course I’ll come. I meant what I said; you’re not alone, okay? I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

Yang looked away, not quite trusting herself to speak again, and Sun lightly touched her shoulder, his brows knitting together in concern.

“Yang... everything’s going to be fine, alright? I know it might seem impossible now... and maybe it will for a long time. But things will get better eventually... maybe not today, or tomorrow, or the day after that... but one day, you’ll be fine. It doesn’t matter how. I promise.” His voice was full of conviction, the same conviction she had held once, when she had talked to Blake — the girl who had held her fragile heart in her hands and crushed it— who still held it, if she was being honest. But he was here, and he hadn’t left, not like the rest. He wasn’t here on Blake’s terms, he was here because he cared— he cared enough to make sure she was healing. She looked at him, and he gave her a smile, and a little bit of the emptiness that had been holding a hollow space in her heart, ever since Blake had left and the Bond had shut down, filled up again.
She nodded, rising up off her bed, and he helped her walk out of the room, propping her up. And when he caught her when she stumbled, she felt that for the moment, she might be capable of holding her head above the water.

**A/N:** *Sun = freaking out over a bra = priceless.*

*And on a further note, d’awwww. Sun and Yang’s friendship duo (comedic and more emotional aspects) is so often overlooked in fics, but it’s something I really enjoy. They complement each other well, and I do like to think that in this universe, they care for each other outside of their relationships with Blake. Sun’s definitely got the potential to be a great supporting role, so I hope I highlighted that well. Yang really needs support right now to get back on her feet.*

*No, none of the talk between them was inherently romantic; it was all platonic, and Yang and Sun won’t be getting together in this fic, just an FYI.*

*Also, who caught that Hamilton reference at the very beginning? :D*
Chapter XXX - Midnight Over Remnant

Chapter Summary

Let's get to 505. This chapter is a doozy. Lots happening, lots to see!

Yang

The cold snap of the previous week had abated, and the wind that sloughed through the trees surrounding her home was brisk, but not too frigid. It allowed Yang to roll up the sleeve of her winter cloak, the other one hanging empty, flapping in the wind. She followed behind Sun, who was trotting along and babbling about one of Neptune’s experiences with water, but she suspected he was only talking for her benefit, to fill the silence.

Bumblebee was parked just outside a long scar of freshly turned earth from where Sun had skidded the cycle and come to a halt. As he turned the key in the ignition, the motorcycle purring to life, Yang walked to the mailbox— which, true to his word, was knocked slightly askew— and shoved the letter in before walking back and boarding it with him.

“You ready?” He shouted over the roar of the wheels, and she nodded, gripping the sides with her legs, her arm clenching onto Sun’s shoulder in the paroxysms of her fear.

*I’m not giving up on you, Blake, no matter how scared I am, no matter how much I might want to give up and go home,* she thought fiercely, adjusting her duffel and glancing over her shoulder at her home as Sun kicked the cycle into gear, feeling it shudder beneath her. He revved it up, and then they were off, into the bitter winter wind, bare trees streaking past them, her childhood home fading away. Already, it was a hazy image on the horizon, and she sensed that she was crossing into a new world, and almost certainly, no part of her former life would ever exist again. *I promised you that, ages and ages ago, back when we first became friends, in Forever Fall... I swear I’m going to find you. I’m going to uncover the real you, however long that takes. My life with you means everything to me. I’m not going to let go of us, of this, of you.*

*Blake, I’m not letting go. I will find you.*

Weiss

The world outside her window was blanketed in pure, unmarred white. Conifers stabbed up from the ground like great stone pillars of green, gray, and white, their fanning branches holding up heavy weights of snow.

In hindsight, Weiss supposed, she should not have forgotten how bitterly cold Atlas was. And for that matter, she should probably put on something warmer than a camisole and undergarments, but
she was feeling listless, strangely listless, unable to find the will to move around, let alone change her clothes and get up and do something. Not that there was much to do in here. She’d also forgotten how much her room had felt like a prison— ironic, considering the lengths she had gone to just to escape this place. But those efforts had been fruitless, because she was back here for good once more.

Her father had not entered her room during her absence at Beacon; that much was clear. When she’d arrived, walking at the right hand of her father, Klein trailing behind them, the first thing her father had done was take her to her room. He had turned on the light, bathing everything in harsh fluorescent white, showing that a thick layer of dust coated everything— her bookshelves, her vanity drawer, her canopy bed. It was utterly devoid of life, and the air felt cold and stale.

“That’s not the dust we deal with here,” Vincent had said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes, which were always the same cold, dead blue. “Klein?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Get someone to clean my daughter’s room and send up a meal for her. And take this—” He had attempted to prize Myrtenaster away from Weiss, but she gripped it, shying away from her father and shaking her head.

*You gave me Myrtenaster. I won’t let you take it back, too.*

“No, Father. I…” She’d made herself look vulnerable and brokenhearted, which wasn’t hard. “Please, let me have it for a while until I get used to… everything.”

“I see.” His mouth thinning into a stern line, he had eyed her, deciding how much leash to give her, before acquiescing and nodding at Klein. “Then I shall allow you to have it for a while longer, but it must be locked up sooner rather than later, understand? As an heiress, weaponry in your personal quarters does not befit you, nor shall I allow it.” And then, at Klein, he’d said sharply, “Why are you still standing here?”

“I’m sorry.” The butler looked frightened, but his gaze on her had been full of pity, something she despised. “Miss Schnee, it was a pleasure to see you again. I—”

“You gave me Myrtenaster. I won’t let you take it back, too.”

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“I’m sorry.” The butler looked frightened, but his gaze on her had been full of pity, something she despised. “Miss Schnee, it was a pleasure to see you again. I—”

“Klein,” Vincent had said warningly.

“I— yes, sir. Sorry, sir. I’ll be going right away. My apologies.” He bowed low and scurried off.

After he had vanished, Weiss had stormed away from her father, who looked disapproving. Not that it was a surprise. She’d gone into her room, banging the door shut behind her, before she flopped lifelessly on her bed. Not long after, a servant came in and quickly wiped down all the dusty surfaces, placing a tray on her bedside table. He had bowed to her deeply before withdrawing. She’d sat up, looking at it— it was a little bowl of Caeser salad, prawns, and steaming tea. It was the type of meal she hadn’t eaten in nearly a year’s time, and she found that she had no appetite for it, none at all. Had her father cared, he would have known that she only drank coffee, and looking at the tea only reminded her of Blake, and then the whole team she had lost, so she had turned away, fighting back the sudden grief that overwhelmed her.

She missed them. She missed them all so much that it felt like a physical wound, like someone had taken a knife to her heart. She missed Ruby, her cheerful optimism and boundless energy. Her surprising skill in combat, how she had the uncanny ability to measure her opponent’s strikes, and to play off the strengths of her team. How she never pushed or prodded, and simply let things run their course, trusting that everything would work out fine, in the end. It was a viewpoint that Weiss
had never been exposed to, before she met Ruby, and now that it was gone, she felt like she had lost everything. She missed Blake’s quiet presence, how she had always been curled up on a bunk, reading or asleep, how she had helped Weiss study for the written portions of exams. How she had taught her that intelligence wasn’t measured in standardized tests and perfection of skill, but in other, smaller ways. She missed Yang’s motherly attitude, how she had brought Weiss coffee in the mornings, how she made sure they never forgot their materials before class, how she was always—always—there to provide encouragement. God knew how that had changed after she was brutalized in the attack, but Weiss didn’t want to know. She herself had endured the least trauma at the Fall of Beacon, but sometimes, it felt like she was the most broken of them all.

How, how had she come to be back here, in this place that felt so foreign to her now? Where the meals were eaten alone and silently, with china as fragile as a feather and silver cutlery that felt like slender twigs in her hands? And more importantly, when had Beacon’s family meals—roughhousing and loud, messy conversation and improper manners, all of it—become what she looked forward to in her evenings?

She was sitting here, eating tiny portions in a quiet room with neatly folded napkins and no one to talk to. Beacon had been so different, in so many ways—she had sat at a table with her team and Jaune’s. She missed it dearly, every bit of it. She missed how she would get her meal from the long line and go to sit next to Ruby, who had always saved her seat as if it was the most important job of her life, and had then proceeded to talk Weiss’s ear off, not even stopping when she had a mouth crammed full with food. She missed how Nora and Jaune would playfully toss banter and quips across the table at each other, often with Yang chiming in with choice puns. She missed how Pyrrha and she would discuss battle tactics and how stupid boys could be. She missed how Ren and Blake had been nearly quiet the whole meal, often reading books instead of eating, and how their partners would coax them into joining the conversation with a mixture of cajoling and threats of catapulting mashed potatoes in their hair. She missed how Blake had always spent her meals watching Yang with a look of fondness, how it had reminded her of her own feelings for Ruby, even if she never dared look at her partner so unguardedly. She missed how Ruby and Blake would argue over Zwei. She even missed the terrible food, crazy as it sounded, because it had been, for all its faults, a part of Beacon, one that would now never exist again. She missed the loud chatter and the unmistakable feeling of family.

Now, back in the present day, Weiss let out a long sigh, tugging the edge of her camisole before rising from her chair at the vanity table and stepping forward. She withdrew a ragged photo from the drawer and pinned it to the side of her mirror with a thumbtack. It had been taken by Nora on a sunny summer day; it was her team, frozen in time. Yang, grinning broadly, had one arm draped across Blake's shoulders, and was shooting a finger gun at the camera with the other. Blake was smiling, and Ruby was on her other side, slightly blurry with movement. She was laughing, silver eyes bright. And then, next to her—Weiss hardly recognized herself. In the photo, she was happy, bright, filled out. Now...

In the mirror, there was a dark, writhing agony in her eyes. Grief had stolen pounds from her, sharpening her cheekbones to a feral likeness, and she could count every one of her ribs. The sunset light pouring through the great arched window looked like blood spilling across her face. Get a grip, she scolded herself. What are you, weak now? You're a Huntress, no matter what he says. You do not bend, you do not break, and most of all, you do not fall apart. So what if all she could feel was agony at any thought of her team? She had been stupid to confess any feelings to Ruby; now she would choke on the what-ifs for her whole life.

You stupid fool. Weiss gritted her teeth, turning over the image so she didn’t have to look at Ruby’s face. You shouldn’t have kissed her.
She could still remember it, even after so many days. No, it hadn’t been a perfect kiss, and what had come after had taken any feeling of satisfaction Weiss had had and blown it out of the water, but regardless, it had happened, and now she had to deal with the repercussions.

She whirled, nearly knocking the photo off the side of the mirror, as a deep pounding knocked on her door. A tired voice rang out. "Are you decent?"

"A moment, please." Hurriedly, Weiss threw on a white robe that hung from her bedpost, shivering— the drafts in here were ridiculously prevalent—and tied it. "Enter."

The door swung open, admitting a tall figure. A breath of relief rustled from Weiss's lungs as she realized it was only her sister.

"Father told me you would be unwilling to speak with me - or anyone, for that matter," Winter said. "I told him that he was an old boil-brained sot."

Weiss covered her hand with her mouth. "Winter, you did not."

Winter’s eyes twinkled, but there was sadness on her face. "I did. His attitude is starting to wear my nerves thin, as is his unfortunate close-mindedness. But was he right? Weiss, what happened to you? You look dreadful. I heard of the betrayal at Beacon. I did not think it would have any immediate effect on you."

“Winter,” she said tiredly, “it had every effect on me. My teammate was horribly wounded. My partner almost died, and no one knows what happened to her, exactly. My other teammate fled; no one knows where she is, either. I’ve lost everything.”

“I am sorry,” her sister said softly. “Had I known…”

“Look, you might’ve been killed if you had remained in Vale. I lost so much. I couldn’t lose my sister too."

A brief look of surprise flitted over Winter’s face, followed by sympathy. “I wish I could help you more. It is wrong of Vincent to keep you locked up here; he is not trying to keep you safe, I see that now… he is trying to imprison you, to leave you isolated, but you can’t move on from that kind of tragedy without closure, without help… I’m sorry I hadn’t recognized how poisonous he was before. It hurts me to see you so listless, Weiss. You have always possessed a spectacular focus of mind, but I suppose… I suppose that grief and heartbreak changes us all more than we care to admit."

Weiss rubbed her arm, fingers ghosting over the spot where the Bond— where all Bonds, when first conceived— left the faintest of scars, a physical remembrance as well as one in the soul. An echo of sorrow that wasn’t her own flickered through her heart. “I suppose it does.”

“And your partner,” Winter said, “the one I met in Vale with you. Do you know what happened to her?”

Weiss froze. “No. I just know she’s… Ruby’s not dead. I can feel it.” She pressed her hand to her heart. “I can feel it here.”

“In that case, I do have some news that may be of welcome to you, then,” Winter told her, looking distinctly less composed then when she had entered. “In fact, I’m surprised you hadn’t already heard.”

“What’s that?”
“While you know that your partner isn’t dead,” Winter said, “you don’t know what she did. She’s certainly popular in gossip in Atlas… all over Remnant, really. They all know of how Beacon fell, and they all know who prevented it from being an even bigger tragedy than it already was. *She* did. Reviled in some parts, from what I’ve heard. Everyone is afraid of her— a fifteen year old girl!— and they whisper in guesses at her power. You really don’t know what she did, *do* you?”

“How do you know?” Weiss challenged her.

Winter smiled mirthlessly. “Let’s just say I’ve been finding Qrow Branwen less of a grating company these days. You know, he’s tracking Ruby’s process as she goes across Remnant. To protect her. It’s a noble enough sentiment—I wouldn’t expect that out of him, to be truthful. But the death of your headmaster has altered him in a lot of ways, tempered him down. Grief can do that, even if this isn’t really the way I’d wanted to see him changed. He sent me a letter days ago, talking at length and extending an explanation of what occurred that night Beacon fell. To make a long story short, word has it that she is the child of a power out of legend. That she killed Cinder and singlehandedly stopped time, freezing and stopping the heart of the father of all Grimm where he lay curled around Beacon Tower. That no one knows what will happen next, but she’s on the move across Remnant.”

Weiss’s heart leaped in her throat. “*Where is she?*”

“If you look within your Bond,” Winter replied, her voice mournful, “I think you will find the answers that you seek.”

Weiss turned away from Winter, delving deep inside herself, turning her thoughts to the Bond which she had so desperately sought to ignore, in the faintest of hopes that if she didn’t look, she would get over Ruby, and the pain would go away. That was a foolish idea; she realized it now. There was no forgetting someone you loved. Grief was not forgettable— it was merely bearable. And as she searched, instead of the emptiness that had been in the place of the Bond that fateful night a week ago, she found something entirely different.

Her veins coursed with a determination colder and harder than steel, along with the dreadful feeling of suppressed grief and anger. And when Weiss looked deeper, she felt— like a golden thread connecting her to Ruby— that Ruby was on the move, and that she was just on the outskirts of the coastline of Vale, heading for a dock. She could also sense that her partner wasn’t alone, that she was with three others. She got the glimmerings of a view— a flash of sunlight off golden hair, the impression of Nora’s chatter being subdued by sadness, and Ren’s angular face looking grief-stricken, before she was yanked back to reality as her tenuous connection to Ruby’s senses was obliterated by a flood of emotion.

*A dock to take her to Haven,* Weiss realized. *She’s going to find answers about Cinder.*

She should have been relieved Ruby was alive and okay, but all she could feel was a deep horror. Their Bond had always been light and inconsequential, with Ruby never really feeling any negative emotion besides annoyance. The concept of ‘*they*’ been comprised of happiness and the feeling of being content. But now, as Weiss sifted through it, searching, she could find no light, no joy— just sadness and suffering. And the terrible, terrible weight of responsibility. She could feel Ruby’s powers, and it didn’t feel like something to be jealous of. It felt like a rock, weighing heavy and dreadful in the pit of her stomach, and in the back of her skull.

“She’s not Ruby anymore,” Weiss realized aloud. “*Not Ruby Rose any more than I’m Weiss Schnee, daughter of Vincent, heiress of the Schnee Dust Company. She’s someone different. And so am I.*”
“Yes,” Winter said. “I think that’s right. I think most of you died the night Beacon fell. New people have taken your places. But you must ask yourself this: if you are not Vincent’s daughter, or the heiress, or a younger sister, what are you? What are you then, with all your titles stripped away? What is left?”

Weiss looked at Myrtenaster, which glowed in the dim light, like a streak of silvery fire. She pictured her team, not then, but now: Blake, her face too severe to be beautiful, amber eyes cold. Yang, her eyes gone dark, her face similar to Weiss’s, hollowed by grief, and finally, Ruby—her hair swept around her face like the breath of a storm, her eyes like steel. They had been thrown together by chance. But now, they had to fight for each other. There had been no choice when they became a team—now, Weiss knew that if she ever hoped to see them again, she had to choose it.

But to Winter, she only replied, “I’m still figuring that out.”

Two weeks passed, two weeks of snow and ice, of winter turning. Her element of coldness should have rejuvenated her. Instead, she felt miserable. Every meal she had turned to sawdust in her mouth; she ran herself ragged with training, sparring with the guards around the mansion. Her father disapproved of her keeping up with training, insisting that she would no longer need it—which, of course, made her train all the harder.

One night, she lay in her bed, panting and exhausted from a particularly brutal training session she’d initiated with a Summoned Beowolf. She was getting better and better at Summoning, which seemed to please Winter. “I told you that you were capable of doing such a thing,” she had remarked, to which Weiss had replied, “You also said you’d never be capable of talking civilly to Ruby’s uncle, but look where we are now, Winter. Things change.” That had shut her up.

It seemed as though, ever since she had Summoned the full Knight on the night Beacon toppled, it had unlocked her abilities, in a way. That wasn’t to say it wasn’t hard; it still took enormous effort, like her lungs were being squeezed out of her throat, like her muscles were tugging against themselves. However, to her gratification, the Summoned creatures were always stronger than they had been when she had killed them.

After a brutal day of training, she went to bed early, watching out her window as the broken moon rose above the mountains in the distance. A snowstorm was coming. Clouds threatening to block out the light on every side, and she—

She sat up abruptly as she heard the sound of rustling and scraping coming from outside her window, followed by a thump, and then what sounded an awful lot like harsh, rasping breaths. A burglar? She thought warily, slipping out of her bed and grasping Myrtenaster’s hilt. But how did they get past the guards?

Not feeling particularly scared—she could hold her own, after all—she slipped into the shadows to hide herself. Holding the rapier at the ready, she crept for the doors that opened out on her balcony, and her blood ran cold as she saw there was someone out there, crouched over as they caught their breath. She banged the doors open and struck out with Myrtenaster, the blade blurring in a slash.

The figure ducked the blade with a flurry of cursing, and straightened up. A shadowed face greeted her, eyes sparkling coldly in the gloom. When the dappled, pale moonlight slid over the figure’s thin face, fully illuminating it, Weiss dropped her rapier with a strangled gasp. The person looked terribly different than she had last seen them—gaunter and haunted, with dark blue shadows under their eyes—but unmistakable nonetheless.
“I might not need an arm, but I do need my head,” it said, voice thick with bitterness. "I really hope that's not how you greet your teammates from now on, ice queen.”

It was Yang.

**Yang**

All of her muscles were screaming in protest. After weeks of inactivity, she had lost a lot of her strength, and hauling herself to Weiss’s room had taken every ounce of strength she had. That, and the thought how much she had to lose if she didn’t take action.

Sun was gone. She was alone now. He had made sure she made it safely to Atlas before boarding an airship straight back to Haven, with the parting remark, “I need to be with my team now. I’ve left them too often.” He had hugged her before leaving, whispering in her ear that she had to be strong now.

She had done exactly that. She’d made to the Schnee manor and dodged the night-watch of guards, getting help from Weiss’s butler— a short man who rather reminded her of a dwarf. He had not helped her, really, but he did not hinder her either by giving her up to the guards— he’d pointed her in the direction of Weiss’s room— and she had made it, only pausing to stare up darkened window of Weiss’s room and wonder what kind of special hell her teammate was being forced to endure, within the crushing walls of that manor house. And here she was now.

As soon as Weiss realized who it was, she had flown at Yang and wrapped her in a crushing hug. She’d tried to hide it, but Yang could tell she was crying, and when she pulled back, her eyes were red from crying. “By God,” she whispered. “Yang. Yang. I didn’t know…”

“What happened to me?” Yang shook out her hair, scattering melting snowflakes before grinning— a faint grin, but there nevertheless. “Still figuring that out, Weiss. Absence does make the heart fonder, doesn’t it? I missed you, too.”

She shook her head and muttered something less than positive under her breath about Yang being too reckless, before she began to hurry around the room, grabbing blankets and fixing a steaming thermos of hot cocoa. Yang told her what had happened to lead her to Atlas— Sun snapping her out of her misery and driving her to the airship. How she had boarded an Atlas-bound ship, and Sun had departed on another, heading for Mistral and Haven Academy, in the hopes of reuniting with his team, and maybe even seeing Ruby. Of how she had arrived in Atlas and asked people to point her in the direction of the Schnee manor. Yang suspected they only helped because they felt sorry for her, with her bandaged stump of an arm, which made her furious. She hated being pitied. Finally, she told of how she'd arrived here.

“And who in the name of the stars let you into my father’s mansion? The guards are jumpier than mice, and you’d have to have nothing less than an official document or a word from my father himself to get in here.”

Yang pressed the rim of the mug to her lips. Steam curled against her face. “Your butler Klein took pity on me, I guess. Nice enough guy. He believed me when I told him I was your teammate and he pointed me in the direction of your room, but the rest I had to do alone, or he would be caught and fired… which is why I was on your balcony and not knocking all nicely at your bedroom door.”

"But why?" Weiss's miserable face was all bones and angles; she looked unhealthily thin, as though she hadn’t been eating. That worried Yang— though she suspected she herself was no better off.
She fixed blankets around Yang’s shoulders, shoving the thermos at her so shakily that it sloshed around the rim. "Why did you come?"

Yang took a breath. "I'm going on a journey. I want you to come with me. Scratch that— I need you to go, Weiss. I need your determination and strength, and I need... family. Hell, someone who has the slightest idea what I’m struggling to overcome. I just...” She shook her head, hating the weakness of the words. “I can’t do it alone. I know I can’t, not without someone I know.”

The air instantly felt charged, as though with lightning. Weiss stared at her before giving a weak, helpless laugh. "You never cease to amaze me, or... or confound me, Yang. Do you really believe that we could leave here? My father would kill me if I ran away. He’d kill me, and bury me, and then dig me up and kill me again. He’s already furious enough about the fact that I’ve been training and that I caused ‘a scene’ when he arrived at Beacon, as he likes to put it. It would be easier to find a needle in a haystack than get out of here so easily without bringing hell down upon our heads.”

“You’d do it for Ruby, though,” Yang said, her gaze unwavering as it rested on Weiss. “You’d walk through hell itself if that was what it took. Don’t tell me otherwise. You love her. I do, too. So I’m going to whatever it takes, even if it kills me.”

Weiss looked away, but Yang didn’t miss the way her shoulders trembled.

"I'm on your side,” she continued, false bravado ringing through her voice, “and Vincent is nothing compared to me. Besides, don’t you want to at least be able to say you tried to escape this prison, that you didn’t let your father hold you down a second time, that when it came time to choose between your own fears and being courageous, you chose to be brave? And don't you want to find Ruby?”

"More than anything." Weiss murmured with a sadness and pain in her voice that took Yang by surprise. "But, Yang... how? Have you thought this through at all? It's the dead of winter, everyone's scared and suspicious, we're just a couple of Huntress apprentices... what's your plan?"

"To hell with plans," she said. “Plans always get screwed up by some unknown variable in the end, it’s a law of science. No, this is going to have to rely on sheer guts and determination alone. I can't live like this, Weiss. Waiting for those who have abandoned me to come back, waiting for them to decide I’m worth it, waiting for answers. Even if the journey kills me, I have to go. There’s nothing else for me, no other path... I can’t do it anymore, the waiting. Can't you see it’s killing me?”

“Yes,” Weiss whispered, looking inexpressibly sad as her gaze slid over Yang. “Yes, I can see that.”

“I have to find them... or at least try. And I need you to find Ruby.”

"Why?"

"You're Bonded with her!” Yang said in surprise. “You practically have a built-in Ruby-compass!”

That tugged a smile from Weiss. "My father know I'm recalcitrant to him now. He will be on his guard. How do you plan on getting out of Atlas, anyways?"

Yang dangled her keys to Bumblebee from her hand with a grin, relishing the look of sudden exasperation that filled Weiss’s eyes. “You’re barking mad. Absolutely mad. Yang, do you really believe you can get out of here just because you have a heavy-duty motorcycle?”
"I don't believe it," she said, "I know it. I hope you don't mind riding a cycle so fast it feels like your skin is peeling off, because we'll have to go very, very fast to get out of here before we're noticed and pursued... the coldness will be made doubly worse by the wind. You'll have to cuddle up to me or something."

"Blake would murder me if I did that."

Yang flinched, her visage of confident nonchalance cracking to show her uncertainty and pain, and Weiss apologized. "I didn't mean... I'm sorry. What is your idea? I can't drive a motorcycle, and it requires two hands... " Her voice dwindled, and Yang felt the loss of her arm fresh and new, throbbing with agony. The idea that she had been forming since she left Patch—the one she had kept secret from Sun—floated to the forefront of her mind, and Ruby’s voice echoed in her ears.

*Love* is *worth whatever it might cost you, in the end. Yang, I understand that you're grieving, and that's okay. You need to grieve, or else you'll never heal right, you know? But you and me—we can get through this, no matter how hard it is, no matter how much we feel like just giving up.*

"Just get me to James Ironwood," she said aloud, her voice quiet in the immense emptiness of the room, "and I can do anything."
Chapter XXXI - Departure

Chapter Summary

Is this chapter legitimate? Yes. Did it coincidentally fall on April Fool's Day? Also yes. It's a real chapter, though. I limit my pranks to rick-rolling people online, but not here, so enjoy this chapter and have a lovely day of tricking people.

Yang

Under the guise of asking the General for news about the Fall of Beacon, Weiss’s father had—amazingly, Yang thought—allowed her to go to the military headquarters, but Weiss had only muttered that it put her in his debt, and it was just another manipulation tactic that he employed regularly. He wasn’t being kind by allowing her to leave the manor. He was just trying to get Weiss back under his thumb. Yang contained a snarl of loathing at the thought of Vincent. She couldn’t imagine how Weiss had lived with the shadow of that overbearing arrogance for seventeen years—but then again, she could; that was where her teammate’s carefully guarded emotions and obsession with control had come from. Taiyang had only ever been supportive and loving to Yang and Ruby… all except that one time when Summer died. But that was in the past now.

They walked in behind a guard, and were handed off to another soldier. Looking at Weiss’s face, filled with uncertainty and fear, Yang was taken aback. “Weiss, are… are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Weiss murmured.

“You’re worried about your father,” Yang guessed.

“My father likes giving me things,” she admitted, her voice soft. “But he also likes taking them away.”

“He seems like the type of word I’d use if we weren’t in a highly proper place,” Yang muttered, looking around uneasily as they were guided down a dark hallway by a silent soldier, his rifle crossed over his chest. “I thought the military was all but shattered after the Fall of Beacon, anyways?”

The soldier gave a nearly imperceptible grunt, and Weiss glanced over at her, and explained, “Just the military in Vale was impacted. They left a squadron behind here, but there’s… a lot less soldiers than there used to be. They’ve definitely felt the brunt of the impact… so Ironwood says.”

“You sure about that?” Yang said, unable to conceal the sour note from her voice, the bitterness there, as she remembered her sister’s haunted face, the destruction she had seen, Penny falling, Pyrrha with an arrow in her chest, and finally, her arm, only a testament to the partner that had abandoned her.

“I had to help bury two of my schoolmates,” Weiss said quietly. “I’m not sure of it at all.”
"I’m sorry," Yang murmured, feeling a pang of shame. She had lost a lot, surely, but she hadn’t lost her life, and however dubious she was about what had happened to her, she could not suppress a feeling of gratefulness that she was still here to breathe and feel emotions, however negative they might be. She had been lucky to escape with her life.

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault, it’s Cinder’s, and we ought to remember that. And cherish what we haven’t lost yet.” Weiss stopped as the soldier pulled to a halt outside a heavy silver door, spinning around sharply and executing a tight bow. “We’re here, anyways.”

The door was made of thick, plated chrome, a small square window bolted in the center of it, letting out blue light. It looked like the door into some high-tech science lab, and as they stood there, it let out a hiss of air and popped open, revealing the sharp scent of chemicals, the click of metal against metal, and a tall figure standing on the threshold of the entryway.

“Miss Schnee,” the General said, looking slightly surprised as he swept her a bow. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’m not here on my own account, sir,” she said. “I’m here on hers.” Weiss stepped aside, letting the light wash over Yang’s face, and Ironwood peered at Yang in bemusement.

“I know you,” he began, before Yang spoke, breaking his words off.

“You owe us, James Ironwood,” Yang said, unaltering despite how the General towered over her, unmovable and stronger than an oak. "My sister was Penny's best friend. She knew she wasn't alive, that she was an automaton, but she kept that secret because she knew it would get you in trouble. She made Penny's life better, for being her friend, and she was crushed when she was killed. I nearly lost some of my friends to your machinery when it for hijacked, and that opening led to me losing my arm. I need your help.”

The General met her gaze with a steely, blue stare. "All of what you say is true; I don’t deny it,” he said levelly, signaling for the soldier to leave. "Even so, I know you. You're the girl that broke that boy's leg, aren't you? Yang Xiao Long.”

“Enchanted to make your acquaintance,” she said, her voice soaked in lemon juice. “If you must know, Mercury Black was also a traitor and Cinder’s right-hand man— no pun intended— and he had prosthetic legs, so I didn’t really hurt him at all in the end… but technicalities, aren’t they?”

“Not at all.” He bowed his head, looking somber. “In that case, allow me to apologize for my behavior that day when you were disqualified. If things were different, you would surely be allowed back into the tournament and the circumstances explained to the citizens of Remnant, but sadly, that is not so, and things must move forward, as always. I suppose an apology and the image of justice itself shall have to suffice, for now. May I ask why is it that you are here?”

“As I said, sir,” Yang replied, “you owe me, not just for the things I said, but because you know a relative of mine, don’t you? I know you two have a rocky relationship, but you were both charged under one person who is dead now, because Cinder killed him.”

Ironwood looked at her closely, trying to discern who she was talking about, trying to see the family resemblance, but he would fail. Yang had never resembled her uncle, with his dark hair and pale eyes, except by way of word and action— the sharp-edged confidence and uncouth bravado. "And that person might be...?"

"I'm Qrow Branwen’s niece, sir."
His eyes widened. "So you are. I had forgotten... yes, we talked about you, long ago. Your mother... " He swallowed, and Yang's heart jumped— what did he know about Raven?— but she forced herself to hold her tongue. "Yes, Yang Xiao Long, you're certainly his kin. I can see it, in the way you're looking at me. That defiance. That steel. You really don't care what I say, do you?"

"I know you hide metal and machinery beneath your clothes," she replied, drawing a look of startled surprise from Weiss and a wide-eyed stare from the General. "Qrow told me, a week ago, after the Fall of Beacon was over. You're half-human, at least physically. You lost a lot more than I did, but you survived. Thrived, even. I don't know how to do that. I find myself reaching for things when I realize my arm's no longer there. I can't go a day without getting worked up over the tiniest of inconveniences that result from it. If I was younger, I might be able to adapt, and if I had less of a temper and didn't rely on it so much, I know I could... but I'm none of those things. It's hard, harder than I would have ever imagined. I could survive without it as a normal human, but I would have to give up being a Huntress, and that would kill me more definitely than any missing limb could."

There was pity in his eyes. "I'm sorry for your loss. No child should have to endure what you have. You want a prosthetic. One like mine. You could ask much of me, Qrow's niece, name any price. That is what he would do— or, at least, he would have in the past. But you ask something simple."

"I'm not my uncle," she murmured.

"Your uncle, while a... stubborn man... is a Huntsman, and a loyal one. Do not think badly of him, despite my own consideration on the matter." He appeared almost amused at her defiance, and she saw herself as she must appear to him: a scrawny, battered girl with wild eyes and a stubborn streak a mile wide. "But no, you certainly are not a Branwen, and that, I suppose, is why you do not bear the name of one. It does not fit you. You are a great deal more courageous. What you have told me is true: I do owe the both of you, and it is a small price to pay. I shall have you fitted for machinery, for what happiness you granted Penny Polendina during her existence, and my debts for allowing your peers to get injured by my machines... and perhaps because I owe Vale in whatever way I can repay them. Come with me."

He beckoned them within the interior of the laboratory, and Yang followed, fighting back a surge of fear. Weiss laid a hand on her shoulder, whispering an 'it's okay', in the shell of her ear, and sticking right by her side.

The inside of the lab was stark, pure white, with glimmering tables and beeping machinery. Test tubes lay in neat rows along bolted shelves, and on the far side of the lab, a dim glow of orange Aura pulsed within a glass case, monitored by two stern looking scientists who were quickly taking notes and adjusting the glow to fade or brighten with turns of a knob.

“Acheron!” Ironwood called as they passed a scientist who was fiddling with something at a table. “Come here.”

“Yes, General.” She rose from her seat and scurried over, eyes landing on Yang’s arm. She did not look repulsed, or curious, or even pitying— just critical, like a scientist measuring up a problem. “Is this—”

“Yes; the student from the Vytal tournament, but a victim from the Fall, more importantly,” he said, a touch of impatience in his voice. “Who she is personally doesn’t matter. What do you think she needs?”

“A prosthetic, sir.”
“Yes. But not one of the false ones, or plastic. I’m thinking metal and chrome with the joints that are more fitted for heavy-wear and combat. Get a Dust one, fitted for a teenage girl. Size medium to small, I’d think.” He glanced at Yang’s arm before contradicting himself. “No, make it a medium to large. Huntresses tend to develop more upper arm muscle than the average human. Fire Dust as well, I believe, to power the core of it and sync up with her Aura’s movements. It would suit her semblance, correct?”

“I believe so, sir. The trajectory of the arm fitted to the reserves of Aura should give her more advanced ability with her mobility range, and the fire Dust should mesh well with a more combat-oriented semblance.”

“I agree. In that case, hurry along and get one and bring it here. Fetch Dr. Jade as well and tell her she’s wanted in wing 7B—a surgical room, if you would, and prepare it for an attachment.”

“Yes, sir.” With a deep nod, she scurried off, leaving Weiss, Ironwood, and Yang alone in the room. She shuffled her feet around before asking bluntly, “So how does this prosthetic work, exactly, and how do you make it sound so easy?”

He looked faintly amused at her tone, but not angry, though she doubted he got much backtalk from his military. Maybe he just wasn’t used to being challenged by crippled seventeen year old girls. “If I could survive the surgery that made over half my body a prosthetic, something as minor as a prosthetic arm would be much, much easier, wouldn’t you say? You see, many years back, it would have been difficult to build a prosthetic that realistically imitated a human arm, but with the research we have been advancing in regards to Aura and Dust in itself, it has become significantly easier. We try to find the type of Dust that most suits the owner for whom the prosthetic will be assigned, and build it into the prosthetic—Wind Dust for those with flightier minds and thus, Aura levels, Earth Dust for the more stolid personalities, Fire Dust for more…tempered individuals, such as yourself… Water Dust for those who are calm. It all differs, and because there are so many purely different types of personalities, there are different types of Dusts. The Dust is built into the prosthetic, along with the metal and joints. Auras tend to have a personality, and as you know, all Auras are different; they are like our souls, in a way. They guard our souls, and thus, they are connected to them. Dust is able to connect to Aura, and so the prosthetic is able to move through sheer will and thought. It is hinged to your mental faculties, just like a regular arm…though we cannot provide a few things. Sense of texture, sense of touch, or the feeling of grasping objects will be denied to you. That, I think, is something that will never be done, but it is far better than having nothing, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yeah,” Yang said, slightly stunned. It sounded a lot better than what she had expected, by far. “Yeah… it does.”

“Sir, is this what you had in mind?”

They turned around as the scientist came back out of a side-room, bearing a white Atlas-manufactured case with the circle, gear, and torch symbol pressed on the top of it. The block letters ‘Prosthetic — Arm’ ran lengthwise along it. She set it down in front of them, and they all peered at it.

It was a light, pale gold, the color of the sun at dawn, and thin grooves snaked through it in an intricate pattern. A channel of a dully glowing red substance ran down the length of it—Fire Dust, that would spark to life and connect to her Aura when it was attached to her. The joints between the metal that formed the palm, fingers, wrist, and forearm, were a dull black, like unlit embers.

“It’s…” She shook her head, her words threatening to falter, and stared down at it. Weiss spoke for her, gratitude brimming in her tone.
“Thank you, General. This means— it means a lot to the both of us.”

“She lost her arm in battle, trying to defend what she thought was right,” he said quietly, “Yes? There is no greater sacrifice, and I am honored to have been able to help, in whatever way. I understand the pain of it, losing what was once a part of you, and being forced to confront the aftermath. Now, we must attach it to her to make sure her Aura won’t reject it.”

“How do you do that?”

His eyes flickered with memory. “You will be put under by an anesthetic, and our doctors will attach it to you through a process of physical and spiritual attachment, but when you wake up, it should work just a regular arm.”

Yang stiffened—dark walls and shadowy unconsciousness and the redness of a sword as it sliced down—before she nodded, letting out a long, low breath. “I—okay.”

“We’re ready, sir,” said the scientist, and Ironwood nodded, turning around with a flick of his hand, indicating them to follow.

After a long travel down winding white hallways, filled with the sharp chemical smell and consistent beeps, they found themselves in a small room, windowless and white-washed, with an elevated cot and complex machinery, hanging with tubes and wired and blinking lights. Yang backed away slightly, her heart slamming against her chest, beating hard in her throat.

When did I become so afraid of everything, she thought to herself in a mixture of anger and shame, only to feel the General’s hand on her shoulder—not warm human flesh, but the thin silk of a glove, and underneath, cold metal.

“If you do not consent to this—”

“No—no, I do, I have to do this.” She let out a shuddering breath. “Just… make it quick, okay?”

She found herself in the cot, the prosthetic lying on the table beside, her eyes closed so she didn’t have to see the looming machinery able her, and the people in the room surrounding her—doctors, the scientist, Weiss, and the General. “The pain you have already endured will match up to this,” he warned her. “It is not, perhaps, equivalent to what you have lost, but do not think for a moment it will be easy.”

“Yeah. I’m ready.” Yang opened her eyes. Ironwood, the scientist, and Weiss’s worried faces all hovered over her. “I never thought it would be easy, but I want to do this.”

Weiss’s cold hand covered hers. “Yang?”

Yang blinked open her eyes and looked at her. “Yeah?”

“You’ll pull through this, you know. You’re the strongest person I know. Stronger than me, in some ways.” Weiss smiled, but there was a world of worry in her eyes. “Please don’t change so much that you’re unrecognizable. We all love you, and we’ll find them both, okay? Ruby and Blake are out there, and we’ll find them eventually—just stay whole and unbroken.”

Too late for that, Weiss. But I can try. With a weak smile, Yang nodded, and the scientist exchanged a pitying glance with Ironwood before brushing hair away from the side of her neck and lifting a needle full of clear anesthetic, made to knock her out. “Miss Xiao Long, as stated, we have all things prepared, and this should be over within mere hours. Are you ready?”
Yang laughed weakly. “Do I have any choice?”

She felt the needle prick the side of her neck, sliding something colder than ice into her veins. Everything faded to a blur— Ironwood’s gaunt face, Weiss’s blue eyes, the silver shine of the needle. Colors without any name flickered at the edges of her vision. With a dull sense of rushing headfirst into an abyss, Yang closed her eyes, and gave way to a dizzying blackness.

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She finds herself in a green meadow, with the silken wind bobbing the poppy-heads around her and sending the clouds scudding across a sky bluer than her father’s eyes.

She lifts her arm— no, her arms, both of them whole and unbroken— and the wind seems to lift, whispering through the grass, forming a strangely beautiful sort of tune. The faintest bubble and trickle of water adds to the whispering of the wind, twining together in a calm song of nature. This place feels familiar, not in a sense that she’s been here before, but familiar all the same. There are trees ringing the meadow, beautiful trees in all shades of gold, copper, and scarlet. Something is nagging at the back of her mind, burning there urgently, but she frowns, not wanting to think of much besides the beautiful meadow and the surreal sky. There is something fuzzy about this place that doesn’t seem real, but she doesn’t dwell upon it.

Not feeling any particular urge to do anything— the inviting scent of the poppies wreathes through the air, seductive and warm— she turns around, and then there is a figure emerging from the trees, running towards her, the meadow-grass parting around her, her smile even brighter than the sun itself. Yang recognizes her, and her heart swells.

It’s Blake, and she’s not wearing her bow, her ears high in eagerness. Yang smiles, and then Blake is there, holding her, lifting her up and spinning her around just as Yang did so many weeks ago after their match in the Vytal Festival, where Blake had sacrificed it all.

Blake’s laughing, her eyes closed slightly in pleasure as the sunlight bathes them both in a gentle, warm embrace. She sets Yang down and smiles at her, the sunlight playing with dappled shadows across her face. She looks different. A little too different, and Yang knows Blake’s face well; this is like looking at the distorted reflection in a pool of water… it’s like a memory.

It is a memory.

“I’m really not here,” Yang realizes, suddenly feeling cold despite the warm wind and gentle light, “am I?”

“There are things that are neither here nor there,” Blake murmurs, a note of bittersweetness in her voice. “But… no, you are not here. This is a fever dream… a mockery of what you’ll never have again.”

Yang reaches out to touch Blake, and she cannot. Blake’s form is as solid as the wind itself. The air seems to be colder, suddenly, and Yang’s heart swells again, but this time, with grief.

The wind lifts, and leaves go flying over their heads, swirling past in a long ribbon, sending Blake and Yang’s hair rippling to the side. Something about the whole meadow suddenly seems unbearably sad, and clouds begin to cover the sky, dark and mottled banks of storm threatening away the beauty. The song of the wind isn’t a cheery tune anymore, but something full of grief and bittersweet, shattered dreams, like the keening of a violin and a long-forgotten song.
“The anesthetic knocked me out,” Yang whispers, floored by the realization, “but my mind… this memory…”

“Not a memory,” Blake says. “Your mind is giving you what you most desire in this whole world.”

She looks at Blake, and looks at her, and looks at her, and then she notices. Blake isn’t wearing the bow, because in a perfect world, she is just as equal to any human, if not more, for all the sacrifices she’s made. In a perfect world, Yang’s arm isn’t gone and her girlfriend is happy and the world is warm and full of beauty. But—

Yang turns around and she sees her sister and Weiss, hand in hand, walking towards them from the forest. Weiss looks strange—happier, almost, something hard about her face gone soft. And Ruby—her sister’s eyes are not silver any longer, they are gray, a gentle gray that doesn’t threaten and kill or endanger her life.

Behind them, in the shadows of the meadow, she can see four more people laughing and talking. Qrow, the haunted look in his eyes erased. Taiyang, looking joyful and chattering. Beside him is a dark haired woman who is a parallel of Yang, a mirror image inverted, with red eyes where Yang has purple, and ebony hair where Yang has gold, and she knows it is Raven. And lastly, in the center, stands Summer Rose, alive and full of light, her gray eyes glowing with love. More people are behind them, disappearing into the forest, but Yang can feel their presence all the same. Ozpin, standing a little ways away from Qrow. More familiar faces from Beacon shimmer and blur between the boles of the trees: Fox, Neon, Team TEAL and CFVY and SSSN and all the rest, alive and unharmed…

“None of it…” Yang trembles, shrinking inward. “None of this is real, is it?”

“No,” Blake says, her voice soft and inexorable. “None of this is real.”

She lets out a pained breath. “This is cruel, to see what I’ll never have again.”

“It’s what you want, isn’t it?” Blake seems to shimmer at the edges, and Yang knows she is close to waking, that much closer to painful reality. “Weiss and Ruby, together and happy, not haunted by their own pasts. Your uncle, not a cynic who doesn’t care, but a loving man. Your father, not dogged and broken by what he has lost. Raven here, loving you as a mother should. Summer Rose…still alive, still here, still whole. And her and Ruby don’t have silver eyes, because that only puts them in danger. Yourself, whole and uninjured, your arm returned to you. And me…” Blake smiles. “Me, here by your side.”

“All of these are things I can never, ever have again.” Yang half-turns around, her arms stretching out, but something about her right one seems transparent and ghostly, and numbness is starting to fade, a low hum of pain slowly rising within her to blot out the light. Reality is pressing on the fragile, gossamer-spun edges of the dream, threatening to shatter it and break her free of the lies. Night is falling, and the dawn is near. She can feel herself waking up. “You’re not by my side.”

“I am in the wind and stars,” Blake says, her voice sounding very far away already. “I am in the sunlight and moonrise. I am always there, Yang, if you look for me.”

Blake,” she whispers, at at that moment she knows there is nothing she is more afraid of in this world than to wake up and not find Blake by her side. “Stay with me… please, please, stay with me.”

“Wake up, Yang,” Blake whispers, her amber eyes terribly sad. “Wake up.”
The whole meadow begins to dissolve. First the trees are ripped away into darkness, the students and Ozpin torn into nothingness, then her parents, then Qrow, then Summer and Weiss and Ruby and finally, Blake, her amber eyes going dark as an extinguished flame. Yang is torn away and shattered, pain and grief and numbness chasing away the warmth of the meadow as reality floods in, like dark, cold water pouring through a gaping hole in the surreal dreamland.

The last thing she feels is Blake’s hand on her hand, and she reaches out blindly, screaming Blake’s name, but the darkness pulls her down and away.

Yang came to with a deep gasp of air, her head spinning as the room slowly returned to focus. It felt as though she had been dangling from strings before they had been cut, plunging her into free fall, and now she had landed, knocking all the breath from her lungs. Weiss’s worried face swam over hers, before relief flooded it.

“You’re okay,” she breathed. “It’s all done, Yang. You’re all set to go.”

Yang blinked over at the two doctors and Ironwood. The two looked tired and washed-out under the fluorescent light; Ironwood, on the other hand, appeared to be pleased. “You lost some blood, of course,” he said, pulling off a pair of latex gloves, revealing a callused human hand and a dull gray prosthetic one, “but nothing too major. You might be lightheaded for an hour or so, but if you drink plenty of fluid, that can be remedied. It went well… and it took approximately an hour.”

“I feel like I just got dunked into a blender and stuck through a cheese grater,” she said with a groan.

“Well, sit up,” Ironwood said, a touch of impatience in his voice. “Try it out.”

Yang did. She looked over, and saw the arm there, the line of the metal meeting flesh almost seamless, like they were melded together. She tried to lift her arm, just like the night when Beacon had fallen, when no answering movement had responded.

But now her arm lifted, the faintest hum of machinery buzzing through it and sounding through the air, the warm glow of the fire Dust activating with the movement. The gold metal seemed to be lit from the inside out, the grooves and curves of the prosthetic glinting under the light, and it moved with a fluidity that she had not realized she had missed.

“I— I don’t know what to say,” she stammered, flushing at the stutter in her voice. “I… thank you. Thank you, General.”

“It’s the very least I can do to help someone who wasn’t protected by my military in the battle,” he said somberly, and then with a touch of acidity, “and perhaps it might be a gesture to your uncle that I’m not as much of a bonehead as he seems to think, wouldn’t you agree?”

Impossibly, Yang’s lips curved upward in a smile, and she twitched her new fingers— her new arm!— feeling how it moved with such sinuous, easily-controlled power. “I’ll tell him that if I see him.”

With a low bow, Ironwood turned around and departed, and the doctors followed, leaving the room empty. As the door shut, Yang swung her legs off the cot, her thoughts surging violently with the movement, the room spinning like she was on an out-of-control merry-go-round. “Did he help in the operation? Ironwood, I mean.”

Weiss nodded, her expression faintly green. “I guess he’d know a lot about it, having gone through that type of surgery himself.”
“Wait— why are you looking at me like that?”

Weiss frowned, a line appearing between her brows. “The anesthetic knocked you out well,” she said, “but you were twitching around a lot, and mumbling while you were unconscious. The doctors had to hold you down at one point near the end, because you were thrashing around… you even yelled a bit, there when they were nearly finished.”

“It must have been pretty bad stuff, to have you looking so bad,” Yang joked lightly— the relief at having this whole thing over and done with making her mood lighter than it had been in ages— before frowning. “Well, what was it? Was I screaming swear words, or—”

“You kept saying Blake’s name,” Weiss murmured. “Over and over, asking her not to go. To stay with you… and then at the end you just screamed her name and started thrashing around.”

That punctured her temporary happiness, deflating it instantly, and Yang swore bitterly, turning her face away. The prosthetic fingers curled in on themselves, metal clacking against metal as her hand balled into a fist.

“Yang,” Weiss pressed her, her tone gentle, “don’t be upset. Really, no one is going to think any the worse of you; they all know how Bonds are, and how it feels to lose one, and they’re impressed that you seem relatively okay… even if you’re not, on the inside.”

“I’m not,” she said shortly, “not now, anyways, but… maybe one day. You can’t be okay after you lose a part of yourself, physical and emotional. But I think you know that already.”

A long silence fell over the room, and Yang stared at her arm, studying the shifting glow within, just like the dappled pattern of a coal-bed. “It all just seems lifetimes away,” she said finally. “The day we first entered Beacon. And I thought you were just this bitchy girl having a fit on my little sister. In some ways, I… I wish all of it had never happened, because how the hell did we end up here, right? I’m just a nobody from Patch, and I’m here in a top-secret laboratory in Atlas with the daughter of the largest Dust company in the world… it’s all just changed so much, and I can barely comprehend it. I just want to go back, you know? Back to when things were easier and we didn’t have to worry about betrayal and loss and…” Her throat closed up, choking off her words, and she looked at her feet. “I want to go back to Beacon. As crazy as it sounds, I want all of it back, Weiss. The shitty exams and awful schedules and terrible teachers… it was home. It was family, and now it’s all changed, and gone forever.”

“It has,” Weiss agreed, “but perhaps for the better, in some ways. Not all change is bad for us. And you, especially… you never struck me as the type of person who would make so many sacrifices for other people. I’m glad to see I was wrong about that.” Weiss cleared her throat quietly, and her next words were almost inaudible. “I’m proud of you.”

She didn’t reply— Weiss wasn’t the type who liked needless compliments and excessive gushing— but she gave a small nod, and she thought she saw the ghost of a smile curl Weiss’s lips.

“Let’s ditch this place,” Yang said at last, standing up and holding out her hand; Weiss dropped the keys to Bumblebee in them, metal against metal. The fire Dust cast a strange red glow over her face. “You really ready to do this?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be. We have to be quick if we’re to get a headstart, before my father notices we’re gone and alerts the authorities.” Weiss patted the concealed lump on her hip where she had hidden Myrtenaster, and Yang took her duffel from Weiss, unzipping it and letting one gold piece of machinery fall on the bed: Ember Celica, which she slipped on her human arm. The prosthetic would be unclad with a weapon, but she would have to cope, because she had lost Ember Celica’s
right half along with her arm.

A lump in her throat, Yang pulled on her cloak and made sure the duffel had everything—matches, bandages, nonperishables, Lien, clothes, Dust, sleeping bags, a map, and extra bullets. She shouldered it, marveling again at the prosthetic’s ease and how good it felt to be symmetrical once more; she felt as though a flame had been kindled in her heart, sending sparks coursing through her, filling her with old, familiar fire once more.

“Alright,” she said, her eyes narrowing as sharp-edged heat, like the Dust was running through her veins itself, careened through her. “Let’s crash this joint.”

They found themselves careening down a rocky side-path that twined perilously down a mountainside, one of the smaller mountains that was part of the range that ringed Atlas, and would hopefully take them to an airship that could deliver them to Vale. They had no plan, but Yang figured they could map it along the way. She couldn’t deny how good it felt to be back in charge, one hand on the handlebar, the other steering, sending them crashing down the narrow path at full speed, plumes of dust and snow billowing out in their wake.

Weiss let out a cry as they hit a pile of rocks that slanted upwards and went flying over the edge, free-falling for a moment before crashing to the ground and bouncing one or two paces, still flying forwards at high speeds. The wind battered at Yang’s helmet, and she felt a pang of pity for Weiss, who was getting a faceful of her hair as the wind pulled it backwards.

“We’re near the bottom of the mountain!” Weiss cried into the shell of Yang’s ear, and she nodded quickly, adjusting the levels of the cycle so that it slowed slightly, the vibrating scream of the engine subsiding into a low purr that rattled through her very bones.

They came rolling out in a thick cluster of pine trees, the needles coating the ground in a rusty brown carpet, sap clinging to the ridged trunks. They slowed to a stop as the trees thinned out into a sparser forest, the ground thinly blanketed in snow, like a tundra. The air was bitterly cold, and as Yang brought the cycle around to park at the edge of a small glade, she was glad of her prosthetic. A low wave of heat shimmered around it, emanating from the fire Dust that burned within, casting the faintest red glow spilling across the ground.

“We should stop here for tonight, and set up camp,” Weiss said, breaking Yang out of her reverie as she slipped her duffel from the back of the cycle and dropped it on the ground, crouching to rummage inside for the matchbox. “The airship docks will have closed down by now— they don’t fly during the night, but they open back up near dawn— and if we both take turns to keep watch, we should be safe.”

“Because the scary things,” Yang said, a touch of bitterness in her voice, “come out at night.”

She crouched down, opening her hand, watching how the translucent panel that showed her the Dust swirling inside the prosthetic ended in a whorl on her palm, like she was holding a live coal. The gold looked almost white in the moonlight that fell through the conifers, drenching everything in silver, brighter than her sister’s eyes.

“Does it feel normal?” Weiss asked curiously as she struck the match, fire blooming to life and dancing in dappled shadows across her face.
“Not normal, really... it just feels better than not having an arm, which is what I want. Here.” She took the match from Weiss and held it, not able to feel the texture of the wood or the heat of the flame, but just that it was between her fingers. “Go collect dry wood. Sticks, twigs. We need kindling.”

“Am I your maid?” Weiss grumbled, but she obediently got up and began to collect dry pine needles and leaves and scrape them into a pile. Yang, crouched in the center of the clearing, watched the flickering flame on the end of the matchstick.

“The shoe is on the other foot, oh noble heiress,” Yang said with a certain amount of satisfaction. “I gather you’re not used to doing grunt work, are you?”

“And I gather you like bossing people around,” she said as she kicked the last of the kindling into place.

Yang rose to her feet, and, nudging the soft earth with the edge of her toes, she made sure there was a clear circle of dirt ringing the pile, before she tossed the matchstick into the pile of leaves, twigs, and sticks. They watched in silence as it devoured one leaf and then began to spread, curling orange blooms up into the night, light growing and warming up the frigid air.

“What’s that for?” Weiss queried, pointing at the ring of dirt as Yang sat back down, shivering.

“I want to make sure the fire doesn’t eat up all the fuel and then try to catch the forest floor on fire,” she explained. “We’ll just let it burn itself out. We wouldn’t want this place on fire, now would we? Especially not with your track record.”

“The forest catching on fire during initiation was an accident!” Grumbling, Weiss began to root around in their duffels for food as Yang stretched out with a chuckle.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” she asked. “Not having to worry about anything except getting where we need to go next, just sustaining ourselves, and journeying on. It’s nice not to have my father or uncle worried about me… action’s always the best course.”

Weiss’s eyes darkened as she pulled out two packs of dried meat, and an apple. “Perhaps it’s that way for you, Yang. But all this is for me... it’s just a bitter reminder that every day we waste is another day that puts Ruby even further out of our reach, and how utterly alone we are in this world now that Beacon is gone.”

“You’ll get Ruby back. We all will. Even if it kills us.”

Weiss’s face flooded with a strange expression—pity?—and she looked away. “You’ve already done enough sacrificing, Yang. You don’t need to do more.” She stoked the fire with a long stick, jerking it out before the flames could catch it on fire. “Your share of suffering and strife was more than anyone deserves, really.”

“Don’t dodge the subject,” Yang said. “I know I’m the only who got taken out of the fight when Beacon fell.”

“Nobody could have fought Adam.” Weiss threw a stick into the fire, and it toppled in, end over end. Sparks billowed up, illuminating her face in strange ways, her eyes a strange, flat orange. “You gave your all, and you poured your heart into the battle. Regardless of how you feel, circumstance played an immense part in what happened to crumble everything. You were already weakened before the battle began, like it or not, and no one could have asked more of you than what you already did.”
Yang bristled. A faint snarl was embedded in her voice, like a tangle of thorns. “Yeah, I get that I was too weak to kill the bastard. That’s why we’re here now, right? Adam is dead, because that kind of sacrifice made Blake murder him. But if he wasn’t… I’d catch him, and I’d kill him. I don’t care if that kind of anger is what hurt me in the first place… some things I can never forgive, and never forget. He and Cinder ruined my life, and vengeance… I can’t help but want to pay them back for what they did to me.”

“The treachery and violence are spears pointed at both ends, they wound those who resort to them worse than their enemies,” Weiss quoted.

Yang scowled, turning her head away from both Weiss’s searching eyes and the spitting, lapping upward glow of the fire. She chose instead to crane back her head, looking at the cloud-dappled sky, beams of moonlight striking through the clouds and speckles of stars. The barest edges of the faded sun burned a dim red at the tops of the mountains, and soon, it would be completely dark, the waning moon dominating a velvety-dark sky that burned with pinpricks of icy stars.

“Don’t quote Wuthering Heights at me,” she said finally, bringing her gaze back to the crackle-pop of the fire.

Weiss smiled, but it was thin and didn’t quite warm her eyes. “I didn’t think you’d know its origin.”

“I know more than you think I know. I’m not just the dull idiot with a temper, as everyone seems to think.” Yang clenched her jaw, and Weiss’s voice was sad when she spoke next.

“I know you aren’t any of those things, Yang. I know who you were… smart, caring, optimistic, with more fight in you than any of us, really. But… I don’t think I know who you are anymore.”

Yang slowly slumped down, her back sinking as she rested her head on her knees. “I don’t either,” she said quietly. “I just know what I need to do.”

“To find Blake. But you can’t let yourself be altered so much in the process, because then, you might get Blake back, but you’ll lose yourself.”

She pushed her fingers into her hair, gripping her skull with trembling hands, like she might fall apart upon letting go. “I have to focus on finding her. I have to see her again. Without that goal, without that safety net… when I lose that, I…” She swallowed a sob. “I’ve lost everything. My family, my school, my world, the first person I ever loved. And I feel like I’m about to lose my mind.”


“Blake left me,” Yang snarled, something in her recoiling from Weiss’s words almost blindly, and Weiss sighed.

“Did Sun tell you,” she whispered, “that he wasn’t the last one to see her?”

Yang froze, staring into the flickering heart of the fire, the embers shifting and rising and falling in an entrancing pattern. “No,” she said blankly, stunned, gripping her thermos as if it was a lifeline. “No, he didn’t.”

“I saw her last,” Weiss admitted, absently tossing her apple from hand to hand. “After she got you on the airship and after she talked to Sun, she came over and argued a bit with my father— I don’t know if Sun mentioned that— and when my father headed back to the airship, she talked to me for
a few moments before fleeing into the lands beyond Beacon Tower. Don’t paint a picture of her in your head where she left you easily. She was bleeding out from unseen wounds, and those were caused by the prospect of leaving you behind. I can’t pretend to know her reasons, her motivations, but I know that the choice she made was not an easy one.”

“So that’s where we need to head— north of Beacon. It’s not exactly an exact route, but… it’s better than nothing.” Yang took a sip from her thermos, hot liquid spilling down her throat and cascading into her stomach, trying to block out the memories of Blake, but they flooded her mind anyways. For the first time in many, many days, she flitted through the Bond.

Nothing but a cold, yawning emptiness, like an abandoned cave, greeted her. Stale emotions—sorrow, fear—still lingered there, but it felt lifeless, like holding a corpse’s hand. Yang shuddered, quashing back down the blackness of bittersweet pain that welled up within her.

“It was haunting, the way she acted. I… I’ve never seen her so broken,” Weiss said, frowning down at the apple as if it held the secrets of the universe. “It’s to be expected, isn’t it, though? After what happened? She saw you almost die, and if she killed her ex-partner… I can’t even imagine.”

“Doesn’t matter what she did that night, or what she had to go through, even.” Yang retorted, the edges of her eyes stinging, as if from the smoke billowing up from the fire. “You would know that when you make a Bond, you promise never to leave your partner… never, no matter what. Even if hell is on your heels, you keep the promises you make.”

“Yes. I suppose that you have a point as well. There’s no easy answer, but we’ll get the answers if—when—we find her.” Weiss sighed, drawing out Myrtenaster and taking one last bite out of her apple before tossing the core into the heart of the fire. “We should get some rest if we’re to get an early start tomorrow. I’ll take first watch.”

“I know you kissed my sister,” Yang said abruptly.

Weiss choked on the bite of apple. “Excuse me?”

Despite herself, Yang smiled into her thermos, tipping it back to take a swallow of the hot, ashy-tasting drink. “You seem sort of flustered about that. Of course she told me about it, you dunce. Did you think she’d forget?”

Weiss, still choking, gave a little head-bob that Yang took as ‘I had hoped so’.

“Well,” Yang said, swirling her thermos around to slosh the contents within, “was it any good?”

Weiss regained her composure, swallowing her food and wiping her eyes. “I’m not sure it’s any of your business,” she said at last, “but yes.”

“Huh,” Yang said to herself. “I get to kiss my partner after a dance in a nice, warm autumn breeze with the stars twinkling above and everything picture perfect, and you get to kiss my sister in the middle of a death battle while there’s Grimm everywhere, before she goes off and nearly dies. That strikes me as a little unfair.”

Squirming slightly and looking supremely uncomfortable, much to Yang’s amusement, Weiss leaned forward to cover her faux pas and poked the fire, lurching back as sparks hissed out. “I, um, don’t really care if it was fair or not.”

“Sure you don’t. Did she kiss you back?”
“Yang,” Weiss said with a deep, calming breath, “so help me God, I will throw you into this fire.”

Yang chuckled. “There’s the ice queen I was looking for,” she said, before pulling out her sleeping bag and laying it out with a flourish by the fire, marveling at the smooth dexterity of the prosthetic, before settling down and slipping inside. “Hope your watch isn’t too bad. Wake me up when the moon hits its peak, and I’ll take the rest of the watch, and get you up at dawn.” And then, she sat up slightly, blinking in her teammate’s direction as Weiss drew close to the edge of the clearing, searching the darkness. “Hey, Weiss?”

“Yes?”

“I’m glad it’s you, here with me.”

Weiss paused where she had stood at the edge of the clearing like a silent sentinel, pacing slightly, her figure drenched in silvery moonlight, but Yang thought she could see the ghost of a smile flit over her face. “Good night, Yang.”

She tumbled headfirst into the dark world of dreams, falling through what seemed like miles of black, cold water, a flurry of bubbles rushing up around her in a silvery cloud that drowned out everything. And then, with a sputtering crash, she landed in a shadowy room, fire burning on the edges of the walls. It was blurry and dim, but she recognized it instantly: the cafeteria of Beacon Academy, the room where she had lost her world, her arm, and her partner in one fell swoop.

And then he was there, stalking out of the shadows, a dim red glow clinging to his form, and she was seized by terror as his smile gleamed like a crescent in the gloom.

“Adam,” she growled, more to herself than to him. “I haven’t dreamed in months… why now?”

“Because your Bond has withered away,” he said softly. “Funny, how these things come to pass. In her time, Blake dreamed after she had killed. I am her third strike. Her third death. She never was able to escape Ayran’s shadow, you know. The ghost of his passing always haunted her… as mine shall haunt you.”

“But Blake’s the one with the nightmares, not me.”

“No. It has nothing to do with Blake. She had the nightmares, once— all the lucid dreaming and the vivid nightmares of her past, and of her future. That quality, however, is now yours… consider it a last gift of her to you before you shut down your Bond with her. Her fear and trauma pushed that quality she had onto you, and now you, Yang Xiao Long, are the lucid dreamer, the one who has the nightmares.”

“That’s impossible,” she snapped.

“I assure you, it is entirely possible. You can share emotions, locations, and even thoughts through a Bond; why not a character trait? They are curious, fickle creatures, Bonds. Oft they have been thought to share merely emotion, but they have qualities that are undiscovered, unexplored… souls are layered, complex things, and two connected souls will surely have many peculiarities in that connection, varying from person to person.”

“So Blake won’t have any more nightmares, wherever she is... all those dreams she used to have...
about you, and Ayran, and the White Fang—I remember, she said they were vivid, and she was lucid in them—I’ll get them now?"

“You will not get her specific dreams, no,” he growled, drawing closer. “But you have your own demons, your own material fit for nightmares… perhaps far more than she has ever had.”

Yang looked away, trembling, and saw that on her right side, her arm, and her prosthetic, was gone, ending in only a stump, but Adam’s hissing, sibilant voice drew her attention again.

“We share one other connection besides Blake.” His eyes glittered. “You are just like me.”

“I’m nothing like you,” she snarled, and he began to circle her, his voice like the crackle of the flame.

“You have a dark heart in you. You long for revenge—against me, against Mercury, against everyone who ever left you. Your semblance, even, only has the quality of destruction, just like mine, and your eyes of yours, they glow red, don’t they? Just as my own semblance does. And, like me, you cannot let go of the past.” He narrowed his eyes. “Revenge, darkness, determination, the inability to let go. You are just like me, Yang.”

“You’re evil. I’m not—”

Adam let out a soft growl. “But is the world really divided into clean shades of black and white? Her letter to you even mentioned those selfsame shades of gray that exist on every spectrum of morality.”

“You chased after Blake because you wanted to possess her,” Yang said. “I’m doing it because I love her.”

“No. By all means, run back to that traitorous bitch you call a partner.” Adam’s voice was soft and inexorable. “Run back to her. Chase her, just as you chased your mother and everyone else who abandoned you, and kill yourself in the process. Go crawling back to her, just like the discarded trash you are, right? She left you, after all. She killed me and abandoned you as if you were inconsequential, nothing more than a toy to be used and discarded. She’s no better than I am.”

“No,” Yang whispered. “No, she… she’s not.”

“She decided that nothing was more important than her own view of things, instead of considering that there might be other things she overlooked.” His lips twisted into a mirthless smile. “Darkness lives in you, in her, too. When she left, it would seem that she forfeit all rights to your heart. But still, you follow her, even when it nearly kills you.”

“It’s something you wouldn’t understand,” Yang flashed back, anger flaring up in her heart, licking her veins with scorching, white-hot hatred. “Loving someone, no. You only get possession and obsession. You wouldn’t understand loving someone better than you love yourself, and understanding them and what they did, even if it costs you.”

“Cost,” he growled, sounding like a guttural, wounded animal. “Isn’t such a cost too heavy, Huntress? You made one mistake and it cost you everything—everything.”

With that, he lashed out, his sword clattering as he unsheathed it. She cried out, and his sword scythed downward towards her face; twisting and writhing away, she felt a tremendous pain in her arm—

—and she woke up, gasping, as Weiss shook her shoulder, fingers on the spot where flesh melded
with metal. The trees above them glowed with a creamy, pale light, and Yang sat up, letting out a long breath to calm her hammering heart.

“It’s dawn now,” she said quietly, and Yang could see the dark circles under her eyes, shadows of sleeplessness. “We should be going if we’re to make it out before my father sends out his search parties and forces air travel commerce to cease.”

“You were supposed to wake me up for my watch,” Yang grumbled, but she obliged, crawling out of her sleeping bag and shuddering as the icy cold breath of winter ran its fingers down her spine.

“I figured you needed the sleep more than I,” she murmured, turning away to pack up their stuff and scuff dirt over the last glowing embers of the fire. It died with a sputtering hiss, and Yang rolled up her sleeping bag and packed it into her duffel, drawing the keys to Bumblebee from her pocket. She rolled her fingers, watching the prosthetic slowly fill with an orange glow as it activated.

“So what’s the plan for today?” Weiss asked as she slid onto the back of the motorcycle. Yang took a deep breath, noting how the air seemed slightly tinged with the smell of ice, and how the wind whistled through the trees. The paling dawn sky, streaked with rose and gold, was slowly being shielded by thick cloud cover.

“It’s going to snow later, pretty heavily, I’d guess… those clouds don’t look too good. It might reach Vale, so that’s not good— it’ll obliterate any chances of tracking… her. But if we hurry, we should be able to reach the airship docks before the storm hits, and possibly get over the ocean before the snow turns into a blizzard. Once we’re there, we can restock on supplies and then be on our way.”

“You know an awful lot about this kind of thing,” Weiss marveled, a touch of awe in her voice as Yang hopped onto the cycle, turning the keys in the ignition and watching as it hummed to life, blasting leaves away.

“What can I say? I came ready for a mission, and I’m not going to let a few little snowflakes deter me from it. Now let’s burn rubber.”

With a crooked grin, an exhilaration that she hadn’t felt in ages pounding through her head and bloodstream, Yang hit the gas and they shot away into the coming dawn, embarking on their perilous journey with nothing but the determination in their hearts, and the cold land of Atlas at their backs.
Chapter XXXII - Winter Turning

Chapter Summary

Crosshares dedicated to Naomi. I hear she's fond of them.

We're very near the end of The Final Warning, and the series in itself. I don't know how much more of me you'll see on Ao3, but I've not been writing a lot of RWBY fiction lately (that is to say, none, except for tidbits of Nevermore (Reprise). It's time for me to turn my eyes to bigger endeavors. I hope you all enjoy these closing chapters, regardless :)

Weiss

Weiss shivered as the airship touched down on the northeast coast of Vale, the body of the ship shuddering as it ruddered towards its landing.

“Stop shivering,” Yang snapped, her voice soaked with irritation. “It’s not even cold in here.” She seemed antsy, on edge; she kept drumming her prosthetic fingers against the window of the airship, creating a repetitive clicking sound that drilled into Weiss’s mind annoyingly. But it wasn’t hard to guess what she was thinking about, and Weiss didn’t blame her; she couldn’t get her mind off of her partner, either.

They departed the airship, and Weiss circled around to the front of the dock as Yang went to the back to get her motorcycle from the luggage-holder of the ship. She came back soon enough, lugging it behind her and looking distinctly frazzled from the influx of people.

They both hopped on the cycle, and Yang didn’t gun the engine, but she drove it slowly, and they weaved out of the crowd of people leaving the airships and swerved onto a road that wound away towards the distant shadow of the city. Cars slowly drove on their flanks, avoiding the patches of ice that dotted the road.

“Do you think we’re doing the right thing?” Yang asked abruptly, her voice almost lost in the wind. Weiss could see her stiffen ever-so slightly.

Flummoxed, Weiss ducked her head, trying to get out of the biting gale. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know.” She gripped the handlebars, segueing into another lane and speeding up. “You know me. A lot of the things I do are done in moments of blind passion and emotion… and I usually end up regretting them later. The Vytal Tournament, trying to save Blake’s life, coming to find you…. this is just another thing I did out of an emotion I felt. Determination, I guess. But I can’t help but worry if it’s another decision I’ll regret.”

Feeling awkward— she had never been good at comforting others, not when her go-to was scathing sarcasm— she said, “If going to find your sister and the girl you love—lost,” she tacked on hastily, noticing how Yang had bowed her head at the word ‘love’, “is something you feel you might regret, then of course you don’t have to do it… but it’s the right decision, Yang. You could have stayed at Patch, surely, and spent your life wallowing there— but you’d have always wished for
better, if I know you. You would always be pondering the ‘what-ifs’. And even if you do end up regretting it… you saved me. You got me out of Atlas. Maybe you didn’t succeed in saving Blake, but you did a good thing, the right thing, when you came for me. If what I’ve heard about your mother from Ruby is true… you’re a far better person that she is, in any case. You didn’t give up on your team.”

“Thank you,” Yang said very quietly, before pulling the motorcycle around and swinging it into a dirt lot in front of a run-down store. “We’re here. I’ll go inside and restock, you can fill up the tank, and then we’ll be on our way.”

She hopped off, parking the cycle and striding across the earthy lot, puffs of dust billowing up in her wake. As Yang disappeared into the shop, Weiss looked up. A murder of crows were swooping overhead, calling out their harsh, raucous cries into the dawning day, and she remembered Ruby and Yang’s uncle, who had fought her sister so long ago. Qrow. He’d seemed dark and restless, and Weiss could sense the same restlessness, the same searching longing, inside of his niece, Yang. Yang had acquired a guarded loneliness, like a lone wolf, and Weiss feared that it might never be extinguished.

Turning her mind to more hopeful thoughts, she thought of Ruby’s eyes, her laugh, her hope, and a pang of longing went through her, filling the Bond that was not yet shut down or broken. A pang of sadness echoed back to Weiss— Ruby’s sadness.

_I’m coming for you, Ruby_, she breathed out on a longing exhale, looking up at the sun, and wondering if somewhere, some place, her partner was looking at the sky, too. _I’m not giving up._

_Not yet._

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**Yang**

The interior of the ramshackle little shop was dark, and the walls were piled with messy assortments of supplies— pottery, postcards, jewelry. The back corner was filled with more sensible items— an ATM, nonperishables, lighters, and Dust, though it was a very basic selection of small samples: there was only fire, water, and earth Dust. Yang looked down at her prosthetic with a little smile— the fire Dust within it, connected to her Aura itself, burned so much brighter than any dusty sample of Dust could hope to achieve.

She walked to the back, picking a lighter and some dried meat, granola bars, water bottles, and piled them into her arms before turning around and walking back to the storefront. The shop’s owner was waiting behind the cash register when she strode up. It was a stern-looking woman, with two-toned eyes— one glittered icy blue, and the other a bright gold. She had two white Faunus ears perched atop a mass of thick silvery-white hair that was pulled back into a braid.

And Yang realized, looking at her, that she looked oddly familiar.

“Good afternoon,” the woman greeted her, her tone silky with an accent Yang couldn’t place, one that sound vaguely like Vacuo or Menagerie— they always sounded like they had a burr in their voices, making their ‘r’s roll. “Will those be all of your purchases?”

“Er, yes.” Shaking away her thoughts, Yang piled her supplies on the counter, exposing her prosthetic as she did so. The woman looked down at it, a flicker of surprise in her eyes, followed
by sympathy.

“Are you a victim of the Fall of Beacon, child?”

“I am,” she replied, a touch of defensiveness in her tone.

“Pardon me. I mean no harm; it’s just that I’m curious. The effects of that terrible night are very far-reaching, as you know… especially among the Faunus. The leader of the White Fang was killed in the attack, we heard… they’re reforming, certainly, but it will be a long process. Regardless… I am sorry, young one.” Her golden-amber eye looked even brighter as sunlight fell through the dusty window, and then with a flickering flash of recognition, Yang realized who the woman looked like.

“I’m sorry,” Yang said. “This might sound weird, but you… you look really familiar to this girl I know. Like, really familiar. Do you know a girl named Blake? Blake Belladonna?”


“Oh,” she managed. “Oh my God.”

“And I recognize you, as well,” Khione marveled, her expression lifting in recognition. “She spoke of you, in that talk we had all those months ago. You’re her partner. But if you’re her… where is she?” A look of horror clouded her eyes. “She wasn’t killed, was she?”

“No,” Yang muttered. “Almost, but… no.”

“I see.” Khione lifted a brow, and began to clean out an intricate pottery bowl with a grimy-looking rag. “It is good to hear, that she is alive. If both tyrannical leaders of the Fang are dead…”

“Blake killed them both.”

Khione didn’t look too shocked at that, but a brief expression of surprise flitted over her face. “She avenged her father… and herself, in a way. Ayran murdered him, you know. And Adam Taurus murdered— in spirit— the bright little girl I knew, and turned her into a broken creature. Blake set things right. And she followed the advice I gave her so long ago. Now,” a brief sigh escaped her, the exhale shaking her shoulders, “I can be at peace.”

Yang frowned. “Are you… is this place someplace that makes you happy? Alone, on the outskirts of Vale?”

“Yes… I am happy with my place in life.” She set down the rag she had been cleaning with, her eyes boring into Yang, icy azure and warm gold. “Though my brother is dead, as I’m sure you know of Brian Belladonna, and my niece has fled… the world is healing, and most importantly, the world always goes on, despite that which may blight it and try to harm those who inhabit it. Remnant is a remarkably strong place, full of those of good character, much like yourself.” She looked thoughtful, before pressing a bundle of Lien into Yang’s hands, and waving away her protests as she bagged the items on the counter and handed them to her, free of charge. “Go find her, you understand? I told her not to give up, once. To follow her heart above all else. Now I will tell that to you. Go. Do not give up on my niece, young one. Find her.”

“Thank you,” Yang managed, before she grabbed the bag and fled the shop, bursting out into the lot and blinking in the bright sunlight.

Trying to smooth out the stricken look from her face, she strode back to Weiss, who was plugging
up the gas tank of the motorcycle and climbing back on. She nodded in approval as Yang shoved the re-stocked duffel at her, hands trembling slightly, before she did a double-take.

“Wait a minute, what’s up with you?” Weiss asked incredulously. “You look as though you’ve just seen your own ghost.”

“I saw someone.” Weiss still looked dubious, and Yang turned her face away so Weiss wouldn’t see how her mask of cool confident bravo had slipped, revealing her true, desperate uncertainty, and alarm.

“Oh, really? And who would that someone be?”

Deciding that lying wouldn’t really get her anywhere, Yang sighed and turned the key in the ignition. “Blake’s father’s sister.”

“She has an aunt?” Weiss’s voice was astounded. “I didn’t even know she had any surviving family left.”

“I knew it— she told me about it a long time ago— but Blake wasn’t ever really big on the idea of family by blood. She never talked about them much, but I thought her aunt was long gone. Neither of them really cared much for each other. I’d assumed she lived in Vacuo or Menagerie, not Vale. I didn’t expect to see her here, that’s all… it surprised me.”

“I would have thought it was nice, to see her… anything related to your partner, really.” Weiss sounded a bit wistful, and Yang guessed she was thinking of Ruby. “Especially after the Fall… it’s good to see that some people we know are alright, don’t you think?”

“Maybe it is, for you. All it is for me is a reminder of what I have lost.” Her voice darkened as though a thundercloud had passed through it.


“Maybe,” she murmured, before staring up the cycle and pulling out of Khione’s lot with dust billowing up in their wake, the rising sun ahead of them, and Atlas behind.

She did not look back once.

They made good time, whizzing through roads and pathways until the sun began to fall. They entered a path that cut through a woody grove, and Yang slowed the cycle down so they wouldn’t crash.

As they cautiously bumped and jolted down the rickety path, a dark shadow melted out from the woods ahead of them, red eyes burning with hunger. It was a Grimm, and Yang knew that they would only grow in numbers as the two girls neared Beacon; the old haunt of the school, still drenched in bloodlust, sadness, and fear, would be an irresistible breeding ground for them. Yang pulled the motorcycle to a stop and they both hopped off, tensing up.

“Do you want to take it down?” Weiss said, one hand on Myrtenaster.

“Might as well,” Yang reasoned, obliging as she twisted Ember Celica on her left wrist. “I’ve got to see how this prosthetic thingy works at some point, right?”

Weiss looked briefly amused. “Well, let no one say you aren’t fond of the hands-on approach.”
“Don’t sound so scandalized! Trying to kill a Beowolf is child’s play—they have even less brains than Neptune.” Leaving Weiss rolling her eyes, Yang charged forward down the mountainous path, towards the Beowolf. It lunged with a snarl of rage, and she ducked and rolled as the wolf leaped over her. Eyes narrowing, she swiped out as white claws flashed for her face, the prosthetic glowing like an ember. The strike caught the wolf in the ribs, and it growled gutturally, backing up.

Yang shot out her fist, uppercutting in a sharp left hook, and the Beowolf yelped once as the force of the impact shattered its jaws. Another hit snapped its neck, and it faded away, leaving her barely tired.

“Not too shabby, I think,” Yang said, before she turned around as a deep snarl echoed above her.

“Watch out!” Weiss shouted, her eyes widening, but as Yang turned around, she was too late to react as another Grimm launched itself towards her, closing the span in seconds. Just before its claws hit her face, a brown-colored streak shot out from the woods and plowed into the wolf’s side, sending them both rolling to the side in a flurry of snarls. Yang backed away as the wolf faded away to darkness with a whimper, revealing its attacker, who was barely winded.

“You two shouldn’t be out here,” they chided, looking sternly over their glinting black sunglasses. “Don’t you know that the bad things come out to play in the woods?”

Suddenly the attacker’s appearance registered in Yang’s mind, and she opened her mouth to speak the person’s name, but Weiss beat her to it.

“Coco?”

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Weiss

“Since most of us come from Vacuo, like Velvet, and Mistral—Yatsu and I—we can’t get home,” Coco explained as she led Weiss and Yang through the thin woods. “They’ve stopped airships and boats going to and from all kingdoms, except Atlas and Vale, because of Dust shipments, and the General’s request. And, of course, we can’t stay in the city; it’s been quarantined till they clear out all the Grimm and bodies. Most students have just cleared out and been on the move, camping around and helping each other, but we’ve set up in an old hunter’s cabin here. There’s not a lot of Grimm, and it’s far enough from the school that we don’t get all the negativity…but it’s close enough for news.”

“What do you mean ‘we’?” Yang asked, looking tired and frazzled—another distinct difference between her and the energetic, confident Yang, Weiss noticed—as she hopped over a tendril of brambles. “Just you and your team, or…”

Coco rolled her eyes. “No, we’ve actually got Flynt, Dove, Russel, and Sky—from Team CRDL—with us, can you believe it? We had Team TEAL earlier on…I liked them better than what we’ve got now. Talos was an excellent Huntsman, Amber wasn’t afraid to make sure the boys kept their mouths shut, Leah could do wonders with keeping the worst of the weather off of us, and Eliás was brilliant at keeping our morale up…but they left to go help Glynda repair Vale about a week ago. So now it’s the seven of us.”

“Those boneheaded bullies?” Weiss interjected, shocked. “They’re with you?”

“They’ve mellowed out, believe it or not. They…changed, after Cardin and Neon died. I can’t say
I liked them much before, and I can’t say I like them now, but… they know what it’s like to lose a teammate, and so do we, so we have some common ground with that. We’ve been getting along together.”

“And hell has frozen over,” Yang muttered, but she didn’t sound genuinely venomous, and her eyes gleamed in the half-light with something that looked like pity. Looking away, Weiss hopped over a fallen log, and she thought she could see a tendril of smoke twisting up through the trees ahead, followed by the gleam of lit windows.

“When supplies run low,” Coco explained, “we send two runners to nab some from the city. I was out patrolling the border to clear out any Grimm— lucky for you, or else, you’d be wolf meat.”

“Over my dead body,” Yang said with a little snort.

“It most definitely would have been— you’re right on that.” Coco’s gray eyes darkened. “Well, that’s what we’ve been up to, in the past few weeks… and what about you two? Where are you headed? Remnant’s a lot more treacherous nowadays. Most people are holing up at home, clinging to what they have left… it’s not often you see two kids out on the run.”

“We’re going to find our team,” Weiss said, puffing for breath. Riding on a motorcycle for days, and being in her father’s manor, had robbed her of her usual competence and endurance, but only this journey would be able to give it back to her. “First to the southernmost reaches of Vale, and then to Mistral… however we can.”

Coco didn’t look surprised. “As good as a mission as any, I suppose. I wish you luck. And without further adieu, we’re here!”

They pushed through one last cluster of trees and brush and came upon a little log cabin, dusty glass windows gleaming with light, and smoke curling up in gray puffs from a brick chimney. As they arrived, the door swung outward, revealing Velvet, who let out a cry of startled excitement.

“Coco! Is that Yang and Weiss?”

“No, it’s their exact doppelgängers,” Coco retorted, but her voice was affectionate. “I didn’t see anything on the borders— just a couple Beowolves, and I hauled these two out of becoming Grimm meat. They’re not staying with us, but they’ll drop in to say hi.”

Coco brushed past Velvet and lightly kissed her on the cheek before vanishing inside— a new development, Weiss thought in surprise; they must have confessed their feelings to each other after the Fall of Beacon made everyone realize how fragile life really was— and Weiss chanced a glance at Yang, who looked suddenly lost and helpless, her eyes downcast and filled with misery. However tough she had acted, she was obviously pretending she was okay, hiding all her sorrow to be strong. It wasn’t hard to guess who she was thinking of.

“We must be going soon,” Weiss said hastily, filling the silence as they walked in. “Our journey is long.”

“Yes, thing, but we can help you restock a bit, can’t we?” Coco swept one of her arms out, rolling her eyes. “Welcome to our humble abode.”

There were old mud tracks on the floor, and a cluster of boots piled by the door. A merry fire crackled in the grate, and the cabin was filled with the smell of something cooking over the fire in a black pot. A worn rug was slightly askew in front of the hearth, and a large, old sofa held four teenage boys, who were fiddling with their Scrolls. In the kitchen, messing around with a pair of
knives and a rather-large looking chunk of cabbage, was Yatsu.

Velvet shut and locked the door as Coco crossed the room to join Yatsu in the kitchen, tossing a sharp reprimand over her shoulder at the boys. “Look sharp, idiots, and you might recognize that we’ve got two guests.”

Dove and Russel grunted a welcome, flicking their gazes up to look at Weiss and Yang, before losing interest. Sky only narrowed his eyes at the two of them, before rising and stalking out of the room to a dark hallway, which was fine by Weiss; she’d never liked Team CRDL, anyways. Flynt, however, stood up and nodded to them both. “I remember you,” he informed Yang, with a grin that seemed slightly hollow, his eyes flatter without their arrogant twinkle. “The Xiao Long girl that kicked Neon’s ass.” He looked a little sadder at the mention of his partner, but he plugged on. “Good to see you’re okay. I’m sorry about your arm, though. That’s tough luck.”

Yang nodded, the faintest touch of curtness in her body language, and Flynt raised his eyebrows.

“So where’s the girl that threw herself in the lava to try and take me out, huh? Blake, right?”

“She’s gone,” Yang said flatly, in a tone that sent chills down Weiss’s spine, before she turned around to join Coco in the kitchen, leaving Weiss in the room with Flynt, Dove, and Russel.

“Did I say something wrong?” Flynt looked worried.

“She’s just taking the losses pretty hard,” Weiss said softly, and he shrugged.

“Well, I guess we all are, in a way. It was good to see you both— even if I do think your father’s company is a washout.”

Believe me, Weiss thought grimly as Flynt turned around and stalked down the hallway, so do I.

But I’m gone now. I’m gone; I’ve fled... I chose my own destiny, didn’t I? And that is here, with my team... he can’t hold me down anymore, truly. I chose to come with Yang, no matter the impossible odds... Weiss stared into the fire, and felt her heart lift ever-so slightly; despite whatever awaited her and Yang, she was free now.

Free, and never to be confined again.
Yang

Yang paced the kitchen, her teeth clenched, and Coco let out an amused snort.

“Yang, you’re going to wear a hole in the floorboards, at this rate. If you’re trying not to seem on edge, you’re doing really badly, you know that? Sit down, take a breather.”

Reluctantly, she stopped her pacing and sat down on the floor, back against the roughly-hewn cabinets. Yatsu looked over at her, sympathy on his face, and she noticed a faint scar over his eyes from where Mercury had shoved his face into the burning geyser. That reminded her of Adam’s horrible, scarred eyes, and she flinched away with a shudder.

“Do not reprimand her too harshly, Coco,” he said in his deep rumble of a voice. “The past few weeks have been trying for all of us.”

“True enough.” She curled her lip at the decimated piles of cabbage he had chopped up. “Hey, what’s that even for?”

“The stew, of course. It should be nearly done by now… though I suspect the boys won’t be too pleased by the meal.”

“They rarely are,” Coco said with a delicate sigh.

Yatsuhashi laughed at that, and shook his head. Scooping up the cabbage leaves, he left the room to go dump them in the sizzling pot over the fire, and Velvet entered the kitchen as he left it. Yang relaxed slightly, comforted by the homey presence of the room, the loud, affectionate chatter, the familiar crackle of the fire, and the smell of a cooking meal.

“I didn’t greet you earlier, but hello, Yang,” Velvet said, her voice quiet. “It is good to see that you’re alright.”

“You, too.” Yang scrambled to her feet, not wanting to look rude, and Velvet nodded; her eyes were dark and haunted, but she managed a smile, walking over and embracing Yang. “I’m glad you’re okay,” the Faunus repeated. “I saw you in the courtyard, and after that… I didn’t know what happened to you. It’s good to see you’re back on your feet.”

“Velvet, I’m so sorry… about Beacon, and Fox, and…”

“Don’t be,” she said immediately. “It isn’t your fault, and we know he’s in a better place now.” She looked out of the kitchen at Weiss, who was warming her hands by the fire and talking with Yatsu. Yang felt a pang of guilt— Weiss had come along so obligingly, not complaining once, even
though the journey had been exhausting, cold, and downright miserable at times, standing by Yang’s side with no qualms; she had helped get the prosthetic, get on the airship, and fled her father, not even voicing concern about it. “I thanked her for saying the requiem and burying him… hopefully he’s at peace with that.”

“To lose a teammate,” Yang murmured. “I can’t even imagine. I’d go mad, I think.”

“We’re managing. It’s not easy, though… I keep expecting to hear his voice or bump into one of his Braille books he always left lying around.” Velvet’s eyes shone with tears, before she smiled, though it was watery. “But at least I’ve got Coco.”

Coco came up behind her, wrapping her hands around the Faunus girl’s waist and resting her chin on her shoulder. “You do.”

Yang turned her head away, not seeing the happy couple, but instead a pair of golden eyes, dark hair, and a timid smile, and suddenly the closeness of the kitchen, which had seemed so comforting moments before, was stifling her, choking and drowning her in memories that she could not escape.

“Excuse me,” she mumbled. “I… I have to go.”

She all but fled, brushing past the two, crashing past Weiss, who let out a startled cry, and plunged out the front door into the darkening woods, shadows elongating as the sun died in the sky. She fell to her knees at the edge of the woods, her prosthetic fingers burrowing in the dirt, but she could not feel it, would never feel anything again, not with that arm. She gulped in fresh, clean, cold breaths of the searing winter air. Her cheeks were wet, and she realized that she was crying.

She had forced herself to become strong so quickly after Sun had talked to her that it had bottled up, everything she had felt, and now it was exploding, rocking through her veins, making her collapse.

“Find her,” Khione had said, but that was easier said than done. Blake Belladonna, for all intents and purposes, was gone. She was never going to return. Yang wasn’t the same, and there was every chance Blake wouldn’t be, either. And gods, now she had to live with the unbearable realization that the Blake that she had met on the night before orientation was gone, dead and gone like Pyrrha, like Summer, gone as the person she loved and the partner she needed. She was gone, swallowed up by Adam’s grip. She was gone, and she was never coming back. The only thing Yang would ever see in her place was a memory—a pathetic copy, a copy who wasn’t her and never would be, whose memory was kinder and safer, but a copy all the same. Adam had ripped away so much more than her arm. He had ripped away her Bond, her trust, her soul, Blake.

A snowflake brushed her hair, spiraling down to land on the prosthetic, where it melted against the metal. She shuddered, breath coming fast and shallow, her body numb with the bitter cold, breath puffing out in front of her. Darkness curled in at the edges of her visions. She heard someone calling her voice out, ringing out into the frigid night, and for a moment, she allowed herself to think it was Blake, calling her home. Yang. Yang. Yang.

“Yang!” Came the shout, and then there was a hand fistd in the back of her vest, yanking her back to life. She looked up incuriously to see Weiss, her blue eyes wide and frantic. “By God, I thought you were dead!”

She let out a breath, but the chill in her veins did not abate. “Yang, get up!” Weiss barked, shaking Yang roughly. “You’re going to freeze out here, come on, get up!”
Yang was limp, barely able to comprehend her words, and Weiss crouched beside her, snowflakes dusting her hair. Time seemed to have jumped ahead; when had the ground become white, with the falling snow? And why was she so bitterly, bitterly cold?

“I did not come with you all this way just so you could freeze to death on me,” Weiss snarled, her eyes nearly black. “Get up.”

“What’s the point?” Yang’s voice was scraped raw. “Even if I… even if we find her… even if it’s all said and done… nothing will ever be the same, nothing will change the fact that she left, left me…”

“No. You are better than this.” Weiss’s voice rang with conviction. “You are Yang, and there is so much more to you than ‘the girl who was left behind’. You’re strong, smart, caring… but most importantly, you’re you, and no matter what happens, no matter who breaks your heart, no one can take that away. I’m not going to let you give up. Nothing is worth that.”

Yang felt the slightest bit of warmth flicker in her veins, thawing the cold, just a bit. “Do you really think that?” she whispered, breath puffing out in white smoke.

“I know it. You’re my teammate, and I won’t let you give up, or lie to you, not for anything.” She pulled on Yang’s prosthetic, helping her stumble to her feet. “Come on. Let’s get you warmed up.”

They left the hunter’s cabin early in the morning, before dawn had even lit up the sky, promising to send news to the shattered remnants of Teams CFVY, CRDL, and FNKI if they could.

“We’re getting closer,” Yang murmured as they sped down a road that wound towards the city, the icy wind rushing in her ears as she swerved to avoid a patch of black ice. “We’re maybe a week away.”

Weiss stiffened. “Can you tell through your Bond?”

“No,” Yang said with an ironic amusement in her voice, “no, that’s long since shut down. Logic just tells me we’re near… it’s been about a month since the Fall, and she must have made it to the southernmost corner of this continent by then; she can’t have crossed the sea, not with the blockades on oversea travel and airships.”

“Are you worried about it? Finding her, I mean?”

Yang was silent.

“Well, I suppose that’s telling in itself,” Weiss muttered.

Yang did not reply to that. She took a deep breath of the icy dawn air, letting it wake her into clarity as they sped on through the blossoming dawn. They were surrounded by an avenue of trees on either side, boughs swaying noisily in the rising wind. The dark branches, spiderwebbing out from their trunks, framed the misty, blue-gray sky, and above them, the clouds were thick; the faintest saffron glow on the horizon, lined by jagged mountains like serrated teeth, told that dawn was nearing. Today would be colder than it had been in a while, and the dead of winter was on the air; it tasted of cold, smoky wetness, in a way that let her know that a snowstorm was fast approaching. Her left hand was numb with coldness, but the prosthetic still felt as fluid and warm as ever, even with fuzzy white frost riming its surface and melting as quickly as it solidified.
“Yang,” Weiss said abruptly as they zipped down a slanting road, bouncing back onto the main road, “did you know that your sister made it over to Mistral before they ceased oversea travel?”

Yang sped up, and the trees turned to black blurs as they streaked down the road. Wind roared in her ears, and she said loudly so Weiss could hear her, “I didn’t know, but I kind of thought she must have… she’s very determined, Ruby is. But I’d expect you already knew that, huh?”

“Determined,” Weiss agreed, before her tone darkened, and she went on, “and boneheaded, too. Jaune won’t be able to keep her safe from the treachery of the wilderness, and she’s too determined to know her boundaries without burning herself out… I guess Nora and Ren will be better at keeping an eye on her, but they aren’t spectacular fighters… I’d feel better if she had someone with her. Like Pyrrha…”

“Well, Pyrrha’s dead.” A note of frost crept back into Yang’s voice. “Besides, nothing can really hurt Ruby now. Didn’t you hear?”

“I heard rumors from Winter, but… no, I don’t really know.”

Yang slowed down so the wind lessened, and she was more audible. “There’s an old legend about children who are born with silver eyes having huge power over Grimm. Basically, they’re born-and-bred warriors, but the power is something they grow into as time goes on; it’s not something they can just use whenever they feel like it. Seeing Pyrrha die… it triggered Ruby’s power, in a way, but she wasn’t ready— she shouldn’t have been able to use it, not yet, because she wasn’t developed enough. That’s why it almost killed her… and it killed Cinder and the wyvern so easily. Qrow told her this, and he told me, too… but it made her feel responsible, so that’s why she ran off on us. Lucky, huh?” Bitterness dripped from every word.

“My God,” Weiss said, not seeming to notice Yang’s attitude in the wake of such a revelation about her partner. “To be the subject of a legend, with the world’s eyes on you at such a young age…”

“Yeah, it’s tough, alright. She inherited it from her mom. Summer was one of them, too. They’re hard to believe, legends are… but when it’s staring you in the face, wearing the face of someone you know and love… you kind of have to accept it, you know?”

“Of course,” Weiss said, sounding slightly dazed. Yang frowned, speeding up, darkness shadowing her face as they plunged into a road that wound through a grove of dark trees.

After Blake, she thought grimly, I’m coming to find you, sister.

Even if it kills me.

Blake (One Week Later)

She was trapped.

Vale’s continent was a large one, certainly, but she had reached the southernmost tip, and as beautiful as the ocean was, it was confining her. Oversea travel wasn’t an option, and nothing short
of growing a pair of wings and flying could get her off this damned place, to keep the game going, to keep the White Fang on her heels. Glumly, she thought that, right about now, she’d welcome being some sort of bird Faunus. Not that many creatures could survive the treacherous over-seas travel.

The sea let out a thunderous boom, as if scolding her, and she bristled, her ears flattening as five-foot high waves slapped the shore angrily, dusting her face with droplets of salt spray. She turned away with a quiet sigh, gathering her cloak closer as icy prickles of coldness ran down her back in a vicious chill.

Should she circle back around and head for the lands west of Vale city? Beacon was located up north, behind a mountain pass, a couple miles away from Mountain Glenn and sheltered by the city. She was miles away— maybe hundreds of miles— but if she circled down around the coast and went northward to the western end…

She shook her head, trekking away from the cold shore. Everything felt hollow and uncertain now, ever since that lightning-bolt of pain had shattered through her veins and crushed her Bond down to inactivity. It hadn’t been as worse as the pain she had felt when she had broken her and Adam’s Bond, but it had been entirely worse, in some ways… if only because she had felt Yang’s anger and heartbreak, for the smallest moment, and understood what a terrible thing she had done by fleeing.

“Necessary,” she reminded herself, her voice hoarse. “It was necessary.”

Even the thought of Adam made her flinch. She was utterly alone, but it didn’t feel like freedom, not anymore. It felt like an endless tunnel of darkness and terror. She turned her head sharply as a crackle sounded from the woods behind her, and narrowed her eyes as a Grimm slunk out of the trees, its massive jaws slavering as it growled at her, presumably drawn towards her negativity. She unsheathed Gambol Shroud, shooting at the beast; it collapsed with a dull whine, fading away to smoke.

The woods crackled again. Blake backed away, one hand still on her weapon, and then her eyes widened as a figure melted out of the trees, a bright figure with a glinting covering on their arm, and a look of iciness on their face.

All her thoughts of where to go next scattered from her mind as if blown by a storm, and sheer terror filled her veins, the world fading away to a distant blur, except the one focal place her eyes were focused, on the person’s face, which was in clear, sharp focus. The sound of the sea receded, and the wind, and the snow, and she did not feel cold anymore as the fire of fear roared to life inside of her. Blake’s heart staggered in her chest, blood roaring in her ears, as she gaped at the person, her treacherous heart still beating unevenly in her chest.

“Yang?”
Chapter XXXIV - Of Love, and Love Lost

Chapter Summary

This the one other scene that was in production long before this story was dreamed up. Here’s to you, chapter thirty-six. May you live on in the readers’ hearts as long and bother them as you have needled at my own, with editing, drafting, reshaping, and every sort of rewriting known to man.

God, that's cheesy enough to feed all of Wisconsin. Onwards! I know I said this for the Adam chapter, but I was younger and more foolish then (who am I kidding? I still am) but I would love it if y'all left a review for this one. If you don't feel an inclination to do that after finishing this chapter, I haven't done my job properly.


Yang

It had been one week since they left Team CFVY behind, and it had taken them one week to reach this lonely, desolate place that fringed the endless sea.

Yang had left Weiss behind, in the forest, waiting with the motorcycle and the supplies so she could scout out and pinpoint Ruby’s exact location. The sea was ahead of them; after a week’s travel, they had reached the coast of southern Vale. Yang was patrolling the area, to check for Grimm— and the unlikely prospect that Blake might be there. It wasn’t easy, and the grid of clouds above her head threatened to bring more snow, piling down on top of the white drifts that had blanketed these solitary woods. Everything was still, quiet, the world in suspended silence, as if holding its breath.

Irritable at the snow, the thorns lurking beneath it to tangle and trip her up, and at the world in general, Yang trundled through a thicket of thorny brush, shaking off snow from her shoulders and leaping over a frozen stream, clearing it by several feet. A raw, damp cold pushed its way through her skin, making her shudder as she peered through the narrow trunks of the trees at the sea, and tensed up.

There was someone on the shore.

Despite the snow—despite the bitter cold—someone stood there, as out of place as if Yang had opened her bedroom door to find a slavering wolf standing in the place of her bed. The figure stood with their face tilted towards the misty place where the sky met the sea, heedless of the snow, as if they were part of the raging waves and the cries of the terns and gulls circling overhead. The ocean swelled and receded at their feet, sucking at their toes as if to sweep them away into the black, churning endlessness. Something about the lonelines of their stature and how they seemed to be transfixed on the distant horizon made Yang feel a flicker of impossible emptiness and misery. Nobody good would be out here.

They were dressed in a lumpy, dark cloak, pulled over their head, shielding all of their features.
Yang cocked her gauntlet and gripped the tree harder, prosthetic glinting in the dim light. As she watched, they whirled to the side, hand going to their waist, presumably for a weapon. A Grimm slunk out of the trees on Yang’s far left, and in one sharp movement, like a knife whipping out from a scabbard, the figure shot it.

Something flickered in the back of Yang’s mind, colors without any name, a strain of piano music above the roar of the ocean. Something about the elegant way they flicked up their weapon and opened fire…

Yang walked forward slightly, and she flinched as a twig snapped under her foot, sounding like a gunshot. The sound made the figure’s attention snap to where Yang was standing, and their face came into full view. Yang almost fell down right then and right there, her heart completely stopping as the world seemed to go absolutely silent, everything receding from her eyes before swimming back into ultra-sharp focus.

She must have recognized her, too, for her expression shattered, suspicion crumbling into pure and utter shock. “Yang?” The figure whispered incredulously, her voice wavering, and Yang blinked—

—there was a letter from her, the girl with the amber eyes that held the brilliance of the sun, and hair darker than a raven’s wing. She was gone. She was gone and she wasn’t coming back, now or ever. The girl Yang loved more than any other in the whole world, the girl she would know even if she was blind, and the girl she would never see again. Thoughts clamored in her mind, threatening to pull her down and drown her, and a flurry of shadows raced through her mind—

And here she was, a creature born from the ocean, standing with one foot in the endless darkness and one on land, salt spray misting her with tiny white droplets like stars. Yang couldn’t breathe; her lungs wouldn’t cooperate, and she took a long, shuddering breath, forcing them to inhale. Blake stood there, amber eyes utterly dead and lifeless, her face marked with dirt and blood, her narrow shoulders curled inward as her hands sheltered in the pockets of her cloak. It was Blake, and it was Blake and it was Blake— Blake, who was here, Blake, who was alive, Blake, who had vanished like dew on a hot summer morning— and then it was she who was running, running forward and crashing into her, and Blake held her closely, her heart hammering so loudly that Yang could hear it.

Only then, and much too late, did Blake start to speak.

“Yang.” Her voice was muffled against her shoulder, her hands knotted in the material of Yang’s vest. She was crying, and she smelled of ash and blood and salt— but she was alive, here and whole, at least physically. Feeling her, holding her—it was only then that Yang realized how empty her heart had been, how the weight of the strained, inactive Bond had rent her apart, ripping at the seams, how she’d been slowly dying from an unseen poison. Blake felt different, all angles and bones, and she looked crumpled as paper—the kind of crumpled paper that would never be smooth again.

She has no right to be upset, Yang thought, every bit of her relief and happiness draining out of her in an abrupt chill of numbness until she felt colder than the dead of winter all around them. No right at all, not after what she had done. All of the emotions that Yang had been working towards—forgiveness, understanding, even— splintered under the weight of her misgivings, because when all was said and done, Blake had left her behind. Yang let her go, both hands balling into fists—one warm flesh and blood. One unfeeling metal.

Your fault, she thought blindly, backing away. All your fault.

A dizzying rush of images whirled through her head like pages caught in a high wind. Blake,
staring at her over the back of a fading Ursa. Unconscious, bathed in pale moonlight, her face purpling from a strike meant for Yang. Fire twining down their wrists as the Bond solidified. Blake’s hands cupping the sides of her face as they kissed for the first time. Her tears as they fought. Their skin pressed together as they made up. And always, her eyes, bright gold, shining with all the emotion Yang had known she evoked in her. Yang had always been able to read those eyes— read their anger, their fear, sadness and love— but now, she couldn’t tell what was behind them: they were beautiful and empty.

She looked to the Bond, and found nothing, because the Bond was as inanimate and dead as a long-deceased corpse, almost as if it wasn’t there, like a voice that hadn’t been used in a long, long time. Once their Bond had been a river in full flood, singing with emotion, and now it was a dry and dusty track, as if the water that had once flowed there never existed at all. With the Bond had gone Yang’s understanding of Blake, and in the weeks she had been absent, it was as if the language that had made Blake so readable to Yang was now entirely unable to be deciphered.

It was almost, Yang thought, as if she had forgotten what she loved about Blake.

Did I ever mean anything to you besides your own redemption?

She looked at Blake and Blake looked back at her, still having the look of one who was caught halfway between a nightmare and waking, her hollow eyes as horrified as if she was staring down the barrel of a gun. Finally, she spoke, her voice croaking and terrified, as if she hadn’t used it in months.

“God, you shouldn’t have tracked me here,” Blake said hoarsely, her tone very soft. “Yang, have you any idea what you’ve done?”

It was so out of the blue, so totally not what Yang had expected to hear, that she could only stand there as if she was standing helpless before a stadium of furious people once more, feeling vulnerable and lost, like someone had tossed her headlong into a twisting maze. “I…” She faltered, realizing that her voice had lost its steadiness. And as she looked at Blake, all she was left with was a bitter sense of fury and regret, and her words wobbled. “I know what I’ve done. Everything I’ve done, I’ve done in good conscience. But you…” Her voice curled into a low, deep growl that sounded guttural and terrible, emitting from her throat. “How dare you.”

Blake lifted her chin in surprise, her eyes widening. “What?”

Seconds later, she lifted her hand to where Yang had slapped her across the face with her human hand, leaving an angry red mark. Astonishment written across her expression, she gingerly removed her fingers, breath stuttering in her lungs as Yang looked at her with pure fury, the force of the slap still stinging her hand.

“I don’t remember much about that night when you abandoned me to run off like you always do, you wretched coward, but I remember that I damn near died to save your life! So how dare you leave me, Blake Belladonna!” Yang snarled, fury blazing through her. She welcomed it, welcomed the fury, how it warmed her blood and licked the edges of her hair to bright flame in this cold, dead world. “How dare you leave me half-dead, alone, in an airship and a single message on my Scroll, to go back to Patch without you, to struggle every day with the simplest of tasks like opening a fucking book or trying to put on my clothes with one goddamn arm, and to look my my father in the eyes and explain that he was right about you being like Raven! Right about you leaving me behind like some discarded toy you didn’t have any more use for!” She was screaming now, and it felt good in a terrible, twisted way; she hadn’t screamed in so long, hadn’t talked above a whisper, and it felt like a dam had unlocked inside of her, letting all of her bitter, savage emotions free. “I almost
died for you. I would have died for you! How could you do that to me? How?"

Blake’s eyes were shining bright with tears, and her voice was almost incomprehensible over her choked sob. “I had to go. It was my fault. You can’t be near me or you’ll…”

“I’ll what, die?” Yang gave a harsh, scornful laugh. “I wonder how that would feel, Blake! Tell me, what was more painful, do you think? Losing an arm or losing a partner and your entire world? I lost all three. The Yang you knew? She is dead, Blake. And I’ll tell you who killed her.” She drew back her lips in an almost feral snarl, swallowing, shaking. “It wasn’t Adam. It wasn’t his sword. It was you. When you left me alone. Left me behind, broke the vows of the Bond.”

In all the time they had known each other, Yang had never truly made Blake angry beyond the point of sense. Even when she had told Blake’s secrets to Ruby and Weiss, resulting in their first fight, Blake had been more sad than angry. But now, her miserable attitude had flipped to unhinged anger— there was fire in Blake's eyes, rising unbidden, and Yang knew that the two of them were liable to set each other afire. It was part of the reason she had fallen in love with her at all, really, that hidden inferno that kindled in Blake's core, the fire that made them more alike than anything. “Do you truly think I don’t know that? Do you think that it wasn’t agony to go? Do you think I left because I wanted to?” Her voice rose to a scream. “Do you honestly think I left you because I wanted to go after you lost your arm— when it was my fault, and I know it?”

“There’s only one problem with that sentence,” Yang hissed. “It was never your fault that I lost my arm, Blake. It was mine. Even if we fought Adam together, I went in without a plan of attack, and I paid the price. After all, the thought of you dying... that messed me up, ruined my clarity. You had a way of blurring everything, remember? I suppose you still do.” Blake flinched, as if remembering those whirlwind emotions of when they had Bonded, all those smudged memories, all of it lying buried beneath the weight of too much guilt and pain to ever dislodge. “But for you to do the bare minimum for someone who loved you—”

“I never wanted—”

“No! After that, even after I made that sacrifice for you, you left me. How could you do that? I'm your partner! " Her voice rose to a roar. "That's not how partners treat their loved ones! That's not how they behave!"

“I wanted to die after I went.” Blake pulled away, staring at the glinting gold prosthetic. She was silent, but there was a terrible look on her face that made Yang's eyes sting with tears. She was completely quiet, as if she opened her mouth, she would burst into sobs. “The only thing that kept me alive was the thought of how angry you’d be if I killed myself. How— disappointed. And maybe I’m not fit to be your partner. I almost got you killed. It would have helped, not to see me when you woke up, knowing it was my fault you’d… lost your arm.” She looked away, her mouth working in agitation, and Yang could guess what she was thinking, at least. Maybe not all of her understanding in her partner was gone just yet.

“Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maximus culpa,” Yang whispered, her voice quavering. “Is that what you honestly think, Blake?”

“It is.” She looked up, eyes shining brightly with unshed tears. “The fault was mine alone. It’s not an excuse, but I helped in the only way I knew. I tried to keep you safe— tried to keep you alive. Yang…”

“Don’t,” she whispered, tears brimming in her eyes. She turned away, clenching her fists, struggling not to cry. “Don’t say my name like that.”
Blake tried again. “Then how can I - how should I—”

“Don’t,” Yang managed, “don’t say my name ever.”

She had lied. She hadn’t forgotten what she loved about Blake at all.

And now, that lie had her locked in a claw-cruel grip, forcing her to confront the reality that she had denied in order to mitigate the pain of what Blake had done to her. Blake was the storm and the calm all at once, intense and genius and passion conjured into a person so volatile she almost unraveled of her own accord. Blake was safety. Blake was the first day of summer where you could go out without wearing a jacket.

She was home. And home had run away.

Blake was still talking, her voice more broken than the waves shattering against the shore. “I had to go. I just— I had to do it.”

A harsh, barking laugh tore from Yang’s mouth at that, guttural and animalistic. "Damn you, Blake," she snarled. "Did you honestly think waking up minus an arm and minus you would help anyone?"

"It was my fault you got hurt," she repeated numbly. "I had to go. You don't understand. All the guilt— all your pain— and it's my responsibility—"

"You should feel guilty, but not for that reason." Yang spun around, breaking eye contact, all the pent up rage she had buried deep down exploding out of her. "You know what's happened to me. You alone were the one person I trusted with my past, time and time again, and you know what, Blake? Every goddamn person I know left me, left me behind, and every time, I had to pick up the pieces. Every person. Qrow’s never really cared for me. Not in the way he does for Ruby. I remind him too much of my mother. And she— you know she left me. Decided I was a burden. Summer left and never came back. My father left me for alcohol and depression after Summer died. And now— Ruby left to chase a fool's mission of answers. Weiss is probably the only one I could forgive easily— she didn't have a choice, you see, she was forced to go, but she knows what loyalty means— and Pyrrha and Penny, they were manipulated and killed.” Her anger began to drain, deflating her, until she felt like she was drowning in an inescapable ocean of misery. "And you— you, I thought, would be the one who was different, who saw something in me that was worth keeping, worth fighting for. I thought you had changed, from when you left when Weiss accused you, but you, too, left me, Blake, just like all the rest..."

Yang felt a hand on her shoulder, the arm that was still there. The clearing was cold, locked in ice and snow, but Blake’s hand was warm and shaking. "Yang," Blake said, her voice broken. "I'm so, so sorry. You have to know that I never wanted any of this—"

Yang didn’t pull away from Blake’s hand, but she didn’t offer any encouragement, either. “So you say I don’t understand why you abandoned me. Well, make me understand. You're still keeping secrets, aren't you? Even after all this time?"

"I swore I would never..." Blake let out a low, indistinct noise, half-whimper and half-sigh. “No. I — I suppose I—I owe you answers. Let me explain.”

Her eyes glazed over as if she was seeing back into a terrible, terrible past, and in a way, maybe she was. She began to pace, her ears flat against her head, before she looked directly at Yang. “You remember it,” she said. “The night Beacon Tower fell?”
“I can’t forget something I see every night when I fall asleep,” Yang said.

“But there’s more you don’t know,” Blake choked, “more that happened before you arrived, more secrets undone and pasts shattered and words exchanged. I met Adam in the Academy, Yang, a while before you—you rushed in to save me. I was alone with him.”

Yang’s stomach began to stir with a fluttering of unease as she pictured it. Firelight flashing on the walls, Blake, standing alone in the empty ruin of the school; Adam, across from her, no longer a phantom memory that couldn’t hurt her, but in the flesh, bent on revenge. All the shadows between them, and the wounds on Blake’s face that had been there before Yang entered the scene, the pure fear and horror, the imprint of a slap on her skin. Just what had Adam done to Blake before Yang had jumped in? All those nightmares she had about Adam— all those fears— “Blake, I don’t know if I—”

“No. I have to tell you this.” Her voice was breathless, as if she was hurtling towards a finish line, her eyes swimming with a strange mixture of terror and relief. “You— he hadn’t cornered me right when you arrived. Early on in that horrible night, I fought him. I raised my blade, and for the first time, I lashed out against him, because I told myself long ago he would never control me again.” A faint spark of pride kindled in her voice, but it extinguished as she went on. “However, a fight like that—one that I could win, or ever have hope of winning— simply wasn't meant to be. He was stronger, a shade faster, and he was burning with rage that lent manic energy to him that I simply could not match up against. He pinned me to the ground, and he... he...” Her voice shook so badly, Yang thought she wouldn't be able to complete the sentence. The anger she’d felt towards Blake had given away to hatred for Adam. She hadn't known what Blake had gone through before she had arrived on the scene... but now, it seemed, she was about to find out why Blake had abandoned her.

“Blake, if he hurt you—”

“He’s already hurt me, Yang! He has. He hurt you. Don’t you get it?” A tear snaked its way down her cheek, her teeth clenching together. Anguished agony was written on her face. “Nothing he could have done to me would hurt me as much as hurting you would. He knew I who I loved and he…” She faltered, turning away, but Yang knew what she had been about to say.

He knew who I loved, and he used it against me.


Every word looked like it was being wrenched out of her, her body shaking, hands in fists by her sides. “He quickly became very calm, almost icy. I was nearly out of my mind with fear by then, which I expected you would be feeling through the Bond, but I simply could not do anything. Once again, I was powerless to his whims. He began to speak to me. Yang, I was there for a long time, back against the wall, long enough for him to talk, long enough for him to think clearly through his anger, and plan some sort of revenge.

"I swore then and there I would do anything to keep you alive if you came to save me. Even if I had to sacrifice myself, so be it. Adam is— was— one of the strongest, cleverest warriors I know. All those driven by hunger for vengeance are. He was the leader of a terror-powered revolution, and he did not gain that position by being anything less than the strongest, the fastest, the smartest... and the most ruthless. You were and are powerful, but not the same type that he was. For he knows much of the world and emotions that drive people, but he knows nothing of mercy. I pray you never will be that kind of warrior. I knew he would not hesitate to kill you, for he was out
of his mind with possessive jealousy. He used to be my partner, my whole heart... and from what he learned, he knew that you had filled that position. I loved you, not him, and I was Bonded with you, not him. He vowed to torture and kill you in front of me. He said he would make it his mission to destroy everything I loved. You, and Ruby, and Weiss. You know that I love you. But I love Ruby and Weiss too, and he knew that. I also knew that you would never forgive me, not in this life or any other, if Ruby was killed on my account, nor would I forgive myself. And then... you arrived.

"You challenged Adam— you challenged him, and sealed our fates. By now, you know his semblance, I suppose. Moon-slice, he named it, after the shattered moon. He can slice through the Aura of anything souled. How awful is it that he was born with a semblance that helps him hurt not the Grimm, but the people he fights beside?"

Yang looked at her prosthetic arms, moving her fingers gently, and the fire Dust within flared up gently, melting the snow that had settled on it as heat pulsed out from the metal. Snow had settled on the arm... the arm she would never have again, because of Adam. He had taken so much, so much she would never get back.

"You two talked," Blake whispered. "And then we both challenged him and fought him... and stabbed me in the side and he cut off your arm, and then I fought him again, because he hurt you. I fought him," and here, she let out a little breath of pain, "and I won. I killed Adam, Yang. I took my blade and I threw it and it sank into his chest, and he died. But before he died, you know what he told me? He swore that it would not end with his death. He swore that the White Fang would try to kill me— and try to kill you. He told me that only by running could I keep their attention on tracking me. Only by running could I keep you safe. And in that moment, I realized... I realized that I had nothing to show for what I had done. I had fought Adam, but I only ever got myself hurt and got you nearly killed... then he died in my arms, and I had to look in his eyes, his empty eyes, this boy who was once my partner and my—” She broke off, jamming her fists into her pockets. "And I had to stand there knowing I killed him just as I killed Ayran. And I didn’t regret it. I couldn’t; how could I?" She walked away very quickly, standing at the edge of the clearing, the stiff slant of her shoulders forming a sharp black line against the pale grayness of the forest, and she sounded lost and broken, and very young, her voice tearing like claws at Yang’s heart.

“My past and present collided,” she whispered hoarsely, her words echoing in the silence, “and in the moment it mattered most, I let them overwhelm me and destroy each other.”

“But they didn’t destroy each other, your past and present,” Yang pointed out, bitter. “I’m right here.”

“Yang, I thought you were dead!” Her voice cracking, Blake turned around, her mouth working, snow caught on her eyelashes like tears. “I saw your body lying there just like Adam’s... crumpled and bloody... and the Bond was dead! I thought you were dead, gone, where I couldn’t follow you... it’s the worst thing I’ve ever felt in my life. You can’t imagine, can’t imagine the kind of pain that I... when I thought he had killed you...” Her voice choked up, parallel stripes of tears streaking down her face. “I thought the thing I feared most in this world was not doing something good with my life. But that’s not it. The thing that scares me most in the entire expanse of this universe is losing you, and he knew it.

“When I saw you lying there... I knew. I just knew I had to go. I left Adam’s body there, in the cafeteria... I hauled you into the courtyard. Sage came and fixed you as well as he was able. Ruby and Weiss arrived soon after, but then they left— they left to go save Pyrrha, because she had fought Cinder, but that’s another tale. When I saw you bleeding out in the courtyard, I knew it was my fault you were lying there. Sun tried to persuade me it wasn't, but he didn't understand. How
could he? When Ruby came, I made up my mind to leave. A little while later, I was with Sun, when Weiss and her father Vincent were fighting in the courtyard... and Weiss thought Ruby was dead, but I told her that she wasn’t. Their Bond wasn’t broken, so she must be alive. But after that, knowing that Weiss was being taken away by her father and Ruby was up in Beacon Tower... our team had fallen apart. That was the final straw; I had to go, there was nothing left to do. If I ran, the White Fang would chase me, not you or the others. They wouldn't waste their time on anyone I loved— they would try to hunt me, because I killed their leader. Because if I was with you... you would be in danger. If I was not... You would be safe, you and all the rest." Blake met her eyes then. "That is why I ran. That is why I left you behind. Not because I don't love you, but because I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. He made it his mission to destroy me... but I made it mine to keep you safe at all costs." She shook her head, her breath coming in pained rasps. “Everything I do, I do to protect you. I have been made to protect you. Only in death will I be kept from that duty.”

“I wish you hadn’t put it like that.” Eyes filled with tears, Yang looked at Blake— that tired, unhappy face, eyes haunted and so, so sad. So... resigned. She had already given up her happiness, safety, everything— all to fate, all to keep her alive.

“Yang,” Blake said, reaching out to take her hand, “I... I know can never make things the way they used to be. What we’ve been through... I don’t think you can ever go back from something like that. But I... can you ever forgive me?”

In answer, Yang took a deep breath, and let go of her bitterness and anger, let go of the damaged Bond, let all her emotions flow through it. Blake’s eyes flew wide and she staggered under the weight of everything Yang had felt in the past months: fury, misery, bitterness, listlessness, heartbreak, terror, and so, so much love.

"I love Blake, I do. And I always will. She’s always been my other half. She was broken, but I was too, and between us, we’ve got one whole heart. I pushed away the unimaginable, which was losing her, but here we are, and we’ve survived the unimaginable, learned to live with it and made it through. How could I have ever thought she didn't love me?

“Blake,” she whispered, pulling her close, hearing the unsteady beat of her heart. Blake had been so strong for so long, it was easy to forget how broken she was. “Blake, there’s nothing to forgive.”

Blake was silent for a long, long time, the beat of her heart and the rustle of her breath the only sounds in the cold winter glade. Even the sound of the crashing sea sounded very, very far away. Snow flurried down from a steel-gray sky, powdering her hair in white. A frigid breeze swirled through the forest in a shivering gust, flapping her cloak and making the bare tree branches rattle like bones. Then, she spoke, her voice rusty and hoarse.

"You lost so much, Yang. I don't fault you for being upset. How could I? I told you a while ago before the doubles rounds of my suspicions against Cinder and Emerald, and I spoke to Sage of them... but I never imagined the lengths she would go to. Nor did she leave us with answers. With all she took from us, killing Pyrrha, Penny, and doing God knows what to Ruby up in the Tower...”

"Blake," Yang blurted suddenly, "Blake, don't you know? Ruby is okay. Qrow rescued her from the top of the Tower after you left.”

Instantly, Blake went taut as a wire, leaning away. She looked past Yang, trembling, as if she could see all the way to where Ruby was. Complete shock radiated over her face, followed by a flitting, dubious expression. "She is? She’s really okay? That can't be— not after that chill—"
Relief and happiness were flooding deliriously through her at the fact that she was the bearer of good news for once. Almost giddy, she crushed Blake close again, something loosening in her chest and escaping her, sailing far, far away. "She is, I swear, she's alive and well, and on her way to Haven right now. She's with Jaune and Ren and Nora. Weiss and I are going after her. You see... the silver light... it's a long story. Ozpin admitted her to the Academy because she had silver eyes, just like her mom, Summer Rose. That made her have this power - she still doesn't know what exactly it is, with Ozpin gone and unable to explain - that laid dormant, latent, inside her. It was triggered when she watched Cinder betray her and... and do what she did. The power exploded all at once and froze everything within the mile - that's what that chill you mentioned must have been."

"So..." Blake murmured. "She's changed, then. She'll be very different."

"I expect so, with the burden of responsibility she must have now."

"If Ruby's alive, then Pyrrha—?" Forbidden hope danced through Blake eyes, and sadness once more squeezed Yang's heart in a cruel grip.

"No," she said, "no, Blake, I'm sorry. She's gone. Ruby watched her die."

Blake swallowed. "I had hoped..." She shook her head. "She deserved better. She was the best of us, Yang. She deserved better than a cold death, alone, and she deserved more than some trite eulogy from a coward who fled before she drew her last breath. But there is still some mercy left, I think. Some beauty, despite all the ruined wreck of loss." Blake took her hand and kissed her knuckles, her lips chapped and cold. "You found me."

Yang closed her eyes. "Ruby was the hero of that night, you know. She went through the most, and lost the most. But she's still standing, my small sister, the miracle we didn't deserve... and underneath her exterior, there's a warrior tough as steel."

"It must run in the family." Blake's smile faded to an uncertain expression. "I... are you quite certain about... not wanting me to go? If they find us— me with you after all that happened... you run the risk of getting hurt more than you have been before. We both risk losing more than just a partner or an arm. We could lose it all."

"I understand the danger, Blake. I understand the risks, of the White Fang, of what I could lose still... and I know that’s why you ran. Because you wanted to keep me safe from them, so I could live a normal life. But I don’t want that, I don’t want safety or normalcy, not if the cost is losing you. Don’t you get it?" Her voice was barely a whisper now. "I just want you. I need you, Blake... like I need oxygen and the sun and everything to live, I need you. If we face the White Fang again; then we will... together. Make no mistake. When that time comes, I'll be ready. I have enough to fight for. And as for you coming with me and Weiss? Well... I'm not afraid." She brushed back a curl of ebony hair from Blake’s forehead, and Blake closed her eyes, inexpressible anguish in her expression. "I know who I fell in love with, all those months ago back at Beacon... and I’ll always, always choose you. Just as we always choose each other, as we always love each other..."

“And fight for each other,” Blake echoed, bowing her head. “Even if it ends in tragedy?”

“Especially then.” Yang tilted Blake’s head up, her hand under Blake’s chin, infinitely gentle, and their eyes met. “Even if I am your girlfriend, first and foremost, I am your partner, with all that entails. I will never give up on you. I promised I would never leave you. Even if everybody in the whole world was against you, I would stand by your side. I will be your pillar. I know the risks, I know the cost of everything I have to lose... and I'm willing to make that sacrifice for you. If you're with me, I'm strong.”
“I— I understand. If you know… if you’re willing to risk the White Fang, I won’t say no to you. Not again.” Blake swallowed and rubbed her eyes, looking away. "What now?" she murmured. "How do you move on after what happened to us? How do you cope with that kind of tragedy?"

“The same way we always have.” Yang took Blake’s hands between her own, skin against metal. “Together.”

Blake nodded, something in her eyes wavering and shattering, and Yang felt almost relieved as she realized that she could— once more— sense her certainty. A Bond to last a lifetime.

“I still love you,” she whispered. Tears were coursing down Blake’s face, and she brushed them away. “I never stopped loving you… even when it seemed that way to myself. I never could.”

She slid her hands into Blake’s hair, leaning in slowly to kiss her, letting her pull away, if she wished, but Blake did not, and she captured her partner’s mouth with her own. They melted together, clinging to each other in the silence, one of Blake’s gloved hands sliding up to tangle in the hair curling from the back of her neck. It was utterly quiet, the only sound in the air of the snow crunching under Yang’s boots, and the branches rustling together above their heads. Blake shuddered at the touch of the cold prosthetic on her skin, but she didn’t pull away. She leaned forward, kissing her back with such abandon it was painful, shivering through every fiber of skin with a sharp, aching agony.

It could have been an eternity or only seconds, but they broke apart, still clinging to each other, Blake’s hands resting over her heart, Yang’s hands on Blake’s shoulders, and they looked at each other. The sea whistled its lonely cry in the background, and the wind picked up, stirring her hair and sending it spilling to the side.

“You’re here for something else,” Blake said at last, her face full of the resolve she had always held. “Aren’t you? You’ve got that… that look in your eye.”

Yang let out a small huff of laughter, her breath clouding on the air. “I came to ask if you’ll join me on my journey.”

"Journey?"

“Ruby is still out there,” Yang said.

“Are you… you’re going after her, all the way in Mistral? But… why?”

"She's my sister," Yang said simply. "I love her. I could never abandon her."

There was a long pause, and then, her eyes blazing, Blake nodded. “Okay,” she breathed, as if she had wrestled with her thoughts, and won. “Yes. Yes, I’ll come with you. Every step of the way.”

“Thank you,” Yang whispered, the edges of her eyes stinging with tears, but these, unlike all their predecessors, were ones of happiness. “I’d better go introduce you to Weiss so she doesn’t think I’ve been out here getting gobbled up by a Beowolf, shouldn’t I?”

At that, Blake smiled through her tears. “Yeah, I think you’d better.”
They found her in the trees, crouched amid the dead leaves, fiddling with a map and looking strained as she pried deeper into her Bond than she had ever gone before. Yang felt a flicker of pity, before she cleared her throat as they both trundled into the clearing, hands linked together. “How are things with your ‘tracking Ruby’ endeavor, Weiss?”

Weiss sounded distracted and tired. “Decently, I’d say. I’ve found her location, Yang; she’s somewhere just over the mountain pass in Mistral… she’s still weeks and weeks away from Haven, but if we hurry, we could catch up in less than a—”

Blake coughed, almost inaudible in the silence, but Weiss visibly went stiff before whipping her head around, eyes rounding comically as she saw Blake and Yang, hand in hand. “Blake?” She croaked, before shaking her head. “No, I’m having a hallucination… this journey’s deluding me, right? All these sleepless days and nights…”

“No, Weiss, it’s real,” Yang said, and Blake glanced at her. “I’m really here,” she murmured, and then Weiss scrambled to her feet, flying at Blake and almost knocking her down in a hug. Yang caught the words “stupid”, “left”, “could have been dead”, and “idiot”, and Blake, albeit with a degree of hesitance, returned the hug, her eyes softening as Weiss let out a noise that sounded suspiciously like a sniffle. “Thanks,” she said, voice hoarse. “I missed you, too.”

Weiss’s eyes were red when she pulled away, and she dashed at her cheeks. “Group hug?” Yang offered, attempting a joke to break the silence, and they all embraced each other. Yang let out a deep breath, tears springing to her eyes as she wrapped her arms around them, one around Blake and one around Weiss.

*My family is coming back together again.*

Her heart swelled, fuller than it had been in weeks. She had missed Blake more than anything, but she had missed her team, too; they were as much of a part of her as her own bones. It was a tangled sort of a hug, and the absence of Ruby was more conspicuous than ever, but they were together, and for now, that was enough.

“What’s the plan now?” A shadow of fear still lurked behind Blake’s eyes, and Yang tightened her grip on her partner’s hand. “Even if the White Fang try to catch us,” she said in an undertone to her, “they can’t hurt us, okay? Divided, we’re weak. Together, we’re strong. We’ll leave Vale and go to the coast near Beacon. If they don’t let us on one of the boats… we’ll pull a Sun Wukong and stowaway, if that’s what it comes to. I’m not letting anything short of the apocalypse stop me from finding my baby sister.”

“There’s the determination you’ve been lacking,” Weiss smiled, clearly delighted, a new radiance in her face. Having Blake back had lifted both their spirits immeasurably— one of their objectives was cleared— but Yang knew it would only be completely okay when they found Ruby again. “Are we ready to leave?”

“Well,” Yang said with a smile that, for the first time in a month, lit up her whole face, “I’m not sure how we’ll be able to fit the two of you on Bumblebee, but we’ll have to make do. Let’s pack up and get going.”

Weiss and Yang packed up their duffels as Blake shouldered her own, and they walked over the
cycle, parked in the shadow of an enormous tree.

“Did Yang tell you how we got here, Blake?” Weiss joked, climbing on the back of the cycle and clinging on precariously, Yang in the front, Weiss on the back, Blake sandwiched between them. It felt protected and secure, and as Yang tied her duffel to the side, Blake slid her hands around Yang’s waist for better purchase. She welcomed the warmth and safety Blake’s presence always brought her, the feeling that she hadn’t thought she would experience again in a long, long time.

“Tell me,” Blake murmured, resting her chin on Yang’s shoulder, her breath stirring the fine curls of hair on the nape of her neck. “Tell me everything. I’m right here, and I’m not letting go, ever again.

Yang turned the keys in the ignition, something within her glowing warm as the motorcycle purred to life beneath her, and they shot out of the grove, whooping aloud in the thawing winter morning as the last leg of their journey began. “Well,” she began as the forest and the sea receded behind them, the faintest shadow of Mistral waiting on the horizon, “it all starts off with the story of a girl called Yang and a boy named Sun who snuck out of Patch one winter morning…”

A/N. Hamilton reference, because I can. ‘It’s Quiet Uptown’, for anyone curious— the mood of that song really fits this chapter, and I love its tune, anyhow. The ending is close. Next chapter is white-rose centric. :)

Also, for those who might be curious: Yang was able to catch up to Blake for one simple reason: a motorcycle is a hell of a lot faster than traveling by foot. I imagine Yang told her about how she tracked Weiss, how helpful Sun was, their meeting with CFVY, and about Khione. Blake, of course, was relieved to hear that her aunt was alright after the Fall.
Chapter XXXV - Night Gives Way to Dawn

\textit{Blake}

“It’s awfully warm for winter,” Yang commented, her prosthetic hand shading her eyes as she swept her gaze over the docks on the shoreline. “Don’t you think? Look, the ice on the sea’s already broken up.”

True enough, the white floes on the ocean had melted away to nothing, leaving sucking and swelling tides in their wake. A breeze that was brisk with a softer, warm edge swept over the air, bringing the scent of salt and blossoms with it. Yang rolled her bike forward slowly, and Weiss and Blake followed, trekking over the gritty, sandy docks. It was empty here, with only the occasional sailor or citizen scurrying past. Many people had packed up and moved away after the resulting events of the Fall of Beacon, namely the influx of Grimm that had poured in, but things seemed to be recovering.

After three days and nights spent traveling at top speed, they had arrived at the eastern coast of Vale, Mistral a distant landmass on the horizon of the glittering sea. They had passed through the city, skirting Beacon Tower, unwilling to confront the demons, personal and physical, that haunted the ruined school— not yet. One day, they would go back, Blake imagined. Sort through the memories, exorcise the ghosts. For now, they were on a mission: to find Ruby and the remnants of Team JNPR.

The White Fang could very well be on her heels even now, Blake suspected. They might be tracking her with a vengeance… but then again, she had seen neither hide nor hair of Ayran and Adam’s minions since the Fall, not the slightest sign of them. The fear of being hurt again— of Yang being hurt again— had not left her, and she doubted it ever would, but somehow, the knowledge that she would be over the sea and constantly on the move helped to combat the fear. That, coupled with Yang’s acceptance and forgiveness, made the urge to stay with her team stronger than her urge to run.

She walked forward and took Yang’s prosthetic hand in hers, their fingers lacing together. The tiniest smile curled the corner of Yang’s face, and the prosthetic almost seemed to glow warmer, as if her Aura was responding accordingly. It didn’t feel like her hand— even now, Blake couldn’t shake the terrifying image of Adam’s cold, cold eyes as he sneered down at Yang’s unconscious, bloody body— it felt like metal and Dust, but it was warm and strong. As if Yang sensed her thoughts, she gripped a little bit harder, letting out a deep sigh. Her anger and grief when they had reunited had been terrifying, but in the days following, she had shifted— not becoming the old Yang that Blake knew and loved, but someone stronger and more balanced all the same. Someone who had found equilibrium between chaotic fire and cool calmness.

As they proceeded down the docks, it became glaringly obvious that boarding a boat to embark to Mistral was easier said than done. Guards and sailors milled about, and the presence of three apprentice Huntresses in their midst became more conspicuous by the second.

“Do you think we’ll have to stowaway for real?” Yang muttered out of the corner of her mouth, her eyes darting to and fro as she searched the docked boats for some option they could take.

“I think we’ll have to. They’re not letting any passengers on, right? The General stopped all oversea travel except for the absolute necessities, like food and Dust.” Her eyes narrowed. “If we made a diversion and snuck on while they were looking the other way…”
“Time to employ our almost nonexistent sneaking skills,” Weiss muttered. “Great.” She and Yang shared a glance; Blake wondered if they were thinking of when they’d had to escape Vincent Schnee’s manor. “Well, who’s going to take the fall and make the diversion?”

“I’ll do it,” Blake volunteered instantly, a mixture of guilt and determination making her ears flatten.

Blue and lilac eyes flicked over to her, surprise ringing clear in both of their looks. Yang frowned, lines appearing between her brows. “Blake, you don’t have to—”

“I do… I owe you both. And they can’t catch me.” She took a rattling breath. “I’m not easy to keep a hold of.”

Yang’s gaze shadowed. “Be careful.”

“I will. The moment everyone’s looking the other way, you two board the ship. I’ll circle around and join you.” Not allowing time for further protest, she gave them a resolute nod, and quickly strode off, leaving her teammates to creep down to a shipment boat, bound for Mistral. Once she was far enough away, Blake drew out a matchstick from her pack, followed by a vial full of a mixture of powdered fire and lightning Dust.

She dumped the mixture just under the dock, scarlet and white flecks flaking down and settling in a shimmering pile. Glancing to the right and left, trying to look nonchalant and unobtrusive, Blake lit the matchstick with a quick strike, watching fire bloom to life on the end before she flicked it into the pile of Dust.

**BOOM.**

A mushroom cloud of black fire and sparks billowed up as bright white light flared outward, the whole world shrouded in thick smoke within seconds as the wood of the docks exploded outward, splinters of wood raining past her like shrapnel. Blake was beset by a surge of panic—*firelight dancing on cafeteria walls and silver light dying the whole world to a radiance greater than the sun*—before she turned and fled, choking on the thick gray smoke. She stumbled out of the explosion, ash drifting down like rain, and crashed through the foggy air to the boat, scaling the ladder on the side. The world was still completely veiled from her, and she climbed like a mad animal, going on touch and hearing alone. She could hear sailors screaming in fear and confusion, milling about the docks where the explosion had originated.

Pulling herself up with one last heave, she vaulted over onto the deck of the boat, which rocked with the swell of the tide. Eyes streaming, she staggered forward, blinking in desperation. Where were Weiss and Yang?

She opened her mouth to call for them, before someone hissed her name, and a hand wrapped around her wrist and yanked her down into darkness.

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**Yang**

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Yang whispered, trying to hide her prosthetic under her shirt so the glow of the Dust wouldn’t give them away, but it still emitted a faint orange radiance even through
Blake’s voice, still raspy from the smoke, drifted out of the darkness. “I’ll live.”

Weiss had been watching from beneath deck; she and Yang had made it to the belly of the ship, where the cargo was being held, and she had seen smoke suddenly turn the world to a misty gray before Blake had staggered out of the surreal grayness, looking half-dead. She’d grabbed her and pulled her down into the cargo hold, and now they were hidden behind a stack of boxes, their duffels around their backs, the motorcycle on its side and covered with Yang’s cloak so it would not gleam in the light and give them away.

Yang inched closer to Blake. She couldn’t deny that something had fundamentally changed between them when Blake had run— perhaps so much so that it was a rift that would not heal in a while— but with a quiet sigh, her partner held her close, her breathing uneven. Yang could feel her heartbeat, quick and unsteady.

“I’m sorry,” Blake whispered.

“What for? You did great. The diversion gave us plenty of time to sneak on here, and the boat’s already moving. We’ll be to Mistral soon, thanks to you.”

“That’s not what I’m sorry for.” Blake let Yang go, her amber eyes appearing with a reflected, eerie glow, as if she had abruptly opened them. *Cats’ eyes,* Yang thought, noticing how the pupils widened, as if soaking up every scrap of light belowdeck.

Yang’s smile fell from her face as guilt raced through her, before she realized it wasn’t her own, it was Blake’s.

“You don’t notice how much you get used to a Bond,” Blake said quietly, “until it is gone.”

“You know why I did what I did, and I’m not going to apologize,” Yang retorted, before Blake’s hand closed on her wrist.

“I’m not blaming you… I could never blame you. It was well deserved on my part, don’t you think I know that?” Blake’s voice hitched. “I just wish… you didn’t deserve to lose so much for me.”

“I chose to do it. If it meant protecting you, I’d do it all over again, Blake. Every time, I’ll choose you. Don’t you get that? Partners fight for each other. We never have nearly as much time as we think, so we have to make every second count… but in the end, everything will be okay, I promise.” Yang felt Blake stiffen ever so slightly, remembering, perhaps, another day very long ago, in the scarlet forest of Forever Fall, before they had been Bonded, before they had fallen in love, before they had even been friends.

“I promise,” Yang had said.

“Yang, don’t. Don’t make promises. Don’t ever promise me anything. They aren’t worth anything.”

“They are with the right people,” she’d replied.

“No, they aren’t! I have learned the hard way not to put my faith in people, let alone people like you— ”

“People like me? What’s that supposed to mean?”
“People that make promises they can’t possibly keep,” Blake had replied wearily. “A promise that everything will be okay. The real world doesn’t work like that, Yang, and it never will.”

“You’re right, it probably won’t. But that doesn’t mean you can’t try— to let someone help out every once in a while. I’ve been nothing but nice to you since we met—”

“I don’t need your kindness!”

“Then why did you choose me in the forest, then, out of everyone, knowing how I was? Don’t even dare deny it. You chose me, Blake. You could have run away long before making eye contact. But you didn’t.”

Yang had crept closer to Blake, not knowing her then, not knowing how she worked, what made her tick and what her thoughts and dreams, hopes and fears, were. “Okay,” she had whispered, “so maybe it was wrong of me to promise something I don’t know will come true. I get that. I get having bad stuff you just don’t want to talk about, and we’re partners, so even if you don’t trust me, that’s still okay, too. I won’t promise you things. But I do believe you’ll be okay if you give yourself time and stay optimistic about the situation.”

“You really don’t know a lot about having demons, do you?”

“I do, actually. But I know about other things, too. Like … like partnership, and helping people out, and trusting, and I want to do that with you, Blake. I want to be your friend. And I know— I know you act like you don’t want to have friends, but maybe… maybe I could be, you know? Maybe you could try to, you know, befriend and trust people more?”

Blake had looked dubious. “People can be very awful.”

“I know. People have hurt me, too. You forget that I have the same feelings you do.”

Finally, Blake had said, “Okay.”

“Okay …?”

“We’re friends, Yang.”

She came back to the present, rubbing her thumb across the back of Blake’s hand. “I think that was when I started to love you, just a little bit,” Yang murmured into the sheltering dark. “Maybe it’s idiotic of me to think everything will be perfect now, so I won’t think that. We’ll all struggle as much as it takes to get to where we need to be, just like everyone else. We’ll have our trials and tribulations and suffering fear… but we’ll have good times, too. We won’t leave each other behind, not ever again. Good endings don’t come to everyone, but if you try your hardest, you can hope to have a shot at getting there, as long as you just hold on— hold on to what matters, and hold on to those you love. And we’ll get our happy ending, one way or another. No matter what it takes… because it’s always going to be you and me, Blake. All of our days, it’ll be the two of us, together.”

Blake was silent for a long time, before she breathed out a single word, so quiet Yang could barely hear her.

“Promise?”

“I promise,” Yang whispered, and she held her closely, both of them protecting each other from the demons that lurked in the shadows, letting the gentle swaying of the ship rock them both into the dark oblivion of sleep.
“Wake up, you two,” Weiss hissed, shaking her teammates awake. They had both fallen asleep, curled in to each other in the shadowy hold of the ship, but after long hours spent enduring the repetitive sway of the ship on the swells of the ocean, it had grated to a stop, and Weiss knew they had docked at the shores of Mistral. Sea travel was fairly quick, with water Dust to power it, so Weiss wasn’t surprised that it had only taken a day to go from Vale to their new destination.

Yang blinked her eyes open first, looking bleary and confused before stretching out and shaking Blake away, who was slower to rise. Weiss turned away, pulling her duffel closer and propping up the motorcycle as quietly as she could, as Blake and Yang put on their own cloaks and packs. Happy as she was for them— Blake’s absence had obviously been eating Yang alive— she couldn’t stifle a pang of jealousy and longing. They didn’t have their whole team reunited, not yet, and until they did, she would not be able to rest.

“So what’s the plan to get out of here without getting in trouble? Mistral’s stricter, so I’ve heard… I don’t want to get tossed behind bars for stowing away.”

“Another diversion?” Yang suggested, but she didn’t sound as if her heart was in it, and Blake winced.

“No, not after the last one, I think.”

“Unless we just knock out whoever opens the cargo hold and run before they get a good luck at us,” Yang offered. “Can’t do much harm, right? You get the glyph ready to launch us out of here, and I can do the punching.” She patted her prosthetic, looking satisfied. “It packs a good punch, too.”

“We’d have to be very quick, and Weiss’s glyph would have to be swift and strong enough to launch us, and your cycle, out of the hold,” Blake added, looking thoughtful.

“But we don’t have Ruby to praise the plan and put it into action, Weiss thought, her smile fading. She turned her face away and drew Myrtenaster, before saying, “The idea about the glyph is sound enough, but how about I do something altogether more impressive?”

Yang’s gaze sparkled in the gloom. “Summoning, you mean?”

“Yes. If I summon a Grimm once we’re out on the deck, it will distract the sailors enough that they won’t give us a second glance, and we can be on our way. And that way, we don’t have to punch anyone, and we’re less likely to have charges and angry men on our heels.”

“In that case, make it a King Taijitu, won’t you?” Yang said, her teeth flashing in the dark as she smiled. “Those are the scariest. You’ll have some of the sailors wetting their pants and crying for Mommy. But yeah, overall, it sounds like a good plan. Let’s do it.”
They waited for several minutes, before a loud creak ripped through the silence, and a square of light opened above their heads.

“Now or never,” Yang growled.

The blinding edges of the sun appeared around the silhouette of a sailor, followed by a shout and the sound of rushing sea and wind. Weiss narrowed her eyes, and immediately, she shot a glyph out.

Yang instantly jumped on it, the glyph shimmering as it launched her above-deck, followed by Blake, who disappeared like a streak of shadow vaulted into the sky. Weiss grabbed the handlebar of the cycle, leaping on her own glyph, and then she was flying, soaring upward and shooting through the trapdoor into the blindingly bright sunlight.

She landed on the deck amid screams from the crew, and she caught a glimpse of Yang and Blake jumping the side of the boat, followed by two distant splashes. Weiss drew out Myrtenaster, slashing it out. After the hours of darkness, it felt like the light was sinking vicious claws into her eyes, and she squinted before gritting her teeth and pulling on her Aura, feeling Mysternaster grow white-hot before a silver streak shot out of the tip.

She didn’t stick around to watch the King Taijitu grow to full size. Without a backward glance, she sprinted to the railing of the ship and vaulted herself over, into the undulating, glittering sea.

She met Blake and Yang in the trees bordering the shoreline, and they were both soaking wet. Yang looked exhilarated, wringing out her hair with her prosthetic, but Blake looked borderline furious, her ears pinned flat to her plastered hair. With a growl, she shook herself out, drenching them both again, following by yelps.

“Blake!”

“Gross!”

Weiss shivered, before letting out a swear as she realized she still had her duffel on. Everything in it was probably drenched with seawater, and ruined. “We’ll have to restock,” Yang said with a frown, evidently realizing the same thing. “Oh, well... we’re here, at least, which is more than I’d hoped for. Do you have my motorcycle? If not, we’re really screwed... that’s our transportation and supplies lost in one go.”

“You’re welcome,” Weiss grumbled, still angry about her now-ruined clothes as she pulled the motorcycle forward, passing it off to Yang, who looked giddy. “Not a word of thanks for a flawless escape, of course, but you’re welcome.”

“Not flawless; we’re all wet, aren’t we?” Yang didn’t sound too upset about it, though, and she smiled. “That was great, Weiss. You’re getting really good at Summoning in a pinch, you know that? My blood’s pumping, and with the sun bright as it is, we should be dry in no time. Let’s ditch these stupid docks and be on our way to the town, why don’t we?”

“Does your cycle still work after taking a dunk in the ocean?” Blake sounded more dubious.

“Lucky for Weiss, it’s waterproof; if it wasn’t, I’d be making her pay it off,” Yang warned them, fishing the keys out of her pocket with difficulty, and shaking out her wet hair. “Weiss, we’ll let you take the lead— you know where to go, right?”

Weiss nodded. She could feel her Bond— like a golden thread connecting her to Ruby across the
vast ocean of distance that separated them—but if she concentrated every ounce of her will upon it, she could dimly sense Ruby’s surroundings. A flash of blonde hair, Ren’s eyes, Nora’s laughter, and the beginning of a snowstorm, before she lost focus and was pulled back to her own surroundings. Even then, she could still sense Ruby’s cold determination. “She’s still pretty far away from the actual kingdom itself. She’s not even over the mountains. I would say she’s about two, three days ahead of us.”

“Then let’s get moving,” Blake murmured, and with one last backward glance at the shining sea and the faint shadow of Vale on the horizon, they strode into the forest.

They made a stop in the town, tossing their soaked duffels and ruined supplies and purchasing more. Luckily, the vials of Dust had survived the plunge into the ocean, and so had most of the Lien, which had been in plastic coverings, but everything else was ruined. With half of their money, they bought a single duffel, fuel for the motorcycle, nonperishables, matches, and ammo—enough to last for weeks, if need be. With the rest, they bought new clothes, because the seawater had effectively ruined their old cloaks, which hadn’t been top-notch anyways, seeing as they had been lifted from old homes wrecked in the Fall of Beacon.

Feeling refreshed—dry, with her cloak billowing around her ankles, the snowy peaks of the mountains backlit by the distant sun, and the hint of ice on the wind—Weiss looked over at Blake and Yang, who were hand in hand. Since their reconciliation, they seemed different. They had always been fine together, but they seemed to fit more now in places where they hadn’t before. Yang had toughened up and lost some of her humor, and Blake had traded away her cowardly tendencies for steely grit. It almost saddened Weiss. If they had changed so much in the span of a month, how much worse would Ruby be, when she had been through more than all of them combined?

They boarded the motorcycle, zipping out of the town in a wake of smoke and the smell of burning rubber. As they bounced pass the entrance to the town, and onto the broad dirt path that wound away into the distance, towards Mistral’s capital, something stirred Weiss’s hair. She cried out—it felt like wingbeats—and looked up as a shadow swooped low over their heads. Yang gasped as it let out a triumphant cark, zipping away into the sunlight. Weiss frowned—it was just a bird, a crow by the looks of it, flying off ahead of them—and wondered why Yang jerked the motorcycle to the side, as if startled from her smooth driving.

“Yang,” Blake shouted above the wind, “was that who I think it was?”

“It was! That was my uncle Qrow,” Yang said, a note of surprise in her voice. “He’s letting us know we’re on the right track. He’s been tracking after Ruby this whole time, but he…”

“He must have been keeping any eye on you, too,” Blake murmured. “You’re his family, with all that entails. He wants to make sure you’re safe, and if he was here, it must mean Ruby is okay, too.”

Yang bit her lip. “I hope you’re right.”

She didn’t say anything further, but Weiss noticed that she hit the gas, gunning the cycle harder than she ever had, and they shot off, a stream of dust billowing up in their wake.
Pre-epilogue. It's been a wild ride...

Weiss

With every mile they passed, the golden thread that Weiss could feel within her heart grew looser and looser as the strain that constricted it gradually faded away, and she knew they were drawing nearer with every spin of the wheels on the track. Closer to Ruby, closer to the heart of Mistral, and closer to the end of their journey.

As the sun was falling at the end of the third day, Weiss made a strangled little noise, and Yang immediately slowed down the cycle and cast a worried glance back at her. “Weiss, what’s wrong?”

“She’s here,” Weiss managed, feeling something in her heart swelling and growing warm as the last of the strain dissolved entirely. “We should see her any second now.”

Blake tensed up, and Yang— while she didn’t say anything— looked distinctly pale, her expression shadowed. Anxiety showing the jerkiness of her movements, she gunned the cycle again, before letting out a whoop as they careened over a hilly ridge with a bounce and the land spread out before them, warm, golden rays of dying sun bathing the forest and meadow in rosy and flame hues. As they pulled to a stop at the bottom of the hill, the rushing wind briefly parted the trees in a cacophony of whispering leaves, exposing four long black shadows that extended from their owners.

Weiss was off the motorcycle in an instant, dropping her duffel as she saw them fully: four swiftly moving figures; one blonde and blue, one green and black, one ginger and pink, and then one black and red, and she was running forward, leaving Blake and Yang behind, the ground flying away under her feet as Ruby turned around and gasped as she saw her. It was a mirror image of the night at the Fall of Beacon, where Ruby had towards her and they had crashed together, except now, the terror and bloodshed of the night was replaced by bittersweet sorrow and a winter sky, as pale blue as a robin’s egg.

“Yang? Blake? Weiss?” Jaune was saying, plain astonishment stark in his voice, and Nora was squealing their names, and Ren looked— for once— actually taken aback, his eyes wide as he surveyed the ragtag group. Weiss, though, only had eyes for Ruby, her Ruby, here and whole, her round face and innocent eyes replaced by a lean look and a shadowed gaze.

All at once, the spark inside of her sputtered out, and she drew back to look at her partner fully. She didn’t dare acknowledge the feelings and the single thought both of them were experiencing in their Bond: the night the Tower had fell, and when Weiss had kissed her, before Ruby had
murdered someone at the top of the Tower, and almost died.

“Weiss,” Ruby whispered, her hand coming up and barely brushing her cheek before it dropped away abruptly. “You’re here,” she marveled, her voice full of wonder. “You’re all here. I— how did you—?”

Her voice crumbled into nothingness as she saw Yang, a couple steps ahead of Blake. She was walking towards her sister warily. Ruby’s expression drained of shock and wonder, replaced by a coldness— and, dare she say it, an anger— that startled Weiss.

Ren and Nora cleared off, out of earshot of the group, perhaps sensing the palpable tension. Jaune remained behind, looking frightened, and Weiss could see Ruby’s eyes locked onto her sister. There was not wonder there, or shock. There was just a bitter, cold anger.

This is their moment, Weiss realized. I can talk to her later. Family is the most important… and they’re much closer than just family.

That made her think of Winter, and with a burst of sadness, Weiss edged away, following after Ren and Nora. She caught Blake’s eye, indicating that she should join her and leave the sisters alone, and with a troubled glance at Ruby and Yang, who were looking at each other silently, she complied.

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Yang

When she saw her sister’s face and her cold silver eyes, the world seemed to fade away to a blur. Yang was barely conscious of Weiss scurrying away after Ren and Nora, and Blake following her, but some instinct kept her feet shuffling forward until she was standing across from her sister.

For the first time Yang could ever remember, Ruby moved away from her. Her eyes were cold silver, like a too-bright sheet of ice. She didn't say anything— another peculiarity— but her gaze traced Yang's form, coming to a rest on her prosthetic. Yang was gratified to see almost a flinch ripple that icy cold mask; so, Ruby wasn't completely changed. She couldn't hide her guilt— nor could Yang hide her shame.

Ruby cleared her throat. She was taller, her face sharper and more angular, pale, like the winter snow had changed her. Her voice crackled with stiff anger. "Jaune, can you go? I think I need to talk to my sister."

"Yeah. Uh, are you sur—“ He broke off as Ruby's silver eyes— blazing, now, with a new flame—bored into him. There was rage there, flashing like fire. But Ruby was never angry.

Her sister's fury scared her more than anything.

"Yeah, sure," Jaune muttered. "Um, have fun, I guess."

Yang snorted. "Unlikely." With a sad glance at her— she regretted her tone; Jaune had lost someone he loved, and unlike Yang, there was no chance of him ever getting her back— he scurried off, leaving Yang and Ruby alone.
"Why are you here, Yang?" Ruby's voice cracked like a whip through the still, frigid air, snapping Yang's attention back to her. She stared at her sister in disbelief. When she'd envisioned her reunion with Ruby, it had involved hugs, forgiveness, tears - not them staring each other down like thin, angry wolves, bitterness thick in Ruby's eyes. "Why leave Patch and its safety and your isolation? Why all this?"

Yang managed to find her voice, the facsimile of pain throbbing through her severed arm. The prosthetic did a lot, but it would never, ever feel again. When she spoke, her words were thick, dragged from her like thorns. “I…I made a mistake."

"Yes. You did. But I already knew that." Ruby’s face was more chilling than the winter all around them. "Do you expect me to say I love you again and forgive you, just like that? I already tried. You knew what happened to me, all of us— you knew I almost died and so did Blake and so did Weiss! You made a promise to always protect us and be there for us when you became a member of this team— but you pushed us away." Anger lit her eyes until they shone like embers. “You didn’t care.” Her voice rose. “When mom died, you were there for me! You didn’t let grief ruin you and neither did I! I expected you to be there for all of us after the Fall of Beacon, but you shut yourself off from everyone because you thought you were the only one who suffered. Sure, you lost a lot. Maybe more than all of us. But you didn’t lose everything; you didn’t lose your entire world and have it ripped out from right under you. You didn’t lose someone you used to love; you didn’t kill someone to save someone else’s life like Blake and I had to do. You didn’t have to be dragged back into a terrible place like Weiss. We’re all allowed to grieve, but that shouldn’t take us away from what we still have left. You were supposed to be there for me and you weren’t!"

“I—"

"You left me, Yang," Ruby said, and the anger was gone, and it was like a cry torn from her. "You left me alone."

"Ruby," she said, and suddenly the fragile strength she'd built up shattered in on itself, snuffed out like a flickering flame, and she was crying and everything was broken, torn, dead. Ruby was gone. She had died in spirit on that night: a stranger inhabited her body, and no matter how they moved forward, every part of their old lives was gone forever, including the only sister she had ever known. "Ruby, my baby sister, please, please, stay."

Her little sister, but also a stranger to her, pulled her close, and she cried and cried, knowing that things would never be the same, that every part of the life they had shared was dead. Ruby, God, I'm so sorry, I let all of you go, I let all of you down. I abandoned you when you needed me most, like mother, like daughter. You left Patch and didn't come back; that's Summer's fate, now yours. I wasn't there for you; that was Raven's choice; we're repeating history.

"Things will never be the same," she whispered into Ruby's shoulder, breathing in the scent of snow and smoke, "will they?"

"She's gone," Ruby said hollowly. "Everything's gone."

_Pyrrha, Penny, every part of our old lives._

“No,” Yang muttered, lifting her head. “No, I won’t accept that. We didn’t lose everything.”

“We—”

“Everything changed,” she said, “but the most important things stayed with us. Our team, our family… I lost an arm and a partner and my sister, and now I have all three back. You lost the
familiarity of what you knew, and your team, and two of your friends, and you’ve lost so much, and you still have so much to lose, but you’re here… here, fighting for the better fight, not giving up, and not backing down. Because you’re a Huntress, Ruby. A Huntress and a warrior. Not because you have to be, despite what Qrow told you… but because deep down, it’s who you are, and no powers or genetic eye color is going to change that.”

Ruby managed a watery smile. “Did you practice that speech, or what?” Then her smile slid away, her eyes darkening. “I guess all of what you’ve said is true, and I’m happy for you. You should be happy, after everything. But sometimes I just wonder how any of this could possibly be for the greater good.”

“Do you want to tell me about what happened to you the night of the Fall?” Yang asked softly.

Ruby’s gaze grew guarded. “I asked you to talk about it with me before, remember? You didn’t care then. Why now?”

Yang flinched. “I— I was wrong. I’m sorry for not listening to you before, and I’m sorry for pushing you away. It was selfish and bullheaded of me to do. You’re my sister, no matter whose blood runs in our veins, and you always will be. I should have been there for you, I should have protected you, and I wasn’t… but I’m here now. I’ll always be here for you, no matter what. So tell me what happened.”

Ruby looked away, her eyes clouding. “You know that I went up into the Tower because Jaune called us and told us Cinder was going to kill Pyrrha, so I had to save her. I went up there, but I— I was too late,” she managed, before she began to cry.

Yang reached out and held her hand, and with a choked noise, she went on.

“Cinder shot her in the heart and it was horrible, Yang, she was choking and gasping for air but it was too late, and I saw her die, I saw her eyes just go all dim and she fell on her side. Cinder touched her, and then she… she started to burn.

“She burned down to ashes, and the storm scattered them away.”

God, Yang thought, unable to shake the image of the epitaph on Summer Rose’s grave. Thus kindly I scatter. “Ruby, I—”

“It’s not over.” She took a shaky breath, memories swirling in her eyes. “I saw Pyrrha die, and Cinder turned to me, and then it happened: my head built with pressure before it felt like I exploded. There was just this pain, really intense… it felt like my skull was shattering. Silver light just— it set me on fire, Yang. I rose up in the air, because it was so much more powerful than I was, and it took control of my body and pulled me in every direction, before everything went dark. I thought it was over, I was dead, nobody could feel that sort of pain and live to tell about it… I was in the shadows, and everything was gone. That was when I blacked out, I think. Qrow found me then, he said. I went into the tower and froze Cinder alive. It stopped her heart instantly.” Ruby looked down and away, shadows chasing shadows in her eyes. "I froze the fire who started this all. I killed her, even if I didn't mean to. I don't know what I would have done if things turned out differently. I don't know if I would have killed her all the same, but Cinder is gone, and I thought she was my friend. But she was the biggest enemy all along. I've learned a lot along the road about her. She knew Ozpin; hated him, and she murdered him and Pyrrha before I murdered her. She allied with Adam and Mercury and manipulated Emerald into working for her. I don't know where they are now. They've got nowhere to go, and I guess they hate me. I took away all they had. I killed three people, Yang! Three people… sure, they were evil, but I took away their lives… they were people, maybe with hopes and dreams and families, and I ended their lives."
Yang frowned. "I always knew there was something very twisted, very wrong with Cinder... It was hard to explain. But I put it down to isolation and past events. God, how wrong I was..."

Ruby nudged the snow with her boots, revealing ashy, frozen dirt underneath. "Yang..." She shivered. “You know what Weiss— what she said to me that night, but did she— did she talk to you about it at all?” There was a look of half-hope, half-fear in her eyes, though Yang knew she’d be hard-pressed to get her to admit it.

"She was very worried about you. She never said it to me, but I could tell it was eating her up inside, worrying about you." Yang swallowed. 'I think she gave up on that ever happening the instant she saw her father again, though."

Ruby sighed. "I knew it really," she said after a while. "Deep down, I knew nothing could happen between us. She loves - loved - the me before all this happened, all this tragedy. How do you live through that sort of thing and keep what's important? But I'm not that Ruby anymore." Her eyes were brimming with tears. "I never got to tell her I loved her, too. And now I never will."

"It's not all that bad." Yang tried for a comforting tone. "There's always a second shot, Ruby. Maybe you can try again. Maybe she can learn to adjust to the new you: she's changed too, don't forget. Maybe this time, you can do things right." She looked at the slightest hint of green, a sprouting shoot in the thawing dirt. “Maybe this time, we can do things better. This is our second start. We can’t— we can’t waste it.”

“Yeah.” Ruby wiped at her nose and eyes. “Yeah, you’re right. Things aren’t all terrible, though, you know?”

“Really?”

Ruby took her hand, the prosthetic one, and squeezed it, her expression fierce with certainty. “Really. You’re here. And I’m… I’m so happy that you are, you know? I’ve tried so hard to act like I know what I’m doing, to keep it together for Jaune, Ren, and Nora, but it’s hard, not having what’s familiar. I don’t know what I’m doing. But to have my team here with me— well, that’s better than anything. I missed you so much. I love you, Yang. I don’t want to lose you again.” She lowered her head. “Dad might not always need us, but we’ll always need each other. Because we’re family.”

“And family means no one gets left behind,” Yang finished, hugging her sister close, her heart brimming over with emotion. “I missed you, too. As much as I missed them, maybe even more.”

“I still can’t believe you’re all here with me... and Weiss... oh, Yang, what am I going to say to her? How can I talk to her?”

“If I can reconcile with Blake, you can do it with Weiss, too. I guess I’d better let you go make up with her, hadn’t I?”

“Yeah, I think you’d better.” Ruby let out a long breath. “I hope she doesn’t look at me like some freak. I could think of worse things to mark an inherent trait besides silver eyes. I could have a double-forked tongue, or ram horns, or something.”

“Well, so much for normal knees,” Yang said, her voice muffled as she spoke into Ruby’s shoulder, a mixture of laughter and tears mingling with in it.

Ruby let out a laugh, her shoulders shaking with it, and Yang was relieved to hear a genuine note of happiness in it. “Normal knees are overrated, anyways.”
There was a certain terror that came from plunging into battle—like when she had jumped a rocket locker to Torchwick’s ship, or raced up the side of Beacon Tower, or fought the Grimm for her life. Walking up to Weiss, who was standing apart from the others, looking composed and carefully, neutrally blank, inspired a whole different category of ‘terror’, and it was a lot more nerve-wracking than going into battle. At least when she was in a fight, she was always sure of herself—her footing, her actions, and her skill. Being around Weiss never had her sure of anything, and as she neared her, her heart began to thump almost painfully in her throat. Her palms dampened, beading with sweat, and she wiped them on her combat skirt, clearing her throat as she stopped next to her partner.

Weiss looked up, and the mask of neutrality fractured for an instant, her eyes flickering with fear and sorrow, before it was replaced by a film of ice. “Hello, Ruby,” she said, her voice calm, and with a note of ice that Ruby hadn’t heard from her in a long, long time. Her father, Ruby thought with a sinking heart. Oh, Weiss, no…

“How can we talk?” she asked quietly, attempting to ignore the covert glances from Ren, Blake, and Nora.

Weiss frowned. “In private, I assume?”

“I think that would be best,” Ruby replied, and Weiss looked as if she had been slapped. With a nod, she led the way away from the group into a grove of trees, and Ruby followed her, hair whipping back as the wind picked up.

Weiss stopped under a bare-leaved oak tree, once they were out of earshot. She looked terribly different, and the bright Mistral sunset brought out how angular she looked. Her eyes were dark and empty, her face thin and unhappy. Ruby did not touch her. The last time she had seen this girl, they had been clinging to each other in the shadow of desolation and ruin, and fear of the uncertain future had made them both do things that they normally wouldn’t have ever done. She didn’t know how to feel now—trekking out in the wilderness of Mistral wasn’t normal, really, but she had plenty of time to think about things, and now that Weiss was here, it felt like the fragile peace she had built back up had been smashed to pieces all over again.

Weiss was silent, looking off at the mountains in the distance, as if Ruby wasn’t even there, but that didn’t fool her. She had seen Weiss running over the ridge towards her like her life depended on it, and she had seen the heartbreak in her eyes… but she didn’t dare prise into their Bond to figure out what, exactly, was going on.

“So,” she began. “You came here with Yang and Blake… did you help Yang get her prosthetic?”

“Yes.” Weiss’s answer was soft, almost inaudible. “The General helped.”

Ruby decided to try a different approach. “So, did you help Blake and Yang reconcile, too?”

“No. They did that on their own.”

Ruby frowned. “Do you know if my Dad was mad that Yang left? And how’d she do it?”
“Sun helped her. I don’t believe your father was upset with her,” Weiss answered, sounding less
cold, but still short.

“Did— did you see anyone on the way here? I can’t imagine you wouldn’t, after the Fall’s
chaos…”

“Yes. We saw Team CFVY, and a relative of Blake’s. No others.”

An awkward silence descended around them, Weiss still persistently avoiding her gaze.

“Weiss, y— you’re not upset at me, are you?” she blurted, her eyes round with worry. “Because it’s
lonely, Weiss. Having a power that separates you from everyone and everything is really, really
lonely. Having people talk behind your back, having them be scared of you because you were born
with something you couldn’t help, having even your own family look at you like they don’t know
you anymore… it’s lonelier than anything.”

Weiss watched her with inscrutable, cool blue eyes. It was impossible to guess what she was
thinking.

“Weiss,” Ruby said again, half-pleading, her voice softer than a breath of wind. “Please.”

Weiss’s eyes dropped to her feet. “I’m not upset,” she said quietly after a long pause. “I’m…
concerned, I believe… and frightened. I suppose it’s strange, really, to imagine that someone you
know well is separated from you by destiny, that they are headed down paths where you are unable
to follow…”

“I don’t want this,” Ruby repeated, clinging desperately to that one truth, that one safe haven
among a swirling storm of uncertainty and fear. “I just want to be normal. I don’t want to be talked
about.”

Weiss’s eyes flashed at her. “People are going to talk, Ruby. I saw what happened. Everyone in
eyeshot of Beacon saw it… what you did, it was this enormous, blinding flash of light originating
from the peak of the tower, like a star going into supernova… a chill, this coldness, swept over
everything before fading out. And then you were the only one to come out unscathed… Pyrrha was
gone, without even a— a body— and that girl from Emerald’s team, that Cinder, was completely
frozen, like ice, as well as the Grimm wyvern… not to mention Ozpin’s absence and the flow of
Grimm to Beacon. It was something no one has ever seen. And it scares you, I can tell, but you
have to face that all of that is a direct result of whatever you did. People are scared, Ruby, because
you have a power no one has ever seen, a power to bring something as old as time to its knees and
walk away virtually unharmed…”

Horror swept over her. “I… when you say it like that, I…”

“It makes it all too real, does it not? We’ve all had to deal with the repercussions. You’re no
different from us in that regard,” Weiss added, a hint of bitter irony in her voice.

Ruby felt her throat close up at the look on her partner’s face, as if she had become a stranger. A
huge abyss had opened up between them with a few careless revelations from Qrow. She felt
Weiss’s fear of the future, uncertainty of the present, stunned terror that she was barely repressing,
through the Bond— but most of all, Ruby felt her sadness.

“I want to go home!” she burst out, feeling a stinging pressure behind her eyes. “I wish this hadn’t
happened… I miss Pyrrha, and Penny, and Ozpin, and the old Yang… I want to be a kid again, I
want my mom to be here so she could explain all of this silver-eyed stuff, too… I want the worst
thing that could happen was burning a batch of cookies in the oven.” She stared hopelessly, helplessly, at her feet, unable to bear looking up and seeing her own heartbreak reflected in Weiss’s eyes. “I wish I could go back.”

Weiss’s blue eyes slid away from her. “We can never go back to the way things were, Ruby.”

“I want to go home, Weiss,” she whispered, her voice cracking, and then before she knew what was happening, she was crying, and Weiss had pulled her into her grip, and she was crying into her partner’s shoulder; deep, soundless sobs that felt like they were being wrenched from her very bones. “I’m s— sorry, I’m so sorry… I’m sorry for letting them die… for not being good enough to s-s—ave everyone…”

Weiss’s fingers stroked through her hair, soft and comforting. “It’s okay,” she whispered. “It’s going to be all right, Ruby. It’ll be all right…”

I miss my mom, she thought, a terrible misery swirling through her. I miss Penny, and Pyrrha… I just know if I had just been faster, stronger, better, I could have saved them both, I could have prevented this, all this…

“It’s my fault,” she choked out, words muffled, into Weiss’s shoulder. “All of those deaths… they’re my fault.”

“No,” Weiss shot back, her tone bald. “You didn’t know. It was the fault of those who killed them, who manipulated them… it’s not your fault, and we did the very best we could. You tried as hard as hell with the hand that you were dealt… don’t blame yourself.”

Ruby sniffled, and drew back, swiping roughly at her eyes. Weiss took her by the shoulders, forcing her to meet her steady gaze— unwavering blue eyes, one of which was slashed with a diagonal scar, yet another reminder of the suffering that all of them had borne in their pasts.

“You’re my partner,” she said. “And a Bond means you stick with and trust your partner no matter what. I don’t care what you did, what powers you might have because of some so-called line of warriors… You’re still Ruby to me. Still flippant, still annoying at times, still determined to play the hero …. but ultimately, you’re still you.” She gave her a watery smile. “I wouldn’t have it any other way. Let them treat you like an outcast, but they’ll be exiling me as well… because I won’t leave you behind. Okay?” Weiss looked at her, and for one of the first times, Ruby got the sense that she was looking at her and really seeing her— seeing and understanding. “I will never leave you.”

This is our second start, Yang had said. We can’t waste it.

She leaned forward towards Weiss, almost of her body’s own accord, reminded for the briefest instance of the last time this had happened— Grimm circling in the sky, screaming from the courtyard, a fight to the death taking place above their heads. But the sky here was filled with clouds and gentle starlight, not Grimm, and the only thing surrounding them for miles was not danger— just friends, and family, and the promise of a better future than the one they had left behind. Anywhere I go, I’m home as long as you’re beside me.

Their lips brushed, and Ruby went up on her tiptoes like a flower extending its petals towards the sun. There was no desperation in this, no fear, just a quiet warmth that kindled in her chest and warmed her from the inside out, like a summer’s night. Warmth trickled through her veins, her Bond flaring up, almost with a soft glow. Hesitantly, unsure, she slid her hands up, resting them on Weiss’s shoulders. Weiss let out a soft, murmuring noise, her hands curling against the back of Ruby’s neck.
She pulled away. “Weiss, I never said anything back to you that night Beacon fell,” she whispered, and resting their foreheads together, her eyes still closed. “I—I kind of love you, Weiss. I don’t ever want you to think I don’t.”

Impossibly, Weiss broke into a smile, blue eyes shining. She didn’t say anything back, but she didn’t have to, because in the Bond, Ruby could feel what she had said. Love hummed there, a quiet, content glow that lit her up and chased away the shadows of uncertainty and fear.

And for now, that was enough.

A/N: DISNEY REFERENCES AHHHHHHH.
Epilogue - Taking Wing

Chapter Summary

Well, here it is. The finale of a journey that I've traveled with you guys for over two years.

It's been an epic journey, and I don't regret any of it. These works have taught me so much more about the dynamics of writing, let me grow and change, and meet all of you. This, I think it's safe to say, is my last venture of fan fiction for RWBY - at least, my last huge one. I might dabble in one shots or two shots with the upcoming Volume 5 - I'm not leaving the fandom; just taking a step back to focus on my novels and publishing in the real world.

You can keep up with me at my tumblr, @moonsandstar-s, or at my twitter, @hamilfamily. I'm more active on Twitter nowadays, and it's more of the real deal, but either one is fine. I'd be happy to chat with any of you whenever!

I'll hurry up so we can get on with the epilogue, but I just wanted to say that I love you guys. Thank you all so much for being constantly supportive throughout this. I would not be the writer I am without your feedback, and it means the world to me. I won't forget who has helped to put me where I am now.

Good night to 'Shadows and Sparks', and goodbye, for now.

- Moon

Qrow

Ruby’s journey had taken him on a very roundabout path— crossing over the ocean away from Patch, winding all throughout Vale, taking a wide detour past the school and the city, which he welcomed, and finally sailing over the sea to Mistral, where she had walked for three days with her friends before three more had joined them— his niece, her partner, and Vincent’s daughter. He had been surprised at that, and then almost pleased— no one he knew had the gall to escape the clutches of the tyrannical Vincent, but maybe, Weiss had broken that cycle with her own escape. The girl, Blake, who he had found out had run away after the Fall, was back with them again; that pleased him. A team was always better off together, and he knew that— with team RWBY united once more— maybe, just maybe, the cycle of a broken team had been ended. And lastly, Yang had lost her gaunt, haunted look, and she even had something else that surprised him… she had gotten a prosthetic arm. He recognized the logo of the prosthetic that she had donned— the golden joint, imbued with fire Dust and linked to her Aura— it was stamped with the sign of Atlas, and the General. He knew that Ironwood must have taken pity on his niece and given it to her, and for that, he was grateful.

Three more Huntresses had joined Ruby’s journey; Yang, Blake, and Weiss, and he wondered if Tai knew about it, too— wondered if he knew that his daughters were back together again.
If he continued following them all the way to Haven Academy, he’d have a mission again, and he
could make sure that no more harm came to Ruby, who he had come to love as a daughter. This
wasn’t a mission that Ozpin had given to him; it was one he had undertaken by himself, and there
was a freeing exhilaration in it. He almost felt like he could breathe easy again.

Qrow stood on the cliffside as he watched them talking before they set off once more, wind raking
through his hair and sending it rippling back, teasing the hairs apart and putting them back together
in new ways. It was a beautiful sunset in the west, the sun drawing below the mountains and
turning the clouds into a rainbow of golds, violets, and flames. Above his head, the sky was a
slowly darkening sapphire, and he let out a long, low breath. The trees whispered together in a
secret language, their branches clattering together as the wind picked up, the clouds whipping past
as if pulled by on a silken thread.

It was just the kind of day that Summer Rose would have been playing with her children on, ten or
so years ago, before she had died. It would have been the type of day that Qrow had looked up at
the stars, from wherever he had been on one of his missions, and counted the days until he would
see Ozpin again to deliver the report of his findings, and maybe to make him smile, even once.

It was the type of day that Cinder and Salem had tried to destroy, and failed, because Remnant was
safe now, safe for today and all the days to come. The Maiden powers were safe, out there in their
new host, and they would blossom again when it came time for autumn to rise once more. He
could taste the faintest hint of spring on the breeze as the sun went down, a sharp, bittersweet taste.
Autumn was behind them, and winter was falling away as new life flooded Remnant.

He pulled out the cane from its holder on the small of his back, running a scarred hand along its
length, and he was surprised at the uprush of grief that flooded his veins. It reminded Qrow of how
fiercely he— he, of all Huntsmen!— had cared for the old headmaster. They had not been
particularly close, not in the way partners were close, or siblings, or lovers, but they had shared
something regardless. More than colleagues, more than a mentor and apprentice, more than a
Huntsmen under the charge of another; less than partners. But something, and for now, that was
good enough. Ozpin’s ghostly aura still hung around the cane, of course, because it had been the
last object in his hands before he’d died, and Qrow’s grief subsided into the emotion that clung to
it: a calm, content certainty.

As Qrow was readying himself to put it back within the holder, he accidentally levered down the
trigger on the top of it. The top of the cane, a silvery knob, twisted and popped off, and he
stiffened, wondering if he had broken it in some fashion, before he remembered the cane— like
Ozpin— had many, many hidden depths and abilities.

There was a small slip of paper tucked inside in the handle, written in his gentle, sloping
handwriting. Qrow looked at it, his mouth slightly agape as he did so, feeling as though the breath
had been punched out of his lungs, before the words sank in— almost as if Ozpin himself had
breathed them aloud. Qrow could almost hear his voice in the whisper of the wind that curled
around his head, pushing back his hair and bringing the warmth of spring with it.

Begin again.

And, impossibly, he smiled.

Yang
Yang exchanged a glance with Blake as they both leaned against a tree, just out of earshot of Jaune, Ren, and Nora. Weiss had gone into the woods with Ruby some time ago, and they were waiting for the two of them to return.

“Do you think they’ve reconciled by now, or…”

One of Blake’s ears flicked, and she looked into the woods with a faintly worried expression. “I can imagine they’ve got a lot to talk about. Ruby’s fundamentally changed, and I can’t see Weiss not being somewhat troubled by it, whereas you and I… well, the changes weren’t so drastic, nor did they remove us so far from what we all knew and loved. At least I’m not the descendant of a huge power… and the same goes for you.” Blake let out a quiet sigh, leaning over and resting her chin on Yang’s shoulder, her nose tickling her neck. “Yang?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

Yang let out a little noise of surprise. “What for?”

“Everything,” Blake murmured. “Without you, I— I don’t know where I’d be. Lost, probably. And Adam would still be out there… none of this would have been resolved without you, Yang. None of it would have happened. If you hadn’t gone to get Weiss, to pursue me, to bind these teams back together again, and to give me the courage to chase Adam from this world… nothing would be solved, if you hadn’t done it. It all culminated into one grand event. And here we are now, even after we’ve weathered the storm and come out damaged… we’re alive. We’re all still together. And ultimately, I don’t think we could have asked for more.”

“Ruby’s always been the one to believe in fairytales and neat, happy endings,” Yang said with a sigh. “I used to, once— once upon a time, even. But… I don’t think I believe in fairytales anymore. Not after my mother, and Adam, and losing you… even if some of those things have been resolved, they leave their mark on you forever. Hearts are breakable things, Blake, and they never get put back together in the same way.”

“But life isn’t a fairytale,” Blake said. “Never has been, and it never will be… but somehow, happy endings do exist in real life. And so do heroes and monsters, the light and the dark.”

“Do you think so?”

“You’re the hero,” Blake told her, voice ringing with certainty. “You’re the hero who defeated every impossible odd that weighed her down. You’re the hero who escaped her own dark. You’re the light who found equilibrium and overcame the darkness. You were even the monster, once, in your own mind, and you changed yourself through force of will. You’re not a fire that blazes to kill anymore, but you are still the same fire that defines your soul. The warmth, strength, and passion. You aren’t the hero because you fight for what is right. You’re the hero because you follow your heart, and you do everything and anything to keep the ones you love safe, even at the cost of your own life. Morality doesn’t make someone a savior… but courage, bravery, and love, do. You are every bit the hero you claim you are not, and I will stand by that until the day I die.

“Our story isn’t a fairytale. It’s that we made each other better— that in the grand scheme of the stars and worlds and destinies, we found each other, and we held on to each other, no matter what tried to pull us apart. Destiny isn’t a path that one follows blindly. It’s always a choice, and we chose each other, Yang. Love isn’t something you feel, really. It’s something you do, every day—
in healing someone, in standing by their side, in never giving up, no matter how much it seems like
the ending will be an unhappy one. Ultimately, if you work and try hard enough, you can change
your own destiny to a better one. This is a story of Belladonnas and Xiao Longs and Roses and
Schnees, Valkyries and Arcs and the Nikos… and it’s a story we’ll never forget, not in this life, or
all the lives to come.”

Yang stiffened in her embrace, overcome, her heart brimming with emotion, and Blake’s face— so
familiar, so beautiful— filled with worry. “Was I… I’m sorry. Was that right?”

“Sometimes I wonder how I’m lucky enough to have known you,” Yang whispered, still
overcome, her voice wobbling. She ran her hands down the sides of Blake’s face, marveling at her,
and then placed her hands on the place where her shirt covered her abdomen. There was still a
raised ridge of flesh there, a scar from Adam. They both had scars now, another bond linking them
from the same trauma. But now, they were healed. “You’re a hero, too. Just in different ways. The
girl who helped the White Fang lose a monster, who chose her own fate, who loved her team, who
stood by her heart. The girl who saved me.”

She smiled and leaned in to kiss her, tilting her head sideways. “I’m in love with you, Blake
Belladonna,” she whispered against the warmth of her lips. “If it’s really destiny that puts us where
we are, then I think destiny… I don’t think endings can always be perfect, but this one feels…
happier, somehow. I love you. I love you more than anything.” She drew back, catching her breath,
before a smile crossed her face. “And in the fairytales, wouldn’t this be where we ride off into our
own sunset?”

“A sunrise,” Blake said. “Not an ending, but a beginning.”

Blake leaned forward this time, kissing her under the brisk breeze with the hint of spring and new
life, under the flawless blue sky, and the mountains and their future that waited in the distance.
She kissed her, and it felt like coming home.

“I wanted to get us together for a reason,” Ruby said, looking up from where she stared at the
ground, her expression troubled as the wind blew her hair to the side. “We need to talk.”

They were gathered in a circle, at the edge of the trees. Clouds were rolling in from the east, and
rain misted the mountains in the distant, the air wet with the heaviness of a dawning storm. Ren
and Nora looked somber, faces gray in the darkening light, and Jaune and Weiss seemed
concerned, but Yang knew what was coming; Ruby had the ‘I’m going to make a speech’ face, one
that was very familiar to her, ever since her little sister knew how to talk.

“We’re all in this quest together, and nothing short of the apocalypse is going to stop us,” Ruby
told them, meeting each of their gazes in turn. Her face looked older, and there was a faraway
expression in her eyes, something wise beyond her years. She didn’t look like a fifteen year old
anymore. She was even speaking differently, measuring her words— she had grown into her role,
grown up, but at a terrible cost. “I think we all know that nothing’s going to be perfect from now
on. But— we can’t be divided any longer. I think that played a major role in what happened a few
weeks ago, and that’s how Cinder… that’s how she was able to betray us. She figured out all of our
weakness, and exploited them. There’s been a lot of divisions among all of us, since the very
beginning— with jealousy or rivalries or simple misunderstandings.
“So that’s why we’re going to end those right here before we continue on. We’re going to do something we should have done before we all lost someone we loved. We’re going to figure each other out. We have to become a real team, to join together on this, or we will fail. And if we fail, we lose our one chance to find out why this disaster happened, and how we can prevent it from happening again. We lose the chance to bring justice to Penny’s death, and Pyrrha’s, and all the others who died because of Cinder. So let’s settle our differences right now.

“Let’s start with the basics. My name is Ruby Rose. I’m fifteen, going on sixteen. I’m the daughter of Summer Rose and Taiyang Xiao Long. I’m Yang’s sister, Weiss’s partner, and the leader of team RWBY. And I’m leading this journey to make sure nothing like this ever happens again, and even to make sure Pyrrha and Penny don’t get forgotten.” She shivered, and a shadow of the younger girl she was only a year ago crossed her face. “I was born in Patch. My mom died when I was only a kid. That’s part of the reason I’m coming on this journey, because I know she’d want me to. And I’m coming because Emerald, who I thought was my friend, betrayed me. I want to know why, what she could possibly have gained from it. More than that… about a month and a week ago, my uncle told that I’m different— that I’m the descendant of the silver-eyed warriors. I have a power I know nothing about, but I do know that I have to live with it. And no matter what, I’m not letting anything break up my team and my friends again. And finally, I want to say that I am honestly glad to have met you—all of you.” She gave a tentative smile to the solemn group. “Anyways, that’s me. Who’s next?”

Jaune shifted his shoulders, before glancing around the group and clearing his throat. “I guess I’ll go—is that okay?”

Ruby nodded, giving him an encouraging look. Yang noticed that she had her hand in Weiss’s, and she turned her face away to hide a smile.

“I’m Jaune,” he said, sounding slightly awkward. “I, uh, I have a mom, a dad, and seven sisters.”

“Someone’s parents were getting busy,” Yang muttered, earning herself a reproving smack from Blake, and a snort from Jaune.

“My mom and dad are great, really,” he went on, “and so are my sisters. I love them to pieces—but they don’t understand what it means to be a Huntsmen, not really… and I think I do, now. I think I finally get it. It’s not about how strong, or ‘macho’, or aggressive you are; it’s about what you’re made of, mercy and the sense of duty, and being charged with protection of humans. And my family didn’t know I was coming with you guys, but that’s probably best. This could get dangerous. But I’m coming anyways because I want answers, too, and it’s what— it’s what Pyrrha would’ve wanted. I snuck into Beacon, as you know. It was a bad thing to do, probably, and I shouldn’t have, but if hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met any of you. I wouldn’t have found new family in Ren and Nora, I wouldn’t have become friends with Ruby, and I…” Grief clouded his gaze. “I wouldn’t have met Pyrrha. And I’m grateful to have met all of you.” He looked around, new confidence in his eyes. “Even if we’ve all lost a lot, it’s worth it, I think, to have known you guys.”

“Is there anything you regret?” Ruby asked, the selfsame grief glimmering in her eyes.

His gaze dropped. “Of course,” he said, before he looked up. “I regret being so pushy towards you, Weiss, and I’m sorry for that. I wish I had gotten to know Pyrrha sooner than I did. I wish I had seen the signs that she was suffering before the very end. And I’m sorry for everything that happened with Cardin and his team, back at the very beginning, before all of this was set into motion… but I think that’s all, though.”

Ruby nodded. “That’s right. Thank you, Jaune, that was good. Who’s next?”
The group was quiet for a moment, before Nora bobbed her head, stepping forward and scanning the group.

“I’m Nora,” she said, perhaps a bit less chipper than she would have been moments before. “Um, if we were talking about family first… well… I never knew my parents, not really. I’m me, first and foremost, and Ren’s partner. I’m joining you guys because it’s the right thing to do, and because I lost a teammate, too, and if there’s anything I can do make her— her death— mean something, it’s to help you guys out. And I want to thank Ruby for coming along with us.” She smiled in Ruby’s direction. “I can’t begin to imagine how hard this is on you, Ruby. If I lost my team and family and friends and partner and then got news I was super-special… I think you’re handling it amazingly, and I’m proud to be following behind you. You’re a good Huntress and an even better friend, and I can’t think of anyone who’d be better to lead this journey.”

Ruby looked surprised. “I— thank you, Nora. That’s really nice of you.”

She nodded, looking down thoughtfully, ginger hair falling in front of her eyes. “And about regrets, huh… well, I’m just kinda here. I know I’ve messed around a lot in the past, but it’s time to get serious, isn’t it? I don’t think any of us saw this kind of thing coming… it’s crazy to think that only two months ago the worst thing that could happen was losing the Vytal tournament, cause that was the worst thing I could think of, and now it’s just really weird how—” She broke off as Ren gave a little cough. “Sorry. I’m rambling. But I wouldn’t be coming if I wasn’t sure it was the right thing to do. So I’m sticking with you guys till the very end, you can be sure of that!”

Ruby gave the first real smile Yang had seen on her in weeks, though it was watery, and her eyes— those bright silver eyes— were still touched with grief. “And we’re happy to have you along.”

This time, no one moved forward to speak up, and Ruby’s eyes flitted over the group before landing on Weiss. “Weiss, why don’t you go next?”

Her blue eyes looked a little startled, but she didn’t let out a protest, a sure sign of how drastically the dynamics between all of them had changed. Only a few months ago she would have argued, but now she merely ducked her head in acceptance.

“I’m Weiss, if any of you brainless dunderheads hadn’t picked up on that yet.” Her eyes flashed with a bit of her old spirit, and all of them grinned at her words. “I’m heiress to the Schnee Dust Company— for now, anyways, though I’m sure my father will fix that now that I’ve gone and run off on him… but I did it for Yang and for team, and I don’t regret it. Not at all.”

“Without you, I wouldn’t be here,” Yang told her, and Weiss flashed her a grateful glance.

“I’m sister to Winter Schnee, daughter of Ivana and Vincent. I’m partners with Ruby. And I came to Beacon for the same reason that I left Atlas and I’m journeying with the six of you now: I want answers, and moreover, I want to make my own future, one outside of being born into fame and fortune. I’m more than just a bloodline and money, and it’s high time I stepped outside of that and made my own path.” She shuffled her feet on the leaves. “I escaped Atlas because of a sense of owing something to all of you, and to those whom we have lost. I can promise that as long as there is breath in my body, I will seek justice for what happened. For Pyrrha, for Penny, for everyone we’ve lost, and for all the spirits that Cinder crushed.” Her eyes flickered to Blake and Yang. “And because she hurt my team and friends, and you have to go through me to get to them. And… I’m grateful we didn’t lose more.”

Ruby’s knuckles whitened as she gripped Weiss’s hand harder. “Thank you,” she said, her voice choked and constricted, and the heiress gave a brief nod, her own eyes overly bright with emotion.
“I’ll go next, I suppose,” Ren said quietly, coughing to clear his throat before looking up at the pattern of branches framed across the sky, his face weary. “My name, as you know, is Lie Ren, though I go by my surname only…”

“To stop jokes about how he’s not Truth Ren,” Nora piped up, eliciting a small hum of laughter from the group.

Ren’s gaze flickered with fondness as he glanced at Nora. “I suppose that, yes, I am not one for speeches, or for shows of emotion… I believe words should be saved for those whom you hold dear. And Pyrrha deserves that. She was my teammate, but more importantly, she was the pillar of our team, and now we must learn to stand strong in her absence. I was honored to have called her my teammate as long as I did, nor will I ever forget her quiet courage and her unwavering strength. She was a true Huntress, and she was— is— an example we all should look up to, in our darkest times and in our lightest. In our hearts, she will achieve immortality. In our memories, but not in passing, she will live on. We won’t forget.”

They all nodded as one, and Yang bit her lip hard, grief filling her stomach like dark, cold water.

“As I have said,” Ren continued, “this journey will undoubtedly hold peril for all of us, and we may not find answers at all. But we must try, for her sake. And I…” He glanced around, at Blake and Yang and Weiss, at Ruby and Jaune, and finally at Nora. “Selfish though it may be, I am eternally grateful that we didn’t lose more than we already have. That is all.”

Ruby nodded, closing her eyes briefly before Yang reached out, touching her with her good arm. “I’ll go, little sister,” she said quietly.

Ruby squeezed her hand and smiled. “Thanks, Yang.”

“Well,” she said, her voice seeming to echo loudly in the clearing. “I’m Yang, Yang Xiao Long. I’m the daughter of Taiyang Xiao Long and Raven Branwen… but you probably guessed already, unless you’re an idiot, because me and Ruby aren’t exactly the spitting image of each other.” She felt her tension melt away as everyone laughed at that.

“I’m coming with you guys because I owe it to you,” she continued, “and to Ruby, really. She’s still my baby sister, and I still have to be there to protect her, even if she’s not a little baby anymore, and virtually untouchable by the Grimm— there’s still a lot I have to make up to her. And… I guess… after all that happened, I shut down for a little while. I felt like everything I knew, everything I loved, had been just… snatched away. I had nothing, no one. Beacon was gone, Vale was in ruins. My dad fell back into depression after Ruby left for Haven. Qrow left the very same day. Blake had run away… Weiss was gone… Ruby had vanished… Pyrrha and Penny were dead… I had no one, really. Then Sun helped me get back on my feet; he explained to me, helped me realize that it wasn’t all about me anymore, and it couldn’t be, because no one was going to come back. Not unless I took action myself. Fate works in funny ways, but I’ve come to realize that nothing is just going to come to you, no matter how hard you wish and pray— you’ve got to make it happen yourself. You have to take charge. And to find them— I had to do it myself. So I left home the next day and went after Weiss, I was healed with the help of the General, and Weiss and I tracked down and found Blake before we all headed after Ruby… and here we are now.

“I want to say that things can go back to the way they were. But I know they never will. We’ve all been changed for good. And I regret a lot, too. I regret the loss of my arm,” she said, feeling as though she’d swallowed thorns. “But I’m luckier than most to be able to have the use of it again… and I’m so lucky I wasn’t killed. I regret not being there for Ruby in the first weeks we were back home after the fall of Beacon. I regret that I couldn’t save Blake when… when the past came after her. I know this journey has changed me. But sometimes… I don’t think it’s changed me in the
way I wanted. I’ve lost so many pieces of who I am along the way, that every day, I’m afraid I won’t recognize who I am when I wake up. I don’t think any of this could possibly have been for the greater good.” Her voice choked up, and she looked at her feet, not seeing the grass, but an impossibly endless tunnel of uncertainty and fear. “And I still have no idea what I’m going to do. lost so much more than just my arm the night Beacon fell… I lost who I was.”

“You’re still Yang,” Weiss said, her voice soft. “You’re still you. We all know who you are. You’re our pillar—”

Nora chimed in next. “— our firecracker—”

“— still our best fighter!”

“— you’re one of the most caring people,” Ren interjected, followed by Jaune, “and you’re really smart—”

“—and ultimately, you’ve changed for the better,” Ruby finished, her expression fond. “You’ve changed, sure, but if we never changed at all, never learned from what we’d been through, we’d stay stuck in the past— stuck, while life moved forward without us. We’d never get to see what we might grow into, shaped by our experiences, both the good and the bad. You’re not as headstrong or reckless, but isn’t that good? I think you’ve found your purpose. Not to be a Huntress, maybe, because you never truly had your heart set on that— but to help, to help Remnant, with your story and your experience. You don’t have to figure it all out right now. You can do it along the way, and we’ll be by your side for every step.

Yang smiled, a watery smile as she felt Blake’s hand slip into hers, before looking around at them all. “Thank you,” she managed, “truly, all of you. I’m… at least I have you guys. And even if I regret a lot of things, I don’t regret being here now, and… I’m ready for whatever gets thrown at us.” She looked around hesitantly. “And if I’ve learned anything from all of this, it’s that we’re always stronger together. When we’re apart, we are weak… but united, we stand tall. So we’ve got to put aside our troubles and work as a team.”

“Alright,” Ruby said, giving her a quick hug before drawing away and looking at the one remaining member who had not spoken. “Blake? Do you want to go?”

“I don’t think I have a choice, seeing as the rest of you have already gone.” Blake gave a faint smile before her face grew somber.

“I’m Blake, Blake Belladonna, daughter of Brian and Maria, ex-member of the White Fang, niece of Khione, ex-lieutenant of Ayran, and the former partner of Adam.” Her voice jumped, as if it had skipped a groove. “I’m so many titles - maybe too many. I’ve realized those don’t define me, but what does is that I am part of team RWBY, a Huntress, Yang’s partner, Ruby and Weiss’s teammate, and… their family.” She looked towards the darkening sky, and the stars, slowly coming out one by one, were reflected in the deep amber of her eyes. “One month and two weeks ago, I watched Yang nearly die in front of me. And, in my turn, I killed the one who hurt her. Ruby, you’ve taken three lives and watched two others die… I’ve taken two, and watched countless faces die on that night. A nameless child, an ex-partner, schoolmates and peers… and that death and the actions we have taken in the face of it is something we both have in common, and it is a demon we shall both have to grapple with for the duration of our lives.” She inclined her head towards Ruby. “We both killed people the night Beacon fell… but maybe it’s better to remember that without our actions, more people would have been hurt. Death is never a good thing, but some deaths, I’ve come to learn, are necessary if it means protecting the ones you love.”

She frowned, her ears lowering as the wind picked up, wreathing around the silent group. Above
their heads, a dark shadow danced through the clouds and dying sun and starlight, and Yang knew it was Qrow. She hoped that he knew she had forgiven him, despite everything her mother had done, and despite how the things he himself had done, and she looked up. The crow soared in a spiraling circle, and as it let out a cry into the night, she smiled, recognizing the rasp of his voice within it.

“All of us suffered terribly on the night Beacon fell,” Blake went on, drawing Yang’s attention back to her. “None of us escaped harm. In a way, the past came back to sting us where it hurt the most. All of us were hurt in some way… mental or physical, but that doesn’t matter, because in any and all ways, damage is done, and the injury is equal. Attributing one or the other to a greater strife only continues to divide us. All of you were hurt, and all of you suffered… but I’m the only one who ran away and didn’t have the courage to confront it. In a way, that makes me a coward, but in another way, it attests to a lesson that I’ve learned from. I grew up in a place that was never stable, and running away was the only thing I ever really knew— it was the only thing that I could count on. By running, I could keep myself safe, but I could purge my own presence from places that would be damaged by it. But I’ve learned another lesson from all of this: running away might seem like the better solution, but a Huntress should never abandon what she has come to know. Courage and loyalty are hallmarks of a better soul, and they’re the signs of one who isn’t a coward. Running away was shortsighted and selfish… my presence might have brought strife, but I didn’t know that my friends— my family— were willing to risk that. They were more than willing to suffer and take on that burden and by running, I hurt them far more than staying would have… and I’m sorry.” Her voice became a choked whisper, and Yang bowed her head, a flood of agony and regret squeezing her heart. “I’m so sorry.”

“We forgive you, Blake,” Ruby said, and the sentence was taken up and passed through the group until it sounded like the rush of the wind.

“Thank you,” she whispered, before she closed her eyes. “I will pursue justice as determinedly as all of you, I swear it.” She took a small breath. “I am here, ready to journey with you, because I’m not leaving you again. Meeting all of you was one of the best things in my life. Ruby, you’re like a little sister to me, and you, Weiss, despite our rough start, I can say I am truly, honestly glad to know you. And Yang… you know what you are to me. You’re everything.” She squeezed Yang’s hand, her eyes clouding with regret. “Even you, Jaune, Ren, and Nora. I can think of no one I would rather be making this journey with.”

Ruby nodded at Yang as she let out a quiet cough, letting her speak.

Yang looked at Blake intently. “Is there anything you regret?”

Blake’s eyes dragged back over to her face, a hundred years worth of emotion shining there. “I regret leaving you most of all,” she choked out. “And sending a letter, that’s all. It was so cowardly, I know… I regret not fighting with all I had to keep you safe. I regret everything I did to hurt you— all of you— following the Fall of Beacon. But I will never have remorse for loving you. It was completely selfish and naïve and coldhearted of me to leave, and I will never stop regretting it. And leaving you… that didn’t protect you; it hurt you. Adam wanted to scare me. And I let him. But nothing can ever chase me from your side again, not now, and not ever.”

Ruby looked around before bowing her head. “I want to say one more thing. About Pyrrha, I mean. Because she’d be with us right now if she hadn’t sacrificed herself to buy us time.”

Jaune made a small, pained noise, and Nora reached over and took his hand, comfortingly, like a sister.

“I won’t forget her,” Ruby said quietly. “She touched all of our hearts in different ways. Maybe as
a teammate and family—” she glanced at Ren and Nora—“Or maybe as something more.” She glanced at Jaune, who looked as if he had been kicked in the chest. “She meant something different to every single one of us. Jaune, she loved you, and I know you loved her, too. Ren, she was your teammate, and Nora, I know she loved you like a sister. Weiss, she was your idol. Blake, to you, she was an advocate for the Faunus’s rights. Yang, she was your friend… to me, she was one of my best friends. A role model, really. I remember her playing games with me, helping me study, encouraging me to keep up even if I was a bit too young to be at Beacon. I know you, Blake, remember how once, Pyrrha stood up for the Faunus.” Blake swallowed, her eyes shimmering. “And you, Yang, remember how she gave you advice, and remember how she spun alongside you and Blake at the dance, laughing. How she would always have courage even when it seemed like there was none. So my point is that— we won’t forget her. And we will make sure she didn’t die in vain.” Ruby looked around at all of them, feeble winter sunlight falling through the stark branches and illumining her face. Yang blinked at her, struck by the sudden, aching realization that her baby sister, the playful girl without a care in the world— whoever she had been— had died up in Beacon Tower with Pyrrha. A new girl, a new leader, had taken her place, and Yang knew who she was.

The silver-eyed warrior.

Ruby was just like Summer Rose. She even looked exactly like her, now; Yang could see it. The choppy fringes of her hair, the light of her eyes, the laugh-creases around them, even the stubborn set of her jaw. Even if no one knew what had happened that night at the summit of the Tower, even if no one knew just what had transpired, it was clear to see that it had been momentous. A new power and understanding shone from Ruby’s eyes, her face, lighting her from the inside out. She’s grown up, Yang thought. We all have. These past weeks have changed us in ways we can’t comprehend, can’t even begin to understand. You’re my little sister, Ruby… but you aren’t little at all anymore, are you? Are you even my sister, the little Ruby Rose I know so well?

You never will be again. I know that now. We’re never going to go on adventures through Patch together again. We’re never going to stay up until the early hours of the morning and read books with flashlights and whisper secrets to each other again. We’ll never watch Zwei go crazy when it storms again. We’ll never bake cookies together or help Dad grade his students’ work from Signal again. Because you’re leaving… leaving me, leaving us. This is your destiny… and it’s taking you down a path no one can venture on but you. This path you’re walking is a lonely one, bathed in blood and pain and fate that’s going to get you killed.

But in a way, you’re figuring yourself out, aren’t you? You’ve found a new destiny besides just following me. You’re a Huntress, and you’re a hero. You saved our lives that night. And you didn’t let so much knowledge change you, or harden your heart. And I think that’s the most courageous of all.

“So let’s go and confront what’s waiting for us,” Ruby said, holding out her hand in the center of the group. One by one, they stacked their hands on top of hers, until Yang finally topped it off with her prosthetic, the golden chrome glinting faintly in the falling sun, just like a dying star.

“There’s one thing I want to do before we go,” Ruby said abruptly, drawing away from the group, and she knelt, brushing the grass. “She didn’t— there’s nothing to bury here, but I want to make a memorial for her. Like they made for my mother.”

Yang stiffened with surprise, before she looked down at her little sister with a sad smile. “I think that’s a good idea, Ruby.”
They stood over a rock, carved with her initials, the earth freshly turned, with her circlet laid beneath it. They were loosely arranged in a half-circle, and as they watched silently, wind ruffling the branches that encircled the sky above their heads, Ruby knelt down next to the empty grave and began to speak.

“From dust we came, and to dust we must return.
One day the earth will dim;
the light in the sun will flicker and die, and the moon will sigh and roll over,
keeping her back to the world.
Our shadows will say farewell to our bodies, and go their own way in the darkness.
But today is not that day.
Though we have one less heart than we did yesterday,
Though we are one soul lighter, one absence heavier, today we still stand, and fight.
But your fight is done with.
Shut your eyes on this earth. Place your feet upon the pathway to above,
when auras flicker and die, you shall lend us light,
whence you return to the stars.
Death is not the end. Death is but that one last journey that we all venture on in the end,
We bid you farewell, not forever, but until we meet again
May you find shelter where you sleep. May the waters run clear and the comforts leap into your arms. May the sun shine down upon you, may the rain fall softly upon your skin,
may you find peace.
Your battle is over, brave warrior, those who fight in your stead share your blood, your memories, your love, so that your spirit may never die.
Hail and farewell, Pyrrha Nikos,
Now and forever.

From dust we came, and to dust we must return.”

Her voice broke on the last few words, eyes shining with unspilled tears, and as she stared at the tomb-marker, Yang wondered if she was remembering a very long time ago, when they were both smaller, and they had presided over the same depthless darkness. There had not been a body at Summer Rose’s grave, and there was not a body now… but the grief was still there, sharp as a thorn.

Jaune was shivering violently, tears running down his face. Ruby’s voice wobbled terribly on the last few words. The heavy gray sky, thick with the promise of a storm to come, sent gusts spinning through the air. But behind those clouds lay the sun, and behind the tragedy lay a chance for redemption.

They came forward, one by one, kneeling down by the tomb, whispering a few words. First it was Jaune, kneeling silently before leaning forward and whispering for a long minute; Yang didn’t catch all the words, but it sounded like a poem, followed by some more words, which she didn’t listen to, respecting his privacy. Then Nora came forward to say her goodbyes, her eyes bright with sadness. Then Ren, looking somber, and then Weiss, and Ruby, and Blake, and then Yang, kneeling down by the marker, her chest very tight.

“Bye, Pyrrha,” Yang whispered, her emotion threatening to overcome her. “We—we’ll keep Jaune safe for you. I know you loved him, and we’ll carry on your legacy of warmth and light. I know
you wouldn’t want us to mourn too long. You always wanted us to keep moving forward, and to fight for what was right. We’ll never forget you, but we’ll fight on for you. I— thank you for being so nice to me, for talking to me about everything...” Her voice choked up. “You were one of the nicest people I ever knew, and I’m always going to be happy i knew you, even for a little bit. I won’t let anyone forget the sacrifice you made for us.”

She placed her hand, metal glowing with warmth, on the tombstone, lingering for a moment before she, too, drew away and rejoined the group.

“It’s too late to begin traveling again tonight,” Ruby said. “We should all get some sleep, and rest... after today, I think we all need it. Let’s set up camp.”

They found a clearing in the woods, and Yang settled down beside Ruby, helping her stoke up a fire, enjoying the wordless companionship and comfortable silence between them. She passed Ruby a match, and Ruby lit it with a swift stroke, fire blooming to life and painting her face in warm orange.

Ren and Nora peeled off into the woods with their weapons to hunt for the group, and Yang helped Ruby catch the fire-nest with the flame, watching as it built up and began to crackle merrily. Weiss, Blake, and Jaune circled the campfire, setting up everyone’s sleeping bags, and Ruby sat back on her heels, watching the ever-shifting pattern of the fire, her silver eyes gazing deep within it as if it held all the answers she was looking for.

Yang reached out and took her sister’s hand. Ruby gripped it back, before shifting and letting out a quiet sigh, her gaze dropping away from the flames.

“You’re thinking of her,” Yang guessed.

“Yeah, of course I am... but you know what? It doesn’t hurt this time. Not like it hurt before.” Ruby moved one finger through the grass, not appearing angry or anguished, simply sad. “I’m glad we sent her off. I don’t think she’s unhappy. Wherever she is, I know she’s with Mom and Penny, and I know she’s at peace, Yang. I know it.”

Yang shifted closer to her sister, wrapping her up in her embrace, just like they were kids again. Ruby let out a surprised ‘oof’, wiggling to get comfortable before leaning back and hugging her, eyes closing and veiling the silver light that laid beneath. “I’m always going to be here for you, Ruby,” Yang murmured into her sister’s hair. “No matter what.”

Ruby snuggled a little closer, letting out a quiet sigh. “I know.”

An hour later, after dinner was eaten and the bones discarded, sleeping bags shuffled and rearranged, and the fire had sunken down from a merry, crackling blaze to a dimmer red glow, they all settled down to sleep. Ruby stood up, the fire’s light playing over her face, and they all looked up at her.

“Tomorrow, we set off at dawn,” she said. “All of us— together. Just as it should be.” She looked around at all of them, huddled by the campfire— Weiss’s sleeping bag close to her own, Yang and Blake’s nearer to their team and even closer to each other, Ren and Nora looking up at Ruby from their own corner, eyes bright like cats’ in the light, and Jaune’s, near Ruby’s. “Good night.”
The ‘good night’ was taken up and passed around through the group, and they all settled down, their breathing dropping off into a steady rhythm, one by one. By the time the clearing was stone-silent, with only the dull crackle of the fire and the breathing of the other six, Yang sat up, looking around— Weiss, aslee, looking peaceful with her head pillowed on Ruby’s arm. Jaune, eyes closed, curled up besides the remnants of his team, his face still shadowed with pain, but with the promise of healing. Ren and Nora, curled in close to each other. Blake, asleep, her head resting just below Yang’s heart. Ruby, her silver eyes shining in the firelight as she looked over at Yang.

“Good night, Yang,” she whispered, sounding just like they had when they fell asleep in the same room, back when they were kids.

“Good night, Ruby,” Yang echoed, before settling down and curling up, the prosthetic’s glow dimming in the darkness, fading to the dimmest of red auras. She leaned over and pressed a gentle kiss on Blake’s forehead, lips lingering there as she breathed in her scent, letting it lull her like some long-forgotten lullaby, wrapping her close. Blake let out a quiet sigh, shifting closer, and Yang ran one hand down Blake’s cheek, the gold metal gentle on her skin, before she huddled down into her sleeping bag and let sleep claim her.

Tonight, no thoughts of Adam, Raven, or the enemies to taunt her, darkened her dreams.

She woke up to chatter and saw Ren dumping water on the smoldering ashes of the fire as Nora helped Jaune pack up the duffels, while Weiss and Ruby pored over a map and argued good-naturedly about what pass through the mountains they should use. Blake was still asleep, and to Yang’s surprise, she looked— peaceful. Normally, while sleeping, Blake always looked conflicted; torn— before she remembered Adam’s words, in that last fateful dream.

The nightmares darken my sleep now, not hers. For a moment, Yang frowned, before a surge of determination shot through her. Let them come. I am stronger now. I’m ready in a way I wasn’t before. My eyes have been opened, and I’m not blind to what I have and what I can lose.

She shook Blake away and hopped to her feet to help everyone pack up for the long journey that laid in wait ahead of them. When the sun broke over the trees, flooding Mistral ground with rays of gold and rose, Yang took a deep breath, letting life rejuvenate her. The long, cold months were finally over. Spring had arrived at last.

“Are you ready?” Ruby looked back at them all, the wind whipping her hair in a choppy black storm cloud around her head. Her eyes shone in the strengthening light, and they all nodded at her silently— remembering, perhaps, another day long ago when she had led them from the place of the relics to the cliff of the Nevermore. They were more than a team now. They were a family, and with a smile, Ruby leapt down from the knoll she had been standing on and led the way out of the forest, into the light.

“Beacon is already heading up repairs, you know,” Weiss said as they followed her, chattering amongst themselves. “The city is half-finished in the month that we’ve been gone. They’ve had funerals for everyone who died— and all the professors, and some of the students, are working together to help the school get running again. Ironwood sent an enormous fund to help them, and they’ve cleared off all the Grimm from the area, and gotten rid of the giant wyvern. All the academies are working together to get the CCT back up, and they think they’ll have it done within two year’s time.”
“A happy ending,” Blake murmured.

Yang gripped her hand. “Not yet, but we’re getting there.”

“And in honor of those who died,” Jaune said, “and those who were wrongly framed, like you, Yang, they want to hold another Vytal Festival tournament this autumn, to show that we still have hope. That we aren’t afraid to move forward, even if we still remember those we lost in our hearts.” He looked up at the sky, golden sun dappling his face. “We’ll never forget them or what they did… even as the seasons change. We’ll remember, and we’ll learn.” There was some veiled, hidden note in his voice— something intermingled sorrow and a quiet regret— that suggested he was thinking of more than just Pyrrha, but Yang didn’t press him for details. Grief manifested in many different ways, and if this was part of their healing process, it was going to happen sooner or later.

“Hey.” Blake nudged her, tilting her head to the side. “Are you okay?”

Yang leaned over and pressed a kiss to her temple, breathing her in, and Blake leaned closer to her with a smile flickering across her face. “Yeah.” She looked up at the sky, the vast blueness that stretched out endlessly ahead, promising something more. “Yeah… I think I am.”

The Bond soared with happiness, more than Yang had felt in months, and she allowed herself to smile as she followed on after her sister, team, and friends. As they walked on through the melting snow, finally succumbing to spring, she looked up at the sky, flawlessly blue with a biting wind that sang around them. She was surprised to feel that she wasn’t sad, or anxious, or angry. Her team was here, around her, the demons waiting to haunt her could not hurt her any longer, and she had made her peace with those who had left, because the people surrounding her now were the ones that really mattered, in the end. No matters pressed at her mind.

She was content.

I know this isn’t a complete ending yet. Ozpin’s gone, Pyrrha’s dead, and we don’t know why Cinder betrayed us… I don’t know where my mother is, or why Ruby has these powers. But I’ve made my choices… and I think I’m happy now, even if everything’s changed. Even if nothing had ended yet like I thought it would. It’s not a happy ending with all ends tied up, not truly… but it is a better ending. This is just the end of chapter one in the book of our lives. I’m healed… heart and head. Weiss and Ruby are okay together. We haven’t solved everything, but we’ve solved what truly matters. Adam can’t haunt Blake anymore, and now, we get to go out there, and figure out our fates by ourselves. We’ve hit rock-bottom in the past… now, there’s nowhere to go but up. We’ll heal Remnant, day by day… because maybe, just maybe, this was our destiny all along, the seven of us. Not to be fancy Huntsmen and Huntresses, but to go out there, like Qrow said, and see the world and fix it ourselves. Blake can help fix the White Fang’s wrongs, follow her destiny and change the world to a better, kinder place, day by day. I can just go with the flow like I always wanted, never abandoning my team and friends, and helping everyone who needs help at the same time. Blake is with me, and my team is by my side. Things might happen in the future, but we’ll never be parted now. What happened to us at Beacon made us stronger, and I’m never going to leave them again.

And that is how it always will be.

She looked over at Blake, and took her hand, finding solace in her partner as she always had, clinging to her warmth in the dwindling winter. Blake looked over, and she smiled, something filled with more promise and hope than the brilliance of the stars themselves.

Yang let out a breath, filled with hope as the seven of them headed into the light of the rising sun.
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