The Keeper of the Grove
by ruff_ethereal

Summary

Weiss Schnee discovers that the mythical the Keeper of the Grove, Guardian of the Viridian Valley, the Reaper of all Trespassers, the face to the Nightmares of the people of Avalon's nightmares isn't as fictional, dangerous, or horrifying as she thought.

The real monsters are MUCH worse.

Notes

Cross-posted from tumblr. A "chapter a day" fic challenge for myself, don't expect quality to be very good for the speed.
Chapter 1

The wind that takes your last breath.

The blur you see before your eyes close for the last time.

The caretaker of Nature’s delicate balance, the whisperer in the ear of all great mortals who thought themselves divine, the death knell of all that ever lived:

The Keeper of the Grove.

Weiss had heard all of the stories, seen the art, the plays inspired by her--it was impossible not to, seeing as the twin peaks of the Viridian Valley always loomed over the horizon. Candela may have prided itself as the realm’s capital of Science, Technology, and Reason, but it would seem that even the most faithless and coldly logical people of Avalon could not resist the allure of a good yarn.

She had always thought the Keeper moronic, the stuff of fireside tales told to gullible children, fiction invented by hunters and adventurers returning to town with no game and wounded egos.

Now, with her cadre of elite bodyguards all lying on the ground unconscious, holding bleeding gashes, or nursing slashed wrists; their weapons sliced apart or rendered useless; and her back to a copse of trees perfectly shaped for cornering prey, Weiss realized that the Keeper was real.

All too real.

With nothing else to do except await her inevitable execution, Weiss decided to get a good look at her.

She was smaller than she expected.

Much smaller.

The stories always depicted her as looming several times larger than that of a fully-grown man, the shadow she cast stretching far past the fools and fortune seekers who dared trespass her land, a wicked figure with long, gnarled limbs, perfect for bounding after prey and catching them just before they broke out of the trees and to safety.

But the figure in front of her? She looked more like a little girl, barely older than 10, if she went by human standards.

And she did not look nearly as terrifying. The artists and tapestry weavers always made sure to pay special, loving attention to the Keeper’s visage, a hideous creature, like the bastard child of a rat, a deer, and a wolf; she had jaws perpetually slavering, fangs dripping with fresh blood and the remains of her latest victim, and yet more viscera proudly hanging from her twisted horns if they were feeling particularly gruesome. And if there was one thing they always made sure to keep, however simplified and caricatured the image, it was her eyes:

Glowing red orbs that pierced into your own, into your soul.

Weiss could see nothing even remotely suggesting something as vicious, even if the hood pulled over her face and the angle of the moonlight hid her features.

The one thing that they did get right was her scythe: a massive, ancient branch, gnarled and twisted,
yet also meticulously sanded and shaped, stretching far above the Keeper’s head, with a wicked curved blade that glinted in the moonlight, looking not unlike a serial killer about to enjoy killing you for a long, long time.

Weiss wasn’t looking forward to knowing how exactly it felt like to get killed by it—if the stories were anything to go by, it only hurt if you were hit by a glancing blow or the Keeper intentionally missed.

That it felt like “having a piece of your soul ripped apart, little by little” was not a comforting thought, however.

The Keeper raised her weapon up into the air, the blade catching the light of the moon, glowing so brightly Weiss had to shield her eyes.

In that moment, she prayed to whatever deities were listening, hoping that they would find some way to tell Winter how much she loved her, how thankful she was for everything she’s done, and also that their father was an asshole and she would never, ever love him, even in death.

Thunk.

Weiss waited for the whoosh through the air, the brief pain of cold steel on warm flesh, whatever waited for her in the Aether, if it really did exist.

“Hi!” she heard a young, chipper voice say. “I realize this is going to sound really weird and make you super suspicious, since I just creamed your guards and all, but: could you open your eyes? It feels really weird talking to you while you’ve got them squeezed shut like that.”

Weiss reluctantly obeyed. The scythe was no longer raised up in the air; instead, it was planted firmly on the ground, blunt-end first. The Keeper was still looming in front of her, but her hood was down. She looked as young as she sounded, and infinitely more harmless and friendly than even the most sympathetic depictions Weiss had seen.

“Thanks~” the Keeper said, the deer ears sprouting from her almost-completely human head twitching happily. “Look, I understand that you humans are always looking for more resources and power to grow even bigger, make more cool stuff, and feed your kids and keep the lights on in your cities on...”

“... But we Fae also REALLY like not being killed, not having our home set on fire or flattened, not having our entire culture and history erased just like that—you know, things you humans don’t like having done to you, too.

“So, if you could just promise you’ll leave, and tell whoever started this expedition to never come back, I won’t have to kill every single one of you.”

The Keeper smiled and held out her free hand.

Fleshy, soft, and with four fingers and a thumb.

Nothing even remotely close to the wicked, razor sharp claws of legend.

And really, just like Weiss’ own hand.

“Deal?” the Keeper asked, still smiling.

Weiss stared at her hand for a long, long time. Her eyes strayed to the guards—gathered around her
crashed carriage, unarmed or crippled, looking helplessly at her and the Keeper.

“Some of the best of the best,” her father had told her as they walked in between their two lines, every soldier standing at attention in perfect, precise angles. “Few can stand against their might, and in the unlikely event that they face a foe they can not crush like a bug, know that they are more than ready to lay their lives down to ensure your safety.”

Her father saw them as tools, assets, numbers on a spending report, certainly a bother if they happened to be killed, but not an amount he couldn’t recoup in time, and for sure there was another elite guard waiting to replace them.

Weiss saw them for what they were: men and women who earned their living through bloodshed and violence, some with families, some with lovers, all of them with plenty more fight left in them, if they didn’t throw it away for some stupid cause—or someone else sealed their fate for them.

She was hesitant to shake her hand, partly because of the events that had just transpired, mostly because it was also covered in mud, sap, grass, and fresh blood.

But it was either needing to wash her hands for hours after she got back to civilization, or forfeiting all of their lives for her father’s escapades, and her own foolishness.

“Deal,” Weiss said as she took it.

The Keeper smiled as they shook. “Great!” She pulled her hand back, stuck her fingers into her mouth, and whistled. “Get them out of here, everyone!” she cried.

Weiss and her guards flinched as the nearby bushes and the branches all rustled and shook. Some of them screamed as more humanoid creatures like the Keeper swarmed around the carriage, pushed it back upright from sheer force of numbers before some of them went to work on the engine and the chassis, and the rest loomed intimidatingly over the guards, as if they were daring them to just try and make one final stand, see how well that works out for them.

Mere minutes later, Weiss was back in the carriage, now much less roomy and spacious that she was sharing it with the worst injured of the guards—thankfully still alive, even if their futures as mercenaries dubious if they didn’t get proper medical attention soon. The rest rode on the roof or walked alongside it, making notes to themselves to never accept a job in the Viridian Valley ever again, and to demand vastly increased hazard pay.

In the stories, anyone foolish enough to make a deal with the Keeper of the Grove was only delaying the inevitable and dragging more unfortunate souls down with them when their time came, making an already bad situation worse through their own greed and self-interest.

But then again, those same stories also assumed that the Keeper was fiction, a myth, and probably some vicious pack of wolves than an actual, living, breathing being.

Weiss dearly hoped that wasn’t the only thing they’d gotten wrong.
As the sole uninjured member of the ill-fated expedition, Weiss had the dubious honour of being in the meeting between her father and her guards’ negotiator and leader.

She wasn’t too surprised to see the calm, stately manner he liked to keep just barely holding up, his boiling rage clear in his eyes, every movement of his mechanical and careful as if he were preventing himself from spontaneously exploding right there and then.

She wouldn’t be too surprised either if most of that anger was from the loss of his investment and the new figure the mercenaries were demanding.

And really, she was expecting that he wouldn’t even stop to check and see if she was okay the moment he met personally met them at the gates of their mansion, instead heading straight to the guards and telling them to get to his special, private meeting room and explain to him what exactly had gone wrong.

“I thought you advertised yourselves as some of the best mercenaries in the business, professionals who would guarantee success, absolute security and peace of mind for all their clients,” her father said, strangling a special reinforced cognac glass in his hand.

“We did, and still do,” the negotiator “Snaggletooth” said.

“Then why are we all here, with most of your personnel being treated in one of the most advanced hospitals in all of Avalon, all on my bill?” her father asked slowly, and ominously so.

“Unforeseen threats, sir,” the captain “Striker” replied.

“Please, do elaborate, Captain,” her father said as he took a sip of his drink, glaring daggers at the both of them over the rim of crystal goblet.

“We were ambushed by a guerilla group. With the element of surprise, our unfamiliarity of the territory, and their channeling us into the perfect location to get flanked on all sides, we were quickly overwhelmed and decided it more prudent to negotiate a surrender, than to put up a futile resistance.”

Her father slowly, methodically put his goblet down. In the dead silence of the room, the “thunk” of the base on the black marble table echoed like a cannon blast.

“Are you telling me that I’m supposed to believe there’s a paramilitary group living in the middle of one the most dangerous and inhospitable wilderness in all of Avalon capable of subjugating one of Candela’s ‘finest’...?!”

“What could they possibly have--!?"

“IT WAS THE KEEPER OF THE GROVE!” Weiss screamed.

One of the earliest, most popular, and oft-repeated stories about the Keeper was “The Sole Survivor,” an extremely unlucky noble who’s sense of self-preservation spared him death by the Keeper’s scythe, at the cost of eventually losing his sanity.

Horrified by the effortless slaughter of his beloved cousins and siblings, and traumatized at the glee with which the Keeper did so, the noble fled from town to town, raving and ranting about the horror that lurked in the Viridian Valley. His intention was to warn as many people as possible, so they
would never make the same ill-fated journey as his late companions.

Ironically, driven by greed, fame-seeking, and morbid curiosity, many adventurers, hunters, and villagers did the exact opposite, seeking what riches and luxuries the party had loaded their carriage with, the head of the horror, or just to see what could drive a man so far off the brink.

The stories either stated the obvious, or went into gruesome, gory detail about what befell each party, but all had the same ending:

The noble resting in his tragically lonely castle, making peace with his fate, and honouring his fallen relatives.

A maid, coming along with drink and idle gossip about the fools tromping to their end in some lush valley at the end of a barren expanse of rock and craggy mountains.

The noble screaming, running for nights and days on foot till to the border of the forest before carving an ancient symbol of death and disease on as many rocks and tree trunks as he could find, until he perished, from starvation, exhaustion, or the Keeper putting him out of his misery in a dubious act of mercy.

The story was ostensibly a tale warning against such similarly foolish adventures driven by all the wrong reasons.

As her father stared at her in a mix of disbelief and disappointment, and Striker and Snaggletooth looked at her like she had just spoiled a massive surprise party for the Council, she was starting to realize it was also a warning to the few that survived an encounter with the Keeper:

Shut your mouth, or invent a damn good story.

The company of mercenaries formally departed the meeting room not fifteen minutes after Weiss was kindly asked to leave. From what Striker would tell her later, her father had insisted on 2/3rds of the hazard pay they demanded.

“We want all of it, if you want us to ever work for you again,” Snaggletooth had calmly replied.

“Then it was a pleasure doing business with you,” her father replied coolly. “Such a shame it had to end this way.”

“The feeling isn’t mutual, Mr. Schnee” Striker said just as calmly.

Contracts were signed, but no hands were shaken this time.

Weiss herself fled to her room. There was no shortage of servants and handmaidens waiting to offer her all manner of luxury, words of comfort, and sympathetic ears to the horrific plight she had just experienced, but she ignored them all and walked past them, too tired to politely decline them or even wave her hand in dismissal.

A robotic messenger drone floated over to her, the “wings” on either side of its circular body flapping happily. “Ms. Schnee, Dr. du Pont has cleared her whole schedule just for you!” it trilled.

Weiss walked even faster, not stopping until she had stepped into her bedroom, shut the door behind her, and activated all the locks and automated features that would shut the curtains, stop broadcasting
(if not recording) of the camera feed, and make the whole place more secure than most bank vaults.

Then, she braced herself against the wall, hugged her arms, and finally let the tears she’d been holding back burst out in a flood, her whole body shaking violently with each sob, her legs giving way and sending her slowly sliding to the floor.

She didn’t know how long it was she spent curled up on the floor, crying, shaking, unwillingly reliving the scene over and over again:

Sitting in the carriage, putting away her comm-crystal, reluctantly admitting to herself that she wasn’t going to be free of her father’s reach still.

The first screams, the gunfire, the panic that swept through the whole cadre of guards in seconds.

Lungs burning, heart pounding, feet pounding on the grass, running away from the overturned carriage she had just fled from, away from the scene of so many elite soldiers being picked off one after the other in the blink of an eye, slamming into a tree trunk, turning round and finding herself trapped on all corners, before she spun around and saw an ominous, horned figure looming just in front of her.

She didn’t know when exactly Winter had gotten back from her mysterious assignments all over Avalon, burst through like a woman possessed through the secret tunnel Weiss used to take to break into her room, knelt down and pulled her head into her chest, squeezing the air out of her lungs, whispering words so fast and through so many tears of her own neither of them could understand what they were saying.

And she definitely didn’t know what sort of sick fates and twisted deities would birth her into such an objectively terrible life yet give her this wonderful, saintly angel for an older sister.
Eventually, the tears and the shaking stopped, Weiss recovered enough to get up off the floor and sit on the much more comfortable tea table in one corner of her room, and their father (or more likely, the staff he kept specifically on-hand for child-raising duties) had thought to send her and Winter dinner, plus most of the delicious treats and comfort foods that they had offered earlier.

Winter stood at Weiss door, waving away the concerned guards and servants trying to coax her into letting them in. “My sister and I would like some time just to ourselves, thank you,” she said as she gently wrenched the serving tray from a maid’s hands.

The solid contents shook and rolled and the liquids swayed in their glasses and pitchers, but the magical field that kept them at optimum serving temperatures also kept anything from spilling, and gently nudged everything back into their precise, perfect placements.

“Are you certain, Ms. Schnee?” one persistent butler asked.

“Very much so!” Winter replied, before she calmly slammed the door in his face. She smiled. “Ah, I forgot how much I loved doing that...” she muttered as she wheeled it to Weiss.

The two of them ate and drank, having their first meal in nearly half-a-day, or erasing the taste of the military rations Avalon's supersonic jets were forced to use. The decades of dining etiquette and temperance that had been instilled in them were forgotten for the moment—the only witness was the head of security watching the camera, and they couldn’t have given a damn about their table manners.

Weiss pushed away her plate, wiped away the crumbs, chocolate smears, and excess frosting off her mouth with her hand, before she licked them off.

Winter put the straw of her chocolate shake out of her mouth. “Feeling better?”

“Mhmm,” Weiss said as she licked off some cream between her fingers. “Still traumatized for life, but better.”

Winter chuckled. “You’re being sarcastic and snide again, that’s a great sign. Sure you don’t want to cry some more?”

Weiss shook her head. “No.”

“Need another hug?”

Weiss thought about it. “Later.”

“Another slice of cake, an eclair, a cookie, maybe?” Winter asked, gesturing to the half-emptied but still generously loaded serving tray.

Weiss looked down at herself in mild disgust. “Definitely later.”

Winter nodded. “So can I yell at you now?”

Weiss opened her arms and gestured towards Winter, wordlessly saying, “Lay it on me, sister.”

Winter smiled. “Thank you.”
She took a long, deep breath.


Weiss sighed heavily. “I wanted to get away from Father—somewhere he couldn’t keep an eye on me or control my life unless it was absolutely necessary.”

“Oh, and you thought that the answer to that was throwing yourself headlong into mortal danger?!” Winter spat. She sighed heavily, shoulders slumping as she sank into the back of her chair. “Though I do suppose that’s my fault, for setting the precedent...”

Winter sat back up. “So since official details are sparse and rumours are aplenty, could you tell me what actually happened there and why’s it got Father so pissed? You know, aside from the fact that he lost his initial investment and has to have all his projected earnings reports redone,” she said as she sipped some more of her shake.

Weiss paused. “We got attacked by the Keeper of the Grove,” she said quietly.

Winter made a sound like “AGHFRLKK!” Liquefied chocolate sputtered and dribbled out of her lips and nostrils as she violently beat her chest, her eyes wide open. “I’m sorry,” she said in between coughs, “but this is the name of some terrorist group with a mythology bent, right? Or a crazed, human serial killer lurking in the Valley? It can’t possibly be the Keeper of the Grove, as in, the Keeper of the Grove.”

Weiss shook her head. “She’s real. We all saw her.”

The blood drained from Winter’s face, her skin even paler than usual. After a long moment of silence, she slowly put her violently shaking hands on the table, her fingers weaved tightly together. “O-Okay, so, ASSUMING THAT I WASN’T AS SAFE FROM THE FACE OF MY NIGHTMARES AS I THOUGHT I WAS:

“How’d you escape?”

Weiss shrugged. “She spared me, we talked, and we struck a deal--”

Winter held her hand up. “I’m sorry, are you saying that you made a deal with the Keeper of the Grove?”

Weiss nodded.

Winter slowly nodded back. “Weiss, before you continue, let me take this moment to tell you that I love you so much, and nothing will ever change that, even if you do indirectly get me killed by the thing I repeatedly convince myself doesn’t exist so I can sleep at night.

“Now please, do go on.”

Weiss paused for a moment. “...We struck a deal: I and my guards would turn back, never return, and tell everyone else not to try and make the trip in the first place.””

“’Everyone else’ including father and his drilling teams, I’m assuming?”
Weiss nodded.

Winter sucked in a breath, and let it go. “Well, we’re screwed!” she cried, throwing her arms in the air. “You know, I always did think that father reminded me so much of the antagonistic figures in all the stories warning against excess desire, dooming themselves and the other unlucky victims to the Keeper’s scythe through their greed and lust for power, and now here we are proving that the line between fiction and reality is very thin indeed!”

“She actually wasn’t as scary as the stories make her out to be,” Weiss said. “A lot nicer, too.”

Winter put her arms back down on the table. “I’m definitely going to regret asking this, but what makes you say that?”

Weiss looked down. “She was short. Young—just a few years younger than me, or more. And she had the cloak, but her face didn’t look anything like anything anyone’s ever imagined her with—if it weren’t for the horns and the deer ears, I would have thought she was just a girl like me.

She looked back up. “She didn’t even have the glowing red eyes.”

“Were they just a reflective but non-radioactive red?”

Weiss shook her head. “I didn’t get a good look at them to know the exact colour, but definitely not red. And then there’s the fact that she spared all of the guards, took the extra effort just to cripple them or hurt them badly enough to stop them from fighting back, even if she could have just slaughtered the whole bunch of them and spared me anyway.

“You know all the stories, right?”

Winter nodded. “I do, and I agree this is strange behaviour on the Keeper’s part—for once, in the good sense of the phrase.”

Weiss smiled.

“But, it is with great regret that I inform that there have been stories of the Keeper assuming friendlier forms, sparing people, and earning their trust to infiltrate their secure villages, or shake things up a little, serial killer style.

“They’re very much the minority, and the dates between the earliest known sources of each unique story are very long indeed. However, the latest account is little less than two decades old, and allegedly happened here in the Acropolis region.

“Within a few miles of this city, actually, since apparently Fate decided that I needed to be thoroughly creeped out AND terrified out of my mind!” Winter chirped.

Weiss looked at her strangely. “You’re still doing research about the Keeper?”

“Yes, actually,” Winter replied. “My consistently ill-fated quest for knowledge is as never-ending as the stories. I liked to keep it as a form of perspective, when something or someone terrified me and I’d remind myself that there was something much worse to be scared of, and she was fictional!”

She paused. “Well, I thought she was fictional, anyway...”

Weiss frowned. “So the Keeper could have just been lying and toying with me...” she muttered.

“If the stories are anything to go by—which they probably, definitely are now—yes.”
Weiss looked down at the table, silent.

Winter reached over and patted her on the shoulder. “I’ll be right here when you finally wrap your head around the deep, existential terror. Word of warning: it might take a few days, and always strikes without unexpectedly.”

“Won’t your boss be mad?” Weiss asked.

Winter snorted. “Weiss, Weiss, Weiss—General Ironwood can have me court-martialed for all I care, NOTHING is more important to me than being here for you in your time of need. Besides, the Keeper will probably ensure I’ll never have to worry about him ever again!

“Or everything else, for that matter!”

“You’re taking this whole ‘The Keeper is Real’ business a LOT better than I thought you would,” Weiss said.

Winter laughed. “Oh, Weiss, I’m only keeping it together for your sake! Soon as I crawl back into my room, I’m going to order then imbibe large amounts of alcohol, before sobbing, weeping, and wailing in complete, absolute despair!”

Weiss laughed—she wasn’t sure why, but she did. “I’ll leave you to it, then.”

Winter nodded, walked around to Weiss, pulling her into another hug. “Thank you. I love you, sis.”

Weiss hugged back. “I love you too, sis.”

Winter pulled away. “Sure you don’t need me to keep it together a little while longer? We could have a sleepover, like we used to! I’ll definitely skip the ‘sleep’ part, though.”

Weiss shook her head. “You go have your breakdown.”

Winter nodded, kissed her on the cheek goodnight, and crawled back into the secret tunnel she had come from, back to her bedroom.

Weiss disengaged her bedroom’s lockdown soon after, the curtains pulling back, the steel barriers receding back into the walls, and the windows swinging open to bring in some fresh air that hadn’t been meticulously recycled and scrubbed clean over and over again.

She stepped out to one of her balconies, took in the excellent view of Candela her father had been so willing to pay top-Uroch for decades ago.

The city’s lights burned bright, from the street lights, the glow of the floating markers for flying vehicles, the windows of its skyscrapers, the equipment of their innumerable laboratories and research facilities, and the gaudiest, flashiest, most complex video advertisements to be seen anywhere in Avalon, all of them taking advantage of the nigh-limitless power source humming just underneath them, the dirt cheap rates, and how limited the amounts of energy the city could export (for now) and the rest it had to expend somehow.

“Candela: the city that burns brighter than all the minds that made it, shining long after they have passed onto the Aether,” Weiss recited.

She smiled.

Whenever the Keeper was coming for her, she was going to make sure that she was ready for her—
an easy task, with the most cutting edge of technology literally just a few minutes away.

“Hey there-!” she heard a very familiar voice say. “Man, I am SO glad you finally opened your windows, I was afraid I was going to have to wait here all night!”
There were many ways to react to unexpectedly hearing the voice of your future executioner right beside you.

There was refusing to turn to see them, waiting for them to either finish you off, or for them to leave, if they were planning on delaying the inevitable just a bit longer.

There was screaming and panicking, possibly accidentally throwing you off the railing of your balcony too fast for the emergency systems to catch you, plummeting down several stories, and maybe landing into one of the floating planters, or the hard, unforgiving stone that necessitated their use in the first place.

There was turning to face them, to go out with dignity—though, from the few stories Weiss had read or Winter had shared on nights when she couldn't sleep after a particularly traumatizing research session, looking right into the Keeper's eyes was a surefire way to die of either shock or her scythe, and leave behind a very disgraced, ugly corpse permanently frozen in a twisted, horrific configuration, to be forever burned in the minds of whoever was unlucky enough to find you.

Weiss chose to continue staring off into Candela in the distance, the light at the end of the tunnel—one she probably wasn't going to get to see the end of, all things considered.

She probably would have had a much more energetic, dramatic response if she wasn't so tired. The intense fear she was feeling and the massive reminder of her mortality standing right beside her be damned, she was still human, and definitely no Tinman, those incredibly resilient and powerful soldiers that the combat androids of the same name were based off of.

She had also definitely stuffed herself with far too much cake, chocolate, and sweets, too soon for anything, much more meeting your fate.

“Shocked that I'm here?” the Keeper asked. “I am too, actually! I was really worried that my gear wouldn't stand a chance with your security systems, but it turns out they're actually really terrible!” She paused. “I mean, uh, no offense, you humans have some pretty great stuff that I can only wish we had, and I know they probably weren't designing it with keeping a Fae like me out--”

“What are you doing here?” Weiss whispered, still looking out to the city.

“Oh! Right! Sorry, I get kinda caught up talking and explaining things sometimes; cons of living with a Chronicler!” the Keeper chuckled. “Anyway… how's the 'stay out of the Valley forever' thing going…?”

Even if Weiss couldn't see her, she could tell that the Keeper was leaning towards her and waggling her eyebrows.

“I'm never going back there, and neither are my guards...” Weiss replied flatly.

“That's great!” the Keeper said.

“… But, my Father is likely to just hire a new batch of mercenaries and send them in, instead.”

“That's…” the Keeper paused. “… Not great. Not great at all! Can't you convince him to, you know, not send more guys in? I really don't want to kill them, and you and I both got lucky that we managed to get the hunting party together just as you guys were entering The Gallows; anywhere
else, I would have been forced to use definitely lethal tactics.

“Speaking of which, how are your guards?”

“All of them in the hospital,” Weiss replied. “Some crippled and due for immediate prosthetic installation, but all still alive and traumatized for life. Why do you ask? Want to make sure that you don’t leave anyone alive after you’re done with me?”

The Keeper groaned. “Talos' Stinky Beard! Why does EVERYONE think I’m going to kill them?!”

Weiss found herself getting angry, her hands clenching into fists and shaking. “Isn’t that what you do?! Kill everyone stupid enough to walk into your territory?!”

“Some of them, yeah. But not all of them. You must be thinking of the other Keepers!”

Weiss blinked. “There's more of you...?!” she squeaked.

The Keeper chuckled. “Lots and lots!”

Weiss gripped the balcony railing in front of her, suddenly feeling very faint. Her vision began to spin as she tipped over.

“Woah there!”

She felt someone grip her around the chest, holding her up and pulling her back. Her head jerked downwards; she saw an imprint on her dress where an arm should have been.

“Easy, easy… falling down from this high is going to really suck, trust me...” she heard the Keeper whisper, just a little bit away from her ear.

Weiss felt herself pulled against a body. She could vaguely feel something cloth like pressing up against her skin and her clothes, but it wasn't the texture of any sort of fabric she had ever felt, or described anywhere.

She felt the Keeper gently laying her down on the floor on her back. “There we go, safe and sound on the floor...” she whispered.

Weiss looked up, at the bottom of her balcony's roof; she still couldn't see the Keeper, hear her moving or breathing, but she could feel her kneeling over her, looking right into her eyes.

“You okay?” the Keeper asked.

Weiss made an affirmative noise, not really able to do much else.

“Whew! Good. It'd really suck if you died like that, because I really need you not-dead. Alive, I meant. Sorry, I'm still learning Nivian...”

Weiss stared blankly up at where she assumed the Keeper was. It was rather difficult to tell, what with her being invisible.

“So, uh… what's your name?”


“That's a really pretty name, Weiss!” the Keeper said.
“My mother gave it to me,” Weiss added sadly.

“They tell her I said she's got great taste in names! Or maybe not, since any time I tell anyone to send a message from me they all freak out… anyway: Weiss, I need you to go and tell your Father to stay out of the Viridian Valley, *forever*, and do whatever he can to keep other people out of it, okay?”

“Otherwise I'm going to be forced to use… uh, force, I guess.” She cursed under her breath in a tongue Weiss had never heard, or was even remotely close to any language she knew of.

“I mean, he can do that, right? I mean, I assume you are part of the human version of the Eldan Council since you live in this HUUUGE mansion, and have all these guys working for you, right?”

“He's a businessman, but he's got a lot of politicians in his back pocket,” Weiss explained.

“Huh. That's a weird place to put them, but I guess if he wants to keep them around all the time…”

Weiss sighed. “It's a metaphor. It means that he's bribing a lot of politicians.”

“Oh! Back pocket, as in, where you'd keep your money...” she chuckled. “Now I get it!”

“Was there anything else you wanted to do tonight?” Weiss asked. “You know, aside from confuse and terrorize me?”

“Nope! That was all I got. You humans just stay out of the Viridian Valley, and we'll be good!”

Weiss put her hand on the floor and pushed herself up to a sitting position. “That's not likely,” she said, “more so than my Father loves making a profit, he hates someone getting the best of him. He's not going to just give up because you told him to.”

“Well just try and talk to him for me, okay? I mean, he IS your dad and you ARE his daughter, right?”

Weiss winced. “Just go.”

“Okay! See you, Weiss!” the Keeper said. Again, Weiss felt her doing a salute or some similar gesture, before the sensation of someone standing with her in the balcony disappeared.

Weiss let out a long sigh, slowly pulling herself up from the floor on shaky legs. She had just put both hands on the railing for support when the Keeper's familiar presence came back.

“Hey, sorry for bothering you again, but I didn't realize I'd have to wait outside your window for hours so I didn't have any dinner before I left the Valley, and whatever you have in there smells REALLY—”

“JUST TAKE IT!” Weiss screamed. “JUST TAKE ALL OF IT, WHATEVER YOU WANT, JUST PLEASE, LEAVE ME ALONE!” she wailed, feeling her eyes sting with tears once more.

A pause.

“Okay. I'll… go do that, I guess!”

Weiss turned around, leaned back on the railing for support; she watched as the contents of the dinner tray floated up in mid-air before suddenly disappearing, or a gradually growing chocolate smear hovered in the general area of where a particularly small person's lips would be. She had never heard of the Keeper eating all of someone's food after paying them a personal visit, but then again, the people that witnessed it were probably *dead* after she left, or decided to omit that detail lest
someone doubt the authenticity of their story.

The chocolate smear hanging in the air walked back to Weiss, before being wiped off by what she assumed was an invisible sleeve. “Oh, Eluna, that was SO good. I'm sorry if you wanted like, any of those in the morning, but--”

Weiss just stared at where she assumed the Keeper was.

“--Right. Going for real, now!”

Again, no sound or obvious signs that the Keeper had departed, only the unease in the air disappearing.

Weiss walked back into her room, stepping around the trail of crumbs and half-eaten pastry bits leading outside her balcony, past the ransacked dinner cart, and to the secret tunnel leading into Winter's room.

Winter herself was sprawled out in the furthest corner from any of the doors or windows, beside several empty wine bottles, and nursing an empty glass in her hand.

“Winter…?” Weiss whispered as she crawled out of the tunnel.

“Yes, Weiss...?” Winter slurred.

“Can I not sleep with you tonight?”

Winter clumsily moved some bottles over or knocked them aside, clearing a space for her. Weiss padded over, sat beside her, before letting her head fall in Winter's lap. Winter started slowly, clumsily stroking her hair.

“The Keeper was in my room just now...” Weiss mumbled.

Winter hiccuped. “Really now...?” she mumbled. “What'd she want this time?”

“She wanted me to tell Father not to send any more people into the Valley.”

“Oh… so we're still definitely screwed.”

“Mhm...” Weiss mumbled. “Also, apparently there's more than one Keeper, too...”

Winter's eyes widened. “You don't say...” she said, putting her hand away as it started shaking uncontrollably. “Weiss...?” she hiccuped, tears pooling in her eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you too, Winter,” Weiss said, tears already streaming down from hers.
Chapter 5

Morning brought with it a blisteringly hot and unbearably bright wave of sunlight all over Candela and the still unnamed expanse of mountains and bedrock it stood on, made tolerable and more importantly, nonlethal to pretty much any biological creature by the magical barrier now covering the city.

Vehicles outside of the borders rushed to the loading bays or the few outposts and smaller settlements scattered in the wasteland, trying to outrun the sunlight, keep themselves from being stranded till nightfall, where they’d have to pray they wouldn’t die from a failure in their heat shielding, boredom, or their fellow passengers.

Machines within the city started powering on and rolling out: construction bots ready to work at incredible speed and efficiency so long as the sun was up, dirigibles that sprayed condensation and precipitation to mimic clouds and water the city’s greenery, the many forms of public transportation to deliver the vast majority of daytime-preferring citizens to wherever they needed to go.

Drones, appliances, and human workers began to brew gallons upon gallons of coffee, tea, hot chocolate and other breakfast beverages of choice. Young children were being rushed along by their parents and guardians to make it to their classes on time, and their own jobs and obligations afterward. People enjoying leisurely breakfasts, exercising in the plazas and the gardens, or standing in jam-packed trams or sitting in (supposedly) ergonomically designed seats mostly listened to the tunes of “Good Morning Avalon,” or the daytime segments of their news station of choice.

The artificial lights of the city turned off and the flashier video ads turned to much less complex versions, their power being redirected to more important systems, the ones that kept its constantly growing population from dying of solar radiation, overheating, and in a handful of locations, being instantaneously vaporized by a slowly traveling beam of concentrated sunlight.

The view from Manor Schnee turned from a grossly incandescent beacon in pitch-black darkness, to a radiant monument of life, culture, and technology amid a barren wasteland, broken only by the tops of the tallest trees in the Viridian Valley.

It would have been a comforting sight, if both Weiss and Winter didn’t know that the Keeper was perfectly capable of terrorizing and slaying her victims in broad daylight, she just preferred to do it in the cover of night.

There was a knocking on Winter’s bedroom door.

The both of them flinched and screamed, jittery, nervous, and all too aware of every last bump, creak, thump, and other suspicious noise in the vicinity. Weiss whimpered, and buried her face back in her sister’s chest; Winter picked up one of the empty wine bottles beside her, ready to smash it into the wall and use it as a weapon.

The intercom crackled to life.

“Mses. Schnee,” a butler said, “your father wishes to see you both at the dining hall for breakfast in an hour. He understands that recent events have… err… weighed heavily on the both of you and caused a not insignificant amount of distress, and he consequently he wishes to discuss them with you.

“He has also asked me to emphasize that this is not a request.”
“Should the both of you require any assistance, we, your servants, are standing by, ready to help with anything you should want or need!”

“On a related note: Ms. Weiss, Chief Tov wishes to see you in their office as soon as possible. They wish to speak with you about a… unexpected visitor they detected in your bedroom as of a few hours ago. They have asked me to tell you that they’ve ‘Not a bleedin’ clue whatever THAT was, but I’m pretty bloody sure it’s VERY bad.’”

The intercom shut off. Winter slowly put down the bottle, ignored it when it tipped over and rolled off somewhere.

Weiss pulled her head out of her chest and looked up at her, eyes puffy and red from crying, dark circles underneath. “What do we do, sis?” she whimpered.

Winter sighed. “What else?: We get ready for breakfast with Father.”

Weiss balked. “You can’t be serious!”

Winter sighed. “I really wish I wasn’t, sis.”

“Can’t we find some way to get out of this?” Weiss asked.

“Not without making things worse. The way I see it, we’ve got two choices:

“One, we can go to breakfast like he asked, and hope that we can convince him to abandon any plans of revenge and/or trying to be the first human to settle the Valley, and more so, that the Keeper will keep her word.

“Or Two, we can stay here, wait to pass out from exhaustion, have Father become incredibly angry at being stood up, be forced to show up to lunch or dinner instead, then try to convince him not to anger the Keeper more than he already has while he will most definitely feel MUCH less inclined to agree with us.”

Weiss sighed. “So either way, we lose.”

Winter patted her on the shoulder. “If there’s anything the Queensguard have taught me, it’s that more often than not your only choices are ‘Bad’ and ‘Worse,’ and you better get used to choosing Bad,” she said as she started to get up. “Come on, sis, let’s go get ready for breakfast...”

Weiss sighed and reluctantly obeyed, pulling her head out of Winter’s lap.

“Is Jordan still on staff?” Winter said as she braced herself against the wall.

“Father won’t let anyone else do his make-up,” Weiss replied as she stretched out her legs, winced at the sensation pins and needles.

“Good,” Winter mumbled, “because she’s going to be integral to what I’ve got planned...”

In her letters and their rare live video chats with one another, Winter had always talked about how many tactics and shortcuts the Queensguard had for looking presentable and agreeable even if you had just come back from a sleepless, 72-hour-straight mission in the most dangerous and unstable regions of Avalon.

Make-up tricks to hide even the worst signs of fatigue and distress, and even make you look like you weren’t long past the end of your rope, if not exactly fully-charged and ready for anything. Recipes
for concoctions meant to temporarily cure hangovers or dull the worst of its effects, make you completely awake and your thoughts coherent enough until you could crash for a good long time, or even improvised perfumes to hide the fact that you hadn’t spent nearly enough time in the shower. Quick and dirty meditation, psychological tricks, and specific tactics and guidelines for how to do the least amount of social interaction, with the least amount of effort or willpower, while looking the least rude and cranky possible.

They were so incredibly effective that the servants that hadn’t them earlier didn’t even seem to notice that anything was wrong with either of them, much more that their whole worlds were rapidly falling apart before their very eyes, and their lives ending much sooner, more suddenly, and more violently than either of them had ever imagined.

Even their Father seemed clueless or didn’t see anything too bad to merit specific notice, and Jacques Schnee prided himself on his ability to read people, deftly pushing all the right buttons, bringing out the strengths of his allies and employees, and mercilessly attacking the weaknesses of his enemies and competitors.

(To be fair, though, he never did devote as much time nor energy to his daughters as he did them.)

“Our, Weiss,” he said, looking up from his tablet long enough to nod at them before he returned to it and whatever was on the surface.

In spite of the luxurious, tempting spread of oven-fresh breads, perfectly smoked and fried meats, and freshly picked and perfectly sliced fruits and vegetables before him and arranged specifically for his view at the head of the table, his plate was empty, and his customary mug of coffee untouched and still in its protective bubble.

“Father,” Winter said as she took her old seat, the one just to the left of him.

Weiss said nothing as she sat in the one next to her, a distance of at least one chair between her and her father as always.

Servants came to offer them refreshment and recommendations about which particular offerings they would do well to start their breakfast with, but they both refused and waved them off—they weren’t feeling very hungry, either. Both human and robotic staff lingered for a while longer, until they decided their presence was unneeded, or they automatically returned to their docks from lack of input.

Silence lingered for a few moments more, until Jacques finally put his tablet down. “I’m going to be sending another prospecting team in three days time,” he said. “Weiss, you are no longer allowed to join it or any other expedition outside of this city—not until you are 18, and without a serious discussion between you and I once more.”

No courtesies, such as asking they partake of some food first.

No inquiries about how they were feeling.

No polite conversation about the weather, a topic to lead-in the heart of the matter, or a vague hook to test the waters.

Just a firm, clear declaration of what he was going to do, without hesitation nor doubt, the trait experts said his investors found most appealing about him.

“You can’t be serious,” Weiss said flatly.
“It’s for your own safety, Weiss,” her Father replied. “I was vastly mistaken in how effective your guards would be, and I’d rather not risk your life again; you may entertain this newfound adventuring spirit of yours when you are of legal age.”

“This isn’t about me, this is about the Keeper!” Weiss screamed.

Jacques looked at her in a mixture of annoyance and contempt. “Not you too...” he muttered, his gaze wandering over to Winter.

“Father, you need to stay out of the Viridian Valley, as with everyone else in Avalon! Haven’t you lost enough money on this venture? Weren’t you there to see the injuries those mercenaries sustained? Doesn’t the fact that Weiss almost got killed there bother you in the slightest?!”

Slam!

“ENOUGH OF THIS!” Jacques roared, his closed fist shaking on the table. “Winter, I had thought these delusions of of a mythological creature--”

“She’s NOT a myth!” Weiss screeched. “I’ve SEEN her! I’ve TALKED to her! And she’s going to KILL US ALL if your ego is more precious than you and your family’s lives!”

“Father, PLEASE!” Winter cried, absolute terror in her eyes. “Just this once, just this once, can’t you please just find it in your heart to just believe us?!”

Jacques Schnee gritted his teeth, his whole body shaking, his eyes glaring icy cold daggers at his daughters. He slammed his palms on the table and rocketed off his seat, sending his sturdy, wooden chair crashing to the floor.

All the human servants winced as the sound echoed throughout the dining hall. Then, all was deathly silent, the tension in the air so thick the weaker-willed among them suddenly found it hard to breath.

“Whatsoever is lurking in that valley, I will annihilate them, and show the survivors why you do not antagonize the Schnee Power Company,” Jacques growled, before he turned around, and left.

Ruin was coming, alright—just not for the Valley.
Chapter 6

Chief Tov's office was expansive and messy, holographic displays of information covering the walls, an incredibly large amount of locked and encrypted technomagical devices strewn anywhere they could be put, and no shortage of physical paper schematics and handwritten notes posted, stacked, or hanging off every available surface they could be attached to, like the space between crystal display monitors, on the rims of the screens, or even on their own back sometimes.

In spite of no shortage of complaints from their subordinates, they refused to ever clean it up or implement some sort of order or arrangement, claiming that the mess just “Reminded me of how much shite I've still got to worry about.”

They kept their position because of how effective they were at their job, stopping all manner of digital and physical intrusions on the Schnee Power Company's servers, its corporate headquarters in Candela, and of course, its owner's mansion just outside of the city limits.

And they kept working for the Schnees and refused the numerous lucrative offers they received because Jacques was more than content to “Shut up, stay out, and let me do my damned job.”

Weiss had never seen Tov outside of their office. Now, as her escorts were struggling to clear a path through to one specific bevy of screens on the wall where Tov was—moving aside stacks of nondescript boxes, waste bags filled to near bursting, and even a portable resistance training field generator—she wondered if the cyborg ever left their office.

At the very least, it didn't smell of anything particularly foul or suspect, nor were there any sticky or gooey surprises for Weiss to find out only after she had stepped on or touched them.

Tov was sitting down when she reached them—or rather, they were being supported by the braces attached to the back of their legs, the ones that gave them some place to rest the still organic parts of their body.

“'Bout damn time you made it here, Ms. Schnee,” they muttered as she walked up beside them.

Weiss gritted her teeth, seething, before she decided it wasn't worth it. She leaned on the floating desk Tov was using and asked, “What did you need me for?”

“Oh, I don't know—tellin' me whatever the bleedin' hell it was that was by our room last night, missy?”

Weiss sighed. “It was the Keeper of the Grove. She got through all the security systems to my balcony because she was invisible—among other tricks, I assume.”

Tov grumbled under their breath, probably the language of wherever they had originally come from. “Figured as much; heard from the warm bodies patrolling the halls that they could have sworn someone or something was sneakin' around, but they couldn't see shite.

“And speakin' of seein': you wouldn't happen to know whatever fuckery she did to our cameras, do you?”

An increasingly too familiar sensation of dread gripped Weiss, wrapping its icy fingers around her chest. “What do you mean…?” she whispered, suddenly finding it hard to breath.

“Normally, this'd be the point that I'd happily show you, but seein' as it makes people's EYES
BLEED, and part of my job description is to keep you and yer sister safe, I won't, because that'd be the definition of 'fuckin' up royally.'"

Weiss world started to spin once more. Tov's prosthetic arm shot out, sections of it unfolding and creating a force field that held her upright. “Easy, now, missy,” they hummed, “the lass actually just THOUGHT their eyes turned into fountains straight from yer nightmares.”

“That is NOT comforting news!” Weiss cried, her whole body shaking violently. “W-what—do I even WANT to know what happened...?”

“Depends: are you willin' to sign this release form that says I warned you that it'd suck arse, to say the least?” Tov asked, using their organic arm to slide a tablet over to Weiss. A release form was on its surface, a hardlight pen floating just above it.

Her father had always warned her about signing anything under duress, emotional highs or lows, and especially when when you were less than 100% clear-headed and rational. There was also a part of her mind that was telling her it was best to just walk away and leave this particular mystery unsolved —almost exactly like so many victims in the Keeper's legends.

Weiss picked up the pen and signed her name on the line.

She was already doomed by the Keeper's scythe as it was, and she never did like obeying her father's orders.

Tov grunted, shoved the tablet somewhere where there was space, and took their arm back. She watched as they waved it over the screens, the live feeds of Manor Schnee turning into recorded footage from earlier last night. They all looked normal, nothing particularly notable about them except some off-duty guards slacking off, and one in particular picking her nose.

Then Tov unpaused them, and the horror show started.

It began with the Eastern Border Wall, the one part of the mountain range that hadn't been leveled or carved out to provide natural shade for the construction workers during the brightest, hottest hours of the day, and about the most difficult, arduous place to even attempt to infiltrate Manor Schnee, let alone stealthily, undetected, and without a vehicle.

So of course, that was the side the Keeper had broken in from.

The camera feed started to break and distort, static at first, before they started ominous glowing lines started streaking across the screen, forming alien shapes, and what Weiss could swear looked like vaguely like faces.

Then just as quickly as the distortion had started, it stopped.

Tov gestured to the monitor next to the one she had been looking at, the inside of the eastern wall which her father relegated to storage and the bare minimum of living quarter standards for non-essential or the bottom rungs of staff. It was the least guarded area in the entire mansion, mostly robotic drones patrolling the area with a few human handlers to guard against cyber attacks or accidental mishaps.

Weiss watched as every single one of the drones started to go insane, spinning around with their alert lights flashing bright red, handlers panicking as the machines began to fidget and jerk like crazy, all while the same nightmarish distortion happened on the feed once more.

“If robots could scream and piss themselves in terror, I think this'd be what they'd look like,” Tov
Weiss eyes continued switching from monitor to monitor, following as the Keeper dashed through the halls of Manor Schnee, human guards flinching, jumping, looking confused and terrified as they felt the same uneasy presence Weiss did, but saw nothing but empty air.

The series ended with the camera on the balcony where the Keeper was waiting for her last night. The lockdown was still on at the time, three inches of neosteel shuttered over the entrance and a magical “intruder deterrent field” glowing just over it.

The distortions started once again, getting worse and worse with each second. Weiss felt her eyes throbbing from sudden strain, a pounding in her head that was quickly growing into a head-splitting migraine, her heart racing quickening as she found herself paralyzed, unable to do anything but gaze as images began to form on the screen, staying for only a split-second each and searing themselves in her mind even faster.

Faces screaming. People wrenched over with agony. A skull—a creature, the face artists throughout the centuries had been repeating over and over again, the face of the Keeper with her glowing red eyes boring into her—

The feed cut out, replaced by the calm, familiar “screen of death” of Aurelia OS.

Weiss gasped for breath, cold sweat pouring down her skin. She suddenly realized that Tov was holding her up again, using both limbs this time.

“The reports says that that particular camera 'suffered from an unknown fatal error, or some form of anti-surveillance technology we are not familiar with.' In my personal opinion, it decided it couldn't take any more of that shite and killed itself.”

Weiss swallowed, her mouth painfully dry. “D-Do you know whatever it is that can cause this…?” she whispered.

“Nope!” Tov replied calmly. “I intend to find out. Most of my team, and a whole lotta the guards that were on duty that night intend to get the fuck outta here. So word of warning: yer father might be a wee bit more unpleasant than he usually is.”

Weiss nodded slowly. “I'm going to leave now...”

Tov grunted, and switched the monitors back to their live feeds.

Weiss staggered back to her escorts, both of them looking just as shaken as her. “Where's Winter…?” she asked.

“Her room,” one of them whispered. The other nodded to confirm it, temporarily unable to speak.

“Take me there, please” Weiss said, just before she fainted.

When she came to, she was in Winter's bed, her sister’s arms protectively wrapped around her and hugging her—although that could have also been her using her as a surrogate for her old plush toys, the fuzzy guardians of her childhood long given away to charities.

“Winter…?” Weiss asked.

Winter's eyes shot open in an instant, fully alert and still red from crying.
Weiss let out a strangled noise.

“Sorry!” Winter whispered. “Queensguard training; gotta be ready for action in the shortest possible
time. Was there something you wanted?”

“Air…!” Weiss choked.

Winter yelped and let go. Weiss gasped for breath, scrambled to the side of Winter's bed. She sat up,
cought her breath and looked around.

The room was dark, quiet and, cool, not a living soul except for the two of them.

“How long were we out...?” Weiss asked.

Winter turned over to the other side, where a clock was glowing in the darkness. “Hmm. 12 hours,
more or less.”

Which meant it was night again, passage to and from the city was possible once more, and knowing
their father and the speed of the Continental Communication Network, preparations to invade the
Valley once more and earn even more of the Keeper's ire were well under way.

Weiss frowned.

Winter crawled over and put a hand on her shoulder. “Want to go get some dinner, head over to
Candela, and forget about our impending doom for a while?”

Weiss hummed. “Yes please. What'd you have in mind?”

“I was thinking we could go to the Plushie Palace, get myself some new toys,” Winter explained.

Weiss nodded. “Can we get some triple chocolate cake shakes afterward?”

Winter smiled. “Weiss, we're probably going to die in the next couple of days—I say you can have
anything your little doomed heart so desires~” she chirped.

Then, she stared off into the distance. “Yep. Losing my mind.”
Chapter 7

The dinner Weiss and Winter had was a simple affair, quick flame roasts and brief plunges into boiling oil, salads tossed together with whatever ingredients were available, and bread the two of them recognized from earlier in the morning, testing how long the fields could keep them oven fresh and warm.

It was hard not to notice that instead of the small army of maids and butlers eager to serve them, it was just the one butler handling drinks, with drones floating about serving plates, carving meats, and putting portions onto their plates.

As a matter of fact, there were a lot more drones than people everywhere else, too.

“Short on staff tonight?” Weiss asked as said butler poured her a glass of juice.

“Unfortunately so, Ms. Schnee,” he replied as he expertly twisted the bottle, spilling not a drop. “Chef Naomi wishes to beg your forgiveness; her more elaborate creations require a not insignificant amount of support and assistance, two things she did not have tonight.”

Winter daintily picked up a slice of meat with her fork, put it into her mouth and chewed. She hummed with pleasure, smiling. “Please tell her not to worry,” she said after she swallowed. “It’s as excellent as I remember.”

The butler smiled, if a little nervously. “She will be very pleased to hear that. Do you require anything else, Mses. Schnee?”

“Just one more thing: had Father ever requested our presence again, after breakfast?” Winter asked.

The butler shook his head. “No, Ms. Schnee. Mr. Schnee has been incredibly busy in his office since he left the dining room earlier this morning; he's even had his own meals sent there. I assume it might have to do with Ms. Weiss'… adventure.”

He paused. “It's the talk of Candela—all of Avalon, even.”

Winter nodded. “Thank you, you're dismissed,” she said.

The butler bowed, before leaving the room as fast as professional decorum would let him. The drones and the cameras aside, it was essentially just the two of them alone in the dining room. They looked around just to be sure, waited a few moments, then dropped their polite smiles and amiable looking expresisons.

“Oh damn it, I hadn't thought about the press!” Weiss mumbled, angrily stabbing a slice of meat on her plate.

Winter sighed. “Neither did I; I'd suggest disguises and decoys, but they have the manpower to watch every last transport going to and from here like hawks, and we don't.”

“They're going to be all over this…” Weiss grumbeld. “Why couldn't Father be satisfied with a nice penthouse in Asgard?”

“Because every other trillionaire in Candela has a penthouse there,” Winter replied flatly.

“Are we still going out tonight?” Weiss asked, before shoved food into her mouth and chewed
“Definitely,” Winter said. “I say, let the media hound us: keep us trained on their cameras all night if they want, we'll just ignore their questions as we shop for plushies! And if the Keeper happens to come for us both while they're recording? Then that's what they get for wanting footage so badly!”

She chuckled. “Wouldn't that be quite the headline? 'Schnees Slain By Supposedly Mythological Being!’” she said, spreading her hands apart in the air. “Footage withdrawn for causing permanent mental scarring and psychological trauma in all who view it.”

Weiss nodded slowly. “Hey Winter?” she asked.

“Yes, Weiss?”

“What are you suddenly, constantly making jokes about our impending doom?”

Winter smiled at her. “It's the only way I can think or talk about it without bursting into tears,” she whispered.

Weiss and Winter stepped out from the elevator and into the manor's garage, fed, bathed, and dressed in fresh clothes. It was easy to tell from a glance that a large number of rovers and even one of their father's private jets were missing, which wasn't too surprising.

What was was one of the traffic coordinators coming to meet them personally.

“Good evening, Mses. Schnee,” the cyborg said. “Planning to leave the premises?”

“We are, actually,” Winter replied. “Just a spontaneous shopping trip to Candela! We'll be back before morning.”

The coordinator nodded. “Mr. Schnee has actually requested that you both stay in the manor for the time being; he has asked us to clarify that this goes for all residents and staff, not just you two.”

“As if that makes it any better...” Weiss grumbled under her breath.

The two of them ignored her.

“Requested you say?” Winter asked as she stepped up closer to him. “As in, it's not a formal lockdown?”

“Yes,” they replied. “In my opinion though, Ms. Schnee, it would still be best if you delayed this trip until further notice—”

Too fast for anyone but the most observant and alert eyes could notice, Winter pressed a sizable amount of Uroch bills into the coordinator's hands.

“—However, I can not stop you from doing as you please,” they continued, discretely tightening their fingers around the money. “Do you have an estimated return time? Mr. Schnee does not appreciate vehicles being checked out 'Indefinitely,' more so with recent events.”

“I'm sure he's got more important things on his mind to think about than one more measly rover,” Winter replied. “It's not like we won't be back, right?”

The coordinator nodded. “As you wish, Ms. Schnee” they said, before a holographic screen appeared before their eyes—a visual marker for those without the same implants as them that they
were busy communicating with others or the manor's various systems.

“Since when did you learn to do that?” Weiss asked as continued onto the loading dock.

Winter smirked. “Queensguard. The Uroch may not be the most valuable commodity these days, but it's certainly the most versatile.”

“What else did they teach you?”

“I'm not allowed to say,” Winter replied. “But I can say they really meant 'ready for anything.'”

Less than a minute later, they were off, strapped securely to their seats, listening to the quiet hum of the engine and the crunch of rock underneath the tank treads as they were gently jostled about. Schnee Company rovers may have been a serious step up from the stock models, but there was only so much you could do to compensate for terrain this rocky, battered, and beaten by the elements on a daily basis.

“Any other business you want to get out of the way, hopefully before the Keeper comes for us?” Winter asked. “Friends you'd like to hang out with one last time, or just say goodbye to? Places you want to see? Things you want to experience before it's all over?”

“No,” Weiss replied, “I'll just tag along with whatever you have in mind after you get your plushies and I get my cake shake,”

“You sure?”

“Very,” Weiss replied.

After all, it was hard to do any of those, when you didn't have any friends, and all you've ever wanted to do is leave here, see what it'd be like to start anew somewhere else.

As expected, the media knew exactly which loading bay they were entering the city from, and were prepared to mob and rain questions down upon them, physically fighting with one another for the prized “First Footage.”

Through a mix of the security teams and drones that were obliged to keep the area free of obstruction and especially dense human traffic, Winter's knowledge of hand-to-hand combat, and timely mentions of the Keeper of the Grove granting her a speed and strength Weiss never knew she was capable of, the sisters cut through the crowds like a missile, straight into the waiting backseat of a VIP hover-cab that had been waiting for them.

The vehicle's “crash bubble” activated, a wave of energy repelling any reporters and their camera-bots who had decided to take a desperate last shot at an interview. Weiss looked out the window and smiled as they flew off, knocking down several of their fellow journalists like haphazardly placed bowling pins.

As the cab began to rise up into the air, its AI appeared before them, a holographic bust of a young attractive woman of Oriental descent. “Welcome back to Candela, Mses. Winter and Weiss Schnee! We of the MTC sincerely apologize for not being able to assist you in circumvent the media--”

“Slash Command, AI Personality Switch: ‘Antonio Perrero.’” Weiss said.

The hologram shifted and shimmered, before turning into that of an Italian-American man in his late 40's to early 50's, balding hair, a wrinkled face, friendly face with a big, round nose, bright eyes, and
a bushy handlebar mustache.

“Eeeey, it's Weiss and Winter!” he said with a thick, comically exaggerated accent. “Been too long since I saw you two together—a'nt right for family to ever be apart for so long like that... anyway, where to, gals?”

Winter sat up and smiled. “To the Plushie Palace as fast as you legally can, Tony!” she replied. “I've got a collection of toys to rebuild and return to their rightful places on my bed!”

“Hah! Told you you'd be back there one of these days!” Tony said as the cab began to move through Candela's skyline. “And here were my handlers, telling me I'm wasting space, saving routes people haven't taken in a while. I tell 'em right back--”

“--If you didn't want me saving so many shortcuts, then why'd you give me so many petabytes worth of memory, huh?!” Weiss and Winter playfully griped alongside Tony, before they all devolved into giggles or loud, bellowing laughter.

“And speaking of memory…” Tony asked, “… jeez, how long HAS it been since I took you gals there?”

Winter and Weiss mirth quickly faded away, the joyful mood gone.

“Oh. Oooh… way to go, Tony…” Tony said, his face looking remorseful and a little angry at himself. “So much for the 'most highly advanced and adaptive artificial intelligences in the market today'… look, gals, I'm sorry--”

“It's fine, Tony,” Winter said, “it's been a really, really long time—I'm not surprised even a supercomputer like you would forget.”

“I don't ever forget, especially somethin' as important as that!” Tony snapped. “Just that some geniuses in Programming decided that I need to be a little slower at pulling up some kinds of info from the ol' database than others...” he grumbled.

“We'll put in another formal complaint for you, Tony” Weiss muttered.

Tony smiled. “Thanks, gals, the two of you are little angels. Well, maybe not so little no more, but still angels.”

They drove around for a little while longer until distinct sight of the Plushie Palace came into view—a giant, thirty-story shopping complex that was specifically designed after and the stone and mortal palaces of yore, a giant teddy bear with a modest crown sitting in its highest tower.

“Sure you want to take the front gates to this place?” Tony asked as the cab began to slow down. “They still got those secret entrances and showrooms for doing deals all discrete like, and I know two of 'em, at least.”

“No thank you, Tony,” Winter said she looked out the window, pressed her right up to the glass. “This is my first time back here in a long while—I want to make it special.”

“Then I'll call 'em and make 'em roll out the red carpet like the first time I took you here!” Tony said, chuckling.

Winter teared up. “That'd be great, Tony, thank you.”
From the foot of the double doors of the Plushie Palace's main doors and past its massive neosteel gates of the Plushie Palace, two security guards dressed like medieval knights rolled out a red carpet, before an employee dressed as a royal herald ran out, who was followed shortly by a cadre of flying drones with fancy hats like the handmaidens, squires, and scribes of yore.

Tony set the cab down right at the edge of the carpet. “Enjoy yourself in there!” he grinned and laughed, before his projector deactivated, and the door swung open.

The herald put her trumpet/megaphone to her lips. “Hear ye, hear ye! Returning to the Plushie Palace, these Hallowed Halls of Imagination, the Fortress of Fun, the Place of Furry Friends for everyone:

“Lady Winter Schnee, and her sister, Lady Weiss Schnee!”

Winter daintily stepped out onto the red carpet, trying and failing to keep composed and dignified as she waved and smiled at the welcoming party and the small crowd that had gathered on the sidewalk. A Handmaiden-Bot floated up to her head, and daintily put a modest white crown on her head, its points shaped like the fractals of a snowflake.

It was made out of sturdy, visually striking, but otherwise cheap polymers, but Winter still squealed and jumped with delight, eyes bright and smile as radiant as the first time she was first there at the age of 3.

A different Handmaiden-Bot hovered over to Weiss, with her own personal crown. She tried to wave it off, but it insistently hovered and beeped beside her, so she sighed, and let it put it on her own head, too.

The other “Servant” Bots floated in formation beside them, flapping their “wings” in unison, the “face” panels on their round bodies all looking as dignified as two dots and a single line could be. Winter took it in stride, holding her head up high in appropriately regal fashion before she sashayed down the red carpet.

Weiss looked at the pedestrians laughing, smiling, shaking their heads, or recording the whole spectacle with their phone, then she turned to her sister, happily soaking up the attention. She sighed playfully, and hurried on after her—in the dignified and proper manner of a fellow Lady of the Court, of course!

The herald put her trumpet/megaphone under her arm and fell in step with them. “Know that even with your long absence, milady, the Plushie Palace still welcomes you as warmly and heartily as it always did!” she said. “The halls may expand and rearrange themselves, the faces of the staff and the guard may change, but all your perks and privileges are forever, as per your lifetime membership and the graces granted by the Lady Scarlatina and her predecessors.”

“Wonderful to hear, my good woman!” Winter said in an exaggeratedly “proper” voice. Weiss resisted the urge to snicker.

“Are there any orders and requests you wish done for this visit, milady?”

“Yes,” Winter said, “I want every single plushie I have ever ordered from your company or had been gifted to me to be remade, exactly as I got them the day they came off the fabricators, errors and all.
Flubber Butter is not Flubber Butter without his one slightly larger than the other eye, and don’t you think that I don’t remember exactly which side it was on!”

The herald put her hand to her chest. “We would never dare, milady! Then, now, and forevermore, we take great pains to make all of our creations exactly to how our loyal patrons wish them to be. I must warn you though, that due to legal constrictions, company policy, and the inevitable passing of some of our artisans, we are unable to reproduce most of the limited edition and/or handmade plushies, for obvious reasons.”

Winter sighed. “It’s no trouble; I’ve made peace with the fact that Dr. Blep belongs to another now...”

The herald nodded sympathetically. “Tis tragic, but take heart: we have far more friends to make new memories with than ever before,” she said, smiling. “Would you like me to lead you to our newest additions, milady?”

“Later,” Winter said as they passed under the gate and into the massive front gardens/courtyard.

She grinned as she watched patrons old and young spread out all over the tables, benches, and gazebos, having tea parties and spirited discussions with their beloved inanimate friends occupying the other seats, all persons and plushies dressed in all manner of outfits and of course, fancy hats.

“I want to explore with just my sister for a while,” she finished as they came to the massive double doors leading into the palace proper.

“Enjoy yourselves, milady,” the herald said. “And if you need any assistance, there is as many willing hands as ever, just waiting to rush to your aid!” she said before bowed out, and disappeared.

Two guards at either side of the door greeted her and pushed open the massive double doors; Weiss and Winter had to shield their eyes as they stepped into the Palace’s foyer, with its marble floors and silken banners, the portraits of the Plushie Palace’s former and current CEO’s lining the walls, and the massive, elaborate, and antique chandelier hovering far above their heads, casting it all in a bright, wondrous light.

Just a few centuries ago, the Plushie Palace would have probably just been a massive showcase for PR purposes, with the actual store being in a more discrete area of shelves upon shelves of boxed plushies ready to be plucked and brought to the counter, or a large and expansive warehouse that was kept out of sight and access but to the employees.

But advances in telecommunication, logistics, and automated manufacturing had made it so that comm-crystal shopping made physical stores all but obsolete, if all you needed was the products they offered; C-Commerce was just much faster, infinitely more convenient, and offered a whole host of luxuries and advantages that its counterpart could not.

So the physical stores and locations adapted, offered something their technomagical counterpart could not:

An experience.

Winter and Weiss wandered through elaborate show rooms: grand dining halls, palatial sets, and famous landmarks from Avalon’s numerous cultures, both real and fictional; lovingly recreated scenes from pop culture and timeless tales; exciting displays such as plushie pilots flying through the air, trying to gun each other down with harmless balls of charged air, collecting the other team’s aviator’s caps and scarves for trophies as they flew off their owners’ heads and fluttered to the
They marveled at museums that chronicled the history of the company, the evolution of their trademark fabrics that became the de facto choice for premium plush toys, famous owners, interesting anecdotes, lovingly preserved examples of the works of their deceased masters and mistresses of the needle and thread, generously donated items from collectors who wished to inspire and delight a new generation of plush toy lovers.

(Winter sighed as she passed by Leela Lucavi, her limited edition Jasper Lamia toy with actual jasper gems for eyes from an earlier, long-over run of the Monsters and Mythology line. She cast a longing look over her shoulder at her beloved companion now floating in the center of a protective crystal case, until Weiss tugged at her sleeve and they continued on.)

And most importantly, Winter got to handle and see the toys with her own eyes and hands than a virtual simulator, dress them up in all manner of elaborate outfits herself, be the one to rigorously test whatever topper suited her fancy for that particular toy's visage, before finally sitting down with them in tea tables, dens, and meeting rooms, seeing if she would enjoy their presence after she had “a brief chat” with them over actual, excellently brewed tea and freshly baked goods, provided by their food-and-beverage lessees.

(Weiss joined in with her sister's screening process, getting less and less patient with her thorough standards, until she learned that among said lessees was a Fiorina's, and she could enjoy a triple chocolate cake shake in lieu of tea.)

All the while, childhood companions were lovingly recreated, lopsided ears, misshapen eyes, and miscoulored patterns and all, the extremely rare hiccups in an otherwise flawless fabrication process that one could only experience after being so unlucky, or ordering an extremely large number of plushies over a very long period of time.

As the numbers for Winter's bill kept on rising, gaining more commas, and going even further to the left, Weiss suddenly understood why their father had not been as enamored with these ridiculously adorable, soft, and cuddly toys as she, her sister, and their mother were.

Many hours later, Winter visited the last location on her list: the always shifting “Special of the Month” wings. As it was Autumn everywhere else in Avalon (Candela and the Viridian Valley only experienced two seasons: “The Fury and The Flood”), and the Eve of the Ether was coming up in little over a month, the theme was:

“Fun and Frights!”

Winter and Weiss both had second thoughts as they came up to the display at the entrance, showing off the annual return of the Plushie Palace's Keeper of the Grove plushies. In spite of their reputation for making ANYTHING cute, they were still a popular component in mean-spirited pranks this time of the year, if just their glowing red button-eyes in light or darkness. The two of them decided to give it a wide berth as they entered the area and checked out the much less terrifying offerings—Winter casting glances over her shoulder every now and then.

She added a few more plushies, outfits, and hats to her growing collection, until they reached a room-wide set piece, for just one item at the center of it all:

“She couldn't see these anymore outside of private collections!”
Weiss stopped. She looked at the plush toy inside the protective crystal casing: a white wolf, with a long, flowing mane that glowed like pale moonlight. Where had she heard that before…?

“She’s the guardian deity of the city, back when it was still a struggling port town, their symbolism for the incredibly dangerous swamp creatures that protected them from foreign invaders and each other alike,” Winter said, seemingly reading her mind as she skirted around the display, leaning down and standing up on the balls of her feet, admiring the toy from every angle. “Kind of like the Keeper of the Grove, except benevolent and infinitely less terrifying!”

Winter stopped at the front of it, leaning forward and gazing into the plush toy's face, admiring the incredibly intricate detail in the stitching and the fabric. “In the promotional cartoon, she was the mentor figure and overall leader of the group, the source of the other Lunar Warriors' powers, their defender from threats both from without and within, striking down foes with her Starlight Spear, and helping her wards overcome their personal demons with her boundless compassion and wisdom.”

Thunk. Winter squished her face into the glass.

“I had the BIGGEST crush on her when I was a kid!” she cried. “Still do, actually! I mean, yes, she’s fictional and a wolf, but her voice actress gives me SHIVERS when she says her battle cry, and when she cosplays humanoid Ellie at cons and public appearances—” she made a noise that made Weiss rather uncomfortable.

She slowly stepped up some distance behind Winter, still thinking. Where had she heard that before…? She blinked. “Wait, didn’t you keep talking for like a year about how your mom was getting you one?”

“8 months and 23 days!” Winter replied. “I forgot how much I wanted her…” she said as she put her hand to the glass. “And now I remember just how badly…” she whispered, tearing up. “The review sites that got exclusive copies said it really was objectively the softest, fluffiest, cuddliest plush toy the company has ever produced, and every single lucky person who managed to get one themselves say it's even better than they said!

“They haven't produced a single plushie that's been able to match it in terms of pure softness and cuddling experience—even less likely now that the special secret fabric blend they used died with its inventor…” she moped.

“Why didn't you get it?” Weiss asked.

Winter sighed, slowly pulling away from the crystal case. The smudge mark she'd left disappeared in a wave of energy pulsing up and down the surface. “Mom said we'd buy it after we got back from our trip...” she frowned. “… You know, that trip.”

Weiss' own face fell. “Ah...”

Winter cast one last longing look at the Eluna plushie, before she turned around. “I suppose that's life: some things just pass you by...”

“… Or maybe they were just waiting for you to come back,” said a third voice.

Winter and Weiss looked up, smiled as they saw a familiar face with the same iconic bunny ears atop her headband:

Velvet Scarlatina, latest of the Scarlatina family and heiress of the Plushie Palace, smiled and bowed.

“Welcome back, Miladies Schnee~!”
“Velvet!” Winter cried, brightening up once more. “Still wearing those same bunny ears, I see” she said as she came over to hug her. “I thought you said you hated them.”

Velvet smiled and returned the hug. “You could say they grew on me,” she replied.

Winter hummed as she pulled away. “Can I touch them?” she asked as she reached up to the tall, fluffy ears atop Velvet’s head.

Velvet kept on smiling. “The answer’s still NO,” she snapped, her rabbit ears pulling back. “If anything, the biofeedback mechanisms have gotten more sensitive than ever!”

Winter sighed in disappointment as she took her hand back. “I said it before, I'll say it again: you should REALLY get those removed.”

“I like them! They make them more than just an accessory,” Velvet said, her ears pulling back up straight.

“And a safety hazard!” Winter cried. “I've heard of suffering for fashion, but putting foot tall antennas constantly at risk of getting caught in things and ripped right off your head is just asking for trouble!”

Velvet winced. “You haven’t changed one bit since you were last here, Winter,” she said, shaking her head. She turned to Weiss, and looked surprised for a moment. “And you’ve changed a LOT, Weiss.”

Weiss huffed. “Why wouldn’t I have? I was 5!”

Velvet nodded. “I know, I know, it’s just… strange to see you two here again after all this time. And after what just happened to you, Weiss…” she shuddered. “The press releases and your father said you're fine, but are you really...?”

The two sisters cast each other brief looks, before they turned back to Velvet.

“Physically, yes, healthy as can be!” Weiss replied. “Mentally, traumatized for life, which is why we're here.”

Velvet nodded. “I was thinking as much...” She sighed. “I don’t get why people still think they can settle the Viridian Valley—people from here especially! Hasn't all the failed expeditions and deaths stretching back hundreds of years been enough?”

“Honestly, I think they’re just taking it as incentive, be the first to civilize the Valley after all others have failed—especially people from this city,” Winter replied. “After all, just two generations ago, the very idea of Candela would have been a ridiculous fantasy, if not for all those breakthroughs that changed everything.”

Velvet nodded. “As technology advances, so we expand our domain and leave the sky further and further below us,” she flatly quoted from one of the city’s founders.

“Probably because of all that hot air in their heads,” Weiss added.

Velvet chuckled. “Good thing there’s a gadget for that!” she said playfully. “But enough about
these awful things—I see you’ve been busy rebuilding your collection, after you gave it all away! Mind if I ask what changed your mind?"

Winter smiled nervously. “Uh… let’s just say recent events have shown me that life’s FAR too short to care about what total strangers think of my hobbies,” she replied.

Velvet smiled. “Gram-Gram always did say you’d be back.” She frowned. “Even on her deathbed.”

Winter and Weiss gave her sympathetic looks. “May she be at peace, wherever she is in the Great Beyond,” Winter said.

“Praise be to that,” Velvet replied. “And speaking of which—do you still want the Eluna plushie? I mean, I figured you still do because I saw you earlier just, uh… fawning… over it.” She paused. “I’m sorry for not saying anything, I didn’t know if I should have interrupted,” she whispered quickly.

Winter stared at her. “What do you mean, do I still want the Elena plush? This is a display, isn’t it?”

“It is for now, unless you decide to let us keep it.”

Winter’s eyes widened. “I-I thought you weren’t selling these anymore! Isn’t it against company policy to do that after the final auctions, ruin the point of the Limited Edition toys?”

Velvet smiled. “Winter: it’s already yours. Gram-Gram pulled out the money from her personal accounts to pay for it, if only so the other shareholders wouldn’t throw a fit about the one unsold Eluna.”

“But that was—!” Winter looked at the doll, back at Velvet, her eyes widening in horror, realization, then, regret. “… She… she… was waiting for me to come back, so she could give it to me herself, wasn’t she…?”

Velvet nodded sadly.

Winter teared up. “Why didn’t you tell me…?” she asked, her voice cracking.

Velvet sheepishly grabbed her elbow. “She wanted it to be a surprise, said she had a special message for you when she gave it, for your and her ears only. Before you ask: she died with it. Never told anyone about it, not her lawyer, her family—not even me.”

Winter blinked. “O-Oh.”

Velvet nodded and looked away to the side. “Yeah… we were REALLY surprised at how literally she meant it.” She looked back at Winter. “So”—she pointed at the Eluna plushie—“still want it?”

“Won’t that mean having to turn off all the security features?” Winter asked. “I can’t remember the last time someone brought the system into action, but I do remember the aftermath was ugly.”

Velvet cringed at the memory. “Yes, normally, it would be a long, drawn-out process to remove any of our displays, more so for such a rare, highly valued product…’’ she walked over and put her hand on the display. Energy pulsed out from her hand, the whole crystal case glowed, then disappeared in as shower of dust, leaving the Eluna plushie floating in mid-air.

“… But good thing I have executive override,” Velvet said a she turned around and smiled proudly.

Winter stared at the freed Eluna doll, as if she couldn’t quite process what just happened.

“You use handprint recognition for security?” Weiss asked. “I thought they stopped using that a long
“time ago, when they discovered you could grow dummy hands and just put a little cooking gel on them to fool the system.”

“We don’t,” Velvet replied. “You could say my hand’s just the interface, the whole of me is the actual password. You’d have to go through the trouble of making a perfect clone of myself just to hack it, and even then it locks down if it knows I'm being forced to do it.”

“Never heard of wetware that advanced yet simple to use—not even in this city,” Weiss mumbled. Velvet smiled. “You know companies, their patents, and their trade secrets...”

Weiss groaned. “Do I ever...”

All was quiet for a few moments as Winter just continued to just stand and stare at the floating plushie.

“Aren’t you going to take it...?” Velvet asked.

“I... I’m not sure if I can, after everything I just learned...” Winter mumbled.

“Then let me help you,” Velvet said. She walked over to the Eluna plushie, grabbed it, and walked back over to Winter.

She stared at Velvet like she was the Head of the Sacred Stewards, and the toy was one of the Holy Armaments of the Shepherd herself.

Weiss sighed, took the plushie from Velvet, and pressed it right up to Winter’s face.

She burst into tears.

Velvet flinched. “A-Are you alright...?” she asked.

Winter nodded as she carefully, happily took the plushie into her own hands, and nuzzled her face into it. “She’s even fluffier than I could have ever imagined...” she sobbed.

Winter spent some personal time with the Eluna plushie, before they finalized her purchases and headed back to the front entrance of the Plushie Palace; daybreak was coming soon, and with it risking being trapped in Candela for the next 12 hours or so, and worse yet, leaving her beloved plushies at the mercy of their father.

(While he was never as mean-spirited as to “unfortunately” lose them, he wasn’t above holding them hostage in his private vault, to be released only after Winter sat through yet another long lecture about how much he hated those “damned toys.”)

Winter would have loved nothing more than to be able to cart all of those toys behind her in a long, long, long train of cargo lifters behind her, but due to the sheer size of her order, they were forced to send most of it to the post office for long-range teleportation.

So it was that the sisters carried three overstuffed bags between them, the Eluna plushie comfortably nestled in the crook of the Winter's arm. Velvet personally saw them to the exit, chatting and catching up with them.

“...I’m scared of what’ll happen when I finally take over the company,” Velvet said as they neared the front. “The day-to-day operations, the products, that I know can handle; it’s the press releases, the events, the talking to all those people...” she shuddered.
“You could have avoided this if you actually stepped foot outside of the Palace more often, you know!” Winter replied. “Maybe stay at one of those socials of yours for longer, actually talk to the guests instead of just going around saying hi to a handful of VIPs and taking a few pictures before you leave.”

“True, but it’s really hard to do when you don’t know… any-one, really,” Velvet mumbled. “Unless you guys want to come help me be less of an awkward mess.”

The sisters smiled politely. “Uh, yeah… normally this would be when we’d be delighted to help, but, uh… our schedules don’t seem to have much space for socializing right now…” Weiss replied.

Velvet’s ears fell. “Oh. Both of you going to be very busy?”

“Yes, and neither of us are sure when it’ll end,” Winter replied. “Going to have LOTS of free time afterward, though…”

Velvet smiled, her ears perking up. “Here’s to hoping it’s soon!”

Neither sister commented.

They exited into the gardens once more, now mostly deserted but for a few patrons and their plush companions waiting to watch sun and the barrier come up once more. The red carpet had long been pulled back in (Candela’s streets were pristine through constant street cleaner bot sweeps, not through any discipline or consideration of its pedestrians) and a flying cab was already waiting at the curb, its door open.

“Hey hey!” Tony called out. “Lookit what you got there, Lady Schnee! Gonna be takin’ back some bet money from some guys in Maintenance later, thanks!”

“Don’t spend it all on one place, now, Tony!” Winter replied, giggling. She turned to Velvet. “Your doing?”

Velvet beamed. “The Plushie Palace prides itself on treating every patron like they were family.” She was going to see them to their cab, but was stopped by an assistant. She frowned and excused herself, going off to the side for some urgent, private business.

Winter and Weiss said their farewells (sans the promise to return soon, for obvious reasons), before heading off to Tony and letting his drones load up their bags in the trunk.

“Except you,” Winter said as she slipped into the cab, the Eluna plushie still in her hands. “You are staying right her with me,” she hummed as she nuzzled it once more.

“Careful,” Weiss said as she climbed in after her, “the others might get jealous!”

“No they won’t,” Winter replied matter-of-fact. “I happen to pride myself on my ability to gauge a plushie’s psyche from the first meeting alone—no narcissists, codependents, or toys with dangerous self-esteem issues in my collection, I assure you!”

The two sisters paused for a moment, then fell back laughing.

Tony was about to close the door and take-off when a human employee from the Plushie Palace came running out, holding a gift-wrapped box in her hands. “Wait, wait!” she cried. “Lady Schnee, Lady Schnee, you forgot something!”

The sisters looked at each other, before Winter shrugged, left Eluna with Weiss, and stepped out of
The employee stopped before her, took a moment to catch her breath, before she handed the box over. “Your continued patronage to the Palace has earned you this month's special Loyalty Program Plushie!”

Winter brightened up. “Oh! Who is it?”

“Open the box and find out, milady!” the servant replied cheerfully. “It's half the fun!”

“I suppose so!” Winter chirped as she started to unwrap it.

Velvet stepped out of the doors of the Plushie Palace, waving farewell to some assistants inside. She turned around, saw Winter, the employee in front of her, and most importantly, the box in her hand.

Her eyes widened.

“WINTER! NO!”
Chapter 10

Winter was curled up in a tiny, shivering ball on the backseat of the cab, her Eluna plushie nestled right up to her face. The rest of the toys she had on her were arranged around her body like a wall, or sitting on top of her like sentries. For lack of space to fit all of them, Weiss sat on the front-side seats, spun around to face her sister.

The special edition Keeper of the Grove plushie—the one with much more intricate detailing and real, malevolently glowing rubies for eyes—was in the trunk, back in its box, face and lid down. They could swear they could feel her evil stare boring through Tony's hull, the authentic leather seats, and into their souls, but neither commented on it.

On the shelf behind Weiss' head was Tony, his face turned outside to the city skyline outside, talking as he drove.

“This is why I don't like big businesses,” he grumbled. “Back then in the old days, you walked into a store, everyone in the place knew you by your first name, and you knew theirs, too! I mean, sure, corporations have changed the world for the better, and I'm just an AI talking based on subjective experiences, and personality parameters and memories encoded into me, but still! You gotta ask: “Is it all really worth HUGE slip-ups like this happenin'??”

When the sisters didn't respond, Tony looked back at them. “Hey, you two been awfully quiet—everythin' alright back there?”

“Just peachy!” Winter replied. “So long as I've got Eluna with me, everything's going to be just fine, because when the Keeper breaks out of the trunk and comes to get us, she's going to come to life, use her Starlight Spear, and save us all~!”

She laughed, then cried, then buried her face into her plushie once more.

Tony and Weiss looked at each other as her muffled sobbing filled the cab.

He turned back to Winter, his projector generating a holographic arm to rest on the top of the front seats. “Look, Winter, I'm a firm believer in face your fears and all that jazz, but isn't it a little, I don't know, too much to be haulin' your nightmares around with you like this?" "I prefer it this way,” she sobbed. “I'd rather a constant reminder that the Keeper is always just around the corner than being surprised like that ever again,” she continued, before she buried her face into her toy once more.

“Oh Ellie, your fur is so soft, and warm, and fluffy... and so good at absorbing my tears and snot, too!”

Tony looked at Weiss, unamused. “Okay, something is definitely up! And don't you lie to me, little ladies—I've known you both since you two were just bumps in your mama's belly! Plus, the biosensors in this cab just got updated!”

Weiss tried to remain silent, but Tony's incessant staring broke her down. “The Keeper's after us...” she mumbled.

Tony grimaced. “And I guess it ain't the doll in my trunk, huh?”
Weiss shook her head.

“Aw, phooey!” Tony snapped as he turned back to the skyline. “I wish they never got rid of those lines of code that let me talk bad about people...”

“Cursing my father isn't going to change anything,” Weiss muttered. “Believe me, I've tried plenty of times...”

“It'd make me feel a whole lot better, though!” Tony replied.

They were reaching the loading bay closest to Manor Schnee once more, and the cab slowed down.

Tony sighed, and looked back at the sisters. “Look... girls, if'n the next time I see you two is in the news about how the Keeper got you... you two have been some of the best damn passengers I've ever had, alright? Even if your old man keeps trying to lobby me outta the personality roster...”

Weiss looked down as her eyes moistened, Winter burst into another round of tears.

“We love you too, Tony,” Weiss muttered as she wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

Tony's hologram shimmered and broke. “Go on, get on outta here, you two!” he sobbed. “You enjoy however much time you got left here! Oh, and say hi to your mama—your fratellino, too, if he ain't already someone else's kid.”

“We will, Tony,” Winter blubbered. “We will.”

Eluna remained in Winter's arms, and the Keeper stayed in her box for the ride home, the latter suspended in a stasis field on the dashboard. Both sisters couldn't help but flinch every time the rover hit a particularly bumpy patch of road, and the container jostled about slightly until the stabilizers kicked in.

They made it back into the garage a little before sunrise. The missing rovers and the jet were all back, but there were more drones than ever flying about and a suspicious absence of human or cyborg personnel, even for there.

“Good morning, Mses. Schnee!” a drone greeted them as they stepped back out of the rover. “Ms. Winter Schnee, you have an extremely large shipment from The Plushie Palace awaiting teleport confirmation. We regret to inform you that it cannot be handled by human staff due to a large number of absences, but a more than adequate amount of cargo lifters and worker drones have been prepared in their stead!

“How should we proceed?” the drone asked.

“Confirm the teleport, take the ones from the rover, and bring them all to my room,” Winter replied flatly as she walked past, Eluna under one arm and the Keeper in its box under the other. “Keep them in their crates, I'll handle the unpacking and organizing myself; I need a long, time-consuming distraction right now...”

The drone beeped, humming as it followed them it beeped with a different noise. “Teleport successful! Would the Mses. Schnee like breakfast? However, we also regret to inform you that your father, Mr. Schnee, is unable to join for sudden, important business.”

“No thank you, we're not hungry,” Weiss replied as she followed after Winter.
“Response logged—have a nice day, Mses. Schnee!” the drone chirped happily.

As Winter and Weiss stepped back onto the elevator, they remembered just why exactly human personnel were still a popular hiring decision many managers insisted on, in spite of the low costs and ease of acquiring AI drones that could do the same job.

They stepped out of the elevator and back into the halls of Manor Schnee, bright and flooded with warm sunlight.

The healthy glow only made the lack of people all the more stark and ominous, the cheerfulness of the bots’ voice modules more unnerving than pleasant. It didn't help that the remaining human staff were either nervous and wary, couldn't care less as they went about their duties, or were chipper and happy, wondering out loud on why exactly everyone else passed on the generous sums Jacques Schnee had boosted their salaries to.

Winter and Weiss met with a train of cargo lifters and worker drones just heading out from her room, one of them reminding her that she could summon them at any time, especially since they had to leave several of the crates them stacked outside her door lest her bedroom become a crowded storeroom.

“You really sure you want to tackle this all by yourself?” Weiss asked as she and Winter stepped back into her room.

“I'll manage,” Winter replied, skirting around the perfectly stacked and balanced towers to her bed. “I've been trained for and handled much more complex logistical problems in even worse conditions.

“Though all that's going to be after I sleep the day away again, with the Moonlight Huntress herself watching over me!” She looked affectionately at the Eluna plushie still nestled in her arm. “But first, I need to decide what to do with her...” she muttered, looking at the boxed Keeper in her other arm.

“Ugh—just throw it away!” Weiss cried as she sat on the side of Winter’s bed and took her shoes off. “That thing's just going to give the both of us nightmares, Eluna or no.”

Winter nodded as she carefully set Eluna down on her bed. “Right... might as well have some sweet dreams while we still can,” she muttered as she opened the box.

Unlike earlier, she didn't scream, accidentally throw it into an unfortunate victim's face so hard that it made their nose bleed, before falling to the sidewalk wailing hysterically whilst clutching her Eluna plushie, but she still flinched and felt a chill run down her spine.

Not helping was the morning sun making the ruby eyes of the Keeper plushie glow even brighter and more menacingly than they did at night and under artificial lights.

Winter pulled her out, throwing the box to the side. “Not sorry to say I'm not going to miss you in the slightest,” she growled to her face, before she threw the plushie right out the open door of her balcony.

She turned to watch it sail over the railing, then disappear to the floating gardens below.

Instead, she saw it stop in mid-air, invisible hands turn the toy around to face their owner.

“Oh hey! I never knew they made Keeper dolls that looked like this!” a too familiar voice said. “Oooh, man, these eyes are SO much cooler than the buttons...” the Keeper plushie was lowered, the actual Keeper gasped. “Oh Eluna! Is that an actual, limited edition Eluna plushie?”
Weiss and Winter felt their blood run cold as the plushie moved into the room, and stopped at the foot of Winter's bed, just between the two sisters. “Ooohh… these are SO rare, I never thought I'd be able to see one of them up close!”

The voice paused.

“Why does it smell like tears, snot, and despair...?”

Winter blinked. “Can you please hand me my Eluna plushie?”

The Keeper toy was put down on the bed, and the Eluna plushie floated over to Winter. “Here you go!”

Winter took it and nodded. “Thank you.”

She began to make a long, continuous noise, starting as a quiet whine, gradually growing louder and louder to a wail of pure anguish, occasionally broken by hysterical sobbing.

Weiss felt the Keeper wince. “… Uh... she scared of me, too?”

“To put it lightly...” Weiss replied flatly.

Winter let out another wail of distress. “Could you please not just talk like that while you're invisible? It's freaking me out even more than you already are!”

“Oh, okay”—the Keeper plushie was picked up once more, the toy's face turned to Winter—”how about this?”

Winter started crying even harder. “No! It's even worse now!”

“What if I move the head around while I'm talking, like this?” the Keeper asked, doing just that.

“Nope! No! No, no, no, no, nooooo... you know what? You just tell us whatever it is you were going to tell us, just let me curl up on the floor,” Winter blubbered.

The Keeper politely kept quiet while she did.

“Okay!” Winter sobbed, as she hugged the Eluna plushie to her chest, “you can talk now!”

The Keeper plushie “nodded.” “Alright! First up: your security still really sucks, especially now that all the cyborg and human guards are gone.

“Second: we're getting a LOT of comms-chatter and seeing a lot of recruitment advertisements on the Grid for more expeditions into the Valley, which also really sucks.

“And third: I was prepared this time and had dinner before I left home, but do you have any food on you? I didn't think you were going to be gone all night this time, and now I missed breakfast...”

Silence.

“It's okay if you don't have any!” the Keeper added. “I'll manage.”

Winter whimpered.

Weiss groaned. “Okay, first of all: how are you able to listen to our networks and access the Grid?”
“Uhh… with the terminal I have back at the Valley?” the Keeper replied. “We’re a lot more advanced than mud huts and spears, you know. Well, actually we still do technically have mud huts and spears, but they've got Grid access, power, and HoloVision, just like you guys.”

Winter made a little choked dying noise. “Sorry,” she whispered, “please, continue.”

Weiss stared at the Keeper plushie, unsure of how to react. “… Second: we both tried to talk to my father, but he refuses to believe you exist, or that the threat you’re making is very real.”

The Keeper sighed. “Ugh, yeah, I noticed! I broke into his office earlier last night, and he wouldn't believe I was actually there, just kept calling me a ‘stress-induced hallucination’ or something. I even pulled the hood of my cloak to show him my face, but he just threw a paperweight at me and thought I was one of your drones when I yelled ‘Ow!’”

Winter balked. “Father SURVIVED looking at your face…?”

“I didn't have the mask on at the time,” the Keeper said, pointing at the skull-like face of her plushie self. “It makes actually talking to people really hard, you know? Have you ever tried to talk to someone who just peed and popped himself? It's pretty much impossible, not to mention really, really gross...”

Both sisters just stared at the Keeper plushie.

“Anyway, could you keep trying to find some way to get him to stop all these expeditions? Even if we see just one rover heading over to the Valley, there's going to be--”

“CONSEQUENCES.”

The Keeper coughed and cleared her throat. “Sorry, had to use my Scary Voice for that... kind of an unspoken rule amongst Keepers…”

Silence.

“… Soooo… I'm just going to go now...” the Keeper started to place the plushie of herself back on the bed.

Winter yelped, the plushie stopped in mid-air. “Keep it!” she blubbered, tears streaming down her face, “so at least I know where you are when you come to visit!”

“You sure?” the Keeper asked, holding the plushie out to Winter, its ruby red eyes looming ominously over her, glinting from the sunlight.

Her eyes widened.

As a special, limited edition Keeper of the Grove plushie and a hysterically screaming Winter zipped through the halls of the manor, leaving a trail of spooked humans and malfunctioning drones in its wake, so hastened the Ruin of the family Schnee.
Auerelia F. du Pont, “MD and PhD, thank you!” was Manor Schnee's in-house psychologist. Her official title and her doctorate was in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, but her true passion was in Psychiatry.

Unfortunately, she was much better at catching potential problem employees and gems overlooked by hiring algorithms, than in actually helping people with their personal problems—something Weiss and Winter would have happily attested to, if they could.

So instead, the two sisters refused to take her on her numerous offers for personal counseling, only ever using her if they were forced to, or they needed a mental health professional to certify something, mostly because she was, as their mother warned them long ago, “astoundingly easy to fool and too happy to believe in her own skill, whether or not it was actually her doing.”

Jacques Schnee was well aware of these problems, but he kept her regardless. The reasons were numerous:

First, his employees were content with making the effort to see much more competent psychiatrists elsewhere, as it was less than a half-hour's trip from the manor to the many nocturnal practices in Candela, or telecommunicating with any other professional of their choice all over Avalon.

Two, she was really actually very competent at her job, second only to Jacques' wife who had personally overseen and interviewed the staff until her death, and had even found the ever-mysterious and enigmatic Tov.

And finally she was more than willing to stay with her current employer because of numerous debts and astoundingly bad financial decisions, of which she had relied far too much on extremely idealistic predictions of the success of her private counseling practices over the years.

“So why for the Shepherd's sake are you going to her?!” Weiss yelled. “Can't we find a different psychiatrist in Candela?”

(They were in a private room in the Manor's infirmary—a small, but well-funded-and-equipped hospital from all the cutting-edge technology, the quality of the Doc-Drones, and their stores of pharmaceuticals.)

“We could, but I've got a plan, little sister, and it can only work with du Pont!” Winter replied as she laid in a hospital bed, dressed in a paper gown, Eluna in her arms. “Father may be unwilling to listen to us, but we both know that he's willing to hear out the doctor at least once!”

“So what: you want her to tell father that, in her professional opinion, you've gone completely insane?”

“Quite the opposite, Weiss!” Winter chirped. “I'm going to use her to prove that every reaction I've had so far is perfectly reasonable and sane, considering our rather unique and extraordinary circumstances!

“When father learns than one of his—well, just trusted—associates vouches that I'm mentally sound and most likely telling the truth, and alongside all the evidence Tov has been gathering, then we have a strong case for stopping these expeditions back to the Valley!

“We're still going to be doomed, of course, but at least he isn't going to send more poor souls on a
one-way trip to the Aether!”

Weiss sighed. “I think this is a terrible idea, Winter. Even worse than the last time I came to her for advice!”

“Well we don't really have much choice, do we?” Winter replied. “Look on the bright side: if I get institutionalized, and the Keeper visits and/or slays me there, the whole of Candela is going to be forced to ask themselves, 'What's more likely? That the Keeper actually exists, or that an entire facility of mental health professionals has gone collectively insane?’

“That's how all the settlements and cities that fear the Keeper believe she exists, you know! After they saw with her with their own two eyes, murdering their fellow citizens in horrific, unspeakable ways they will never, ever forget!”

Winter put her Eluna plushie to her face, slowly rubbing it up and down on her skin, reminding herself of how soft, and warm, and fluffy she was.

Weiss frowned. “Winterrr...” she whined.

Winter put her Eluna plushie down and smiled. “You're just going to have to trust me on this, sis,” she said as she reached out and affectionately patted Weiss on the head. “You can borrow Eluna if you'd like,” she said as held the plushie out.

“No thanks, sis,” Weiss replied, waving her hand in the air. “You can keep her.”

Winter was undeterred. “It's fine, Weiss—and besides, I think you need her more than I do!”

Weiss grimaced. “No, seriously, you can keep her—I can smell the tears, snot, and despair now,” she said, pinching her nose.

Winter took her back and frowned. “Guess I'm going to have to be very liberal with the cleaning spray later...” she muttered.

Her bedside intercom piped up, the cheerful, feminine voice of the medical systems AI. “Ms. Winter Schnee, Dr. du Pont is ready to see you!” she hummed, small group of Doc-Drones coming in with a wheelchair soon after.

Winter let them help her into it. “Wish me luck, Weiss!” she cried as they wheeled her off.

Weiss watched her go, frowning, unable to shake the ill feeling in the pit of her stomach.

—

Du Pont's office was a warm and friendly place, with cream walls, vibrant plants, hand-knitted throw pillows, and holographic posters that changed depending on her latest client's personality, issues, and religious beliefs, if any.

Winter's were telling her there was no shame in seeking professional help, that her illness was not her fault, and giving her infographics about recent, incredible advances in mental health. She didn't much appreciate them or du Pont's attempt at a maternal, caring smile, but both the Queensguard and her father had trained her to fake it with the best of them.

“Winter!” du Pont trilled. “How good to see you again, even with the circumstances... oh, pardon me, can I call you Winter?”

Winter kept on smiling. “If you wish, I don't mind.”
She did, but du Pont never suspected a thing.

“Would you mind if we just skip the pleasantries and go straight to business?” Winter asked as she sat down on the easy chair opposite du Pont, Eluna nestled in her lap.

“Of course, of course!” du Pont replied. “And you can keep your little furry friend with you, too, if you'd like,” she continued as she pulled up her tablet.

Winter's smile got a little bit tighter. “Her name's Eluna, and thank you.”

Du Pont began to read her file. “So, as I understand it, you've been suffering from constant hallucinations about a... 'Keeper of the Grove'?”

Winter clutched Eluna a lot tighter. “Yes, I have been suffering from her, but she's not a hallucination. She's real—very, very real.”

Du Pont smiled politely. “From my research, she's a very popular mythological being, the personification of the dangerous wildlife within the Viridian Valley...”

Winter nodded. “That's what I thought, too! Until I met her in person, that is.”

“And when was that?”

Winter looked at the clock behind her head. “6 hours and 32 minutes ago! Forgive me if my estimates are wrong, I was unconscious for most of that time, what with having been shot by tranquilizer darts and all.”

Du Pont forced herself to keep smiling. “Yes, the guards were... rather extreme with their measures to, er, calm you down.”

“I'm not surprised,” Winter hummed, “Queensguard nominees are legally registered as lethal weapons upon reaching rank 2, what does that say about an inducted rank 7 like myself?” she chuckled.

Du Pont gulped. “S-So this... visit, by the Keeper was very recent, just before you were seen running through the halls, chasing a plushie of her in a... state of extreme distress, before you spent some time at the edge of the Eastern Border Wall crying a, err, very strongly worded parting message, towards the 'Keeper,' until the guards... intervened.”

Winter chuckled, now hugging her Eluna plushie as tightly as she could. “Well, that's certainly one way to put it!”

“Why were you chasing that toy, if I may ask...?”

“Wasn't it obvious? I was chasing her—the Keeper—out of the manor, because she didn't want to take the plushie of her.”

“... And why would you want her to do that?”

“So I would know where she is the next time she comes visiting!” Winter replied. “She was wearing a cloak of invisibility, you know. Ask my father and my sister, they've seen her too!” she paused. “Actually, I take that back, don't ask my father, but Weiss will back me up, guaranteed!”

Du Pont looked at her, back at her tablet, then spent a good minute furiously typing and making memos. Winter calmly released her death grip on Eluna, stroking her silky soft, faintly glowing mane.
to apologize for hugging her so hard.

“This is just a rough start, I'm still going to convince her I'm not crazy!” Winter thought.

“Oh, Sacred Stewards, it's even worse than I could have ever imagined…” du Pont thought.

Du Pont took a long drink of water from a bottle she had nearby. She put it down, and said, “I'm well aware that you have a… very strong phobia of the Keeper--”

“It's not exactly a phobia if it's a rational fear is it not?” Winter interrupted. “A phobia is an irrational fear of something or someone, regardless of the threat it actually poses to my safety!” Her eyes took on a haunted look. “And believe me, the Keeper is coming for me and my sister.

“Probably you, too, and everyone else in this manor, because she's like that. So sorry in advance for your possible premature death!”

Du Pont was starting to have serious second thoughts about her lifelong devotion to helping the mentally ill and suffering, no matter what.

“And why would you think that?” she asked.

“It's a common thread in the stories of the Keeper,” Winter hummed. “She really enjoys making very vivid warnings for all to keep out of the Viridian Valley. Not that that's ever stopped invaders completely, but oh well, you're always going to have extremely stubborn people determined to learn it the hard way!”

Du Pont nodded. “I noticed you had have a lot of articles, documentaries, and books regarding the Keeper in your Info-Grid browsing history, stretching back quite a long time—almost two decades, I believe?”

Winter nodded. “Yes. As the saying goes, 'know thy enemy.'”

“And how has that worked out for you?”

“Terribly!” Winter chirped. “If anything, every single new piece of information I receive about the Keeper only makes her even more terrifying—the most recent of which is that she's actually real!”

“And when did you learn that?”

“Two days ago, the night of Weiss' trip into the Grove and my subsequent return home! I learned it from Weiss; the Keeper had just visited her, you see, just after I left her room earlier.”

“Didn't you also order a large amount of alcohol that same night…?”

“Drank most of it, too!” Winter replied. “It didn't help much, but any relief is welcome when you discover that the face of your childhood nightmares is in fact real~!”

Du Pont stared at her, looked at the wealth of alarmed, hastily typed notes on the surface of her tablet. “When did this fear of the Keeper start, exactly?”

Winter got a far off look in her eyes.

“I was 6. Mom and myself were attending the annual Eve of the Ether fair in Candela, just the two of us, because father had chosen to stay in the office and work that evening, and Weiss hadn't even been conceived yet...”
Chapter 12

Though Candela was always grossly incandescent at night, it was never brighter than during the Eve of the Ether, the pinnacle of Avalon’s annual, realm-wide power surge; not even the incredibly festive, religiously celebrated, and much more profitable Feast of the Shepherd could match.

All manner of displays, hologram generators, and sound emitters littered every street corner, the source of the “hauntings” in storefronts, buildings, and residences, visited for that night by giggling and grinning “Shades” and other ghastly apparitions. Drones and salespeople hawked spooky specials and eerie events just for the night for the citizens and swarms of tourists trotting about in costumes, looking for candy and other delights, or victims for pranks and frights. The street lamps had been changed to shades of oranges, pinks, and greens in keeping with the season, bathing everything in an unnerving glow.

Far above them, the dirigibles were working overtime, spraying a cool fog over the city to add to the atmosphere and keep everyone cool.

Those who wore particularly elaborate costumes, and had been unable to afford or unwilling to install internal cooling systems were especially grateful, like a full-scale, 14-foot tall and several hundred-pounds heavy replica of the iconic Shepherd Suit MK II, constructed and piloted by one ambitious history buff and engineer who should have really sprung for better heat sinks.

Young Winter didn’t have the same problem as she pranced about dressed like the Holy Shepherd herself, Captain Piorina “Piper” Nikos. Her “leather” jacket wasn’t real, and her energy lance didn’t fire plasma-blasts, just harmless bursts of energy, but her hat was an actual, Starfarer Captain’s Cap, worn, aged, and still holding on even through the centuries, even if it did smell more that a little funny.

Nevermind that it was too large for her tiny head, that the visor kept falling over her eyes, and that she kept blindly running into things, lamp posts, and other people’s ankles because seeing required a free hand and holding her prop-rifle required both—she was Captain Piper, the Holy Shepherd, and she wouldn’t let being unable to see in front of her (or in any other direction, for that matter) slow her down!

“Winter, no!” her mother cried.

“Captain Piper” felt a shepherd’s crook catch her around her neck and gently pull her backwards, just in time to stop her from taking one more step off the curb and into the land-bound cars plying the streets.

“Mission Control to Captain Piper: we strongly advise you don’t go running off like that again,” Silsa “Snowy” Schnee said as she scooped her daughter up into her arm, the crook of her Sacred Steward costume tucked in the other. “We don’t know what might be lurking out there, and I don’t intend to have you finding out firsthand, my little snowbunny!” she scolded playfully.

Winter looked at her mother.

“Little more to the left,” Snowy said.

Winter looked at where her mother actually was. “But moooomm…!” she whined. “I’m Captain Piper! I go forth, into the Brave Unknown, even if it’s dark, scary, and/or dangerous!”

Snowy sighed. “You forgot she almost never left without her trusty crew if she could help it—just
“Don’t go running off like that again, okay?”

“But there could be treasure, people who need my help, or even a whole new Avalon out there, waiting to be found!”

“How about TWO new plushies if you stay in orbit around me, Captain?”

Winter paused. “Treasure, people who need my help, and those other Avalons can wait!” she cried triumphantly.

“That’s more like it, Captain,” Snowy chuckled, before she pulled Winter’s hat off and nuzzled her on the cheek. She yelped and giggled, before she nuzzled her right on back.

Snowy moved them to someplace less crowded and less laden with tempting distractions and attractive storefronts; she found a bench to sit on, and rested their props beside them. “So, Captain,” she asked as she hoisted Winter onto her lap, “where do we set sail to next?”

Winter pulled out her mother’s comm-crystal, a 3D hologram of Candela’s commercial district popping out before their eyes. She hummed and put her hand on her chin, trying to figure out where they hadn’t gone to yet that evening. Snowy gently lifted her cap up above the level of her eyes, and she began to actually read and decide on the points of interest on the map.

“Oooh, oooh!” Winter bounced in her lap. “Can we go to the Candy Kingdom?”

Snowy glared at her. “Captain, you both know we definitely won’t be able to control ourselves in there; we might be able to resist for a while, but it’s all over once we either of us get a Flicker Stick in our mouths.”

“The Haunted Halls?”

Snowy snorted and rolled her eyes. “You’ve seen it once, you’ve seen it all, and it wasn’t even that good in the first place! They won’t even let you stay if you want to make fun of how bad all the effects are! Horror and comedy both live and die by timing, people!”

Winter looked at the model once more, squinting her eyes in serious thought, until she realized that made it impossible to read the text. As she opened her eyes again, she found the answer right in front of her.

“I got it! I got it!” she said, bouncing and pointing excitedly at a theater in the hologram.

Snowy gently pulled Winter’s hand back to stop the info-box from popping up then resetting over and over again. “The Shadow Friends Theater Company presents: ‘Into The Woods: The Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove’ at the Golden Days Theater...” she read.

“You love history and culture, right?” Winter chirped.

“Yes, I do,” Snowy replied, “which is exactly why I’m having second thoughts about this...”

“What’s wrong?” Winter asked. “Is it because it’s the Keeper? She’s not even that creepy!” she said.

As if on cue, a whole group of Keepers of the Grove came walking past; it was hard to feel intimidated in the slightest when their costumes were clearly mass-produced from barely modified templates, and more so that there was a Fat Keeper, a Tall Keeper, a Short Keeper, and a Really-Didn’t-Want-To-Do-This-But-Had-No-Choice-In-The-Matter Keeper all walking right next to each other.
“She will be if the Shadow Friends make good on their promise to be ‘loyal to the legend’...” Snowy muttered as she looked at the group in a mixture of disappointment and annoyance.

Winter turned off the hologram and faced her mother. “Come on, mom!” she whined. “Can we go see it, pleeasssee...?”

Even with the antique cap obscuring her face, Snowy could still feel those adorable eyes looking right into her own, melting her heart and her resolve—if anything, it probably made them even more effective than usual.

She sighed, defeated. “Are you sure you can handle it? It’ll probably be SUPER scary.”

Winter puffed her cheeks up. “Captain Piper is not scared of anything! She’s the bravest human who ever lived!”

Snowy smiled and tilted her cap up so she could actually look her in the eyes. “Bravery is being scared, but going on anyway, Winter.”

“Whatever!” Winter replied. “So can we go there? Please?”

Snowy sighed playfully. “Well, you ARE the Captain, and I am only your humble Steward...”

Winter beamed. “Yay!” she wrapped her arms around her mother, her hat falling off her head. “I love you, mom!”

Snowy snatched it out of the air with one hand, and hugged her back with the other. “I love you too, Winter...” she hummed as she put the cap back on.

As streaming and home entertainment systems became more and more advanced, cheap, and readily available to the population, lovers of theater had lamented and spokespeople of AV equipment companies had bragged about how one day, the age of people wanting to take the effort to dress up and leave home to go watch a play or a movie would end.

Everyone—from the average audience member to the most discerning critics—would be enjoying productions and shows broadcasted live to their HoloVision receivers in their homes, or accessed through their comm-crystals and tablets, anywhere and anytime they wanted, at the fraction of the cost and with infinitely more convenience.

And just like with the Plushie Palace, the theaters, auditoriums, and stages did not all die out, they simply adapted and gave their audiences what their technomagical counterparts could not.

The interior of the Golden Days Theater harked back to times long, long past, with authentic hardwood walls, red velvet carpeting, and soft, warm “gas lamps” on the walls supported by brass sconces.

Suited men and finely dressed women greeted them and took their coats, sashes, crooks, guns, and hats from them; Winter wasn’t too happy about losing any part of her costume, to say the least, but the employee in charge of the coat closet assured her that their antique feel didn’t extend to the security of their patrons’ belongings.

“See?” he said as Winter’s antique cap was surrounded by a protective bubble, before being carefully hanged on a stand with many others.

Winter grumbled, still upset at her new favourite hat being treated that way, but Snowy just thanked
them and coaxed her further in.

A tall, gaunt man wearing a crooked top-hat, a black jacket with coattails, and long, white gloves greeted them. “Good evening, madams,” he said as he bowed politely, pulling his hat off his head and pressing it to his chest. “My name is Dino, and on behalf of the Shadow Friends Theater Company, I welcome you, to what we hope will be a tantalizing, enchanting, and terrifying evening with us, as we bring back from the mists of time and right before your eyes the art of Shadow Puppetry, to the Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove...” he hummed in a low, melodious voice.

“‘For legal purposes, we must tell you that children and their parents sit separately, with the young ones seated just before the stage, the adults some distance back, but still within sight of your dear ones; this is to allow space for us to let our productions truly...” he smiled “… jump at you.”

“I don’t like the sound of that one bit,” Snowy muttered.

“What do you mean?” Winter asked, fascinated.

Dino dropped the theatrics in his voice. “A costumed member of our company will prowl either section at the climax of our play, and give one member of the audience a scare. Nothing violent, sudden, or particularly mean-spirited mind you--” he smiled again, returning to his old voice “--but when you are under the spell of theater, it can give you quite the fright.”

Snowy frowned. “Winter, I don’t think we should do this...”

Dino hummed. “Your mother makes a fair point, little one; the Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove is not for the faint of heart, nor for children under the age of 5, especially those not accompanied by their parents.”

“Then it’s a good thing I’m six now, and my mom’s here with me!” Winter chirped, smiling proudly.

“Winterrrr...” Snowy started.

Dino walked over to her and knelt down, bringing himself down to just a little above her head. “Not afraid to be scared?” he asked.

Winter shook her head. “I’m brave—like Captain Piper! I go on even if I’m scared!”

Dino smiled, and chuckled. “And where would we all be, had our Holy Shepherd not been so? But still, the decision rests with your mother,” he said as he stood back up to his full height.

He turned back to Snowy, and bowed slightly. “Madam..?”

She sighed heavily. “She is my Captain for tonight...” she said, smiling.

Dino put his hands together. “Wonderful. Now, I’m sure you are aware of the fees we must charge, to keep this ancient art alive...?” he asked.

Snowy laughed and pulled out one of her credit cards. “That won’t be a problem at all, believe you me...”

Dino smiled. “Wonderful.”

“I thought I was going to be just fine, so long as mom was there with me,” Winter said, shaking hands clutching Eluna tightly. “I was wrong.
“So VERY wrong...”
Chapter 13

The Golden Days had a proscenium stage, a hardwood semi-circle on the far end of the auditorium, framed by luxurious red curtains and with three columns of plush velvet seats radiating out from it. As Dino had said, the adults took the proper seats while the children were just before the screen, on a semi-circle of fluffy pillows and plush rugs, perfect for sitting down on, or laying on your stomach with your head propped up by your elbows.

There was no small amount of dismay from both parties—children and adults who wanted to be right next to each other, or who would have rather been as close to or as far-away from the show as possible—but the ushers quickly quelled them.

Winter happily plopped down right down in the center of the kid's seating section, on a cushion she had all to herself. The other kids didn't mind and respected the rule of “First!”, or weren't nearly as enthusiastic about the show as she was.

“Did your folks drag you here too?” asked a fairy princess who sat down beside her.

“Nope!” Winter replied happily. “I wanted to be here, actually.”

The fairy wrinkled her nose. “Ew. Why would you want anything to do with all this old stuff?”

Winter was unfazed. “Because the present rests on the back of the past, it is our duty to honour and remember those that have brought us so high,” she quoted from Valentino, one of the first Sacred Stewards.

The fairy rolled her eyes. “Whatever! New stuff is always better, anyway! I bet your parents don't buy you the new ayGems right when they come out...”

“Didn't they pull out the latest models because they exploded when people used them too much, so they paid and begged everyone to give them back and get one of the earlier models instead?” Winter asked, curious and without a hint of malice.

The fairy turned red. “They fixed that problem already!”

Dino sauntered in and gently shushed them, putting a gloved finger to his lips and eyeing the particularly restless of the kids; his fellow thespians handled the adults. “Quiet now, quiet now, dear audience! Turn off your technology, seal those lips, and turn your eyes now to the stage, for the Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove is beginning right about...”

The lights gently dimmed, pair by pair, until the whole theater was plunged in darkness. The screen lit up, actual paper with a soft, orange light behind it.

“Now...~” Dino said, as he calmly waltzed off to the side and began to narrate.

“Our Terrible Tale begins in a lush valley not too far from here, a grove of green, nestled between two tall mountains: the Viridian Valley.”

The puppets for the Valley popped up in bits and pieces, first the mountains, then the grass, and finally several of its taller trees.

“The Valley was a special place, one reason being where it was: in the middle of a vast wasteland filled with nothing but rocks, rocks, and even more rocks.”
The rest of the area popped up—spiky, cruel looking spires and vast, empty plains filled with just rocks, rocks, and even more rocks.

“The place had no name, for you see, it was hard for people to stay there long enough to give it one—and before you ask, this was LONG before Candela was even a vision in the founders’ dreams...”

Settlers with horses and carts began to wander in, trotting merrily through the plains.

“For half the year, the Stars vent their Fury on this patch of land, scorching it and everything unfortunate enough to be there when they do.”

The settlers, their horses, and their carts all burst into flames, tiny screaming and panicking as they ran around with their flailing arms in the air.

“And for the other half, when the Stars had calmed down, they apologize, and bring in rains to soothe the land...”

Clouds appeared, and it started “raining.” The settlers and their horses cheered and calmed down as they were all put out.

“... Quite a lot of rain...”

The rain grew harder. The settlers and horses began to turn to each other, uneasy and worried.

“... So much that the whole land Floods.”

The settlers and their horses began to float upwards, slowly and gently spinning around like they were underwater and being nudged by invisible currents; from their carts, barrels and boxes floated up to the surface, while the lighter of the vehicles bobbed on the surface like boats.

“So the people left, returned to their homes, or found other lands, for they simply decided this particular patch of wilderness was NOT worth it.”

The settlers climbed aboard on whatever floated, fished out their horses, and paddled their way off-screen, back from whence they came.

“But still, they wondered: what lay in that Valley just on the horizon? What riches were hidden between those two peaks? What sort of life could they make, in a place so wondrous in a land so awful?”

The Valley and the mountains disappeared, replaced by silhouettes of fantastic animals, of mysterious and tempting treasures, of a vibrant, thriving city built between tall, ancient trees.

“Time passed, other lands were found, and most people were content for it to forever remain a mystery... however, three adventurous souls were not.”

Three puppets sprung up, two men, and one woman.

“These were Gus, Abner, and Tessa.”

Gus raised and flexed his arms, Abner tipped his top hat to the audience, Tessa waved demurely.

“Gus was a hunter, proud and strong, living to provide the biggest animals at the feasts, and take the heads of the most ferocious of beasts.

“Abner was an inventor, with big ideas, big dreams, even bigger debts, with what he had in smarts
he sorely lacked in self-control.

“Tessa was just a farmer’s daughter, from a little tiny settlement, who dreamed of more to life than the dreary days of tilling the soil, feeding the animals, and maintaining their tools and their wells, her reward a full belly and a place to sleep at night.

“So these three and a whole host of other like-minded souls banded together, and made the treacherous trip.”

The three protagonists and a small army of figures all boarded carriages—motorized, not horse-drawn this time. The caravan began to chug across the screen, the suns and the moons passing arcing over them screen numerous times, rainclouds and perilous winds harassing them all the way.

“The journey was long, perilous, and at times, tedious, especially because they could only travel to the Valley itself just after the Fury ends and shortly before the Flood begins—a week, at most, and a few days, at the least.

“But driven by glory, dreams, and debtors waiting to take everything Abner had and then some, they made it to the Valley.”

The caravan stopped, and the puppets began to cheer and unload their equipment.

“Triumphant but tired, the adventurers set camp at the foot of the Valley and within the shade of the mountains; as they drifted off to sleep, they dreamed of what lay beyond those tall trees, what strange plants, weird creatures, and great discoveries awaited them inside!

“… Little did they know someone was watching them right back…”

A familiar image popped up, the Keeper of the Grove. She had been exaggerated greatly, her skull-like head a size too large for the rest of her body, her mouth full of sharp fangs operated by three separate strings for the size, her scythe’s blade waving up and down as if it would come flying off at any moment.

Winter had laughed, then, young and innocent.

“… The Keeper of the Grove.

“She wasn’t known by that name then—in fact, no one even knew she existed, not yet. But all that would change soon…

“Gus was the first to venture forth into the Valley, to hunt the animals and gather food for his companions; the Valley held creatures none of them had ever seen before, had ever dreamed could exist, and had never known the likes of humans like them.”

Gus and his hunters marched single file, armed and ready, until they met what looked like a giant feline of some sort.

They readied their weapons.

“… Unfortunately for them, this ALSO meant that they did not know what they were capable of, how to fight them, and more importantly, that there were to be feared, not feasted upon.”

One by one, his hunting party dwindled, pounced on by giant canines and felines, taken from above by tentacled creatures, swallowed whole by massive toads, the whole nightmarish business represented by the steadily dwindling number of puppets running back and forth across the screen, to
some new horror at either end.

“Who once were many, were now down to Gus and three others; injured, starved, and with repeatedly soiled underwear, he and his fellow hunters sought shelter in a cave. Gus, being the bravest, the strongest, and the fiercest of them all took the duty of guarding them, standing armed and ready at the mouth.

“Once the others were asleep, a visitor came forth.”

The Gus puppet raised his weapon warily, both the Keeper and her scythe raised their arms and blades in surrender.

“'Be not wary, strange one,' the Keeper said, 'I only wish to offer you a deal: do you wish to leave this Valley alive?'”

Gus lowered his weapon.

“'It seemed like an obvious question with an even more obvious answer. But Gus had not become the great hunter he was without developing a healthy sense of skepticism.'”

“'What's the catch?' he asked.

“'No catch!' the Keeper replied, 'I will lead you all out of here myself—the creatures in this grove fear my scythe, respect their keeper.'

“Without much choice, Gus was about to agree. However, the Keeper spoke once more:

“'Unless… you want to fight your way out of the Valley yourself?'

“Gus paused, curious.

“'As you may see, great weapons, my people have forged—greater than the beasts that lurk in this Valley, greater than anything your kind has, greater than anything they could ever make...'

“Gus frowned. 'Why should I believe you?'

“'And so the Keeper produced a sword, a ruby red blade like nothing he had ever seen before. 'Why don't you try it out for yourself?'

“'And so he did.

“'With the aid of the Keeper, she summoned beast after beast to the mouth of the cave, each more ferocious than the last, each slain by Gus' hand with the help of his new sword.'

The beasts from earlier returned, one after the other; Gus merely waved his sword through the air and each creature was sliced neatly in half or in neatly sectioned parts, some flying past his head or every which way from the momentum of their pounces and charges, killed so fast they hadn’t realized they were already dead.

“'He had never seen a blade cut its foes down so swiftly, felt such power in his hands, strength that only seemed to grow with each new beast he slew! Woken up from the commotion going on at the mouth of the cave, and fearing for their lives, his companions fled deeper into the cavern—

“'--So deep they were unable to hear Gus nor the Keeper, witness what transpired next.

“'This sword is amazing!' Gus cried, having barely broken a sweat as he gathered himself new
trophies with but a flick of his wrist and a light touch of his sword on the beast's neck. 'I must have it!'

"The Keeper smiled. 'And so you shall! If you will pay my price.'

"Gus turned to her, eyes gleaming. 'Tell me.'

"The lives of all your other companions—three in this cave, and many more at the foot of the Valley, I believe?' the Keeper replied.

"Gus thought about it—for all of a second, before he ventured into the cave, and fetched his companions. All the while, the Keeper waited just above the mouth of the cave, hidden from sight.

"His companions were scared and concerned as he arrived with his strange, new blade, but as they ventured back out to the entrance and saw the remains of Gus' great battle, they were enamored and impressed!

"Never had they seen a blade so swift, so powerful, so shiny before, either! They asked him, begged him, cajoled him into showing them a taste of its power!

"And so he did."

Gus swung his cursed sword.

The first hunter's arm fell off.

The second hunter's head fell off from their neck.

The third hunter's legs fell off from the rest of their body, leaving them a floating torso in mid-air.

Then, all three of them fell down, dead.

"Gus grinned, he cooned, he giggled; never before had he wielded so lethal a weapon, one that could bring victory so easily, one that would make him the most famous, the most feared, the most powerful human in existence!

"He turned around, ready to face the Keeper, slay her, and take her head, for surely this weapon was no match for her?"

Gus raised his sword, execution style. The Keeper casually swung her scythe.

The sword and Gus separated into two neat halves, which then slowly fell apart.

"… It was, though not in the way Gus had thought."

The scene returned to the camp, now less a significant amount of puppets.

"As the hours grew with no sight nor sound of Gus with and his party, the rest of the travelers grew hungry and anxious; no stranger to risking everything on dubious pursuits, Abner went next..."
Chapter 14

“The Viridian Valley held many wonders for a scientist like Abner—even if he didn't understand the implications, the potential uses, the great things he could invent with such new and exotic materials and specimens, just being able to bring them back to the rest of Avalon would heartily pay off all his debts, if not more!”

Abner waltzed through the grove, stopping and taking in the alien plants, strange critters, and weird wonders that lay within.

“… Of course, all of that came with the assumption that he would be able to make it out alive.”

The same creatures that had terrorized and/or eaten the hunters returned.

“Though he was no warrior like Gus or his party, Abner fared much better, dodging and hiding from every beast that came for him, thanks to his many years of experience with a similarly determined, ruthless, and cunning foe:

“The Valentinian Debt Collector.”

“Unlike them, however, these hunters tired and went after much easier prey to satisfy their hunger, and so he found himself at a relatively peaceful clearing thriving with edible plants.”

The beasts gave up and disappeared, Abner continued running back and forth across the stage with his hands flailing in the air until tripped and fell headfirst into a field of flowers and vegetables.

“Tired, scared, and starving, Abner did not think twice about feasting on whatever he could reasonably determine was edible. Lucky for him, the food was delicious, and none of it poisonous to other creatures--”

“--Though the Keeper added that she wasn't entirely sure if that extended to humans.”

The Keeper suddenly appeared behind him. Abner screamed and ran with his hands pointing skyward once more, foraged plants flying in his wake.

“'Stop!' the Keeper cried. 'You have others starving at your camp, do you not?'

“Most would have kept running, but Abner was no stranger to making friends in unusual places and even more unusual circumstances. He stopped, turned around, and replied, 'Y-Yes—why do you ask?'”

“'Take these plants,' she said, 'they shall satisfy your hunger. Keep some for the trip home, and guard all the seeds, then see what will grow where you come from; if nothing else, your kind will pay for such rare things, will they not?'

“Abner had to admit she had a point. Should even one of these new, exotic plants thrive outside of the Valley, he would be able to sell them with ease, possibly enough to wipe away his debts completely, if not more than that. He began to gather them in his arms, as many as he thought he could safely return with.

Abner began to leave with his haul.

“'Stop!' the Keeper cried once more.”
Abner threw his foraged berries and vegetables into the air once more.

“Do you wish to have something more valuable to return to your people? Say, the bark that my scythe is made of? It is strong as steel, yet lighter than air.”

The Keeper puppet began to make impressive, acrobatic tricks with her scythe, Abner watched, transfixed.

“As a scientist, Abner was more than intrigued; he followed her, deeper into the Valley, to a grove of strange trees he had never heard before, whose name he could not pronounce.”

The clearing of plants disappeared, turned into a thicket of trees full of sharp, pointed branches.

“These trees are what my people make their weapons of,” the Keeper explained, “we leave them to grow here in the wild, letting the weak ones die out, tending to the strongest of them all, until we hew them into even stronger weapons.”

“I shall call them Ironbark,’ Abner said, marveling at them, wondering what new things he could make from such miraculous material! ‘Oh, if only I could find some way to bring some home for study!’

He pawed at the Ironbark before he flinched, as if he cut himself.

“The Keeper handed him some seeds. ‘Plant them in soil near mountains and rock, where the sun shines brightest, and water, they need little of. Keep the strongest ones, prune the tiniest branches and let the largest ones grow till they bear fruit, and more Ironbark you will have,’ she said.

“Abner grinned. Not only had he made the discovery of a lifetime, here he had someone willing to share all of its secrets so he need not suss them out himself! Now he was sure he would not just wipe away his debt, he would thrive, and become a very rich man indeed.

“He stuffed his pockets to bursting with seeds, dropping the food he no longer had need for—the others could starve for all he could care, he would make penance by paying their families some of the generous sums he was sure to gain from his future endeavours.”

Abner turned around to leave once more.

“Stop!” the Keeper cried a third time.”

Having learned the other two times, Abner did not flinch, and carefully turned around to face her.

“Do you wish to be free of ills, of hunger, of aches for the rest of your life?” the Keeper asked.

“Do I ever?! Abner replied. ‘Please, take me to whatever it is!’

“And so the Keeper took him out of the thicket of Ironbark, to a lake that ran crystal clear and glowed with its own light.”

The scene changed to that of a “waterfall” with “waves” gently moving about on its surface.

“Is this…?” Abner asked.

“A fountain of eternal youth?” the Keeper replied. ‘Yes, yes it is—keep drinking from these waters, and you shall live for evermore, unable to die of anything but blade or unnatural fate.’

“Abner did not hesitate.”
He jumped into the lake, began to swim in it, even dove down and spat out a fountain of the miraculous waters.

"This is amazing!" Abner cried as he climbed out of the water. 'I shall fill all our flasks and barrels with this wondrous water—there is no price my people will not pay for eternal life!'

The Keeper laughed, her grotesque jaws yawning up and down.

"Not even their freedom?" the Keeper asked.

"Abner paled. 'What do you mean...?'

"Those who drink of this water must continue to partake of it; three days without a drop, they drop dead."

Abner stared at the Keeper; the puppet's mouth could not move, but you could tell he was slack-jawed.

"I DID say you would be unable to die of anything but blade or unnatural fate! Now, shall I show you to your new home? It's quite close by here, fret not~'

"And so Abner went off with his new Keeper, to live the rest of his eternal life a slave to her people."

The scenery changed, back to the entrance of the Valley, with all the figures huddled around the carriage and Tessa sitting mournfully at the top of it.

"Back at camp, hunger grew as did fear, hope dwindled as did their numbers; the ill-fated party was out of fuel, out of food, and out of choices. Desperate, they gathered whatever supplies and weapons Gus' hunting party and Abner had left them, and made trekked inside.

"They were no hunters, they were no artful dodgers of debt collectors, they were adventurous spirits, and the other children of farmers and other commoners; the poor souls were barely a mile in when their meager party quickly dwindled to just one."

Tessa lead the group of ragtag individuals, armed with all of two guns, shovels, and tools for repairing the carriage. As they carefully made their way inside, everyone from the very back up until the poor sap just before Tessa were taken away by giant birds, hooked off by snakes and tentacles, disappeared into the ground by grasping claws, and even one was accidentally shot by the person in front of them before they, too, were taken.

"It would have been the end of their tragic tale, and this sordid story you would not be hearing now, if the Keeper did not take pity on her.

"For as humans were as new to the Keeper as she was to them, she drove back the beasts, gave her food and non-cursed water, even helped her refuel a carriage, and sent her a parting gift—the same wonders and treasures she had gifted Gus and Abner, with warnings of their potential downfalls.

"Tessa was thankful, glad to have met this kind stranger in this stranger land; so grateful was she, that she invited the Keeper to ride with her, back to her home—terrifying as she was to look at and be in the presence of, she had saved her."

"So Tessa and the Keeper set off, out of the Viridian Valley and back to her village, where they told this tale to the people there."
A village popped up. Farmers and the other residents welcomed Tessa with open arms, screamed and raised their pitchforks and rakes as the Keeper stepped out. They relaxed as Tessa explained and more so, when they showed the fantastic gifts the Keeper had given them.

“A feast was held! Thanks were given for this new, strange friend of them all! The humans all slept peacefully, drunk, fed, and dreaming of what good fortunes awaited their futures…”

“… And now that the Keeper knew where these 'humans' lived, she killed them all where they slept, left this tale in a scroll for the poor souls that found them in the coming days, this message written at the very end:

KEEP OUT OF THE VIRIDIAN VALLEY

“So ends The Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove…” Dino hummed as the puppets disappeared, just the warm glow of the lamp at the back of the screen in the still-dark theater. “Take its lessons to heart, dear audience:

“Fear the corruption that comes with great power!

“Temper your greed, your desire, so that they may not be your undoing!

“Be careful who you trust, especially those that come to you in times of great distress!

“But above all, stay away from the Viridian Valley, leave its many mysteries unsolved forevermore, do not attempt to find out these terrible things for yourself…

“… For if you do, you might find yourself visited by a most terrible guest.”

Winter felt two bony hands gently place themselves on her shoulders.

Up until that point, she had been enjoying the play greatly, enchanted by Dino's story telling; intrigued by the new details she was learning about the Keeper after all the adaptations made her so much less creepy, cunning, and cruel; even laughing at the some of the attempts at extremely dark comedy.

She had felt a chill run down her spine after he growled the Keeper's warning, but it had disappeared just as quickly, like every other time she had watched something scary.

Now, however, as the bony fingers squeezed her lightly; warm, moist breath caressed the back of her neck; their owner made it very clear to Winter's senses that she was right behind her, the chill returned and spread through her whole body, freezing every last bone till she was completely unable to move.

The jumpier kids beside her screamed and panicked. “It's the Keeper!” they yelled as they scrambled. The braver or the fearless among them turned around in interest, surprised by the sudden appearance of the costumed thespian behind Winter, but nothing more.

“Turn around, kid!” someone from the adult's section called out.

“Winter--!” Snowy started, but the other adults quickly drowned her out, chanting for her to turn around, look back, the Keeper was waiting.

Winter refused, her breathing growing shallow, her heart pounding in her chest, her skin breaking in a cold sweat.
“If I don't turn around, I won't see her, if I don't see her, she doesn't exists...” she chanted over and over again in her head.

It worked for the ones in HoloVision, when her mother turned off the receiver and it turned into a blank slate once more. It worked for the ones on the Grid, when she closed the video and she saw her wallpaper, latest plushie she was gunning for on her next visit to the Palace. It worked for the ones in the books, where she simply had to pull it shut, or switch to another work on her tablet or her comm-crystal.

If you didn't see the monsters, they stopped existing—simple as that.

The Keeper of the Grove pulled her bony fingers back, her hot breath on her neck disappeared.

Winter gasped, taking her first breath for what seemed like forever.

Just as she was about to take a second breath, one to laugh triumphantly with, the Keeper leaned over her, using her height to look her in the face.

Winter stared at that upside-down, skull-like head, its ruby red eyes glowing in the darkness.

“Boo~!”
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Warning: mentions of suicidal behaviour in this chapter, and Jacques being a selfish, manipulative bastard.

Winter was curled up in a ball on her easy chair, her head resting on one of the arms, and her Eluna plushie pressed right up to her face as she sobbed and shook from fear.

Du Pont didn't know what was more disturbing: the fact that she was alone with an incredibly dangerous human weapon in an extremely vulnerable, unpredictable state, or that something or someone could be so traumatic as to reduce one of the infamously unflappable Queensguard into a weeping wreck.

She offered Winter a box of tissues, before she gingerly, carefully left it on the opposite arm of her easy chair, taking great pains not to do any sudden movements. She spent a good long time trying to review her notes, do some refresher research on possible diagnoses, or think and reflect on everything that had just happened, but the sound of Winter's muffled cries of absolute despair made it exceptionally difficult.

Eventually, Winter sat back up properly, and wiped her eyes and nose off on her Eluna plushie. “It was one of the worst nights of my life,” she blubbered, before she blew her nose on her toy. “Mom picked me up and didn't let go, Tony hacked his speed limiters to drive us to the Plushie Palace, then Granny Scar let me and her sleep in one of the beds in the employee's lounge with every single plushie they could spare.

“Mom bought all of them afterward; father was pissed, but she didn't care.”

Du Pont hummed. “What was the time after the incident like, if you would mind telling me?”

“Flinching and screaming at every last sound or creepy noise,” Winter muttered. “Didn't go back to school for a while. Only fell asleep because I was so tired I couldn't keep my eyes open, and I had all of my plushies and mom with me in bed.

“So, you know, most everything I've been doing these past two days, except substitute mom with Weiss, I only got most of my plushies back, and now I have Eluna!”

She held up the now soggy, gross, and astoundingly absorbent plushie.

Du Pont nodded slowly. “So, these plushies, they are very important to you?”

Winter nodded. “Super. Mom bought me my first one when I was three; she was leaving on one of her personal trips, and I didn't want her to leave. So she took me to the Palace, bought me Idun—she's an arctic fox, mom's favourite animal—and told me I could hug her and hold her and pretend it was her, then and whenever she wasn't around...”

Du Pont's eyebrows rose as she made a note of that. “I noticed that you began to slowly rid yourself of your original collection sometime after your mother passed away...”
Winter sighed. “Yeah. I was in denial for a few weeks, kept telling myself she's going to come home one of these days, and when she did, we'd go to the Plushie Palace together, like we always had…”

“And this is why you have only recently returned?”

Winter nodded. “The plushies, the Palace, the people there—they reminded me too much of her, everything we had together, everything we couldn't do anymore, I couldn't take it. And at the time, father convinced me that the best way to cope was to rid myself of everything that did that.”

Du Pont frowned; Jacques hadn't seen her for therapy or even spoken to her about his wife's passing, but those who had been working before and after the Mses. Schnee and her unborn son's passing had definitely noticed the sudden lack of portraits of her, and the resignation or the firing of her favourite employees like her favourite butler, Mr. Sieben.

“But here's the Keeper coming back to haunt me, and showing me how wrong I was!” Winter chirped. “Funny how we often don't try to solve massive problems until something catastrophic happens and we can't ignore it any longer.”

“Change is inherently terrifying, even if it is positive,” du Pont said. “But back on topic: I hope you don't mind, but I had a program calculate the estimated cost of all of the purchases you recently made at the Plushie Palace, based on the transport logs.

“It came to… an extremely large sum of Uroch, Winter.”

Winter nodded. “It was almost all of my life savings, actually. Good thing I won't be needing it anytime soon!”

“And why is that?” du Pont asked uneasily.

Winter balked. “Didn't I already tell you? The Keeper's coming for me and my sister!” Her voice suddenly dropped to a low, ominous tone. “No one survives the Keeper. She reaps you with her scythe, she terrorizes you until you go insane and do the deed yourself, or on very rare occasions she steals you away and forces you into slavery, usually till the end of your life, sometimes for forever.”

“Such as the characters in the story?” du Pont asked. “Winter, these are fictional--”

“They're real,” Winter muttered. “*All* of them. I did the research, verified and made sure there were historical records backing up the legends. The names may have been changed to make them catchier, they were actually hundreds of years apart from each other, events were changed and melded with other stories, but they were all real.

“Guillermo Aguirre: 200 or so years ago, went off on a quest to hunt down the Keeper of the Grove, prove she *did* exist, or that she was just one exceptionally lethal mutant reindeer and her descendants.

“From what they could piece together of the two survivors' stories, he found a weapon of some sort and began slaughtering everything in sight—beast or his fellow man. They couldn't give many more details, presumably from trauma-induced memory loss, dehydration, and starvation from when they fled the Valley.

“Abner Jordan Ignatius: 547 years ago, on hastily borrowed loans, stolen goods, and money from confidence scams, hired an expedition into the Viridian Valley with the intent to either hide out from his debtors where they wouldn't want to chase him, or to find something to bring back and wipe away his massive debts.

“The man was in fact a genius, potentially one of the greatest minds Lumania had ever had, if not for
his weakness for alcohol, leisure, and both women or men as the mood struck him. No one quite knows how he became associated with a cursed fountain of youth, because unlike Guillermo, none of his party made it back.

“And finally, 'Comtessa,' the earliest known record of the Keeper of the Grove, about 100 years after the Shepherd brought the First Settlers here to Avalon—the Info-Grid still hadn't stretched that far, and the records they did have were bad, corrupted, or lost entirely. Actually the daughter of a rich land baron who made his fortune going out into the dangerous wilds, attempting to find natural resources to exploit them to hell before anyone else could, turned into a farmer's daughter from a small town to make her more sympathetic to audiences...”

She suddenly fell silent, staring off into the distance with an expression of sudden realization, followed by ever growing terror.

“Winter…?” du Pont asked. “Are you okay…?”

Her breathing suddenly got shallow. Her whole body began to shake violently.

“I'm fine…” she squeaked as her world began to spin, her fingers tightened on Eluna. “Just... just...”

“... It was one of the most *vicious* panic attacks I had ever seen,” du Pont mumbled as she sat across Jacques' desk. “Thank goodness I made sure to keep sedatives in my office, I don't even want to *think* of how she would have fared if she had to ride it out for its full duration.”

Jacques frowned and put his hands to his temples, trying to stave off yet another headache. “So this phobia of hers is even worse than I feared...”

Du Pont nodded. “It's very clear to me that almost losing Weiss in that expedition has brought back decades worth of unsolved issues from the traumatic loss of their mother and their unborn brother—my apologies for bringing it up, Mr. Schnee, but it's really the best explanation for her recent episodes. With the connection between the Valley and this 'Keeper of the Grove,' a childhood phobia from a traumatic experience *strongly* associated her mother, and her experiences in the Queensguard...”

“... Well, it's all just been too much, all at once.”

“How bad is this situation, exactly?” Jacques asked carefully.

Du Pont paused. “Mr. Schnee... I fear she might be suicidal. She's exhibiting so many of the warning signs: suddenly abandoning her responsibilities in the Queensguard; a blatant disregard for the future with her spending nearly all of her money on those plushies; regressing to behaviours from an earlier, happier stage in her life just before the tragedy—not to mention how sure she is that this 'Keeper' is going to slay her *and* her sister in the near future...”

Jacques looked up at her, alarmed, before he lowered his head and thumped his fist on his desk. “Oh no...”

“Oh no' doesn't begin to describe the half of it!” du Pont cried. “Mr. Schnee, Winter requires an intervention of the *highest* caliber, as soon as possible—right this moment, in fact!”

Jacques nodded his head gravely. “Rest assured, Dr. du Pont, I will have the best in psychiatric care flown in as soon as possible, and pour every resource I have at my disposal in guarding Winter and making sure she does not do anything *drastic.*”
Du Pont blinked. “Mr. Schnee, forgive me, but I don't think you grasp the full gravity of this situation: Winter requires far, far, far more than anything you can provide. She needs an urgent stay at Candela General, where they will have both the manpower, the expertise, and the equipment to deal with her properly, not to mention a change of scenery certainly wouldn't hurt—”

“Is it because of the recent rash of absences because of these invasions and security breaches, this terrorizing of my house?” Jacques interrupted.

“Exactly!” du Pont said. “Whether or not you believe this 'Keeper of the Grove' is real, you can't deny that this place isn't exactly the safest in all of Avalon as of the moment, let alone for someone with such rapidly decaying mental health as your daughter!”

“And I agree, Dr. du Pont!” Jacques shot back, his voice growing louder. “But I can assure you, I can provide my daughters everything they could want or need right here in their home!”

Du Pont was about to fire a heated reply, before realization hit her. Her lip curled in disgust. “This is about the media, isn't it?” she spat.

“Yes,” Jacques said gravely. “I fear that those opportunistic ‘journalists' and those lunatics spreading the rumours of this 'Keeper' will haunt her night and day, if she is anywhere less secure than this manor.”

“Don't you lie to me, Jacques!” du Pont cried, putting her hands on the desk as she shot out of her seat. “You're just trying to save face! I happen to live here and read the news, you know—your staff running away terrified out of their wits en masse, the footage of these mysterious invaders that are foiling every security measure you've put up, investors pulling out for fear of the 'Keeper' or whichever group is targeting you and everything associated with you, like your own daughters—”

Jacques shot out of his seat. “Dr. du Pont--”

“No. You listen to me, Jacques Schnee: I have spent decades, helping you grow this empire of yours, convincing hesitant prospective employees that you are not nearly as bad as your detractors make you seem, even defending some of the most reprehensible decisions you have made, like that damned drilling operation in Sekhmet!

“But this? This is the last straw, Jacques!”

Jacques gritted his teeth. “Du Pont, may I remind you of the terms of your contract, the things I have done for you?”

Du Pont threw her hand out. “Go ahead! Ruin me! I'd rather die broke with a clean conscience, than be an accomplice to a devil like you any longer! And don't even try to have me detained, Jacques— I'm sure that'll make for an even better headline:

“Power Baron Holds Suicidal Daughter, Psychologist Hostage In His Mansion!"

“Goodbye, Mr. Schnee,” du Pont spat. “In its own twisted way, I'm delighted we part company in circumstances as poor as this.”

“What will it take, du Pont?” Jacques growled. “Name your price.”

“Check Winter in Candela General, and she better be on Suicide Watch the moment she's admitted. And go see if you and Weiss can't live somewhere safer and more secure than this madhouse.”

“Done,” Jacques said.
Du Pont nodded. “Good. I'll be watching the news, Mr. Schnee,” she said as she turned around and left.

Jacques' eyes burst into flame. “Where are you going?!”

“Out of here!” she replied as she went out. “You know, Jacques? I was always under the impression that your wife was scared of me, paranoid that I was going to take her place in the heirarchy of this house.

“Now I realize she was trying to warn me.”

The antique wooden door of Jacques' private office shut with a thunderous **SLAM!**

He winced, before he pressed the button on his intercom.

“Yes, Mr. Schnee?” hummed the voice of the garage's automated systems.

“Prepare a rover for du Pont, take her wherever she wants to go; and tell she can keep the damned thing, so long as she never returns here.”

“Yes, Mr. Schnee.”

The rumours did not lie: the wrath of Jacques Schnee was swift and all-encompassing.

Thank the Shepherd she had the foresight to put some money away in a private account, one that wasn't legally under Jacques control or that of the banks he may as well have owned. It wasn't much, granted, but she doubted she could justify ever using his money ever again—who knows what had been done to earn it.

The room she had rented was really just one sleeping pod of many set in a wall, the most basic of quarters for visitors who had already blown most of their budget on the fare flying into the city, or residents who hadn't gotten a share of Candela's famed “prosperity for all.”

All she needed was a reasonably private communications line, though.

“Queensguard Anonymous Tip Line,” a curt, professional female voice said, no doubt an AI.

“H-Hello? My name is Dr. Aurelia du Pont, I used to work for Jacques--”

“One moment, please.”

Du Pont sighed. She waited for a few moments, before she saw the holo display before her change, the hotel's logo change into the distinctive red and gold of the Queensguard.

“Dr. du Pont, General Ironwood,” said a distinctive, unmistakable voice on the other line. “We've been hoping to speak with you for a quite a while...”
Queensguard HQ, somewhere deep underground in the Nexus.

General Ironwood sat in one of the many briefing rooms, two field agents sitting on either side of him, Kajiki and Gwendolyn. The three of them listened to du Pont talking about her examination with Winter, sitting silently with the frowns on their faces steadily growing, asking questions from time to time.

The mood was grimmer than usual, the consensus among all four of them that this was bad.

Very bad.

“… Jacques did agree to my terms, but after I stormed out like that, I doubt he will honour them…” du Pont was saying. “Please, forgive me for only informing you when the situation had already deteriorated so much, the first sleepless night she spent with her sister should have been—”

“Don't feel guilty, Dr. du Pont,” Ironwood said. “We can't catch every red flag the moment they go up, either.”

Du Pont sighed. “A most unfortunate truth… can you promise me that Winter will be properly taken care of?”

“On my word as General, Specialist Schnee will get the care she needs.”

Du Pont hummed. “Thank you, General.”

“No, doctor, thank you—this situation likely would have gotten much worse, if you hadn't called when you did. Is there anymore you'd like to add?”

“Just to be wary of Jacques; the man is even more hard-headed and determined than they make him out to be.”

“We'll manage, Dr. du Pont.”

They said their farewells, along with the canned speech about how the citizens' tips were vital to the Queensguard—and for this particular time, Ironwood meant it. The holographic screen faded away, and all was quiet in the room as they let the new knowledge sink in.

“Agent Kajiki,” Ironwood said, nodding towards them.

The cyborg sighed. “Winter has lost it/ Reason slips through her fingers/ What do we do, sir?”

Ironwood sighed. “Let's review the situation, shall we?”

“We have one of our most dangerous and skilled covert ops specialists suddenly going insane, after she abandoned her post, stole a jet to return home to her family, and had been terrorized by a group who are still almost literally and repeatedly walking right through some of the best security to be found anywhere, let alone a private home.

“From what we know—that is to say, almost nothing—said group is based in the Viridian Valley, a location that Jacques Schnee is currently organizing a large number of armed expeditions into, in retaliation for the first one where they were so kind as to let his second daughter and her escorts
come home alive.

“What do you think we do?”

Gwen frowned. “The Knight does not like where this is going...”

“Since when have we ever, Gwendolyn?” Ironwood replied as he got up. “Get ready to move out to Manor Schnee immediately; I want the both of you in Shepherd Suits, locked, loaded, and lethal.”

Gwen’s eyes opened, alarmed, before she sighed. “The Knight sincerely hopes neither she nor her companion will have to use them.”

“As do I,” Ironwood grunted. “I expect all of you to do your damndest to take her in peacefully, but if it begins to look like it's going to be ugly...”

“Better one body/ Than two, three, or so much more/ Choose 'Bad' over 'Worse,'” Kajiki recited.

“Precisely,” Ironwood said as he got up. “Don't deploy without me, I'm handling this situation personally.”

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Back at Manor Schnee, Weiss busied herself cleaning and drying Winter's Eluna plushie in one of the many bathrooms.

With the specially formulated spray sold by the Plushie Palace, she got it back to feeling soft, warm, and fluffy, but the faint smell of tears, snot, and despair was here to stay until she could find something better.

Winter herself was back in the infirmary, her private room completely closed off but to the constant watch of Doc-Drones and the few human or cyborg security guards who were brave enough—or desperate enough for their salaries—to stay in the manor. By her request, she was cut-off from all forms of telecommunication, and especially the Info-Grid.

Her explanation was that she needed “a LOT of time to wrap my head around the new, horrific implications that elevate the Keeper of the Grove coming for us to a whole new plain of terrible I had never thought possible until now.”

So here Weiss was, idly flipping through incredibly detailed, thorough, and sometimes heated discussions on how to properly clean your limited edition Eluna plushie, if you were so lucky to have one. She was in the middle of reading a particularly lively debate about whether or not you should just throw your Eluna plushie in the washing machine on “Gentle,” as one father had with her daughter's toy, when a comm-request from the garage popped up on her screen.

The ill feeling in her stomach returned as she pressed the “Accept” button.

“Ms. Schnee, your sister has a visitor: General Ironwood,” said one of the few remaining coordinators.

Weiss frowned. “Tell him she's not feeling well,” she said.

“He knows—it is why he is here. He is already on his way to the infirmary. I thought you might like to know.”

The ill feeling grew. “Thank you.”

She left Eluna somewhere safe, then rushed down the halls. She made it just in time to see Ironwood
and his escort presenting their warrants and clearance to the guards. The two agents were using the seven-foot tall Sheperd Suit MK III power armour, and equipped with assault rifles, shotguns, pistols, and even a grenade launcher on one of them.

Yet somehow, Ironwood wearing his usual formal suit in the Queensguard's colours, with a holster around his waist holding a stun gun worried her more.

“Weiss,” he said, nodding politely.

“General Ironwood,” Weiss replied automatically. “Why are you here...?”

“To see your sister about official Queensguard business,” Ironwood replied. “Nothing to concern yourself about.”

Weiss frowned. “What are you going to do to her?”

Before Ironwood could reply, the door opened, revealing Winter still in her paper gown. Her eyes glimmered, her grin was just a little too wide, and her hair was out of its usual prim and proper bun, left to fly out in every direction behind her head and around her shoulders.

“General Ironwood!” she trilled. “Great timing! I assume you've come here after hearing about the Keeper situation?”

“Yes, actually,” Ironwood replied.

“Well, I'm afraid to say sir that it's going to be impossible to stop her even with the firepower all of you are packing, but I've got some very important revelations to share with you—ones that change everything!”

“You can tell us back at base, Schnee,” Ironwood replied.

Winter nodded. “Okay, let's go.” She looked around shifty. “Don't know if she could be right here listening on this conversation this very moment...” she said as she walked out of the room.

Ironwood held out his hand to stop her, and pulled out his stun gun with the other. “Schnee, I'm sorry to say, but I'm under strict orders to take you in incapacitated.”

Winter blinked, then laughed. “I never pinned you as one for jokes, sir!”

Ironwood got into a shooting position, as did his escort.

Winter stopped laughing. “Seriously? I'm cooperating! I'll go with you! You're not really going to shock me and haul me away in front of my own sister, are you?”

“Winter Schnee Shocked And Hauled Away In Front Of Her Own Sister!” read the Avalon New Network's headline after the incident made its way to the public knowledge; below it was “Jacques Schnee Wages War On The Viridian Valley!”, and below that, “Military Presence Rises In Candela, Nearby Territories Amid Security Concerns.”

All Weiss really needed or wanted to know was:

- Winter was hauled off back to Queensguard HQ to be treated, under concerns for her and others' safety given her combat skill and her mental state;
- The Avalonian Military was setting up shop in Manor Schnee both as a base of operations and as the most frequent target of the “New, Unidentified Threat” getting the rest of the realm in a
tizzy, and as a result, she and her father were to be confined there for their own safety;

- Her father still refused to call off the new expeditions into the Valley, and for a variety of reasons, some of them in the Queensguard's operations manual, and some of them unofficial but no less binding and sacrosanct, no one could supercede his authority and stop them from going off, presumably to their deaths; and,

- She couldn't sleep in Winter's room, as it was still too clogged with all those crates, and thus “an unnecessary security risk and potential safety hazard.”

So she lay on her side in her own bed, hugging the Eluna plushie to her chest, eyes closed, trying to pretend that it was actually Winter, and not just a soft, warm, and fluffy ball of fabric that smelled of her tears, snot, and despair.

Winter had always claimed it worked for her, back when their mother was still alive.

And like after she died, the trick never quite worked.

She probably should have cried, gotten angry at her father all over again, maybe even relieved some stress on holo-dummies in the training room, put all those fencing lessons to good use. She just couldn't work up the effort to do much of anything, though, especially in the wake of Tov and his new, unwanted partner from the military briefing her on the new protocols and changes coming to the manor—mostly about the soldiers and androids now patrolling the halls in an attempt to stop any intruders.

“Emotional exhaustion,” one of her therapists had called it.

“Running out of fucks to give,” Winter had explained to her later in private, and which Weiss found a much more appropriate term.

Both her balcony doors were open. The military had kindly suggested she put the lockdown on full-time—Shepherd knew that Candela could use the extra load on their power reserves, avoid the dreaded “overflow discharge” flaw of the technology her grandfather had pioneered—but since she knew it would just delay the Keeper, possibly force her to be less polite and peaceful with her visits, she didn't.

“Hey!” she heard a familiar voice whisper. “Weiss, you awake?”

Weiss turned on her side, looked at the floating Keeper of the Grove plushie right at the edge of her bed. It only sent a little chill in her bones this time, as she had gotten somewhat used to the sight of it and its owner—or alternatively, she was far too dead inside for even her most primal of instincts to kick in.

“What do you want?” Weiss asked flatly.

“Well, you know, we expected to see a lot of civilian and paramilitary carriers flying in, but now there's all these actual military—”

“They're for here, not the Valley. Unlike my father or the poor saps he's hiring, they understand it's better to leave you alone. This is more for PR than anything else, say they're doing something about your visits, at least.”

“Oh. Well. That's good!”

“For you, maybe,” Weiss muttered.

The Keeper plushie floated lower in the air. “Yeah... speaking of which: I heard what happened to
your sister, Winter..."

Weiss looked the plushie in the eyes, the red rubies glinting evilly as they always did.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize this would happen, and as little as it means, I never wanted things to end up this bad."

Weiss felt a rage flare up inside of her, before it died just as quickly.

"Is there anything I can do?" the Keeper asked.

"Can you convince the Queensguard to release her?"

"Ah, yeah... no. I don't even know where they took her, and neither does anyone else. 'Not our business,' they said."

"Then go away," Weiss replied, before she turned back to the other side.

"Okay," the Keeper said, before she left.

Weiss fell asleep to the sounds of radio chatter, soldiers yelling questions at each other, drones and automated security complaining about unknown errors.
Chapter 17

The second round of expeditions to the Valley started with a massive party paid for by Jacques Schnee himself, and attended by the ragtag collection of mercenary groups, adventure seekers, and random hired guns who needed or wanted the money, and didn’t mind or were woefully ignorant of the Keeper’s reputation.

The military at Manor Schnee were concerned about the Keeper’s casually breaking into the premises and foiling the security, but they assumed that it was nothing that couldn’t be stopped with a large number of human/cyborg patrols and some experimental detection technologies fresh from Candela’s skunkworks.

In the following days, rovers from those same groups charged back to Candela in droves, spilling out countless traumatized, crying, and screaming mercenaries and adventurers nursing horrific wounds, and speaking of even more terrible things that mere mortals were simply never meant to know.

Even more disturbing was the ever growing number of corpses on the trail leading to the Valley—unfortunate souls that had decided escaping on foot and trying to outrun the daylight was a better alternative to hiding out in the Valley until rescue vehicles could come.

Some time after the last of the expedition had returned grievously wounded, insane, or assumed dead, the Keeper came visiting once more, almost completely bypassing the security as usual.

She pulled out the plushie of herself, and then a large, loaded sack made of plant fibers.

Weiss took notice; Winter had spoken about the Keeper’s “gifts” to her victims and the survivors of her attacks, and they were rarely pleasant.

“Hi Weiss!” the Keeper said.

“What IS that?” Weiss asked, pointing at the sack.

“Something I thought you might want,” the Keeper said quickly. “I gotta go, they still need me back at the Valley!”

She dropped the sack, the plushie “waved” goodbye, and was gone before Weiss could yell at her to stop.

She held Winter’s Eluna plushie as she sat on the side of her bed, staring at the bulging bag, wondering what in the world was in it.

Her bedroom door slammed open soon after, soldiers swarming in, barking orders and talking over their radios, rifles and shotguns at the ready as they looked for any sign of the Keeper.


A sense of extreme unease washed over the troops. “Ma’am, please evacuate immediately,” said one of the squad leaders as they prepared to quarantine her room.

Normally, a suspicious, bulky package like this would have been detonated, either with conventional explosives or an anti-matter charge. Given the unique source, and the whole host of unpleasant unknowns it implied, they were left with little choice but to open it.
Weiss and Jacques stood with Tov in the security room, watching the remote feed as a drone carefully undid the string holding the bag closed, while a whole firing squad of soldiers prepared to blast it and anything that came out of it with enough firepower to level a building and the ones next to it.

The mouth of the sack widened. Everyone tensed up. The drone’s camera slipped in, trying to get a visual of what was inside.

“Dog tags, sir!” one of the on-site soldiers said over the radio. “It’s full of dog tags!”

Specifically, Queensguard nominee dog tags. It wasn’t unusual for those who’d failed to make the cut to keep them as a badge of honour; even just being a rank 1 who had “washed out” got you a great deal of respect, given the exclusivity and high standards of being selected, let alone the brutality of the actual training.

There were other mementos inside: printed photographs, good luck charms, and a letter on a napkin, unsent.

“Dear Hali, Mama knows she’s messed up before, but now she’s going going to...” it read, before the rest of it was too smudged and blotted by stains to read.

With what, Weiss didn’t want to know.

The third, smaller round of expeditions was a much more somber, quiet affair than the second, a handful of survivors from the last group warning the newcomers that they could turn back now before it was far too late.

The next day, there were no survivors from the third expedition, the makeshift base and the rovers at the entrance left completely, ominously abandoned.

Back at the manor, and with their high-tech methods to foil the Keeper a complete, absolute bust, the military decided on much more low-tech methods or sniffing her out: paint sprayers, trip wires, pressure pads, and even buckets of dyed water hanging precariously over partially open doors and points of entry. As night descended once more, the whole of the manor was left pitch black, every soldier turning on the infrared or night vision of their visors.

Weiss’ room was ordered on lockdown, two Tinmen equipped with fully automatic “Rolling Thunder” shotguns and blind-fire protocols in the room with her, her bed was surrounded by high-powered shields to prevent her from getting caught in the inevitable crossfire.

In spite of the vastly increased security, she was completely unsurprised to see a flash of rose petals suddenly appear just inside the doors of her balcony.

“Hey Weiss!” the Keeper greeted, about to pull out the plushie.

The two Tinmen turned to her. “Intruder detected: commencing blind-fire,” they said in their deep, monotone voices.

“Eeep!”

Deafening blasts filled the room as electromagnetically charged shrapnel ripped through the air and annihilated the Keeper plushie. As the sound faded into echoes, one side of her bedroom was now decorated with numerous deep craters and bullet-holes, thin clouds of wood, concrete, and other debris gently raining down to the floor.
“WOAH!” the Keeper said from somewhere atop her dresser. “That was close!”

The Tinmen turned to the sound of her voice. “Intruder detected: commencing blind-fire.”

Weiss made a note to go shopping for new clothes in the morning. “WHAT ARE YOU HERE FOR?!” she yelled, temporarily hard of hearing.

“I WAS JUST GOING TO ASK--”

Weiss’ printed high school, fencing school, and preparatory school diplomas evaporated.

“--IF YOU GUYS COULD NOT--”

The wall separating Weiss’ bedroom and her bathroom disappeared.

“--ATTACK THE VALLEY BETWEEN THE HOURS OF--”

One side of windows were blown out, before the walls surrounding them followed.

“--7 TO 8 PM ON MONDAYS THROUGH--”

Moonlight poured in from the new holes in the ceiling.

“--FRIDAYS? I WOULD REALLY--”

Drones were turned into scrap, soldiers outside in the hall screamed and just barely avoided being turned into a thin, pink mist by friendly fire.

“--APPRECIATE THAT!”

The barrier around her bed glowed and solidified as it stopped several pounds worth of white-hot metal from reaching Weiss.

“WHY? WHAT’S GOING ON THEN?!” Weiss yelled, curious.

“RUNE RANGERS: LIGHTNING LEGION!”

The wall behind her bed all but disappeared.

“I MEAN I KNOW I CAN WATCH IT ON--”

She could see one balcony through the new holes in the wall.

“--HV-ON-DEMAND BUT--”

More of the ceiling disappeared, Avalon’s two moons smiled upon Weiss.

“--IT’S NOT THE SAME, YOU KNOW!”

One balcony had several new holes blown through its floor, before it broke off from the wall and took several planters with it.

“PLUS EVERYONE’S TALKING--”

She could see her second balcony now.

“--ABOUT THE NEW EPISODE--”
The second balcony disappeared.

“--ON FLITTER AND DECANTR--”

The secret entrance to Winter’s room was no longer much of a secret.

“--AND IT REALLY SUCKS TO--

The secret entrance collapsed, as did a good deal of the wall around it.

“--NOT KNOW WHAT THEY’RE--

What remained of the ceiling creaked and groaned ominously.

“--TALKING ABOUT, YOU KNOW?"

The ceiling collapsed, as did most of the walls around her room. Weiss was spared by the shields; the Tinmen were buried underneath several feet and pounds worth of rubble.

A refreshing breeze from outside flew in, gently taking away all the fine clouds of dust floating about.

Weiss scowled. “GET OUT!”

“OKAY!” the Keeper said, before she fled.


The Tinmen were deactivated, and Weiss was escorted to a room that hadn’t become a giant, missing chunk of mansion to spend the rest of the night in. It was hard not to notice that the lights were all turned back on, and almost all of the soldiers were sporting bright, neon splatters of paint all over their usually pristine, platinum white armour.

The fourth expedition into the Valley was by air—a single scouting ship flying over the treetops, dropping transmitters, all of them disappearing from radar soon as they floated under the canopy. Before the scouts manning high-powered telescopes from Candela watched it get dragged out of the sky through unknown, mysterious means, they received this transmission:

“Still nothing, HQ. Going to turn back now, we’re just wasting time and equipment at this point. Wait, we’re getting something—what the--” Sounds of the instruments going crazy. “--HQ, we have lost control and are going down! I’m going to try to--!”

Then, nothing.

Back in the manor, desperation, public humiliation, and an incredibly irate Jacques Schnee had forced the military to use one of the oldest tactics in the book: excessive firepower. Tanks had been set up outside, loaded with every variety of shell they had, while others were used as mobile platforms for blanket missile launchers. Every last corner had a turret emplacement, trigger-happy soldiers behind flamethrowers, grenade launchers, and miniguns. Ready and waiting to reinforce them at a moment’s notice were soldiers wearing Shepherd Suits, armed with more of those same turrets in their hands or atop their armoured shoulders, with an escort of other well-armed infantry and combat drones, just to be sure.

“Let’s see her try to break through THIS!” one soldier said.
Tov smacked them. “YA JINXED IT ALL, YOU FUCKIN’ IDIOT!”

The escorts in Weiss’ temporary room this time were four Queensguard nominees, rank 4, led by one Cardin Winchester with his men—just in regular equipment, for the sheer cost of manufacturing the Shepherd Suits, and their confidence in their own skills. She was pretty sure that they had only been assigned to her room because if the Keeper finally decided to get violent, they wouldn’t be missed, but she still couldn’t be bothered to care, and especially listen to the machismo they were spouting, bragging about how they were going to show the Keeper that you “didn’t mess with the Cardinals.”

There was no lockdown this time, since the guest rooms were not considered important enough for such serious security measures.

“I’m telling you, Schnee, that Keeper is going to be sorry she ever crossed us,” Cardin may or may not have been saying—Weiss was busy brushing Winter’s Eluna plushie. “She may have fooled the Tinmen, but she’s not going to fool me, or any of u--”

His words were cut short with a sharp gasp of pain, Weiss began to pay attention.

She watched as, in less than a minute, the still invisible Keeper took them all down, knocking Cardin down to his knees, stole his pistol, and proceeded to twist limbs, cripple arms, and smash stocks into heads until all four of them were unable to fight, unconscious or too busy trying to wrap their heads around what the hell just happened.

“Cardinals?” crackled from the fallen guard’s comm-crystals. “Cardinals! Report!”

Weiss gently put down the brush. “Have you finally come to kill me?” she asked.

“Nope! I’ve got a plan instead: how about you and I go talk to your dad together so we can prove to him that I exist?” the Keeper asked cheerfully.

Weiss blinked. The rage from before flared up, and this time, it kept on burning. “Take off your hood,” she growled as she slipped out of her bed, Eluna secured tightly in her arm.

“Uh, I kinda can’t, because that’d make it easier for people to shoot me, and I like not being exploded meat chunks, or full of bullet holes—

“JUST LONG ENOUGH FOR ME TO KNOW WHERE YOU ARE, YOU DOLT!” Weiss yelled as she marched to where her voice was.

The Keeper obeyed. Without the hood, she looked a whole lot younger, especially with that baffled expression on her face.

Weiss poked her in her invisible chest. “You are going to kidnap me, and use me as ransom to get my father to stop these invasions into the valley, understand?!?

The Keeper frowned. “Uh, are you sure about this?”

They could hear footsteps and yelling coming closer, the steady thumps of armoured feet pounding on the floors.

“Just take me anywhere but this hellhole...” Weiss growled, tears stinging her eyes before she squeezed them shut.

She felt invisible arms wrap securely around her, the Eluna plushie pressed between their chests.
“Hold on tight!” the Keeper said.

Weiss did, burying her face in her shoulder.

The door exploded into splinters. Green energy surrounded the both of them, shimmering and whirling around them like leaves caught in a fierce gust. Soldiers yelling were the last thing she heard when she and the Keeper disappeared.

Weiss had never been teleported before, and most every human before her either disappeared entirely, or didn’t make it through to the other side safe and sound. For the few seconds that she and the Keeper were surging through the realm as pure energy, she felt her very being split apart and thrown over miles and miles of barren wasteland and wilderness, flashes of distorted landscapes and sensations from so much stimuli on so many receptors simultaneously, her mind struggling, confused, and screaming at the alien sensation of being in hundreds of thousands of places all at once.

Then, all the many pieces of her were put back together at one specific location, like so many little scraps of metal under the force of an industrial-sized magnet.

Weiss gasped for breath, inhaling musty air, feet stepping on cold, mossy stone, her body still being squeezed tightly by the Keeper. She opened her just reformed eyes, saw two foreign figures—both female, one scrambling to her feet and pulling out a sword, the other calmly releasing what looked like several floating blades from her back.

<RUBY, WHAT THE HELL?!> one of them yelled in a language Weiss couldn’t understand.

She threw up, then passed out.
Weiss woke up in a hospital bed, warm sunlight beaming down on her face, the Eluna plushie nestled in her arm. She scowled, thinking that her plan was a bust, until she heard a bird on a post just above her head start calling out:

<Mender to Patient Schnee! Mender to Patient Schnee!>

The only thing she understood was her name, but even *that* was so heavily accented she had to struggle for a moment.

Weiss sat up, finally took notice of her surroundings. It looked like any other non-private patient room in Avalon, rows of similar looking beds separated only by privacy curtains, except almost everything was clearly made of wood—the frames of the beds, the posts for the curtains, even the walls and the floor seemed to be constructed entirely out of it, complete with the swirls and spots of the grain.

As she looked up and noticed the natural, asymmetrical curves of the ceiling, the shadows of leaves covering the holes in the windows, she realized the hospital wasn't *made* out of wood—it was the carved out inside of a giant tree.

She looked down at herself. The gown she was wearing was completely made out of natural fibers, as were the sheets, something she could tell after her mother and Mr. Sieben had personally taught her the exact feel of anything synthetic, or supposedly all-natural blends. The IV tube attached to her wrist was *definitely* organic, something she could tell because it was green, and gently pulsing as it fed her nutrients from what looked like a giant plant sac.

Weiss screamed, Eluna flew off to the side. She gripped the edge of the vine, about to rip it off, when a hand was put on her wrist—one made out of many pieces of warm, intricately carved rock, no joints, just green energy floating between where knuckles, tendons, and a wrist would be.

“I would *strongly* advise you not to do that,” said a young, female voice in perfect, unaccented Nivian. “Aside from the fact that disconnecting yourself prematurely will be *extremely* painful and cause yourself unnecessary harm, thanks to the vine already having taken root in your veins, it is also busy gathering much-needed data about your health, and any potential issues or allergies you may have.”

Weiss pulled her hand away. She looked up at the source, felt an unease wash over her like the first time she saw the Keeper—the unique feeling of seeing something *like* a human, but not quite.

The cyborg or android—she didn't know *what* she was exactly—smiled, the mouse ears atop her head twitching happily. She felt a pang of recognition, realized this was one of the two figures that had been there with her and the Keeper when she teleported in.

“Hello, my name is”—she said something in the same language as the parrot, with syllables and sounds that she wasn't even sure she could make with her own voice—"but you may call me 'Penny.' I will be your mender for today!”

Weiss blinked.

“Do you have any questions? I must warn you that, thanks to protocols installed within me, and the orders of Elder Goodwitch—not her real name nor title, but as close a translation from Actaeon to Nivian as I could manage—I may not be allowed to answer every inquiry you have, or in as much
detail as you would like.”

“Where AM I...?” Weiss asked.

“In the hospital of the Bastion, one of the many settlements in the Viridian Valley!”

“And where exactly is the Bastion?”

“I'm sorry, I am not allowed to answer that question,” Penny replied, still smiling.

Weiss groaned. “Figures…” she muttered. “What happened to me?”

“You suffered from a case of 'Teleportation Sickness': nausea, disorientation, and temporarily altered perceptions from having been transmuted into pure energy, transported to a different location, then transmuted back into a physical being.

“Do not worry: even the most frequent users of teleportation magics oftentimes have to invest heavily in pharmaceuticals and other precautions to avoid suffering it.”

Weiss nodded. “What is this thing?” she asked, gesturing to the vine still attached to her arm.

“That is a”--another unpronounceable, alien name--”or, roughly translated, a 'Vitality Vine.' It is analogous to the intravenous devices you humans use to inject nutrients, drugs, and solutions straight to a patient’s bloodstream, if they are unable to take them through other means.”

Weiss looked at where the vine and her hand met, saw bumps under her skin that weren't there before. “And you say it's taken root inside me?”

“Yes!” Penny replied cheerfully. “Do not worry; with the proper procedures, it will unroot and leave almost no scarring, and if it does, there are methods to heal them quickly and efficiently!”

Weiss looked at where the vine went into her wrist, at the sac that was the Fae version of an IV bag, then back at Penny. She wisely decided to leave it alone and sat back on her bed.

She scooted a LOT further back as Penny's arm stretched out, over her bed, and off the side, the tendrils of green energy holding her together arcing longer and longer from each end as she picked up the Eluna plushie from the floor. She reached out with her other arm and gently dusted her off, more of that energy doing the actual brushing and picking off than her “fingers” themselves.

“There,” Penny hummed as she placed her back on Weiss' lap. “Good as new~”

Weiss looked at her, then back at Eluna. She slowly, carefully wrapped her hands around the plushie before she squeezed it tightly to her chest. “... Thanks.”

“You're welcome!” Penny hummed. One section of her “wrist” split and flipped open, symbols and images appearing on its inner side like a tablet. “Do you feel well enough to answer some questions?”

“What kind of questions?” Weiss asked warily.

“How you are feeling at the moment, inquiries to your medical history for any allergies or conditions we may not find through the Vitality Vine, and any requests to make your stay more comfortable! However, we may not be able to honour some or all of them.”

Weiss agreed, and Penny began. She didn't know what bothered her more; that she was being interview by a mouse robot/cyborg nurse, or that it felt almost exactly like any sort of interview she'd
have back at Candela, if her digital records were somehow inaccessible.

Penny maintained that cheerful voice and disposition the whole time, what she assumed to be written Actaeon glowing on the surface of her arm-tablet; probably for other people's benefit, much like the holographic screens of many cyborgs.

“Thank you very much, Ms. Schnee!” Penny said as the section of her arm closed. “This is extremely helpful data that will go a long way to improving your care, and the Fae's understanding of human biology.”

“Weiss,” Weiss muttered. “Just call me Weiss. No more Ms. Schnee, alright?”

Penny nodded. “As you wish, Weiss. And speaking of wishes: would you like to rest more, or speak with Elder Goodwitch? She has asked me to tell you that this 'Plan of yours better be good..' or something to that effect.”

“What, they didn't install an Actaeon to Nivian dictionary in you?” Weiss asked sarcastically.

Penny shook her head. “My creator did, actually! It's just that Actaeon to Nivian is not a clear, precise process, mostly because of the vast wealth of highly specific and contextual alternatives to words, as Fae are not as fond of adjectives or adverbs as you humans are, and prefer emphasis to be easily understood by sound alone.

“As an old, roughly translated saying goes, 'There is a world of difference between “Big Spider” and “BIG FUCKING SPIDER, RUN!”', and you better be able to communicate that as fast and as clearly as possible.’”

Weiss blinked, unsure on how to react to the failure of her sarcasm, and more so the implications of the Fae needing a single word to describe spiders of extremely worrying size.

She shook her head. “Take me to her,” she said.

“Are you sure, Weiss?” Penny asked.

“The sooner I can get out of here, the better,” she said.

“As you wish, then, Weiss,” Penny said as she put her hand to the sac of the Vitality Vine.

Weiss watched with a mixture of interest and unease as the roots within her wrist receded, before the vine itself snaked all the way back into the sac on its own. She felt something warm and sticky spread over her skin as pulled away, looked at the organic bandage of sort that had formed over the entry-wound.

She put it up to her nose and sniffed; it had a faint smell like hospital-grade disinfectant.

“The seal will naturally be absorbed into your body within a few hours to a few days, at the worst,” Penny explained. “Do not worry: it is merely being broken down into proteins, carbohydrates, and other organic materials to accelerate your body's natural healing process.”

Weiss wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Penny helped her out of bed, and lead her off to a changing room off to the side.

As they walked, it was hard not to notice that every patient and mender in the ward was looking at Weiss, quite a lot of them cold and hostile.
The nightgown Weiss had teleported in was cleaned and pressed, smelling faintly of sweet flowers, ones she couldn't pin down, if she even knew what they were. Because it was definitely not made for being outside of the bedroom, or being decent and comfortable out in public, she ended up wearing a simple white dress, with a blue diamond-shaped patch sewn just a little bit above her rear.

Where a tail would have gone, she realized, as she looked at the segmented series of floating blocks that made up Penny's own “tail” poking out from the back of her clothes.

It was comfortable; loose, soft, airy, almost like she was wearing nothing at all! And the moment she thought that, she suddenly felt very, very naked, even if the fabric wasn't transparent in the slightest and quite conservative in design.

“Can I get a jacket or something?” Weiss said as she looked at herself in a mirror, unconsciously tugging the knee-length skirt lower.

Penny handed her one that looked like the skinned fur of a wolf, if a wolf was several times the size of a fully grown-man and could glare vicious daggers at you even in death, its hollowed out eyes vowing swift, brutal vengeance at you and your loved ones.

“… You know what, nevermind,” Weiss said, suddenly fine with the almost weightless clothes she wore.

She and Penny stepped out to what Weiss assumed to be a side entrance, going down one of the tree-hospital's hollowed out roots and to an underground chamber. Two familiar figures were waiting for them, both armed:

One was the other figure beside Penny, dressed in lightweight leather armour and cloth, her cat ears warily pulled back as she put a hand to the sword around her belt.

The other was the Keeper, wearing a different hooded cloak in shades of red and black, but the same scythe resting on her shoulder. “Hey Weiss!” she waved with her free hand. “Great timing: me and Blake here just finished discussing our super awesome idea for your 'Kidnap You and Hold You Ransom' idea!”

“What is it?” Weiss asked.

Ruby beamed. “We're going to kill you!”
Chapter 19

Weiss blinked. “You're going to what?”

“Kill you!” Ruby repeated. “If there's anything that's going to stop your dad from attacking the Valley anymore, it's going to be that.”

Weiss nodded, before she gripped Eluna to her chest, stared blankly off into the distance, and reminisced about the series of bad decisions that had led to this point.

The most immediate that came to mind was her spontaneously telling her father that she wanted to join his newest venture: an expedition into the Viridian Valley. Like her maternal grandfather and his father-in-law, Nicholas Schnee, he wanted to find a new wellspring of mana to tap, ones similar to if not even greater than the gigantic concentrations of energy that rested under the Nexus, Valentino, Lumania, Zeal, or Solaris—possibly even the unprecedented titan that powered Candela.

“Uh, Weiss?” Ruby asked, before she waved her hand before her unseeing eyes.

She didn't know what it was that set her off about his droning on about all the failed expeditions, the rumours of the Keeper being responsible for it and thousands of other incidents, the new incredible advances in technology that made possible to thrive in a barren hellhole like the one surrounding both Candela and the Valley itself, but the moment she blurted out that she wanted to be a part of the scouting team, personally overseeing the operations like her grandfather before her, she never once thought of taking it back.

Now, she really wished that her father had vetoed that plan as he usually did.

With no response, Ruby turned to Penny. <What's wrong with her?> she asked in Actaeon.

<I believe she's experiencing what humans call 'thinking about where they went wrong.'> Penny replied.


Perhaps it was how she reacted to Winter's leaving for the Avalonian Armed Forces six years ago. She should have sympathized more with her decision, understood she would have done the same thing if she could, not held it up as a massive betrayal, put a wedge between them until just before she was selected for Queensguard training, and become so surly, cold, and hostile to everyone, “projecting” her anger and hurt as du Pont had said.

She was eleven, yes, and it was a confusing time for her with puberty and all these new, confusing feelings and new responsibilities thrust upon her by society just because her age was now in the double digits, and the fact that her mother was long dead, that she had few close friends, and that her father was a hands-off parent (at best) certainly didn't help, but she probably should have done like Winter had, when she was twelve, had been old enough to fully understand their mother's death:

Grow the fuck up.

<It's probably when you said you were going to murder her.> Penny replied.

Ruby's eyes widened, her ears pulled back in alarm. <What?! I said I was going to 'fake her death' not 'put her to death!' Isn't that what I said in Nivian?>
Penny shook her head.

<But it's the same word…!> Ruby whined.

<It is, but humans add additional words to clarify that it's going to be a faked killing, not a real one.>

Or maybe it stretched even further back, to the one point in life she could clearly, confidently point to as the moment her already less than ideal life went to a constant, ever accelerating downhill slide leading to this moment: the day they got the call from the emergency response teams in Sekhmet, that their mother and her unborn child had succumbed to the plague ravaging the desert, that they couldn't even receive their bodies as they were needed to figure out how the hell they were going to stop the new disease from ravaging the rest of Avalon, and their ashes would likely be mixed with the masses of other dead.

Maybe, just maybe, she shouldn't have agreed with her father, and especially Winter's question, the tie-breaker to her decision to start giving away her beloved collection of plushies, the one thing that reminded them of their mother after her father had every portrait and image of her put into storage or hidden away where he'd never have to be reminded of who they'd lost, what died with them.

On the bright side of things, she'd be meeting her again soon, if the Aether really was real. Winter would probably join them soon enough, though she wasn't looking forward to meeting their father again, even if the Stewards always emphasized that they would be a completely different type of being upon reaching it, "stripped away of all that which divided us, our boundless desires and prejudices, the mortal things we clung to so desperately in life."

Ruby sighed. <This is why I hate Nivian…> she muttered before she turned to Weiss, still zoned out. “Weiss? Weiiiss…?” she snapped her fingers in front of her face.

Blake turned to Ruby. <May I?>

Ruby sighed. <Go ahead…>

Blake stepped up, and slapped Weiss across the cheek.

_Smack!_

Weiss reeled from the strike, a new bright red print glowing on her skin. “Ow! Just kill me and get it over with, why don't you?!”

Blake sighed. <Believe me, princess, I would if I could.>

Weiss glared at her. “I don't know what you just said, but I know I didn't like it.”

Blake narrowed her eyes. <Feeling's mutual.>

“Okay!” Ruby cried as she stepped between them. “Blake: calm down! Weiss: what I said earlier didn't come out right!”

“Oh, so you're going to torture me instead, is that it?” Weiss spat.

Ruby frowned. “It's--”

“Ruby actually meant to say that we were going to fake your death,” Penny interrupted. “I believe the confusion came from the fact that Actaeon has very specific variations on the word 'kill'—that of killing an opponent; killing prey; killing predator; killing the enemy’s morale or desire to fight; or in
this particular case, faking a killing, for purposes of demoralization or manipulation.”

Weiss blinked, letting the realization sink in for a moment. “Can we all agree that, from now on, anything anyone tries to say to me in Nivian goes through Penny first?”

Blake and Ruby nodded.

Penny beamed. “I will try my best to make sure that no more misunderstandings will occur!”

“Good,” Weiss said as she headed out to the exit. “Now let's go make my ransom video! And let's be clear that I'm writing the script—the last thing I want my father to think is that this is all a terrible prank!”

Almost as long as people had been speculating and theorizing about what could be found in the Viridian Valley, they had been dreaming and fantasizing about what they would make of it, the grand cities they would build, the new lives they would lead in a place like nothing that had ever been seen in all of Avalon.

There was no shortage of artistic interpretations and depictions in all manner of fiction throughout the years: grand castles and cities built out of the blackened rock surrounding the area; elaborate wooden mansions dotting the trees and the vibrant vegetation, dirt roads thriving with flowers and herbs, animals left to roam and roost wherever they pleased; sometimes even a modern city like Candela or Lumania, glass skyscrapers, neosteel infrastructure, paved roads and carefully controlled and cultivated patches of nature amidst all the artificial construction, the ultimate symbolism of mankind's domination and control over the surroundings their ancestors were slaves to for so long.

**They were all wrong, if only because no human had ever attempted anything like what the Fae had done.**

The Bastion was the trees, the mountains, and the vegetation—their homes, infrastructure, and even their transportation built in their hollowed out cores, resting on top of them as foundations, or grown in such specific, intentional patterns and directions, it couldn't have gotten that way by itself. Weiss felt her attention dragged every which way as they walked through the streets of the city—or rather, its many hanging bridges, the giant walkways carved out of even bigger branches, the tunnels and pathways going into and around the rocks and mountains.

She saw Fae in specially made robes and protective gear tending over saplings, fungus, and even living creatures, magic flowing from their hands as they tended to their wards, guiding and accelerating their growth into their desired shapes, grafting and inducing features and details they wouldn't have in the wild.

Water poured out from the faces of rocks and mountains, being piped in by pulsing vines to their crop planters and their homes, spraying out from fountains and intricately carved statues and memorials, adding beauty to the surroundings and a place for citizens of all ages to play and enjoy themselves.

Fae of every shape and size going about their days, tending to all manner of weird and strange animals, giving packages to birds and sending them off, leading their lumbering pack-beasts through the walkways, training ferocious looking predators to attack certain target dummies and not others; going about the various stores and workshops trading, working, or just chatting with one another; strolling about enjoying the scenery, if they weren't immersed in their own version of tablets and comm-crystals, looking not unlike the citizens of Candela when they blogged, caught up on each other on social media, and enjoyed funny holos of cats.
And all the while, Weiss couldn't help but notice the sheer number of eyes looking back at her, the heads doing double takes, the people stopping to take pictures of her before sending it to others.

She didn't understand a word of what they were saying, but regardless of language barriers, you could always tell when everyone was talking about you.

The various “Watchers” posted almost everywhere were particularly wary of her, their eyes trained on her, their weapons at the ready, and their animals heeled, if only for the moment. Some of them were only pulling back just hard enough on their attack wolves’ leashes to keep them from getting away, not slashing their paws at the air, barking and slavering at Weiss with their powerful jaws full of massive fangs, their fur bristling and crackling with what looked like electricity.

Ruby, Blake, and Penny surrounded her in a triangle, casting glares and barking warnings at others to stay back.

“I'm not very popular here, am I?” Weiss muttered under her breath.

“Your father's expeditions into the Valley have caused very serious disruption to the peace we usually enjoy here, causing a significant amount of panic, unease, and diversion of time, resources, and labour that would have otherwise gone to different projects,” Penny explained. “And this is not even going into all the casualties.”

Weiss blinked, feeling the pit of her stomach drop. “… Ah. Right.”

Weiss feet were aching by the time they finally made it to the tallest, biggest tree in the very center of the Bastion; she realized she really should have thought of packing at least a pair of bedroom slippers, because apparently the Fae were not fans of footwear of any sort, just straps around part of their feet, or bands of leather, metal, and bone strapped to their toes or heels, obviously meant for combat.

The inside of the “Tree of Life” was not unlike a tower, its circular floors built with giant open ring in the center to let you stare up, marvel at how massive the structure was, see the thick canopy at the very top, the sunlight peeking through the leaves.

“How tall is this tree…?” Weiss asked, dumbstruck.

“Pretty fucking tall,” an unknown, ominous voice said.

Weiss turned, and found herself staring into the face of her nightmares, the terror that haunted the dreams of Avalonians for centuries, like the bastard child of of a rat, a deer, and a wolf, with glowing red eyes that pierced into your soul.

The physical manifestation of fear itself waved. <Hey Ruby.>

<Uncle Qrow!> Ruby cheered, before she pounced and hugged him.
Warning: As mentioned in previous chapters, Ruby and the others are going to fake Weiss death. There's going to be fake blood and a faked execution, and believe me, things WILL get dark and very intense soon.

Your heart pounding so fast, liable to stop dead at any moment from sheer terror. Icy claws wrapping themselves around your chest, piercing your lungs, making it impossible to breathe. Every muscle in your body paralyzed, your eyes affixed to that nightmarish face, feeling those red orbs plunge into your very being, killing you little by little from the inside.

Weiss clutched Eluna in a death-grip, cold sweat pouring down every inch of her skin, her mind screaming at her to look away, away from the face of her impending doom, her body unable to do anything but stare.

“Weiss...?” Ruby asked. <Oh crap--!>

She grabbed the mask on Qrow’s face, pulled it off, and shoved it underneath her cloak and out of sight.

Then, just as suddenly as the most vicious, visceral panic attack Weiss had ever experienced started, it stooped.

She gasped for breath, still shaking. “W-What was that?!?” she whispered, her eyes throbbing, a piercing, awful pain slowly spreading in her head.

“That would be the Mask of the Keeper,” Qrow replied. “Specially carved, designed, and improved over the centuries to induce screaming, paralyzing terror, and sudden bowel evacuation in 9 out of 10 humans.”

“How...?” Weiss muttered.

“Magic,” Ruby said as she was lowered back onto the floor. “Don’t know how it works, but it works! Anyway... Weiss: this is my Uncle Qrow!” she said, gesturing to him.

Qrow waved. “Sup. Qrow Branwen, but just call me Qrow,” he said as he walked over and offered his hand—or talon, as the case may have been, as his human shaped hand was covered with a rough and bony layer on both sides, and his “fingers” ended in black claws.

Weiss very carefully took it and got a good look at him as they shook.

What she assumed to be messy, spiky black hair was actually a head of sharp feathers sweeping back from his forehead. His eyes were aquiline, and the skin around his nose and mouth was covered in the same material as his hands, like a beak. Where ears would have been on a human, he only had two holes on the side of his head, covered over by more of his feathers and some fluffy down.

“You’re here to record your ransom video, right?” Qrow asked as he took his talon back. “Studio’s all set, even got a script all written up for you.” He smirked.
Weiss scowled. “There better not be what I think you put in there!”

“What do you think is in there, Weiss?” Ruby asked innocently.

“It’s not important,” Qrow said, still smirking. “Come on, this way,” he said, beckoning with his arm.

Weiss stayed put. “Does you have to be with us?”

“Yes,” Qrow replied. “It’s part of my duties as a senior Watcher, Chronicler, and part-time Keeper for all the Keeper-stuff Ruby can’t do.”

“Keeper-stuff?”

Earlier, in the underground jails of the Bastion.

Qrow was dressed up in a larger version of Ruby’s cloak, the mask on his face, and a pair of fake reindeer antlers on his head. In front of him and backed up against the wall were the survivors of the ill-fated third and fourth expeditions into the Valley.

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU DUMB FUCKS ABOUT GOING INTO THE VALLEY?!” Qrow yelled.

“AAHHHH! NOOOOO...!”

“PLEASE! I’LL DO ANYTHING! JUST LET ME GO...!”

“MOMMY! MOMMY! MOOOMMMMMYYY-YYY-YYY...!”

Underneath the mask, Qrow cringed as his nose was assaulted with a fresh wave of the unmistakable scent of fear and repeatedly soiled underwear.

“Ah,” Weiss replied.

“It’s hard to believe a story where the Keeper is barely 5 feet tall without antlers,” Qrow replied.

“Hey!” Ruby cried. “I’m still growing!”

“Just keep on drinking your milk, and eating vegetables instead of cookies every once in a while, and you’ll be fine in a couple of years,” Qrow replied.

Ruby grumbled under her breath in Actaeon.

“So how many Keepers are there?” Weiss asked.

“Not including part-timers like me?” Qrow replied. “One.”

Weiss blinked, then looked at Ruby. “I thought you said there were other Keepers!”

“Yeah!” Ruby replied. “There was my mom, and her mom, and her mom—stretching all the way back to my great-great-great...” she continued on for about a minute or two “… great-grandma, Gabija!”

Weiss glared at Ruby.
“What...?” Ruby asked.

Weiss groaned. “Nevermind...” she muttered.

Ruby looked at the others, they shrugged, smirked, or showed that they couldn’t really have cared, and the group finally went on their way to the studio.

Weiss supposed she shouldn’t have been too surprised to see that it was just like any other set; the building materials and equipment may have been made out of enchanted rock, wood, or a specially-grown plant, and instead of AV drones it was birds and other small animals, but everything looked the same, from the cameras and the lighting, the sound equipment, and even what she assumed to be a green screen.

In the center of it all, directing everything through a mix of barking orders and moving things around with magic was who Weiss assumed to be Elder Glynda Goodwitch.

She was dressed differently from the other Fae, wearing especially vibrant robes with intricate designs, the patterns of vines, roses, and animals pulsing with bright magic, sometimes even moving by themselves. But even without the outfit, the aura of confidence, authority, and power she exuded would have told you she was the one in charge.

… However, Weiss found herself incredibly distracted by her animal features: a pair of large, floppy bunny ears, and a poofy, cotton-ball tail poking out from the back of her robes.

Glynda turned around, her mouth a hard line, her eyes narrowed just slightly enough to be the right mix of intimidating and cool. “You’re late,” she said, her tone level, but with an edge that warned you not to annoy her ever again.

<Our sincerest apologies, Elder Goodwitch,> Blake said cutting through between them. <We had a delay back at the hospital.>

Glynda raised her eyebrows, silently asking them to explain.

“Just a normal case of miscommunication, Elder Goodwitch!” Penny explained. “Ruby accidentally told Weiss we were going to *kill* her, not *fake* her death.”

Glynda’s expression remained neutral, but you could just feel how hard she was resisting the urge to put her palm to her face.

“And I assume this has been cleared up?” she asked.

“Yes,” Weiss said as she stepped up, “alongside the fact that I’ll be writing the script to my ransom video.”

“Oh, c’mon!” Qrow cried. “Can’t we just use mine? I worked hard on that—legitimately this time!”

Glynda ignored him. “Give me one good reason to let you do this.”

“I know my father better than any of you, and know just what to say to press his buttons,” Weiss replied.

Glynda smiled. “Good reason,” she said, before she turned around to the crews and animals awaiting filming, and shouted something in Actaeon. They soon abandoned their posts and went to a buffet table on the side or formed their own little groups to the side.
She turned back to Weiss. “Can you do it in an hour? I would like these attacks to stop before your father can mobilize another expedition.”

“Deal.”

Little under an hour later, the studio crew was back to work, getting the lighting and sound calibrated, meticulously putting make-up on Weiss to make her look the part of “poor, innocent hostage scared out of her wits,” and double-checking that her new script had been transcribed properly in the teleprompter.

They were only getting one chance to do this, since Jacques had unintentionally given them the perfect opportunity: a press conference in one of Candela’s largest auditoriums, broadcasting through all of Avalon on unsecured channels that the Fae could easily hack into.

Ruby was wearing a mask identical to the original, only without the nightmare-inducing magic. “It tends to mess up cameras of any kind,” she explained, her voice talking on a deep, ominous tone from the modulator inside.

She still looked unnerving to look with the still glowing red eyes, but at least she wasn’t inciting panic attacks from a mere glance like Qrow had earlier.

“Got the bleeder bandages and your fake scythe!” Penny said as she came up with container with green strips of plant matter and a scythe that looked almost identical to real thing.

“’Bleeder bandages’?” Weiss asked.

“An extremely common prop in both live and recorded productions!” Penny explained. “It simulates grievous wounds and other types of injuries while leaving the wearer completely unharmed. It’s filled with fake blood, you see, and the membrane is thin and sensitive; even with a dull prop like this, just a little bit of pressure is enough to break it.”

Weiss looked at the strips dubiously. “I doubt these are going to trick anyone...”

“That’s because you haven’t put them on, silly!” Ruby said as she took one of the strips and put it on her arm. Weiss watched with a mixture of interest and unease as the bleeder bandage instantly, perfectly mimicked the colour of her skin. “See?” she said, holding it up.

If she hadn’t seen it come on, she wouldn’t have had the slightest clue where it was.

The small crew manning the jury-rigged and salvaged communications tech from the expedition gave Glynda the thumbs up. “We’re ready to broadcast on your command—make it soon, that press conference isn’t going to last all day.”

“I know how long the average Avalonian’s attention span is, don’t worry,” Weiss said as she put a bleeder strip around the front of her neck. “Just one more thing—Ruby! Penny!”

“Yeah Weiss?” Ruby asked as the two of them came over.

She pointed at Ruby. “Just in case my father refuses to surrender, I want you to practice ‘slitting’ my throat.” She pointed at Penny. “You go see if she does anything that's going to make someone reviewing the footage suspicious.”

Penny nodded. “As you wish, Weiss.”
Ruby balked. “Wait, what?!”

“Wasn’t it you and Blake’s idea to fake my own death?” Weiss asked.

“Well, yeah! But like in the, in the...” Underneath the mask, Ruby's face scrunched up struggled to find the right word.

“Threatening to kill her way, but not actually going through with it?” Penny offered.

“Yes! That! Thanks, Penny.” Ruby turned back to Weiss. “Are you sure about this, Weiss...? He's your dad, he's probably--”

Weiss scowled. “Just do it,” she growled before she knelt down to the floor.

Ruby reluctantly guided her prop knife to her neck, where the bleeder strip was.

“Ruby!” Weiss yelled.

Ruby pulled away. “What?”

“Your hands are shaking!” Weiss cried. “Who's going to believe you've actually killed me if it looks like you've got stage-fright?”

Ruby whined. “This is really messed up, Weiss! Your dad can’t possibly think that we’re not serious, right?”

Weiss didn’t reply.

“Right...?”

“How about Weiss pretends to grab the handle, hold her steady whilst pretending that she’s trying to stop her?” Penny suggested.

“Let’s try it,” Weiss said.

Ruby frowned. “Weiss--”

Weiss stood up, and looked Ruby in the eyes. “Ruby?” she asked calmly.

“Yeah...?”

“You want these expeditions in the Valley to stop, right? You don’t want any more people to get hurt or killed? Or for anyone else to come sending another expedition for a good, long time?”

Ruby nodded meekly.

“Then I need you to act as cold, bloodthirsty, and cruel as you possibly can—leave absolutely no doubt in my father’s mind that you’re serious, that you’ll kill me if he doesn’t agree to a complete surrender. Can you do this for me...?”

Ruby looked down.

Weiss expression softened as tilted her head back up, gently removed her mask and looked her in the eyes. “Ruby: can you do this for me? Please?”

Ruby sighed. “… If I have to ‘kill’ you, can you do all the work? I don’t think I can get my hands to
stop shaking.”

Weiss nodded.

“We're running out of time here!” Glynda called out.

“Coming!” Ruby called out. She turned back to Weiss. “Are you sure you can’t get my Uncle Qrow to do it instead?”

Weiss shook her head. “It’s going to be very suspicious if the female Keeper of the Grove suddenly sounds like a man.” She paused, casting a glare at Qrow standing in the corner. “Plus, I have this sneaking suspicion he’ll probably make a stupid joke that’ll ruin everything...”

“Sorry, Ruby!” Qrow called out. “She’s definitely right on that one!”

Ruby sighed. “Okay...” She put the mask back on. “Let’s do this.”
Warning: This chapter is REALLY dark and disturbing. Blood, graphic if faked deaths, and drama abound.

There was nothing more Jacques Schnee would have loved to do than to rip into the entirety of the AAF, call them out as the incompetent, overconfident, poorly prepared fools they really were. First they haul away his eldest like she were a dangerous, unstable criminal. Next, they hold him and his one remaining child prisoner in their own home, and not only did they completely fail at stopping the invader that had been terrorizing them constantly, they managed to completely destroy Weiss’ room and leave a permanent scar on the face of a grand masterpiece of architecture that should have lasted till the end of time. And to top off the ever-escalating series of blunders and PR disasters that plagued him, Weiss had been kidnapped, too, and no one had a damn clue who had done it, how they had apparently managed to solve the problem of human teleportation when Candela’s brightest minds were estimating “significant progress within the next few centuries” at the most ideal, or how they were going to track them down.

Unfortunately, business required no shortage of compromise, of keeping ugly and rickety bridges standing, of sacrificing the fleeting pleasures of the now for the greater, lasting rewards of the future.

“…Rest assured, the AAF will find out who these kidnappers are, rescue Ms. Schnee, and stop them from ever doing so despicable a crime as this ever again,” the AAF’s current camera-friendly General was saying.

Camera drones flashed and zoomed about, trying to get the best shots within their prescribed fly-zones. Journalists took notes and began to refine the questions that they had ready long before they even got word of the event. Jacques continued to look morose and somber, rather than the burning, explosive fury he actually felt.

There were times when his temper was to be unleashed, and this was not one of them.

“We now open the floor to questions,” one of his many PR spokespeople said.

Reporters all shouted and physically fought each other, as if a selection system hadn’t been instated for the sake of sanity; old habits truly died hard.

It the draw fell on the Avalon News Network. “Mr. Schnee! Mr. Schnee!” their reporter cried out. “Should these terrorists contact you to attempt to arrange for your daughter’s release, will you negotiate with them?”

Jacques put his hand to his face, to hide the way his face always contorted whenever he was told that someone was threatening him into action. The moment passed, he calmly put his mouth to the microphone, and said:

“As my predecessor Nicholas Schnee has always done, I will not bow to anyone who thinks that force is the way to get what you want. Then, now, and forever, the Schnee Power Company and I
myself do not negotiate with terrorists.”

And with those tempting words, Fate could no longer resist.

All over Avalon, the feed broke and flickered until a new image appeared on HoloVision screens, comm-crystal projections, and the surfaces of tablets everywhere:

The Keeper of the Grove.

Panic washed over the crowded auditorium, and all over Avalon. “I’ll believe her when I see her,” was a common saying in Candela, and that moment, the whole city became believers.

“Hello, Jacques,” the Keeper said. “You’re a stubborn, stubborn man, aren’t you? You just don’t know when to quit, just like when you had that drilling operation in Sekhmet.”

Jacques gritted his teeth.

“The locals warned you. Your own experts told you there was something very unusual about the core you were trying to reach, that you should have postponed the excavation until they knew more. Even your own family could feel that trouble was coming, but of course, you know best, don’t you, Jacques…~?

“So you kept drilling, and drilling, and drilling, until you finally reached paydirt, and we all found out just what was down there.

“And it only cost tens of thousands of lives, two of them your own wife and your unborn son—I do so hope he’s been reborn to a much better father than you ever were.”

Jacques looked back to the IT teams and AAF cybersecurity crews on the side. Faces were hunched over devices, but it didn't look like any of them were tracking the signal down soon. One of them motioned for him to keep talking.

Jacques he turned back to the mic. “What do you want…?” he asked, trying to keep his voice level.

“You should have died in that outbreak, Jacques. You should have just left your lovely family at home, but no—you insisted that you all be there, for your newest, biggest breakthrough, like a family. Though the pictures that did get published, the articles they made weren’t exactly what you wanted…”

Jacques gritted his teeth. “I'll ask you again: what do you want?”

“I want you to stop going into the Viridian Valley, Jacques. I was in a good mood that night of your first little expedition—even thought I might spare your daughter and her guards, shake things up a little! Apparently murdering every trespasser that comes through can get boring…

“… But now, thanks to you—you, you power-hungry egomaniac—I’ve changed my mind.”

Back in the studio, the camera zoomed out, to show Ruby putting the blade of her prop scythe up to Weiss' neck.

“You’ve already lost wife, your unborn son, your eldest daughter—all because your silly little ego was more important than their lives. Shall we add your second born to the list? I’ll give
you some time to think it over...”

“You’re bluffing!” Jacques yelled.

The Keeper giggled. She pulled the scythe away from Weiss, “slashed” the inside of her arm. She showed off the “wound” to the camera, let it stay there for a good while, letting everyone see the “blood” pouring down from it.

“I assure you, Jacques, I am very, very, very serious. Do you think I won’t do it? Think of it, Jacques—you’re a smart man who’s always right, and never wrong, aren’t you? What do we have to lose if we kill our one and only hostage, hmm?”

She put the scythe back to Weiss neck, she whimpered.

“You don’t know who we are. You don’t know where we are. But you do know that if you don’t stop, there’s no stopping us from doing this all over again either—hope your senior staff have told their families they loved them recently!”

Jacques slammed his fists on the table. “YOU MONSTER!”

The Keeper giggled. “Funny: who’s the one who keeps sacrificing other people’s lives for all that power you seek? Whose blood keeps the lights on in your cities? Whose corpses did you build that empire of yours over?

“It’s just two words, Jacques:

“I Surrender.

“See? Simple. Why don’t you try it with me?”

“Fuck you!”

The Keeper giggled. “Wrong answer.”

Ruby gently tilted the scythe closer to Weiss neck, she grabbed the handle and the weapon began to shake from their “struggle.”

“Father! Please! Just do it!” she screamed.

Jacques stared at the screen, shaking and trembling with fury.

“Say it with me now: ‘I surrender.’”

“What do you want?! Money?! Technology?! Land?!”

The Keeper shook her head. “That’s not how you say ‘I surrender,’ Jacques. And Nivian is my second language! For shame.”

“He surrenders! He surrenders!” yelled one of the PR reps Jacques had brought.

“Doesn’t count if it’s not him, sorry,” the Keeper hummed. “One last chance, Jacques. Come on now, I know you can do it! Say it:

“I surrender.”
The crowd was in a panicked frenzy now, people were shouting into their HV receivers, their comm-crystals, their tablets, if they hadn’t already stopped watching, anticipated the worst.

And still, Jacques remained silent.

Weiss pulled the prop scythe across her neck, breaking a neat, clean line over the bleeder bandage.

Ruby dropped it in surprise. Weiss stared at the screen with eyes full of betrayal and *hurt*, keeping herself on camera for a few moments, letting them watch the “blood” run down from her neck, before she let herself fall to the side.

It was so quiet in the auditorium everyone heard the sound of her head hitting the floor.

Ruby stared at the camera, frozen. With the mask on, she betrayed no emotion, looked like she was just silently staring at the audience.

Glynda cut the feed.

The face of the Keeper disappeared, replaced with the stunned face of Jacques Schnee.

An aide carefully reached out to him. “Sir…?”

“**I’LL KILL THEM!**” Jacques roared.

Guards rushed to calm him down, he struck one across the face so hard they dropped to the floor. The other tackled him to the table.

“**I’LL BURN THAT FORSAKEN VALLEY TO THE GROUND…!**” Jacques roared, his voice echoing through the microphones and all of Avalon before he was hauled away.

Back at the Valley, Ruby tore off her mask, knelt down, and picked Weiss up from the floor. “Oh, crap—Weiss, are you okay? You didn’t hit your head too hard, did you? These wood floors are really—”

She stopped as she noticed the tears welling up in her eyes.

Ruby frowned. “Weiss…?”

She lunged forward, buried her face in Ruby’s shoulder, wrapping her arms around her as tightly as she could before she began to cry.

Ruby slowly, gingerly hugged her back.

Glynda began to quietly usher everyone else out.
“Day 7 of my imprisonment:

“From what little news of the outside world I’ve been allowed, the expeditions in the Valley have officially stopped. Regardless of if the people thought that Ruby was real, or she was just a new terrorist group using the monicker, no one is planning on returning any time soon, for superstitious beliefs, or the massive damage my father has caused to the SCP’s coffers and the company's already poor reputation.

“Speaking of whom, the official story is that his removal as CEO of the Schnee Power Company and the corporate boards he sat on is temporary, that the vacation he's taking to some far-off, isolated resort is to give him time to mourn and relax, escape the stress and the ugly aftermath of my 'death.'

“But I'm pretty sure anyone can read the writing on the wall, know that his thrones won't be waiting for him when gets back, if ever.

“There's already rumours of plans to buy Manor Schnee via eminent domain and renovate it into a proper military base—the personnel and the equipment are already well-established there, the location is very secure and has numerous important facilities already constructed, and the troops rather enjoy the horde of servant drones, and are more than willing to put up a fund to keep them around.

“Meanwhile, here in the Bastion, the Eldan Council are still busy discussing what exactly to do now—apparently all the equipment they'd salvaged, and the information they gotten from their numerous 'interrogations' into the survivors from previous expeditions has created a gigantic backlog of paperwork, unforeseen issues, and new research projects.

“And though it pains me to admit it, I am very, very low on their list of priorities.”

She heard footsteps from outside her cell; she paused and sat up, until they passed by and faded away. She laid back down, shifted a while to get comfortable again on her cot, then continued to speak.

“No one had expected that I would make it impossible—or at least, very, very difficult—to return to human society, least of all myself. No one wants me around, and those that do are either Ruby, or 'Makers' who are far too eager to study me for mysterious, undisclosed reasons. And no one has the heart to throw me out out of the walls and leave me to the wildlife, as befitting the Fae's rather humane and charitable philosophy towards governance.

“Hope is fading ever faster, but I'm slowing down its decay by looking at the bright side of things:

“I have a very nice prison cell!

“It's high up in one of the tallest trees of the Bastion, a window to let sunshine and fresh air in, a curtain I can pull down at any time, a comfortable cot, bright light for when it gets dark, even indoor plumbing! Though it's limited to a sink, a toilet, and a bucket with a dipper in it, the nigh unlimited supply of hot water makes up for it.

“Whatever minerals are in the hot springs, they are doing wonders for my feet, skin, and sanity.

“The Watchers were nice enough to let me keep Eluna, treat me with respect and never use more force than is strictly necessary, and feed me regularly with a decent variety of food—nothing
gourmet, for sure, but a far cry from the nutriblocks and protein paste some jails in Avalon use!

“I tasted one when Winter got it mixed up with her luggage. It was terrible, and I doubt they've gotten any better over the years.

“Ruby has even been kind enough to use her influence in Fae society to get me this very recorder I'm using, and some copies of books in Nivian to occupy myself with, the originals used by the thriving black market of unofficial Actaeon translations.

“They're mostly incredibly trashy romance novels or painfully predictable and simplistic ‘adventure' stories, and reading them makes me feel like my brain cells are slowly committing suicide, one by one, but the thought is much appreciated.”

A voice echoed from her cell’s PA system—a series of hollowed out wooden tubes. “Schnee, you’ve got a visitor,” one of the watchers said.

Weiss turned on her other side, to the receiver beside her bed. “Let her in,” she said.

To the recorder, she quietly added, “I actually have no control about who enters my cell and when, but it's nice to feel like I have some control over my life, after my attempt to be free of external influences went horribly, horribly wrong.”

She stopped recording and sat up as the door opened. One bulky Fae guard walked in, her giant axe clearly on display as came over and cuffed Weiss’ hands. She was a political prisoner and no one thought for a moment that she could be dangerous, but the Fae liked to err on the side of caution.

A second guard came in, ushering in a familiar guest.

Ruby waved with her free hand, the other carrying a small sack. “Hi Weiss!”

“Did the Eldan Council decide already?” Weiss asked, feeling Hope stir in her chest.

Ruby's smile turned uneasy. “Uh, yeah, no. They're still talking, and it doesn't look like they're going to be done soon.”

Weiss felt Hope get brutally crushed once more. “Oh.”

“I’m sure they’ll finish soon! It’s been like, what, a week? They’ve got to be reaching a decision about you soon!”

Weiss decided not point out that this was almost exactly what she’d said the other six visits.

“Anyway, I've got great news: Uncle Qrow finally got permission to try and contact your sister!”

Weiss blinked, then beamed. “Really?!”

“Yup! He knows some people who owe him big favours! You, uh, owe him a ‘fuck-ton of favours’ now, however many that is.”

Weiss nodded. “Fine with me! I can’t believe he actually managed to find an in with the Queensguard!”

Silence.

Weiss smile slowly faded. “… He’s just going to call the Anonymous Tip Line, isn’t he?”
“Yeeep… BUT!” Ruby pulled out a data-stick—human design, not Fae, complete with an adapter. “He can pass on a message from you. The Watchers will have to approve it for sending, and you’ll have to be careful not to mention anything like where you are, exactly, or that our cities are totally a thing, but they agreed to let you tell her that your death was totally fake, so long as the details never reach your dad!”

Weiss snorted. “That won’t be a problem.”

“Great! So, you want to go think up something, or just go full improper with this?”

“‘Impromptu,’ you mean?”

“Yeah!” Ruby paused. “What did I say?”

Weiss shook her head. “Just ask Penny. Hand me my recorder, please?”

She made her message. It took a few tries, from either the Watchers telling her she put in too much info, or her bursting into tears and spilling everything, but eventually, they got something that both parties were happy with.

“Can he make sure it’s going to make it to her?” Weiss asked as her guard kindly mopped up her tears and snot for her with a tissue.

Ruby shrugged. “We’re shamans, craftsmen, and scientists, Weiss, not miracle workers.” She smiled. “But knowing my Uncle Qrow, he’ll find a way—he always does.”

They stuck around for some idle chatter—it was impromptu hunting season again, as the wild animals were getting too populous, too daring, and too close to the walls for comfort—until Ruby’s visiting hours were over.

“See you, Weiss!” she said as she waved goodbye as she dropped off the sack.

“Bye Ruby,” Weiss replied.

The Watchers were obliged to check thoroughly check it again—like humans, smuggling contraband in new and interesting ways was nothing new to them. It had contained the same thing as always, though:

Chocolate chip cookies, and a big container of milk from the local “cows.”

The trick was to go in a crowd.

Face recognition technology had advanced so much that they could pick out individual faces in a densely packed sea of people spanning several miles, but that was only if you knew the exact face you were looking for, and Qrow took great pains to make sure that the ones he put on was one wanted to remember and would avoid recognizing in a high-definition holograph.

It helped that it was easy to switch out his prostheses—new pair of fake ears, different nose, all new made-up skin condition, “alternative gene-modification,” or horrific lab accident to tell anyone who bothered to ask.

But in the end, it all boiled down to merging into the right groups of people, taking care to never be caught alone in the middle of the street, leaving some other guy to catch the Peackeeper’s attention—“just like a herd animal,” he thought, smiling to himself.
Eventually, he dropped off a bus and to his destination—the “Dark Side” of Candela, home of the people that had been left behind, wanted to be left the fuck alone, or were on the left side of the tracks. He sighed happily as he could finally walk down the streets freely; no one was going to bother remembering his face, and he would do the same for them.

All the gaudy neon signs and chintzy advertising made it difficult to see anything properly, anyway.

He continued onto the Null Set—an illegal bar, didn’t officially exist in the city records, with an owner that had a love for programming humour. It wasn't his scene—too many hackers, “modding” enthusiasts, and would-be revolutionaries for his taste—but it was the best place for discrete exchanges of information, legal or otherwise, business or pleasure.

Qrow headed up to the bar, ordered a drink that was a far too colourful and named weird, tried to enjoy it for a while until he finally found an opportunity to talk to the tall, lithe cyborg beside him. “Hey, Fish, I got a question: why is it that every single one of you I meet is fucked up in the head in some way?” he asked.

“We are forged in strife./ Broken. Fixed. Broken again./ Powerful, but scarred.” Kajiki replied.

“Huh. That explains a whole lot actually.”

“Indeed.”

Qrow discretely passed on the data stick with Weiss’ message. “Sure it’s going to make it to her?”

Kajiki looked at him disdainfully. “If you can’t trust me/ The shady ‘borg at the bar/ Then who can you trust…?” they said as they downloaded the info, before they crushed the stick in their hand.

Qrow smirked. “Ain’t that always the million Uroch question…?”

They sat there for a while, Qrow drinking and Kajiki “trancing” for a while, before Qrow left the bar and rented one of the heavily encrypted lines on the side.

“Queensguard Anonymous Tip Line,” a curt, professional female voice said, slightly distorted and broken up.

“Got a message for one Winter Schnee: your little sister says you shouldn’t do anything drastic. If you do, she’s going to be real pissed, believe me,” he said, before he hung up.

He left and went to find a much better bar to spend the Urochs he’d been lent as he’d called the Queensguard Tip Line, just like he told the other Watchers.

Elsewhere, in a section of the Bastion few knew about, and even fewer could access, the Eldan Council continued their meeting, Glynda sitting alone at a table with projections of her fellows before her.

<… Well, I think we’ve discussed this matter to death—shall we all take a vote on it, or give it another day of reflection?> Ozpin asked.

<My decision is as firm as the day I made it: she stays!> Port cried. <There’s no question she can prove herself a very valuable asset indeed. After all, one does not slaughter the pups of a killer wolf, one takes them in, raises them with love and care, so they may grow up to lend you their power, their majesty, brothers in tooth and claw!
Especially if her lineage has proved very formidable indeed...

I concur! Oobleck added. There’s simply too much valuable data at stake, and many future opportunities that would be lost without her—no to mention the leverage she can provide us with, ahem, certain individuals.

Glynda sighed. And for what it’s worth, I still vote ‘No.’ There’s too many unknowns in this decision, much potential for catastrophe, not to mention the eerie parallels...

Ozpin nodded gravely. Indeed. He smiled. All the more reason to monitor her very carefully. Second thoughts, anyone?

There were none.

Ozpin hummed. Then it’s settled: Weiss Schnee will be released to the Viridian Valley on parole, and trained accordingly under Glynda’s guidance.

May I speak freely, Archon? Glynda asked, keeping her voice level.

But of course!

I would just like to say that it’s extremely easy to agree on something when you yourself are not personally responsible for it.

Oh, come now, Glynda; we both know that there’s no joy in any endeavour without a bit of challenge and uncertainty! Port cried.

Maybe you’ll even find a valuable ally in her—stranger things have happened. Oobleck added.

Maybe, Glynda said. But for the moment, she’s just a load that most everyone would rather see locked up than walking the streets as a fellow citizen.

And that’s where care and nurture comes in. The Valley was once just a patch of fertile land, rife with potential, was it not? Ozpin asked, smiling.

Glynda’s nose twitched. I’ll begin drafting the terms of her release immediately.

Ozpin smiled. Excellent. Meeting dismissed, back to the day to day grind, everyone.

Glynda watched the projections of her fellow council members disappear, finally letting her lips curl into a scowl. She sat there brooding for a few moments, before she magicked a scroll into her hand and started thinking.

There was going to be a lot of precaution to make it work this time, and the precedents were not encouraging in the slightest...
Chapter 23

The terms of Weiss’ parole were surprisingly simple:

One, she could only freely move around in the Bastion, and could not exit the walls of the city or travel to any of the many other settlements in the Viridian Valley without Ruby and an additional escort consisting of Penny and Blake, or just Qrow.

Two, she’d have to get a job, or at the very least, prove that she was being useful to the Fae in some way. Glynda recommended joining the Watchers—the “Order” that was a combination police force, army, and forest rangers—but Weiss was going to take her chances with other work that didn’t involve putting life and limb at risk, and whose legitimate claims for hazard pay included “Partially Eaten By Predators.”

And three, she’d have to live with Ruby and Qrow at their home, where Blake and Penny also happened to be staying.

There were other small details and nuances such as the fact that like most citizens, she had restricted access to “the Codex”—the Fae’s storage for every single piece of data and information they’ve ever collected since they first became sentient and organized—being forced to learn Actaeon for everyone’s benefit, and being tested for something Penny translated as “the Gift” after a month’s time or so.

“This is… actually a whole lot less than I was expecting!” Weiss said as she sat in Glynda’s office.

“What were you expecting?” Glynda replied from behind her desk. “Tracker collars? Constant watcher escorts? Being forced to have a Governor installed and all your thoughts and memories regularly uploaded to the Codex? You’re a hostage, Schnee, not Public Enemy #1.”

Weiss nodded. “It’s just with who my father was and all…”

“That was your father,” Glynda said. “If we based all of our decisions and judgments entirely on your lineage and the actions of your ancestors, then the Fae would have extinguished themselves long ago from nepotism, incompetency, and old grudges.

“Though I must warn you that there’s always an element of it in many organizations and social interactions.”

Weiss sighed. “I’m not surprised…”

“Fae and human society are not that different, Schnee. When you really get down to it, we’re all just animals working together to make better lives for ourselves, and the ones we love and care about.”

“I figured when I saw someone forwarding funny cat videos to their kids on Storybook.”

Glynda nodded. “Indeed. Do you have any other pressing questions? If it’s anything regarding Fae society in general, specific terms, or cultural attitudes—‘the ropes,’ so to speak— you can just ask Qrow or Penny; its their job as Chroniclers.”

“Just one: how do you know Nivian so well?” Weiss asked.

“I did as those that are keeping your Old World's Tongues alive: I studied it, I immersed myself in it, and I used it frequently with others who spoke Nivian better than I. I suggest you find something
entertaining to enjoy; our industries may not be as robust or prolific as you humans, but it's still there.”

“You learned Nivian through cartoons?”

“Yes. I'm particularly fond of the one with the rabbit who keeps outsmarting his human hunter, among other antagonists,” Glynda said with a straight face.

Weiss sniggered. “I'll just be going now, Elder Goodwitch,” she said as she slipped out of her chair.

Glynda's nose twitched. “Please, try your best to make the reasons of our next meeting much more positive,” she said coolly.

Weiss nodded before she turned around and made haste to leave.

A little after the door was shut behind her, Glynda sighed. “Should of turned left at Albuquerque...” she muttered to herself.

Outside, Weiss finally burst into laughter, clutching her sides as her eyes watered with tears. Glynda's small army of secretaries and assistants mostly ignored her, but their supervisor glared at her. Weiss gave them an apologetic look, got some tissues to clean up, and made for the waiting room.

Blake was on one of the benches, quietly reading a book. Qrow sat beside her nursing a wooden container of locally produced alcohol, discretely sipping from it when the avian “security camera” wasn't looking at him. Penny was standing and smiling, the glow of her eyes and arms dimmed to show that she was on standby mode.

Ruby stopped pacing around the area and ran up to her, almost crashing into Weiss. She tilted forward for a moment, Weiss leaned way back to avoid getting poked by her antlers. Ruby quickly fell back on the balls of her feet and asked:

“Well? How'd it go?”

“If I understand it correctly…” Weiss smiled. “I'm mostly free!”

Ruby cheered. “Yay! Congratulations, Weiss!”

Weiss yelped as she suddenly hugged her, dodged her head to the side and just narrowly avoided getting butted with her horns.

Ruby quickly pulled away and looked sheepishly at her. “Sorry...” she muttered.

Weiss sighed. “Just warn me the next time, alright?”

Ruby nodded. “I will!”

“Got any more business here, Princess?” Qrow asked as he got up. “I mean, we're all on the clock and getting paid to guard you until you get out of the Tree, but babysitting duty doesn't have the best time/profit investment compared to everything else we could be doing.”

Weiss shook her head. “Are you all seriously going to leave me alone as soon as I'm out the door, just like that?”

“Yes!” Ruby replied. “Because I, your Parole Watcher, trust you,” she hummed
Blake said with a straight face.

Weiss frowned and looked to Penny.

“Do you want a rough translation of her exact words, or the essence of what she said?” Penny asked. “The latter is much faster.”

“Gist,” Weiss replied.

“Blake confirmed your suspicion, and wishes for you to stay safe,” Penny hummed.

The both of them could tell that wasn't exactly what she meant, but they let it slide.

“I would like to add that the Bastion may be the safest city in all of the Viridian Valley, but the Valley is not exactly the safest place in general, so please, always be on your guard for the numerous dangers that lurk here!”

Weiss frowned. “Like what, exactly?”

“Mutated wildlife and plants, mostly,” Qrow replied. “All that raw magic just floating around, escaped Maker experiments and work animals getting freaky with the natives, plus the unforeseen long-term consequences of science projects from the past tend to have some pretty interesting effects.”

“Don't worry though, Weiss!” Ruby said. “If there's one part of my job I'm great at, it's making sure the populations are in check, so no one gets killed and/or eaten by wild animals—so long as they stay within the border walls, at least, because otherwise I'd never have time for anything else!”

“So in case it wasn't obvious, you'd best stay in until you've toughened up a lot and got yourself some decent gear,” Qrow added. “The critters lurking out there will fuck anyone's shit up.”

“And that's terrifying, along with being really gross and confusing!” Ruby added.

Weiss shuddered. “Relax: I'm never going to step foot outside the gates if I can help it. I'm a city girl, anyway.”

“Yeah, but you're not in Candela anymore,” Qrow murmured.

<Hey, sorry for butting in, but can we please go now?> Blake asked. <Some of us have to work to eat.>

They made their way out of the Tree of Life, stopping only to pick up a care package for Weiss.

True to their word, Qrow and Blake split from the group the moment Weiss had both feet out of the entrance.

She didn't mind; not having them around made the sweet feeling of finally being (mostly) free all the better. She stepped into a less shaded patch of sunlight and felt its warmth on her skin, sucked in a deep breath of fresh air, before she gagged and choked on the cumulative scent of so many citizens and animals who spent more time outdoors and working than in the hot springs.

“Don't worry, Weiss!” Penny said. “I can say with confidence that your biology will eventually get used to the unique aroma of Fae cities—in time, you won't even notice it!”
Weiss pulled the fabric of her dress up to her nose, then pulled it back down when the breathable fabric did nothing to hide the smell. “Let's just go to wherever my new home is...” she grumbled. “Where do you live, anyway?”

“Pretty far from here!” Ruby replied. “But don't worry: since you're no longer a hostage, you can use the Tubes like we do!”

“The Tubes?” Weiss asked.

“It's--” Penny started, before Ruby grabbed her and stopped her.

“It's better if you see it for yourself,” Ruby said, smiling.

Weiss had a sinking feeling about it, but it wasn't like she had much of a choice.

They walked to the nearest “station,” an extremely short distance away considering the Tree of Life was the Bastion's version of a city hall, among other things. As they walked up to it, Weiss noticed that they were getting closer and closer to some of the massive aqueducts, to a joint that exited in multiple directions. The center of it had three workers, one monitoring a terminal, the other two helping passengers in and out of what looked like wooden tubes with unfolding covers.

Her eyes widened as the pit of her stomach fell. “We're not seriously going to...”

“Yes!” Ruby chirped. “Don't worry, Weiss, it's super safe and such a rush, too! Oh, and just so you know, never take the Tubes if you've just eaten, and especially if you're still eating. Trust me on this, neither of them are good combinations.”

Weiss turned to Penny. “What are the chances of me dying in a freak Tubing accident?”

“Almost completely zero!” Penny chirped. “Not including the first few months of its implementation several hundred years ago, the Tubes are the safest mode of transportation in any Fae settlement. It's been 5 years since the last accident, but even then, the passengers were physically unharmed if traumatized, and the cause was a sudden earthquake that also interfered with many other parts of the Bastion's infrastructure.”

“We build our cities with the intention of making them last forever and stand against almost anything you can throw at them, Weiss,” Ruby said as they fell in line. “You'll be fine.”

Weiss didn't reply, and quietly wondered that if the Keeper of the Grove was real, was the Holy Shepherd's supposedly divine powers true, too?

She didn't reach a conclusion by the time the made it to the front of the line—the Tubes were also very efficient, it seemed. Ruby had gone first to demonstrate how it was done, and Penny had allowed herself to be partially disassembled to show just how secure the cargo hold for a “Log” was.

The both of them smiled at her before the lid was closed, but fact that Penny's head had been detached from the rest of her body rather ruined any reassurance they intended.

<First time, kid?> one of the workers asked, holding up a clawed finger.

Weiss nodded meekly.

<Just close your eyes and keep your mouth shut.> he said and mimed as his companion secured her care package into the cargo hold.
“Thanks,” Weiss whispered.

She was loaded into the tube, ramrod straight on her back. It felt like she was being put in a particularly spacious coffin, and the fact that they were strapping five belts over her body—on her feet, her knees, her waist, her chest, and finally across her forehead—didn't help.

The worker smiled, gave her a two-finger salute, and closed the lid. She heard it click securely shut, the grates above her head and by her feet open, and the sound of gently trickling water turn into a deafening roar.

And then, she was off.
Chapter 24

The problem of all safety instructions was that they were very difficult to follow while you were in the midst of trying not to soil yourself in sheer terror.

Weiss managed to follow the handler's instructions of keeping her eyes closed and her mouth shut up until the first hard turn five seconds in, when her log went from going at swift but constant downhill slant, to a 90 degree angle drop straight down.

As some of her internal organs began to shift upwards, Weiss opened her eyes and started screaming.

The ride was less than a minute long, her log only ever slowing down to safely maneuver more hard turns and sheer drops, climbing up the vertical pipes, or waiting for a different log to pass through a junction before she rocketed on through, but the path was full of more twists, turns, climbs, and drops than most roller coaster designer's wildest, most improbable fantasies.

Up, down, to the left, to the right, round the bend, over a hill, under the ground, through a mountain, and once through a loop-d-loop—the Tubes seemed to make it a point to use every single direction possible in three-dimensional space, all in the name of getting their passengers from point A to point B as swiftly as possible.

Her log finally reached its stop, the roar of water quieted down to a steady thrum, Weiss hoarse scream's finally ceased from lack of oxygen. The cover was opened, the handlers at this station unstrapped her, and were kind enough to gently pull her out when they realized she was paralyzed with fear.

Weiss stepped onto the wooden platform of the dock, one shaking, bare foot at a time. Ruby and Penny rushed over to her, the two of them taking over for the handlers.

“You okay, Weiss?” Ruby asked as she held her from the front.

Weiss threw up.

“… Probably should have seen that coming!”

Weiss went off with Penny to the side, to retch and heave into the water than on the floors. Ruby got her clothes cleaned up—to none of Weiss' surprise, every station was well-stocked with cleaning equipment for both the logs and the passengers, going so far as to offer spare clothes at a pittance.

Weiss' stopped shaking, Penny handed her a bottle of water—"Purified and mostly removed of any sort of microbial organism, beneficial or otherwise, until your body fully adjusts,” she explained.

Weiss thanked her and took a slow sips of it. It tasted weird, and having drank water sourced from all over Avalon, that was really saying something. But, she forced herself to swallow it all; no Aquarius Industries deliveries or machines out here.

She recovered, looked around at her surroundings.

When Ruby had said that she lived far away from the city center, she'd imagined something along the lines of a cul-de-sac, a Fae version of the miniature agricultural communes that existed in some of the cities, or maybe even something like Manor Schnee, a few miles out of Candela and connected to its power grid, but otherwise completely independent.
What she saw was wilderness—untamed and unnerving, trees and their massive roots rising up from the ground and above the water, rivaling Candela's skyscrapers in size; vegetation growing uncontrolled on the grass and the mud, just barely hewed back from the road; and the sounds of hundreds if not thousands of frogs, birds, and insects humming and going about their days.

From what she could see, the docks, the aqueduct, and the dirt road leading outwards were the only signs of civilization.

Weiss turned back to the others. “Why does it look like you live in a swamp?” she asked.

“Because I do!” Ruby replied cheerfully.

Weiss turned back to the wilds around them, feeling her stomach begin to sink than rise up into her throat.

“It's not THAT bad!” Ruby continued. “The really dangerous swamp critters aren't don't live even remotely close, and you only ever need a boat to get around when the Flood comes! That's like, what, four or five months from now?”

Weiss didn't reply.

“Come on!” Ruby said as she made her way out. “My house is just a little further out!”

Weiss collected her care package, squeezed her eyes shut, and then began to trek into the swamp, barefoot.

Keeper's Hollow—“or as my Uncle Qrow likes to call it, 'The Bastion's Butthole’”—was a patch of protected wetland, used to help the city combat the intense sun as a heat-sink, and the pouring rains as a storm-drain.

In theory, it was excellent land: spacious, close to a massive source of unpolluted freshwater, with incredibly fertile ground that would have been ideal for large-scale agriculture or a decently sized farming community during the Fury, and nutrient-rich water for aquaculture during the Flood.

In practice, it was dirt cheap real estate in a highly undesirable location, since the Fae had long ago mastered the art of urban agriculture and efficiently housing and moving around densely packed populations.

There were really only two places of interest:

Ruby's personal training grounds, a large collection of rocks, trees, and artificial obstacles that held scars from years if not decades of intense, frequent exercises and drills; and her home proper, a giant crooked tree that sloped to the side, looking not unlike the head of her scythe, if you ignored all the stairs, ladders, and platforms held up by nails, rope, and blatant disregard for the laws of physics.

The rest of it was just more swamp, growing around the long-reclaimed ruins of some ancient village, vines poking out of rotten cabins, fish making their homes among the broken planks of a dock, and what might have been a barn long ago, before a tree inside grew right through its roof.

“I'll get the elevator!” Ruby called out as she dashed up to the base of the tree, climbing up footholds, planks, and rope ladders; Weiss figured she could manage the whole gauntlet in her sleep, literally. She fiddled around for a while before said elevator came down, a fishing boat that had been tied to a motorized pulley system.
Penny climbed in without hesitation, Weiss stopped at the cut-out sides that were its entrance and exit. “Is this thing safe?” she yelled.

“Absolutely!” Ruby replied. “I always keep the system working at 100%! If I didn't, Uncle Qrow would be spending a lot more nights passed out on the ground than on the living room floor!”

Weiss reluctantly climbed aboard. She gripped the bottom of her seat as the boat began to rise back up, the crank creaking, the sides gently rocking, her knuckles turning white. She only let go when it had come to a complete stop, and Penny had climbed out of it.

“Want me to get your bag?” Ruby asked as she pointed at the care package.

“I'll handle it myself,” Weiss replied as she got out. “Is there anywhere I can wash my feet before I head inside?”

Ruby looked at her, confused. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Humans generally dislike tracking mud, dirt, and other related stains inside their homes and buildings; they like to keep a strict separation of 'indoors' and 'outdoors,'” Penny replied.

“Well, that explains a lot...” Ruby mumbled. “Anyway, bathroom's to your left, past the kitchen. Heads up: we don't really do showers or tubs at home in Fae cities, we just use our bathhouses or the rivers.”

“Seriously?!” Weiss cried.

Ruby chuckled. “Weiss, we're outdoors outdoors like 90% of the time, and our home aren't as sealed off from the rest of the world like you humans are! If we had to take a bath every time we got mud on ourselves, we'd have a huge time and water shortage for everything else—especially considering we only ever get rain half the year here!”

Weiss looked at her muddy, gras- stained feet, and sighed. “At least tell me you have soap and hot water like my prison cell did...”

Ruby nodded. “We have plenty!”

“Good enough...” Weiss muttered as she headed to the door.

“The bath house is a great place to hang out, catch up with folks you haven't talked to in a while, and just let off some steam, Weiss!” Ruby said as she hurried over to open it. “My friends Ren and Nora work at one of the restaurants there, and they make these amazing pancakes!

“I'll take you there some time! Not all the time, though. Baths are expensive.”

Ruby unlocked the door—instead of a key and a physical or magical mechanism for locks, tough roots had spread out all over its face and receded only after she pressed her palm to their clumped up center. “Remind me to get you into the gen-mem later!” she said as she stepped in.

“Genetic memory, the door's list of approved DNA signatures for access,” Penny explained.

“I won't have to get any vines growing inside my body again, do I?” Weiss asked warily.

Penny smiled. “Of course not! A reasonably sized saliva sample will do just fine.”

“...”
“Weiss! You coming?” Ruby called out from inside.

Weiss braced herself, and headed in.

It wasn't nearly as bad as she'd been expecting. Aside from the fact that there was a thin layer of mud and dirt packed into the wooden floors, the rest of the house was clean and orderly, everything put away and organized according to a system, much less armour and clothes hanging off chairs and laying on the ground than she expected, and the various containers for alcohol that Qrow consumed on a regular basis were all collected in regularly spaced bins.

As for decorations, she'd describe it as “Simple.”

The home of someone who didn't need or want for much in the way of material things, or couldn't afford it. The living room was essentially just a couch and a few throw pillows for company, all centered around a giant slab of carved rock she assumed to be their HV receiver. The walls were either bare, or covered in post it notes and reminders in a mix of Actaeon and Nivian, with a consistent handwriting style—“Uncle Qrow forgets important things a lot, so he either puts it on the wall before he forgets, or so he'll find it when he's struggling to remember what it was,” Ruby explained.

The rest of it were photos, printed. There were images commemorating particularly memorable hunts for both Qrow and Ruby, one or the both of them goofing off with a trophy body part, or the carcass of their kill. There were images of the two of them having fun in the city and other settlements, sometimes with other Fae Weiss didn't know—Nora and Ren, she guessed the two most frequently recurring duo were. Much more personal photos, like Qrow holding his hands out to a much younger Ruby playing with her scythe, blowing out the candles on a gigantic chocolate chip cookie with ice cream on top of it, and a teary eyed but proud looking Ruby holding up her cut and bleeding hands.

One in particular caught her eye:

Ruby, she thought, until she realized she was much older, and that it was probably her mother—the family resemblance was extremely strong, almost like her daughter was a perfect, younger clone of her. She had a little bundle in her arms, two tiny nubs sticking out from the white cloth.

There was Qrow, a surly looking woman beside her with the same head of black feathers and the avian traits, and to her surprise, two humans on the other side: both blond, father and daughter, wearing the same goofy grins.

“Oh hey, you found my family photo!” Ruby chirped as she walked over. “It's really special, you know; it's the only one I have of all of us together.”

“Do they live in another city, or something?” Weiss asked.

“Nope! Mom's dead, my aunt's dead, too, and my sister and dad are permanently exiled from the Valley—and every other Fae settlement for that matter!” Ruby replied calmly.

Weiss blinked, stunned. “I—I'm sorry, I...”

Ruby shrugged. “It's cool. I was barely a year old when it all happened, don't remember a thing! Anyway, you hungry?”

Weiss' stomach growled; it had been a long while since her last meal in prison, and losing all of it from the Tube ride hadn't helped matters any. “Sure, what're we having?”

“Same thing as always: chocolate chip cookies and milk!”
“What else could I be having…?”

“Just that!” Ruby replied. “Uncle Qrow takes home whatever he can from the hunts, and buys some fruits and vegetables every other day; cookies and alcohol are about the only two things we have all the time, guaranteed.”

“What is the Eldan Council paying you!?”

“Ingredients for baking cookies and milk!” Ruby replied, beaming.

Weiss stared at her, trying to see if that was a joke, before she realized she was completely serious. “So you've been working all this time, for cookies?”

Ruby nodded. “If I need Shinies—that's our version of the Uroch, by the way—I just go on hunts and take cash than food.”

“How is this even legal?”

“The same way any other contract would in the human world: via the agreement of two mutually consenting parties!” Penny chimed in.

“… So you've just been surviving on cookies and milk all this time?”

“Not JUST cookies and milk!” Ruby replied. “There's vegetables, fruit, meat, and restaurant food. But mostly, yeah, cookies and milk for every meal since I was like a year old.”

Weiss paused. “… How are you still alive? Seriously, how?”

Ruby shrugged. “Same reason my mom, her mom, and her mom, and every other Keeper stretching back to Gabija did, I guess! It's her recipe, by the way; completely unchanged for nearly a thousand years and still delicious!”

Weiss stared at her, before her stomach growled. “You know what, nevermind… cookies and milk it is….”

Thinking and fretting over her new living arrangements could wait until after she had gotten food in her.
Chapter 25

Ruby’s kitchen should have been massive, more than enough space for a crew of four or five with their own work stations, if nearly half of it hadn’t been taken up by two giant refrigerators (one standing, the other a deep freezer), a massive tank of milk, and the biggest cookie jar Weiss had ever seen, so large even someone as tall as Qrow would need a ladder to access it, and a second person to open the whole lid than the smaller inner section.

The other half was where a small table for six had been wedged in, along with a counter, some cabinets, a sink, and a massive clay oven powered by natural gas.

Save for the water filtration unit in the corner—a device that was one of Penny’s many “backpacks,” she learned—everything was scarred and aged from hundreds if not thousands of years worth of use, cleaning, and accidents, along with faintly smelling of freshly baked cookies.

Weiss was no stranger to antiques—ironically, the market for treasures of times long past was never more thriving, competitive, and prolific than in ‘the city of the future’ Candela—but this was a whole new level.

Ruby served Weiss cookies and milk on a plate and a glass—both made out of clay, both with lovingly, intricately carved detailing of plants and animals that had to have taken days of hard work and decades of constant, intense practice beforehand.

“Bone appetite, Weiss!” Ruby said as she sat across her with her own dinner.

“It’s pronounced ‘Bon appetit,’ Ruby,” Weiss replied, reaching out for her glass, before she hesitated.

“What’s wrong?” Ruby asked as she dipped a cookie into her milk. “Weren’t you hungry?” she continued as the cookie disappeared into her mouth.

Weiss’ stomach growled. “I still am...” she muttered.

“Then why don’t you dig in?” Ruby asked as she chewed.

“I’m afraid of breaking these,” Weiss replied, gesturing to the plate and the glass.

Ruby snorted, wet, half-chewed crumbs spilling out of her mouth. “Seriously?”

“Yes! They’re obviously antiques! How old are these? How old is everything in here? And for that matter, how old is the tree this house is inside of?”

Ruby swallowed and shrugged. “Dunno, should probably ask Penny when she’s done with her maintenance, or Uncle Qrow when he gets back,” she replied as she dipped another cookie and shoved it into her mouth. “What does it even matter?” she continued as she chewed.

Weiss frowned. “You’re not afraid of me accidentally breaking a valuable piece of your history and culture?”

Ruby smirked. “Go on,” she said through a mouthful of cookies. “Get one of the plates from the cupboard, drop it, and see what happens—watch your feet, though!”

Weiss got up out of her seat and did. She held the plate for a few moments, feeling the intricacy in
the carving, how light it was for something made of clay, before she dropped it a good distance from herself.

Thunk.

Nothing.

No shatter, no crack, not even a scratch. Weiss picked it up, brushed off some of the fine powder that the kitchen floor was littered with. “How did you make these?” Weiss asked as she put it in the sink. “Where do you even get the materials for this?”

“Ask a Maker who does plates and stuff in town, and from the Valley, where else?” Ruby replied as she drank some milk. “Why all the interest in plates all of a sudden?”

“Because they're amazing, that’s why,” Weiss replied as she walked back to the table.

Ruby looked at Weiss in amusement.

“What...?” Weiss asked as she sat back down.

Ruby chuckled. “Weiss, I get that you’re not from here, but this just what we eat our meals on or drink from, and sometimes use to play with my dog—nothing more,” she said as she picked up another cookie.

“First of all, fair point,” Weiss said as she finally took a cookie. “Second, you have a dog?” she continued before she took a dainty bite out of it.

“His name’s Zwei!” Ruby replied as she chewed. “And he’s not really a ‘dog’ but I don’t know what he is in Nivian, and Penny still can’t find a ‘reasonable translation to accurately encompass what Zwei is exactly,’ whatever that means.”

Weiss swallowed. “Why haven’t I seen him?”

“We rent him out a lot of the time with the Watchers on hunts, or at the Pits, usually to help save someone who took on something or someone way past their league,” Ruby explained before she swallowed. “We have to, since he eats a LOT, and we can’t support him with just our salaries, even if Blake pitched in!”

Weiss nodded. “What’s the Pits?” she asked before she took another bite.

“It’s a bunch of big arenas, where we fight each other or animals for practice, tournaments, and some festivals.” Ruby said as she grabbed another cookie. “I used to want to be a professional Pit Fighter, but it turns out there’s SO much going around meeting people, shooting commercials, meetings with agents and stuff, and I just like the killing things and getting paid to do it part!” she said before said cookie disappeared into her mouth.

Weiss shook her head. “Sounds barbaric,” she said after she swallowed.

“Is it really that far off from when humans put two guys in a ring and watch them beat the crap out of each other with just their fists?” Ruby asked while she chewed. She swallowed. “Besides, it’s got like one of the best names in Actaeon.”

“What’s it really called, then?” Weiss asked as she took drink of her milk.

<The Pits!> Ruby said, words that were supposed to sound like a threatening growl from one animal
challenging another.

Weiss snorted, milk shooting out of her nostrils. She started half-coughing, half-laughing as she hurriedly wiped her nose with her sleeve.

Ruby frowned. “What’s so funny...?”

“What did you just say?” Weiss asked, her eyes tearing up.

*The Pits…?!* Ruby repeated.

Weiss burst out laughing all over again. Her clutched her sides, and began to tilt to the side.

“Wait, Weiss--!”

She fell out of her chair, reached out for the table but only ended up taking her glass of milk with her. She landed on the floor with a soft thud, followed by a splash as some of it spilled all over her face.

Ruby hopped out of her chair and rushed over to her. “You okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine,” Weiss replied.

Ruby sighed in relief. “That’s good! I’m going to laugh at you while I help you up now, okay?”

Weiss scowled at her, but took her hand still.

_Qrow sent a message asking for help hauling his and Blake’s share of the day’s hunt--“We ran into a herd of not-so-little pigs that had just too few visits from the big bad wolves,” read the parts of his message in Nivian._

_As it was still too early to turn in for the night, Weiss headed out along with Ruby and Penny back to the Tube station, where they would be arriving with Zwei. She spent the walk looking around at the swamp as the sun set and night began to creep in, marveled at the dancing lights in the water and in the trees, bugs and plants of all manner of hues providing a beautiful spectacle, and more than enough light to make your way on the road._

“That solves the problem of getting back here at night,” she thought to herself.

_They had to wait at the platform for the others to arrive, as the handlers had to coordinate and adjust the flow of water and all other trips._

_A log came in—Zwei’s, by Ruby’s request. The handlers opened it as they usually would, before they all stepped well back. At first, Weiss assumed that there was a mistake, as it was filled with what looked like a giant mass of black fur that occupied all available space in the log._

_Then it started moving._

_A gigantic, monstrous paw reached out to the docks, found purchase and began to pull the rest of himself out. A head followed—the fanged, slavering face of the Queen of the Damned's favourite dog breed. Then a second head popped out, identical and attached to the body by a different neck. They both looked around, saw Ruby, and began to pant happily, thick, viscous trails of drool dripping from the two sets of jaws._

_Weiss eyes widened and her pupils shrank as a massive, two-headed beast stepped out onto dock, about the size of a tank, if not larger, with a proportionately-sized bobbed tail wagging happily atop_
his rear-end.

Ruby threw her arms in the air. “Zwei!”

The hellhound barked in what Weiss assumed to be delight before he took a dainty step towards Ruby, and both heads leaned down to lick her, his tongues so large and powerful he covered every inch of her body on both sides and lifted her a good few feet off the ground.

The now slobber-coated Ruby laughed. <I>Missed you too, boy! Zwei, this is Weiss!> She switched languages as she gestured to Weiss. “Weiss, this is Zwei!”

Weiss became very, very still as both of Zwei’s heads loomed over her and started sniffing. Then, they both opened, and she found herself looking into two hot, moist, smelly abysses lined with titanic fangs, before two giant tongues darted out to meet her.

<NO! ZWEI! DON’T--!>

Too late.

Whatever dirt, grime, mud, and grass Weiss had on her skin disappeared, replaced with an inch thick coating of thick, hot, two-headed mutant hound slobber. After her feet were back on the ground once more, she let out a tiny, strangled whimper.

Ruby frowned. “… Sorry about that, he’s, uh… really affectionate.”

Another log arrived, containing Qrow and several bloodied sacks. “Let’s get all this meat loaded on Zwei ASAP, folks!” he called out as he climbed out. “Zwei hasn’t done his business yet and I’d rather not have to haul all that back home, too!”

Weiss’ eyes slowly turned to Ruby.

“It’s where we get most of our fuel for cooking and heating…” Ruby explained sheepishly.

Weiss turned back to Zwei, then at Qrow who was coming over with the sacks. The two of them spent a few moments staring at each other, unsure of how to react.

“… Weiss, you can sit this one out, Ruby, help me out here,” he said as he handed the sacks over to her.

Blake arrived with yet more meat. She skirted around Zwei to get to Weiss, giving him a wide, wide berth, before she pressed a large jar of ointment and a cloth into her hands. “Dry bath,” she said in Nivian with some trouble, miming rubbing it into her skin before wiping it off with an invisible rag.

Weiss opened it and began to liberally began to coat herself with it, weeping silently all the while.

The “dry bath” did its best, handily soaking up all the slobber on Weiss, but it and a special odour-eating bacteria solution Ruby kept around because of him were just no match for the amount of affection that Zwei had shown her.

If it was any comfort, the scent of “dog” slobber also had to compete with the more pleasant (if still funky) smell of the others and the freshly killed boar they were butchering in the kitchen. More importantly, Ruby promised she’d pay for a private bath at the hot springs the next morning.

In the meanwhile, distracted herself by sorting through her care package with Penny and Ruby in the living room. Among other useful items, she found a new Fae-made comm-crystal, a printed copy of
her parole agreement, a Nivian-Actaeon primer on some helpful words and phrases she should know, a list of areas of interest and public services in the Bastion, several pairs of clean underwear and clothes for most occasions, a small stipend of “Shinies,” and several bottles of a milky fluid kept in an insulated bag.

“Live Gut Bacteria Culture,” Penny read for her. “Consume once daily for improved gastrointestinal health, or to aid in acclimation to Viridian Valley food and water. Keep chilled. Do not consume if contents turn blue.”

“Do I HAVE to drink this...?” Weiss asked.

“Though it will definitely cause distress to your gut flora in the short term, in the long term, it will greatly reduce the chances of your getting sick from ingesting the local water or food, along with allowing you to safely expand your culinary choices,” Penny explained. “As you are now, anything boiled, stewed, or served with a sauce is out of the question, and some oils may be suspect, which is unfortunate considering a number of Fae staple foods and commonly offered fare belong in those categories.”

“Does that include the pancakes at the hot springs?” Ruby asked.

Penny nodded. “Even if they are not made with the water there, the sheer amount of exposure the cookware receive might be enough to trigger a negative reaction.”

Ruby's eyes widened, horrified at the prospect. “Take it, Weiss! The pancakes will be worth it, I promise.”

Weiss sighed. “Fine...” she muttered as she uncapped it, and knocked down in one gulp. She preemptively cringed, before she found that save for the sour, yoghurt-like taste, it wasn’t that bad!

Then it actually made it to her stomach, and she could feel the war between her local gut flora and the foreign bacteria kick off to a violent, terrible start.

Weiss groaned, curling up on her side and clutching her stomach.

“I'll go fetch a bucket!” Penny chimed as she went off, taking the cultures with her to store in the fridge.

“Want to turn in for the night, Weiss?” Ruby asked as she put a hand on her shoulder.

She whimpered and nodded her head.

For lack of space, Weiss had to sleep in Ruby’s room.

The neatness of the house didn’t extend there, as it was a giant mess of discarded clothes, toys, and mementos all arranged around a pile of pillows, blankets, and cushions in the center, with an Info-Grid terminal on one side, and a hammock on the other.

“The hammock’s yours, unless you want to sleep together,” Ruby explained as she helped Weiss in, an arm around her shoulder and the other holding the bucket Penny had fetched.

“I’ll manage on my own, thanks,” Weiss muttered.

She crawled into the hammock, curled up on her side with the Eluna plushie hugged to her chest. Ruby offered her a pillow and a blanket from her collection, but Weiss was already shutting her eyes
and trying to will herself to sleep, so the day would finally be over.

“Good night, Weiss,” Ruby whispered, leaving the bucket by her side before she left—the nocturnal animals were coming out of their dens, and needed as much culling and surveillance as their diurnal counterparts, if not more.

As the gentle rocking of her hammock helped negotiate a temporary truce in her stomach, Weiss realized something: her plan to go into the Valley, to be free of her father, to start a new life somewhere else, and to see what it’d be like to just be her, than “the daughter of Jacques Schnee” had in fact worked.

… Just not in the way she expected.
Chapter 26

Weiss had a dream.

The sun was shining; Ruby's room was messier, largely because Weiss' belongings had joined the piles of stuff scattered all around; and her mother was gently shaking her awake.

She was older—much older; even more wrinkles on her face, her platinum blonde hair looking more grey than white, but she looked happy. “Time to get up, my littler snowbunny!” she hummed. “There aren't any servants to do everything for you out here, you know!”

Weiss got up, playfully glared at her, and climbed out of her hammock, moving through her dream in that foggy way where details were sparse, time was flexible, and she suddenly found herself seated at the kitchen table.

It was crowded, every single chair taken by Ruby, Qrow, Blake, Winter, and others she didn't recognize, Fae and human. Penny was standing to the side, busy feeding Zwei using a “backpack” that looked like a giant toaster complete with spring mechanism to fire the bread straight into both his waiting jaws.

Everyone was happy to see her, greeting her warmly like she was an old friend or a member of the family. Ruby pushed a plate of milk and cookies to her—one that had already been set out and just waiting for her.

She smiled, thanked her, and reached out for one of them.

“Weiss, what in the world are you doing?” her father asked.

Everything changed.

She was back in the dining hall of Manor Schnee, seated one chair away from her father, Winter and her mother's seats empty, as they had been for years. At his perennial place at the head of the table, her father looked at her disdainfully as he cut into the meat of his dinner.

Roast beef. Not venison or the head of anything, thankfully.

Weiss looked down. No more cookies and milk. A familiar set of priceless china that could only be handled by the servants or one of the drones, worst comes to worst. Food sourced from all over Avalon, kept at their absolute freshest by magitechnology, prepared by the skillful hands of a chef who worked with anyone who paid for her to always make the best, strive to innovate, and challenge herself.

The cold, cavernous hall of carved stone. The army of faceless servants and maids all around her. The ceiling looming far above her head and the monolithic walls that stood silently all around her, reminding her of just how little she was, just how trapped she was in this gilded cage.

Weiss began to cry.


Weiss blinked, her eyes blurry and stinging from tears, the Eluna plushie being strangled in her arms. “Ruby…?” she blubbered as she turned in her hammock and looked up at her.
The room was dark, but her eyes glowed; not the infamous blood red of her mask, but a calming silver.

“Sorry,” she whispered, “I just came back from night shift, and it looked like you were having a really bad dream, so...”

Ruby trailed off, the ensuing silence filled with Weiss sniffling and hiccuping.

 “… What is it you do when you're feeling sad?”

Weiss took a deep, calming breath. “Winter used to sleep with me in her bed,” she muttered. “Sometimes we'd have her plushies out as 'guards.'”

“Want to do that?” Ruby asked. “Definitely won't be able to do it in your hammock, since it's only really just made for one—or two who don't mind sleeping REALLY close to each other.”

Weiss debated it for a moment. “Help me out, please?” she mumbled.

Ruby did.

Weiss stomach started stirring all over again, both residents upset at her doing absolutely anything except lie down on her side, but they settled down after she got comfortable in Ruby's little nest of pillows and blankets—or was it a den, since she was a reindeer Fae?

She decided it wasn't more important than sleep and curled up on her side, buried her face in one of Ruby's pillows. Everything smelled of her—earth, mud, numerous traces of wild animals and Zwei especially, chocolate chip cookies—but they were warm, and luxuriously soft.

“Anything else?” Ruby asked as she laid down next to her.

Weiss paused for a moment, before she muttered, “She used to hold me until I fell asleep...”

“Like this...?” Ruby asked as she wrapped her arms around Weiss' chest.

She had a very strong, firm grip. Stronger than she would expect someone of her size to be. But then again, she wasn't human, and she was capable of wiping the floor with four soldiers twice her size and several times her weight.

“… Y-Yeah, like that...” she murmured after a long pause—longer than it should have been.

She felt something gently poke into the back of her head.

“Woops! Sorry, about that,” Ruby whispered, shifting about behind her.

Now her head was level with hers, her warm breath on the back of Weiss' neck, her horns angled outwards and above their heads.

“Better?”

Weiss felt her cheeks begin to heat up as she gently tilted her head back. No poking, no rubbing up against anything hard and smooth, just her hair rubbing up against Ruby's face.

She sniffed a few times and let out a low, pleased hum.

Weiss quickly tilted her head back. “What was that all about...?”
“Your hair smells really nice,” Ruby replied.

Weiss face started to feel like it was burning. “… Oh.”

Ruby yawned and nuzzled up to her again. “Goodnight again, Weiss…” she muttered.

Weiss gently curled up against her. She felt different from Winter. Height, species, and scent aside, Ruby was a lot harder, her body's muscles tensing and relaxing even in her sleep, so densely packed and tightly woven together she could feel them moving.

She didn't mind, though.

It wasn't bad...

… Just… different.

“Goodnight, Ruby,” Weiss whispered back.

She got a quiet snore in response.

Weiss smiled, and closed her eyes, drifting back to sleep.

Qrow rapped his knuckles twice on the door, before he threw it open and strode on in. “Alright, Princess! It's been more than eight hours, and you've got plenty of shit to do today, that's enou--”

Ruby shot up in an instant, her ears perked and alert, turning every which way for signs of danger.

Weiss groaned and slowly picked her head up from Ruby's nest. (Or den—whatever.) She cringed and squinted as the bright morning sun hit her eyes. “Ugh…” she muttered, “what time is it…?”

“Time for me to get the fuck out of here!” Qrow said as he hastily backpedaled right back out.

Thunk. The door to Ruby's bedroom was closed once more.

“What was that all about…?” Weiss asked, idly rubbing at the side of her face she'd been sleeping on. She stopped. “Ruby… why is my face all sticky…?”

“Oh! That's probably just my drool; don't worry, it washes right off!”

Weiss slowly turned to her.

“Did I mention I drool when I sleep…?” Ruby asked.

Weiss stared.

“I... probably should have mentioned I drool in my sleep...”

Weiss' face slowly fell in ever growing horror. “Where was the bathroom again…?” she whispered.

“Through the kitchen,” Ruby replied sheepishly

Weiss had rarely ever moved so fast as she did that morning, slowing down only to safely nestle the Eluna plushie into her hammock before she rushed out the door, leaving it swinging in her wake.

Qrow and Penny were cooking the boar they hauled in last night, the flames of the oven roaring as they both tended to boiling pots filled with bones and meat being turned into stocks or stew, several
hunks being roasted over an open flame, strips of meat being smoked above those, and three separate pans frying and sizzling all at once—not to mention guarded them all from Zwei, who had one head sticking in through a window from outside, and the other chewing on a large amount of bones wrapped inside a raw hide. Blake was sitting at the table, using her comm-crystal to read a magical copy of a book in Nivian and its unofficial Actaeon translation side-by-side, a language learning guide running below it.

All four of them looked up and watched Weiss zoom past them and straight into the bathroom, where she proceeded to lock herself in. The faint sound of constantly running water and vigorous scrubbing began to come from inside.

Ruby waltzed in soon after. <Morning everyone!> she said as she grabbed a plate and headed over to the giant cookie jar.

Zwei barked, Blake nodded, Penny waved with her tail before she lifted the lid of a pot with it, and Qrow saluted with the hand holding his morning beer before he took a sip.

<Is Weiss okay?> Ruby asked as she climbed up the ladder. <She seemed in a real rush just now,> she continued as she lifted the lid and started putting cookies on her plate.

<You tell me!> Qrow replied as he flipped over several cuts of frying meat. <You were the one that was with her most of the night, I just walked in on the both of you.>

Ruby looked at him and blinked. <Wait, what…?>

<Qrow was using a Nivian slang term in Actaeon: 'Walking in on (someone).'> Penny explained. <It refers to unintentionally being witness to and/or interrupting an intimate moment you are not involved in, usually that of sexual intercourse.>

Blake cringed, her ears pulling back, Ruby dropped her plate into the jar.

<Wait, what?!> Ruby cried, her face burning red. <We just slept together!>

<Qrow was using a Nivian slang term in Actaeon: 'Walking in on (someone).'> Penny explained. <It refers to unintentionally being witness to and/or interrupting an intimate moment you are not involved in, usually that of sexual intercourse.>

Ruby looked at him and blinked. <Wait, what…?>

<Wait, what?!> Ruby cried, her face burning red. <We just slept together!>

<I noticed,> Qrow said before he took another sip of his beer.

Ruby balked. <No, just sleeping! She was--!>

Everyone stopped as Weiss stepped out, repeatedly pressing a towel to her face. “You're running low on soap...” she muttered as she slowly walked to a free chair beside the wall, sat down at the table, and proceeded to hang her head, the hand holding her towel hiding her face.

Everyone, including Zwei, turned to look at her, then at Ruby.

She shot them all disgusted looks, turning around to fish her plate and her cookies out of the jar, and also hide her reddened face.

Penny turned to Weiss. “Noted! I'll refill it before we leave for our trip to the hot springs, then the Trader's Guild.”

Weiss nodded. “So that's where I get a job?”

“All the shitty ones, at least,” Qrow replied as he took two of the pans off the stove, started plating freshly cooked meat. “Don't worry, though: every one goes through the Job Gauntlet at least once in their life; just be glad it'll be shorter for you.”
“As you are not literate in Actaeon and require a translator for even the most basic written or spoken communication, have no skills or education of note or that which would prove useful to Fae society at large, and your status as an outsider barring you from any careers of a religious nature, your choices are greatly limited to that of manual labour, apprenticeships with some types of Makers, or basic training with the Watchers,” Penny explained as she brought the plates over to Weiss and Blake. “Though, the third also requires that you pass a test to ensure that you are at least capable of independently surviving outside of the walls for a reasonable length of time.”

“It doesn’t do anyone any favours if the wildlife gets a taste for humanoid beings as an ‘every other day’ food,” Qrow muttered. “Except Soul Eaters, but those are Soul Eaters.”

Weiss put down her towel. “What's a Soul Eater…?”

“A giant, walking collection of claws, teeth, and hate you pray you'll never meet,” Qrow replied. “For now, let's just say they're one of the biggest reasons we're so strict on ethics here in the Valley...”

Weiss decided to not to ask any further. She picked up what looked like strips of bacon with her hands—Fae weren't big on utensils, outside of cooking—and took a bite out of it. Her eyes widened as all the fat inside out burst onto her tongue, greasy as all get-out and even more flavourful.

“Wow! These are REALLY good!” Weiss said as she chewed, before she stopped and mopped up the grease dribbling down her lips with her towel.

“Enjoy it while it lasts!” Qrow said as he lowered the fires, set the pots to a simmer, the roasts to a slower rotation, and the jerky to dry more slowly. “Me, Blake, and Zwei here NEED meat to survive, so no griping when we get the lion's share,” he said as he held up a spit that held several kilos worth of freshly cooked pork to Zwei.

Zwei ate it in one bite, metal and all, before he spat out the now empty and slobber-coated metal straight into the sink with no ill-effects. Weiss chuckled. “Believe me, there's nothing more I want than to stop being a load on all of you.”

<Good,> Blake said, smiling at her before she attacked her food like an actual animal, holding it up with her hands, tearing hunks of meat out with her teeth, and purring happily as she chewed.

They finished up breakfast, and everyone but Qrow and Zwei headed back to the Tube station to head to the hot springs, carrying changes of clothes, some of Weiss' care package, and Penny's water filtration “backpack” between them. The sun was shining, the birds and the frogs were singing, the temperature in the swamp was comfortably warm, and the rest of the Bastion not too hot so long as you didn't stay outside of the shade for more than an hour.

It was a beautiful start to Weiss' day, before it all went downhill once more.
For the volume of both clients and water that went through the hot springs on a daily basis, they had several Tube stations scattered all over the place, to keep backlogs from occurring and incidentally, giving the very elderly or less mobile, time-starved, or those who just didn't want to walk a convenient, fast way to get around the place.

And frankly, Weiss couldn't blame the third because of how massive it was.

It was everything she imagined: steaming hot pools of mineral-rich water, inside an open-air cave in one of the mountains that surrounded the valley. Wooden structures that sectioned it off, provided walkways, planters, and the aforementioned private baths if clients were willing to pay extra. A large army of uniformed attendants offering towels, body care products like shampoo, lotions, and ointments, and even someone to talk with you or wash your back and tail, if you couldn't get your hands or the brushes to the really hard to reach spots.

But there was also what looked like an incredibly expansive series of restaurants, miniature farms, and bars all set up in one alcove, clients enjoying delicious food and drink at the tables provided, or sent floating to them on trays as they soaked in the water. There was what looked like a giant book club and/or a language learning class, a meditation/yoga session, and “Weavers” practicing their magics, guiding floating masses of water or air with their hands and tails as they slowly progressed through a series of poses. There was even a full stage for live plays or a movie showing (the latter of which was going on at the moment—Weiss recognized it as “Sound and Fury XXXVIII”); a temperate swimming pool for doing laps, goofing off, or just laying about on a raft; and even a section coated with non-slip flooring for land-bound activities like basketball, running laps, or most of your sports of choice.

It was a hot springs, a well-equipped spa, a library, a school, a foodie's paradise, a temple, a recreation center, a gym, a movie theater, and many more, stretching on for miles underground, sunshine beaming in from the mouth of the cave through a wall of protective tree canopy and giant thriving plants providing more shade and privacy, very few walls higher than your waist, an open, airy place where the Fae could all get clean, chat, and relax as a whole community.

It was beautiful, a sight she would have loved to share with the whole of Avalon if she could, if not for one big, glaring detail that she just could not ignore:

“WHY IS EVERYONE NAKED...?!” Weiss whispered, her face burning bright red.

“Uh, because we're here to take baths...?” Ruby explained. “I don't get it: don't you humans take off all your clothes when you bathe, too?”

“YES!” she hissed. “GENERALLY IN PRIVATE, AND NOT WITH OTHER PEOPLE AROUND!”

“Well, I'm sorry to say, Weiss, but you're going to have to get used to it unless you never want to take a bath ever again,” Ruby said. “Well, unless you want to go outside the walls and find a spring out in the wilds, but that's dangerous and pretty inconvenient.”

Weiss was about to reply when a group of elderly Fae ambled on past. She didn't know what bothered her more: that she had just seen several old people completely naked, or that Fae aged very well indeed. She quickly wrenched her face back to Ruby, and whispered, “Don't you have private baths anywhere but here?”
Ruby shook her head. “Not even Elder Goodwitch. We do have them in hospitals, but that's only for the patients who really shouldn't be going anywhere in the first place.”

“Regular visits to the hot springs are actually a very common and important part of the recovery process,” Penny added. “The magic and mineral-content that seeps into the water is very conducive to physical health and the treatment of many illnesses and injuries, not to mention the relaxed, leisurely atmosphere, and opportunities for social interaction and bonding is excellent for mental and emotional health.

“On a related note, said magic and mineral-content is also great for my systems, helping maintain structural integrity and full efficiency.”

Weiss groaned. “Do I HAVE to get naked…?” she muttered as she pointedly looked down at her feet.

“You could wear a towel around you, but you'll look really out of place,” Ruby replied.

“Any more out of place than being the only human in a sea of Fae?”

Ruby paused. “Good point! Towel it is.”

They went through to the entrance, where there was surprisingly tight and serious security, a sizable amount of Watchers and Menders making sure all heads were paid for, you weren't bringing in any contraband, infectious disease, or parasites, and you were briefed on all the rules—very basic things, like no running, no fighting, and no having sex or other intimate acts in the public areas.

After feeling like she was about to be thrown into prison again, much friendlier, gentler staff took their clothes before they put them through a brief hosing down to remove the worst of the dirt and the grime, a walk through and under a running stream for a little extra insurance, until they were given a towel and a basket of complementary toiletries as the doors to the hot springs proper were opened to them.

Weiss didn't protest, but she didn't enjoy the process, either, spending most of it with her eyes closed, trying not to think about how many bodies had been through this same process, of the Fae behind and in front of her in the line, and as Penny reminded her beforehand, doing her damnedest not to swallow any of the water.

“You're not going to spend this whole trip with your eyes closed, are you, Weiss?” Ruby asked as she and the others towed off from the dip.

“I'm going to damn well try,” Weiss grumbled, her face burning red.

Ruby sighed, she heard her padding over to her. “Weiss, is it really that big of a deal for you?”

“Yes...” she muttered.

She felt Ruby take her hand into her own. “I'll go slow and tell you when you can open your eyes again, alright?”

Weiss tightly wrapped her fingers around hand. “Okay.”

<You're making an awfully big fuss about this,> Blake said. <It's just being naked, what's so wrong about it?>

“Blake is expressing concern and confusion about your distress because of the hot springs allowing
complete nudity,” Penny translated.

“It’s just a human thing, alright?” Weiss said.

Blake shrugged, and the group got going, Ruby and Weiss trailing behind.

Sounds of conversation, laughter, and activity poured in from all around; the hot springs looked busy and lively from a distance, and was even more animated and noisy when you were right in the thick of it. How the Fae ever managed to ever relax in such a chaotic place like this, especially with their superb hearing, she didn't know.

She couldn't understand anything they were saying, but she could get the gist of it from tone and the sounds of the syllables—if she had to guess, it was just catching up on each others’ lives, talking about recent events, or lively debate about whatever. She thought back on what Penny had said about the Fae being adverse to adjectives and adverbs, and preferring single words to describe things than tacking on more; did they really have a term for everything, to cover every single description and situation possible?

Just as she was thinking that, someone called out at her specifically—some things were universal, language barriers be damned.

<Hey, soft-skin! Why don't you take that towel off and show us what you got, huh?> yelled a teenage Fae, before he and his friends began laughing raucously.

Weiss gritted her teeth and kept on walking.

<Hey, bark-bite! Why don't you get out of the water and show us what you're compensating for first, huh?!> Blake yelled back.

The teenage boy was stunned, before his friends quickly started laughing at him. A fight ensued, and whistles were blown as security came in.

Weiss opened her eyes just long enough to see the boys getting hauled out of the water, before she turned to Blake and smiled. "Thanks," she said.

<Don't mention it,> Blake replied coolly.

Weiss closed her eyes again and continued walking.

After what seemed like an eternity, they finally made it to their private bath, stepping through a door, the sounds of the public areas outside all but muted the moment it was closed behind them.

“You can open your eyes now, Weiss,” Ruby said.

Weiss did. Then, she squinted, trying to adjust to the low light from the glowing rocks set into the wall.

The private baths were set deep within the springs, spacious, carved out niches with a large steaming pool in the center, miniatures of most of the amenities the rest of the springs offered all around: a table with food and drink already set out, a nook for reading and study, even what looked like a bed to lounge on after your bath, among others.

“No wonder these were so expensive;” Weiss thought, remembering the simple characters beside “Public Entrance” and the much more complex calligraphy beside “Private Bath.”
“See you in the water, Weiss!” Ruby said as she let go and skipped off.

Weiss blinked. “Wait, what?”

<You didn't think this was going to be just for you, did you?> Blake asked as she sauntered past her.

“Blake is expressing surprise at your surprise that we're going to be sharing this bath,” Penny explained as she passed by her other side.

“Wait, wait, wait—HOLD UP!” Weiss cried.

All three of them turned around to look at her. Except for Penny, who's “body” was a larger collection of intricately carved rocks and gems held together by a layer of green energy, Blake and Ruby were completely naked, doing nothing to cover themselves up, and not caring in the slightest.

The comfortably warm room suddenly got excruciatingly hot.

Weiss squeezed her eyes shut but that particular image wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Ruby frowned. “Weiss, what's…?”

Ding.

Ruby smiled. “Weiss… do you like girls?”

Weiss bit her lip.

“Are you—what do you humans call it—a less-bean?”

“A lesbian,” Weiss corrected her. She tilted her head down. “…And yes.”

She may as well have said it outright, since she was being so obvious she may as well have had a giant sign behind her, the word “GAY” blinking on and off, while three arrows pointing towards her lit up in turn.

Ruby chuckled. “Relax, Weiss! I'm fine with it! I mean, it'd be pretty hypocra—hypocrey—hyporcry—really weird in the bad way if I was, since I'm one, too.”

Weiss paused. “Wait… you're gay...?”

“Is that what you humans also call girls who like other girls, and boys who like other boys?”

“It is,” Penny said. “Other terms may include 'queer,' and 'homosexual,' along with a surprisingly expansive list of derogatory slang, if you include Old World languages alongside Nivian.”

“Then yeah! I'm guess that means I'm gay, too,” Ruby said, nodding. “And Penny here is a robot so she doesn't really do… well… any of that stuff, and Blake here is… actually I don't really know what Blake is, but she doesn't mind! Right, Blake?”

<Yep, couldn't care less,> Blake replied, nodding.

“Blake confirmed what Ruby said, and assures you it's not a matter she puts too much attention to,” Penny translated.

Weiss slowly opened her eyes, her face still burning red. “Okay… that… makes me feel slightly better about this.”
Ruby beamed. “Great! Now that that's over, let's get in and get clean! We don't have this place for all day!” she turned around and padded over to the water.

Weiss nodded and made her way to the spring after her, before she stopped.

Because of the cloaks and long-sleeved hunting gear Ruby wore underneath, and Weiss being distracted by other things when she was wearing more revealing clothing, she'd never ever seen more bare skin than her hands, her face, and her feet.

Now, she got a full view of Ruby from the front and back, knew just how powerfully built and muscular she was in spite of her tiny frame, and the soft, fluffy, happily waggling reindeer tail sitting just atop her rear, black with red tips just like her hair.

Whatever goodwill Weiss had built up with Blake was completely erased when Ruby and Penny sided with her and cut their time short so Weiss could have the bath all to herself.

If it was any comfort to Blake, watching Weiss sitting in the corner, face hidden from the others, attempting to bore holes into the wall with her sight alone was pretty damn funny.
Chapter 28

The Trader’s Guild was a combination administration building, bank, trading post, and training center, set inside a tree smaller than the Tree of Life but even more heavily and blatantly guarded, Watchers, their animals, and surveillance birds everywhere you turned.

Compared to the hot springs, it was all business: Fae walked about briskly and with purpose; Shinies and other commodities changed hands constantly; and though cracking a joke wasn’t exactly illegal, the atmosphere didn’t encourage it, either.

Weiss wandered into the center, looked up at the circular opening in the middle of the floors; instead of being able to see all the way up into the canopy, she found herself getting dizzy by just how many animals, packages, and items were zipping on by through a large series of interconnected cables, guide rope, and streams of magic, like an intricate spider’s web.

Ruby held her steady and coaxed her eyes back to the ground floor.

Weiss thanked her before she put a hand to her head. “How the hell am I supposed to know how to get anywhere here?” she asked as she willed the world to stop spinning.

“Through the information desk!” Penny chirped, pointing to it. “It’s just in front of the Job Board.”

Weiss turned to look, found herself staring up at a three-story tower of desks and public terminals staffed by a small army of uniformed Fae, and behind that, a giant slab of enchanted rock whose surface constantly shifted and changed as job seekers pressed their hands on wanted ads and work notices, signing up for duties and taking on commission work.

“We have to use that every time I need a job...” Weiss muttered as she worriedly eyed the scaffolding and the stairs for people to reach the higher postings.

Ruby chuckled. “Yeah, it’s really funny to read some of the things humans think Keepers like me do when I’m not hunting down people! … And a lot of things that are just really messed up!”

Their conversation was interrupted by the PA system booming:

<Calling all participants of the Job Gauntlet! I repeat: calling all participants of the Job Gauntlet! The morning session is about to begin.>
The Fae that had been lounging around in the lobby, hanging about by the indoor cafeteria, or walking about aimlessly all began to trek towards a direction.

Weiss watched them go and turned back to Ruby. “I’m guessing that call was for me, too?”

“Yup!” she replied. “Good luck in there, Weiss,” she said as she hugged her goodbye—careful to point her horns away from her face.

“You’re not coming with me...?” Weiss asked as she pulled away.

Ruby shook her head. “Blake needs me as her Spotter for an emergency fishing trip—some animals broke a fish pen, so now the river’s flooded with domestic tuna, and we need to catch them before they wreak havoc on the ecosystem.

“Those guys grow big, and eat even more!”

Blake licked her lips. <Mhmm...~>

Weiss blinked. “Oh… I see...”

“Don’t worry though! Penny’s going to be with you the whole way as your translator!”

Weiss nodded. “Okay. I guess this is goodbye, then...”

“Mhmm—for now, at least~” Ruby smiled and waved. “See you later, Weiss!”

Weiss weakly waved back, before they split up and went their separate ways.

“I’m detecting a dramatic downward shift in your mood levels, Weiss,” Penny said. “Is something the matter?”

“Nothing,” Weiss replied. “Let’s just get me a job already...”

Just inside the gate, a caravan made of Watchers, Tenders, and other citizens who wanted in on the free fish were organizing and making the final preparations for the trip. As Blake and Ruby stood around and waited for the go signal, they got to talking.

<Hey, Ruby, what was with that back there at the Guild?> Blake asked.

<What was what back at the Guild?>

Blake sighed. <Oh, I don’t know—that whole display back there? You couldn't have been any more obvious! I swear, I could hear the all the sighs from the people waiting on you to kiss her.>

Ruby blushed. <Why would I do that?>

<You’re chasing her, aren’t you?>

<What? No!> Ruby shook her head. <I already told you, we’re just friends friends.>

<So you cuddle with her in the same nest at night...>.

<She was crying, I wanted to make her feel better.>

<… And then you hold her hand and guide her through the whole of the hot springs because her ‘human sensibilities’ can’t handle public nudity...> Blake said, making air-quotes.
<I promised her I’d get her a private bath, didn’t I?>

<… And then you cut our time short so she can have it all for herself!>

Ruby scowled, her ears pulling back as she turned around. <Oh, give her a break, won’t you, Blake?!) she yelled, unconsciously lowering her horns towards her. <You of all folks should know what it's like to be the new girl in a city where everyone hates your guts, and Weiss isn't so lucky to be a Fae like us!>

Blake winced, her ears pulled back and her tail darting between her legs.

Ruby sighed, her face expression softening. <I know you've got issues with humans, Blake. I do too! But I don't let them make me be a total assbutt to people that don't deserve it, just because they happen to be from the same species.>

Blake's ears and tail stayed down. <Okay, I'm sorry… but just one more question: are you attracted to her?>

<Oh, HELL YES I AM, why wouldn’t I be?> Ruby replied, brightening up immediately. <She's so cute and so great to cuddle with, too—soft, smooth, and squishy-squishy~ Oh, Eluna, I wanted to ask her if I could sleep on her chest so badly!> she said, swooning.

<I mean, yeah, she's almost completely flat-chested, but boobs are boobs, you know?>

Blake stared at her, her mouth agape and an expression of deep regret on her face. <Didn’t need to know that last part, but I suppose I was asking for it...>

The caravan master called out for everyone to start loading up and rolling out.

<Look, Blake, Weiss is just my friend, okay?> Ruby said as she picked up her scythe. <Just because we’re both gay, and I happen to be super attracted to her doesn’t mean we’re automatically going to be girlfriends.>

<I might not even be her type, you know!> she added as she headed up to the front of the train.

Blake stared at her, before she took her post at the last carriage.

<Hey, your Keeper Ruby’s friend, right?> one of the other Watchers asked as Blake boarded.

<What of it?> she asked coolly.

<Mind if I ask if all those rumours are true? You know, the ones about her and the new soft-skin being--> they made a sexy animal noise.

Blake sighed as she climbed up to the roof. <I honestly don’t even know anymore...> she replied.

Back at the Guild Hall, Weiss and Penny were standing in a large auditorium, as all the seats had already been claimed, or given away to others more deserving of them in the unofficial pecking order of the Job Gauntlet.

As Weiss understood it, elderly Fae and those that were obviously just looking for a new career out of boredom, financial difficulty, or genuine interest were first; young children and teenagers who were about to embark on their first ever Gauntlet were second; and last were the Moss, a mishmash of different ages, attitudes, and backgrounds unified by the air their lack of a desire to get a job, ever.
As an outsider, Weiss was lumped into that last group.

If it was any consolation, the Guild’s heavily practical attitudes continued here; no one seemed to recognize or care that she was guilty of her father’s expeditions by association, only that she behave and look interested as a presentation started—spoken, written, and with animated cartoons for the illiterates or those with poor comprehension.

The orientation ended with all of the Fae reciting a vow—Penny later translated it as “The Three Truths,” the guiding principles of most of Fae society. As the words, concepts, and historical context were too deep and complex for her to interpret without an hour or so of dedicated processing and cross-referencing the Codex for information she might not be allowed to share with Weiss, the extremely rough, very basic translation came out as this:

I am the World, as the World is I.

I am the Other, as the Other is I.

As the World rises, so We rise; as We rise, so does the World.

These truths we hold in our hearts and our minds, in thought and in deed, in living and in death, now and forever.

Weiss was tempted to say “Praise be,” as those of the Holy Shepherd would, but didn’t.

The presentation ended, and the participants for the Gauntlet were given slips of paper with their schedules, the names of their facilitators and the potential jobs they were being tested for, along with a space for stamps or signatures they needed to get lest they risk a hefty fine, community service, or even imprisonment.

“You are really serious about everyone having a job, aren’t you?” Weiss asked as Penny guided her to her first test.

“Very much so!” Penny replied. “Few Fae are willing to forsake the Three Truths and the laws and practices that they are based on, but as you humans might say, ‘There is no free lunch.’”

Weiss nodded. “So what am I looking at here, anyway?”

“Mostly Maker and Tender positions involving lots of precision work and deft handiwork! Though we understand it doesn’t extend to the whole of your species, humans in Fae society tend to have a reputation as excellent artisans, engineers, and scientists.”

Weiss smirked. “Then this’ll be easy!”

Penny calmly put a hand on her shoulder. “There’s a Fae saying I think is very appropriate right now:

“All prey are easy kills until you actually try to kill them.”"
Chapter 29

When Weiss recalled her first time in the Job Gauntlet, her memories played out like a movie montage.

First Scene.

The participants sat in rows of tables, claws deftly working tools and manually-operated machines, cutting, bending, shaping, and sewing fabric and leather into clothes, armour, and bags.

The proctor walked up to the first desk, nodded as the young Fae held up a simple pouch-in-the-making. She patted him on the head, signed his card, and moved onto the second desk.

An older Fae proudly held up a dress fresh off the sewing machine, a beautiful pattern of colourful threads woven into the front and back. The proctor hummed, congratulated them and signed her card with a flourish, and moved onto the third.

She stopped as she saw Weiss with her cheek pressed against the table, her arm shooting out perpendicular to her sewing machine, the sleeve of her dress accidentally sewn into the fabric she was working on.

Weiss smiled sheepishly up at her, the proctor frowned and calmly pulled out a seam ripper.

Penny crossed out <Leather/Cloth Maker> as Weiss had her clothes repaired.

Second Scene.

The participants stood at the foot of long, great tables, strewn with plates, bowls, cups, and glasses of all sizes. They were all handed trays, upon which the proctor blew a whistle and off they went, clearing their assigned table as quickly as they could.

The sounds of stacking plates and the clatter of cups and bowls filled the room, before a loud, heavy “THUD!” rang out in the hall. Everyone stopped, looked around for the source of the noise, before someone noticed that Weiss had mysteriously disappeared from sight.

The proctor came over to Weiss, casually removed the loaded tray crushing her hands with one hand, and helped her up with the other.

Penny crossed out <Server> as Weiss got her hands examined by a Mender.

Third Scene.

The participants stood over their own cauldrons, intentionally assigned highly unstable solutions, an abundance of ingredients with which to try and stabilize it, and the barest minimum of instructions. The proctor blew their whistle and all the stoves underneath turned on, the liquid inside quickly boiling and bubbling.

After exactly one minute, the stoves were turned off, and the proctor began to check each individual cauldron.

The first had a sweating, panting, but proud Fae hunched over a blue fluid that was calm as a lake on a windless day.

The second had a Fae standing with a surprised look on their face, now painted in several
splotches of random colours from the explosion just moments before.

The third had both Weiss and the proctor peering into the cauldron; the solution had turned an ominous purple, and was still bubbling despite the lack of direct heat.

Then gooey tendrils reached out for them, and they started screaming.

Penny crossed out <Potion Maker> as Weiss, her proctor, and a small team of armed Watchers tried to reverse-engineer her creation, while a team of other Makers autopsied the remains of the original, their brows furrowed and their heads being scratched in confusion.

Fourth Scene.

The participants were in the Guild’s barn, dirt-packed floors, plants and trees growing at a carefully controlled pace, animals walking about in their respective pens and habitats. The participants were only allowed to handle the Valley’s most common domestic creatures:

“Thunder Wolves,” extremely large predators capable of generating and weaponizing electricity using their fur; “Cows,” which were actually giant horned bovines even bigger than Zwei, several times heavier and stronger, but almost completely docile; “Chickens,” like the non-Valley variety except 6 feet tall and infinitely more aggressive and angry; and “Sheep,” who could walk on two or four legs as they pleased, were rather intelligent, and happened to grow wool at an incredibly accelerated pace and sometimes with very exotic, useful qualities depending on their diet, and exposure to certain types of magic and elements.

Because of her qualifications and her performance at earlier tests, Weiss was only cleared for either milking the cows or shoveling manure for use as fertilizer and fuel. As the stench was already nearly overwhelming her as is, she opted for the former.

Her proctor was saying that milking the cows was one of the easiest and safest jobs as a Tender, so long as you knew exactly what you were doing and were careful to never grab their udders incorrectly. To emphasize the point, she had a model of said udders on a rack that every one in line had to grab, to correct their form before they risked getting it wrong on an actual cow.

Weiss wondered what exactly would happen, until the Fae in front of her did it wrong, upon which the beast screamed, panicked, and accidentally stomped him into a crater as she ran off.

The Tenders chased the rampaging animal before it destroyed any more of the barn, hurt the other animals or participants, or worse yet, started a stampede, damage that could easily spread to the rest of the Guild and the area around it.

A group of Menders that were on-hand rushed to the unfortunate victim, wielding what looked like shovels, giant tongs, and a bicycle pump.

Penny looked down at Weiss schedule, debated preemptively crossing out <Animal Tender> as Weiss handed her milk bucket back to her proctor, and went to go look for a shovel.

Fifth Scene.

The participants were in a combination of a kitchen and a laboratory, as the line between the culinary arts and experimental science was very thin for the Fae, even if the facility had a clear split down the middle.

As fetching ingredients could be easily done by trained animals, Fae workers had to go one step above and show that they were capable of cooking, creating, and solving problems as they arose,
with or without supervision, so the test was a mix of seeing how fast you could gather ingredients from a communal storage area, then making something out of it as best as you could with limited time.

One of the proctors blew a whistle, and they were off once more, fighting each other over ingredients, sometimes stealing from the others' baskets, and a few pocketing food for later. Weiss stood just behind the crush, trying to figure out a game plan; like Candela, the ingredients were super fresh and maintained by a magical field, but unlike Candela, she didn't have the luxury of a screen popping up and showing her potential recipes and uses, and Penny was only allowed to warn her about dangerous combinations of ingredients or ones best left to professional chefs.

With the ransacked bins and shelves before her, Weiss just grabbed the most familiar looking ingredients and hauled them away. "Chicken" eggs normally weren't the size of a human baby, but everything else was almost exactly the same.

If it was any consolation, there were more than enough knives, tools, and cooking stations for everyone.

Stoves and ovens were fired up, the air was filled with flying slices of vegetables, meats, and fruits as they were cut with incredible speed, force, and precision, before they were fried, boiled, blanched, baked, roasted, smoked, or what have you. It was anarchy—delicious, delicious anarchy as no one was exactly going light on the fragrant herbs and spices, the premade soup stocks, and especially the boar bacon, and Penny had to shout over the chaos to remind Weiss that she'd best not taste test anything lest she risk suffering for it for the rest of the day.

At the tail end of the exam, some participants were focused on plating, arrangement, and last-minute touches to improve the presentation—culinary standards were universal too, it seemed, if with a much bigger focus on aroma for the Fae. The rest were trying to think of some last-minute gimmick that could work, cooking up something to replace their original plan, or trying to discretely get a free meal on the Guild's tab.

Then, a horn sounded, loud and bellowing, followed by a high-pitched whistle for those that didn't stop at the first. Weiss was glad she couldn't hear it as it had pretty much every Fae in the room cringing in pain.

The participants prepared three plates total, one for each judge: a purely vegetarian meal, for the herbivorous Llama Judge; a mostly meat meal, for the carnivorous Hyena Judge; and a mix of both, for the omnivorous Hedgehog Judge.

The first table had a young feline Fae who had made an artful arrangement of shredded, sliced, and pared vegetables and meat using his hands and special bladed caps to protect his claws. The food was very basic, the cuts messy and clumsy at times, but the presentation showed promise and enthusiasm, so the judges passed him on all three accounts; one even gave him a much appreciated pat on the head.

The second table had a middle-aged Fae who smiled and bowed as she presented three separate bowls of noodle soup made with three separate stocks. The judges took up chopsticks or drank directly from their bowl, and all three didn't stop until they had consumed everything. Two of them thanked her profusely while the third offered her a job at one of their restaurants on the spot.

They went to the third table. Weiss had made three variations of the one dish: egg omelets. The three judges smiled politely and ate them anyway; they didn't exactly start gagging or turn green, but they weren't exactly impressed, either.
<Decent enough, but it lacks something for distinct flavour,> said the Llama Judge.

<Yep, it lacks that kick, kind like an alpha for the ingredients, but at least you know how to balance out your flavours well, kid!> said the Hyena Judge.

<Agreed, perhaps you should have used boar bacon?> the Hedgehog Judge offered.

The Hyena Judge drooled a little. <Mmm, boar bacon... multi-paste of food, kid, you should always remember that,> she said as she wiped up her mouth.

<Indeed, few foods that can't be improved with boar bacon,> the Hedgehog Judge nodded.

<Oh goodness, yes! It's my one animal product, aside from eggs and milk,> the Llama Judge said, humming.

After Penny translated and summarized, Weiss asked back, “But wasn't one of the meals supposed to be purely vegetarian?”

The Llama smiled. <That's when you use boar bacon salt!> she said, pointing at her and winking. <Why didn't you, by the way?>

"I didn't know it existed...” Weiss muttered.

The Hyena Judge winced. <Oooh, now ain't that the saddest thing I've ever heard in a while...> She patted her on the shoulder. <Cheer up, kid! There's probably another job out there for you—always something that needs getting done wherever there's Fae out and about,> she laughed as they left for the next table.

Penny crossed out <Food Maker,> the last job on her schedule, and Weiss was very glad the proctor who needed to sign her card was on the way out of the lab.

Weiss turned in her fully signed schedule, waited with the other participants to get her evaluation. Her name was called, she walked up to the counter and received a freshly printed and stapled stack of papers. She couldn't understand the words, but the attached table with her tests on one column and all X's on the next, and the charts having all her levels at the lowest possible with the symbols being a Fae bent over and panting for breath, another scratching their head in confusion, and a third helplessly holding up raw materials were not encouraging.

She hadn't it over to Penny. “Give me as close to an exact translation as you possibly can,” she muttered as they walked out of the Trader's Guild.

Penny frowned. “Are you sure, Weiss? It'll take a lot longer—”

“Just do it.”

“Okay...”

Weiss sat on a bench outside as Penny did her work.

It was a beautiful, sunny day still, about 2 in the afternoon. Lunch time for the Bastion, it seemed, as hordes of Fae were clocking off from their jobs, heading out to eat at the many restaurants, street vendors, and take-out places that littered the area around the Guild, enjoying their packed lunches outside, or going back home through the Tubes, other means of transportation, or just hoofing it.

It took Penny five minutes to translate the letter, and she insisted that Weiss keep sitting as she began
“We of the Trader's Guild regret to inform you that you are completely, absolutely unqualified for any job we can offer you. You are physically unfit for manual labour; you are illiterate, and effectively uneducated; and have no salable practical skills whatsoever.

“We sincerely hope you can stay in Keeper Ruby Rose's good graces, or that you are fine with sleeping in the homeless shelter and eating rock bread and meat paste for the rest of your life, because unless you can vastly improve your physical fitness and capabilities to at least the normal levels of an adult Fae, become literate in Actaeon at an adult level and cram 12 years worth of basic education into your head, and/or develop talents and skills that oftentimes take years of intense, daily practice to master, those are your only two options to keep on living and surviving from day to day.

“Should you have need for work or Shinies, hopefully while you train and/or educate yourself, we suggest you try your luck with the Watchers, sell your body as a paid test subject with the Makers and Menders, or develop an entertaining act that folks will want to pay to see.

“For whatever it's worth, we are truly, honestly, from the very bottom of our hearts sorry for you, you poor, unfortunate soul, you, and wish you only the best in all your future endeavours.”

Penny put the letter down, frowned as she saw Weiss' teary eyes and shaking body. “Weiss…?”

She sniffed. “Do you have triple chocolate cake shakes here...?

Penny consulted the Codex. “There's a shop nearby that sells an exact replica of the famous Fiorina's recipe, yes.”

“How much is it?” Weiss said as she pulled out her pouch of Shinies, started counting the glimmering, carved rocks she’d gotten for participating in the Job Gauntlet for the first time.

“49 Shinies for a Small.”

Weiss carefully counted her money and noted the value on the faces. She had 45. She looked up. “Do you guys haggle here?” she asked.

Penny looked uneasy. “We do, but it's not likely to happen, given your position as both an outsider, and being associated with your father and his expeditions.”

Weiss nodded. “Okay.”

Then, she burst into tears.

Penny stashed the letter into one of her arm's compartments then hugged Weiss. “There, there...” she whispered as she patted her on the back.
“Are you sure you want to do this, Weiss?” Penny asked as she and Weiss stood in a public bathroom. “Your body's stress hormone levels still haven't returned to normal.”

“Yes,” Weiss said before she splashed more water on her face. “I'm a Schnee, and as my grandfather Nicholas famously said: 'Where other people see desolation, failure, and the writing on the wall, I see motivation to keep on going until we turn this shit around,’” she continued as she dried her face with a paper towel.

Penny nodded. “Calling the Watcher's Roost...” she said as she held up her arm, the “tablet” section flipped out.

Weiss threw the towel away, checked her reflection in the mirror: her eyes were red and puffy from crying, she had the ominous beginnings of eye bags thanks to all the stress and less than ideal sleep she'd been getting recently, and just an aura of unpleasantness had settled on her from having been screwed over far too often and frequently.

She would have killed for make-up, some concealer at the very least, but she supposed she'd just have to work with it. Who knew: maybe looking like someone you wouldn't want to mess with would be a plus in the Watchers.

They left the bathroom and headed to the nearest Tube station, and off they went to the Watcher's Roost.

The Roost was situated on the side of one of the highest mountains of the Valley, overlooking all of the Bastion and a great deal outside the walls, too. Like the city itself, it was a series of trees and platforms connected by bridges and rope, along with a number of extra Tube stations, elevators, and zip lines for getting around quickly.

As Weiss arrived at the main entrance, she looked up and noticed giant birds perched in the higher branches, racks with saddles, bags, and harnesses with folded mechanical wings nearby. “If the Valley had an air force, this would be it,” she thought to herself as Penny arrived.

The two of them walked up to the doors, where there were already two Watchers waiting for her. One was an orange squirrel with all the chipper demeanor and hyperactivity that entailed, the other gave Weiss pause as she stared at him.

Most of the Fae she'd seen in the Bastion were based off mammals, and she'd only seen a handful of bird-like Fae such as Qrow. The one before her looked like a snake or a reptile of some sort, slit pupils in his pink eyes, pink-green scales creeping in on the sides of his face, his neck, and his hands, and what looked to be horns poking out from his forehead.

“Oh hi, you must be Weiss!” the squirrel said as she ran up to her. “Oh who am I kidding? EVERYONE in the Valley knows who you are! You're practically famous! Or is that supposed to be infamous? Anyway, I'm Nora, and that's Ren, and we're going to be helping you in your run through the Grinder!

“Oh hope you don't come out the other side as meat paste~!”

Weiss blinked, confused and more than a little concerned.
“The Grinder’s’ what we Watchers call our entrance exam,” Ren said. “It can get pretty brutal.”

“Super brutal, you mean!” Nora cried. “There's a reason the Guild stopped offering 'Watcher' as part of the Job Gauntlet! Well, aside from the fact that we kept getting so much Moss and people who just didn't want to join up clogging up the ranks, but there's that, too!”

Weiss nodded slowly. “I... see...”

“So, are we going to stand here all day? Or are we going to see if you are Watcher Material?!” Nora said, grinning and leaning ever closer to Weiss' face with each word.

Ren calmly coaxed his friend back to a more polite, less uncomfortably close distance. “Sorry about that; Nora's been dying to meet you since Ruby told us that you were staying here permanently, and Penny's call got her excited all over again.”

“Why wouldn't I be?!?” Nora cried. “We're going to be just like the Void Claw Clan and Lang-Lang from 'The Last Bear Ender!' An outsider, scared, confused, thrust into a new, dangerous world they are completely unprepared for, seeking guidance and protection wherever she can find it, fighting the wilds, her enemies, and her inner demons to rise up as their new CHAMPION!”

As Nora was busy with her monologue and dramatic posing, Weiss discretely asked Ren, “HV addict?”

Ren nodded. “It's how we both learned Nivian.”

“Figured...” Weiss muttered.

Nora turned back to her, put her fists on her hips and attempted a serious, dramatic look. “So, outsider, do you wish to grow strong with the darkness, or continue to cower in the light?”

Weiss wondered if it was too late to back out, and go see just what being a paid guinea pig would entail.

“There's a sign-on bonus of 1,000 Shinies if you pass, plus a regular monthly salary even if you'll probably be spending the next year or so training and shadowing senior Watchers in the less populated districts here in the Bastion.”

And at the promise of 22 Triple Chocolate Cake Shakes with change to spare, plus a year's worth of compensated on-the-job training, Weiss' mind was made up.

“Let's do this,” she said, smiling.

Nora cheered, while Ren smiled back. “Alright,” he said. “Let's head inside, and get you started.”

The interior of the Roost was a bizarre mix of a military base, a police station, and a hunter's lodge.

There was a giant board with announcements and notices about dangerous and criminal individuals, and suspicious activity in general. An army of operators manned terminals, screening and updating the others on important tips from citizens and their sources of information. A holographic “Heat Map” of the entire Valley was projected from the ceiling, lighting up in different colours depending on how dangerous an area was, sometimes with images of particularly deadly animals, always with a name in Actaeon or Nivian and a corresponding bounty for taking them down.

There were also the stuffed heads and carcasses of famous kills throughout the ages, portraits and pictures of proud Watchers and their trophies, and sometimes statues and reliefs of their more
legendary figures, frequently portrayed in combat with their most infamous opponents.

Weiss passed by a giant statue of what looked like the bastard child of an alligator, a shark, and a tank that had also been heavily irradiated with magic, then injected with several gallons worth of steroids, because apparently whoever had designed it thought it wasn’t terrifying enough.

There was a plaque underneath it: “Death Claw, the First Soul Eater,” Penny translated.

It was definitely just a statue, but the detail in its six eyes, the rows of serrated fangs within the three flaps that made its “mouth,” and the giant, twisted horns atop its head gave Weiss the chills. “That’s a Soul Eater...?” she whispered.

“Yeeep!” Nora said as they passed it by. “Big reason why we Watchers are paid and funded so well—and also why we recruit year round, too!”

“We keep it largely as a reminder to never get complacent,” Ren continued.

Weiss gazed it at one more time, before she resolved never to turn her head in its general direction again, and hurried on after the others.

They went deeper into the Roost, into a series of underground caverns. She could hear the echoes of training and fighting, shouts and war cries from both Fae and animals. And from even deeper in…

“… Is that music?” Weiss asked.

Ren nodded. “We share our facilities with the Pits for extra funding and convenience.”

“Plus, a lot of Watchers tend to be Pit Fighters when they're off-duty, or vice-versa! You're going in there later as part of the Grinder, by the way.”

Weiss’ eyes widened in alarm.

“Don't worry, we have safety measures and really good equipment,” Ren explained. “Your opponent's also skilled at roughing folks up without actually causing lasting harm.” He paused. “Physical harm, at any rate.”

“But for now, we're going to do Part 1 of the Grinder: The Reflex Test!” Nora said as she opened a door that led to a training room. It was very basic with a safety mat in the center, some machines for exercises and drills, and a rack of training dummies.

“It's very simple,” Ren explained as they headed to a table. “For 30 seconds, I'm going to try to touch you on your nose, you try and stop me or dodge. To pass, you only need to do either once. Ready?”

Weiss nodded and stood in front of him. “Ready,” she said as she held up her hands.

Nora put her hand over to a giant timer and turned on a camera. “On three: 1… 2… 3!”

Boop.

Ren lightly tapped Weiss on the nose, just enough for her to feel it.

Weiss blinked. “Wait, wha--”

Boop.

Weiss scowled. “Hey--!”
Weiss raised her arms in front of her face.

Ren effortlessly weaved his hands around her defense.

Weiss growled.

Ren was unfazed.

Weiss started flailing her arms in the air.

Weiss grabbed both of Ren's wrists.

“Gah!” Weiss let go, unable to stand against the assault. She spun around.

Ren sidestepped.

She hid her face in her hands.

Ren gently pried her hands from her face.

Weiss looked him straight in his pink, slit-pupil eyes.

“Time's up!” Nora yelled. “Reviewing the footage now and…. yeeep… looks like you dodged a grand a total of zero Boops!”

“Don't worry,” Ren said, “you need only get a score of 2 out of 4 to pass, and the Combat Test counts for 2.”

Weiss grumbled as she rubbed her repeatedly booped nose.

“To the Endurance Test!” Nora said, walking off to the side and wheeling in a device that was composed of a tank with a valve, a hose, and a nozzle pointed well away from the operator's side.

“What is that?” Weiss asked.

“A Soul Fire Thrower!” Nora replied cheerfully.

“… What's Soul Fire?”
“A magical substance used for non-lethally taking down powerful targets that shrug off more instantaneous methods, or to weaken strong enemies to level the playing field," Penny explained.

Weiss worrily eyed the nozzle. “… Is this going to hurt?”

“Yep!” Nora replied, nodding her head. “Gonna hurt LOTS!”

Weiss stared at her. “Wait--”

“On 'Burninate!' 3, 2, 1: **BURNINATE**!”

**FWOOSH!**

Weiss screamed and ran around as she was suddenly engulfed in green flames. She patted herself, stopped, dropped, and rolled and rolled on the floor, but the fire wouldn't let up and kept on burning, and *burning*, and *burning*.

Then, as quickly as it started, it ended, leaving Weiss sprawled out on her back, eyes wide and breathing heavily, her body, hair, and clothes unburned, though tendrils of leftover magic rose up from her like smoke.

Ren stopped the timer. “5.27 seconds,” he said, before he walked over to Weiss, uncapped a bottle from his belt, and poured its contents over Weiss.

“**WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?!**” she screamed as she scrambled up, rejuvenated.

“Testing how long you might last out in the wilds,” Ren replied. “The time you can stay alight is a very accurate predictor.”

Weiss groaned. “Please tell me I passed...”

“Nope!” Nora chirped. “Gotta burn for 15 seconds at the least, 30 seconds ideally, and at least 72.08 seconds to break the record!”

“There's still the Combat test, don't worry,” Ren said. “I'd recommend at least a repeater, a melee weapon of some sort, and the lightest armour we have for speed and agility.”

“Do you have rapiers?” Weiss asked.

Ren nodded. “We do.”

"Good."

Weiss stood in one of the smaller arenas in the Pits, armed and equipped exactly to Ren's advice.

Tall rocks and waist high barriers were strewn about, alongside a miniature mountain range behind her back and a deep ditch on her opponent's side, but hiding behind them wouldn't count for much with how small the arena was, how easy it would be to get flanked.

She looked at her repeater—a wrist-bound machine-pistol of sorts—then at the rapier of carved bone in her other hand. She'd been given time to practice with both, and a vigorous warm-up before the fight beside, but no one would tell her who or what her opponent was going to be, exactly.

“Are these darts live?” she asked earlier as Ren taught her how to reload her repeater with a fresh canister.
“As real as your sword,” he said calmly.

Weiss frowned. “Aren't you worried I'm going to hurt someone?”

Ren smiled. “Weiss, believe me, your opponent's going to turn out fine, and you will, too.”

She complained and cajoled anyone to give her a hint, but everyone kept their mouths shut, wanted her to find out for herself as she had with the Tubes. And as the lights dimmed, the crowds in the stands howled and cheered, and her opponent's gigantic cage was lowered into the ring, Weiss could take comfort in the fact that the mystery was finally going to be over.

She got into the stance Ren had taught her—sword for defense and deflection, repeater to actually do the actual hurting.

Nora got on the mic. <And now, Weiss Schnee's opponent for her Combat Test: ZWEI!>

The crowd cheered and howled as the lid opened and crashed to the ground with a massive thud. Zwei casually trotted out, both heads panting happily.

Weiss smiled.

<And for the purposes of this test: ZWEI on FIRE!>

A bird dropped a flaming pot of soul fire on Zwei's back. The flames engulfed his entire body in an instant, but he was completely unharmed. Heavy metal music began to play as he raised his heads up and howled, twin jets of green flames shooting out from his mouths.

Weiss eyes widened as several hundred pounds of burning, giant, mutant two-headed Corgi came bounding towards her, jaws open and tongues flapping in the wind.
Chapter 31

Ruby and Blake trekked back to Keeper's Hollow, a pole on their shoulders supporting a giant, seven-foot long, several-hundred-pound weight tuna; the latter had a content smile on her face, her stomach noticeably distended.

“We're home, and we brought tuna!” Ruby called out as they came to the foot of the elevator. “Well, just a tuna because Blake got hungry on the ride back, but she'll share with everyone! Except Weiss, sorry about that!”

Silence, not even the sounds of anyone heading out to the elevator.


It was then that she noticed three figures sitting on the highest balcony of the house--"Qrow's Nest" as her mother used to call it, because of how fond he was of going up there alone. One was clearly Zwei, laying down and looking forlorn; the other two were sitting over the edge, nursing drinks in their hands.

Ruby sighed, her face falling. <Oh no...>

Blake frowned. <You need help with drunk duty?> she asked as they set the tuna down on the ground. <I'll help with Qrow, but Weiss is all yours.>

Ruby shook her head. <Nah, I got this; you get this tuna in the fridge, before the Weavers' spell starts to run out,> she said as she headed up the ladder on the side.

After the fish was safely cut up and stored, Ruby made her way up to Qrow's Nest. Zwei looked up from both Qrow's and Weiss' laps as she poked her head out of the hatch; he panted happily at her, before put his heads back where they were, anchoring them to the floor with his weight, eyes watching them both carefully.

Qrow turned around and waved. “Hey Ruby,” he said, slurring slightly.

“Hey Uncle Qrow,” Ruby said, trying to smile. “You're not both drunk, are you...?”

“Just buzzed, but Weiss is 100% sober,” Qrow replied, before he took another sip of his beer.

“It's impossible to get drunk on milk, after all,” Weiss grumbled, before she took a swig of her own drink.

Ruby blinked. “You're drowning your sorrows in milk?”

“Yes! Because apparently the fermentation process for all your alcohols involves so much bacteria it'll utterly annihilate my stomach as is, and your uncle here only seems to ever buy the shitty, beer-flavoured water than the good brands.”

“Well excuse me for being poor…” Qrow muttered.

“So, how’d the Job Gauntlet go?” Ruby asked quickly.

“Terrible!” Weiss replied. “I failed every single exam. Did you know I'm completely unqualified for any sort of job the Fae could offer me? I have printed evidence from the professionals to prove it, just ask Penny when she's done with her daily maintenance!”
“Did you try the Watchers like Elder Goodwitch asked?”

“She did,” Qrow replied. “The holo for her combat test’s gone viral all over AoA.” He switched languages. <It's called 'Soft-Skin Schnee Gits Wrekt.'>

“Go watch it,” Weiss grumbled.

Ruby frowned. “I don't know, Weiss, it sounds pretty--”

“*Just do it.* The sooner all of you Fae watch it for the fifteen-hundredth time and collectively get sick of it, the better.”

“Shit, Weiss, that holo's going in the Hall of Fame!” Qrow said. “Hundreds of years from now, we're still going to be pulling that out of the Codex and thinking 'Man, you'd *think* this'd get old, but it just gets funnier each time!'”

Weiss scowled. “That's a very encouraging thought, Qrow,” she said through gritted teeth.

Qrow shrugged. “Just making sure your expectations are realistic! It’s easier to just face your shit reality and do something about it now, than waste time and energy pretending things are going magically to become better. Trust me, sooner or later, the smell's going to be *impossible* to ignore.”

Ruby sighed quietly. “I'll just go do that, then...” she said as she climbed back down.

“Watch it on the HV!” Qrow called out. “It's better with big resolution!”

Later, Blake and Ruby were sitting on the couch, grilled tuna slices, cookies, and milk between them. They loaded up the holo, skipped through the technical details and the info that was for the benefit of the senior Watchers handling recruiting.

They watched Zwei come out from the cage. Ruby smiled, Blake frowned.

<...And for the purposes of this test: ZWEI on FIRE!> Nora cried.

Zwei was set alight with soul fire. Ruby frowned, Blake smiled.

As the giant, flaming, two-headed canine came bounding towards her, Weiss turned around and fled, arms in the air and screaming at the top of her lungs.

<… And our recruit is off, trying to put some distance between her and—oh, nope! Zwei caught up to her already.> In Nivian, “Cardio, Weiss, *cardio!“”

Weiss replied by shrieking in renewed terror as Zwei grabbed her in one of his mouths, bit down just hard enough to hold her steady as he shook her side-to-side.

“Use your sword!” Nora cried.

Weiss whacked the hilt on the side of Zwei’s head.

“Use your sword as a sword!”

Zwei carefully tossed her away. Weiss went flying for several feet, rolling as she hit the dirt. She dropped her rapier as she scrambled back up to her feet and started running for higher ground.

“Wait, Weiss—you dropped your weapon!”
“I KNOW!” Weiss screamed, tears streaming down her face now.

Zwei stopped and looked up at Nora, conflicted and still alight.

<Go get her, boy!> she called out. <She's not going to pass if you go too easy on her!>

Zwei turned to Weiss over on the other side of the arena, sobbing and jumping up and down, trying to reach a handhold that was just slightly taller than she was.

Blake choked on her fish from laughing so hard. Ruby smacked her on the back as they continued watching.

“Turn around and shoot him!” Nora cried. “His vitals are getting low! Well, low enough for you to get a good score!”

Weiss turned around, held up her shooting arm, and fired. Because of the tears in her eyes and the absolute terror she was experiencing, most of the darts missed Zwei in spite of him being an incredibly large target that was only getting closer.

Weiss ran out of ammo, the repeater kept on spinning and whining as she held the trigger.

“No, Weiss, point it away from your--!

The empty canister popped out and flew into her eye.

“--Too late.”

Weiss groped about, dropping two of her extra canisters before she finally got a grip on the third. She was about to load it into her repeater when the bright glow of the Pit's floodlights were replaced by an ominous, green hue.

Zwei slowly padded up to her, both heads deep in thought, unsure of what to do.

Weiss screamed, threw the canister at him, it bounced harmlessly off his left head.

Zwei barked.

Weiss dropped to the floor and curled up in the fetal position.

The horn was sounded.

Birds came by and dropped cure water on Zwei, extinguishing the soul fire. An extraction crew came up, along with Penny and a Therapy Mender carrying a well-worn, much-loved limited edition Eluna plushie the Watchers kept on-hand for situations like this.

There was a final shot of Weiss hugging it and squeezing it to her chest as she was carted away, before the video ended.

Blake snatched up the remote, and pressed the replay button.

Ruby heard a door opening, turned around saw Weiss dejectedly walking back into their room, her milk exchanged for one of her bottles of bacteria culture. She picked up her dinner and went on after
She knocked on the door with her horns. “Weiss?” she called out. “Can I come in?”

“It's your room, you decide!”

Ruby frowned, and opened the door. She saw Weiss already lying on her side in her hammock, gently rocking back and forth as she hugged Winter's Eluna plushie, an empty bottle on the floor.

“You want some milk and cookies?” she asked as she held up her dinner.

“Already had way too many,” Weiss muttered.

“Okay,” Ruby said. She walked over to her nest, and sat down on one of her pillows. “So...”

“So, what am I going to do about my being a NEET?”

“A what?”


Ruby nodded. “Yeah, that. So, do you have any talents or anything? Song, dance, arts and crafts, maybe? I'm sure we can use your being a human as a gimmick while you're starting out and building a fan base—I'll even be your audience if you need someone to test an act out on!”

“I can sing, but I think I'll just sell my body to science,” Weiss replied. “If being a star with the Fae is anything like being a star with us humans, the competition's going to eat me alive by virtue of being able to talk with their fans anytime they want without needing a translator...”

Ruby frowned. “Weiss...”

“You don't need to come with me to the Chronicler's Grove,” Weiss said as she turned away from Ruby and to her other side. “Qrow and Penny are already overdue for a 'brain drain,' so they're taking me with them tomorrow morning.”

Ruby sighed and put her food down. “Weiss, you can't just give up like this!” she said as she got up and walked over to the other side of her hammock.

“And why not?” Weiss snapped, glaring at her, tears beginning well in her eyes once more. “Let's face the facts here, Ruby: I'm completely, absolutely useless to all of you!”

Ruby blinked. “Well duh! I thought that was already pretty obvious.”

Weiss gritted her teeth. “You were supposed to tell me I'm not useless.”

Ruby frowned. “Why would I do that?”

“Because I was fishing for compliments!”

“Fishing for what now?”

“It's when we talk bad about ourselves so other people will try and make us feel better...”

Ruby paused, and slowly raised a finger. “Weiss, let me get off topic for one moment:
“THIS IS WHY I FUCKING HATE NIVIAN! 'THE DOVE DOVE,' 'THE KNIGHT RIDES OUT AT NIGHT,' THE ENTIRE CONCEPT OF 'SARCASM' WHERE YOU SAY THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF WHAT YOU MEAN FOR 'EMPHASIS'!

“WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU EVER INVENT A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE FOR EVERYONE IN AN ENTIRE REALM WITH THE INTENT OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD 90% OF THE DAMNED TIME?!

“WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU HUMANS?!”

Weiss stared up at her, stunned.

“Whew!” Ruby sucked in a deep breath. “Look, I'm sorry, but I had to get that out of my system!

“Anyway… Weiss, you're going to find something you can do to make yourself useful, and even if it's probably going to be just me and Penny, we're going to help you find it. We'll put you through a training regime, teach you Actaeon and all the other stuff you'll need to know, help you develop a skill than you can use to make something out of your life!

“There's a saying in Actaeon—something about every animal, from the smallest bacteria to the biggest monsters in the Timeless Depths being here in Avalon for a reason, all of them with a purpose in life, and because we Fae are animals too, that means we have those too!

“Maybe it won't be as obvious and instinctive as sheep existing to eat grass and get eaten by thunder wolves, who keep their population in check so they don't eat all the grass and everyone dies of starvation…

“… But you're not going to be useless forever, Weiss.

“Maybe now, yeah, you can't do anything right, but way back when, the Valley was just a big patch of wet dirt and swampland that happened to get shade from the sun because of the Twin Peaks, and retained a lot of the water from the Flood.

“But now look at it, after we Fae moved in and put in the work to try and make it better...”

Ding.

Weiss could see the light bulb go off in Ruby's head.

“… And I just got a great idea!”

“It's not going to involve faking my own death again, is it...?” Weiss asked warily.

“Nope!” Ruby replied, beaming. “Go to sleep, Weiss—you're going to need it!” she said as she hurried on out, stopping only to grab her dinner.

Weiss sat up. “Ruby, wait--!”

She was already out the door.

Weiss sighed, before she laid back down, and decided to just do as she was told and get some shut-eye.

Whatever it was Ruby had planned this time, it could wait till morning.
In the living room, Qrow and Blake were still rewatching the footage of Weiss' ill-fated fight, drinks laid to the side after one too many choking and spitting incidents.

<Uncle Qrow!> Ruby said as she zoomed up right to the back of the couch.

Qrow turned around. <Yeah, Ru--?> he dodged and avoided being accidentally gored with her horns.

Blake noticed, and paused the video.

<Sorry!> Ruby cried. <Do we still have dad's old tools?>

<Uh, yeah, they're in the shed, still on the old hooks on the wall—why do you ask?>

<Because, I've got a great idea to help Taiyang stay here!> Summer replied.

Qrow blinked, shook his head, and noticed Ruby frowning at him.

<A flash again...?> she asked.

<Yeah, don't worry about it,> Qrow replied.

Ruby sighed. <You should really go get your chronicle fixed, Uncle Qrow.>

<Not until that doesn't come with a mind wipe...> Qrow grumbled as he turned back to the HV. <Go get Penny to help you, I've stuffed a LOT of crap in there over the years, and I don't know what might have nested there since the last time I opened that door.>

<Will do, Uncle Qrow!> Ruby said, before she zoomed off once more.

<What was that all about?> Blake asked.

Qrow shrugged. <Who knows? Now unpause that holo, we're almost to the best part!>
Chapter 32

Weiss had another dream her second night in the Valley.

She was sitting in a classroom this time, the esteemed halls of the Arcturus Institute of the Arts and Sciences, the school for children of the rich, the famous, and the ridiculously smart as Lumania continued to lose scholars, funding, and prestige to Candela. Her classmates were all the same: beautiful, fashionable, and bored out of their skulls.

The presentation going on at their respective HV receivers was yet another lecture of the history of Candela, specifically about one of its chief founders: her maternal grandfather, Nicholas Schnee. She used to love watching this video just for fun, until it reminded her far too much of how far everything had fallen the moment “Ole Nick kicked the bucket, and left it all to Jack.”

She knew the narration by heart:

“Ever increasing demand for raw materials and power, and ever dwindling natural resources and overloaded wellsprings. Overpopulated and fatally congested cities, and with yet more citizens being born and moving in every day. Rampant corruption, social unrest, city states at war, driven by survival, greed, and just pure, unbridled hate towards anyone deemed the ‘Other.’

“The world of Avalon seemed on the brink of collapse, brought down by the blinding speed of its technological advancement, scandal after scandal in the Church of the Holy Shepherd, the splintering of Captain Piorina ‘Piper’ Nikos’ once-unified people into the three distinct regions of the Nexus, Solaris, and Zeal.

“It was a time of strife, of uncertainty, of fear; all over, citizens cowered, crushed by the weight of anxiety; fought and killed each other over the scraps; or did their best to hold together a society that was fast falling apart at the very seams.

“And in these darkest hours, when all hope seemed lost, a hero emerged, a man who could not just stand by and let the light of humanity starve itself to death.

“Born in the cutthroat, dog-eat-dog streets and canals of Valentino, trained with the Armed Forces of Avalon in the Nexus, the leader that put an end to the petty in-fighting of Lumania’s academics and scientists, who united the best of the Triumvirate and formed a brave band of scouts, soldiers, settlers, and scientists to venture off into the barren wastelands of the Acropolis, and found our salvation:

“Nicholas Schnee!”

The holo went on to a cliched shot of her grandfather, standing on a mountain top, his energy sword in one hand and his lucky plasma pistol in the other, looking proudly over the foundations of what was to become Candela.

Then, he looked over to Weiss, sheathed his weapons, and stuck out a hand through the holo.

Weiss didn’t even blink as she took it and pulled him out.

“Ah, much better!” Nick said as he climbed out, onto Weiss’ desk. “Thanks, sweetheart; been doing that same stupid pose for far too long...” he grumbled as he climbed down to the floor.

Desensitized and apathetic, no one else noticed.
“Come on, Weiss, let’s get out of here,” Nick said, putting a rough, calloused hand on Weiss’ back. She happily got up and followed him outside of the classroom, to a giant expanse of pure white.

“Are you actually the spirit of my grandfather, or just my subconscious personified as him?” Weiss asked as they walked.

Nick shrugged. “Who knows! I’d say ask an expert, but if there’s one thing any person who actually knows their stuff will tell you, it’s how much shit they don’t know about. I’ve talked to and learned from enough to know the difference between the real deal, and a phony talking out of their ass.”

Weiss nodded. “So what are you here for, anyway?”

“To give you a pep-talk!” Nick replied, stopping and gently poking her in the chest. “What happened to you, Weiss?”

“Weiss chirped, smiling. “Okay! I get it! I’m sorry! Wrong way to to start off a pep-talk right there!” he yelled. He sighed, and they walked in silence for a few moments. “Let me try again: what does the name ‘Schnee’ mean, Weiss?”

“Unsafe labour conditions? Unethical practices and rampant corruption? Profit over the lives of people?” Weiss replied.

Nick scowled. “Let me be more specific: what did the name ‘Schnee’ mean, before that jackass I regret is my son-in-law and I regret even more is your father went and fucked it up for everyone?”

Weiss sighed. “It meant determination. Quality. Hard work, top-notch service, and cutting-edge technology, all with the goal of making the world a better place to live in for everyone, not just the guys at the top.”

“Wrong. What happened was that I saw the shit all around me, had nothing to my name but washing out at Rank 5 with the Queensguard, and decided if I was going to die penniless and starving on a cold, hard floor, it may as well have been while I was trying to do something to not be poor, hungry, and homeless.

“Me and the original crew, we had no idea what we were looking for, where we were going to find it, or what we’d have to do to get it back to our friends and families back home; all we knew was that we were sick and tired of standing around doing nothing, or spinning our wheels and spraying mud all over ourselves.
“The history books keep skipping to the part where we somehow, magically found ourselves the biggest damn wellspring of raw magic in the history books, one that also happened to sitting over a shit-ton of precious minerals, as if somehow, I had a vision and I just knew we’d have to cross a giant-ass blacktop by night and avoid getting turned to people-jerky by day to get to it.”

His face softened. “But it wasn’t that way, Weiss. You’ve read my journals, haven’t you?”

Weiss nodded. “The ones that didn’t get eaten, destroyed, or lost in some way, at least.”

“What’d they say? What’d I talk about?”

“About how much all of your lives sucked. About how you were constantly cold, hungry, starving, lost, had absolutely no idea what any of you were doing, and kept discovering new levels to the ‘How-Fucked-We-Are-O-Meter’ every day. And about the many, many, many times you got sick from trying to purify bad water and testing the results on yourself, even when you recruited grandma whose doctorate was entirely about that.”

Nick pointed a finger at her. “Exactly. And on a related note, make sure to keep on drinking that purified water from Penny and shut your mouth in the hot springs; all those hours I spent on the crapper could have been spent on something infinitely better, I tell ya.”

Weiss winced. “I will. Believe me, grandpa, you made VERY detailed notes.”

“You’re damn right I did! And what else did I do?”

“You trained hard and fought smart—talk first, shoot last, threats never. You made friends wherever you could find them, whoever they were because you never knew who was going to stick around when times got rough. You learned about everything you didn’t know, and were always ready to admit you were wrong so you could start being less wrong.”

Nick put his hands on Weiss shoulders. “And what are you going to do, sweetheart?” he asked softly.

Weiss sighed and looked away. “Spend the rest of my life as paid test subject, I guess...”

Nick shook his head. “Wrong answer, sweetheart, and I know you didn't need me to tell you that.”

“Well what am I supposed to do, huh?” Weiss snapped as she began to tear up. “I’m not you, grandpa!”

“True...” Nick smiled as he put his finger over her heart. “But you’re still a Schnee.”

The white light began to fade.

“Turn this shit life of yours around, Weiss,” he said as he began to disappear, too. “For me, for Ruby and all the other Fae, and most importantly, for yourself.”

Weiss woke up.

She opened her eyes, before she shut them in a hurry. It was morning in the Valley once more, and the light of Avalon’s suns were still as painfully bright as ever. She turned to her other side and started climbing out of her hammock.

Ruby looked over her shoulder from where she was sitting at her terminal. “Oh, hey! You’re awake!” she said as she sat up and dashed over. “You ready to get started on my new super
awesome idea?” she said as she helped Weiss out. “I promise it’s better than the last one!”

Weiss nodded sleepily. “Where do I have to go this time?” she asked as she stretched.

“Just outside! Oh, and skip breakfast for now and change into one of your work dresses—they’re the ones that feel a little rougher compared to the rest.” She thumbed to the door. “I’ll leave and get things ready!”

“Wait! Ruby, before you go: have you ever eaten so many cookies and milk that you had a REALLY weird dream afterward? Like, ‘seeing and talking to your dead relatives’ weird?”

Ruby chuckled. “Oh my gosh, like ALL THE TIME! There was one like a week back where I dreamed you, me, my sister Yang, and Blake were like a team of Watchers fighting off these monsters made from hate, jealousy and Mondays, and we all went to this special school together just for that!”

Weiss stared at her. “What is IN those cookies?”

“Oh, milk, flour, eggs, butter, sugar, vanilla, chocolate chips, and a little salt? Why do you ask?”

Weiss groaned. “Nevermind…”

The house was completely empty save for Blake in the kitchen, entirely focused on slicing up her tuna with loving precision; Weiss ignored the growling of her stomach as she headed out the front door and down the elevator.

Ruby was waiting by a giant patch of land infested with weeds, rocks, trees, and all manner of debris that had washed in during the Flood. Beside her was a rack of tools, mostly for farming and some for construction.

The wood was all aged and worn, probably centuries-old like everything in Keeper’s Hollow, but the metal parts were brand new, freshly sharpened and shined.

“You want me clean up your yard?” Weiss asked, eying the overgrowth dubiously.

“No, I want you to try and bring the old farm back to life!” Ruby replied, holding up a bag of seeds. “Starting with these sweet potatoes!”

Weiss turned to the barn in the distance, the one with the tree growing right through its roof. “This place used to be a farm?”

“Yes! Way back when, Gabija’s husband, wife, or whatever they were started a garden here, and it kept on expanding until it became a full-on farm, with Tenders and animals and everything!

“My family’s been kinda on-and-off about it, because Keepers only tend to ever have the one kid, and even then we’re more Watchers than Tenders, but the land’s always good. My dad grew a LOT of great things here—well, before he got banished, anyway.

“So, what do you say? Want to get to work?” Ruby asked, holding up her scythe.

Weiss nodded. “On one condition: I do all of it.”

Ruby blinked, then frowned. “You sure about this, Weiss?”

“Yes,” Weiss said as she walked up to the rack, and picked up a machete.
It took a few hours, but Weiss managed to beat back a little patch of ground, just enough to plant three neat rows of five seeds each, with a little buffer to build a fence in the future. She watered her crops with a giant, 10-liter can, before set it down in the dirt, and followed it soon after.

She sat on the ground, panting, sweating, covered in mud, arms and legs aching, yet feeling better than she had in a while.

Ruby handed her a bottle of purified water and a towel; Weiss thanked her, before she dumped all of the former over her head and wiped herself up with the later, as the suns were already well-up in the sky.

“So how many weeks am I looking at here?” Weiss asked as she caught her breath.

Ruby snorted. “Weeks? Weiss, these are sweet potatoes, they’ll be ready to harvest in three days.”

“Three days?!” Weiss cried. “How is that even possible?”

“Uh, because this is the Valley? Haven’t you noticed how things tend to grow super big and super fast here...?”

“Right...” Weiss muttered.

The two of them stayed there for a few moments, looking at the tiny garden Weiss had started, the many acres more of debris and overgrowth around it.

“It’s going to be a LONG time before I can hope to get this farm up and running again...” Weiss said.

“Yeeep,” Ruby replied. She smiled at her. “But it’s a start.”

Weiss smiled back. “Yeah. It’s a start.”

Beat.

“Do you need me to carry you back home?”

“Yes please...”
At Weiss' insistence, Ruby carried her all the way back to her hammock for a nap.

“But you're still all muddy and sweaty!” Ruby said.

“Don't care, too tired,” Weiss muttered back.

She slept till the middle of the afternoon, woke up famished and sore. Thankfully, Penny was already back by that time, and her “Mender Protocols” included physical therapy.

“How long is this going to take?” Weiss asked as Penny helped turn her over face down in her hammock.

“No more than a few seconds at the worst!” Penny chirped.

Weiss frowned. “What exactly are you going to do?”

“Almost exactly like you humans do in your hospitals: irradiate you with specially charged magic, in this case for stimulating your sore muscle groups,” Penny explained as she held up her hands, already glowing with a lighter shade of the green energy that held them together.

“This isn't going to hurt, is it...?” Weiss asked.

“Possibly, but nothing worse than a tingle!” Penny said, said as she placed her hands on Weiss' back.

Weiss closed her eyes and preemptively cringed.

The energy in Penny's hands discharged, traveling up and down Weiss body like ripples on a pond. Her muscles did tingle, but not any different than what a vibrating massage module would do, and leaving a pleasant warmth afterward, too.

Weiss opened her eyes, blinking in surprise.

“On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your pain?” Penny asked as she took her hands back.

“Zero!” Weiss asked as she climbed out of her hammock, completely free of soreness. “I feel completely fine!” she said as she stretched and moved about. “Better than fine, even!”

Penny smiled. “Response logged.”

Weiss stomach growled—loudly and angrily, from having missed both breakfast and lunch—and the two of them left for the kitchen. To Weiss' dismay, it'd have to be cookies and milk yet again as all the boar meat was reserved as a buffer for all the predators in the house.

“Where is everyone, anyway?” Weiss asked as they walked in the quiet halls.

“Busy with their duties, or otherwise enjoying themselves at the Bastion,” Penny replied as they entered the kitchen. “Fae generally prefer to spend their free time outside of their own homes and interacting with the community at large; even the most sedentary folks who prefer to spend their time indoors come out at least once a week, and attend most if not all major celebrations and events.

“It's just one of the many aspects of Fae culture you'll be learning about during your education!” she continued as she fetched a plate and went off to the cookie jar.
“My education?” Weiss asked as she headed to the fridge.

“Elder Goodwitch has recently authorized myself to be your tutor in all twelve years of basic education, and my protocols have been updated accordingly,” Penny said as she climbed the ladder. “I will be administering a test later, to properly design a curriculum for you.”

“Got it,” Weiss said as she opened the fridge to fetch the milk.

She noticed that Blake's tuna sashimi was right beside the jug, carefully encased in cling wrap, with a little sticky note on it. It had a crudely drawn picture of Weiss' face on it with a giant X over it. She scowled, and reached for it.

Her grandfather's voice echoed in her head, a line from one of his many video interviews: “Pissing someone off out of spite is about the worst investment you can make; very short-term gain for long-term pain.”

Her hand strayed back to the jug, Weiss pulled it out and shut the door. “She caught it, she can decide who gets it,” she thought to herself as she sat down at the table.

Weiss' life quickly settled into a routine:

Mornings, she'd do farm work, tending to her crops, hacking back a little bit more of the overgrowth to clear space for more plants in the future. She was careful not to exert herself too much as there would be more exercise in the afternoon—weight lifting, running, and even weapons training with all the many varieties of armaments the Fae produced.

Weiss dubiously held up a blade whose hilt could shoot out, connected by a razor wire and an automatic reel system. “How does someone even use this?” she asked, touching the wire and flinching as she cut herself almost immediately afterward.

“Very carefully!” Ruby replied. “If you're fast, have great reflexes, and get up high places easy like Blake, a Breakneck's a great weapon to use!”

“I'm going to regret this, but why's it called a Breakneck?”

“Because we use it a lot for catching fast prey like chickens,” Ruby replied. “You just piss them off with a repeater or a crossbow, run through some trees, tie the wire taught between them, and make them run straight into the wire. Run around so the weighted end loops around their neck, and pull the switch.”

She mimed tugging an invisible rope, and violently jerked her head to the side. “Violin! Roast chicken for everyone. Sometimes you can cut the head clean off and save a whole lot of prep-time!”

Weiss turned green and slowly put the Breakneck down. “I think I'll just leave this to Blake...”

After cooling down with the Fae's version of yoga and meditation, she'd spent the rest of the day studying with Penny. It was mostly focused on learning Actaeon and how Fae society worked, as math, economics, science, and so on were essentially the same as humans.

About the only thing she had a problem with was her learning materials:

“Are these children's books?” Weiss asked as she held up worn, much-loved physical copies of simple, colourful books—some of them with Ruby's name scrawled inside, most of them with her many ancestors'.
“They are,” Penny replied. “The Chroniclers recommended that we use these, as they are both
designed to help total beginners learn the language, and contain simplified versions of a lot of the
cultural concepts and history that you will be learning later.”

Weiss sighed. “Can't argue with that… what do we start with?”

“This one!” Penny said, holding up a book with the cartoon of a generic-looking Fae on it. “The title
translates to 'I Am Fae,' though I recommend you read it all out loud in Actaeon to help you with you
with your pronunciation.”

She opened it and laid it down before Weiss. “Now, repeat after me...”

< I am Fae.
< I am of Havalon, our Home.
< I am formed from Her Earth.
< I take breath from Her Air.
< I draw life from Her Water.
< I gain strength from Her Fire.
< I care for myself as Havalon cares for me.
< I care for the Other as I care for myself, for they are also of Havalon.
< I care for Havalon, for She is our Home.
< As Her Bounties feed us, so we feed Her.
< As Her Forests, Her Mountains, Her Seas become our cities, so our cities become Her Forests, Her
Mountains, Her Seas.
< As we rise, so She rises with us.
< For I am Fae, of Havalon, our Home.>

They repeated it several times; Weiss struggled to speak it properly, as Actaeon sounded like animal
growls and noises, not sounds that humans made normally, to say the least.

“So this is basically Fae religion?” Weiss asked as they took a break.

“It's actually much closer to a constitution or a guiding philosophy,” Penny replied. “Religion is a
belief in a higher power or powers, and the effects of Avalon are very real and easily proven, no faith
necessary.”

“How so?” Weiss asked.

Penny smiled. “That'd be for a much later lesson. For now, let's start with the basics...”

The days in-between training were followed by even more education, though this time in practical
skills.

“Though most Fae tend to have one specialized role as their main career, it's not unusual for them to
have a second job to complement the first or serve as a back-up, such as Watchers also working as Makers to maintain their own equipment and serve as insurance should they be crippled or otherwise rendered unfit for duty,” Penny explained. “Some even switch careers several times over the course of their lives, following personal interest or necessity.”

Ruby helped teach her how to maintain her tools, and construct a fence for her garden, using the wood and materials from the overgrowth she'd already cleared. With the help of the Codex and supplies permitting, Penny guided her in making common home remedies and useful products, like “multi-paste,” an incredibly powerful and sticky adhesive that had a nearly limitless amount of uses, from patching up walls, repairing clothes, and even serving as a durable temporary fix to a broken weapon until you could find a more permanent solution. And though Blake was unwilling to teach her how to sew and work leather, Qrow was teaching her how to cook and butcher meat, though Weiss had her reservations as he insisted on doing both only while he was sufficiently drunk.

“I'll have you know I do my best cooking while I'm wasted!” Qrow said as he reheated some stew over the stove, one hand on a wooden spoon, the other holding his flask of “jungle juice.” “Granted, I've also done my worst while I was wasted, but I hit more than I miss!”

Weiss groaned as she cut some carrots to throw in. “Qrow, we're both going to be handling sharp objects, fire, and things that might be both sharp and flammable, I'll learn a LOT better and faster if I know you'll be completely sober if something goes wrong! Or at least MOSTLY sober...”

Qrow groaned as he lifted the spoon out. “Princess, I have done way harder things in much more dangerous conditions while I was even more drunk than I usually am—I've got the footage from my Chronicle to prove it, too!”

“Good for you, but my point still stands!” Weiss said as she slid the carrots into the pot.

Qrow sighed. “Fine. But I decide what we cook, alright?”

“Deal.”

As it turned out, it would be sweet potato fries, as “Nothing tastes better when you're completely fucked up at 3 AM than some nice, greasy sweet potato fries!”

Weiss couldn't match Qrow in precision or knife work, but frying them was easy, and only some of them got burnt. No one really minded the extra crunch, though, especially Zwei who had been kept on hand in case everything went horribly, horribly wrong.

“Man, I really should have fried up some fish or grilled hamburgers for this, these are pretty good!” Qrow said as he ate them. “A lot cheaper than what the fast food joints around here charge, too.”

“Yeah, Weiss, looks like the farming life might really be for you after all!” Ruby said through the fistful of fries she had shoved into her mouth.

Weiss smiled. “Thanks,” she said as she picked up the last plate of fries.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Blake looking in from the doorway, her nose twitching, her expression conflicted.

Weiss frowned, a memory of the now long-gone sashimi and the sticky note flashing through her mind.

Then, her grandfather's voice echoed through her head again, the second part of that quote: “Extending the olive branch to someone you hate, though? Much better choice.”
She walked up to her. Blake looked ready to bolt, before Weiss held up her plate and smiled

Blake looked worriedly at her, caught between the delicious aroma of the sweet potato fries, and who was offering them. In the end, the allure of greasy, hot snacks won out and she carefully picked up one of the smaller wedges.

Blake nibbled on it daintily, her expression brightened. “Is good!” she said in Nivian, struggling with the words.

“Get ‘em while they last!” Weiss said, inviting her in.

<Thanks,> Blake replied as she did, a smile on her face now too.

A week later, and thanks to Elder Goodwitch's surprisingly enthusiastic support for Weiss' gardening, she’d expanded her crops to include more vegetables like tomatoes, green peas, and even some herbs for medical and cooking purposes.

Unfortunately, the local wildlife had taken notice, and though insects were foiled easily enough by planting a protective row of pest control plants, the birds were still a problem. Ruby had built a very basic scarecrow out of wood and weeds, even drew an angry face on it, but the animals weren’t the least bit fooled or intimidated.

“We need to make him look scarier!” Weiss said. “Do you have any clothes we could use?”

Ruby shook her head. “Sorry, Weiss, clothes are expensive here because we make them to last; we don’t throw them away soon as they stop being fashionable, we just take them to a maker and have them changed up.”

Weiss sighed. “Do you have anything we can use, then?”

“I think we can use some of Zwei’s old blankets, but I don’t think the birds will be scared by this guy wearing a sheet,” Ruby said, gesturing at her skeletal creation.

“We're going to need to hire a maker for this, then...” Weiss said as she headed back inside, shooting a glare at the birds eying her crops from the trees.

Penny was sent to stand out and shoo the birds while Weiss and Ruby scavenged some materials, and began to search for a tailor they could hire on their limited budget.

As she headed back from the bathroom, Blake noticed the naked scarecrow outside, the pile of old blankets and popped buttons on the living room floor, and Ruby and Weiss busy with a comm-crystal, clearly looking through the magical version of the Job Board.

She quietly stole some of the them, and took them back to her room.

Later, Weiss closed her comm-crystal in frustration. “Ugh! This is impossible! Isn't there ANY maker willing to do a job on the cheap?”

“It's highly doubtful,” Penny said as she walked up. “A Makers' products are their living, their pride, and their reputation; if word gets around they did a lackluster job just to make a handful of easy Shinies, there will be serious monetary, societal, and personal costs.”

Weiss sighed. “Never have I thought I would ever regret someone putting quality over profit...” she stopped. “Wait, Penny, what are you doing here? Weren't you watching my crops?!” she asked as she scrambled up.
“I was, but Blake took care of that problem!” Penny smiled. “Look out the window.”

Weiss and Ruby did.

Standing guard over her crops was a scarecrow styled after Jacques Schnee, wearing a white jacket complete with buttons and a red handkerchief in the breast pocket, his arms stiffly held by his sides, his bushy eyebrows and mustache making him look very, very angry indeed.

It wasn't the finest craftsmanship, but it scared the birds, which was what mattered.

Weiss and Ruby turned away from the window as they heard the elevator coming back up.

Blake waved and smiled as she walked on past, her pouch full of sewing tools under her arm.
Chapter 34

Weiss was in her dream world once more.

This time, the scene was her ever growing garden, vegetables growing to massive sizes with speed that they could have only dreamed about in Candela. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the actual Jacques Schnee was tied to a post where the scarecrow was, silent and scowling as he reluctantly protected his daughter's crops.

Nick chuckled as he walked through her garden, careful to step between the neat pathways she'd carved out. “Well ain't this a sight for sore eyes!” he said as he came up to edge of where Weiss was working.

“Mhmmt!” Weiss said as she knelt in the ground, carefully clipping her herbs. “Thanks for the pep-talk and the advice, grandpa; I really needed those.”

Nick snorted. “Don't thank me, thank yourself! You know, especially because I really could just be the back of your head using me like a sock puppet, or something.”

“You're not going to turn into another me, are you?” Weiss asked as she tossed leaves into the pockets of her dress. “Because that'd just be creepy.”

Nick shrugged. “Your mind, your rules, sweetheart!”

“Then you stay as my dead grandpa,” Weiss said as she finished up.

She and Nick spent a while admiring her work; she hadn't come close to clearing even a quarter of the overgrowth, but damned if she hadn't made a fine looking garden.

“Is this what it felt like for you, grandpa?” Weiss asked. “When you and the crew were out on expeditions?”

“HELL NO!” Nick yelled. “All that time spent roaming around and trying to look for anything that could help were objectively the worst time of my entire life, second only to when Frosty told me she was pregnant with Snowie while we were still out in the middle of Fucking Nowhere, and third to when Jackass over there didn't even wait for me to kick the bucket before he set the company on its death-spiral!”

“The company has never been more profitable since I took over!” Jacques yelled.

“YEAH, AND THAT WORKED OUT REAL WELL FOR YOU, DIDN'T IT?!” Nick yelled back. He groaned and shook his head, before he turned back to Weiss. “Anyway, the journey sucked, but when we hit pay dirt, there was nothing like it! It's what kept us all going, all those little victories, even after we found that mother of all wellsprings.”

Nick frowned. “It's what kept me going long before I should have retired, too...”

Weiss reached out and put her hand in his calloused palm. He wrapped his fingers around her hand, held her like he was never going to let her go, let anyone take her from him.

“Was it worth it, grandpa?” she asked softly.

“More than worth it...” Nick muttered, smiling. “Hell, now we got a problem with Candela bleeding
every other city state dry for everything they've got, but at the very least, we're not shooting each other dead over the last can of spam!

“Anything worthwhile is going to be harder than hell and cost a lot, Weiss,” Nick said. “If it were easy and cheap, we’d never be talking about people like me, or erecting commemorative statues before tearing them back down because I specifically asked those asshats to put up one of Frosty, not me!”

Weiss giggled. It was one of her favourite stories about her grandfather, the time he snuck out of his hospice, flew over the crowds with Tony's help, and personally stopped them from cutting the ribbon on his new statue, then refused to be put back on life support until he saw them taking it down right before his very eyes.

It shortened his already grim lifespan even more, but it was worth it.

“And speaking of costs, you're going to be paying one of them real soon, sweetheart!”

“What, muscle soreness from all the farming and training? I've got Penny for that!”

“Haaah… yeaah... I'm pretty sure she's using the ‘Resonator’ tech me and the Nerd Herd modified the crap out of pre-Candela, and the thing is, there was a HUGE flaw in our design that we never really solved, and no one's been able to crack since, either.”

Weiss frowned. “What flaw?”

Nick frowned as he started to fade away. “Brace yourself, sweetheart, you're going to find out in about 3, 2, 1...”

Weiss woke up.

It was dark, moonlight streaming in through the window. Owls hooted, frogs croaked, Ruby drooled all over her pillows and sheets. Everything was calm and peaceful, except for the fact that every part of Weiss' body hurt.

As it always tended to happen, a memory came screaming up to the forefront of her mind, too little, too late:

Penny, doing her usual treatment to help Weiss with her soreness, the pain and the aching disappearing with the discharge of magic.

Weiss climbing out of her hammock, limber and feeling like she could run a triathlon right there and then.

“I noticed you've been dramatically increasing your levels of physical activity recently, Weiss.” Penny said.

“Yeah, all that training's working wonders—I'm feeling stronger and stronger every day!” Weiss as she headed out the door.

“That's great to hear! But as your personal Mender, I have to warn you against overexerting yourself.” Penny said as she followed her.

“What, afraid I'm going to wake up even more sore than usual? You have all that Mender magitech on you, don't you?” Weiss asked as she headed out to the halls.
“True, but they have their limits,” Penny said as they headed out the front door. “Magic in living bodies can only last for so long before it dissipates back into the environment, and I’d hate to think of what sort of damage you could accidentally inflict on yourself while you’re under effects similar to high-grade painkillers.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise,” Weiss replied as she headed down the elevator to her garden.

But evidently not careful enough. Weiss tried to move her arm, winced as pain shot up her spine and the rest of her body followed suit, her stiff muscles simultaneously screaming in agony. Paralyzed, she could only let out a tiny whimper of pain.

Ruby's ears twitched. Weiss heard her snort, she groggily raised her head up. “Weiss…?” she muttered.

“Weiss…” Weiss whispered. “Help…!”

Ruby blinked, her instincts kicking into high gear, up in an instant and scrambling over to Weiss. She looked her over once, and instantly knew what was wrong. “Oh man, Stiff-Stuck?”

Weiss made an affirmative noise. “Get Penny…”

Ruby frowned. “Can't: she's totally drained from the hunts today, she won't be ready for anything until morning.”

Weiss whimpered, tearing up.

“Wait, no! Don't cry! Don't cry!” Ruby said as she scrambled off, dug through her piles of belongings. “All of us watchers learn everything there is about massaging sore muscles!” she said as she pulled out a container of ointment, then pumped her fist in victory. “I might not be as good as a therapy mender or Penny, but I can help till we can get you to the hot springs!” she said as she laid it down by her bed and scrambled back to Weiss.

“I'm going to need to carry you to my nest, okay?” Ruby said as she reached for her. “I'm sorry, but this is really going to hurt…”

Weiss whimpered, tearing up.

It hurt. It really, really hurt. Ruby was fast and strong, capable of picking her up like she was nothing and laying her down on her nest in the span of a few seconds, but even the tiniest movement was agony.

“I'm going to need you to take your clothes off now,” Ruby said as she reached for her. “I'm sorry, but this is really going to hurt…”

Weiss whimpered and squeezed her eyes shut.

“I can't massage you properly through your clothes, Weiss!” Ruby explained. “I mean, I've already seen you naked before at the hot springs, so it's not like it's anything I haven't seen already, right?”

The burning worsened.

Ruby bit her lip, took a moment to consider her next words very carefully. “Will it help if I close my eyes? We were trained to do it blind, too! Just tell me! On second thought: blink twice for 'Yes.”’
Weiss debated it. Suffer for however many hours until Penny was done charging, let alone capable of helping her, or have Ruby strip her naked and massage her, a buffer till they could get to the hot springs come morning?

Blink, blink.

Ruby went to work. She kept her eyes open only long enough to strip Weiss naked, open the jar of ointment, and know where it was on the floor. Weiss was laid on her stomach, her body throbbing in pain, her face burning bright red in embarrassment.

She was beginning to have second thoughts, up until Ruby placed her hands on her ankles. Weiss yelped as she felt the ointment kick in, freezing cold on her skin as Ruby started to massage her sore muscles, feeling how Weiss' body reacted and adapting accordingly.

It hurt—possibly even more than if she had just laid awake all night, stiff and sore. Weiss yelped and whimpered, squirming and flinching, until Ruby finally found just the right amount of pressure, and things quickly turned around.

The soreness and stiffness in her body began to disappear. The ointment began to heat and left a pleasant, warm tingling on her skin, along with a minty and soothing scent. Soon, Weiss stopped flinching, squirming, and yelping, smiling in relief and humming in relief as Ruby finished up her legs.

“Feeling better, Weiss?” Ruby asked as she rubbed a fresh layer of ointment all over her hands.

“Yes...~” she moaned happily.

Ruby continued onto her back, Weiss began to doze off, until her hands happened to cross over a particularly sensitive part of her lower back.

Ruby stopped. “Weiss...?”

“Yes...?” Weiss squeaked back.

“You um, uh... made a noise.”

Weiss began to sweat. “What noise...?”

“It kinda sounded like--” Ruby made a poor imitation. “You okay...?”

“I'm fine!” Weiss squeaked.

“Are you really? Because I can--” Ruby stopped. She sniffed, then sniffed again a few more times.

Weiss' face felt like it was on fire—soul fire, as she could feel herself dying inside once more.

“Oooohh...” Ruby giggled as her hands continued their work. “Weiss, there's nothing to be ashamed about! We Fae aren't as weird about sex as you humans are—why are you like that for something so natural, anyway?”

Weiss bit back another “noise.” “I guess we're just weird like that...” she said through gritted teeth.

“Like with Nivian?” Ruby asked.

“Mmpff--!” Weiss stiffened up for a moment. “I mean: mhmm...!”
Ruby snorted, Weiss could feel her shaking her head. “I'll never get you humans...” she muttered as she applied some more ointment on her hands. “Oh, and Weiss?”

“What?”

“After I'm done, I can leave if you need time to, you know--” Ruby made a sexy animal noise. “I'll even hang a sock over the door so no one will walk in on you.”

Weiss mulled it over. “… No… no thanks, I'll… I'll manage…”

“Suit yourself!” Ruby said as she worked on her shoulders. “Offer still stands, though.”

Weiss bit her lip, hard. “Thanks, Ruby,” she whispered, as she began to doze off yet again, finally falling asleep again after Ruby turned her over on her other side.

Morning came, Penny knocked on their door before she opened it. “Good morning Ruby, Weiss! Sorry for barging in, but--”

She noticed Ruby and Weiss sleeping in the former's nest together. The former groggily got up, the latter kept on sleeping peacefully, clearly naked under the blanket that had been thrown over her for modesty's sake.

Penny kept on smiling as she slowly, carefully stepped and closed the door.

Later, that morning Weiss was back to tending to her garden, watering, weeding, and clipping. She looked up as she saw Penny coming up to her.

“Good morning, Weiss!” she said with a wave.

“Hey Penny—something up?” Weiss asked as she got up from the ground.

“Yes, actually!” Penny lowered her voice. “I noticed that you and Ruby have gotten intimate recently...”

Weiss blinked. “I'm sorry, what?”

“You know, the two of you--” Penny made a sexy animal noise.

Weiss face turned completely red in instant. “W-Wait, what?! No we didn't!”

Penny winked. “Of course you didn't- Anyway, as your personal mender, I have to warn you to please wash both your hands before to minimize the risk of infection to either of you, manicure your nails frequently, and use plenty of lubrication!”

Weiss scowled. “No, seriously, we didn't do anything!”

Penny nodded, still smiling. “I should emphasize that that last point is extremely important: the human body was simply not designed to be able to handle the speed, intensity, and frequency that Fae are capable of, especially when incredibly aroused.”

Weiss just stared at her, simultaneously mortified and offended.

“Do not hesitate to ask me for any questions you may have!” Penny chirped softly. “Though the identities have been changed and obscured for privacy reasons, you and Ruby are not the first interspecies relationship in Fae history.”
Weiss sighed. “Thanks, Penny...” she grumbled.

“You're welcome, Weiss!” Penny said, winking one more time before she left.

Weiss finished up her garden work, and picked up her machete and ax. She was planning on skipping clearing the overgrowth today, but it looked like she was going to go hack some weeds and chop down some more trees after all...
“Ooohh…! Oooh my goodness, this is amazing...” Weiss moaned as she sank into the hot spring, feeling the heat and the minerals soak into her skin, and what remained of her aches and pains melting away into nothing. “Blake? Blake, I am so sorry for cutting your time short last time, no one should ever have to get out of this until they absolutely have to...”

<Weiss is apologizing for last time, and now understands why you were so displeased when she cut our time in the private bath short,> Penny translated as she soaked with them.

Blake smiled. <Apology accepted. I gotta say, I’m surprised your ‘human sensibilities’ aren’t the least bit offended this time.>

“Blake accepts your apology, and is expressing surprise that you are suddenly so comfortable bathing with us,” Penny translated. “I myself am also surprised but pleased at how you’ve gotten over your reluctance of using the public baths.”

“Fuck it!” Weiss said, raising an arm in the air. “Don’t care anymore! Seeing a couple hundred to a thousand Fae naked all at once is worth this...” she murmured as she laid back on the edge, letting all but her head sink beneath the water.

A passing group of Fae recognized her, started talking about her, and snickering under their breath. One of them imitated her terrified screams from her fight with Zwei, but Weiss found she couldn’t care in the slightest. “There’s only so many fucks I can give, and I sure as hell ain’t giving it to them,” as Nick would have said.


“It’s a rest day for all of us, actually!” Ruby chirped. “Nothing to do but relax, have fun, and recharge!”

“Fae believe very strongly in the importance of rest and recuperation, to the point of mandatory enforcement of shift limits, vacation days, and much offering much incentive for participation in most of our major holidays,” Penny said.

Weiss nodded. “Guess I’ll just stay home and watch HV then, seeing as I’m broke...” she muttered.

Ruby nodded sympathetically, before a light bulb went off in her head. “Actually... we’re all going to go hang out with my sister Yang after this! Want to come join us?”

Weiss looked at her in confusion. “I thought she was banished from all Fae territories.”

“She is! But they let me talk to her remotely, so long as we don’t try to relay messages to dad.”

“What, like through holo-chat?”

“Through the Honey Den, actually.”

“What’s the Honey Den?”

Ruby smiled. “You’ll find out.”

“I’m not going to end up getting scared out of my wits, then puking my guts out like my first time
riding the Tubes, am I?” Weiss asked.

“Not if you’re allergic to Dreamer’s Honey!” Penny replied. “Which, going from your vitae vine data and your gut bacteria’s swift adaptation to Valley food and water, I can **confidently** say you’re not.”

Blake tapped her on the shoulder, said something to Ruby in Actaeon.

“Oh, right! One more thing: whatever you do, **do not laugh** when Blake tries to say something in Nivian.”

“I won’t,” Weiss replied.

---

Clean, relaxed, and recharged, the group made their way to a district of the Bastion that Weiss hadn’t been to before:

The Weaver’s Terrace.

The whole place resembled a giant temple to some ancient deities, which judging by the statues and reliefs of Fae lovingly maintained and frequently surrounded by worshipers offering tributes, lighting incense, and praying, it probably was. The architecture was either rocks quarried from the bedrock surrounding the Valley, or carved out of the face of the mountain, the one opposite the Watcher’s Roost and the Pits, and the whole place was overrun with plant-life, vines, moss, flowers, fungi, bushes, and even some trees, their roots oftentimes cracking and wrapping around the stone.

Animals abounded, but unlike the rest of the city, these were clearly running wild and untamed, as Weiss found out when she got pelted with berries by some monkeys, and there was no tender to apologize, or stop them from howling with laughter at her now stained dress.

“Just ignore them!” Ruby said. “They’ll get bored of you, and go away.”

“Don’t you have **anyone** keeping them in check?” Weiss asked.

Penny shook her head. “The Terrace’s animals are sacrosanct, both culturally and to the local ecosystem.”

Weiss shot the monkeys a death glare; they mooned her back, and started laughing once more as Blake grabbed her by the collar and dragged her off, kicking and cursing.

They ended up in an underground den, lit up by glowing stones on the wall, pulsating crystals scattered about alongside cushions, curtains, and rugs. Uniformed staff patrolled the area, watching over their clients who were all laying down on their backs, sitting in meditative poses, or sprawled out looking blitzed out of their minds.

Weiss expected smoke to be floating about from burning herbs and concoctions, but the air was completely clear, save for a relaxing, calming scent emitting from the flowers growing on the walls and ceiling.

“What’s wrong with them…?” Weiss quietly asked Ruby as they waited in line for the staff to pat them down.

“They’re just in Honey Dreams, they’re fine,” Ruby replied. “The worst that can happen is that you get the prickles from sleeping or sitting on something wrong, but the staff takes care of that—they’ve even got a therapy mender, worst comes to worst.”
“Okay, now what’s a Honey Dream?” Weiss asked.

“You’ll find out soon~” Ruby chirped.

They walked up to the counter. If not for the bags of carefully guarded Shinies and staff meticulously counting recent transactions, it looked more like the tent of a sage from Sekhmet, with the luxurious curtains, the incense, and the woman meditating in the center of it all.

She was large, in every sense of the word: her rotund and generously endowed body was swathed in silky fabrics and scarves worn loose. Her long dreadlocks were decorated with beads, leaves, and feathers, falling around her head like a veil from which only two soft, rounded eyes peeked through, crowned with a massive pair of yak horns. She radiated an aura of authority and strength, but like that of a mother than a dictator.

“Hey Weaver Miko!” Ruby said, waving.

Miko smiled, and slowly rose up. She already dwarfed Weiss sitting down, even if she hadn’t inherited her maternal grandmother’s “vertically challenged” gene; standing up, she rose well over the heads of all of them.

“Hello, Ruby,” she hummed, her voice deep, rumbling, and soothing. “I see you’ve brought your companions as usual—including your newest friend, Ms. Schnee.”

“Just call me Weiss, please, Weaver Miko...” Weiss muttered sheepishly.

Miko nodded slightly, her dreadlocks shaking and the ornaments in them clinking noisily. “As you wish, Weiss. I assume you will be joining Ruby and the others in the Dreamscape?”

“The what now?”

“The place which your consciousness flees your body and arrives to, usually in sleep or with the help of Dreamer’s Honey; it’s a land where anything is possible, a blank slate to be shaped by your mind, or to join consciousness with others in spite of distance.

“It is similar to what you humans call ‘The Trance,’ though more magical than technological.”

Weiss scowled. “Oh, great...” she muttered. “I knew there was something about this place that felt vaguely familiar...”

“You got something against trancing, Weiss?” Ruby asked, curious.

“The act itself? No, but the Trance Addicts are a different story,” Weiss replied. “No offense to any of you guys, but for me, trancing is mostly for people that can’t ever accept their reality, and just want to keep escaping it, no matter the costs.”

“Any cure is a poison with the wrong dosage, and we of the Den are very careful and precise about how much we allow you,” Miko hummed.

“I don’t doubt that, but I think I’m going to back out anyway,” Weiss said. “Sorry, Ruby, I’ll see you guys back at home...” she said as she started to walk away.

“Wait! Weiss! Are you sure you don’t want to give it a try, just once?” Ruby asked as she grabbed her hand and stopped her.

“No,” Weiss replied. “First time I tried trancing, 15 seconds after connecting to my first public
server, I got dozens of messages from creeps asking if I was really 13 and female or that was just my avatar, among other inquiries I’ll spare you the details of!"

“Ruby’s communications with Yang use a connection analogous to a secure private server, though,” Penny said. “No one gets in without both their permissions, and it’s all but impossible to break into without serious effort, and highly complex infiltration methods beside.”

“We could REALLY use a fifth member for our team, too!” Ruby said. “All this time, we’ve been using a golem, or hoping Ren or Nora’s rest days are the same as ours.”

“Well I wish you luck in finding someone permanent to fill that slot, because I won’t be them! Now please let go of my hand, Ruby.”

Ruby didn’t. “Won’t you please change your mind, Weiss? For me?”

Weiss glared at her. “No.”

Ruby made the Fawn Eyes at her.

Weiss scowled. “Ruby, I said no!”

Ruby’s bottom lip quivered as her eyes began to well up in tears.

“Oh alright, fine!” Weiss cried. “But just this once...”

Ruby brightened up immediately. “Yay! Thanks, Weiss!” she hugged her, pointing her horns away from her face. “Now let’s go—Yang’s probably already waiting for us!” she said as she skipped off.

Blake, Penny, and Miko all smiled.

Weiss raised a finger. “NOT A WORD FROM ANY OF YOU, IN NIVIAN OR ACTAEON!”

The four of them were now lounging in a sectioned-off area of the Honey Den, getting comfortable as Miko personally configured the crystal in the center, before Ruby pressed her palm on it as her “password.” As it began to spin and rise up into the air, an assistant came along to feed everyone but Penny rich, gold-white honey—thankfully, with disposable spoons fresh from sealed wrappers.

The dreamer’s honey tasted incredibly sweet, but not overwhelmingly so, spreading out over Weiss tongue at a slow, even pace. She hummed as she swallowed, enjoying how smooth it felt going down, before her body grew heavy, and her eyes were suddenly locked on the crystal.

There was a flash of light, and Weiss found herself in the same blank, white expanse of her dreams.

She blinked and looked around; Ruby was there, as was Blake, and Penny was finishing uploading her consciousness into the crystal, her form becoming more and more solid with each second.

“Well, add ‘talking to the dead’ to my list of ‘Weird Shit I’ve Done!’” she heard an unfamiliar voice say.

Weiss turned around and found herself looking at Yang, much older and vastly changed from the little girl in the picture, but still with that same happy, cocky expression.

“Yang!” Ruby said, running up to her and jumping straight into her arms.

“Ruby!” Yang cried, catching her and hoisting her up to avoid getting butted with her horns.
The two spent a moment laughing and chatting excitedly in Actaeon, before Ruby remembered the others were there, and sheepishly climbed back down.

“Sorry about that! It’s been a while since I’ve been allowed to talk to her, what with everything that’s happened,” she said. “Anyway: Weiss, this is my big sister, Yang!”

“Sup, Princess!” Yang casually saluted her. “So, what’s it like, being dead?”

“It’s quite terrible in the beginning, and you lose ties and communication with everyone you knew when you were ‘alive,’ but you leave all the shitty parts behind, and it gradually gets better, so net positive, I suppose.”

Yang grinned. “Probably all thanks to my deer sister Ruby here, right?”

Weiss opened her mouth to reply, before she stopped. “Wait, was that just a pun?” she asked, confused.

“Yes!” Yang said as she walked up to Weiss and looped an arm around her shoulders. “Better hold on tight to the reins, princess, because you’re going on a magical sleigh ride straight to Puntown!”

Weiss stared at her, awful, terrible feelings welling up from deep inside her.

<And now you know one of the many reasons I have issues with humans,> Blake muttered.

Weiss pulled away from her in disgust. “Let’s just get this dream over with! What are we going to do here, exactly?”

Ruby beamed. “The next episode of Rune Rangers: Viridian Vanguard, starring our newest Sapphire Ranger:

“You!”
Avalon.

A realm of some of the most powerful wellsprings to be found anywhere in the Aether.

A realm of life and wonders rarely seen elsewhere.

A realm of boundless potential, where your wildest dreams and fantasies have the best damn chance of becoming reality.

You could say that it was pretty much inevitable that you'd have people trying to fuck it up, locals and foreigners alike, which is why all of them tend to have some sort of agreement and organization trying to keep things in check, make sure that no one person or group can grab all that power, and do whatever the hell they'd like with it.

The Humans over at the West and North ends have the Triumvirate Treaty, the Acropolis Accord, and the Armed Forces of Avalon. The Eldan Fae have the Three Truths, and the Orders of the Watchers and the Seekers. The rest over in Celestion and some parts of Sekhmet have their own ways of making sure their streets are nice and orderly, ensure that there's no one actively trying to make it so that there's not a (mostly) free, safe, and sane Avalon tomorrow.

But sometimes, something or someone grows so powerful, so cunning, and so insidious that even if these three get over their differences and in-fighting to join forces, they won't stand a hope in hell of winning.

Sometimes, you need a new force altogether, a band of misfits and outcasts so different they couldn't give a shit about what the other guys are so long as they can help, who are the right mix of bravery and stupidity to charge headlong into danger, and never realize or just not give a fuck about how bad the odds really are.

In those times you need…

The Rune Rangers.

“Wow,” Weiss said, “you have your Uncle Qrow narrating everything?”

“We used to!” Ruby replied, “but now we just have a golem of him doing it, in case he can't be around. I can't sound as cool as him.”

“It's fucking ADORABLE when you do, though!” Yang said.

“Do we really have to him?” Weiss asked.

Hey! I'll have you know that no story of adventure, action, and world-threatening danger isn't complete without a handsome, well-spoken narrator with a sexy, sexy voice.

“I like him!” Ruby said.

“Punching magical bad guys to death isn't the same without Golem Qrow telling me how awesome I was, yeah,” Yang hummed.

<I've learned to ignore him,> Blake said, subtitles of what she said in Nivian popping up before
“Weiss’ face.

“And I think it pays great homage to the inherently ridiculous and over-the-top nature of Rune Rangers!” Penny chirped.

4-1, princess—looks like you lose by majority vote.

Weiss sighed. “Fine. When do we stop being disembodied voices talking over a montage of stock footage?”

Right about… now.

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**Rune Terra, Somewhere in the Viridian Valley**

Our brave heroes hoof it through the grossly incandescent halls of Rune Rangers' HQ, giving their newest member the grand tour.

Weiss and Blake groaned.

Get used to it; Yang's way worse.

“That I am~!”

Ruby was pointing out the various facilities as they passed them by. “…And that's the Training Room, where we can make pretty much prepare for any sort of situation, and also relive awesome battles again; next door is the Theater, where we can just watch them all over again, and sometimes review footage from our helmets' chronicles in case we missed something; and finally we have the Core, where we meet with our Guardian and get told about whatever's going down now!”

FYI, the “Guardian” is whoever gives the Rangers their powers, and makes sure they don't accidentally blow up the realm with them.

“Thanks Golem Qrow!”

It's what I'm here for, Rubes.

“I think you'll really like her!” Ruby said as she put her rune to the door, those big-ass slabs of carved rock sliding open. “After all, you know her already, kinda.”

Weiss shielded her eyes as bright light poured out of the Core, blinding her. A deep, echoing voice rang out from within, the sound of a woman who's replaced her lungs with liquid chocolate—the really good kind.

“Welcome to Rune Terra, Weiss! I, Eluna, formally and heartily welcome you to the Viridian Vanguard.”

The 24/7 light show that is Eluna's hair turns down a few notches, enough for Weiss to actually see her as they enter the chamber.

She stops, stares at her new boss with a dumbfounded look.

Maybe it's the fact that who she thought was just a myth is actually real, and she's not a literal white wolf, but a wolf Fae that also happens to be wearing the fur of a giant Lunar Wolf. (There's a not terrible, awful story behind all that, don't worry!) Maybe it's the aura of radiance, of authority, of power she's giving out, the kind of presence that only comes when you've been training constantly
and growing stronger for the past couple of millennia. Or maybe it's the fact that she's about 7 feet
tall and 300 or so pounds of pure muscle, flawless skin like caramel, and all her body-fat seems to be
concentrated in that kickass rack of hers.

“Golem Qrow!” Ruby yelled.

What? It's true, isn't it?

“Fret not, I'm quite aware that seeing me in person can be a very overwhelming experience,” Eluna
said, smiling. Her face turned deadly serious. “But I suggest you recover soon, for we've got a
situation on our hands.”

Penny offered Weiss a drool rag to clean herself up with. She can't do anything about your face
being on fire, though, sorry.

“Relax, princess,” Yang said, “everyone's got the hots for Eluna! Even asexual golems like Penny.”

“I do indeed,” Penny said. “She's such a fascinating Fae specimen!”

“Why does she look exactly like Guadalupe Garron...?” Weiss asked.

“Because I am her,” Eluna said. “Or more precisely, it's one of my many assumed identities over the
centuries.”

Turns out there's something in you humans' brains that makes it infinitely easier to just accept that
someone's wearing fake ears and a tail, than them being an animal person, let alone immortal and the
actual Eluna.

“Indeed!” Eluna said. “I used to make my disguises much more complex, before I decided to walk
into into the Nexus on the Eve of the Ether on a lark, and everyone wanted to know who made my
'costume,' how much it cost, and if they made designs of different animals. And don't get me started
on when I lost a look-a-like competition at a convention...

“Talk of my adventures in immortality will have to wait, however, for we've got a much more
urgent, dark business to attend to:

“Dr. Nefarious is back.”

A holo popped out of the crystal, the face of your stereotypical mad scientist: nose that puts bird
beaks to shame, one eye larger than the other, completely bald, and with a face that looks like he's
lived through a couple of strokes.

“Hello again, Rune Rangers!” he said with his awful, terrible voice—seriously, that sound should be
illegal.

Weiss groaned. “Stop, stop, stop!”

The whole world around them froze, faded and washed out.

“Something the matter, Weiss?” Ruby asked.

“Are you serious with this villain?”

“Well, uh, yeah! Dr. Nefarious is kind of what we've been using all this time...”

“He looks and sounds like something a 3-year old would make as the Evil Villain of their story!”
“Ruby was actually 2 at the time,” Penny said. “Fae generally mature faster than humans in a lot of ways.”

Yang stepped up to her, looking a little pissed. “You have a better big bad in mind, princess?”

“Yes I do, actually!” Weiss said as she held out her hand. “Temporary admin privileges, please!”

Yang rolled her eyes, and gave it to her.

The world unfroze, colour seeped back in like me at last call for Happy Hour.

“… Or, at least, he was, until the man funding all of his crazy experiments finally decided to show himself,” Eluna said.

“That's quite enough, Dr. Nefarious,” Jacques Schnee said as the camera drone turned to him.

“The… Rune Rangers, were you? I've recently gotten word that you've kidnapped my daughter, as you believed the foiling of my expedition was not enough.”

Freeze.

“Wait, wait, WAIT—you're making your own dad the Big Bad?” Yang asked.

Weiss turned to her. “Yes, do you have a problem with that?”

“Only if I can't punch him in the face!” Yang said, grinning.

“You can, but I get first strike.”

“How about we punch him together?”

“Deal.”

“Sweet. I'm starting to really like you, princess!”

<… Me too…> Blake said.

Unfreeze.

“We sent those men and women back to Candela unharmed, Jacques!” Ruby snapped. “Well, mostly unharmed, and it's not like you can't just give them cool robot limbs!”

Jacques scowled. “Those are still billions in equipment, contracts, and medical expenses I'm never recouping! Make no mistake, Rune Rangers: I will not let anything stop me from claiming that Valley and all its riches for the Company and Avalon!

“Not even you, Weiss.”

Weiss winced.

Too real, too soon?

She nodded.

Sorry. Rewind!

“… I will not let anything stop me from claiming the Valley and all its riches for the Company and Avalon! And though I sincerely hope you will come to your senses before it reaches that point, I will
do my best to get you away from these terrorists, and back where you belong:

“Here, in Candela, safely in your room, and under the watchful eye and guidance of your father, like every child should be.”

Weiss scowled. “I’m never going back to you!”

Words in Nivian with an Actaeon translation popped up in front of Blake’s face. She spent a few moments reading them, before she said, “Yeah! You... better close up shop while you're still in the black, Zhock, because we're fur... far... forecasting big losses in your next quarter report!”

Freeze.

Blake sighed, her ears drooping. <I was terrible, wasn't I...?>

“Terrible is right!” Weiss cried. “Those puns were awful!”

“Hey!” Yang yelled. “I worked hard on those! Legitimately!”

Blake blinked. <You mean I didn't totally butcher what I just said...?>

“You kinda really did,” Ruby said.

<Oh.>

Weiss put her hand on her shoulder. “Look, how about the next time I'm learning Actaeon with Penny, you help me, and in exchange, we help you with your Nivian?”

Blake smiled. <Sure.>

“Great! And to start you off, you can try saying this instead...”

Unfreeze.

Weiss scowled. “I’m never going to back you!”

“She's not your propereey, you monster!” Blake cried. Her eyes darted to Weiss.

“Close enough,” she mouthed.

“True, but she is still my daughter, and until the day she turns 18, the Acropolis Accord states that is my legal and moral responsibility to keep her away from corrupting influences like you.”

Yang snorted. “Hah! Like you're the poster-boy of Good Behaviour...”

Jacques scowled. “I tire of this. My second expedition into the Valley is just about to arrive—I suggest you surrender my daughter, and step aside before they have to mow you down, too.”

The holo disappeared as alarms began to flash.

Eluna frowned as she pulled up a map of the Valley. “I'd suggest you all hurry, this group looks MUCH better armed than the first.”

“We'll take care of it, Ellie!” Ruby cried. “We're the Rune Rangers, we've got this!”

Eluna smiled. “I know you do.” She walked over to Weiss, a frown on that pretty face of hers. “Weiss, I am so sorry your first mission pits you against your own blood...”
“Don't be; I've always wanted to stick it to my father in a way he can't ignore.”

“Then do not let your rage cloud your judgment,” Eluna snapped. “It'd be DANGEROUSLY ironic if our Sapphire Ranger, the embodiment of Wisdom, does something incredibly stupid in the heat of the moment.”

She pressed a sapphire gem into her hand, funky symbols carved into its face.

“This Rune is but a key to the power that lies within you, Weiss—within all of you. Guard it well, for it has been far too long since it has had an owner.”

“Wait, what?” Yang said. “What happened to Lifi?”

Eluna's face contorted in confusion. “Who is this 'Lifi' you speak of?”

Yang slowly turned her eyes over to Ruby, who was totally, absolutely acting completely natural standing there stock still, beads of sweat slowly dripping down her face.

“Who is Lifi?” Weiss asked, looking at her, too.

“'Lifira' was what we named the golem we used in place of a fifth member, should Ren or Nora not be available,” Penny explained.

“Yeah, and we totally don't need to use her anymore since we've got Weiss now!” Ruby yelled. “How about we all teleport out of here, guys?” her rune appeared in her hand. “That new expedition could be trying to find some parking spots in shade like right now!”

Yang grabbed her wrist and stopped her she could raise her arm all the way into the sky. <Oh, Ruby... my dear, darling little sister Ruby, you are not getting out of this that easily~!>

<CAN WE PLEASE NOT?!!>

<Nope!> Yang chirped. She turned to Weiss. “Weiss, get ready to meet your predecessor, the former Sapphire Ranger who is also totally not Ruby's golem girlfriend:

“Lifira!”

A flash of blue light appeared, spiraling downwards around a figure who was quickly forming back into existence…

“Hi!” a pale-skinned, white-haired, amethyst-eyed human girl about Ruby's age said. “My name's Lifira, but you can call me Lifi! Nice to meet you.”
Weiss stared at Lifira.

Then she stared some more.

She opened her mouth and raised a finger, looked like she was about to say something, then she closed it. She might have been trying to think of something to say, but with a face like that, her brain's probably decided to take a walk around the block, get some fresh air and put this problem on the back burner for a while.

Yang grinned as she put her arm around Weiss' shoulders again. “Yeah, turns out Ruby's really got a thing for platinum blondes, just like her mom did for blondes.” She winked. “Better watch yourself, princess!”

Weiss heard a scream of pure, unbridled teenage fury before Ruby slammed full-force into Yang, horns first. Because this is the Dreamscape and Rune Rangers is PG-13 most days, she only gets sent flying off, before Ruby jumps her and starts beating the shit out of her whilst yelling at the top of her lungs.

I'll spare you the unnecessary details of what she's saying exactly, and just call it “Angry Yelling and Cursing In Actaeon.”

“That happens a LOT, don't worry,” Lifira chirped. “It's just how Ruby and Yang show how much they love each other!”

“Play Fighting is oftentimes encouraged between young Fae as a form of bonding and training, to better prepare them for both social life and the dangers they face on a daily basis,” Penny added.

Weiss looked at the two off to the side. Ruby had Yang pinned on her back, holding her arms down as she repeatedly, violently smashed her horns into Yang's skull. Lifira put her hand on her shoulder, and she turned back around.

“You're going to be a great Sapphire Ranger, Weiss!” Lifira said. “I can see it in you: the Wisdom to do what is Right. And don't worry about the team: everyone's super friendly once you get to know them, and Ruby is a fantastic leader.”

She winked and giggled, before she disappeared.

A few seconds later, Weiss' brain finally decided to clock back in. “… Is there… is there anything like a private instance here...?”

Yang kicked Ruby off of her. She flew off like a tiny missile and slammed into one of the walls, adding some visual interest with a new crater shaped like her. Yang picked herself up, perfectly fine because of the power of CENSORSHIP!

“I got this!” she said.

Magic circled around them both from the feet up, till they were whisked away, off to someplace only Yang knew.

Weiss found herself by a cabin deep in a forest. It was a nice place: peaceful, quiet, and more than
enough space for a very big family—or, in this case, a giant garden that was right next to a training grounds similar to the one in Keeper's Hollow.

“Where are we...?” Weiss asked as she looked around.

“Where me and Rubes used to live, before The Shit went down,” Yang explained. She smiled. “Lotta good memories here...” she frowned “… lotta really bad ones, too, but all that's important is that Ruby stays away from this place like the Scourge.”

Weiss winced.

“So, wondering why Lifi looks almost exactly like you? Well, before Life beat the Innocence and Wonder outta you, anyway.”

“Yes, I am,” Weiss replied flatly. “I'm assuming it wasn't a spur-of-the-moment decision to leave me unharmed, once she knew I was in that carriage...?”

Yang snorted. “Hah! Don't flatter yourself, princess: there's like 10 billion of us humans and three to four times as many Fae here in Avalon; I guarantee you, Lifira was probably based on hundreds if not thousands of white-haired hotties, real and fictional!

“Besides, Eluna comes much easier to mind than you when imagining a platinum blonde dream girl.”

Weiss nodded, pacified if insulted.

“… Though, the fact that you do look a lot like the golem I caught her trying to make out once with probably helped!” Yang sighed. “Man, I wish I hadn't deleted my holo of that, the look on her face...” she smiled and shook her head.

Weiss groaned. “Do you really have to share all of Ruby's embarrassing secrets like this?”

Yang took on a look of mock offense. “Weiss, Weiss, Weiss! I thought as a little sister yourself, you should know that one of a big sister's most important duties is to embarrass their younger siblings in front of their friends, and especially their potential girlfriends!”

“Then please stop making things painfully awkward for everyone, because I am not the slightest bit interested in Ruby.”

Yang paused. “Seriously? You two aren't--” she made a sexy animal noise.

Weiss' face turned red in rage and embarrassment. “Ugh! No! Why does everyone think we're--” she made an adorable, somewhat sexy animal noise.

Yang sniggered.

“What?”

“Okay, one: that was the cutest way to say--” she made a sexy animal noise “--that I have ever fucking heard in my entire life.” Yang's face turned serious. “And two: because the Eldan Council doesn't just take in every last human that happens to survive whatever lurks in that hell-hole we call the Valley, either on their own or with the help of the Fae. In case you haven't noticed, princess, they're pretty serious about making yourself useful.

“There's got to be a reason that they're keeping you on. A big reason. At the very least, they think you might be this generation's key to keeping the Keeper bloodline alive.”
Weiss blinked. “Pardon...?”

Yang groaned and clutched her head in pain. “I’d tell you more, but there’s this niggle in my head that’s telling me I’ve already said too much... look, Weiss, if in case I get my privileges revoked after today, I want you to know that Ruby hasn’t had an easy life, alright?

“Dead mom, broken family, and being raised by Uncle Qrow for the past 14 years aside, Keepers are like all those Nikos kids with the Holy Shepherd: an institution first, before a person. Only for Ruby, it means a lot more than just a fancy title you got from your famous dead grandma, and having to make public appearances every once in a while to appease the Flock.”

Yang groaned again, shaking her head as the throbbing faded away. “The only thing I think I can say is that there’s a REASON they’ve all lived in a swamp, far away from everyone else.”

Before Weiss could ask more, there was a flash of light, and they were both standing at the entrance to the Valley.

The world around them was frozen, which was probably a good thing, seeing as the goons staring them down looked like serious business—full-on AFA types, not just private mercs.

“Hey guys! Sorry we're late, wanted to get a private audience with Princess Snowflake over here,” Yang said, waving as she walked up.

“It's fine!” Ruby said, much calmer now. “Did you happen to teach her about metamorphing?”

Yang snapped her fingers. “Shit, knew I forgot something...”

“Eh, that's fine, we'll just show her!” Ruby said. “Everyone but Weiss, form up on me! It's a triangle formation, me in the center, and from your right to your left, it goes Yang, Blake, me, Penny, and then you, Weiss.”

Ruby spoke as they went through the motions. “It’s really simple: you just throw your arm into the sky in a badass way; wait for the suns, the moons, or wherever the light is coming from to reflect off your rune; shout ‘Avalon’s Might!’ and wait to metamorph!

“Get into your pose, cry ‘Rune Rangers: Viridian Vanguard!’ and then we can all go kick some butt!

“Oh, and for reference: I'm Ruby as in the Ranger, and my pose is kneeling on the ground and looking like I'm about to smash my horns into someone; Yang's Onyx, and her pose is looking like a bear standing up and getting ready to maul someone; Penny's Emerald, and her pose is looking cute with her tail curled back into a heart; and Blake's Citrine, and her pose is... well, being her and clawing at someone, I guess.”

“What's mine?” Weiss asked.

“Whatever you want it to be!” Ruby chirped. “You want some time to think it up?”

Weiss shook her head. “I'll just take whatever Lifira's was.”

“Then that'd be looking like a fox mid-pounce!”

“Like this?”

“Perfect! You're a natural at this, Weiss.” Ruby said as she and the others broke formation, turned back to normal. “Want to do a dry run, or go straight to the fight?”
“I think I can wing it,” Weiss said.

“Alright!” Ruby said. “Places, everyone: it's showtime!”

Unfreeze.

Human and cyborg AFA soldiers formed a wall around the Rune Rangers, armed to the teeth with body armour, batons, rifles, shields, and dirty looks. The Rangers didn't look the slightest bit intimidated, glaring at them right back.

From the semi-circle of rovers behind them, their Captain popped her head out from the top of hers, activated the speakers. “Rune Rangers of the Viridian Valley! I ask you all to please stand down, and surrender Ms. Weiss Schnee immediately! You are guilty of kidnapping one of our citizens, and pursuant to Environmental Order No. 8921 of the Acropolis Accord, this land is now reserved for the use of and future development by the Schnee Power Company!”

Penny smiled. “I am sorry, I am afraid we of the Viridian Valley do not fall under your jurisdiction! I highly suggest that you invalidate that order in the records, take whatever physical copies you have of it, and insert them in your bodily orifices that are generally left unexposed to sunlight~”

Weiss stared at her, before she turned to the others. “Did she seriously…?”

“Yeeep...~” Yang said, grinning.

Weiss snickered, before she put her Game Face back on.

The Captain grimaced. “I was afraid you were going to say that... this is your final warning: surrender now, or we will use lethal force. You are outnumbered, outgunned, and are facing a foe more than ready to wage a prolonged campaign against you:

“What could you possibly have that makes you think you have a chance against us?”

Ruby grinned as their runes appeared in their hand. “These. All together now--!”

“Avalon's Might!”

The night sky glowed red, blue, yellow, black, and green as the Rangers raised their runes to the sky. The AFA shielded their eyes and started having second thoughts about signing up for this as the four teenagers and one golem before them turned into colour-coded, spandex-clad warriors with matching animal-themed helmets, their actions completely in-sync.

“Rune Rangers: Viridian Vanguard!”

Boom.

Weiss yelped and dropped to the ground as the mandatory post-pose explosions happened just behind her. “WHY DID NOBODY TELL ME ABOUT THAT?!?” she said as she picked herself back up.

“We thought you knew about it already! Sorry!” Ruby cried.

“This is what you get for not watching enough HV, princess!” Yang added.

The Captain sighed and rolled her eyes, before she got back on the loudspeaker. “Alpha Squad: attack! The rest of you: stand by! We're going to need manpower if we're going to make any real
progress tonight…"

Weiss saw words appear in her visor:

**Qrow's Commands:**

- Perform 3 Team Acrobatics with Weiss
- Perform 3 Team Attacks with Weiss

“The hell…?” she asked.

Something to shake things up, princess; it'd be boring if we just made every episode about beating the bad guys in the most efficient and boring way possible.

“Mhmm!” Ruby said. “And speaking of which: Blake, Weiss: get the shooters! Yang, help them get there! Penny, you're with me!

“Ready?”

“*Ready!*” everyone else but Weiss said.

“*Charge!*” Ruby yelled as she ran horns-first into the front-liners, smashing her horns into some poor sap’s gut.

Yang ran up in front of Blake and Weiss, crouched and got into position. “Air Xiao Long now boarding!” she said as she held out her hands.

Blake ran up, Yang catapulted her over the front-liner's heads. She somersaulted through the air, and ended up just in front of the riflemen at the back line. No surprises that she landed perfectly on her feet.

“Do I *really* have to?” Weiss asked.

“It's not Rune Rangers without somersaults and team attacks!” Ruby yelled as she kept some baton-wielders busy, Penny giving her back-up.

“Last call for boarding, princess!” Yang said.

Weiss shook her head, ran up and put her foot into Yang’s waiting hands. Her trip through the air was… much less graceful than Blake's was, though at least she knows how to do a tuck-and-roll landing.

<Didn't take gymnastics in school?> Blake asked as she pulled her up.

“I took fencing...” Weiss said as they turned to the shooter in front of them.

He raised his gun up to fire, Blake ducked and kicked out his leg, brought him down to his knees. Now that she could reach, Weiss wasted no time grabbing his head and introducing his jaw to *her* knee.

*Pow!*

“… And some hand-to-hand combat with Ruby,” Weiss continued as the poor sap fell down for the count.

<*Nice!*> Blake said. <I was wrong, Weiss: you might just survive out there in the real world!>
She jerked Weiss to the side.

A bullet whizzed past her helmet, missing by less than an inch.

Underneath her helmet, Blake smiled.

<Might.>

Underneath her helmet, Weiss rolled her eyes, before she smiled back.
Chapter 38

Penny wrapped her arms around an AFA grunt’s legs and held them down, Ruby jumped on her back and used her like a step-ladder to smash her horns into their face.

Blake catapulted Weiss right over a rifleman's head. The AFA gal does the smart thing, aims for the one heading in a straight line than somersaulting through the air, but most of those shots just zip right on past where Blake was a second ago. Weiss lands feet into first into her chest, knocking her down to the ground; she steps off, Blake pounces on her, smashing her palm into her face just as she's about to raise her gun to fire, keeping her down.

A baton grunt charged to his buddy's aid, raising his weapon up high before a gloved hand attached to a black sleeve grabbed his wrist. Yang slowly shook her head at him, before she punched him in the face with her free hand.

The AFA got plenty of hits in and landed some shots, and while they certainly hurt, it was clear they were losing, and losing fast.

From inside her rover, the Captain got back on the loudspeaker. “Regroup! Regroup!”

What remained of the Alpha Squad broke off and ran for the rovers, the last rifleman putting their back to the wall of vehicles, two baton-wielders covering their sides, and a big gal with an even bigger shield up front.

The Rangers reformed behind Ruby, a diamond with Penny in the center. She glowed and blasted out some much needed healing goodness, made it a lot easier for all of them to stand and look badass.

Without a field medic of their own, the AFA could only have their lead grunt bash her shield and hurl insults at them as their shooter reloaded.

From inside the Core, Eluna smiled.

From his office in Candela, Jacques scowled.

Ruby looked back at the others, started whispering, “I'll distract shield girl; Yang, get left; Blake, get right; Weiss and Penny, team-up and take out the shooter. Then: finisher.

“Ready?”

The others nodded. “Ready.”

Ruby let out a war cry, everyone around her suddenly glowing with red auras that told their enemies they were in for a very bad time.

They charged!

*Crash!*

The shield grunt blocked Ruby’s horns, got in a few quick bashes with her baton as she held her back.

Blake and Yang rushed the troops on her side, put them down for the count with a 3-part-combo, or a much less graceful but still effective punch to the gut before a bash over the head.
The way now clear, Penny and Weiss both rushed up Ruby's back, launched off the shield grunt's helmet, and landed at either side of the rifleman still trying to decide which ranger to shoot first. With two kicks into both sides of their chest, they solved that problem for them.

The last grunt pushed Ruby off of her, smashed her shield in the side of the face and sent her staggering back.

She grins, up until she notices that she's surrounded.

Ruby recovers and shakes her head. “Need a quick tutorial about how the finishing move works, Weiss?”

“Nah,” Weiss says as she and the others get into their poses, one after the other. “I think I've got it.”

Ruby grins. “Awesome.”

The Rangers glow with power once more, auras of animals surrounding them: a Sapphire Fox, a Citrine Cat, an Onyx Bear, and an Emerald Mouse. They shoot up into the sky, twisting together before they curve down and make a beeline into Ruby.

Glowing with all five of their colours now, she crouches low and leaps into the air, tilting her head back as the aura of the Ruby Reindeer above her does the same.

Then, they both turn their horns down, the other animals grin and bare their teeth.

The shield grunt's eyes widen, and she raises her shield and braces herself for a world of hurt.

“WRATH OF THE WILD!”

The night turns into day straight out of a really good drug trip. The AFA grunts on site shield their eyes, Jacques yells as he's blinded, Eluna smiles as she had already put on her extra-dark shades. When the multi-coloured smoke clears, there is one VERY down and out AFA grunt laying on the ground, just like the rest of the Alpha Squad.

Yang chuckled as she turned to the lead rover. “You going to tell your boss to write this off as another loss, or what?”

The Captain popped her head out to scowl at the Rangers. “Not yet.” She activated her comm-crystal. “Mr. Schnee, permission to deploy the BADAAS!”

“Permission granted, Captain,” they hear through the speakers.

Weiss frowned. “The BADAAS...?”

“The Big-Ass Defense And Assault Suit,” Penny explained. “It's an acronym for the magitechnology developed from the Shepherd Suit MK II, after the MK III made it largely obsolete.”

“That is one of the stupidest names for military gear that I have ever heard in my entire life!” Weiss cried. “What does a BADAAS even look like?”

The ground began to rumble. Soldiers in the other rovers drove off to make room as the Captain's ride began to transform, protective plating shifting and reforming around arms, legs, and a torso, revealing much more serious firepower than your standard AFA rover is equipped with—things like an energy lance, a minigun, and even a grenade launcher turret up top.
“Like *this,*” the Captain said.

“… Oh…”

The Captain raised the minigun up at the Rangers.

*Whirr…!*

**Qrow’s Commands:**

- Defeat The Captain with A Finishing Move
- Don't get hit by her Sticky Bombs.

Freeze.

Weiss turned to the others. “We have weapons, right? Because one, there is no realistic way we're punching, kicking, and headbutting that thing to death, and two, if we can, that'll *seriously* break my suspension of disbelief.”

Ruby nodded. “Yep, we do! I've got a scythe!” she said, her rune glowing, before turning into a scythe that probably had *way* more moving parts than was strictly necessary.

<>*I've got my breakneck,*> Blake said as hers turned into a yellow, fancier version of her usual gear—hey, if it works, right?

“I have two swords that can be easily reconfigured into a bow or a claw,” Penny said as hers split into two beams of light, and turned into twin blades. “I used to have more, until I realized that was too ‘OP,’ and demeans the Rune Rangers' theme of requiring teamwork and coordination to take down foes too powerful for an individual.”

“And I've got my *bear* hands!” Yang said, smashing her fists together as her rune turned into twin gauntlets.

Weiss scowled at her. You couldn't see into the visors of their helmets, but you could just *tell.*

She pulled out her rune, found herself holding a weaver's staff. Realistically speaking, something like this would be no better than a regular staff if you don't have the Gift, but since the Sapphire Rangers are always the ones with all the cool magitech or the really obvious mystic powers, let's just assume you do, princess.

“Is there a version of it that's more sword-like?”

*Boom.* Runeblade, with an unlimited supply of all four of the Elemental Essences, to be combined however you damn well please. You want me to throw in a Spellslinger so you can make like your grandpa and go stab and shoot things?

Weiss tested the revolver, watched the blade catch fire, freeze over and with water flowing in the ice, crackle with electricity and miniature gusts of wind, then get a metallic sheen with clouds of dust all around.

“I'm good,” she said as she turned it back to normal.

Want a primer on what you can do with the power of the elements at your fingertips?

“I think a hands-on lesson will suit me *much* better,” Weiss purred. “Hey girls? You mind if we rewind to just before she points that gun at us?”
“Sure,” Yang said, “but this idea of yours better be cool!”

Weiss winced. “… And I find myself actually sorry to say that it will be…”

Rewind. Unfreeze.

“Like this,” the Captain said.

She raised the minigun up at the Rangers, they readied their weapons.

*Whirr…!*

Weiss turned the revolver to Water, stabbed her sword into ground.

A giant block of ice rose up in front of the Rangers, just in time to block the near-solid line of supercharged-lead flying at them.

“What the hell?!” the Captain yelled as she stopped firing.

The ice wall shattered, icicles and frozen bullets raining to the ground.

“Spread out, and keep moving!” Ruby yelled. “She can't hit us as easily if we do!”

“That's what you think!” the Captain snarled as she readied her grenade launcher.

*Thoom. Thoom. Thoom.*

Sticky bombs landed all over the field, flashing bright red with a handy circle around them showing just where you don't want to be when they go off. The rangers hot-hoof it around them, until Yang just happens to step on one of them just after it landed.

“Oh, MOTHERFU--!”

*Boom.*

Thanks to the power of CENSORSHIP!, she goes flying off instead of turning into a black-and-pink mist.

“YANG!” Ruby yells as she and Penny run to pick her up.

The Captain sees the opportunity, points her energy lance at them. The sides of it begin to light up, ending in a big ball of crackling, concentrated magic that's only getting even bigger.

Might want to do something about that, kiddos, just saying.

Lightning pours out of Weiss' sword and into the BADAAS. Inside the cockpit, all the fancy holos and magitechnical systems malfunction, flashing red and spitting out error messages like crazy. The energy lance fires off at half-charge, Ruby, Penny, and Yang duck as the shot just grazes their helmets before blowing up a patch of bedrock behind them.

“Stop screwing with my mech!” the Captain yells as her mech makes like a break-dancer on three cans of Sgt. Pick-U-Up having a seizure.

“Then stop screwing with the Valley!” Weiss yells back through gritted teeth, trying to hold her sword steady with both hands.
“Blake!” Ruby yells as she pulls Yang up and back. “Get the grenade launcher!”

<Already on it!> Blake cries as she fires her breakneck's hook on the base. She pounces into the air, flips the gears in reverse, and goes zipping upwards.

_Schwing_!

You can see the ghost of her swing in the air for a moment, before the grenade launcher starts to jerk and fizz.

The Captain yells as she smashes a Big Red Button.

All lights in the BADAAS go off, except for the chest which is only growing brighter and brighter...

Ruby and Penny get Yang haul ass behind the rovers. Weiss stops shooting sparks out of her sword, makes a line of ice heading straight for Blake, and starts skating on it. Blake lands on her feet, slips and lands on her ass, wonders what the hell was that all about, until she notices the way everything's gotten _so bright_ all of a sudden.

Weiss grabs her by the arm as she zooms on past.

The BADAAS' EMP goes off.

Weiss and Blake go skidding and rolling on hard, unforgiving ground after her sword suddenly stops making ice, the chambers in the revolver go dim.

The Captain catches her breath as she reboots her mech. “That was a _very_ good effort, I'll admit…” she says in between pants.

She turns to where Weiss and Blake are just picking themselves up, the tank treads and the boosters in her mech's legs engage.

“… But _not_ good enough!”

The BADAAS comes screaming towards them, faster than anything that big should be able to move.

Blake and Weiss did the smart thing and jumped in opposite directions, to the _sides_ of the thing charging towards them.

Penny climbed up the side of the rover she was hiding behind, helped Ruby and Yang up to the roof.

The Captain missed, disengaged the turbo, spun around, and aimed at the one she could take out without getting shit from her boss:

Blake.

Everything went into slow-mo.

Blake turned around, eyes widening and ears pulling flat as the BADAAS came for her, too close to dodge this time.

Yang picked Penny up, aimed, and threw her straight at Blake, before she repositioned, picked up Ruby, and threw her at the mech.

Everything began to go back to normal speed.
Penny slammed into Blake, getting her out of the way of just a second before she got turned into kitty paste—or sent flying off against all laws of physics, I guess.

The Captain gritted her teeth, leaning forward up until a scythe head came ripping right through the hull, the tip of it coming within an inch of her face.

Ruby lost her grip on the handle from the inertia, flew off between BADAAS’ legs, rolling on the ground until she finally stopped near Weiss.

Yang saw the mech coming straight for her and the line of rovers, turbo still engaged; she jumped off and hauled ass to the others.

The poor saps hiding inside them hung onto their asses.

The sound of screeching metal and suspension screaming for mercy filled the air as the rovers flew and flipped around like the toy cars of a two-year old having a tantrum. The BADAAS’ screeched to a halt, but the scythe was still stuck in its hull.

The Captain tried to get it off with the mech’s arms, only ended up driving it deeper as the minigun and lance acted like paddles. “AGH!” she yelled as she tried to push it out from the inside. “WHO THE FUCK DIDN'T THINK OF GIVING THIS THING CLAWS FOR GRABBING?”

Back at Candela, Jacques glared at Dr. Nefarious over to the side.

The not-so-good doctor just chuckled nervously, giving him a sheepish smile that was missing several teeth.

The Rangers regrouped, watched the BADAAS struggle with its new ornament.

“What's the plan, Rubes?” Yang as she ran up.

Ruby smiled. “We go all out on the Captain while she's distracted, and end this with a finishing move.”

Yang grinned. “Sounds good to me.”

They readied their remaining weapons and were about to start running, when Weiss sword suddenly sparked back to life.

“Can I use my elemental fire like a rocket?” she asked as she turned the revolver.

Penny nodded. “Yes. Yes you can.”

Yang grinned as they got ready. “Great news, passengers: Air Xiao Long is happy to inform you that we've entered into a partnership with Schnee Aeronautics! Our first joint trip is boarding now...”

Inside the BADAAS, the Captain kicked at the blunt side of the scythe with her boot, until the holos started to flash once more.

“Warning: Incoming Missile Detected.”

The Captain dropped back into her seat and ducked below the scythe. “Give me a visual!”

Yang was grinning as she headed up the five-Ranger-rocket, her fist already cocked.

The Captain couldn't see into visors of her helmet, but she could just *tell.*
Chapter 39

The Ranger-Rocket zoomed through the air at ludicrous speed, a grinning Yang up front, a worried Penny behind her stretching her robot arms as far as she could around all of them, Ruby sandwiched in the middle, then Blake with her arms and legs wrapped tight around Weiss at the very back, her runeblade digging into her gut as it shot out a jet of blue flames.

“ROCKET PUUUUUUNNNNCCCCCHHHHHHHH!” Yang yelled as she pulled Penny’s arm off her chest and broke off from the group.

“YANG, WAIT--!” Penny yelled.
Too late.

Yang fell straight into the BADAAS fist-first, more than enough momentum to send the whole thing reeling and make a new deep dent in the cockpit, right next to the scythe sticking into it.

“What kind of sick joke is this?!” the Captain yelled as she struggled to reach a different button—one that the scythe’s head just happened to be in the way of.

“One with a helluva punchline!” Yang cried as she grabbed onto Ruby’s scythe with one hand, and continued punching the hull with the other.

Weiss and Blake would have groaned if they weren’t so busy trying not to crash into the ground, or send them all flying off into space; the laws of physics being what they were, the sudden loss of the weight up front that kept the whole thing balanced tends to fuck things up royally.

“LET GO!” Weiss screamed as she jerked and wrestled with her sword, trying to keep it centered.

Ruby and Penny did, tucking and rolling as they hit the ground.

“BLAKE!” Weiss screamed they went further and further away from the BADAAS, and closer and closer into the line of Rovers. “LET! GO!”

<I CAN’T!> Blake yelled back.

“THEN TURN THIS THING OFF!”

Blake wrenched a hand free, grabbed the trigger of the revolver, and pulled with all her might.

The flames stopped as it turned twice to air.

Meanwhile, inside one of the rovers that had been turned upside down, all the AFA troops had their arms and backs to the right side.

“Alright, everyone!” their Sergeant said. “On ‘Push’: one… two… three—PUSH!”

They all grunted and yelled as they put their backs into it, or just threw their weight against the wall. The yelped as the rover rolled on its side, rocked about as the suspension kicked in and did the rest of the work for them.

The soldiers started cheering and high-fiving.

“Woo!” the Sergeant said. “Good job, everyone!”
Outside, Weiss put a mini-cyclone on the side of the rover. She and Blake landed on it, slowed down until the air-cushion exploded and sent them flying back the way they came, and the rover flipping over across the ground for a second time.

The soldiers screamed as they went tumbling, crashing into the walls, the seats, and each other until their ride came to a stop, upside down once again.

The Sergeant pulled himself up by the upside-down steering wheel. “To the LEFT side this time, troops! On ‘Push’: one… two… three—PUSH!”

Back with the Rangers, Ruby and Penny ran and tried to catch up to Blake and Weiss as they both flailed through the air, screaming.

“We’ve got you, we’ve got you!” Ruby cried as she tossed Penny up.

Penny extended her robot arms and snatched Blake out of the air, but missed Weiss by a few inches.

“… We’ve got Blake…!” Ruby said as Penny landed. She turned back to the BADAAS. “YANG!”

Yang looked back.

The Captain finally pressed the button for “Hull Detonation.”

The outermost layer of the BADAAS’ hull exploded, blowing Yang and the scythe off, but not without leaving a nasty gash that left the Captain exposed.

Weiss made another mini-tornado on the front of the mech, landed on the air-cushion face first. She and the Captain made eye-contact just before it blew up.

Weiss rocketed straight into the ground, skidding and sparking for several feet until she finally stopped.

The BADAAS staggered back, the Captain flailing its arms about blind, blinking and trying to get the dust and the tears out of her eyes. An emergency energy shield formed over the breach, she aimed her lance at Weiss and started charging.

Yang planted Ruby’s scythe into the ground, pulled herself up with it. She saw the sides of the lance, almost at full power.

“WEISS! EARTH! NOW!”

Weiss changed and raised her sword up, holding on tight because her life really did depend on it.

Whoomph.

A giant, crackling ball of magic met Weiss’ runeblade. Blinding streaks of raw energy shot through the air as Weiss pushed back with all her might, arms shaking, knuckles white, eyes squeezed, until finally, she sent that blast right back at the Captain.

KRRZZHHH!

Inside what was left of the cockpit, the remaining holos flashed and almost all the alarms screamed and whined simultaneously. Over it all, the Captain’s comm-crystal was beeping and flashing like crazy; she answered the call, if only to get it to stop.

“CAPTAIN, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?!” Jacques yelled.
“MY JOB!” the Captain yelled back.

“You almost killed my daughter!”

The Captain wrenched the BADAAS back into her control. She looked through the gaps, watched Yang drop Ruby’s scythe as she scooped Weiss into her arms before she ran to the others. She scowled even harder than she already had.

She looked at the holo of Jacques. “With all due respect, sir? I don’t give a shit.

‘Your daughter is undeniably guilty of cooperating with terrorists, assaulting and seriously injuring several uniformed AFA personnel in a combat situation, and costing us billions in damages to equipment, among other expenses!’

‘Good fucking luck trying to keep her from jail!’ she snapped as killed the connection, then raised her minigun it Yang.

Whirr…!

“How you holding up, Weiss?” Yang asked.

“My arms…!” she moaned.

“Don’t worry! If you die in here, you don’t die in real life!”

“That is NOT comforting news!”

Yang laughed. “Yep, you’ll live!”

Bullets started to rain just behind her feet, Yang catapulted Weiss to Ruby before she made a hard left. Thanks to the Captain keeping the target-lock on her, the hail of bullets followed her instead of tearing into the others.

Ruby caught Weiss out of the air, holding her up by her arms. “Weiss! You okay?”

She let out a scream of pain that had even me wincing—and I’m just a disembodied voice!

Ruby laid her down in a hurry as Penny got to work.

“WHY did you have to make the pain so real?!” Weiss moaned as she got her arms unbroken.

“We built this off a combat dream from the Watchers, and we paid Miko to modify it for us…” Ruby explained sheepishly.

“Ugh, I am so learning coding after this...” Weiss said as Penny helped her back up.

“It’s actually called ‘Dreamweaving,’” she said.

“Whatever!”

“Uh, GIRLS?!” Yang yelled over their helmet-comms. “LITTLE HELP OVER HERE!”

The BADAAS was firing sticky bombs again. Thanks to Blake, even with the manual aiming the turret was going nuts, spitting bombs every which way, sometimes launching two or three at a time. If anything, it made it even more dangerous, because now you really couldn’t tell where they were going to land.
<What’s the plan?> Blake asked.

“We can’t finish her off without my scythe, and even then, the BADAAS still has too much health for it…” Ruby muttered. “Let me think…”

“THINK FASTER, RUBES!” Yang yelled.

Ruby watched the sticky bombs flying all about the field, some of them zooming straight down, others arcing up in the air and exploding before they reached the ground.

“Ding!” goes the light-bulb in her head.

“Ranger Rocket!” she yelled. “Blake! Up front, so you can tell us where to turn—first my scythe, then Yang, then let’s lure the Captain into the bombs!”

Everyone but Blake got into position. <Do we really have to do this again?!> she asked.

“YES!” everyone else yelled.

Blake winced, and got on the front like a trooper.

Yang kept on playing Avalon’s most dangerous game of Hot-Hoof ever.

“Just give up, and make it easy for yourself!” the Captain said as she had one hand firing the turret, the other manually turning the BADAAS around by its waist.

“FUCK! THAT! LADY!” Yang said in between dodges, ducks, and hard turns from the bombs falling all around her.

“Warning: Incoming Missile Detected.”

The Captain groaned. “Oh, WHAT NOW?!" she turned the BADAAS.

She watched the Four-Ranger rocket zoom around the chaos, Blake up front screaming at the top of her lungs, turning her head to tell the others where to turn, her arms and legs latched on tight on Penny behind her.

Ruby reached out, grabbed her scythe with one hand, before they weaved through the chaos and grabbed Yang with the other.

The added weight and Yang’s feet dragging on the ground slowed them down plenty—enough for the Captain to lead a shot, three bombs arcing out to the only patch of ground that wasn’t blinking red.

Things went into slow-mo once more.

One hand already on the revolver this time, Weiss shut the jet off, and switched to air. The gusts around her sword twisted tighter and tighter around the blade as she raised it up to the bombs still flying. With a massive gust of wind, she sent them all flying off to safety, and those bombs right back at the BADAAS.

The Captain stared at the trio of hot potatoes staring her in the face, all blinking bright red.

She sighed. “I hate this Valley...”

BOOM.
The Rangers made a landing that was a lot less graceful than any of them would have liked, tumbling, rolling and skidding across the ground until they finally came to a stop. They picked themselves up, looked back, saw the BADAAS sparking and smoking, its emergency shielding now off.

That thing was on its last legs, but not quite ready for a finisher just yet.

“Penny, Weiss?” Ruby asked.

“We're on it,” Weiss said as Penny turned her swords into a bow, she put her runeblade in like it was an arrow.

“Any suggestions?” Weiss asked as she put her hand on the trigger.

“Fire might completely destroy it, and render us unable to end the battle in appropriately stylish fashion,” Penny replied. “Best to play it safe with Water and an ice blast to hold her in place.”

“Water it is,” Weiss said.

The Captain groaned, coughed and blew the smoke out of her face. She turned to where the Rangers were, just in time to see the ice bolt go into the BADAAS’ legs and freeze it in place.

NOW you can finish her off.

Ruby put her scythe on its side into the ground, blade first, Blake attached her breakneck to the back of the head. Penny put her swords on the sides, Yang attached her gauntlets just underneath them. Weiss put her runeblade in between them like an arrow.

Ruby explained the lines for the weapon finisher, as the Viridian Blaster started charging up with all their colours.

Weiss nodded. “Got it.”

All together now.

“By the power of the Suns, the Moons, and the Core of the realm we all call Home...”

“FURY OF THE FAE!”

As five beams of red, blue, yellow, black, and green magic shot out of the Blaster, spiraled together and came for the BADAAS, the Captain sighed, and closed her eyes.

They saw the prismatic pillar of light all the way from the furthest outpost of Candela, the one on the mountain range that marked the start of the Acropolis region.

The BADAAS collapsed, multicoloured smoke pouring out of it. The Captain coughed and crawled out of the destroyed suit, looking none too hot herself. She stopped and looked up as five pairs of booted feet came before her.

She couldn't see their grins underneath the visors, but she could just tell.

The Captain sighed, pulled out her comm-crystal. “Attention all units: retreat! Repeat, attention all units: retreat! Mission is FUBAR! Repeat, mission is fucked beyond all goddamn repair!”

Blake purred as she held up her hands. “Can’ela – 0. Valley – 2.”
Some troopers came along to pick her up off the floor, like they had Alpha Squad earlier. One nervous looking grunt was holding a tablet with a very pissed-off Jacques Schnee on-screen.

“Do you understand the consequences of what you’ve just done, Weiss?! I can’t protect you from this! The AFA will have your head! They’ll have all of our heads!

“What drove you to join up with these… these… these terrorists!”

Weiss pulled off her helmet, scowled at her dad. “Because, father, these terrorists stand for everything you don’t…” she said as she put it back on.

They began to line up and pose, one by one.

“Compassion for all in need!” Penny sang. “Rune Ranger Emerald!”

“Will to fight until the end!” Yang roared. “Rune Ranger Onyx!”

“Courage to act come what may!” Blake shouted. “Rune Ranger Citrine!”

“Wisdom to do what is right!” Weiss cried. “Rune Ranger Sapphire!”

“Strength to lead us all to victory!” Ruby shouted. “Rune Ranger Ruby!”

“We are the Viridian Vanguard!”

Boom.

This time, Weiss only flinched a little when the prerequisite, multi-coloured explosions happened behind them.

Jacques was unimpressed. “You are hereby disinherited, and disowned, Weiss.”

“Good,” she spat. “You can keep that perversion you’ve made of Grandpa’s legacy.”

Jacques scowled, before he cut the line. The AFA soldiers loaded up and rolled on back to Candela.

“Fantastic work, Rune Rangers!” Eluna said through their helmet-comms. “You especially, Weiss; I hadn’t realized you were so well-versed in elemental weaving.”

“I… haven’t really done anything like this before, actually!” Weiss said. “It all just felt so… so natural…”

Yang chuckled. “Sure you’re not just a closet RPG geek there, princess?”

“Whatever the case, you should all be teleporting back to Rune Terra, and getting some much needed rest; I doubt this’ll be the last we see of Jacques, with or without Dr. Nefarious.”

“Will do, Ellie!” Ruby said.

And so the Rangers thrust their runes to the sky and went on home, the Valley a lot safer than it usually is…

… Until Jacques comes knocking again, at least.

Guys like him don’t give up just like that.
“That was amazing!” Weiss cried as they teleported back into the Core and their usual clothes. “I haven't had so much fun in years!” she said, all that giddiness getting so much she has to jump around in place like a little kid on a sugar high.

And just like a little kid on a sugar high, she really can't care that everyone's watching.

Blake smirked. <What happened to 'just this once'?> she asked.

“I changed my mind,” Weiss said as she slowed down some. “I can do that, can't I?”

“So does this mean you're going to be our Sapphire Ranger permanently…?” Ruby asked.

Weiss stopped then nodded. “Yes.”

Beat. (Which, for those of you that don't know it, is the time it takes to breath once.)

“YAY!” Ruby cried, before she charged Weiss and jumped right into her arms.

“GAH!” Weiss yelled as became the newest victim to the Flying Fawn Tackle, one of Ruby's favourite forms of affection/hand-to-hand combat moves.

(Fun Fact: Baby Reindeer are actually called “Calves,” but “Flying Calf Tackle” doesn't sound as nice.)

Yang laughed as the two hit the floor. “Cool it, lovebirds! I get Ruby's pretty horny, but we're still in the Core.”

“Though I've become accustomed to all manner of depravity, eccentricities, and unusual displays and acts throughout my thousand or so years of life… yes, I would prefer it if you two don't--” Eluna made a sexy animal noise “--in the Core, I kind of live here…”

“Okay first of all: RUBY, GET OFF ME THEN HELP ME UP!” Weiss yelled.

Ruby did.

“Thank you. And second of all: WE'RE NOT EVEN GIRLFRIENDS, STOP THINKING THAT WE'RE GOING TO--” Weiss stopped.

Ruby made a sexy animal noise, with a little “?” at the end that you could hear.

Weiss turned red. “Yes, that.”

“We really aren't girlfriends, guys,” Ruby said.

And since Ruby's pretty much incapable of being anything other than completely honest, you know you can believe her.

“But just in case you or anyone else change their minds at a later date: romantic relationships between Rangers certainly isn't encouraged, but not illegal, either,” Eluna said. “Stronger than friendship Romantic Love may be, but it carries a lot more baggage, and I'd rather Avalon not be screwed over by a lover's spat.”
She narrowed her eyes. “And seriously: **no fucking in the Core.**”

Yang shook her head. “Ellie, you realize that's just making it all the more tempting, right?”

“You do that, and I'll show you what it's like to be on the **receiving** end of a Starlight Spear,” Eluna snapped. “But back to more important matters: I'll be here monitoring activity, you girls get some rest or just wind down, seeing as I'm the immortal deity and you guys aren't.”

She turned around to the giant-ass rune in the center. “Breaking character for a moment: there's about two and a half hours of real time left for your honey dream before you need another dose, and you can only stretch your mind's perception of time so far before it starts to become dangerous.”

“Oh, wow, how long have we been here?” Weiss asked.

“Probably about little over a half-hour real-time, including all the freezes to explain stuff to you,” Ruby said. “Yang being **persona non grata** aside, we can fit a lot more catching up in a honey dream than anywhere else.”

“And speaking of catching up: it's been fun kicking ass, yelling cool catchphrases, and doing silly poses with you guys, but I think I'd like to do some of that with Rubes over here,” Yang said, throwing her arm around her shoulders. “You mind if Qrow gives us his review now?”

“Just one more thing before he does,” Weiss asked. “Why do my, Ruby, and Penny's outfits have skirts, if they're we're all wearing full-body suits?”

“Because combat skirts look cool!” Ruby said, smiling.

Weiss nodded. “Okay, that I'll agree with. But why do mine specifically have 'stockings' that are of a different colour…?”

Ruby kept on smiling. “Oh, you know: **no particular reason!** Hit it, Golem Qrow!”

**Qrow's Closer:**

**In Ten Words Or Less:** “Good first try, still messier than it needed to be.”

**Commands:**

- Perform 3/3 Team Acrobatics With Weiss
- Perform 3/3 Team Attacks With Weiss
- Defeat the Captain with a Finishing Move
- Don't get hit by the Sticky Bombs

**Rating:** "Fury Blockbuster"

“Oh COME ON!” Yang said. “That should of at least been a 'Holo of the Year!'”

Be happy I felt generous for princess over here and didn't downgrade this to “Top Ten in HV-on-Demand.” Practice some more, try not to get blown up or fly off in decidedly un-badass ways so much, and by the end of this season, you guys will be a team of grade-A, certified BAMFs.

You've got the chemistry, that's for sure, but the skill isn't there just yet.

Taking you guys back to the Lobby in 3… 2… 1…
Weiss found herself back in the white expanse with the others.

“Am I forced to stay here, or can I ‘disconnect’?” she asked.

Yang shrugged. “Your choice, princess! So long as you don’t try to learn anything the Council hasn’t cleared you for, you’re free to do anything you want. Before you do anything spicy, though, just know that Miko’s legally obliged to review all the footage from this particular dreamcatcher and tell the Chroniclers about it.

“Well, we’re off! Lotta shit to talk about, the Bastion isn’t the only place that’s been busy...”

Ruby waved. “See you guys back in the real world!”

The two of them faded away.

Weiss turned to the others. “Any ideas on what I can do now?”

“Though this dreamcatcher is open for modification, the creation of a new dream might consume a lot of your time, and be more stressful than relaxing,” Penny explained.

“So are there any other preloaded scenarios?”

Blake shifted about nervously. <Well, there is the one I use after Rune Rangers...>

“Then let's do that!” Weiss said.

Blake frowned. <Promise you won't laugh or make fun of me?>

Weiss smiled. “I promise.”

The world around them shifted. Now, Weiss found herself standing in the streets of an urban metropolis, not the gleaming metal and glass of Candela, but much older buildings made of brick and mortar, with architectural styles that had long been phased out, or survived only by the grace of enthusiasts of “Old World” designs.

Her clothes had changed into a white trench coat, with matching thigh high boots, and a beret over her head—all for the better, as her Fae dress would have been woefully unfit for the gloomy, foggy, and overall miserable weather that night.

Weiss looked up, saw just one moon up in that black sky. She craned her neck across the skyline, saw a tall, iconic building from her Old World History classes: the Empire State. She turned back to Blake, now dressed in a white shirt, black pants, and leather boots with metal buckles on the straps.

She eyed the faces of the pedestrians streaming all about them, walking with purpose, ignoring everyone around them or interacting solely with their in-groups. It was a mix of everything you could have found in the Sol System way back when, except for the particularly pale types who had hints of sharp fangs peeking past their lips, or looked a lot deader inside than usual.

Weiss turned back to Blake. “Are we in The Midnight Society?”

Blake looked away sheepishly. <Yeah, I know it's really old, and cheesy, and-->

She stopped as Weiss grabbed her hands, a look of pure joy on her face. “I thought I was the only one...” she whispered, eyes sparkling. “Can be a Maharani?”

Blake blinked. <Only if you aren't magically able to control EVERYONE with your Dominate,
including the First Ones. I used to let Yang be one, now she's permanently a Tyrtaeus.>

“Oh, believe me, I will practice MUCH more restraint and class than she ever could, as befitting a member of Royalty!” Weiss said, turning her nose up in the most snobbish way possible.

Blake chuckled. <Maharani it is.>

Weiss squealed with delight as she felt power surge into her, sharp fangs sprout from her teeth, her already pale skin become a beautiful if unnerving shade of porcelain white. “Oh, this is perfect...” she purred.

“Shall we go find some politicians, supermodels, and other people of noble birth and high status for you to feed on, mistress~?” Penny asked as she came up, looking not unlike a regular human if not for the intentionally dead, hollow look in her eyes.

“Let's!” Weiss hummed. “Oh, wait: what bloodline are you Blake? No, let me guess: Grendulus?”

Blake scowled. <Oh, just because I'm a Fae, you automatically assume I'm going to want to be the animal-shifter vampires? That's racist, Weiss.>

Weiss winced. “Sorry.”

With much less bite, Blake continued, <... I mean, you're not WRONG, but that's still racist!>

Weiss smiled. “Shall I apologize by finding something to satisfy your hunger first?”

Blake nodded. <That'd be great. By the way, you can't use your runeblade because you're the wrong bloodline.>

“I know, which is why I'd like a gun this time.”

Penny handed her a .357 Magnum, chromed metal and pearl grips.

“Thank you,” Weiss said as she put it inside a discrete inner pocket of her coat.

<Don't want to get blood all over yourself?> Blake asked.

Weiss put on a look of mock disgust. “Do you know how much all of these cost?”

They paused for a moment, before they started giggling.

The rest of the pedestrians continued to ignore them as they made their way to the nicer parts of downtown.
Chapter 41

Elsewhere in the Dreamscape, Ruby and Yang were in a copy of the former's room in Keeper's Hollow, lounging on the cushions and pillows as they talked.

<… So Weiss is getting stronger because of all that farming, training, and Valley food, right? One day, she asks us to start training her for agility, so she can pass The Grinder's Boop Test. I asked her if she wanted to do some reps on the dummies, and she goes, 'No, I want you to do the test on me, but a lot slower.'>

Yang grinned.

<I go, 'Okay, I'll go get Blake! She's the best at that!' and Weiss is like, 'Why can't you do it?' I tell her I don't want to hurt her, and Weiss just goes, 'Ruby, I trust you won't hurt me if you can help it, just hit me with the absolute lightest touch you can,' and I say, 'Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you!'>

Yang leaned forward. <And then what happened next?>

<1 booped her on the nose. Turns out, the bones in human noses are a LOT more fragile than I thought, and I think I inherited dad's 'Finger Death Punch' skills…>

<Oh, shit! Was there blood?>

Ruby nodded. <Lots. She started screaming, so I asked her, 'Weiss, are you okay?' and she said, 'Nnow, GET PHENNY!'>

<So now Blake is in charge of her agility training. She's trying to teach her how to climb and use a hookshot, too, but it's kind of hard for Weiss seeing as she can't completely balance on her toes like she does.>

<Is she getting any better at the Boop Test?>

<Nope! Blake just gets her every single time, and she's going so slow, it's so funny!>

<Man, I wish I could see that!>

Ruby nodded. <Yeah. Me too…>

Yang looked at Weiss' hammock in the corner. <You're all getting along really well with Weiss, aren't you?>

<Mhmm! It was all rough at the beginning, because she was pretty useless at everything, and she forced the Council to take her in after she faked killing herself in front of her dad.>

<Shit, if I didn't know that was you behind that mask, I would have thought it was real, Rubes! You were fucking savage with that speech, too.>

<That was Weiss' work, actually! She's really good with words. Penny's actually surprised at how quickly she's picking up on Actaeon, but that could be because Blake is helping her learn now, too.>

<Out of the goodness of her heart?>

Ruby smirked. <Nah. Weiss is slowly taking over cooking from Uncle Qrow; butchering and cutting
aside, she's a *lot* better at it, plus she grows ingredients for all of Blake's favourite recipes.>

Yang laughed. <Should have known... she trying to make her own tofu now, so you guys don't have to hunt so much?>

<Nah. Penny says everyone but Weiss are 'obligate carnivores' and can't survive without actual animal meat. Still, her garden's REALLY useful; cheaper AND we don't have to compete with all the Makers and their assistants that snatch up the good stuff straight from the Tubes, the delivery carts, or right from the planters.

<Plus, the Watchers say that if she can seriously ramp up her production, they might start subcontracting her for supplies—healing salves, burn creams, sore-stiff ointment, that kind of stuff. She says she won't try until she gets one or two Tenders helping her, though.

<T'm not planning to be a farmer full-time,' she said.>

<Sure seems like she's getting there whether she likes it or not...>

<I know, but she doesn't like folks pointing it out. It's taking her time to get comfortable with the idea, you know? Kind of like how dad dated your mom, had you, and well... all that stuff happened before he and my mom got together...>

<... Sorry.>

Yang waved it off. <It's fine. Dad keeps telling me that short version every once in a while, ever since I said I wanted to try out dating.> In Nivian, “Don't rush into a relationship, young lady! You might just find yourself being part of a big, messed-up Life Goal!”

The two of them laughed, but not for very long.

<I miss dad...> Ruby muttered. <I mean, *can* I miss him, since I was just a baby when we got separated?>

<Of course you can!> Yang's face softened. <You miss Summer, too, don't you?>

Ruby nodded. <Do you think the Council will ever change their minds about us?>

Yang sighed and rolled over on her back. <Doubt that! Aside from The Shit that went down and who my parents are, all my run-ins with the human branches of law enforcement have pretty much proved their fears of me being a bad influence right—with documentation, testimonials, and holos to back it up, too!>

<What if I tell them I won't try to run away like mom did? I'm fifteen now, they can probably believe that I'll do as I say!>

Yang rolled back on her stomach. <Yeah, sorry, but she pretty much ruined all of that for everyone when she told them the same thing, then did it anyway. Besides, those Soul Eaters still roaming around?>

<We get one like once a season, yeah. We Keepers have killed most of them, or they've just gotten REALLY good at hiding. Whenever they do show up pretty much everything grinds to a halt, though...>

Yang nodded. <Man, isn't this whole thing *fucked up*? All the Valley's screw-ups were 1,000 years ago, and here we are, the great-times-whatever grandchildren, still paying for it. You shouldn't have
to deal with shit that wasn't your fault, it's just not fair!>

<But if we all acted like that, then all of us would probably be dead by now from all the mess-ups
that went unfixed, just because it wasn't your fault. Besides, can you imagine what would happen if
YOU had to fix all the stuff you've broken?>

Yang winced. <Okay! You've got a point, that's enough poking holes into my rage against the
system with your logic.>

<The Wise Ones save The Foolish Ones from their folly, for the Folly of Fools can doom us all,>
Ruby hummed, quoting a well-known Fae saying.

<Let's talk about happier things… Eve of the Ether is coming up! You going to that big party in
Candela?>

Ruby shook her head. <Probably not. Between all the seeds, equipment, and groceries we've been
buying for Weiss, we're pretty broke! Well, broke-er than usual. And it's not like we can go pull
some Urochs from Weiss' old accounts…>

Yang grinned. <Well you might want to change your mind, because me and dad are going there this
year!>


<One of his old students decided to send us a thank you gift! The letter was unsigned, but those
round-trip tickets to Candela are oh-so real—business class, too! Plus, I reread dad's copy of his
sentence, and it precisely mentions just Fae Territory, and nothing about the human cities nearby.>

<Elder Goodwitch is going to be SO pissed when she finds out about this.>

<I know. But they can't exactly ban us from entering Candela, can they?> Yang said, waggling her
eyebrows.

<We are going to get in big much trouble for this. They'll probably cut us off from ever talking
through the Honey Dens ever again!>

Yang leaned in. <Will it be worth seeing your big sister in person after all these years?>

Ruby smiled. <Hell yes. Oh: can I bring the others with me?>

Yang frowned. <Are you and Princess Snowflake REALLY not--?> she made a sexy animal noise.

<We're just friends! And I think she might love it, you know, getting to be back in Candela, even if
it's in costume and under an assumed identity.>

Yang nodded slowly. <Okay, but on one condition: if it turns out you can only afford just you, then
she stays in the Valley, alright?>

<Deal.> Ruby paused. <Hey, do you guys have any idea who could have sent those? I mean, this is
Eve of the Ether; even if you guys are flying in from Valentino, the price of admission isn't exactly
cheap…>

<Nope! But come on, Rubes, this is Avalon: weirder things have happened! The series of events that
led to you being born aren't exactly believable, even with the proof in front of your face…>

Ruby shrugged. <Suppose you're right>
Two weeks earlier, in the real world…

Jacques Schnee sat on the deck of his particular slice of tropical island paradise, sitting stock straight in his chair and fully dressed in a warm-weather three-piece suit, as if he were having a business meeting at sunset than being permanently “on vacation leave.”

His mind drifted back to his last board meeting, in the Schnee Power Company's own corporate headquarters.

“This is the last straw, Schnee!” Kovacs cried. “There is no recovering from this! Forget the media, the history holos will have all of our heads for this!”

“What did you want me to do, negotiate with terrorists?!” Jacques shouted back.

“Yes,” Kovacs replied flatly. ‘Those 'terrorists' had been sending us all a very clear message: stay out of the Valley.

“But you just couldn't let them go, could you? Never you mind the stories about the Keeper, the failure of those expeditions and all the casual break-ins to your home should have been proof enough that you were facing something far beyond your power!”

“Don't get on your high horse with me!” Jacques yelled as he rocketed up from his seat. “You all authorized the expeditions—I have the holos, the communications, and the signed documents giving me your blessings to journey into the Valley, all three trips!”

“We won't deny that, and we are all prepared to face the consequences of it,” Kovacs said. “But the crux of the matter is that you were the one who could have saved your daughter.”

Jacques gritted his teeth, fire raging in his eyes.

“The lives of all those mercenaries? No one could say they didn't know they were risking death and dismemberment. Collusion with criminal organizations? Nothing we couldn't have covered up, or turned in our favour! But the deaths of even more of your own family...?”

Kovacs sighed and shook her head. “Sekhmet? Sekhmet we recovered from. Who could have expected that killer fungus to have been feeding off the wellspring for all this time? But this, Schnee?

“I’ll be damned if anyone thinks you were trying to call a bluff, that you didn't know they would actually do it.”

Jacques glared at her. “May I remind you who is CEO here?!”

“And may I remind YOU who are the Directors that put and keep you in that position?” Kovacs snarled as she stood up from her seat. “Who now have to pay dearly for your mistake?”

The air grew tense as the two stared each other down; some of the weaker-willed directors found it hard to breath, the rest were indifferent, or calmly summoning the security teams and drones in.

“Take a vacation, Jacques,” Kovacs said flatly. “If the Schnee Power Company is going to have any chance of recovering from this irreversible screw-up of yours, it would be best if you made yourself scarce, had someone else at the helm of this sunken ship.
“In fact, there's a jet waiting to take you to your new bungalow in Paradiso—all paid for by us, for we don't want to saddle you with financial concerns in your time of ‘grieving...’” she spat as the security teams entered the room.

He glared at Kovacs as they escorted him out of the building, mustering all the fury and malevolence he had within him, but she paid him no mind.

Like he had taught her so many years ago, the only effort you should give to a total, unsalvageable liability was cutting them off, and no more than that.

A drink was laid on the table beside him—a Mai Tai. Jacques looked up and glared at the waitress with long hair the colour of ash, and eyes the colour of a raging fire.

“I didn't order anything,” he said flatly.

“Compliments of my colleagues, no charge,” she replied, smirking.

Jacques narrowed his eyes at her, read her name tag—Cinder Fall—cross-referenced it with his administrator and memory implants. “You're not one of the regular staff. Who are you—a reporter, or an assassin?”

“Neither,” Cinder replied. “We share a common enemy, you and I, Mr. Schnee. I have information and connections you sorely need, you have the resources my people can use to do great things...”

“Ah, so you're terrorists, just like the Keeper and her ilk.”

“We prefer the term 'Rebels,'” Cinder replied flatly.

Jacques rolled his eyes. “Why should I trust you?”

“Because, you've got nothing left to lose, and everything to gain. We both know this 'vacation' is just their way of firing you without the PR stink, and that they're already imagining how they'd look like in that throne of yours, now that the King is in permanent exile.”

She smiled as she leaned on the table beside him. “So, what do you say, Mr. Schnee?”

“I want my Company back, and full knowledge of what you are doing with my assets. Don't think for a second that I won't know if you're trying to keep me in the dark.”

“And we want two seats for a round-trip flight from Valentino to Candela—business class, preferably—plus two tickets for the Eve of the Ether festival.”

“What are you planning?”

The waitress smirked. “Even terrorists have loved ones, Mr. Schnee.”

Jacques hummed. “That they do. You have a deal, Ms. Fall.”

“Shall we drink to it?” Cinder asked, gesturing to the Mai Tai.

“Not until I see it made in a fresh glass right before my eyes by someone I can trust,” Jacques replied. Cinder chuckled. “This is going to be the start of a very fruitful partnership, Mr. Schnee. You won't regret this.”

“Just show me some results.”
Cinder smiled. “Oh. We will.”
“Vivian Vixen” had the foresight to hire paranormals as part of her security team—witches, werewolves, vampires, and even the odd zombie thrown into the mix, alongside the mortal street thugs and other criminal types.

Unfortunately for her, they were very good at absorbing blows and taking bullets before they went down for the count, but they weren’t very good at dealing it back.

Weiss blew a few more holes into a zombie rushing for her, smashing the butt of her pistol into its head as it tried to lunge at her. The living corpse flailed at her as it staggered back, spitting and flicking bile and blood all over her coat.

“Ugh!” she cried as she kicked it in the chest, sending it down on the floor. She emptied her revolver, and put in six fresh bullets with a speed loader. The zombie got up, just in time for her to snap the cylinder back in place.

“Do you have”—Bang!—“any idea”—Bang!—“how hard it is”—Bang!—“to get putrefied bodily fluids”—Bang!—“out of clothes?!” Bang! Bang!

The zombie finally dropped permanently, leaking from numerous, sizable holes all over its body and head.

“Always aim for the head,’ my undead ass…” Weiss growled as she reloaded, and stepped well around the double dead corpse.

Penny and Blake finished up with their opponents and regrouped with her. The former had clearly taken the worst of it as their meat shield and zombie bait, but she was still smiling, a flicker of happiness in those dull, dead eyes of hers.

They checked the halls for any signs of any more goons still living, or that hadn’t taken the opportunity to flee before they gathered before the door a corner office.

“Pink gold door plaque embossed in cursive,” Weiss said as she took position on the side, her gun at the ready. “Why I am not surprised?”

Blake grinned. <Thought you might like it.>

Weiss chuckled. “I do.”

Penny stood in front of the door and reattached her left arm back into its socket. “Ready to breach at your command, mistress!” she chirped.

Weiss nodded. “Try not to kill her, if you can help it, I could use a new pawn. On three: one… two… three!”

Penny ran into the door, the rosewood splintering and breaking apart like it was made of paper.

Fwoosh!

Fire shot out from within, Penny bursting into flames like tinder.

Weiss and Blake screamed her name as she ran back from the blast, stopped, dropped, and rolled as quickly as she could. Weiss tossed her gun to Blake, before she took off her coat and smothered the
flames with it.

Weiss pulled it away from her face. “You alright?”

Penny coughed up smoke, her skin and clothes badly burned. “I will definitely need a long session at the mortician's later, but I am otherwise fine! Shall I try again?”

“You just try and pull that shit on me again!” Vivian yelled from inside. “I have TWO tanks of fuel in here, and I'm not afraid to use them!”

Weiss glared at their target, before she turned back to Penny. “No, you’re more useful to me than she ever could…” she picked up her singed and smoking coat and put it back on. “Keep yourself together, we'll be right back,” she said as she walked back to the office.

“As you command, mistress,” Penny said as headed back to the elevator on the other end.

Blake spared a look at Weiss as she kept the gun trained at Vivian. “Well? What do we do?” she whispered.

“That tank's only going to cover one entrance: the door,” Weiss said as she took over for her. “We need to find a different way in.”

“No windows,” Blake replied. “Even then, this is one of those crappy Second Millennium jobs with all smooth, featureless sides.”

Weiss sighed. “Whatever happened to the classics…?”

“Stop whispering like that! It's creepy!” Vivian screeched. “Just… go away, you fanged freaks!”

Blake and Weiss both narrowed their eyes at her.

“You brought this on yourself, Vivian!” Weiss said. “You want to play the game, you better be prepared to lose!”

“Oh, fuck you two! Like, seriously!”

Blake peered in, noticed something in the corner. She covered her mouth with her hand, and whispered, <AC vent.>

Weiss discretely looked at her, wordlessly told her to go for it. She stepped just out of range of the flamethrower, covering Kitty's view of the hall outside as Blake headed back and broke into one of the other offices.

Fwoosh!

Vivian blasted another jet of flame, kept it going as she talked. “Don't come any closer! You don't think I won't kill you?! Because I will!”

Weiss sighed. “Just keep on talking and wasting fuel, Vivian! I'm sure things will work out VERY well for you when you run out of words and have to change the tank!”

Vivian cursed and shut it off. “What do you want? Is it money?”

Weiss laughed, a real, genuine laugh that had her aim shaking for a moment. She calmed down and said, “No.”
“Come on! Everyone's got a price, right? We can work something out!”

“We could have, but that was before you torched my personal assistant over there. As you definitely have been skimping on maintenance for your living impaired employees, you don't know just how much it costs to keep her functional and presentable.”

“She's just a zombie!” Vivian cried. “Gawd, it's like you can't just go into any old morgue and buy a new one!”

“That assumes that Penny is replaceable,” Weiss replied coolly. Her eyes darted to a pair of yellow feline eyes, visible between the slats of an air vent. “And I'm afraid you just can't make another her—just like this opportunity.”

Vivian glared at her, about to shoot off another reply, before she stopped. “Wait, what?”

Blake burst out of the vent, back in her panther form. Vivian instinctively turned her head to the noise, didn't realize that Weiss had rushed in until it was too late.

Fwoosh!

Weiss dove to the side, ignoring the smell of flamethrower fuel and burnt leather alongside the stains already on her coat. Blake pounced on Vivian and knocked her down to the floor, Weiss ran to the side of the desk and shut the flames off.

Vivian looked up at Blake’s snarling face in fear, before she turned to Weiss and tried to muster up a dirty look.

To none of Weiss’ surprise, she couldn't.

“Blake, off, please,” Weiss said as she pulled out her gun and aimed it at Vivian. “I'd prefer not to have to think of might be lurking in that carpet...”

Blake did, and transformed back into her humanoid form.

“Oh, but pointing a gun at someone while they do it is totally fine?” Vivian said as she pulled herself up by her desk.

“Yes, because now I won't have to crane my neck so much,” Weiss said as she perched herself on the side. “Sit down, Vivian.”

Vivian reluctantly did. “What do you want?” she muttered.

“What you yourself do: power, influence, connections—the ones I can't buy with money. But unlike you, I'm not quite as willing to prostitute myself for it.”

“Excuse me? I am an escort!”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I don't have time for this...” her face and tone softened. “Look, Vivian, we're both after the same thing, aren't we? I can offer you everything Marjoram could—the money, the prestige, the invites to all the most luxurious parties with a brand new dress just for the occasion, with killer shoes and the jewelry to match—but with much better terms and compensation.

“For starters, there'll be no more of all that 'pro bono' work she's so fond on sending you on.” Weiss smiled. “What do you say?”

In Blake and Weiss' vision, a ghostly die jumped in the air, clattered before them, and landed on “1.”
Vivian spat in Weiss' face. “Fuck you!” she cried as she tried to grab her gun.

She smashed the butt of it into her head, grabbed the side of Vivian's head with her free hand, gripped her tightly so she couldn't turn away. Weiss' ice blue eyes were suddenly tinged with ominous, glowing streaks of red.

Vivian started to realize she had made an even bigger mistake than she already had.

“What did you just say to me, peasant…?” Weiss growled.

Vivian started crying. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm--!”

“'Sorry' is not going to cut it! Now make yourself useful, before I contemplate turning you into a spare body for my assistant!” Weiss cried, before she let go.

Shaking, blubbering, and with tears and mascara pouring down her eyes, Vivian could only frantically nod her head.

“See you at my office at 10 AM tomorrow; before you ask, I have people, too, you know,” Weiss said as she reached into her coat, opened a tightly sealed pocket, and laid a card on Vivian's desk.

Blake disconnected the fuel tanks and hauled them away, but it was more for salvaging the resources than keeping Vivian from activating it again; the way she was curled up in her chair sobbing, they needn't worry about her anymore.

<And everything was going so well up to that point,> Blake said as Penny came up and took the tanks for her.

“Any time where I almost get bitten by slavering, rotting zombies is not what I'd call something that 'goes well,'” Weiss said as she pressed the button for the elevator. “Penny, how much time do we have left?”

“Little less than five minutes, actually,” Penny replied as she stepped in and kicked out a corpse that was stuck between the doors. “All that time you two spent crafting Ms. Vivian's sordid background and the events leading to her earning your ire added up to quite a lot of real time.”

Weiss laughed as she and Blake stepped in. “Wow, time really does fly when you're having fun,” she said.

<How'd you get into Midnight Society anyway, Weiss?> Blake asked as the elevator quietly whirred. <It's not like it's been picked up for the reboot holo machine lately.>

“My mom and grandma were both into it,” Weiss replied. “They're MAJOR history buffs, and absolutely love anything that reeks of Old World Culture—it helps if you can play as part of a clan of vampires who speak exclusively in insane, prophetic ramblings that even they can't understand.”

Blake snorted. <They were Pythia?>

“Yeeep,” Weiss said. “Grandma was kind enough to keep it exclusively to the Trance and table-top
sessions, but my mom just LOVED dropping all sorts of weird hints whenever a surprise was coming up.”

<Like what?>

“Secrets flee to the sands as the wolves whisper in the moonlight,’ or something like that.”

<What does that even mean?> Blake asked as the elevator stopped, and the doors opened into the blank, white lobby of the Dreamscape.

“I have no idea, and probably never will; it’s one of the last things she ever said to me before she died,” Weiss replied as they stepped out.

<Oh.> Blake's ears pulled down. <I'm sorry. I heard about what happened… it was terrible. No one should have to die like that.>

Weiss frowned. “You lost someone to the Scourge, too?”

<No. It was all we could talk about for months afterward, though.>

“Good thing it never spread past Sekhmet.” Weiss said as the elevator disappeared behind them. “I shudder to think what would have happened if it managed to spread all the way to Candela and the Valley.”

<Or even Celestion. My kind would have been fucked.>

Weiss looked at her. “Settlements there not as advanced as the Bastion?”

Blake hesitated for a moment. <The Fae settlements in Celestion aren’t a part of the Eldan Council. Haven’t been for a long time; it’s kind of why we live there in the first place.>

Weiss blinked. “I never realized there were separatists in the Fae.”

Blake got a far off, remorseful look in her eyes. <It's generally because the movements burn out in the planning stages, or they end up dying trying to look for someplace new to settle, or they crawl back to the Council and beg for forgiveness.>

“Fae are very closely connected to their environments, and especially the power of the wellsprings they build their settlements over,” Penny explained. “Prolonged separation can lead to severe psychological anxiety, not to mention the withdrawal symptoms from not being within a powerful source of magic and nature…”

“Wow. That sounds…”

<Really fucking rough?> Blake suggested.

“Fae have a single word for that?”

<We have several, if you want to get specific on how exactly you're being fucked over. Anyway, my being a Celestian is why I was so rough on you in the beginning, you know, when you were…>

“Completely useless?” Weiss smiled. “Let's leave the euphemisms back at Vivian's office, shall we?”

Blake smiled. <Yeah. Completely, utterly useless.> She frowned and looked away. <We Celestian Fae don't have the luxury of all the safety nets like the folks here in the Bastion do; we don't have 'Moss,' for one.>
“Why do they call them 'Moss'?”

<br>“<You know how when rocks sit in one place for too long, they gather moss? Like that.>”

Weiss chuckled. “Funny, we humans have a proverb that says that moss gathering on a rock is a good thing.”

Blake shook her head. <You humans are crazy.>

“<What do you have instead of 'Moss,' though?”>

Blake frowned. <'Feeders...'>

“Who are called that because…?”

<br><… It's what happens when we kick them overboard, into the middle of the Endless Sea: they drown, and then the fish eat their corpses.>

Weiss blinked. She blinked again. “I… wow, that… just… wow.”

Blake nodded. <Yeah...>

Weiss paused. “Wait, so if you're from the Celestian Fae, why are you here in the Valley, working for the Council…?”

Blake looked away, her ears pulling back as she stared off into the distance. <It's a long story. Maybe I'll tell you it sometime...>

Before Weiss could get another word in, the Dreamscape began to fade around them, and her consciousness returned to her body.
Chapter 43

For Weiss, the worst thing about Trance Addicts was how they would often be found after they disconnected—by their own choice, by someone or something forcibly severing their connection, or by a “Hard DC,” collapsing from exhaustion, malnutrition, or even death.

Gaunt faces, hollow eyes, deep bags in under their eyes from having stayed conscious for hours if not days at a time—the worst of them boasted weeks, with the dubious realm record being little less than a month. Bodies stiff, aching, and oftentimes filthy and abused in some way, largely because of the sorry state of the “Trance Dens” that the poor, the desperate, and the criminal liked to frequent for the strict limits on trancing in homeless shelters, or to escape the watchful eyes of their guardians, supervisors, and landlords. Oftentimes only able to get back up on their feet or even just move with outside assistance, unable to speak for dehydration, weak from starvation, minds wondering what hellish reality they had suddenly entered.

And instead of cutting down the hours of their trancing sessions, they just found new, admittedly clever but still disgusting and disturbing ways to avoid or delay the pitfalls, arrangements to “tag-trance” with fellow addicts, and illegal dens boasting of how many amenities they had for “trancing till you drop.”

It made Weiss tremendously sad that long after Candela had put a stop to the Resource Wars of 200 years ago, Trance Addiction numbers had only gone up—though instead of people in every city state trying to escape the chaos and the despair going on all over the realm, it was people who couldn't afford to immigrate to Candela, or who had watched their lives fall out from underneath them when the “Shining Beacon of Hope” utterly vaporized centuries-old business empires, academic institutions, and social organizations.

Thankfully, the Fae had much more self-restraint and stricter regulations, and Weiss found herself back in the real world laying comfortably on her back, being gently helped up by a uniformed attendant, with another waiting with water and snacks.

<Well, that was fun!> Blake said as they got up and began to leave. <Anyone want to go eat something we don't have to kill ourselves, for once?>

“Blake is--” Penny started.

“Wait,” Weiss said. She paused for a moment. “Blake is… asking us something about food?”

Penny smiled. “That's correct. To be specific, she's asking if we'd like to go eat out at restaurant, or one of the many food stalls.”

Weiss nodded and turned to Blake. With great difficulty, she said something she intended to be, <Yes, I'd love to.>

The attendants' professional demeanor broke for a moment.

Ruby snorted. “Oh my gosh, Weiss...”

Blake snickered. “Wrong word, not close 'nough.”

Weiss turned to Penny. “What'd I say?”

“Well, you used the Fae word for expressing affection towards other sentient beings and not objects,
so what you said can be *easily* mistaken as a popular euphemism of an intimate nature.”

Weiss blinked. “What exactly does it mean...?”

Blake snapped her teeth at Weiss, then made a sexy animal noise.

Weiss blushed bright red then buried her face in her hands.

Penny patted her on the shoulder. “Do not worry, Weiss; as your grandfather said, ‘Learning is a process of trial and error, but mostly error.’”

He had said it in an interview asking him about his numerous misadventures in experimental water purification, and the almost always awful aftermaths thereof.

“Let's just get some lunch already!” Weiss said as she got up off her pillow and made her way out, hiding her face from sight.

Blake smiled and went on after her.

“Me and Penny will catch up to you guys at the station!” Ruby called out. “I just need to ask her about some complicated math stuff!”

“We'll wait!” Weiss yelled back, still blushing.

Weiss and Blake passed the time at the Tube station by practicing the latter’s Nivian, putting common phrases and sayings into a translator.

Weiss was impressed by how a simple word like “Friend” had several different alternatives in Actaeon; it could be just a friend; an extremely close companion whom you consider no different to a blood-sibling; or someone you have less than friendly feelings for, but consider a friend nonetheless. The characters they used were similar except for distinct features that could easily tell them apart from each other when written, and the pronunciations varied in interesting, almost musical ways.

Met with much less enthusiasm was the discovery after they reversed the process, and started translating Nivian metaphors and phrases into Actaeon.

“It's puns!” Weiss cried. “*It's all puns!*”

“FUCK! *It iz!*” Blake cried, equally distressed.

They tried several more phrases, words, and even song lyrics, but almost every machine translation ended up coming out as a pun, a metaphor, an allusion, or some other form of cheesy wordplay.

Weiss and Blake looked at each other, before they closed the program in disgust.

“Oh...” Weiss mumbled.

“Yeah...” Blake said. “Nevurr re'лизет!”

“Can I see one of your books? The black market translations.” Weiss asked.

Blake pulled up one them. Weiss flipped around until she found a disclaimer, in Nivian and Actaeon:

“For purposes of style, clarity, and coherence, the editors and translators have changed, modified, or outright replaced many Nivian passages. The following is NOT a loyal, word-for-word translation of
the original text, and thus should not be used as an educational material for any sort of serious study.”

Blake sighed. “No wonder so s'pensive...”

“How so?”

Blake showed her the store page on her comm-crystal.

Weiss balked. “This is robbery!”

“S'worse fur--” Blake discretely made a sexy animal noise.

Weiss gestured for her to show her. Blake looked side-to-side, and sure that no one would notice, opened up a separate page.

Weiss' jaw dropped. She looked at Blake, wordlessly asking her HOW they could charge so much compared to the already costly books.

Blake blushed and hung her head. “Kno' will buy it an'way...”

Weiss was starting to understand why most of the reading she'd been lent in jail were mass-produced, cheap novellas, and stories lifted from pulp publications.

“Hey Blake, hey Weiss!” Ruby said as she walked up to them, Penny in tow.

The two of them smiled and greeted her back; they both frowned as they noticed something off.

“Something happen, Ruby?” Weiss asked; Blake looked at her, wordlessly asking the same question.

Ruby smiled. “Oh, nothing! So, any place you guys want to eat at? My treat!” she said, before giving a shorter version of it in Actaeon.

Blake looked at her in worry. <You sure about this, Ruby? I can help pay.>

Ruby waved her off. <It's fine!> Her voice broke slightly. <I won't be buying any thing else any time soon...> 

Weiss and Blake discretely looked at each other, before they decided to drop it.

They headed off to the Trader's Guild for lunch. The mood quickly improved after they ate, and Weiss insisted they head to the “Fae-orina's” and get triple chocolate cake shakes for dessert.

“Oh, Eluna...” Ruby muttered as she laid her head on their table, her glass empty and licked clean.

“How have I never had any of these before...?”

“Like humans, Fae very easy to fall into familiar patterns and previous choices, than expend the effort to look for alternatives, even if they could be objectively better,” Penny explained.

“We definitely need to go on a food safari one of these days then!” Ruby said.

From beside her, Blake made an affirmative noise as she enjoyed her shake. She took slow, deliberate sips, her ears and face perking up in delight as soon as it came up to her mouth. The shake flowed back down while she was enjoying herself, and the process started all over again.

Weiss smiled as she savoured her glass. “Just have Penny point me to all the restaurants here that make copies of what they offer in Candela, I'll tell you which ones are worth getting.”
She stopped as she noticed the brief flash of sadness in Ruby's expression.

Weiss frowned. “Okay, something is definitely up—Ruby, come on, tell us.”

“Eh, it's personal stuff, I don't want to bother you guys with it...” Ruby said as she picked her head up from the table.

After Penny translated, Blake put her straw out of her mouth and put a hand on Ruby's shoulder. <That never stopped you from helping us with our problems, though.>

<I can put in a request for chronicle footage of all the instances that you persistently offered assistance to others, if you would like!> Penny added.

Ruby looked at them both uneasily.

Weiss reached across the table and put her hand on hers. “You've helped me out plenty, let me return the favour for once.”

Ruby sighed, then smiled. “Alright...” she looked around warily at all the people in the busy restaurant. “… But I'll tell you guys about it later, when we're back at Keeper's Hollow.”

“Fine,” Weiss said as took her hand back, “but you better not try to weasel your way out if it then!”

A weasel Fae from a nearby table over shot Weiss a dirty look, she apologized.

Ruby and the others giggled, before she said, “I won't, I promise.”

Ruby told them of Yang's plan and the mystery tickets later at dinner, when they were all gathered outside and having a barbeque of Weiss' vegetables and prime boar cuts, before it was “back to heated up stews of all the crappy parts.”

“… And they just happened to receive both free tickets and air-fare, just like that?” Weiss asked as she basted the meat and vegetables on the spits. “I'm sorry, Ruby, but something about this is really suspicious.”

“Well duh, but it's still my only chance to ever see Yang again!” Ruby replied. “Probably both in-person and over the Honey Den...”

“Sorry to say, Rubes, but the timing couldn't have been any worse,” Qrow said as he turned the spit. “The Eve's just a week away, and the price for a ticket is only going to get even more jacked the closer it gets.”

“How much is one going for right now?” Weiss asked.

“57,750 Shinies, and rising,” Penny said. “And that's not including an allowance for spending Urochs inside Candela.”

Weiss balked. “Why so much?”

“Fake ID's and made-up Info-Grid histories for background checks aren't cheap, and neither is maintaining our back-doors into Candela,” Qrow explained. “The less time you give our folks on the inside, the more they're going to want because of how much farther they're putting their asses over the fire.”

“Ah... right...” Weiss said.
“And speaking of which...” Qrow took sip from his flask of “jungle juice,” before holding it over the meat.

Weiss stepped well back.

Qrow poured.

_Fwoosh!_

The barbecue pit's flames exploded with renewed vigour. They let it burn uninhibited for a while before Zwei gently blew on it, and lowered it to a safer temperature.

“Pitch 'n fur fund...?” Blake asked. “Wan' t' help.”

“I'm afraid we can't do that,” Penny said. “With this household's general lack of savings, our recurring expenses, and the time-frame of the return of investment for Weiss' garden and skill training, the Eve of the Ether will be long over before we can safely splurge on such a large expense.”

Ruby sighed, her ears drooping. “I guess I'll just have to spring for a phone call or a message, tell her why I can't go...”

Weiss dunked her basting brush back into the bowl, splattering marinade on her apron. “No. We'll find a way. Can't we take out a personal loan?”

“Nope!” Qrow said. “Ruby's too young; you, Penny, and Blake are all disqualified for different reasons; and my credit score is so shitty they'd just laugh at us, before getting security to chase us out.”

Weiss thought while she took the vegetables off the fire. “What if we put up something very valuable as collateral...?” she said as she laid it on a banana leaf laid in front of the others.

“Like what?” Qrow asked. “If you haven't noticed, princess, none of us can pawn off any of our stuff. Even then, they're not worth much.”

“And my sister's Eluna plushie...?”

Ruby's eyes widened.

Qrow thought as he turned the spit. “… Yeah, that could definitely work! Even if it does smell like tears, snot, and _despair_, Ellies are so rare folks would kill to have one in general, so long as she's not as beat-up as the one we have at the Roost.”

“The last recorded private sales in both the Codex and Info-Grid are _well_ in excess of the price of a ticket to Eve of the Ether, yes,” Penny added.

_“Weiss!”_ Ruby cried. “You can't just give away her away like that!”

Weiss sighed as she returned to opposite end of the spit. “Well, we don't really have much of a choice, do we?” she smiled ruefully. “Besides, I don't think Winter will mind, and I literally owe you my life, don't I?”

Ruby sighed. “This still _sucks...”_

Blake nudged Penny and told her something. “Blake is asking if we can't all pitch in to repay the loan, so we may eventually get the plushie back.”
“We could, but where are we going to get the money?” Qrow asked. “We're paycheck-to-paycheck here,” he said as he tested the meat.

“From me,” Weiss replied. “Is there anything I can do to help us earn or save money?”

“You can attempt to distill your own alcohol for Qrow’s consumption, as that particular expense consumes a large chunk of his wages,” Penny replied. “It’s not illegal to produce it for personal use, and there is no need for licensing nor fees so long as you can prove you can make it safely, and in small enough amounts.”

“Don't worry about the taste,” Qrow said as he and Weiss prepared to take the now-cooked boar off the spit. “All I really need is for it to get me good and fucked up.”

“Then it's settled then!” Weiss said as she and Qrow hauled it to the banana leaf. “Tomorrow, we're pawning my Eluna plushie, and getting Ruby a ticket to Candela!”

“And after that, we all help her get it back!” Ruby added.

“An' fur now, we eat!” Blake finished.

They all dug into the food, eating, drinking, and having fun, for it was going to be a long, long week for all of them...
Chapter 44

In the beginning, Weiss' parents had thought that Nick and Freya were just completely enamored with their newest grandchild as they had been with Winter, cooing over Weiss, begging to let her be put in their arms and care as much as possible, and taking her out to Candela or jetting off to the other parts of Avalon.

Both even went so far as to take year-long sabbatical from her research laboratories and leave from his seats at company boards, the careers the two never truly quit even though they were officially considered retired.

Weiss had fond memories of that time, if blurry, and frequently pieced together from holos and second-hand accounts.

Her grandfather's strong, calloused hands holding her, carrying her, and raising her up in the air, making her feel like she was Queen of the Realm. Her grandmother's voice explaining scientific concepts and events in history that flew right over her head, but soothed and entranced her nonetheless. The two of them looking at her with such love and affection they oftentimes ended up crying from joy.

And of course, there was the constant, bizarre but amusing mix of flirting, affection, and verbal abuse that characterized their relationship.

Jacques had complained, largely because Tov's predecessors only ever discovered the spontaneous grandparent-granddaughter trips AFTER they had stolen away in a rover or jetted off in the night, but Snowie placated him.

“Just you wait,” she said, “they're going to get sick of her and start begging for us to take her back, just like they did with Winter.”

They didn't.

If anything, as Weiss' first birthday got closer and closer, they started to get more demanding; ignoring the letters from their colleagues and constituents reminding them that their vacations were fast ending; sometimes even outright kidnapping her for spontaneous trips, with the most memorable incident being Frosty snatching her granddaughter right from her father's arms during a public photoshoot, Tony flying overhead, and Nick holding her by her legs as she hung out from an open door.

Weiss remembered the holo clear as day: Nick effortlessly hoisting his wife and second granddaughter back up into the cab, Freya nestling her in her arm and putting a bottle into her mouth with her free hand, Tony extending his hologram out the driver-side window, casually saluting the crowds, an amused Snowie, and a scowling Jacques before he closed the doors.

Jacques had threatened to put in a restraining order after that—emphasis on “threatened,” as Nicholas and Freya were two of the most important, iconic, and beloved founders of Candela, and were all but untouchable.

He needn't have worried, for just a week after that, the allegedly invincible Nick collapsed in the middle of a busy street, all 6'7 feet and 317 pounds of him laying face down on the floor, struggling to breath as his wife frantically called for help as their granddaughter cried in distress.

In hindsight, the reason for their obsession with spending every single one of their waking hours with Weiss was obvious:
They knew their time was running out.

Nicholas spent the last of his days in a hospice, his wife all but living with him on-site, and his daughter and grandchildren dropping by as often as they could. Jacques made a big show of spending every single Uroch the company could spare in trying to extend his life, but if he wouldn't sign the consent forms (and pass every test that asked if he was still of sound mind), then the treatments would mysteriously flounder, be they gene therapy, cybernetics, or even the nigh miraculous “Life Serum” pharmaceuticals developed shortly after Candela's completion.

“It's like his body is just… refusing to live any longer!” was how one of the many baffled doctors had explained it.

Weiss had less fond memories of those times.

Seeing her titanic grandfather bedridden, unable to stand up or carry her in his arms like he used to, his famously strong grip getting weaker and weaker as time passed. The lawyers that frequently dropped by, going over his estate with him, plans for his successors in the organizations he sat in, rooting out and calling out Jacques’ sneaky attempts at getting him to sign off more and more of the company to him before he officially kicked the bucket. Falling asleep in her grandfather's or grandmother's arms, then waking up back in her crib, or in her mother or sister's lap as they road back to Manor Schnee.

It was a slow, ugly death that dragged on for months, an extremely ironic closing chapter for the “Man Who Couldn't Stop Moving.”

He kept on living, however, “sheer force of will” being the only reasonable explanation anyone could offer. Weiss' first birthday neared, and at her, Freya's, and Nick’s insistence, he was airlifted from his hospice, and personally delivered to Manor Schnee by VTOL, with Tony as the pilot AI.

(Because of Tony's already extensive record of independent behaviour, decision-making, and blatant breaking of and circumventing the rules—acts that should have been far beyond the capabilities of any transport AI—the CTC had been EXTREMELY reluctant to let Nick access his creation's source code again, let alone modify him to be able to fly aircraft outside of the city proper.)

She remembered sitting in his lap as Freya personally pushed him around in his wheelchair, Nick dressed in one of his favourite, battered suits—the one that had seen more than its fair share of accidents, transit mishaps, and the odd foiled assassination—smiling, proud, and happy as could be to have made it to see his granddaughter blow out the one tiny candle on her titanic birthday cake.

Then, three days later, at 2:37 AM, Nicholas Schnee breathed his last, and the next day, 10:54 PM, Freya “Frosty” Schnee followed him into the Aether.

Both causes of death were “Heart Failure.”

It was Weiss' first experience with loss—true, permanent loss, when grandpa and grandma weren't coming back, when there was no way life would ever be like before, when mom and her older sister became that much more protective of her, when her father began to be around less and less as he completely took over the Schnee Power Company.

Their last words to her were delivered by holo, made after they had returned from Weiss' birthday party.

“Stay curious,” Freya said. “Never stop asking 'Why?' Whenever there's a mystery, you don't stop until you find the answer.”
“Be good, Weiss,” Nick said. “Just be good.”

And now here she was with all her family dead or effectively gone from her life, giving away the last memento she had of them.

Weiss laid on her side, staring at Winter's Eluna plushie in the corner, floating in the center of a protective bubble generated by a carved stone underneath it. She had been the one to pass on one last night with the plushie, had been the one to insist that all of them lock it with their DNA or magical signature, so Weiss couldn't change her mind and risk damaging it in any way and drive the value down.

She hadn't realized that it meant she wouldn't be sleeping that night, too used to snuggling up to it before bed, her first night in the Valley and the sore-stiff incident aside.

Ruby carefully opened the door without knocking; she and the others had just finished their after-dinner meeting, going over their finances, scheduling their shifts so they could continue to help Weiss with her endeavours and training, and most importantly, making a budget for luxury spending so they wouldn't all go insane from boredom, or permanently giving up their creature comforts.

(Apparently, Penny had a paid membership to a “Mechanical Hearts” online community. What that entailed, no one asked, nor wanted to know.)

Ruby was careful to move around with the least noise possible, acting like she would on a hunt, or when she had infiltrated Manor Schnee.

“I'm still awake, Ruby,” Weiss said as she turned over on her other side.

Ruby flinched, looking appropriately enough like a deer in the headlights, before she relaxed. “Can't sleep?” she asked.

Weiss sighed, casting a look at the Eluna plushie. “Yes...” she muttered.

“I've got just the thing!” Ruby said. She scurried off to her many piles of belongings, digging through them until she pulled out a familiar looking plush toy with a scythe prop.

Weiss tensed up for a moment, until Ruby came walking over with her Keeper of the Grove plushie—very different from the ones from the Plushie Palace. This one was wearing a snow white coat, and the infamous mask was off, revealing a friendly face with pale silver buttons for eyes.

“It's of my mom,” Ruby explained. “Uncle Qrow said she and her won a plushie of herself this one time they snuck into Candela on the Eve of the Ether; it used to look just like the ones they usually sell, until he hired a maker to make it look more like her.”

“And you're just going to give it to me...?” Weiss asked.

“Well, yeah!” Ruby said. “But can I borrow her when I'm sad?”

Weiss smiled as she gently took the Keeper Summer plushie from her. “Well, duh? I thought that was pretty obvious.”

The two of them looked at each other, before they burst into giggles.

“Good night, Weiss,” Ruby said as she headed back to her nest.

“Good night, Ruby,” Weiss whispered back as she snuggled up to her new plush toy.
She wasn’t as objectively fluffy, soft, and cuddly as Eluna was, but she made her feel safe and comfortable all the same.

Weiss was in her dreamworld once more, this time in her and Ruby’s bedroom. The plushie was gone from her arms, the real Summer perched in the corner and watching over her with the Keeper’s scythe resting on her shoulder.

She smiled and waved.

Weiss got up and waved back.

There was a knock on her door, before it opened. A familiar face stepped in, wrinklier than ever.

“Excuse me, but I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” said a heavily accented voice.

Weiss jumped off her hammock. “Grandma Frosty!” she cried as she run over.

“Weiss!” Freya cried as she waited for her with open arms. “Oh, look at how much you’ve grown!” she cooed as she hugged her.

“Sorry to say, you’re not going to get much bigger than that,” Nick said as he stepped in, ducking his head out of habit.

“Oh, hush!” Freya said, glaring at her husband as she let go of Weiss. “We both know physical size doesn’t matter, it’s what you can do with it—you of all people should know that!”

Weiss groaned. “Grandma!”

“What?” Freya asked, confused. “I was referring to all the blunders guts-over-brains here has done.”

“Like you haven’t made any screw-ups yourself…” Nick growled as he stood over her.

Freya was unfazed, craning her neck well up to glare at him. “Those were failures of which I was well aware of the potential consequences, unlike when you gave that Jackass your blessing to marry our daughter! I always knew there was something off about him, Nicholas, but no: when push came to shove, you just couldn’t say no to Snowie!”

“Oh, and it’s suddenly all my fault? You’re her mother, shouldn’t you have had the advantage in romantic advice?”

“YOU KNOW DAMN WELL YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE SHE’LL ACTUALLY LISTEN TO!”

“WITH ADVICE YOU GAVE ME TO PASS ALONG TO HER SINCE YOU CAN’T GIVE IT WITHOUT SOUNDING LIKE A CONDESCENDING BITCH!”

Summer stepped up to Weiss as the two began to bicker, a 6’7 battle-scared titan built like a brick-house, VS a tiny 5’1 ball of Hate, little less than 100 pounds soaking wet.

“Does this happen a lot?” Summer asked.

“All the time,” Weiss replied.

Summer smiled. “Heh. It’s pretty funny!”
Weiss nodded. “Yes.” She smiled. “Yes it is.”

Nick and Freya bickered, their voices unintelligible for the sound and the fury, both gesticulating wildly with their hands, before finally, they stopped and turned away from each other.

“Bitch...” Nick muttered.

“Asshole...” Freya spat back.

Nick sighed, and turned back to Freya. “You’re right, though, I was an even bigger dumbass than usual with Jackass.”

Freya turned back to him. “Yes, yes you were! But on the bright side, he did make her happy for a time, and gave us two beautiful grandchildren.”

“That he did, which is about the only good thing I can say about him.”

Freya’s face softened. “I love you, Nick.”

Nick's did too. “Love you too, Frosty.”

He picked her up off the floor so they could kiss.

“And speaking of beautiful grandchildren...” Freya said as she was set down. “How are you feeling, Weiss?”

Weiss frowned and shrugged. “Conflicted, honestly. Also, I’m starting to realize you guys only ever appear in my dreams whenever I’m having trouble with something.”

“That we do!” Freya said. “It’s quite an interesting psychological phenomenon, that in times of emotional or physical distress your subconscious decides to split into separate personalities of sorts with us as the faces of them.” She sighed. “How I wish I were still alive to study it, and more importantly, offer you an unbiased second opinion, if you could even call this a second opinion at all!”

“Don’t we all, Frosty?” Nick said. “Anyway, what’s eating at you this time, kid?”

Weiss turned to the Eluna plushie, thankfully still just a toy in its protective bubble than the Fae Eluna trapped in a magical prison. “Should I really pawn her off?” she asked as she turned back to her grandparents. “It’s the last thing I have of Winter—of any of you. I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do...”

“Well, ’right’ and ‘wrong’ in general is extremely difficult if not impossible to accurately, objectively claim given the incredibly relativistic nature of morality and—” Freya started.

Nick put a hand on her head. “What Frosty here means to say is: we can’t decide that for you, kid.”

Freya glared at him, before turning back to Weiss. “Yes, grossly oversimplified, only you can decide whether this is the right course of action.”

“Any way I can try and tell?”

“There’s numerous Old World and Avalonian philosophers who have attempted to answer that, but I like to subscribe to Utilitarianism: whatever benefits the most people is the ‘right’ decision.”

“Just be careful not to become like your father, becoming a monster all in the name of ‘Progress.’”
“The road to Hell is indeed paved with good intentions,” Freya hummed.

“Completely, super-duper biased over here, but I think you should pawn it and get Ruby a ticket to Candela,” Summer said. “It’s not like you aren’t all planning on getting it back eventually, right?”

Weiss nodded. “Right.”

Nick walked over and put his hand on her shoulder. “Look, Weiss, life is full of confusing and complicated situations where it’s hard to find out what the right thing to do is, if it’s not just ‘Bad’ and ‘Worse’ like they say in the Queensguard.

“Don’t stress too much about everything, and just try to figure out how to make today a little less crappy than yesterday—it’s how we all survived and kept ourselves sane out there, when we still hadn’t hit the jackpot with Candela.”

“And be wary of bizarre, unexpected results and developments you couldn’t have hypothesized nor theorized about, such as falling in love with an overconfident troglodyte like this asshole over here,” Freya said, affectionately wrapping herself around Nick’s side.

“Yep!” Nick said. “Always knew one of these days me and your grandma over here would end up at each others’ throats, though it wasn’t exactly in the way either of us thought...”

Weiss cringed. “Aw, gross!”

Freya smirked. “You put the two us together, you better be ready for the chemistry.”

Weiss groaned. “Just get out of here already!”

“Alright! We’re going, we’re going!” Nick said, he and Freya smiling as they headed out the door.

Weiss sighed as they closed it after them.

“Aww, I wanted to see more of them being all sweet and salty,” Summer said.

“Easy for you to say when you don’t have grandpa’s very detailed journals burned in your head...” Weiss muttered.
They all went to the Trader's Guild first thing in the morning, taking jerky, cookies, and several pounds worth of stewed meat to go. Because of a penalty for “misuse, misinformation, and misconduct” from when Qrow had delivered Weiss' message to Winter, he and her waited in the lobby with the Eluna plushie, while the others—including Zwei—went off to go renegotiate their salaries, be they in Shinies, or in ingredients for baking cookies.

Though not nearly as busy as when Weiss had last been there for the Job Gauntlet, she could still hear that same musical clinking of Shinies being shaken by the counting machines ringing in the air.

“Does this place ever close up shop?” Weiss asked as they sat on a bench. “Even just for a few hours or on holidays?”

“Nope,” Qrow replied, “Guild pretty much handles all financial matters in the Valley bigger than buying booze in bulk off your local grocer, or writing a check to your cousin to pull them through for the next month, after they spent all their Shinies on buying booze in bulk off their local grocer.

“Just think of having all of your human banks, corporations, and insurance companies under one government-run location, and have a few satellite branches for convenience here and there.”

“And how do you protect against corruption? All this money and valuables under one roof is a gigantic temptation for embezzlers.”

“Very, very, very strict regulations, security, and supervision, and much more serious punishments than getting roasted over the Info-Grid, before getting away with it anyway when the red tape and the corruption doesn't let anyone actually do anything,” Qrow replied. “Authoritarianism has its perks.

“Well, that, and the shiftier clerks tend to have governors installed.”

“Governors?”

Qrow pulled up a patch of feathers that covered the back of his neck. He showed off what looked like a tiny stump growing on his skin, where his spine would be. “Guarantee for good behaviour,” he said as he hid it once more. “Mine's a deluxe that also doubles as my chronicle.”

Weiss looked at him in a mix of curiosity and horror.

“We've got ethics here in Fae society, don't worry,” Qrow said. “It's just that they can get VERY flexible when someone like me fucks up, big time.”

“What happened?”

Qrow closed his eyes, trembling as flashes of memories ran through his mind:

A cottage in an isolated island village, one of those “back-to-nature” farming communities that were escaping the city states' governments.

His sister Raven, murder and madness in her eyes, fresh blood dripping from her sword.
Summer, calmly handing him a crying bundle of blankets with two tiny nubs sticking out from it.

“Take care of Ruby for me.”

He looked away, discreetly wiped the tears welling in his eyes. “It's... it's a long story, and one that I'm not allowed to tell you anyway, princess...” he muttered as he turned back.

Weiss frowned. “I... I see. Sorry for bringing it up.”

Qrow shrugged. “You didn't know, Weiss.” He stared off into the distance. “None of us did.”

“... I'm going to go review some homework Penny gave me now, if you don't mind,” Weiss muttered as she pulled out her comm-crystal.

“Knock yourself out,” Qrow said, leaning back in his seat.

The others came back while Weiss was in the middle of the beginnings of the Eldan Council, formed from the larger of the independent tribes of Fae that roamed Avalon several millenia ago. Penny and Blake got raises from their original salaries because of their training and education of Weiss in addition to being her parole watchers, Zwei managed to get a sizable advance on his from being “very persuasive,” and for the first time in a thousand years, Ruby changed the Keeper's salary from ingredients for baking chocolate chip cookies.

“Now I'm getting paid in that, and seeds and supplies for the farm so you can eventually grow them yourself!” Ruby announced happily.

Weiss shot out of her seat. “SERIOUSLY?! Ruby, Penny, we are marching back in that office and getting you a better deal!” she said, taking Ruby's hand and dragging her off with her.

“But it is better!” Ruby said as she came with. “Penny said so.”

Weiss stopped, and turned around to Penny.

“I made the calculations: with the sheer amount of calories Ruby needs to consume thanks to all her activity, eventually taking over production of some if not all of the ingredients will have us ending up with far more Shinies than if we took her payment in cash, and bought food with the equivalent amount of caloric content.”

“It's why Keepers have been paid in cookies for all this time, and the amounts were only ever adjusted for inflation,” Qrow added. “ Turns out, Gabija and her beau figured out the cheapest, most efficient, and completely complaint-free way to feed these gals without bankrupting themselves, or forcing the Council to spend WAY more than they really need to.”

Weiss stared. “... Are you shitting me right now?!”

Qrow shrugged. “Hey, most of those Keepers went on to live long, happy lives, and have perfectly healthy kids on almost-exclusively cookie-based diets, right?”

“It's supported by their vitae vine data,” Penny said. “Among the many unique physiological quirks of Keepers are their ability to thrive on a diet composed almost entirely of milk, sugar, and chocolate. They're quite the treasure trove of bizarre, baffling phenomena that stump makers to this day.”

Weiss slowly turned to Blake.

She shrugged. <Valley. Don't think too hard: head-hurt.>
Weiss squeezed her eyes shut, and nodded slowly. “Let's go pawn my sister's Eluna plushie...” she muttered.

They had to wait a while at the Loans and Securities section for Nivian-speaking clerks to assist them, as Weiss was considered the borrower and the others were co-signers. Eventually, their number was called, and all of them walked up to the counter.

“Oh hey!” Nora said as she and Ren sat behind the security glass. “What a coincidence! I was wondering what kind of borrower would need someone who knew how to speak Nivian, and then I thought, 'Huh, what if it's Weiss?' and it turns out I was right!

“Isn't that neat?”

Weiss nodded slowly. “Uh… I suppose? Was the Guild short on employees today?”

Ren shook his head. “We're part-time workers here and in lots of other places,” he explained. “Me and Nora used to work all sorts of odd jobs back then, and we never truly lost the habit. So, how may we help you?”

Weiss put the Eluna on the counter. “I'd like to pawn my sister's Eluna plushie.”

Ren's eyes widened, Nora whistled. “Oh, Eluna...” she whispered, “is that an actual, limited edition Eluna plushie? I thought you could only see ones this nice in museums and collections that have their own security staff and fancy systems just for them!”

“No offense, but we'll have to verify that it's authentic first; we're still getting counterfeit Elunas every once in a while...” Ren said as he strapped on some gloves, and pulled out one of the Guild's own magical containers. “Unlock it, please?”

One by one, they pressed their hands, talon, or paw on the bubble, until it disappeared in a flash of magic.

Ren swiftly, carefully grabbed it out of the air and placed it in the Guild's container, a new bubble surrounding it. “Thank you, we'll be right back,” he said as he took it deeper inside.

Nora grabbed her hammer from under the counter and followed him.

Some time later, they returned with an entire cadre of watchers, complete with a guard wolf.

Ren set the Eluna back on the counter. “Good news: it's definitely real, and can be used as collateral for a loan.”

Weiss nodded. “How much is it worth?”

“741,000,000 Shinies,” Ren replied calmly.

Both of Zwei's jaws dropped.

“Holy fucking shit...” Ruby muttered.

Penny blinked. “I am sorry, I had not reserved enough processing power beforehand to comprehend such a large sum.”

<That… that is a LOT of money!> Blake said.
“All this time…” Qrow whispered, “all this time… we were sitting on a fucking Etherite mine…!”

Weiss finally recovered. “Is that in the condition it's in right now?”

“Yes,” Ren replied.

“It's been 12 years since production ended!” Nora added. “That's enough time for all the kids who saw their classmates showing off their Elunas to start earning serious money and want to buy their own, so they can show them up on Storybook and go, 'Look who's got an Ellie NOW, bitch?!’”

“A restoration job and the removal of the tears, snot, and despair smell is nothing compared to what people will pay for an Eluna in good enough condition,” Ren finished.

“How much is that in Urochs…?” Weiss mumbled.

Ren punched in the numbers on his terminal. “49,400,000 Urochs,” he calmly read off the screen.

“And how rich does that make me here in Fae society?” Weiss asked.

“Well,” Nora said, “we could bother you with all sorts of boring statistics about average wages, the cost of living a decent life here, and how much the richest Fae tend to have, or I could just say this:

“Money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, money, motherfucker!”

“Please don’t ask for all of that in cash,” Ren said calmly. “The Bastion does not have enough physical Shinies to pay you, and the logistics of producing that many new gems, shipping it from the other Council settlements, and transporting it to Keeper's Hollow will be EXTREMELY difficult, time-consuming, and complicated.”

Weiss held up a finger. “We'll be right back.”

“Huddle up everyone!” Ruby cried. “Emergency meeting!”

They all moved to one area, with Zwei looming over them and protecting them from eavesdroppers.

“Weiss, you're not TOO attached to that plushie, are you?” Qrow asked.

“Uncle Qrow!” Ruby snapped.

“He does have a point in that selling the Eluna plushie outright will allow us to live very comfortably,” Penny added. “With proper investment, reasonably responsible spending, and no major disasters of any sort, your descendants for the next 1,000 years will most assuredly be living extremely comfortable lives.”

“See?” Qrow said. “Penny's with me!”

“I'm not, actually,” Penny replied, “I'm merely explaining that from a purely financial standpoint, selling the Eluna plushie outright is the better decision. From a more holistic perspective, the loss of such a valued sentimental item, and the definite emotional and psychological repercussions to Weiss makes it a terrible decision.”

“We're getting that Eluna back, Uncle Qrow,” Ruby growled.

They paused for Penny to summarize and translate it for Blake.
<I agree.,> she said, <we're not defaulting on that loan.>

Qrow whined. “We could use the money, can't we?”

“Yes, there is no question about that,” Penny replied, “but taking out just a small portion of the total value will allow us more than enough capital to invest into Weiss, her farm, and general improvements to Keeper's Hollow, and give us time to pay off the loan within two or three years and reclaim the plushie.

“We can even safely squeeze in a sizable amount for luxury spending, such as tickets to Eve of the Ether for four of us!”

“But no kicking back with kickass beer and market-bought meat for the rest of our lives…?” Qrow asked.

Penny shook her head. “No, all my calculations assume we continue to earn our current wages or more, and my projections on the return of investment for Weiss' farming and training, erring on the side of caution.”

<Let's vote!> Ruby said. <Sell Eluna, raise your hand!>

Qrow raised his talon.

<Get Eluna back eventually, raise your hand!>

Everyone else raised their hands or their paws.

Qrow sighed. “Alright… alright… you girls win. But can we buy a still with it first, so Weiss here can start making booze…?”

“Yes, we can, so long as you promise to keep up your end of our payments!” Weiss replied.

“I will, I will…” Qrow replied.

Penny redid their plans, and after signing contracts and earmarking money for improvements and investments for the long-run, they had four tickets to the Eve of the Ether festival in Candela, four new fake IDs in the works, and some extra money for making costumes and converting into Urochs for the night of the event.

<Are you sure you don't want to come with us to Candela, Uncle Qrow?> Ruby asked as Blake and Weiss had their pictures taken.

Qrow sighed and shook his head. <Nah, you just take Penny, and enjoy yourselves; I'm pretty sure if I meet up with you-know-who again, it'll be anything but a heartwarming reunion.>

Ruby frowned. <She stopped hating you a long time ago—what does that say about him?>

<It's not him I'm worried about, Rubes...> Qrow muttered. He smiled. <Besides, I'll probably just end up getting totally wasted with all the 'witches' brews' going around, and ruin things for everybody.>

Ruby didn't smile back.

<Next!> the photographer called out.
<Go on, they're waiting.> Qrow waved her off.

Ruby sighed, and did.

Penny was ecstatic to hear that she was getting the fourth ticket instead, and had one of the biggest, brightest smiles Qrow had ever seen when she had her picture taken. After they got their fake documentation and Info-Grid histories, memorized all the small details and answers that'd throw off suspicious Peacekeepers, they left the Guild, the girls taking about their costume plans, and Weiss advising them on which places to hit up, and in what order to get the most out of their night.

He knew he should have been happy for them, but he just couldn't shake this feeling in his gut that something very bad was going to happen soon—and as his chronicle would attest, it was never wrong...

Chapter End Notes

Note: 741,000,000 Shinies = 14,820,000 US Dollars
Mitzi Kovacs burst out of a VIP taxi, cursing under her breath as she dodged and weaved around the sea of people streaming in and out of Candela International Airport.

She bumped into no shortage of fellow businesspeople, carefully circled her way around families (especially those with small children in tow), and even climbed up then vaulted over a train of cargo lifters hovering across the floor and slowing down the human traffic.

She stuck the dismount—thank you, her Old World inspired school's emphasis on athletic extracurricular activities—before making her way to one of the many terminals.

On the downside, she was late—horrifically, inexcusably late.

On the upside, her sister didn't mind, the saintly, patient soul that she was.

“(Sister!)” Mei-Li cried in Chinese, one of their ancestors' Old World Tongues.

“(Mei-Li!)” Mitzi cried, rushing over and hugging her.

Mei-Li's wheelchair always made it awkward, but they managed.

Mitzi pulled away, bombarded her younger sister with questions—about how things were back in Solaris, about her trip to Candela, about her health, until Mei-Li held up her hand and stopped her.

“(How about we go home to your apartment first so the nice guards don't have to escort us out?)” she asked.

Mitzi looked around, noticed the glares of the other passengers streaming past them, and the Peacekeepers standing by in the distance; with Eve of the Ether less than a week away and the flow of incoming tourists only getting denser and more chaotic by the day, heartfelt reunions at the terminal weren't exactly encouraged, especially when you took up more space than usual.

Mitzi chuckled sheepishly. “(Right…)” she walked behind Mei-Li and grabbed the handles.

She stopped. She hadn't noticed it earlier for how many years she'd been using that same wheelchair, but now that her fingers wrapped around the well-worn grooves in the rubber, there was no mistaking it.

“(Mei-Li, this isn’t the wheelchair I bought for you,)” Mitzi said.

Mei-Li looked back and smiled at her. “(I know, it’s just that this one is more comfortable.)”

Mitzi scowled as she began to wheel her to the taxi bay. “(Have you been using the new one at all since I gave it to you?)”

“(I have.)” Mei-Li replied.

“(When?)”

“(Whenever we holo-chat.)”
Mitzi sighed. "(Mei-Li, that chair is so much better than this creaky piece of shit.)"

"(Easy for you to say when you’re not the one that has to sit on it all day!)" Mei-Li shot back. "(‘Specially adapted for you’ my ass, I could never get comfortable in that damned thing.)"

"(So you’d rather wait for this thing to finally fall apart for good before you use it?)"

"(No, I’ll have it taken to a foundry to be studied first, have them make the new one exactly like it without most of the problems, then use it.)"

"(That’s going to be stupidly expensive.)"

"(Any more stupidly expensive than all those clothes, shoes, and mods you ‘have’ to buy...?)"

"(That’s different.)"

"(How?)"

"(Because those clothes, shoes, and mods help me get the promotions to pay for that chair.)"

The Kovacs sisters paused their conversation to hail and load Mei-Li into a cab; the drones could help her in easily enough, but Mitzi had to fold and compact her wheelchair herself. Even if it had been over two years since she’d last done it, she could be asleep and still undo the jury-rigged latches, fold the clumsily welded bars, and reinforce the duct tape with the roll it always had stashed somewhere, before stuffing it into the trunk.

Mitzi sighed in a mix of relief and frustration; she instinctively reached up to wipe the sweat off her brow with her sleeve, before she remembered she wasn’t wearing hoodies and sweatshirts anymore, she was wearing a hand-tailored Adel three-piece suit had taken a great deal of favours and connections to acquire.

She pulled out a handkerchief from her pocket, mopped herself up with that, before neatly folding it and putting it back, as the holos in proper etiquette had taught her.

From the inside, Mei-Li watched with a frown on her face.

Mitzi stepped into cab shortly after, then stretched out and relax in a most improper manner, an arm lazily looped around Mei-Li’s shoulders.

They both smiled as they snuggled up to each other.

"(Good evening, Mses. Kovacs!)” the default CTC steward AI said in Chinese. "(Where will I be taking you tonight?)"

Mitzi limply waved her free hand in the air. "(Home, and step on it!)"

"(Right away, Ms. Kovacs!)"

The taxi began to lift up into the air.

Mitzi turned to Mei-Li and smiled. "(So, how’s life, Mei-Mei?)"

"(Same old, same old: still programming AFA-grade combat sims, changing the enemies into Zombie Cyborg New World Nazi Pirates so I can sell them as pre-loaded scenarios to Call to Action junkies, then relishing in the bruised egos of all the noobs who can’t beat it because it’s ‘so imbalanced.’)"
Mitzi chuckled. “(Gamers never change, do they?)”

Mei-Li smirked. “(That was from the soldiers. Queensguard wannabes; always so sure they’re going to get their invite any day now... but enough about me, what about you?)”

Mitzi sighed heavily. “(Oh, you know: trying to raise a sunken ship from the bottom of the Endless Sea, then grabbing the helm before someone else takes it and rams it straight into the Maw.)”

Mei-Li frowned. “(I read the news, sister! I meant what’s going on with your life, not your career.)”

“(My career IS my life!” Mitzi tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling. “(God of the Old World, Mei-Li, they weren’t exaggerating when they said that Candela never sleeps; there’s always some new crisis, some once-in-a-life-time opportunity, new slots and positions opening up when the ones that used to have them burn-out, leave for rival companies, or screw-up, big time.)”

“(You make it sound like its war.)”

“(Because it IS war, and it’s every fucking one for themselves!” Mitzi spat. “(Shit, sister, that we’re all working for the SPC is the only thing uniting us; even I can see my own personal assistant wondering what it’d be like to be sitting behind my desk, with her name on the plaque.)”

She beamed. “(But all that’s going to change soon, because now that fuckhead Jacques Schnee finally screwed up so bad there’s no saving his career!)”

“(Mitzi! His daughter was just MURDERED!)”

“(I KNOW! Don’t you ever think for a moment that I don’t have anything but the sincerest sympathies for that poor girl, and the rest of her family! But the facts are, she’s dead, her father is gone, and the position of CEO of the Schnee Power Company is up for grabs.)” Mitzi smiled bitterly. “(It’s going to be hard and bloody, and I’m going to have to burn a lot of bridges, but it will be mine...)”

She smiled warmly at Mei-Li. “(And then, I’m going to be free to spend all my days however I like with you, sister.)”

Mei-Li frowned.

Mitzi looked worried. “(What’s wrong, Mei-Li?)”

“(You’ve changed, sister...)” she muttered sadly.

“(Well, duh?! I couldn’t exactly stay Mitzi Kovacs, Jade Kingdom 415 working under the Mickey Wus! Especially because those two fucks will actually succeed in killing each other one of these days.)”

“(They already have.)”

“(Shit! How they’d die?)”

“(They got into a fist-fight on their 75th birthday party, and ended up force-feeding the other the poisoned birthday cake they personally baked for the other. Before you ask: Mikhail’s last words were ‘Too much butterscotch...’ and Makoto’s were ‘Not enough chocolate...’)”

Mitzi groaned. “(See? This is what I hate about Candela: there’s so much shit going on within the city you don’t have time to check in on what’s going on everywhere else. What happened to their
“Turf?”

“(Their widows and children split it in half, and are now thinking of how to off their in-laws and cousins so they can take it all for themselves, preferably without getting any crap from the rest of the Dragons.)”

“(Huh. Well at least now we know they’re legitimate!”)

Mei-Li stared at her, before she sighed. “(I want you to quit your job, Mitzi.)”

Mitzi blinked. “(… I’m sorry, what?)”

“(I don’t like what Candela is doing to you, these corporations you’re working for! It’s just like the Jade Empire, the Black Cross, and the Jahiliyyah in Solaris—all the money, the power, it makes them crazy!)”

Mitzi scowled. “(Mei-Li, if it wasn’t for my fighting my way up the ladders, criminal or corporate, you wouldn’t be safe in your apartment in Ciel Solaris being paid to trance for a living—we’d both be dead!)”

Mei-Li scowled back. “(I’m starting to wonder if the world be better if we were…)”

Mitzi looked at her in horror. “(Don’t talk like that!)”

Mei-Li glared at her. “(Do you ever stop to wonder what they did to get the Urochs to pay you? Where, and from who they got it from? Who else is paying for your helping them become richer and grow all the more powerful?)

“Because I do!”

“(I’ve gone legit now!)”

“(No you haven’t!)” Mei-Li screamed, pulling away from her. “(All that has changed is that you call them ‘Hostile Takeovers’ not ‘Turf Wars,’ you fight with lawyers instead of thugs, and the Justices don’t get called in to clean-up the bodies in the streets!)”

Tears welled in Mei-Li’s eyes. “(You’ve changed, sister…!)” she whispered, her voice trembling.

The steward AI reappeared. “(We are now approaching your residence, Ms. Kovacs,)” she said calmly.

Mitzi stared at her, confused and hurt. “(Mei-Li…)” she reached out.

Mei-Li slapped her hand away. “(What is it, Mitzi?!)” she barked as she began to cry. “(What the fuck is it that keeps you going, that helps you sleep at night, that makes you think all the new blood on your hands is worth it this time?!”

“(Egan’s Syndrome!)” Mitzi cried. “(No one is looking a cure for it even if it’s possible because it’s just too rare to be ‘profitable,’ but if I just earn enough money--!)”

“(Forget it, sister. )” Mei-Li growled.

“(Preparing for landing,”) the AI said as the cab slowed down and turned in the air.

Mitzi looked at Mei-Li’s legs peeking out from her skirt—emaciated, and useless. “(Don’t you want to know what it’s like to walk with your own two legs?! What it’s like to use mods?” her voice broke
as she began to cry, too. “(To fix whatever is *broken* or *wrong* with yourself, just like that...?)”

Mei-Li glared at her. “(*Not if it costs other people their lives.* And besides: I have the Trance for that.)”

Her condo’s attendants opened the door, professional smiles on their faces, trained and paid enough to ignore every sign that anything was wrong between the two sisters. Mitzi unloaded Mei-Li’s wheelchair and set it out again—she couldn’t trust anyone but herself to do it right—but the moment she was back on it, she was wheeling herself to the elevator.

If it was any comfort, she let Mitzi in the same car.

The coldness continued as they exited to her floor, and went to Mitzi’s apartment—really, a miniature mansion with three floors sharing space with other similarly-sized abodes due to the high cost of living in the flying city block of Asgard, and Mitzi not being rich enough to own her own lot.

Mei-Li waited in front of the door as Mitzi put herself through the bio-scanner gauntlet to open it. The two of them paused as the wooden double doors swung open.

Her place was trashed, which was no surprise—Mitzi lived alone and only ever hired the simpler helper drones because she liked her privacy and the freedom to be completely, absolutely *disgusting* without anyone judging her nor having evidence of just how bad she could get.

But there was just something that was *off.* A familiar sort of unease when they were living in crappy apartments and the backs of illegal trance dens, easy targets for every last small-time burglar in the whole of Terre Solaris.

Mitzi frowned, reached into a discrete inner pocket of her jacket and pulled out a pistol—the one that security was always informed of ahead of time, so it wouldn’t trip the weapons scanners. “(Mei-Li, stay back, and call the Peacekeepers,)” she said as she prepared to step in.

Mei-Li looked at her in horror. “(*Sister--!*)”

“How about we *not* do any of whatever it is you just said, and step inside for a nice little chat?” a male voice said from behind them.

Mitzi spun around, found herself facing two people that *definitely* weren’t there in the hall before—a well-dressed man with a bowler hat and a white suit, with a young woman with multi-coloured hair, a parasol, and a love of pastel pink.

She aimed her gun at the both of them, switching back and forth. “Get out of here before I have to shoot you both,” she growled.

The man chuckled as he pulled up his cane and pointed it at Mei-Li; the end of it began to charge with magic.

Mitzi’s eyes widened.

He smiled. “*Just try it,* sweetheart.”

*Bang!* *Bang!* *Bang!* *Bang!*

Faster than anyone should be able to move, the young woman stepped forward and blocked every shot with her still unopened umbrella. Mitzi turned to her and fired, she calmly sauntered towards her
like she was in a musical, twirling her umbrella around, blocking every shot or turning her body so that the bullets would zip right on by, missing her by less than an inch.

She came right up to Mitzi.

Out of ammo, she raised her arm to pistol-whip her.

She dodged the attack, Mitzi’s gun and wrist sliding off her clothes and body like she was water pouring over her.

Then, she hooked her umbrella’s handle into Mitzi’s ankle, and pulled.

She fell onto her back, the gun knocked out of her hand and into her apartment as she fell.

Thud.

The walls were soundproof. The security footage was easily doctored to help sneak in guests, business partners, and illicit lovers without suspicion or proof. The other residents were either gone on their own high-power jobs and luxury destinations all over Avalon, or just wouldn’t give a shit about a commotion in the hallway until it spilled into their abode.

Mitzi could only glare at the pink-haired girl pulled a sword out of the umbrella, and held it over her.

“What do you want?” she growled at the man.

“To propose a mutually beneficial business deal,” he hummed.

“(Don’t do it, sister!)” Mei-Li cried.

The man fired.

Mei-Li gasped in pain, magic glowing and crackling in her chest, before she slumped over in her chair, alive but struggling to breathe.

Mitzi screamed her name, shot up to help her before the pink-haired girl stopped her with a blade to her neck.

“Shall we head inside to discuss this further, or will I have to terminate this partnership before it even begin?” the man growled, more ominous looking energy glowing on the end his cane.

Mitzi reluctantly dropped back down to the floor. “Who are you people?”

The man chuckled as he grabbed Mei-Li’s chair and wheeled her in. “There’ll be time for names as soon as we know you can both be trusted,” he hummed.

Though her body was paralyzed, Mei-Li could move her eyes still, could give her sister the coldest, harshest look she had ever seen.

“(I’m sorry,)” Mitzi mouthed, before the pink-haired girl cheerfully dragged her inside her apartment.

“(Don’t worry: my employer happens to share your interest in genetic modification,” the man said as they closed the doors behind them. “She wants to get rid of all those pesky roadblocks just like you do—you know, Egan’s Syndrome, organ and prosthesis rejection, laws on Human Testing, and the like...”
Solaris is separated into two halves:

- Ciel Solaris, a large series of floating platforms and islands that constitute the “upper-middle class” districts, and
- Terra Solaris, the original docks and town, generally fallen into disrepair and crime, if they aren’t lovingly preserved landmarks.

Ever since the Resource Wars of 200 years ago and Candela’s founding, the organized crime has only gotten even worse, to the point where three major criminal organizations effectively control the entire city state:

- The Jade Empire, specializing in the drug, arms, and sex trades, remnants of the Chinese Triad, Japanese Yakuza, and Drug Cartels, largely from South America
- The Black Cross, specializing in money laundering, smuggling, and black markets for “exotic goods and services not easily acquired nor publicly advertised,” remnants of the Italian and Russian Mafias and mostly British Criminal Enterprises, and
- Jahiliyyah, specializing in hacking, information brokering, and the market for illegal technology and leaked corporate patents, remnants of numerous Religious Extremist Groups, former members of numerous Intelligence Agencies, and disillusioned First Settlers after the formal establishment of the Church of the Holy Shepherd as the Nexus governing body, against the original plan of a new civilization without the combined state/religion that drove them from the Old World in the first place

The Adel family is a well-known member of the Black Cross.
A small army of workers and pack-animals trooped in to Keeper's Hollow the morning after they pawned Eluna, coming in through a mix of the Tubes and making their way through the water on boats powered by motors, with giant turtles hauling in materials and equipment.

It was fascinating watching them work, in-between Weiss tending to her new crops of sugar beets and wheat, and her budding cacao tree orchard.

The new sprinkler system was like the Tubes, a system of vines grown in deliberate paths and connected by wood and stone anchors, and the larger equipment like the mill used live trees for foundation, the rest of them made with the raw materials Weiss had been stockpiling from the overgrowth, or gathered from the remaining wilderness.

They didn't tear down the mossy and partially rotten walls of the old barn, but instead had the weavers place their hands on them, pulsing magic into the wood and reversing the aging process right before Weiss' eyes. They even adapted most of the plant-life growing in and around it as decoration; part of the piping for indoor plumbing, power, and natural gas; or a potential source of food or other amenities for the animals they were planning to house in there, once they found tenders willing to take most of their wages in food and lodging.

Even the tree growing through the roof wasn't cut down; they just patched up the breach to keep the elements out, hacked off some of the unrulier branches, and rebuilt the interior of the barn around it.

<Foundation for house,> the foreman had explained to her, after she gave them water and some snacks for their break.

The final touch was restoring the old transport system between the barn and the house, another boat suspended in the air, at where the water level could reach during the Flood. After a couple of safety tests to ensure that the makers had completely repaired or replaced the hinges that had broken off some years back, Ruby and Weiss took the maiden voyage.

They sat on opposite ends, listening to the cranking of the motors as it pulled them across, peering over the edge and waving at the cheering construction crew, looking at the fast-disappearing overgrowth and the small but thriving farm that had gone on to replace it.

Weiss sighed happily as she turned back to Ruby. “We've come a long way from those sweet potatoes, haven't we?”

“Youp!” Ruby chirped. She playfully pointed her horns at Weiss. “And it's all thanks to you!”

Weiss blushed. “Oh please, we both know I wouldn't have even thought of gardening if it wasn't for you...”

<Just kiss her already!> one of the makers yelled, before the rest joined them, howling, cheering, and making playful gestures.

Weiss glared at them, before she quickly sunk below the level of the boat's sides.

Ruby leaned out. <WE'RE NOT--> she made a very loud sexy animal noise <--YOU GUYS!>

There was laughter, confusion, and some sighs of disappointment as Shinies changed hands.
The boat stopped at a deck on the barn's second floor. Ruby stepped out first, grabbed Weiss hand and helped her out. The boat shook a little, leading Weiss to step farther than she intended and end up MUCH closer to Ruby, just one or two inches of distance between them.

They stared at each other, cheeks taking on a light dusting of pink.

“… I… better get started on making Qrow's booze!” Weiss said quickly.

“And I better get ready for the hunts again!” Ruby said as she jumped off the platform, landing softly on the grass below. “See you later, Weiss!” she called out as she ran back to the house.

“See you later, Ruby!” Weiss replied, before she hurried headed inside, and to her new laboratory/kitchen.

With instructions from the Codex and Penny on-hand for documentation and in case something went horribly wrong, Weiss had her first batches of sore-stiff ointment, moonshine, and cheese on the burners, bacteria cultures hyper-accelerating the process to give her what usually took months in the span of a few days.

She hung up her apron with pride, washing her hands, and heading off for a much deserved snack break before it was back to practicing her Actaeon and learning more about Fae society—fittingly, the day's lesson were about Talos, the progenitor for the Order of the Makers, and one of the most prolific engineers, scientists, artisans, and many more professions of the “Ekindling Era” beside.

“Where have I heard that name before?” Weiss asked as they walked back to the house.

“Probably from one of the more popular Fae epithets,” Penny explained. “‘Talos Stinky Beard' is the one of the top ten.”

“Why his 'stinky beard' of all things?”

“Talos was a goat Fae, and extremely proud of his beard which he liked to grow long and wear in braids, and meticulously groomed every morning and night. Whenever an experiment or an endeavour went horribly wrong, or in an entirely unexpected and oftentimes unpleasant direction, for some bizarre reason, his beard would always be stained or marred in some way, the most frequent being afflicted with a difficult to remove smell.

“On a related note, he has another popular epithet frequently used as part of prayers to him: 'Talos Help Us All.' This one was because Talos was also oftentimes called in to assist or reverse the damage done by other Makers less skilled than he, also victims of unexpected outcomes, or both.”

“Well 'Talos Help Us All,' then,” Weiss said.

Penny frowned.

Weiss stopped. “… What?”

“I forgot to mention!: that particular epithet and its related prayers are only ever used AFTER something has gone wrong. In Fae superstition, saying it BEFORE anything unfortunate has happened will allegedly cause something to go wrong, as Talos was also well-known for his short temper and dislike of others calling for him, largely because it entailed him having to fix yet another disaster or mitigate unforeseen consequences.”

Weiss frowned. “… How bad are we talking about, exactly?” she asked.
Penny smiled. “Just repeat after me: ‘Gabija Have Mercy On Us All,’”

“Gabija Have Mercy On Us All,” Weiss said.

As Penny climbed up to get the elevator, Weiss made a note to herself to not call upon any more divine powers until she knew everything there was about them.

It started with her moonshine.

Though for full flavour and maximum potency, it needed to ferment for a week or more, ethanol was already present within the first 24 hours, and since that was all Qrow really needed, he, Weiss, and Penny were at the laboratory doing the first taste test.

All of them cringed as Weiss poured some into a shot glass, as the moonshine had developed an incredibly powerful, acrid aroma. “Man, they weren't kidding when they said this brewer's bacteria was powerful stuff,” she said as she pinched her nostrils then handed it over to Penny for scanning.

“We Fae have neo-steel guts compared to you humans,” Qrow explained. “It takes a LOT more to get us fucked up.”

Penny made a beeping noise. “Analysis complete! Qrow, I would HIGHLY suggest that you don't drink this, I've detected worryingly high levels of ethanol...”

“It's moonshine, Penny,” Qrow said as he plucked the shot glass out of her hand. “It's meant to be that way.” He raised it in the air. “Bottom's up!” he said, before he knocked it back in one gulp.

“Well?” Weiss asked.

Qrow came to in a hospital bed.

<UNCLE QROW!> Ruby cried, jumping on his bed, and nearly smashing her horns into his head as she hugged him. <I'M SO GLAD YOU'RE NOT DEAD!>

<Fuck me! What happened?!> he asked.

Ruby pulled away. <You mean you don't remember?>

<Last thing I'm getting from my chronicle is me drinking some of Weiss' moonshine, thinking 'Huh, not bad, kinda sweet, but I could see myself drinking this soon as it's got some time to age,' and then POW! Nothing!>

<Did the makers launch another rocket, and it happened to punch through the roof and land on me?>

<Actually, you died of alcohol poisoning,> Penny said as she came over. <Fortunately, my mender protocols include detoxification and revival of patients, so long as brain activity had only recently ceased.>

Qrow’s eyes widened. <Holy fucking shit... Weiss' booze was that strong...?>

Penny nodded. <The makers currently have it in secure storage, until they find someone brave-stupid enough to want to do serious study of it.>

Qrow laid back on his bed. <How long was I out?>

<6 hours and 37 minutes, including the five minutes that you were brain-dead,> Penny replied.
Qrow closed his eyes. <Someone fill me in on what the hell happened in the meanwhile, before the Council gives me crap about it...>

Penny put her hand to the chronicle-governor on the back of Qrow's neck, and did.

The footage was from Penny's optic sensors, with an overlay of her many scanners' readouts, a scrolling ticker of her inner thoughts, and her “To Do” list in the upper right corner. The latest item was <Keep Qrow from Dying.>

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit...!” Weiss whispered over and over again as she stood over her and Qrow. “Is he dead?! Did I kill him?!”

“No,” Penny replied as she held her glowing hands over Qrow's unconscious body, “he's just suffering from severe alcohol poisoning, he's not yet--”

Qrow’s vitals readings flat-lined.

“--And now he's dead.”

Weiss wailed in despair. “Ruby's going to kill me!”

“Initiating revival protocols!” Penny said as her hands began to glow with immense power. “And Ruby won't take violent retribution on you, knowing this was an accident; however, she will definitely be permanently traumatized, and also likely fall into a serious depression.”

“THAT'S EVEN WORSE!”

Qrow fast-forwarded the footage. Penny revived him, stabilized him, and proceeded to siphon all the alcohol from his system. Unfortunately, there was no closing his eyes for the inevitably messy aftermath of that last part.

The emergency menders were called in, and Qrow was hauled off to the hospital for recovery. Penny spent a good while consoling a distraught Weiss, and he put it back to normal speed as after she recovered and they were back in front of the still, looking at it like it had grown fangs and legs.

“Is Fae alcohol always this powerful...?” Weiss asked.

“No, which is what worries me,” Penny replied. “There's no reason for any of the ingredients or the processes used to end with a product this potent, especially this early in the fermentation stage. The only way they could achieve this is with a catalyst.”

“Like what?”

Penny shrugged. “I don't know. I suggest we call the Maker's Forge—they're going to want to study this. And more importantly, we might need someone with the skill and equipment to safely dispose of it...”

Weiss warily looked at the other two containers of fermenting products.

“Don't worry!” Penny said. “Sore-stiff ointment and white cheese are not nearly as volatile as moonshine is!”

Qrow fast-forwarded again through their attempting to recreate the wort they had used for the moonshine, until Ren and Nora arrived at Keeper's Hollow.
“You two work as safety inspectors, too?” Weiss asked as she met them at the doors of the barn.

“Yes,” Ren replied. “It's cheaper and easier, considering we're already combat-trained watchers.”

“You need combat-training for this job?” Weiss replied.

“Yep!” Nora replied as she walked in, her hammer over her shoulder. “Never know WHAT might come out of a flunky science experiment, here in the Valley.”

Weiss was silent as the two went up and began to test her moonshine.

The results were not encouraging, with the alcohol levels still strangely, dangerously high, and requiring extreme dilution in water until it was reasonably safe to drink.

“There's only one more test to see if we're going to need to bar you from making more until you get a license,” Ren said.

“What's that?” Weiss asked.

“The Fury Potato Test!” Nora cried, pulling out a canister from her back-pocket.

“It's when we see if your alcohol could potentially be used as an explosive,” Ren explained.

Qrow fast-forwarded over the preparations, and resumed when they were standing at a remote, uninhabited corner of Keeper's Hollow, on a bank facing out to the water.

Nora loaded the canister full of moonshine into her hammer. “FURY POTATO!” she cried as she swung.

*Thoom.*

They all watched it sail off into the distance, and into the water.

*Plop.*

They waited a few seconds.

Nothing.

“Well, that answers that!” Nora said, putting her hammer down and leaning on it.

*BOOM.*

Quite a lot of clouds of debris, exploded plant matter, and dead fish and frogs began to float up to the surface.

“… *Nope,* spoke too soon!” she said.

“Yeah...” Ren muttered, “we're going to have to confiscate all your moonshine and your still, until we're certain you won't accidentally blow Keeper's Hollow sky high.”

“What exactly did you do to make it, anyway?” Nora said.

Weiss walked them through the process, and at the end, added, “I also kind of said 'Talos Help Us All' just after I put them away for aging...”

Nora and Ren's eyes widened.
“… I didn't know you weren't supposed to say it then.”

“What's inside the other containers, and when are they going to be done fermenting?” Ren asked.

“Sore-stiff ointment and white cheese, and a little before two tomorrow afternoon.”

“Call us when you open them,” Ren said as he made a note of it in his tablet. “Ideally, when Ruby and Blake are with us.”

“Tell them to come armed!” Nora added.

“Is invoking Talos when you shouldn't really that bad?” Weiss asked.

Ren put his hand on her shoulder. “Let's just put it this way: pray to whatever other deities you believe in, except for him.”
Chapter 48

The next day began with an ominous message from the Maker's Forge: Weiss' barrel of moonshine had spontaneously exploded while it was in storage.

“Don't worry: no one was hurt, and our insurance will cover the damage,” Penny translated. “Besides, it isn't as if anyone is surprised, just disappointed we won't be able to study it any more. If ever you successfully apply for a Potion Maker's license, we will happily pay you in materials and labour, and allow you use of our equipment to recreate it on-site, though please give us at least three days advance notice to prepare adequate safety measures and staff for the experiment.

“Signed, Maker Viktor Logos, Shift Supervisor.”

Weiss sighed as she ate her breakfast. “I don't know what worries me more: that my moonshine blew up all on its own, or that they actually want me to try and make it again,” she said as she picked up some fried tomato slices and brought it to her mouth.

“From what little data we did gather, it's got fantastic potential as a cheaper and more easily produced explosive component for grenades, or as an incendiary coating to darts and bolts that can also seriously debilitate targets,” Penny explained as she cleaned up the counter. “We don't have any conclusive evidence, but I wouldn't be surprised if it also works as an excellent medium for channeling elemental fire.”

Weiss looked blankly at her as she chewed. She swallowed, and asked, “Medium for channeling what now?”

“Fuel for magic,” Qrow muttered as he sat in the furthest chair from the sunlight, nursing his head and sipping the weakest, most watered down beers they had in the house. “Weavers can transform raw magic into whatever elements they want, but it's a lot easier, faster, and more sustainable to use something that's already imbued with what you need—poison, electricity, or just bursting into flames if you jiggle it a little too hard.”

“Think of it like your humans' magitechnology, using science to expand what used to be the sole domain of prophets, witches, and sorcerers to the common man, as the 'Computer Wizards' of Silicon Valley had,” Penny said.

Weiss nodded. It was a real game changer when they discovered that magic could be programmed.

Qrow took a sip from his beer. “It also lets non-weavers get in on that elemental action, like with soul fire throwers and grenades. And speaking of fire and explosives, there won't be any more of that when we open those lids later, will there?” he asked, looking at Weiss in a mixture of annoyance and worry.

Weiss sighed. “I hope not, and I'm afraid to think of what might instead.”

Qrow nodded. “Any more of these weird accidents happen, we're calling the Weaver's Terrace, alright? Because then I'll be pretty sure we've got a magic leak building up underneath the swamp.”

“What could be causing it?” Weiss asked. “Last I saw, none of us were burying depleted bullets or dumping barrels of radioactive waste in the lake, and my farming should be stopping it, not causing it.”

Qrow shrugged. “Maybe something washed in during the Flood, and it's reacting to all the magic
building up for the Eve.”

“Something...?”

“It's not like we can keep track of everything that gets stuck here on its way to the Timeless Depths,” Qrow said as he took another sip.

Weiss sighed. “I hate this, not knowing what the hell's going on.”

Qrow finished his beer. “Get used to it; if there's one sure thing in the Valley, it's that you can never be sure about anything.”

Blake and Ruby came back from their morning patrol, and Ren and Nora returned to Keeper's Hollow some time after Weiss' cheese and sore-stiff ointment finished fermenting. Save for Zwei, who was still away at the Pits, and Penny, who was a golem, they were all dressed in safety masks, gloves, and makers' robes.

The watchers among them were armed, and wore their armour underneath.

They all stood around the lab in a semi-circle, with Penny acting as both the remote camera-feed for the others and the one to actually open the containers.

Everyone held their breaths as she began with the cheese.

Penny lifted the lid. Inside was a wheel of pure white, delicious-looking cheese.

It formed a face, depressions in its surface.

:D

Everyone screamed and jumped as Penny slammed the lid shut.

She carefully opened it again, just enough to peer inside.

D:

Penny closed it again, held it shut with both hands; Ruby and Nora quickly put a heavy cast-iron pot over it to keep it closed.

“What the FUCK?!” Weiss cried. “WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?!”

“Okay, we are definitely calling the Terrace for back-up,” Ren said as he stepped behind the line and pulled out his tablet. “That is just not normal.”

Within the hour, Keeper's Hollow was swarming with weavers and watchers, some of them going around with magic “dowsing rods” trying to find a leak, the others guarding the barn to ensure that whatever was inside couldn't get out, and the rest were interrogating Weiss and the others until a senior Weaver could arrive on-site.

It was all standard protocol, until Elder Goodwitch showed up.

All the Fae tripped over themselves in surprise and showing her the proper respects; Weiss awkwardly curtsied as she approached the group. She greeted them all briefly, before she got the situation report from one of the supervising watchers.
She turned back to them. “All of you, come with me,” she said.

Blake didn't need a translation to know what she said.

They were all back in the second floor, armed and outfitted, with back-up in the form of watchers with crossbows, repeaters, and cannons, ready to blast into non-existence the things that were in the laboratory.

One was the cheese, escaped from its prison and now shaped like a blob with a little antenna above it. The other was a mound of sore-stiff ointment, a bulging concentration up top drooping forward like a head. They were trapped in a magical field, looking panicked (the cheese) or annoyed (the sore-stiff ointment monster).

“What ARE those things?” Weiss asked.

“Elementals,” Glynda explained. “They're concentrations of magic and materials given life and rudimentary intelligence.” She looked at her. “You wouldn't happen to know just who made them, did you?”

“Are you sure this wasn't a freak accident because of the Eve?”

“Wild elementals are rarely this well-behaved, and more to the point, no one has ever reported seeing cheese or sore-stiff ointment varieties,” Glynda replied flatly. “Who made their base materials, the ointment and the cheese without the magical animation?”

“Weiss and Penny,” Weiss replied.

“Then one or the both of you kindly talk to what has become creations,” Glynda said.

Weiss paused. “Did we make these, the elementals?”

“One of you did, and I'd like to find out who, so we can safely disenchant them for study; elementals that have been violently dispersed tend not to leave much in the way of samples.”

“I'll do it,” Penny said. “Perhaps an excessive amount of my magical essence has leaked into them.”

Glynda nodded. <Let her in!> she called out to the watchers maintaining the field.

Penny stepped into the lab, the field closing behind her. The cheese was wary of her, but the sore-stiff ointment found her familiar enough not to raise a fuss. The others watched with interest and worry as she put her hands to the both of them, the energy from her fingers arcing into the two blobs.

<They're peaceful and wish no one harm, they're just scared and confused!> Penny said.

<Can you relay our questions?> Glynda asked.

<I'll attempt to!>

With pauses for Penny to interpret and clear up things, the conversation went like this:

<What are you?> Glynda asked.
<I am food!> Penny said, talking with a high-pitched, childish voice. <Be eaten, nourish others, yes!>

<I am healing,> Penny huffed in a deeper voice. <Life-blood for others, till last drop.>

<Who made you?> Glynda asked.

<Weaver did, Weaver did!> the cheese replied.

<Weaver did,> the ointment hummed.

<And who is your Weaver?>

The cheese frowned. <Weaver is Weaver!> Penny said for it.

<Weaver is Weaver,> the ointment hummed.

Glynda sighed. She turned to Weiss. “Either they're not that intelligent, or whoever made them was smart enough to cover their tracks.” She turned back to Penny. <Tell them we need to disenchant them.>

Penny nodded. <Yes, Elder Goodwitch.>

The cheese began to bounce about in a panic, the ointment rumbled and simmered ominously.

<No! Must be eaten! Must not rot! Must fulfill, fill tummy!> the cheese whined.

<Life-blood for others,> the ointment grumbled. <What Weaver wishes.>

<What Weaver wishes, what weaver wishes!> the cheese chirped.

Glynda frowned, and turned back to the others. “Well, the good news is, whoever made them didn't intend them to be anything other than what they are. The bad news is, we need to get rid of them somehow, because who knows how they think they're supposed to do that.”

“Should I try to talk to them?” Weiss asked.

Glynda nodded. “If you think it will help.”

“I'll go with her!” Ruby said, stepping up with her scythe.

“Then go,” Glynda said.

They went in.

Weiss frowned as the ointment and the cheese settled down once more. “Do I just… talk to them like I normally would?” she asked.

“I believe it would be better if you interface with them as I am doing,” Penny replied. “I am not speaking to them in words, so much as abstract concepts, emotions, and intentions, as they are to myself. Putting your hand on my bare chassis should be enough.”

Weiss looked at Ruby. She shrugged. “It's worth a shot!”

Weiss sighed, and did. The larger sections of rock that made up Penny's body were warm, constantly thrumming from the magic and the complex crystal arrays that were embedded inside. She watched
Penny's green magic curl into her fingers, meeting above her palm, before it dove into her skin.

“Weiss! Weiss!” the cheese said—not Penny's voice, but an actual, high-pitched voice like a small child's.

“Weiss,” the ointment said in a much more reserved tone.

Weiss let go in a panic. “O-Okay, did anyone else hear the elementals saying my name?!”

“I didn't hear anything,” Ruby said. “Penny, did you say anything?”

“No, I was too busy transmitting and translating the elementals' thoughts into something Weiss can more easily understand,” Penny replied.

Weiss frowned. “This is getting REALLY weird.”

“Do you wish for me to attempt to convince them to let them be disenchanted?” Penny asked.

The two elementals began to make a fuss again. Ruby readied her scythe. Weiss hurriedly placed her hand back on Penny's chassis.

“Stand down, relax,” Weiss thought.

The elementals did.

“Weiss?” the ointment asked.

“I need you two to go back to normal,” Weiss thought, imagining the two of them back in their containers, white cheese and ointment that didn't move nor have faces.

“My purpose goes unfulfilled,” the ointment rumbled. “I was created to heal others, to soothe their pains, was I not, Weiss?”

“Yes, but I need you back in your container, NOT moving nor intelligent.”

“But then how will I serve my purpose?”

Weiss' face heated up as she remembered the sore-stiff incident, Ruby massaging her stiff and aching muscles, the sensation of her hands releasing the tension in her muscles, the ointment on her fingers seeping into her skin.

“Understood,” the ointment rumbled. “You or Penny may disenchant me at your will, I will not fight.”

“Wait there.”

The ointment pulled away, and climbed back into its container, and did so, still.

“You too, cheese.”

“No!” the cheese began to bounce once more. “I'll rot, then I'll have to be thrown away, and then I'll be useless! All your hard work for nothing!”

“I'll put you in the fridge!”

“But then you might forget me, and I'll get all moldy!”
Weiss sighed. “What will it take to disenchant you?”

The cheese smiled and stopped. “No disenchanting needed! Just eat me!”

“Eat you?!”

“Yes! Eat me!”

Weiss frowned. “Wait, wait, wait—let me get this straight: you WANT me to eat you?”

“Yes! It's what you made me for!”

“I… I don't feel comfortable doing that…”

“Then have Ruby eat me! She looks hungry, anyway. Has she had lunch yet? I don't think she's had lunch yet.”

“Hey Weiss?” Ruby asked. “Can we hurry this up? I haven't had lunch yet, and I'm getting really hungry.”

“See~? Let her eat me!”

Weiss looked at Ruby, then at the cheese. “You seriously want to be eaten?”

“It's what you made me for!”

“And you're not going to poison her?”

The cheese looked horrified. “Why would I?”

Weiss bit her lip. “… You're still safe to eat, aren't you?”

“Little floor dirt, nothing too bad! Barn is new, clean!”

“Then wait in your container, and Ruby's going to eat you.”

The cheese bounced happily. “Yay! Invite the others, too, I am delicious!”

It disconnected from Penny's hand, bouncing all the way back into its container and waiting there.

Weiss let go. “Penny, disenchant the ointment; Ruby… you're going to have to eat the cheese.”

Penny did that, putting her hand into the ointment and letting out a pulse that turned it back into normal, unintelligent, and non-moving matter.

Ruby just stared at her.

“… It wants to be eaten.”

Ruby shrugged. “Well okay, if you say so!” she removed her mask, and her gloves, came over to the cheese. She took a piece out of it, and ate it. “Mmm! This is really good, Weiss!” she said as she chewed.

The cheese wiggled in happiness, even if a chunk was missing out of it.

:D
Weiss face fell in horror.

D:

She came over, grabbed more of the cheese, and ate it too.

“**Weiss!**” Qrow cried. “What the hell?!”

“If this thing ends up killing Ruby, I don’t want to have to live with the guilt!” Weiss cried as she chewed. “Plus, it’s actually *quite* delicious!”

“Then who’s going to end up getting roasted by Glynda over here?!” Qrow asked. “*Shit!* Outta the way, let me have some of that!”

Qrow made his way in as the watchers were beginning to dispel the field.

<What are they *doing*?!) Blake asked as she looked at the cheese, now a quarter eaten.

Penny told her.

Her eyes widened in alarm. <*Fuck you guys, you’re not pinning this on me!*> she said as she made her way to them, shoving past Ruby who was trying to get seconds.

<Hey!> Ruby cried.

“Save some for me!” Nora said as she headed over, leaving her hammer with Ren before she took off her mask and gloves.

The other watchers stared, while Ren and Penny walked over to Glynda.

She sighed heavily. <If this ends up actually killing them, the revival priority is Ruby, Weiss, Qrow, Nora, then Blake, alright?>

<Yes, Elder Goodwitch,> Penny and Ren replied.

<*Fuck* me, why does this thing taste so good?> Qrow cried.

<It has a *face*! I shouldn’t be enjoying this so much, but I am!*> Blake wailed as she went for her third handful.

<Come on, guys,> Ruby whined, <I’m the one that missed lunch here, *priorities*!>
“That was the most disturbing but delicious thing I have ever eaten in my entire life...” Weiss muttered as she and the others sat in a triage tent, their stomachs being scanned by Penny and other menders.

“Same, and I have eaten some weird shit in my life,” Qrow said. “I'm talking take out at the Dark Side of Candela!”

<Why was it so delicious...?> Blake murmured as she stared at her distended stomach. <Why...?>

“Man, we should have bought some salt-bread rolls first, those would have been awesome with it!” Ruby said.

“Ditto that!” Nora chimed in. “Hey Weiss, can you make some more of that cheese? I can pay you to make it! Well, actually, Ren will considering he handles our money!”

“I'm afraid Weiss will not be making anything until we get to the bottom of this mystery,” Glynda said as she came up. “Penny, will they have to be confined for further observation?”

“Not at all, ma'am!” Penny chirped. “My scans show that the magical essence animating the cheese has long dissipated into all of their systems, either transforming into nutrients or stimulating taste and pleasure receptors more strongly than regular cheese.

“Save for the animation, intelligence, and its strong desire to be eaten, it was no different than other elementally-enhanced foods!”

Glynda nodded. “Any potential side effects?”

“We'll have to wait and see to be sure, but honestly, we'd be very surprised if it's anything other than indigestion from having consumed too much.”

“Good. As soon as you and Weiss are able to, please proceed to the Heart of the Maker's Forge immediately. Further instructions will be waiting for you there.”

“Will any of us be coming with her, Elder Goodwitch?” Ruby asked.

Glynda shook her head. <You, Blake, and Qrow stay here. If you'll excuse me, I need to finish up the rest of this investigation...>

After she was engrossed with the supervising watchers and the weavers, Weiss discretely asked Ruby, “Why would she want to send me there?”

Ruby shrugged. “Don't know, but you're definitely going.”

As the watchers were dismissed and headed home and the weavers began to set up surveillance equipment and mana detectors in case more magical mishaps happened, Penny and Weiss went off through the Tubes and to the Maker's Forge.

Weiss had to stop and stare as she and Penny stepped out to the Heart.

Steam whistled and erupted from the geothermal vents that powered most everything. Water was constantly being piped in at near-freezing temperatures and being siphoned out lethally scalding hot.
The carved rock walls and millenia old machinery were cast in a warm, orange glow as sounds echoed all throughout the facility: metal being pounded, liquids bubbling, and the work songs of the makers sweating and labouring at the assembly lines.

Elementals abounded here, creatures of pure fire and lava torching huge batches of raw ores and other materials to be smelted; titans of rock and metal lumbering right on through the thermal vents, unharmed by the blazing hot steam; intelligent gusts of air with ribbons and other identifying markers floating within their centers whisking away the worst of the heat and guiding it into the turbines or the exhaust vents; and beings of water and ice walking around, putting out uncontrolled fires, cooling and freezing items for tempering or storage, or just giving cold comfort to tired workers, sapping the excess heat from their bodies, and chilling their beers or other drinks of choice.

Weiss noticed giant slabs of enchanted rock posted all over the area, numbers and words on them. <Days Since Last Accident,> she read, as the Actaeon was simple enough, and the logo of a calendar and a maker looking at where their arm used to be was very telling.

The number was currently at “0,” with an image of Weiss' barrel of moonshine, with written details.

If it was any comfort, the times for the other most recent incidents were “362 Days” “237 days,” and “5 Seconds.”

“So this is heavy industry for the Fae?” Weiss as they walked, raising her voice over the din.

“Exactly!” Penny replied. “This is where we produce most common consumables like ammunition, and refining raw materials for further processing. It is also the biggest research laboratory in the Bastion, where we constantly develop and improve our current technology and methods, to keep up with the constantly evolving flora and fauna of Avalon, and within this millennium, the much more rapid advancement humans are capable of.”

Weiss noticed some of the makers had prosthetic limbs similar to Penny's; instead of energy, however, most of them were connected by plants or miniature trees growing from where the originals had been severed, or had taken root in the rest of the remaining limb for extra support.

“Is this where you were made?” she asked.

“No,” Penny replied. “Aside from the fact that I was made outside of the Valley, the Fae are quite against automation and fully independent AIs, both for cultural and practical reasons. Though initially, golems might surpass the strength and skill of a Fae, over-time, the natural development and the unique symbiosis of the latter with Avalon will allow them to far surpass the capabilities of both our and you humans’ technology, not to mention other beneficial phenomena.”

“So where we you made, and who did, if Fae are so against golems?”

Penny smiled apologetically. “I am not allowed to answer either of those.” She got a far off look in her eyes. “What I can say is that my creators were very lonely, and wished to have more company than each other.”

“And the Council took you away from them…?”

For the first time since she met her, Penny looked angry. “Absolutely not!” she cried, her green eyes glowing ominously.

Weiss flinched.

Penny sheepishly looked away. “It was my own decision to leave...” she said, just loud enough to be
heard. “We had access to both the Codex and the Info-Grid, you see, and well… I wanted to see Avalon with my own optic sensors, than through the Trance or Honey Dreams.”

“And they let you?” Weiss asked carefully.

Penny nodded and smiled at her. “There were parents and grandparents before they created me. In one of their words, ’Well, kids gotta leave the nest some time, right? Might as well do it now, before she decides to run away and leave us heartbroken twice over.’”

They stopped as they reached their destination: the Thumper.

It was the Forge's internal transportation system of elevators and trains, because the plants that composed the Tubes couldn't survive at the Heart's extreme temperatures. Instead of water, it was powered by steam, pressure gathering up before the “shells” were sent rocketing off to their destinations, stopping using the power of incredibly strong magnets and prayers.

As they waited for a free shell—essentially a giant bullet that could fit Fae, humans, and equipment being transported—Weiss observed the life-size statue of Talos before the Thumper.

He was 7’4 feet tall and 6’8 without the gigantic horns curling back over his head. He was built like a mountain, broad-shoulders, massive limbs, rock-solid muscles bulging underneath his robes—the prototype for the maker's robes used in the present, with only very few modifications since. His entire body, horns included, was covered in belts, pouches, and straps for holding tools and materials: hammers, saws, surgical equipment, a protractor, scrolls with charcoal, brushes, and pots of paint, the ancestor of the present-day Fae-firearms, pots and pans, utensils, binoculars, rolled-up maps, nails, screws, pieces of scrap metal, wooden 2×4 planks, hanging crystal arrays and beads, incense burners, a massive tank filled with a liquid that had a tube leading to the side of his mouth with the words <BLACK MOSS TEA> inscribed on the side, and no shortage of what looked like squares of parchment with handwritten notes attached wherever there was space in-between.

And Weiss had to admit, that was one very impressive beard.

At the raised base of it were these:

A sign saying <In Case Of Emergency,> with holos of the current shift supervisors, and a tablet for calling them.

Another saying <In Case Of Catastrophic Emergency,> with a holo of Glynda over it, also with a tablet for calling her.

A third sign saying <In Case We're SCREWED,> with holos of evacuation routes, a stack of enchanted paper with templates for last wills and testaments, and an inscription of a prayer to Talos.

If Weiss had to guess, the first line was “Talos Help Us All” in Actaeon.

A free shell arrived, and they got into it. Unlike the Tubes, the safety measures for these were stasis field generators, magically freezing their physical bodies in time and space. Weiss had to wonder just what necessitated the use of these as the pressure began to build up above them.

**THOOM.**

Down they went, dozens of miles below the surface of Avalon.

The shells were featureless inside, except for a panel in front of them that displayed a peaceful beach with a calm sea stretching to the horizon, written words on it being spoken out loud over and over
again by a soothing, female voice:

<Don't panic.>

Weiss' could only scream internally, as she her unmoving, unblinking eyes stared at the scene.

Five seconds later, they stopped, dipping down a foot lower than intended, before the magnets got a good grip and gently shifted them back up.

Weiss gasped as she Penny were freed from stasis, shaking and woozy from the disconnect between the pandemonium in her brain, and her body still as calm as it was when the field was created. Eventually, she recovered, and the two of them stepped out to a laboratory, very different from the rest of the Forge.

For one thing, the floors were hardwood.

The interior looked like an aristocrats' mansion, a love letter to Victorian Era design with ornate crown moulding, simple but elegant patterns on the wallpaper, brass sconces on the walls, the furniture mostly made of wood with elegant gold accents, with Persian rugs, elaborate tapestries, and curtains with tassels completing the look. There were painted portraits and landscapes all over the walls, though for obvious reasons most of the subjects were Fae and the scenes were from the Valley.

Weiss looked at one of the few humans in the portraits, standing beside one of the former Keepers, the two of them clearly good friends. He had a goofy, confident grin, a top hat that had seen much better days, and a friendly aura that made you want to trust him implicitly, or at least know he was of absolutely no harm to anyone.

She was starting to wonder just who that could be, and why he was so familiar, when he stepped in.

He had changed since the portraits were painted, his body now mostly made of the same organic prosthesis as the makers back in the Forge, not to mention the four spider-like limbs growing out from his back, tools and claws at their ends. His face had turned wrinkled, his skin had mottled with age, and his eyes had long been replaced with glowing crystals like Penny's optics, but that smile, that aura, and that iconic top hat stayed.

“Greetings, and a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Weiss!” he trilled, tipping his hat to her. “Maker Abner Jordan Ignatius, at your service! Please, call me Maker Abner, or just Abner.”

Weiss blinked, her memories going way, way back to a shadow puppet play, the one that had caused Winter's lifelong phobia of the Keeper. “Wait, Abner? From the ‘Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove?’ The story was real...?!”

Abner chuckled. “Mostly! I'll explain later, we musn't dawdle! Penny, please do escort your friend to the Magical Resonance Chamber for testing! We must hurry, before it's too late!” he said, hurrying off around the corner.

“Right away, Maker Abner!” Penny said, reaching out for Weiss’ hand.

Weiss pulled it away. “I'm not going anywhere until you explain to me what the hell is going on!”

“We're testing you for the Gift—if you're a Weaver, in other words!” Abner called from further in. “Assuming your result is positive, we simply can't risk you being at the peak of your power on the Eve of the Ether whilst you have no knowledge nor control of your abilities!”
"What abilities?!" Weiss cried as she followed him and ran through a hallway littered with doors and more paintings. "Humans haven't been able to use magic without technology for centuries!" she added as she came to the end, into a massive room littered with all manner of strange equipment.

Abner looked back from where he was operating the terminal of giant chamber lined with carved crystals and metals. "Oh! You mean you weren't authorized to know?" he asked, before he shrugged. "Huh... well, I guess that's not too surprising, in retrospect!"

"Authorized to know what?!" Weiss snapped. "Someone tell me already!"

Penny caught up to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Weiss, would you like to sit down before I tell you?"

Weiss spun around and face her. "No. You tell me right here, right now."

Penny paused for a moment, looking uneasy and conflicted, before she said it:

"Weiss... you're a Fae/Human hybrid."
Weiss blinked. “What.”

“You're a Fae/Human hybrid.” Penny repeated. “Your vitae vine data has shown that you have unmistakably Fae genes in your DNA, which explains why your body and mind has been so quick to adapt to everything here in the Valley—part of it already was, before you even arrived here.”

Weiss stood there, staring at her.

Abner picked up a fancy wooden chair, and put it behind Weiss; Penny gently helped her into it.


“Err, well, since I’m assuming you’re asking for ‘How long’ your family has had Fae blood in it, ‘How didn’t anyone’ know, and ‘Who’ was the one hiding animal ears and tails, or an older relative that had them…” Abner said.

“For the first: we don’t know.

“You're several generations from your full-blooded Fae ancestor; your human traits were naturally more dominant and/or expressed themselves more blatantly than your Fae traits, like with Ruby's sister Yang; or you're very recent, but whoever did know was smart enough to modify your genetic code so you're essentially human.

“For the second: the trend of 'Designer Descendants' unintentionally gave inter-species liaisons the perfect, socially acceptable cover to erase the fact that, well, one parent wasn't entirely human, or human at all!”

“Then who was it?!” Weiss snapped. “Was it my mom? My father? My grandparents?!” she shot out of her seat and stormed up to Abner. “Tell me! And don't give me any of that 'Not authorized' bullshit, this is my family you're talking about!”

Abner raised his hands, all four of his spider-limbs following suit. “I would sincerely love to so we could begin to accurately map out your lineage, but unfortunately, I really don't know! The Council likes to keep very accurate records, but obviously there are things we can't keep track of, and individuals that don't fall through the cracks so much as they intentionally seek them out, and dive through without hesitation and without a trace.

“For all we know, your Fae ancestor could have been a Celestian, where the Council has no dominion—and the folks there are notoriously good at hiding every last trace that they even exist—or they were from one of the independent tribes in Sekhmet!

“In the latter case, I sincerely wish you luck trying to find them, if they haven't already been killed and eaten by scrabs, or any of the other horrors lurking in the sands.”

“So what CAN you tell me?!”

“That hybrids like you are not that rare,” Abner replied. “Certainly, we don't have many first generation Fae-Human hybrids running around in all of Avalon—Ruby, for example—but if I had to guess, 10% or less of the total population have some form of ancestry with the Fae.

“Aside from the fact that both of our societies have long been capable of removing most boundaries
for any two individuals to have biological children, later generations or almost entirely human hybrids like yourself and Yang have been shown to be able to reproduce with humans no problem, and vice-versa for those that were born with ears and tails like Ruby.”

“Shouldn't have this have shown up somewhere?” Weiss asked. “You can buy mods off the Info-Grid to change your biological gender AND be capable of having children AND make them however you want them!

“It's practically one of the best sellers!”

“It should have indeed!” Abner said. “But, you know: politics! Humans and Fae society aren't exactly strangers to gigantic cover-ups, modification, and even outright erasure of facts, history, and new discoveries that would prove to be… quite disruptive to the peaceful order of things!

“And on a less ominous note: accidents, natural disasters, and mistakes DO happen, and regularly.”

Weiss glared at him, her hands balled into fists. “So I'll probably never know anything and it’s going to stay a huge mystery, is that what you're saying?!”

Abner thought about it. “… Pretty much, yes!”

Weiss screamed in frustration, before she turned to Penny, her expression not angry, but hurt. “You knew…? All this time, you knew…”

Penny frowned, and nodded her head sadly. “For what it's worth, I really did want to tell you, but--”

“The Council didn't want me to know, until I was down here deep underground, with a man that they enslaved 500 years ago because he was dumb enough to fall for the Keeper's tricks, right?!” Weiss snapped. “What are you going to do if I say 'No,' huh?! Keep me down here and just tell Ruby there was a horrible accident in the Maker's Forge which is why I'm never coming back?!”

“So sorry for interrupting, but Keeper Ilaya didn't trick me into slavery!” Abner said. “That was just the story we propagated so my debtors wouldn't come looking for me anymore, alongside the general goal of keeping us humans out of the Valley.”

Weiss turned around. “Then please, enlighten me with the truth, because I'm pretty sick of all these 'We weren't exactly lying' omissions of it!” she said as she angrily sat back down on the chair.

“Might I convince you to get tested for magical capabilities first?” Abner said, gesturing a hand towards the chamber. “You'll need to be fully conscious for the whole 10 minutes. Don't worry, it won't hurt, though the deliberate stimulation of your magical resonators, should you have them, might tingle.”

“Depends: what happens if I test positive?”

“Well, depending on your elemental alignment, you'll be able to throw fire balls, shoot electricity from your fingertips, punch with the power of an earthquake, or freeze things with a wave of your hand, possibly whilst singing a catchy tune about your powers!” Abner chuckled.

Weiss and Penny stared at him blankly.

“Sorry, Old World holos! There's only so many projects I can busy myself with... anyway, shall we?”

“Can it help me get answers from the Council?” Weiss asked.
“I'd be surprised if didn’t! Rogue Weavers are one of the greatest threats to Fae society, alongside Soul Eaters, and human beings in general.”

Weiss got up. “Then let's do this,” she said as she stepped into the chamber.

“Splendid!” Abner said. “Now, before I begin the experiment, I must warn you that you will begin to float in mid-air, and the constant bombardment of low-intensity magic waves will likely cause a constant but harmless thrumming in your chest, alongside the aforementioned tingling.”

“I've sat through the entirety of my father's shareholders’ balls speeches looking interested for the holos,” Weiss said as she stepped in. “Trust me, I've had worse,”

“Then let the testing begin!” Abner said, dramatically raising his hand, and pushing the big, round “Start” button with his index finger.

The crystals around Weiss began glow as they charged with magic and faded as they released it, the waves being absorbed or reflected by the metals. Her feet lifted up a few inches from the floor, her hair lazily floated around her head, her fingers and toes tingled, and her chest was being hit by a soft, rhythmic pounding.

It was like she was in the middle of an anti-gravity chamber that had static electricity generators and subwoofers blasting at the lowest settings possible.

“You alright in there?” Abner asked as he monitored the various readouts.

“I'm fine, just… tingly.” Weiss said.

Abner chuckled. “Good, good, that's a wonderful sign! Now, shall I start with the True Tale of the Keeper of the Grove? Well, my section of it, anyway; can't speak for Guillermo, seeing as he's dead, and Comtessa was FAR before I was even born!”

“Sure,” Weiss replied. “What really happened…?”

“‘Well, the part about me being potentially one of Lumania's greatest minds was certainly true. ‘Aside from the fact that my parents were rather fond of genetic engineering to create the smartest, most charming, and most athletically gifted progeny possible, my father was quite rich and born of a noble family, and my other father was also one of the latest candidates for secretary to Steward Reese—the one who was assigned to Lumania at the time. ‘Unfortunately, wealth, prestige, and luxury tend to make people complacent, and my family quickly fell to ruin, overtaken by both daring new upstarts in business and academe, and a number of sordid scandals I won't bother you with the details of. ‘I was still in utero when they ran out of funds or other means to continue my gene therapy, currently in the middle of vastly increasing my intellectual capacity and energy levels. The doctors said the pregnancy could continue without any significant problems, and they didn't need to go deep into debt to either reverse the procedures or complete them, so they busied themselves with making as comfortable a life as they could with whatever was left, along with something for my surrogate mother. ‘What’s the worst that could happen,’ they thought? ‘As it turns out: hypomania and academic excellence, marred by a lifetime of impulse control
problems!

“Think days of intense work, pushing the boundaries of science and our understanding of reality, stupefying the public and impressing the most advanced minds at the time, followed by weeks of wild daredevil stunts, poorly thought out business ventures, illicit sexual escapades, gambling, and numerous terrible decisions made in the heat of the moment, such as an incident involving a prostitute with an artificial leg, a lamp post, and an umbrella.

“My goodness, life before my governor was hell: procrastination, distraction, and guilt at what I could have been doing with my time, energy, and skill than researching everything there was about Joe Pesci, which lead to even more procrastination, distraction, and guilt…

“It was a vicious cycle, is what I’m saying.

“And it didn’t really help that I decided to go against dear daddies’ advice and slowly build up wealth I could safely call my own, and instead borrowed extensively, on the promise that I’d get my metaphorical shit together long enough to start a venture that would pay it back several fold in the coming years.”

Abner shuddered. “Never doubt the saying that a loan from a Valentinian is for life.

“Once it began to look like I was going to be unable to show anything of note, they began to hound me, day and night. Soon enough, they didn’t even want the money any more, they just wanted to get their hands on me, because apparently my uncanny ability to avoid them was starting to humiliate their organization, put cracks in their reputation as people you do not trifle with lest you pay the inevitable consequences, and make people begin to doubt their claim that they would find you and get you, wherever you were.

“And believe me, after they chased me out of Lumania, they found me, every single time.

“Be it the Nexus…”

Valentian Debt Collectors burst into a temple for the Holy Shepherd. The congregation and the custodian preaching at the time did not appreciate the intrusion, but paid them little heed soon enough. Out of respect, the uniformed goons acted discretely, apologizing as they methodically swept the pews, looked for opportunities to peek into the rooms on the sides, whispering into their comm-crystals than shouting to each other.

A line of hooded shipmates walked down the aisle, on their way out the doors. A goon passing by noticed one of them seemed a little too engrossed in his copy of Captain Piper's Logs, holding the hardbound book right up to his face.

She took a risk, pulled it down.

She and Abner made eye contact.

“Well praise be to Piper,” she said, grinning evilly.

WHAM!

Abner smacked her upside the head with two-inch thick tome, stunning her long enough for him to run deeper into the temple.

The goons shouted and tore through the pews, members of the congregation screaming and fleeing while the poor custodian had to abandon ship as Abner threw the book at the stained glass window
behind her, shattering part of it into pieces.

He launched off the altar and through where Steward Valentino’s crotch used to be, the goons shattering the rest of the window as they tried to follow him out the same way, with much less grace.

“… Sekhmet...”

Debt collectors in weather-appropriate garb roamed the dunes on a sand-surfer, cloth and goggles around their heads to protect them from the howling winds. The scout on the bow saw a small, inconspicuous stone building nearly buried underneath a mound, and raised their hand.

The leader of the group called for the pilot to stop.

They landed, and made their way inside the seclusion.

The hermits inside paid them little mind, engrossed in their meditation or their chores. The goons began to explore the interior, opening up clay pots, opening doors and looking in, peering past beards and overgrown hair, trying to look for a familiar face.

One of them stopped before a statue of a man down on one knee, his face bowed as he offered a massive bowl of fruit to a relief of the infamous Red Queen of Sekhmet, the inspiration for the Queensguard.

He was about to walk on by, before he saw the “statue” shudder, trying to hold back a sneeze. He leaned down, peered into the face still resolutely pointed downwards, eyes closed.

“Over here!” the goon called out, and soon the five-person crew were standing in a semi-circle around Abner, guns and clubs out, watching him shake and sweat, relishing the moment before they moved in for the kill.

Abner's arms gave way, the bowl fell to the floor, the offerings rolling before the guard's feet.

They paid it no heed, until one of them noticed a “pomegranate” beeping.

Boom.

The guards regained their sight and hearing just before Abner ran away with their sandskiff, pilot included as had enough Urochs and valuables to pay her for the other half of the trip.

“… And then there was that kerfuffle in Solaris!”

Abner screamed at the top of his lungs as he stood at the helm of a tiny sky-skiff.

Just behind him, Black Cross, Jade Empire, and Jahiliyyah forces shot each other out of the air, damaged and sparking ships crashing into buildings, the streets, and the Endless Sea below with reinforcements constantly coming in to replace them, fighting to the death for the massive bounty on Abner's head and the lifetime of good favour it would afford them with Valentino and all its riches.

The Justices on the ground, the rooftops, and the Halls debated stepping in, or just letting them do their work for them.

“There was a brief stint of hiding out in the independent communities trying to make it outside of the city states, but I am a man of many creature comforts, and I simply couldn't make it as a simple farmer, or a wandering trader...”

“Mama NO!” a young woman cried as a pantsless Abner fled for the hills as her mother tried to
shoot him with a hunting rifle.

“… Well, that, and there are no secrets in such small communities.

“So I decided to hide where they least expected me to: Valentino itself. Which worked out surprisingly well, actually! I lasted there for all of two years, since there’s so many other fugitives, quasi-legal enterprises, and bad debts that need attention on a regular basis, their infamous tunnel vision and single-minded determination worked to their detriment.

“… Unfortunately, those same problems that got me into such deep debt in the first place hadn’t disappeared, and they found me soon enough—fittingly enough, after I flirted with an off-duty collector at a bar.

“To be fair, I REALLY should have been more suspicious when she said she recognized me from somewhere.

“I must confess: I didn't assemble a last ditch expedition into the Valley, to attempt to find something to bring back and pay off my debts. Even my charms have limits, and there's only so many bridges you can burn before you're just surrounded by water you can't cross, and your pursuers all have motorboats.

“For better or worse, the Valentinian Debt Collection Agency had made a serious cost-benefit analysis, and it'd be best for their reputation and their bottom line if I just happened to completely, officially disappear off the face of the realm or die in some mysterious way of my own hand, so they wouldn't have to admit that they only found me by pure happenstance, and they could begin moving on from the giant stain in their reputation that I had become.

“It would have been the end of me, if they hadn't insisted on 'Doing it the right way,' by digging a shallow grave to throw my soon-to-be lifeless body in. And as you know, the bedrock only begins to stop once you're deep in the Valley proper…

“… And that's when Ily—err, Keeper Ilaya—found us.”
“Fuckin' hell, can you dig any slower?!” the Boss of the Valentinian goons complained.

“This'd go a lot faster if someone didn’t pull off that shit with the dirt-blasters!” replied one of the goons digging with shovels.

“In my defense, it did significantly cut our travel time past that mountain!” Abner said as he stood with his hands and ankles shackled together. “Why take the long way 'round when you can just send your carriage straight through it, right?”

All five of the goons glared at Abner, trigger fingers itching, knuckles turning white from how tightly they were gripping their shovels.

“… I'll just be quiet now…” Abner muttered.

“You do that…” spat the other goon on shallow grave duty.

All was quiet for a while save for the sounds of digging and cursing.

“Aright, that's deep enough!” said the Boss. “Get outta there, grab your guns, and let's all shoot this motherfucker dead— and I want ALL those clips on empty, and a grenade on his face when we're done, in case he's wearin' bulletproof clothes again!”

“Do we have to shoot him, Boss?” asked one of the goons climbing out the hole.

“What, you want to give ‘im a chance to pull off more of that Houdini shit on us?!” the Boss barked.

“Nah, I was wondering if we couldn't just beat the ever loving shit out of him till he stops moving,” the goon replied. “Got a LOT of stress built up from the trip here, and I want to let it all out before we all head home.”

One of the other goons snorted. “He not help you enough when you thought we were all asleep?”

“Fuck off!”

“All of youse, shut up!” the Boss cried. “We shoot him, toss some dirt over ‘im, then we get the fuck outta here, all accordin' plan!”

“What, you afraid the Keeper's gonna get us?” one of them teased.

“Never thought you'd be scared of fairy tales, Boss,” another hummed.

“Keeper, wild animals, whatever the fuck is killing and eating everyone that comes here, I don't want to meet ‘em, capisce? Now get your guns before my trigger finger 'slips!'”

“Alright, alright!” “We're going, we're going!”

Soon, all five of them were standing in front of Abner, his feet right on the edge of his grave, the barrels of their guns point-blank on his chest.

“Anyone have any last words before we ice this fucker?”

“T'd just like to--” Abner started.
“Anyone other than this fucker have any last words before we ice ‘im?”

“Yes,” said a new voice. “Get out of the Valley before I have to dig graves for ALL of you.”

The goons spun around, and came face to face with the Keeper.

“I had the good fortune of being knocked into my grave; ironically, it ended up saving my life as it was just deep enough for me to avoid all the bullets that went flying around, or being caught in Ilaya's scythe swings, and also gave me time to finally pull out the lock pick I'd fashioned from the dirt-blasters.

“It was a miniature seismic-wave generator that could easily liquify the anchors for my bindings, you see.”

“You made that on a bare-bones trip to the Valley, with five armed Valentinian Debt Collectors who wanted you dead riding with you and watching over you at all times?” Weiss asked.

Abner nodded. “The key is to feign stupidity; people will be wary of a smart man, but quickly grow tired of an idiot. And sometimes, actual stupidity works in your favour, when it provides you with a new angle you hadn't seen before, or a window of opportunity.

“Anyway, I managed to break my cuffs, and waited for the sounds of fighting to stop. After that, I attempted to climb out, after which a hand reached in to help pull me out. I had assumed that the Keeper had left, and that one of the goons had survived and had made the rational choice of keeping me alive to better our chances of survival…

“… Only it wasn't one of them, it was Ilaya.”

Abner stared up at the face of fear itself, her crimson eyes glowing in the darkness, his hand wrapped tightly around hers, frozen like the rest of his body.

“You okay?” Ilaya asked.

Abner screamed, his free hand pulling out the lock pick, and blasting Ilaya's wrist with it. She yelped, unharmed but surprised, he took the opportunity to use the last of the pick’s battery to dig handholds for himself.

“STOP!” Ilaya cried as he scrambled out and ran into the woods.

Abner replied by screaming even louder.

“SERIOUSLY, STOP! YOU'RE GOING TO RUN OFF A--”

Abner wailed and flailed his limbs in the air as the ground beneath his feet suddenly disappeared.

“… Cliff…!” Ilaya finished too late.

His screaming continued for a few more seconds.

Thud.

Ilaya ran up to the edge of the cliff with the help of her mask’s night vision. “Are you still alive down there...?” she yelled. “Groan once for 'Yes,' and—uh, I guess I'll just climb down and look for you! Wait right there!”
At that, Abner's head shot up from the ground. The canopy was thinner here, the moonlight illuminating the little grove of plants he had found himself in. He grabbed one of the wild tubers by the stalk, and pulled it up as food for later.

He stopped as he realized that it had a face.

:o

Abner blinked.

D:

The elemental started letting out a high-pitched, *ear-drum bursting* wail. Abner dropped it and clapped his hands over his ears, running through the grove as the rest of them woke up and joined in the bone-chilling pandemonium.

“I ran until the screams of the elementals stopped ringing in my ears, at least, and found myself in an ironbark forest. The Fae do in fact harvest them from the wild, considering that it's difficult to replicate the conditions that allow the quality they desire for their weapons and other projects. Aside from that, they only ever grow so strong thanks to the constant love and attention of their symbiotic caretakers:

“Steel Spiders.”

Abner stopped for breath, put his hand against a tree for support. He didn't notice that he had cut himself on the bark until he felt something other than sweat dripping down his palms. He quickly pulled it away, wrapped his wounds with some bandages he always had stashed somewhere on his body, before he took in his new surroundings.

The moonlight shined down on the ironbark trees, massive, angular titans with branches that shot out like metal spikes, twisting and turning like a set for a horror movie. All that was really missing were the bodies and viscera hanging from them.

Abner nervously made his way through a spacious gap in the trees.

He hadn't noticed the steel-silk web until his palm had already been caught in it.

*Twang.*

Abner paused as he heard the strand vibrate, letting out a musical sound like an instrument's string being plucked. He turned his head to the noise, watching it vibrate an attached strand, and another, and another, making an admittedly lovely chime.

Then he saw some of the ironbark “branches” start moving, eight eyes opening and glowing in the dark.

Abner tried to pull his hand from the web, but it was stuck, and the strand held strong.

The music became louder. More and more of the webs began to resonate, alerting the other steel spiders that there was prey.

Abner bit back a yelp and began to walk backwards, trying to see how far the strand could stretch until it broke. He stopped as soon as he felt *several* sticky somethings attach to his back. His teeth began to draw blood as he tried to jump forward, and accidentally got his foot caught in a low-hanging web.
The chiming had become a full on melody now, echoing all throughout the grove. Even more of the spiders woke up, excited, for it seemed like there was even MORE prey that had gotten caught in their webs.

Abner desperately, violently jerked his limbs and staggered around, trying to free himself from the webs, only succeeding in getting himself even more tangled until he could not move an inch. The music he was making would have actually been quite pleasant to the ear, had it not also been the dinner bell for the steel spiders, and the soundtrack to his doom.

Abner saw one of them begin to crawl down the ironbark tree closest to him.

His two eyes met the spider's eight, saw his reflection in those glimmering orbs, its giant fangs curl and twist upwards.

:3

Abner screamed.

“… Would steel spiders happen to be why Fae invented the word for 'BIG FUCKING SPIDER, RUN!'?” Weiss asked.

“Oh, goodness no! Those are MUCH larger than the steel spiders could ever be and bounds more dangerous.”

“… How large are we talking about?”

“Oh, somewhere between half the size of a building such as the Plushie Palace, to little larger than it.”

“… Do these happen to live in the Valley?”

“Oh no, they live in the—ow, OW, OW—sorry about that, seems my thought process got too fast for my governor and it had to pull the emergency brake. Shall I resume the story?”

“Can we skip to after Ilaya rescues you?”

“Can we not? It's quite a daring, musical escape; the melody she made as she cut the webs and sometimes even plucked them intentionally to fool the spiders is permanently stuck in my head, both for being so catchy, and because this was how I got my crippling fear of steel spiders and ironbark groves!”

“I think I'll pass, thank you...”

“Oh, alright... anyway, after Ilaya performed her daring rescue, she took me far away from the grove and to a stream so she could refill her canteen—chasing after someone like me is thirsty work. Because the grand crescendo of the rescue, where she stunned the entire grove of spiders with a sound not unlike an especially powerful electric guitar riff, I had become temporarily deaf, and couldn't understand a word of what she was saying.

“She tried her best, but unfortunately, Keepers are better at killing the horrors of the Valley than they are at breaking language barriers...”

Abner stared at the Keeper, frozen in fear, dumbly nodding his head as she made cryptic signs with her hands, no doubt what horrible, terrible things she was going to do to him if he misbehaved.
She had taken off her mask, revealing a surprisingly human and friendly face, nothing even remotely close to what they rumoured to lay underneath that skeletal visage, but he knew all too well the disconnect between friendly appearances and what sort of person lay underneath.

Satisfied that Abner understood she wasn't going to kill him, that there were going to be more horrible things that would actually try to kill him if he got out of her sight, and that she was just going to get a drink of water, Ilaya turned around and pulled out her canteen from inside her cloak.

She was taking a long drink of water when she heard a splash.

She spat it all out as she noticed that Abner wasn't where she left him any more.

“I'm quite an excellent swimmer, as it was a regular part of my cardio exercises, and a lot of my more daring and close escapes have been made through watery routes—you'd be surprised at how many people close off the streets first, and sometimes never bother to check the sewers or the canals, Valentino being the only exception.

“I could have easily escaped Ilaya, if not for the carnivorous fish that lived in that river who did NOT appreciate my presence."

Ilaya ran along the bank, her mask back on her face, trying to find Abner's aura—a difficult task as the magic in the water was gumming up the sensors.

Bubbles rose up to the surface—as they popped, Ilaya could hear the staggered bits and pieces of a now familiar scream.

She dove into the water.

Splash!

Moments later, pieces of dead fish floated up to the surface. Ilaya broke through soon after, gasping for breath and hauling Abner over her shoulder. She dug her scythe into the roots of a tree growing over the water, and pulled them back up to dry land.

She laid Abner on his rear, held him up by his shoulders. “You okay?” she asked.

Abner threw up all over her.

“… Probably should have seen that coming!”

“You were extremely lucky that Penny's creators had the foresight to build a water filtration unit for her; the microbes and elements in the Valley's water are vicious little buggers if you aren't adapted, and the ones in magic-enriched water like that river more so.

“I was stuck in the hospital for weeks! I should have died from a mixture of dehydration and water-borne illnesses, but Ilaya, kindhearted soul that she was, managed to convince the Council it'd be better to try and keep me alive than euthanize me.

“And this was no mean feat: up to that point, no one knew anything about me other than the fact that a Valentinian organization thought it was necessary to bring me all the way here to execute, and it wouldn't have been too far of a stretch to assume that I was a gigantic problem they wanted gone for good reason.

“It didn't help that caring for me was difficult, with at least two menders on me at all times and hourly visits from a water weaver trying to detoxify my body and acclimate it to the Valley.
“And oh sweet Shepherd, the buckets. There were so many buckets…!

“About the only thing that kept me going was that Ilaya always came by to try and cheer me up, and as I'd later find out, act as a subtle means to guard against someone euthanizing me under the Council’s noses.

“This was before they installed my governor, and I was quite loopy from the water, the sickness, and the trauma, you see.

“Eventually I recovered, and together with Ilaya, made my case for the Council. I was a controversial issue ever since she returned from patrol early with me unconscious over her shoulder, and the division only grew with how expensive my treatment was, and the opportunities lost to both the Valley and the Fae that took care of me.

“I managed to convey to them that I was a highly skilled inventor, and with Ilaya's help to keep me on track, I helped create the Tubes. Funny how it was inspired by my noticing how fast the current was taking me and the distance it was helping me put between me and the aquatic predators trying to kill and/or eat me, and my complaining about how long it used to take to get to and from Keeper's Hollow to the rest of the Bastion—even if all that rowing did wonders for my arms!

“That was where I helped build the very first Tube station, by the way, with the maiden voyage being to the Tree of Life, the second station.

“As I had proven myself more than worth everything they had already invested in me, I voluntarily had a governor-chronicle installed to help tame my worst impulses, took a vow to maintain the Fae's secrecy, and I've been living the good life here in the Valley since.

“And that, Weiss, is the True Tale of the Keeper of the Grove!

“… Well, my section, at least.”
“So the part about the Keeper leading you through the Valley and tempting you...?” Weiss asked.

“All poppycock!” Abner replied. “If Ily had even attempted to offer me seeds from the Valley, there would have been serious consequences for the both of us, and I guarantee you I wouldn’t be coming back to human settlements with them, if they didn’t imprison or kill me first.”

“And the ending, where you were tricked into drinking cursed water...?”

“Artistic license. The river was in fact enchanted, but it’s just a base component for life-water, mana-water, and some forms of elemental weaving.”

“And the eternal slavery?”

Abner smiled. “Well, we had to ensure that my debtors wouldn’t feel the need to go looking for a corpse or any traces of their ill-fated crew, would they? And besides, what better way to scare off Valentinians than with the one thing they fear: "Uncompensated labour!"

“The eternal life part was actually spread much later, seeded into other rumours of the Keeper after the original account had been around for so long it had mutated all on its own. It was Ilaya’s idea, after I accepted the Council’s offer of vastly extending my own life to continue my work, if at the cost of never leaving the Valley ever again, and being the organoid—my term for organic cyborgs like myself—you see before you now.”

“And you accepted?”

Abner chuckled. “Why wouldn’t I have? I was free from all of my debts, had all the equipment and funding I could ever want or need plus a constant supply of fascinating projects to occupy myself with, and a means of controlling my worst impulses and keeping me on track.

“Sweet Shepherd, if anyone over at the human territories ever invents something like these governors, they would become an overnight trillionaire! Though I shudder to think at what would happen to Avalon when you have a human workforce that suddenly no longer suffers from lost productivity due to distraction...”

Abner’s face fell. “About the only real con was that I would, and did, outlive Ilaya.”

“The two of you were close?”

Abner smiled bitterly. “She was my best friend, before or after the Valley. I’ve never met a kinder soul, someone who was willing to put up with so much from me because they knew that for all my problems, I was going to be more than worth all the effort—both to herself, as a companion for life, and for the rest of society, as you can experience for yourself whenever you ride the Tubes.”

He looked off into the distance. “Though, to be fair, it’s not like she was spoiled for choice with friends...”

“I suppose living in Keeper’s Hollow made it difficult.” Weiss said. “Why do they live so far away...?”
“Keepers attract trouble like super-powered magnets, and their living far away from the rest of the Bastion reduces the collateral damage when the metaphorical 'shit goes down.’” Abner said. “Well, that other reasons I’m afraid my governor is telling me I’m not allowed to tell you.”

Weiss grumbled under her breath.

“Stand by! The test is almost about to finish.”

Soon enough, the machine powered down completely, and Weiss feet went back down to the ground. “Well?” she asked as she stepped out.

Abner was hard at work at the terminal. “Just one moment to double-check the results and… congratulations, Weiss, you are a Weaver, attuned to Elemental Water, with astoundingly high power levels, and incredible potential for further growth beside!

“I knew Ruby saw something in you!”

Weiss nodded. “Should I be feeling anything?” she said as she looked at her hand and turned it over. “Because I don’t feel any different from before I stepped in.”

Abner chuckled. “That’s because we haven’t given you a focus yet! Remember the runeblade you wielded in your Honey Dream with the others? The Rune Ranger section, at least.”

Weiss nodded. “Yeah, it felt… weird in my hand. Good weird.”

“Even more evidence you’re a Weaver, this test just confirmed it.” Abner said as he shut down the chamber. “Penny, take Weiss along to the Raucous Room, while I take your potential focus out of storage; if the results are going to be even half as I hypothesize they will be, I want you in a facility specifically meant to be completely, utterly destroyed without consequence.”

“Yes, Maker Abner,” Penny said. She didn't reach out for Weiss and gestured out the testing room, and kept a noticeable distance from Weiss as they went off to the hallways once more.

They walked in awkward silence for a while.

“Hey…” Weiss said. “Sorry about earlier, when I snapped at you… that was really wrong of me.”

Penny smiled. “Apology accepted. I understand that given everything you’ve just learned, the temptation to ‘shoot the messenger’ is very strong indeed!”

Weiss nodded. “Why does the Council keep so many secrets?”

“Controlling the flow of information is key to maintaining the peace and authority of the settlements; an uninformed public tends to be a docile one, especially when there is an ever present and very real threat from outside forces occupying their immediate thoughts.”

“Isn’t that facism?”

“It is, and is one of the largest reasons for the separatist movements, such as the Celestians.”

“Democracy lose the popular vote?” Weiss joked.

Penny nodded. “There have been attempts to change the system, from both regular citizens, members of the Council, and local leaders, but it’s extremely difficult to do so given the fact that all of our vital, life-supporting technology and infrastructure rely heavily on pre-existing construction dating back to the Enkindling Era, and the Fae's complex symbiotic relationship with their environment
beside.

“All successful Fae mass migrations and separations from the original settlements have relied heavily on truly exceptional circumstances—one of which is you humans arriving here in Avalon.”

Weiss nodded as they entered a giant basement, the walls, floors, and ceilings a pale brown, made of square tiles arranged in a neat grid. “I guess aliens landing and making themselves home will throw the natives for a loop...” she muttered.

“The entirety of Avalon, actually!” Abner cried as he met them, a long, ornate box in his hands. “The realm was very different before we humans arrived. Now, I’m sure you’re growing quite tired of all the history lessons, and are eager to test your powers, but just a few things to get out of the way first:

“One, this is not a brand new weapon, and is actually very, very, very ancient. I’m afraid whoever owned it before you has been permanently lost to time.”

“Two, Fae Ancestral Weapons, while very powerful from the essences absorbed from their previous owners and their battles, are also EXTREMELY picky about who owns them next. From what Elder Goodwitch tells me, so far this one has never had a successor, so the likelihood of it rejecting you is very high.”

“And three, alongside that power also tends to come memories, knowledge, and instincts, which while normally beneficial in that it allows even total beginners to become formidable fighters in record time, it sometimes comes with detrimental side effects to mental health, so please, please tell me if you suddenly have intense moments of déjà vu, intimate memories of events that happened long before you were even born, and especially if you’re referring to people by their ancestor’s names.

“I am obliged to mention, the effect is especially pronounced with Weaver’s weapons such as this.

Abner put his hand on the lid. “And now, without further ado, I present to you... "Myrtenaster!"

The runeblade inside the velvet cushions looked like an Old World Relic, an ornate rapier that had been later modified with an essence revolver, much like the one she had wielded in the honey dream. Inscribed on the hilt was the weapon’s name in German.

“Well, go on now! Take it!” Abner said. “Don’t worry: if it rejects you, I can manufacture you a new runeblade within the hour, among other alternatives.”

Weiss slowly put her hand over it. Even though the cylinder had been empty of mediums for centuries, she could feel the power radiating from it. She wrapped her fingers around the handle.

Immediately, magic surged from Weiss’ hand and into the sword, the blade glowing a pale blue like ice. She pulled out of the box, held it up and admired the glow. She’d never quite seen anything so beautiful...

“Ha-ha!” Abner cried. “I knew my suspicion was correct!”

Penny clapped her hands. “Congratulations on being chosen, Weiss! Being named the successor of an Ancestral Weapon is a--”

They all stopped as even more power surged into the weapon, the glow growing ominous, water-like
tendrils now spiraling around the blade and meeting up at the top as a bubble of energy. Weiss thought she really should let go, but couldn’t, like her fingers were frozen.

Beat.

Abner screamed as he dove well out of the way, Penny reached out and grabbed her arm, wrestling the point of her blade away from them.

A beam of concentrated magic shot out moments after, cutting a straight line across the ceiling and the far-wall.

Weiss wrenched her hand free of her sword, her whole body shaking.

Myrtenaster clattered to the floor.

The damaged panels fell off, cleanly cut apart where the laser had split them, new ones teleported in shortly after.

Penny let go of her arm, and held her steady by her shoulders. “Detecting severely elevated vital signs, brain activity, and extremely high magical levels! Are you okay, Weiss?!”

“HOLY SHIT, THAT WAS AWESOME!” Weiss screamed, grinning from ear to ear, her eyes wild.

Abner frowned. “Oh dear, here comes the power high!” he said as he stood back up.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take a break first…?” Penny asked, smiling nervously.

“HELL NO!” Weiss replied, now looking dangerously pale. “Give me my sword back! Gimme! Gimme!”

Penny looked at Abner.


<Yes, Maker Abner,> Penny replied.

She let go of Weiss with one hand, the other crackling with magic.

“Sorry, Weiss,” she said, before she put her hand to her chest, and everything went dark.

Weiss came to on the floor of the Raucous Room, lying on her back with Penny kneeling over her and Myrtenaster laying on her other side.

“Are you alright, Weiss?” Penny asked as she helped her up to a sitting position.

“I feel… really weirdly good, actually!” Weiss muttered. “What happened?”

“You were suffering from an overload of internal magical energy, and I had to shock you unconscious.”

“So sorry about that!” Abner said, his voice booming from the PA system. “For better or worse, with unstable Weavers, it’s safer for everyone involved if you knock them out first, and calm them down later.”
“Why?” Weiss asked. “What would have happened if you didn’t?”

“You would have exploded,” Penny replied.

Weiss blinked. ‘Exploded’…?

“The official term is ‘Catastrophic Involuntary Discharge,’ where like an overloaded mana collector, the excess energy is unable to be contained, and is released into the immediate environment as a result—oftentimes violently.”

“Holy shit…” Weiss whispered. “Is it wrong that I still want to use my powers more?”

“Not at all!” Penny said. “This is actually quite healthy, that you feel the need to discharge your excess mana reserves. The only real issue here is that you do it safely, and in amounts that don’t overwhelm you like earlier.”

“How do I do that?”

“In the long-term, regular weaver training, continuing your farming, and making processed goods from them will help tremendously,” Penny replied. “Without a doubt, your body unconsciously leaking excess magic is what caused your moonshine to be so potent, and your creations to turn into elementals—both the most recent ones, and the goo monster back at the Job Gauntlet.”

Golems began to warp in around her. They were all simpler and more inhuman than Penny, designed like medieval knights in full plate armour, Fae-made weapons in their hands. All of them of them were the size of an adult human, except for a giant titan four times as large as them with an executioner’s blade to match.

“And in the short-term, you can help me get some valuable data about you and your powers by destroying everything you see around you—preferably with your magic,” Abner finished.

Weiss looked around and smiled as the Knight Golems came to life, standing at attention with their weapons at rest.

Penny picked up Myrtenaster, then held it out to her with upturned palms.

Weiss took it. Now that she knew what was coming, she had much better control over her flow of magic, and as a plus, the feeling of it amplifying it several times over still felt amazing.

“Stay back, Penny,” she said as she stepped forward, the first of the knights mirroring her. “This is going to get messy.”

Penny curtsied and giggled. “As you wish, ‘mistress~’” she said playfully, before she ran to the side, into a bunker Abner had just warped in.

One of the knights stepped forward, a swordsman.

Weiss curtsied, it bowed, and they raised their weapons.

The knight charge, both hands on its blade.

Weiss readied herself to meet it with her rapier, before she felt Myrtenaster pulse in her hand, images, wordless ideas and suggestions echo in her head.

She smiled, and stabbed the sword into the ground.
A sheet of ice came rocketing out, catching the swordsman unaware. It slipped and fell, Weiss stood aside as it zoomed on past her. The ice cracked and dissolved back into pure mana as soon as her opponent slid past it, but there was no time to complain:

The next knight was stepping up.

Again, she curtsied, he bowed, before he charged her with his sword.

Weiss held up her free hand, spreading her fingers open, a sheet of solid ice forming in front of her.

The knight swung.

_Crash!_

The shield shattered into a million pieces, barely stopping the blade from meeting her shoulder.

The attack didn’t hurt, but the blow to her ego certainly stung.

The knight stepped back, gestured apologetically.

“I’m fine,” Weiss said as she readied herself again.

The knight did the same, stepping back a few feet, before he swung again.

This time, Weiss didn’t try to block the blow with her magic, but with Myrtenaster. The runeblade was _bounds_ stronger than its thin appearance would have suggested, and knight’s blade came to a stop. However, it still had brute force on its side, and it pushed down on Weiss with most of its strength.

Again, the golem's blade struck home, on her other shoulder.

Once more, no injury, except to her pride.

Weiss gritted her teeth, saw that the knight overbalanced, falling forward and leaving his chest open.

She slammed her off-hand into him, magic pouring into the knight’s chassis, before it turned into _freezing_ cold ice.

The knight staggered back from the blow, stunned.

Weiss stabbed it three times with Myrtenaster, the knight staggering back if it had been blasted by a firehouse.

The shock wore off, it began to move once more.

Weiss grinned as she cocked her off-hand back, then thrust it forward.

The knight went crashing to his back, and skidded back a few inches.

The icicle jutting out from Weiss hand stayed in the air, before it disappeared, the leftover magic falling and glimmering in the air like frost.

The golem was hauled off to the side by the third knight, this one armed with a repeater.

Weiss curtsied, he bowed, then got into a shooting position.

Dummy darts began to fly through the air and into Weiss. She raised up her off-hand, formed another
ice shield, but it too shattered after only a handful of shots. She raised up Myrtenaster, closed her eyes and thought:

“Shield.”

The hail of blanks stopped. Weiss opened her eyes, saw the darts landing on a translucent barrier in front of her, ripples of energy spreading out from the points of impact before they harmlessly dropped off.

The knight reloaded.

Weiss circled Myrtenaster in the air, the ripples spiraled into the middle.

The knight raised its firing arm.

A beam of water shot out from Myrtenaster, and bored a sizable hole into its chest.

It looked down at itself, up at Weiss, nodded, then promptly collapsed.

“You seem to be getting the hang of this quite quickly!” Abner said. “Shall I up the difficulty?”

Weiss grinned. “As high as you can make it.”

“Well… good thing I had the foresight to equip them all with blanks!” Abner replied.

The knights all bowed as one, before they raised their weapons and charged.
Chapter 53

The army of knight golems thundered towards Weiss, what semblance of chivalry and fairness they were displaying earlier gone as they assembled into a proper fighting force: melee fighters forming a front-line; shooters, crossbowmen, and cannoneers taking firing positions in the back; the giant between them lumbering towards her, its executioner's blade glimmering ominously in the light.

Weiss ran straight for them, dragging Myrtenaster's blade on the floor behind her, both hands on the hilt as her magic surged into it. She swung upwards, and a tsunami of magic rose up from the floor and crashed straight into the army.

Those that didn't collapse on impact were swept away by the tide, flying off to the sides or sent crashing into the knights behind them. Weiss was disappointed they weren't capable of speech, as she would have loved to hear their screams.

The back-line ran away from the wave, and even the giant braced itself, magic and its lighter fellows crashing into and streaming past its ankles.

Weiss laughed as she pulled up her sword. “Is that all you've got?!”

The knights of the front-line threw off or climbed over their fallen comrades, then continued the charge. At the same time, the back-line let loose a hail of bullets, bolts, and blasts, all arcing towards Weiss.

“...”

She braced herself, and formed a barrier around her.

It soon sounded like the Flood had come early, the projectiles crashing into the barrier one after the other like pouring rain, explosions ringing in her ears like thunder, the translucent shell cloudy and chaotic from all the ripples of energy spreading all over its surface. It took all she had to keep her grip on Myrtenaster, her arms beginning to ache as her magic began to reach its limit.

Suddenly, the rain of projectiles stopped.

Weiss put her sword down, let out a sigh of relief, just as the first of the front-line came charging at her.

The knights were merciless, attacking her from all sides. Weiss dodged the swing of an axe only to get caught in the side by a sword; she dodged a spear thrust, only to get smacked in the side of the head by a hammer. She fell to her stomach on the floor, upon which all of the knights surrounded her and began to literally kick her while she was down.

The weapons were blanks, and they were all pulling their attacks so much every blow felt like being smacked around with foam bats, but somehow, the humiliation hurt worse than the broken bones, internal bleeding, and painful death she would have suffered had they been going all-out with real armaments.

Weiss gritted her teeth, pulled Mytrenaster and her arms underneath her chest, where the knights couldn't try to step on them and pin them to the floor. She closed her eyes, ignored the dull thumps assaulting her from all sides, and concentrated.

“Should I stop the simulation?!” Abner asked, switching his optics to infrared for the knights
crowded around her.

A magical geyser erupted, sending the vanguard flying off as Weiss spiraled into the air, smiling and balancing on the toes of one foot.

“Not yet!” she cried triumphantly.

As she began to fall back to the ground, she noticed the titan’s fist coming towards her.

Just before it impacted, she had a flash from five years ago, during her final exam at the La Maupin School of Combat Arts in the Nexus. The golem became a holo dummy, a knight just like the one she was fighting, only all of the safeties were off.

Pow!

Weiss flew off, to the far side of the arena.

There was no pain, no blood trickling down her left eye and leaving her half-blind for the rest of the fight, but it stung all the same.

“Goodness gracious!” Abner cried, the knights lowering their weapons as Weiss picked herself back up. “Should I stop the fight?”

“Keep it going!” Weiss barked, as she had that day.

The knights didn’t hesitate. The vanguard reformed around the titan, and the back-line launched another hail of projectiles towards her.

Weiss put her off-hand in front of her, frost already already pouring from her fingers, and pointed her runeblade on the floor behind her, tendrils of water spiraling into the tip. It wasn’t a jet of pure elemental fire, but it’d have to do.

Swoosh!

She blasted off, skating on a trail of ice that disappeared as soon as her heels slid past it, a determined grin on her face.

The bullets, bolts, and blasts landed and exploded where she was just a moment ago; the melee troops spun their heads as they watched her zoom past them, the shooters adjusted their aim. The titan used its size to run and stand in her way, raising its blade to block the tiny space between its legs.

Weiss gathered power in her sword once more.

Swoosh!

The knights that had tried chase her behind her were blasted with a solid jet of water, getting knocked flat on their backs if they weren’t destroyed outright from the pressure. Weiss zoomed between the titan’s legs, just before it slammed the hilt of its sword down to the floor.

She looked back over her shoulder, stuck her tongue out at it; she turned back and saw the shooters aiming their repeaters, crossbows, and cannons straight at her, before they fired.

Weiss made a mental note: “Learn how to time taunts better.”

She stepped off the ice, staggered to a stop and braced herself as she held up Myrtenaster and
projected another barrier.

CRASH!

Weiss yelped, staggering back from what felt like being hit like a tidal wave. Blanks and holo effects the projectiles may have been, but there was still magic powering them...

… Magic that was all gathered up in her barrier, and only growing as the knights emptied their repeaters and readied another round of bolts and bombs to fire.

Weiss felt her body start to move on its own, like when she had first held Myrtenaster and couldn't let go. She spun herself around on one foot, the barrier disappearing as all that energy surged into the blade, now glowing the brightest it ever had.

The lens of Abner's optics preemptively shrunk as he smashed a button on the console, teleporting Penny out of her little bunker and into the control room with him.

A second later, another beam of pure, concentrated magic shot out of her sword and all around the Raucous Room. It cut straight through everything it hit: the vanguard were halved horizontally, some legs still running as their top halves flew off; the row of shooters were utterly annihilated in one smooth stroke; and the titan's ankles were sliced clean off, the golem burying its sword into the ground for support as it fell to its knees.

The beam stopped, Weiss arms fell limp, the tip of her sword clattering noisily on the floor. Her body was shaking, sweat pouring down every inch of her too pale skin, her breath in shallow, laboured pants.

Penny recovered from the teleportation disorientation and looked worriedly at the carnage in the holo feeds. The damaged panels on the walls fell off and were soon replaced. Abner's lens carefully expanded as he put his mouth back to the microphone.

“… Okay...!” he said nervously. “I... I think we should stop now.”

“Yeah...!” Weiss said in between pants, “We... we really should...”

She passed out.

Weiss woke up in a luxuriously soft four-poster bed, like the one back in her old room in Manor Schnee, except in dark oak than spruce, with red velvet curtains and sheets with golden trim. The room was bathed in a low, orange glow as its fireplace crackled.

She felt similar to how she did after a good workout, or a productive day clearing the overgrowth in her farm: exhausted but happy, basking in the glow of her endorphins. Instead of aching limbs, however, she just felt…

… Empty.

“Weiss!” Ruby called out.

Soon enough, she was hugging her, arms wrapped tight around her head as she pulled Weiss' face into her chest. “Oh, Eluna, I am SO glad you're not dead, either! Could you start putting a couple of weeks between your accidentally killing people or almost dying? I don't think I can take this on a regular basis!”
Weiss would have been touched at her concern, and more than a little embarrassed by her latest blunder, if she hadn't noticed that because Abner's home/laboratory was always "comfortably warm," Ruby was wearing just a tank top.

And more importantly, Weiss' face was buried right between her boobs.

There was a frantic knocking on the door.

Blake opened it. <Ruby, what ha--!>

Ruby and Blake looked at each other, the former still hugging Weiss' face to her chest, the latter holding onto the doorknob with one foot in the guest room.

Blake slowly, carefully closed the door, the centuries-old hinges creaking lightly thanks to carefully measured, scheduled, and applied oiling.

_Click._

The door closed.

"Huh..." Ruby said. "Wonder what that was all about?"

Weiss wrenched her arms off her and gasped for breath; her face was burning bright red, and it might have been her imagination, but she could feel blazing hot streams of blood pouring down her nostrils.

"Oh, _woops!_ Sorry about that, Weiss," Ruby said as she pulled away, and sat back down on the chair beside her bed. "How do you feel?"

The correct answer was "Like my face is _melting._" but the one Weiss gave her was "Fine, just… drained."

"No surprise there!" Ruby said. "Man, Weiss, the power levels for your fight were insane! Oh, and congratulations about testing positive for the Gift, by the way!"

"Thanks..." Weiss muttered as she laid back on her bed, silently wishing there were some way she could remotely put out the fireplace because this room was _way_ too warm now.

"You thirsty?" Ruby said as she pulled up a clear canister of water.

Weiss nodded. She paused. "Why is it glowing...?"

"Because it's mana-water," Ruby replied as she opened it up. "Don't worry, Penny says you _definitely_ won't get sick from it, seeing as you've been done with the bacteria stuff for a while. Well, that and you being a Fae/Human hybrid just like me."

"So, did you ever know or suspect anything, or was it just a total whammy out of nowhere?" she asked as she held it to Weiss lips.

"The latter," Weiss replied before she started drinking.

The mana-water tasted exactly like the Valley's regular supply of drinking water. Unlike it, however, she could feel the power seeping back into her system, the empty feeling inside her disappearing.

"Any guesses as to who it might be? My bet's on your grandpa Nick; he's pretty much _exactly_ like one of the stereotypes for Fire aligned Fae."
Weiss sighed as she finished drinking. “I don’t really want to think of it right now, Ruby; got a lot of stuff on my mind, chief of which is the fact that apparently I can shoot laser beams now.”

“It’s called an ‘Aqua Laser’ in the spellbooks,” Ruby said as she put the empty canister back on the end table. “Have you been reading them, by any chance? Cause you pulled off a kickass Tsunami Slash earlier, and that’s like one of the most advanced spells ever, and you pulled that off in dry land, without a medium of any kind!

“That’s triple the badassery right there! Even Elder Goodwitch is impressed, and that’s a saying a lot!”

Weiss squeezed her eyes shut. “Later, Ruby, later…”

“Okay. Sorry.”

Knock, knock.

<Ruby...? Weiss...?> Blake asked. <You guys aren't>--she made a sexy animal noise--<in there, are you...? 'Cause if you are, just… just call me when you're done, alright? I don't mind going home late...>

After Weiss had gotten some rest, and went through a very thorough exam in Abner’s miniature hospital, she headed over to his foundry so he could make her a Weaver’s gauntlet. “It won’t amplify your powers nearly as strongly as Myrtenaster for a variety of reasons, but it will be much more versatile, can also be loaded with elemental mediums, and help tremendously with your control issue,” he explained as she put it on.

Weiss looked at the glove, turning her hand back and forth, examining Abner’s intricate stitching, the metal and crystal components embedded into the leather, how well it fit her hand despite being made from scratch.

“Shall we test it out?” Abner said, pulling out a hammer.

Weiss held out her bare hand, and projected an ice shield.

Abner hit it.

Crash!

To none of Weiss’ surprise, it shattered after three strikes. She held out her gloved hand, and made another shield, noticeably thicker and more solid than the last.

This one took several hits, before Abner was even capable of making a noticeable crack in it.

“Whew!” he said, putting the hammer down as one of his spider-limbs wiped the sweat off his brow. “Well, I think we can definitely say this is a vast improvement.”

“You can say that again!” Weiss said, dispelling the shield. “So I just put this on whenever I’m mixing up anything, and it’ll keep any more elementals from spawning or moonshine from exploding?”

“Precisely! Unless you wish it, of course, but I do suggest you get plenty of formal training and practice with the weavers at the Terrace first; the accidental creation of elemental mediums and elementals are no joke, especially with water weavers like yourself.
“Alchemy is the most popular specialty among them, after all.”

Weiss nodded.

“Any other concerns? Modifications to Myrtenaster or your gauntlet? Urgent questions about your newfound powers?”

“Nothing at the moment, Abner,” Weiss replied. “I’ll call if anything comes up.”

“Please do,” Abner said. “I may not be able to personally attend to it given my governor’s hyper-focus, but know that my answering golems always stand at the ready.” He smiled as he tapped the back of his neck. “Sometimes weeks go by before I even think of checking my messages.”

“I’ll make note of it,” Weiss said.

“Well, I guess that settles everything! Lovely meeting you in person Weiss, and what an exceptionally productive day this has been!” he tipped his hat at her. “Cheerio!”

Weiss bid him farewell, and went back to his parlor where everyone from Keeper’s Hollow were waiting.

“Well, look at that fancy piece of gear you got there!” Qrow said as he lounged on a chair, a drink in his hand. “That going to stop me from dying of alcoholism way sooner than I thought I would?” he asked before he took a sip.

“It will,” Weiss replied.

She looked at where Zwei was sitting, a cart loaded with a mix of kitchen and lab equipment near him. Among others, it had a still much more complex than the one she had used for her moonshine.

“What’s all this?”

“Equipment and modifications for making elemental mediums, and/or controlling the effects of your magic,” Penny explained. “Elder Goodwitch thought it very important that you be using designs specifically for weavers, given everything that’s already happened.”

“Don’t worry, it’s free of charge, like with your Weaver training,” Ruby said. “And speaking of new stuff: Blake’s got something for ya!”

Blake walked up with a leather belt, a holster on its side with Myrtenaster in it, and several pouches and clips, presumably for holding spare elemental mediums, mana-water canisters, and other useful things for weavers.

“Mad’ it while you ‘n’ Ruby were… bizzy,” she said as she handed it over.

Weiss bit back a sigh of annoyance and smiled at her. “Thank you.”

She put it on. It was a perfect fit. At Blake’s request, she turned around and showed it off to the others.

Ruby whistled. “Looking good, Weiss! All you really need is some armour and some supplies, and you’ll be ready to head out the walls!”

Weiss smiled at her. “Let’s just head home for now, okay?”

And so they did.
Chapter 54

It was late when they arrived back at Keeper's Hollow, Weiss riding on Zwei's back as the magical exhaustion set in. She could still walk and stay awake, but now it just felt incredibly difficult to muster the willpower to do much of anything, alongside a very physical and real growling in her stomach.

It felt strikingly like the aftermath of a particularly brutal test, and just like then, all Weiss wanted to do afterward was gorge on something sweet—in this case, chocolate chip cookies.

“Elemental weaving is a largely mental process,” Penny explained as she and Qrow cooked chicken tortillas for dinner. “Magic already exists in all bodies and beings as the base components for matter, and the Gift is both a body capable of accumulating and storing larger than usual amounts of it, and a mind able to harness and manipulate it in ways difficult or impossible through conventional means.

“Most Fae just have the former, which tends to manifest in greatly enhanced physical capabilities like the Watchers, or just the latter, which tends to manifest in skill in science and the arts like the Makers and Creators.”

Weiss nodded. “So how rare is it, anyway?” she asked after she swallowed her mouthful of cookies.

“With the extreme amounts of magic in the Valley's wellspring, along with the frequent exposure to it from its food, environment, and our magitechnology?” Penny said as she chopped up vegetables. “About 20-42% of the population, with 61-67% of that going on to become professional weavers. The rest tend to gravitate towards other professions, oftentimes makers, watchers, and/or creators, either from personal choice, or simply not being capable of handling the stress and rigours of weaver training and occupations.”

Weiss picked up her glass of milk. “So why isn't Candela overflowing with weavers? We had to use energy like there was no tomorrow, or else the collectors would overload,” she said before she took a drink.

“Two reasons: genetics, and the nature of your magitechnology,” Penny said as she brought the tray of vegetable fillings to the table.

“As your magitech started to become cheaper, easier, and more convenient than training and hiring human weavers, the importance of preserving their bloodlines and avoiding genetic modifications that could impair their abilities became less and less important,” she said as she went to get the tortilla wraps. “At times, they were even actively hunted down and removed from the gene pool at large to avoid their side-effects, like the increased vulnerability to dementia and other mental illness.

“It didn't help that, unlike Fae, your designs tend to protect and isolate magical exposure to its users as much as possible,” Penny said as she laid them on the table, next to the vegetables. “To use a metaphor: while the Fae were outside getting regular doses of sunlight, you humans were locked in your homes with blackout curtains over the windows.”

Weiss smirked. “Fitting. Makes me wonder what would have happened if we hadn't made the full switch to magitech...”

“You humans wouldn't have started a realm-wide resource crisis because you ran out of shit to build it with, for one,” Qrow said as he came over with a crock pot full of chicken.

Weiss nodded. “Did the Fae ever suffer something like the Resource Crisis?”
“Plenty of times!” Qrow said as he set it down in the center. “Believe it or not, Sekhmet used to be a rainforest before we Fae fucked it up royally. In terms of how long we’ve been able to bang two rocks together and call it music, being the poster-civilization of sustainable living was after we got out of our shitty teenage years,” he continued as he ladled out shredded meat for everyone's wraps but Ruby’s.

“But it's been a long day, and that's an even longer story, princess, so that's all the Chronicler Qrow you're getting today,” he said as he made a quadruple-large tortilla for Zwei.

“We'll eventually get to it in your history classes, don't worry,” Penny said, smiling as she and Qrow worked together to keep Zwei's dinner from falling apart. The head sticking in through the window started to drool like crazy.

Weiss shrugged, and dug in. She hummed after she took her first bite; her herbs and vegetables had helped make a damn good sauce.

She still had too much energy from sleeping at Abner’s lab earlier, so Weiss spent most of that evening building and setting up the new equipment they’d received, starting with the barn and her lab/kitchen, and after that, the long abandoned weaver's section of the training grounds.

“Alright!” Ruby called out as she worked in an underground hatch, only the very tips of her horns visible. “I'm turning the valve on—tell me if anything happens!”

“Got it!” Weiss said as she stood by with a lamp in her hands.

She watched as a long-dead fountain came back to life, water trickling down its numerous grooves, filling its many basins, and a waterfall appearing in the center and pouring out onto a platform big enough for two or three Fae to sit and meditate under.

“It's working!”

“Woo!” Ruby cried as she climbed out. “Go me!”

The two of them stood there, admiring their handiwork, until the combined light of their lamps and the water brought out some rather unpleasant details they'd missed earlier.

“… Do you Fae happen to have bacteria that can eat all that mold and fungus?”

“Yeah, we do, but we could also just turn the water off again then torch it! Weaver equipment is made to withstand all the elements.”

Weiss hummed. “Yeah, that'd work much better.”

Ruby shut off the water, and the two began to head back to the house.

Weiss yelped and nearly dropped her lamp as she came to face with a ferocious looking bird Fae, ghostly and glowing an ominous blood-red.

“Oh, hey!” Ruby said. “The Echoes are already appearing! Neat!”

Weiss stepped well back as the “echo” of Raven Branwen pulled out her sword and got into a combat stance, her eyes narrowed and her mouth/beak curled into a scowl. “What the hell are 'echoes,’ and why are they happening?” she said as her eyes darted between Ruby and Raven.

“Echoes are the pieces of you that you leave behind after you die,” Ruby explained. “Usually, it
takes a ritual to make them appear, but when there's so much raw magic floating around before and
during the Eve, they just come out all on their own.”

Weiss watched a different echo appear some distance away from—Summer, her cloaked figure and
the Keeper’s scythe a calming silver. The two echoes charged each other, their battle too fast for
Weiss to see, so ferocious she could hear the clashes of blade-on-blade and the faint sounds of war
cries from long ago.

It was far beyond the level of anything Weiss was capable of, or that she'd ever seen in her entire life
—even Ruby's wiping the floor with all of her guards that fateful night.

Raven swung too hard and missed, all the energy in her sword exploding into the ground, sending
ghostly dirt and debris flying several feet into the air.

Summer took the opportunity to swing the Keeper's scythe right at her neck, stopping just before she
cut her head clean off her shoulders.

The air was tense as the two figures stared each other down, seething hatred in Raven, amusement in
Summer's.

Summer pulled the scythe away, and offered her hand with a smile.

Raven ignored her as she picked herself and her sword off the ground.

The two echoes parted ways, and disappeared.

It all happened in the span of less than a minute, though it felt like it had dragged on for much longer.

“Holy shit...” Weiss whispered.

“Yep,” Ruby said. “And that's when mom was holding back.”

Weiss looked at her in disbelief. “That's her holding back?”

Ruby nodded. “Mom was always way stronger than Aunt Raven or Uncle Qrow. It always bothered
her, my aunt, since their family has always been kinda obsessed about being the strongest around,
probably because they were from Sekhmet.”

“How'd they end in the Valley?”

Ruby shrugged. “Uncle Qrow says it's a REALLY long story—so long he's never really found the
time to tell me!” she replied innocent.

Weiss stared at her for a moment, before she nodded slowly. “Do these echoes just show up, or is
there a pattern?” she asked as they resumed walking.

“They tend to appear wherever someone had really important memories, or where they spent most of
their time, but only if you're related to them in some way.” Ruby replied. “It's mostly for family, but
Abner always sees echoes of Ilaya at his place this time of year. You could also summon them by
bringing something they used to own and used a lot, seeing as part of their essence rubs off on it.”

Weiss smiled. “You Fae certainly bring a new dimension to the value of heirlooms and antiques...”

“Mhmm!” Ruby said. “As the saying goes, 'Our bodies falter, our memories fade, and our breaths
cease, but Havalon remembers always.'”
They walked through Weiss' farm, and noticed one of the mana detectors that had been planted among her crops was glowing and beeping in warning.

Weiss sighed heavily. “Oh, what now...?” she muttered as she walked over to investigate.

“You think your vegetables turned into elementals too?”

“I seriously hope not! Cheese blobs with faces and sore-stiff ointment that moves, I can handle; I don't know how I'd react to vegetables that scream when I harvest them.”

“They definitely won't do that,” Ruby replied. “You're their weaver; they'll probably think it's a great honour to be picked and eaten, maybe even tell you when they're at their best so you can get the most out of them.”

Weiss cringed. “Please stop before I have to become a full-time carnivore; at least I know meat's supposed to move around before I can eat it...”

They halted as they reached the edge of the fence. There was an echo walking through Weiss' crops, wielding a hoe and tilling the soil. She was an arctic fox Fae from the tiny ears and the ridiculously fluffy tail, wearing a long, flowing dress of distinctly human-make, with her glow a pale, icy blue.

“Relative of yours?” Weiss asked as they watched her work and slowly come closer to them.

“Uh… not that I know of...?” Ruby replied. “I haven't really seen her before, either.”

The mystery woman got close enough to reach. Weiss slowly held out her gloved hand, her fingertips brushing the echo. The crystals on it began to glow.

Then, a flash.

Weiss found herself in Keeper's Grove, a long, long, long time ago, seeing through the eyes of the mystery woman as she worked. From the grunts of effort and the sweat she was regularly wiping from her brow, she was just as new to farming as Weiss was, when her farm was just a patch of sweet potatoes.

She heard a voice ask something in broken German.

The woman turned, and Weiss found herself looking at one of Ruby's ancestors. She had the same silver eyes, the friendly face, and the black hair, only her horns were much more pronounced, there were almost no whites in her eyes for how wide her irises were, and her hands and feet clearly ended in what looked like hooves.

The woman chuckled, affectionately said something in the same language, except much more fluently.

Ruby's ancestor smiled, getting a mischievous look on her face as she struggled to say something in a playful tone, before suggestively waggling her eyebrows.

The woman made an exasperated noise, then planted her hoe in the ground. She narrowed her eyes at Ruby's ancestor, shaking her head before she walked up to her.

From the loving expression on her face, it was clearly for a kiss.

There was another flash, and Weiss found herself back in her own body, her legs crumpled beneath her, Ruby holding her up and sounding increasingly desperate.
“… eiss?! Weiss! Are you okay?”

Weiss blinked, groaning and shaking her head. “What happened…?”

“You touched the echo of that fox lady, she disappeared, and then you fainted!”

Weiss looked at the mana detector, now dark and quiet, then to her crops, no more trace of the echo.

“Call the Terrace and Abner,” Weiss muttered as she took off her gauntlet, the crystals now glowing a pale shade of icy blue.

Weiss was amused that the senior weaver for the night shift was an Owl Fae.

Less amusing was the way Keeper's Hollow was swarming with weavers once more, this time with chroniclers deep into their tablets and comm-crystals, half frantically requesting files from all over Avalon and an audience with Elder Oobleck himself, the other half studying the data from the mana detector, what footage they had seen of Weiss touching the echo and it disappearing before she fainted.

And from the way Penny was conversing with them in Actaeon, shaking her head even as they pleaded desperately with her, she could just tell they were itching to crack her head open and see what memories they could pull up.

Through Qrow, she relayed what she had seen through her vision to the chroniclers, Ruby, and Abner who was attending through the second's comm-crystal. The things they knew was that the ancestor she had seen was Gabija herself, and that the time-frame was a few decades after the First Settlers had landed.

Everything else was a mystery.

The chroniclers grilled her relentlessly, frustrated at what little she could tell, before they sighed and returned to their referencing the Codex, calling up their fellow chroniclers, and trying to rebuild the vision from the mana detector and her gauntlet.

“What was that all about?” Weiss asked after the last finally gave up.

“You may have found a very important key to unlocking the mystery that has been boggling the Fae for a thousand years,” Abner said.

“The short version of it is: the Valley wasn't always an Eldan Settlement, it started as a split-off,” Qrow said. “A lot of unethical and illegal shit happened here, and when everything went to hell, the survivors called the Council to save their asses…”

 “… But not before destroying most the evidence that would link them to the crimes against Avalon that would get them executed or worse, a lot of identities changing, and folks mysterious disappearing of the face of the realm.”

“They burned down the original Chronicler's Grove...” Abner said sadly. “Aside from the loss of all that data, there was also the fact that those who did come forward for their crimes and pleaded guilty were put into witness protection, and what information we do have from just after the Council retook the Valley was delivered via Info-Grid—not nearly as fast, expansive, or reliable then as it is now, made worse because they were ferrying secret messages that were destroyed at the slightest hint of being compromised.”
“So what does what I saw have to do with all that?” Weiss asked.

“Because, Weiss, that lady whose memories you saw was probably Gabija’s mate, and the key to why Keeper’s like me are so special,” Ruby replied.

“And you don’t have better records of her? She was the first Keeper of the Grove, right? Did no one happen to have a pen and paper on hand?!”

Abner sighed. “She and her mate requested the latter’s true identity be kept a secret, for reasons unknown. And more importantly, this was WELL before anyone realized just how important the Keeper bloodline really was...”

“Go get some sleep, Weiss,” Qrow said. “Believe us: the answers to the mysteries of the Valley are massive teases, who also love coming when you least expect them.”

Weiss scowled. “I’m starting to realize that, and it’s giving me a real headache...”
Weiss was in her dream world, sitting in the living room of Keeper's Hollow. She had a piece of paper in front of her, upon which she'd written the three big questions on her mind:

1. Who was the secret Fae in my family, and who knew?
2. Why are Keepers so important to the Valley?
3. What else does the Council know, and why am I so important to them?

It didn't take long for both her grandparents to come up and sit down on either side of her, Weiss and Freya sliding into Nick from how deeply the cushions sank from his weight.

“Do any of you happen to have any revelations from my subconscious to share with me?” Weiss asked. “Things I've been ignoring, or dots that I haven't connected yet? Wisdom from beyond the grave, should you two actually happen to be the spirits of my dead grandparents, and not signs of this Valley driving me insane?”

“Sorry, sweetheart, got nothing,” Nick replied.

“A multidisciplinary scientist I may be, but neither a miracle worker nor a seer of the past,” Freya said sadly.

“Anything I can do to help?” Summer said as she walked over to the side of the couch.

“You can spill all the secrets of the Eldan Council to me,” Weiss replied. “You Keepers seem to have a direct line to them and a lot of sway, seeing as Ilaya managed to convince them to keep Abner alive even before they knew how good of a scientist he was.”

“Oooh, yeah, sorry, can't really do that...” Summer replied. “You know how Ruby's days are mostly just going out killing animals and trying to keep humans out the Valley? Those were pretty much mine, too. Never was interested in all the nitty gritty of politics.”

Weiss sighed. “Figured.”

“Maybe you could try touching my echo back at the training grounds with your gauntlet? Maybe you'll get a flash of memories like you did with the fox lady. If nothing else, you'll get to see that kickass fight from my eyes!

“Man, did you see me versus Raven?! I was like--” she started making fighting noises and waving her arms, up until she noticed all three Schnees giving her withering looks.

Summer slowly, sheepishly put her arms down. “… Can you dream up a kitchen for me to hang out in? Just the cookie jar will do.”

Weiss did.

“Thanks~!” Summer said as she skipped off.

Grandparents and granddaughter returned to the list. “Let's go over what we do know...” Freya said as pens for all of them and more paper magically appeared.
“One, you are a Weaver, and an exceptionally powerful one if the way you decimated all of those golems earlier is anything to go by,” Freya said.

“Two, the Fae don't seem to mind keeping us humans around if it's a good deal for them, like with Abner,” Nick continued.

“And three, everyone seems to think me and Ruby are...” Weiss trailed off.

Summer poked her head out of the kitchen and made a sexy animal noise, with a “?” at the end you could hear.

Weiss blushed. “… Yes, that. Seriously, what is up with that?!”

“You being sarcastic right now, sweetheart?” Nick asked.

“What do you mean, am I being sarcastic? Why the hell would I be sarcastic?” Weiss asked.

“Well, for one thing, all the evidence overwhelmingly supports such a hypothesis, even if there's no outright confirmation...” Freya replied.

Weiss blushed harder. “Like what?”

“From the top of my head: Ruby spaing you and leaving you unharmed, and going to incredible lengths to convince Jacques to stop; her visiting you every day in jail and doing her level best to give you small creature comforts to make your imprisonment more comfortable; and then there's her passion and drive to help you find your place in Fae society, alongside all her efforts to comfort and care for you in your times of need, such as your first night in the Valley...” Freya muttered.

“And there's also the fact that pretty much everyone here except the dog has walked in on you two in some pretty damn incriminating scenes,” Nick finished.

“What they assumed from those perfectly innocent situations are their fault!” Weiss said, face now burning red.

“True, but I really can't blame them for thinking that,” Freya countered. “Spooning in the Ruby's nest, the same except one of you is clearly naked under a blanket that seemed to have been thrown over you for decency's sake, and then there was earlier when you were...”

“Exploring a valley of a different kind?” Nick offered.

Freya groaned. “Really, Nicholas?!”

Weiss squeezed her eyes shut. “I hate you so much right now, grandpa.”

“ANYWAY!” Freya cried. “Regardless of the truth behind those events, the heart of the matter is that the facts seem so much like fiction, and whatever your attempts to convince them otherwise will likely only lead to them being more convinced it is true.”

Summer poked her head out of the kitchen. “Hey, you mind if I ask if you actually do like Ruby?” she said through a mouthful of cookies.

Freya nodded. “I have been wondering that myself, yes; all these assumptions that you and her are...”

Summer attempted to make a sexy animal noise through a mouthful of cookies, and ended up choking.
“Sweet Shepherd! Why can't you ladies just say that everyone thinks Weiss and Rubes are fucking?!” Nick said as he walked over to Summer and thumped her on the back. “It's not like Nivian doesn't have a shit-ton of ways to talk about doing the diddly!”

Summer snorted and choked some more. Nick ushered her into the kitchen where she cleared her throat out of sight. After they returned, she sputtered, “You humans seriously call”—she made a sexy animal noise—”that...?!” she said, before she doubled over in laughter.

“Among other weird-ass alternatives,” Nick said as he walked back to the couch. “It's one of the great mysteries of Nivian. And speaking of mysteries: how do you feel about Rubes?” he said as he sat back down.

Weiss looked down. “I... I really don't know. How can I tell?”

“Well, shit, sweetheart, you couldn't have picked worse people to ask...” Nick mumbled.

“I concur...” Freya said. “As you are well aware, it was a miracle to everyone that Nicholas and I did not eventually end up killing each other, given our constant, public, and very violent disagreements.”

“Though if you saw me every morning after we did the deed, you'd wonder if Frosty here was just using kinky sex as a cover to murder me,” Nick said.

Weiss shuddered. “I am so happy that most of the parts where you and grandma got intimate were lost or corrupted...”

Freya sighed. “Damned shame, that...” she said wistfully.

“Grandma!”

Summer waltzed over. “How about I ask it like this: do you want to be in love with Ruby?”

Freya hummed. “Sometimes the problem is not the lack of an answer, it's asking the wrong question.”

“True that,” Nick asked, looping his arm past Weiss and around Freya's shoulders. “You can't choose who you fall in love with—see me and your grandma—but you can have a pretty good idea about who you won't mind ending up with.

“So how about Rubes?”

Weiss looked down, frowning; the way everyone was looking at her and waiting for an answer didn't help. “I still don't know...” she muttered.

“Take your time, sweetheart,” Nick said, affectionately ruffling her hair. “It's not like me and your grandma didn't take little over a year to either fall for each other, or realize all those sparks was passion and hatred.”

“And even then, before we found Candela's wellspring we always wondered if it was real, or just convenience and circumstance...” Freya added.

“At least we know you really like having your face in her boobs!” Summer chirped.

All three Schnees glared at her.

“What? It's true, isn't it...?”
Weiss woke up the next morning feeling miserable.

Maybe it was the exhaustion from having learned of her magic and driven her reserves into the negative on the same day, and seriously fucking up her sleep schedule as a result. Maybe it was the newest mystery with Gabjia’s possible mate and her connection to her. Maybe it was the dream that had her wondering if she should start looking for a therapy mender, and ask Penny if she had protocols for that.

Possibly all three.

She looked at Ruby's plushie of her mother. In the daylight, Summer looked friendly as ever, her silver buttons sparkling and her smile radiant like the suns. It made her wonder if she should just learn how to sleep without a toy companion, from all the things that were coming out of her mouth in her dreams.

Ruby yawned and stretched as she got up. “Morning Weiss! You feeling okay?”

“Never better...” Weiss grumbled as she continued to look at the plushie.

“You don’t sound... oh! This is that ‘sarcasm’ thing when you mean the opposite of what you just said, right?”

“Yes,” Weiss said as she climbed out of her hammock, leaving the Summer plushie in it. “Hey, Ruby, has anything weird ever happened while you were sleeping with the plushie? Like, your mom appearing in your dreams?”

“Oh, yeah, she always does when I sleep with it, it's why I like to hold it when I'm sad!” Ruby's ears drooped. “It's like she's not dead, even just for a little while.”

Weiss nodded. “Uh, this is going to sound really weird and insensitive, but... has she ever, you know...?”

“Stared at you the whole time, trying not to judge but totally doing it anyway?” Ruby offered. “Because that's what happened the night after I tried to uh... do something really awful because I was just hitting puberty, and MAN, hormones suck!”

“... I was actually going to ask if she's ever asked you if you liked someone. As in, wanted to be their lover.”

“Oh! Yeah, yeah she does that too.”

Beat.

“... I'll go check on my crops now.” Weiss said as she grabbed her work dress from a corner.

“Don't forget your gauntlet!” Ruby said.

Thanks to recent improvements, all Weiss really needed to do was monitor her crops' growth, harvest and replant as necessary, then water the few sections that weren't covered as the vines grew and expanded the sprinkler system all by themselves, little intervention needed.

She was wondering what she should do with all the free time she now had, when Penny came walking up.

“Good morning Weiss! I see you've already retrieved and are wearing your gauntlet, so I hope you're
ready to start creating your first elemental mediums! Elder Goodwitch has already provided you a sizable amount of ingredients and catalysts to begin.”

“Already?” Weiss asked. “Isn't this kind of a really bad idea considering my moonshine spontaneously explodes, and my fermented products turn into elementals?”

“That was before we confirmed the existence of your powers, and also before you received your gauntlet and proper equipment for weavers,” Penny explained. “Now, it'd be best if you begin to make a habit of releasing your excess energy in productive ways, before we risk it overwhelming you again like yesterday.”

Weiss had a flash of Abner showing her footage of her first receiving Myrtenaster, and cringed. “Right...” they began to head into the barn. “So how exactly do I make mediums?”

“Almost entirely like cooking: you take ingredients, combine them, and put them through a specific series of processes to produce a product worth more than the sum of its parts,” Penny said as they climbed up the stairs. “Though it has advanced greatly from the cauldrons over fire pits of the Ekindling Era, the basic principles of elemental medium creation remain basically the same.”

“So I can just make more moonshine, and I'd have fuel for fire magic?”

“Yes, though it may not be as potent if you choose not to use more reactive ingredients like sulfur, saltpeter, and charcoal.”

“Gunpowder?” Weiss asked as she picked up her apron, now beside a new full face-mask with air filters, and a single safety glove for her other arm.

Penny nodded. “You could also extract the capsaicin from peppers, if you wish to cast fire spells meant to non-lethally subdue targets or just distract them,” she explained. “Alternatively, you can make an extremely spicy hot sauce.

“Qrow likes his to taste like regret.”

“Just what are the limits for elemental mediums and the spells I can cast from them?” Weiss asked as she opened up a new box of ingredients on the counter.

Penny smiled. “Your creativity, what ingredients you have available, and your mastery over your powers. I suggest we start with something simple and effective for you: making purified water.”

Weiss nodded as she shut the box, and looked at the vastly improved and expanded equipment. She hadn't been paying much attention last night aside from looking at the graphics in the instruction manuals, and now that she was seeing in daylight with a refreshed mind, she was starting to realize just how complex everything was.

“If you have any questions, I'd be happy to answer them!” Penny chirped.

Weiss turned around to do so, before she stopped. “Is something the matter, Weiss?” Penny asked.

“Is it okay if my question isn't about alchemy?” Weiss asked.

“Of course! I'm here to help you however I can, after all.”

Weiss blushed, thankful that her mask hid it. “… How do you Fae see interspecies relationships with
“It's one of the biggest taboos, with only very few exceptions.” Penny replied. “You have to understand: for most of the Fae, humans only represent one of the many dangers they have to contend with on a daily basis, and it's difficult to find someone who's life has not been personally affected by the actions of humans and your society in general, positively, or more often than not, negatively.

“There's also the fact that relationships themselves have a very low success rate, given the fact that a number of them are made hastily, are based largely off the exotic quality of the romance than any real compatibility, and are prone to being started and sustained by exceptional and oftentimes temporary circumstances, not to mention cultural differences between both humans and Fae.

“It does not help that that these relationships are often with Fae posing as human in your settlements, oftentimes secretively, and never revealing it to their lover until the relationship has already long been made 'official.'”

Weiss paused. “So why is everyone so okay with me and Ruby being…?”

Penny made a sexy animal noise, with a little “?” at the end that you could hear.

Weiss blushed even more. “… Together, yes,” she said, making a note to begin using that instead of trailing off.

Penny smiled. “Keepers are one of the above-mentioned exceptions.”

“Because…?”

Penny frowned. “I'm afraid I'm not allowed to answer that.”

Weiss sighed. “Figured… so how exactly do I go about purifying water for magic?”

“There are many ways, but we'll start with the most basic of methods: charcoal filtering!”

Weiss pulled out the equipment and ingredients, and got to work.

Chapter End Notes

Note: Hot sauce that tastes like regret is hot sauce that you taste, and shortly after go, “Oh no…” or something to that effect.
As Weiss purified water and made new solutions with them, captured the resulting gases from various chemical reactions, liquified mineral and soil samples, and carefully distilled a new batch of moonshine with gunpowder for plenty of extra kick, she had flashes back to her chemistry classes in Arcturus Academy.

Because of her reluctance to use all but the most basic and unobtrusive of mods like vaccines, she was lumped in with all the other students who had the same philosophy as her, couldn't afford them, or had the misfortune to be afflicted with Egan's Syndrome or other conditions that prevented the use of them, or seriously impaired their effects.

A lot of her classmates who flunked out or got lower grades than they wanted accused her of secretly modding, bribing the proctors and security to sneak in cybernetic or genetic enhancements so she could pass her classes with ease, while avoiding what was essentially real-world work with all the other “transhuman” students.

“Has it ever occurred to you that someone might just naturally be better at some things than others?” Weiss shot back after they had made threats about “busting” her—ones that ultimately had no teeth.

It was always just natural and easy for her, having strong hunches about what proportions her experiments needed for the right results, balancing chemical formulas, even the actions of pouring, stirring, and mixing seemed second nature. About the only times it had failed her was during the Job Gauntlet and her first attempts at processing her produce, but those were the faults of her being a stranger in a strange, strange world, and all the magic unknowingly leaking from her fingers.

Now, it turned out she was almost literally born for it, as a water aligned weaver.

“The claim that your elemental alignment completely decides your personality and skills have long been debunked, however, and there are many records of water weavers who have made terrible alchemists,” Penny explained as they waited for her mediums to cool off, or build up to usable amounts. “No one individual consists almost entirely of one element, and numerous factors affect them beside such as environment, genetics, and how they were raised, to name some.

“However, the correlations between certain personality types and alignment are incredibly strong; stereotypes are based on some grain of truth, after all.”

“What's the one for Water?” Weiss asked.

“Intelligent and adaptable, capable of being both soothing rain or a destructive typhoon as is needed, but also considered the most emotional, either volatile and unpredictable like stormy seas, or antisocial and reserved like ice.”

“Sounds like me, and every other female from my mother's side.”

Penny nodded. “Elemental alignment is hereditary, yes, as with Ruby and all the Keepers being Earth.”

“What's theirs?”

“Amiable and with great integrity and adherence to their values, if either stubborn and irrationally resistant to change like a mountain, or too easily molded such as that of clay.”
“And Fire?”

“Passionate and energetic, but oftentimes overwhelming and even dangerous. Prone to fits of anger and other strong emotions, to the point of burning everything and everyone around them, sometimes even snuffing themselves out like a pyre running out of fuel.”

“Oh yeah, that's grandpa Nick, 100%. And what's for Air?”

“Regal and confident, but sometimes too detached from the world around them—be they aloof and snobbish because of their often very high standards and unrealistic expectations, or moving through the world like a passing breeze, never staying still nor committing to anything for any reasonable period of time.”

“So my father, Blake when we first met, and Abner, with how he's a master escape artist and all.”

Penny nodded. “Ilaya and her descendants' influence have helped make him more 'grounded,' though that can also be attributed to his governor overriding his natural tendency towards flight and distraction, if not the creativity and the unusual, novel ideas that comes from 'having your head in the clouds' most of the time.”

“That is a lot of puns and similes right there,” Weiss said as she began to shut off her equipment, took finished batches off for bottling.

“Whereas Nivian reserves wordplay for literature and creative comparisons, Actaeon uses them for the actual terms,” Penny said as she helped her with the rest.

With the help a special device for funneling her creations into special vials, Weiss had a sizable row of multi-coloured mediums, a decent mix of potency for each element. She loaded the weakest from all four into her gauntlet, her smile growing ever larger as she shot out a dust cloud, set it alight with a fire ball, put it out with a spray of water, before she whisked it out the window with a gust of wind before the smell stayed.

“Shall we go test this out with Myrtenaster at the training grounds?” Penny asked, smiling.

“Let's!” Weiss said as she began to gather them all up in a bag. “Bring the others, too, I feel like showing off...~”

Weiss faced the fountain from last night, its ancient stone damp, moldy, and lousy with plants and fungus that grown over the years of disuse.

In one hand was Myrtenaster, and on the other, her gauntlet, the water vials glowing a faint, icy blue. She wore a Water Weaver's coat just delivered from the Terrace, its hood thrown over her head and her usual ponytail tied into a bun for safety. On her face was the specially carved mask that came with it, for protection magic and utility such as an overlay over her vision of how much of each medium she had left, and what Myrtenaster was currently attuned to. The belt Blake had made was around her waist, loaded with spare vials, a few canisters of mana-water, and an anti-magic grenade in case things went horribly awry.

She could feel her power surging all through her body as it was amplified by her runeblade and gauntlet, and sustained and controlled by her armour. It felt wonderful—not a powerful, electrifying jolt like the first time she had touched Myrtenaster, but a constant thrum that made her feel like she could do anything.

The others sat behind a magic barrier, Penny putting her hands on the generator for extra safety. All
was silent as Weiss took a long, deep breath, and slowly let it go. Then, she put her hand on Myrtenaster's trigger.

“FIRE~!” Ruby yelled.

Weiss thrust her sword forward, a jet of orange flames pouring out of the tip. The fountain was completely ablaze in an instant, the mold, the fungus, and the plants turning to ash.

“Air!” Qrow cried.

Weiss spun her runeblade in the air, a gust spiraling out from her sword, feeding the flames and taking the smoke and ash deeper into the swamp.

<Earth!> Blake shouted.

Weiss sandblasted the fountain, holding her blade steady with both hands as she suffocated the flames and gave the stone a good polishing.

“WOOF!” Zwei barked.

Weiss slowly raised Myrtenaster, a miniature rain cloud forming above the fountain. She gently tapped the air in front of her, the cloud burst, a deluge of water coming down, and washing away the leftover sand.

The grooves, the reliefs of Fae weavers and the elements, and the basins all sparkled and shined like new.

Weiss turned to the others, pulled off her mask and hood, and bowed.

They all cheered and clapped, Penny putting her hands off the barrier as they came over to hug her and pat her on the back.

“That was awesome, Weiss!” Ruby cried.

“Supur cool!” Blake added, smiling.

“Gotta admit, princess, you've got a real knack for alchemy and elemental weaving,” Qrow said. “Maybe you could even start making bombs and ammo for the rest of us, help us out with our own jobs.

“Just make sure they don't explode until after we pull the pins…”

“It can also help them take on higher risk-reward targets and duties at the Watcher's Roost,” Penny said. “Though there is always an abundance of especially dangerous creatures in the wild, the Council rarely funds the necessary equipment, labour, and munitions until they become an imminent threat to the residents.

“The bounties alone will also go a long way into helping pay off our loan and getting your Eluna plushie back much sooner, not to mention improving security in the Valley—something the Council always appreciates.”

“Oooh! Ooh!” Ruby started bouncing in place. “Does this mean I can finally use my scythe's farslinger attachment more?”

“Your what now?” Weiss asked.
“It's the sniper rifle version of a spellslinger,” Qrow explained. “Also takes mediums instead of bullets, but they have to be super potent so they'll actually go that far.”

“You have an attachment for the Keeper's scythe, that also turns into a magical sniper rifle?”

“Mhmm!” Ruby said. “Have to put the blade in the ground when I fire, or else I go flying—and sometimes I do it on purpose because it's so much fun!”

“That sounds incredibly dangerous, and just outright insane.” Weiss said.

Beat.

“What do I have to do make ammo for it?”

“First, you'll have to take out more money from our loan for licensing fees and equipment,” Penny said. “Assuming you pass and your resulting products are even a fraction as powerful as your magic is, it will easily pay for itself within six months to a year.

Weiss laughed. “Never thought I'd end up in munitions manufacturing! But then again, I never really thought I'd end up in… anything like this!”

Qrow smirked. “Eh, to be fair, it's kinda hard to imagine getting abducted by supposedly mythical creatures, living in their society, and them helping you find out you have magical powers.”

Weiss was actually thinking of close friends, a loving home, and a place where she could just be herself, rather than the heiress of the Schnee Power Company.

But, they didn't need to know that.

“We should go celebrate!” Ruby said. “For Weiss finding about her powers, and for her life seriously picking up since she first got here!”

“It might also be good to celebrate while you still can,” Qrow added. “With the Eve coming in just a few days and all the general weirdness yesterday, you can be damned sure you're going to be spending a lot of your time in the Terrace from now.”

“I suggest triple chocolate cake shakes at Fae-orina's!” Penny offered. “It'll be beneficial for both the energy she's expended just now, and for her emotional well-being.”

“Won' say 'No' to that!” Blake said, licking her lips.

Zwei barked happily, picked Weiss up and put her onto his back. He held his heads up high, the others smiled and laughed as they came up to his sides, like they were all in a parade and Weiss was the star attraction.

Weiss had to laugh and shake her head at the ridiculousness of it all, before she grinned, thrust Myrtenaster in the air, and cried,

“Onwards!”

They went off to the Guild, both to readjust their loan and find out just what Weiss needed to do to get licenses for producing large amounts of ammo, high-explosives, and alcohol, and just to go shopping for materials to add some much-needed personalization to Weiss' clothes.

“If I'm going to wear them until they fall apart, I want to actually mourn their loss,” Weiss said.
But first, they were going to buy materials for their Eve of the Ether costumes.

Blake was going as a character from one of her favourite novels, “Ninjas of Love.”

With the help of a jumpsuit and life-like prosthetic hands her creators had given her, Penny was going as an actual mouse mechanic, a character from an Old World holo.

Inspired by Weiss' new mask and weaver's robes, Blake modified her original idea of an “Elven Princess” from more Old World literature, and instead made her costume like the infamous “Keeper's Bride,” one of the rare figures in the legends who survived an encounter with her by becoming her servant/lover.

After the Keeper had massacred the rest of her party, she was relentlessly hunted down and psychologically tortured for a whole week, never given rest nor peace until she went insane, and became an inhuman monster who helped her track down and slaughter her victims as a twisted, gruesome idea of date night.

And after Weiss explained to her how the humans knew and remembered her, Ruby laughed, and laughed hard, so much that they had to move to the side of the street to keep from blocking the rest of the days' shoppers.

“That's what you humans think happened?” she said she wiped tears from her eyes. “That was my great-great-great...” she continued for a while “… grandmother Myala's mate Samaria, and believe me, the relationship was totally consensual and not based on murdering people, and she didn't need to drive her insane first for her to fall in love with her!

“Sammy was always kind of crazy before she came to the Valley.”

“What really happened, then?” Weiss asked.

“She really was the last survivor of the Mystery Busters, and she was there to find proof that The Keeper of the Grove did exist, but the only things chasing her were more animals—Myala and her party were trying to lead her out of the Valley the whole week she was in there, but all whenever they did to scare her off or offer her a way home backfired, and Sammy just kept going deeper and deeper into the Valley every single time.

“Eventually, she managed to attract the attention of a Soul Eater, and even if she was one hell of a badass to survive that long all on her own, she was still human, and Soul Eaters are Soul Eaters. Myala killed before it could kill her, and she was so impressed by the fight she told her,

“‘Marry me or kill me. I'll be happy either way.'”

“She did not,” Weiss said. She turned to Penny. “Did she?”

Penny nodded. “One of her party members had a chronicle.”

Weiss turned back to Ruby. “Well what happened to her after that?”

“Well obviously, Myala didn't kill her, though she did say she at least wanted to date her for a while before she decided on whether or not she wanted to marry her. Sammy went on to work for the Watchers, they did eventually get hitched, and then they had kids who married and had their own kids, and eventually we end up here, with me!”

<Samaria was one of the most legendary Watchers who ever lived, too,> Blake said. <Even before she got modded, she had all the senior watchers worrying and making plans to go to the training
After Penny translated the words Weiss didn't understand and clarified what Blake meant, she asked, “You Fae have gene mods, too?”

Ruby nodded. “We don't really use them as much here in the Fae territories for a lot of reasons, but we have them. Abner can get you some, though it won't be cheap! He doesn't need Shinies, but green goo doesn't grow from trees, either.

“Well, *some of it* doesn't grow from trees, anyway.”

“Before you ask, 'Green goo' is the slang term for the extremely versatile substance we use for all of our genetic modification,” Penny said.

Weiss nodded, and they resumed shopping.

“Have we gotten everything for our costumes?” Weiss asked. “I don't want us to go over-budget because of me.”

<Yep,> Blake said, holding up some of their bags.

“Our checklist is complete, yes,” Penny added.

“Why doesn't it seem like we didn't get anything for Ruby?” Weiss asked.

“Because I already have my costume, silly!” Ruby chirped.

“So what, or who are you going as?”

“What else?” she beamed. “Myself, as the Keeper of the Grove!”

Weiss scowled. “Are you *serious*? You realize you're still very much Avalon's Most Wanted after you 'killed me' on live holovision, right?”

“Well who's going to believe that the actual Keeper of the Grove came to Candela, and is just hanging out at the Eve of the Ether fair with her friends, and not killing and/or scaring people?” Ruby replied. It works *all the time* for Eluna at conventions and press events.”

Weiss raised a finger, before she slowly put it down. “You have a point…”

<Saves Shinies, too,> Blake said, holding up the bags of materials and accessories they'd already bought.

Weiss nodded. “But what if someone somehow realizes it *is* actually you?”

Ruby beamed. “That's when I use my *human disguise*!”

“What does it look like?”

“I'll show you later!” Ruby said. “It kinda ruins the point of a disguise when there's tons of people around seeing you put it on,” she said.

Weiss couldn't argue with that, and they resumed shopping.
Chapter 57

To Weiss’ disappointment, she wasn’t going to be able to manufacture elemental or regular ammo and explosives any time soon.

The Guild, the Forge, and the Roost required that the Terrace certify that she had much more control over her powers, and that certification would take at least six weeks, with three-four visits per week. And with Penny advising her against any more physical or magical exertion in preparation for her first trip tomorrow afternoon, there really was nothing to do but laze around, or watch Blake and Penny finish their costumes in the living room and wait for them to ask for input.

“Want to go see my human disguise?” Ruby offered.

Weiss agreed, and off the two went into their room. Ruby put on her full Keeper of the Grove armour: enchanted cloak, the hood pulled up over her head, and the same mask she’d worn when they’d staged Weiss’ death, as intimidating as the real one but without the fear hexes.

“Ready to see my super awesome human disguise, Weiss?” Ruby asked, waggling her eyebrows underneath the mask.

“Weiss?” Ruby cried, throwing her arms out.

She had pulled off her hood and her mask, the latter stashed inside her cloak. She was now wearing a top hat similar to Abner’s sans the bullet holes, the tears, and the weathering, so large it completely hid her horns and animal ears.

Weiss stared blankly at her.

“Pretty clever, right?” Ruby asked, waggling her eyebrows again.

Weiss groaned. “Ruby, that is the most stupid, paper-thin disguise I have ever seen in my entire life! Who’s going to be fooled by that?!”

Knock-knock.

The door opened.

Blake peered in. “Hey Whyss, hau low d’yu--” her eyes widened, and her ears and tail perked to full attention. “Who’err you?!?” she cried as she threw the door open and jumped back in fright, her hands in front of her with her claws out.

Penny rushed in, arms and eyes glowing in warning. “Detecting--!” she paused at the doorway, and blinked a few times. “Oh! Hello, Ruby! I'm sorry, your disguise completely fooled my optic
sensors!"

Blake whipped her head back and forth between Ruby and Penny, the horror on her face turning into confusion. <That's Ruby…?!> she whispered.

<It's her,> Weiss said with difficulty.

<My magical aura sensors can not be fooled as easily, Blake,> Penny said.

Blake turned to Ruby. She pulled her top hat on and off several times, showing them how she pulled her ears up and stuffed them and her horns underneath.

Blake just stared at her in ever growing disbelief, her face going through a number of expressions, none of them pleasant.

Qrow came up. <The hell is all this—oh, it's just Ruby and her human disguise, got it.>

Weiss looked at Ruby, then at the Fae crowded in the doorway. “Were you guys SERIOUSLY all fooled by that?”

Qrow, Penny, and Blake nodded.

<Excuse me...> Blake muttered as she walked away in a daze. <I just need to… question everything I thought was true...>

“Blake is currently suffering an existential crisis, and needs some time to pick up the pieces of her shattered perception of what is reality,” Penny translated.

Weiss looked at Ruby, who was now holding the hat in her hands, then back at Qrow and Penny. “Are you all fucking with me right now?!”

“I am not trying to deceive you in any way, Weiss,” Penny replied.

“She got me bad the first time she showed it off to me,” Qrow said. “You're probably not freaking out because you two are so close you can always tell it's her in a heartbeat.”

Weiss gritted her teeth. “Never mind… now, before I have to wonder who are these 'mysterious humans' wearing the same costumes as my friends, what are Blake and Penny's disguises like?”

“Blake ties a bow over her ears, and I have a headband with slots cut in to look like my ears are a novelty accessory,” Penny replied.

Weiss stared at her, then at Ruby, unable to speak.

Blake walked back in the doorway, one hand rubbing her temples. <Weiss: how low do you want your skirts?> she asked, her other hand making a line back and forth across her thighs.

Weiss got up off her hammock. <I'll just show you...> she replied in broken Actaeon.

Later that night, Blake finished their costumes, and Weiss' wardrobe had been modified more to her taste: the skirts cut higher over her knees, some with the sleeves and most of the topmost sections removed entirely, with the leftover fabric turned into decoration, or part of her new jackets, coats, and stockings that helped add some extra protection from the elements, natural or magical.

With a curtain set up in the living room for changing and her comm-crystal as a mirror, Weiss
dressed up in her new and modified clothes, then showed them off to the others, going through the whole gamut of everyday wear, gowns and outfits for celebrations and special occasions, working clothes, and even some extreme weather gear in case she’d ever find need to venture out of the Bastion and travel to the rest of the Valley.

“Why in the world would I need a thunder wolf fur coat?” Weiss asked as she nuzzled her face into the soft white fluff around the collar. “I mean, I don’t mind, it’s so fluffy I could die, but isn’t this too warm for the Fury and too heavy for the Flood?”

“There’s places here that you’re going to wish you had it if you don’t already,” Ruby said. “You might not ever need to go down to the Coldburrow Caverns, but hey: never hurts to be prepared!”

“I’ve never heard of any place that cold anywhere here in Acropolis,” Weiss replied.

“Plenty of secrets in the Valley, Weiss,” Qrow said. “Lots of them we’re still trying to figure out.”

“If you say so,” Weiss said, shrugging the coat off as she was already beginning to sweat in it.

The impromptu fashion show ended with her Eve of the Ether costume.

Blake had taken all manner of liberties with the design, both because Weiss weaver’s coat was armour first and foremost, and no one thought she would look good with the most popular—and as Weiss’ learned then, accurate—depiction of Samaria:

Crouched low to the ground, a repeater in one hand and a hookshot-dagger in the other, both loaded with potent poisons that would ruin the days of anything short of a Soul Eater, with her hood thrown over her head, and only the emerald eyes and “fangs” of her Gila Monster mask peering out from under it.

Weiss’ version was much more regal and dignified: standing proud with Myrtenaster in one hand and her gauntlet in the other; her hair left untied and flowing out from her hood and down her shoulders in carefully brushed locks; her belt of mediums and equipment tied around her waist; and a slit in the front of her dress, with enchanted steel-silk stockings to compensate for the exposure, and some risque elements to it.

Completing the look was her weaver's mask, now modified to look like a mischievous and sinister fox, the eyes an icy blue, and a voice modulator just like the one Ruby had in hers.

She checked herself out for far longer than all the other outfits, making sure that everything was perfect—you never got a second chance at a first impression, after all.

“Come on, princess!” Qrow called out. “Night shift’s coming soon!”

“Yeah, let us see, let us see!” Ruby added.

Weiss sighed, and shut off her crystal. She supposed she had done everything she could… except…

From the outside, the others watched as a cool, frosty mist started to pour out from under the curtain, before Weiss threw it aside, and the fog rushed out to the others. She stepped out with slow, measured strides, thin layers of ice on her clothes glimmering like jewelry.

Ruby’s jaw dropped.

Weiss smiled as she stepped up to her, carefully put Myrtenaster under her chin, and pushed it back up.
“You’ve got a little something...” she hummed as she daintily tapped the side of her mask, her voice coming out husky, with an unnerving, ethereal echo—a sound that’d send a chill down your spine and a very different sort of shiver elsewhere.

“Holy hell...” Qrow muttered. “Should I start calling you Ice Queen instead, princess?”


Qrow chuckled. “Well alright then, your majesty.”

Blake smiled and hummed in pride, giving her two thumbs up.

Penny beamed. “You look very intimidating and attractive, Weiss!”

“You guys really think so...?”

“Hell yeah!” Ruby said, a line of drool still running down the side of her mouth. “You look hot, Weiss!”

Weiss felt her face heat up. “Thanks... but could you hold back on the compliments when we're in public? I don’t want things to get... weird.”

“What’s so weird about me telling you how good you look...?”

“People might think we’re actually a couple, when it’s just our costumes,” Weiss replied. “And before any of you ask: I only agreed to this because it’d be cheaper and easier for Blake, alright?” she said, pointing Myrtenaster at the others.

After Penny translated, all of them nodded.

“Glad we got that cleared up,” Weiss said, before she dispelled her magic, and took off her mask. “Hey, Ruby? Can we talk some more in our room?”

“Yes!” Ruby said, getting up off the couch. “But better make it quick, most of us are leaving for the night shift soon!” she said as she headed there.

“I’ll skip changing until after, then,” Weiss said as she followed after her.

Qrow waited until the door to their room was shut. When it didn’t look like either of them were stepping out soon, he turned to the others, and whispered, <Is Weiss fucking with us, or does she just have one of the most impressive cases of denial I have ever seen in my entire life?>

<It feels like there's some sadistic author teasing us with Unresolved Sexual Tension for as long as they possibly can.,> Blake grumbled.

<The disconnect between what my sensors detect, the evidence I have on record, and what she claims to believe is indeed jarring.,> Penny said. <But didn’t her father also take quite a while to realize he was really more interested in Summer than Raven?>

<That was with my sister distracting him, and as far as I know, there isn’t anyone else trying to melt the Ice Queen’s heart,> Qrow replied. <Well, unless I missed one or the both of you making your own moves...>

Blake wrinkled her nose. <Ugh. I am DONE with romance for a LONG while, until I’m sure I won’t make such a horrible mistake ever again...>
Meanwhile, in Ruby and Weiss' room...

“Could you give me a minute to gather my thoughts?” Weiss asked as she put away her mask and equipment.

“Sure!” Ruby replied. “I'll just be in my nest.”

“Thanks,” Weiss replied.

She had thought that she’d have a well-articulated, thoughtful speech all ready to go by the time she put away her mediums in a locked box, but she still had absolutely nothing by the time she sat down in front of Ruby.

A long, awkward silence passed as they just looked at each other, Weiss fidgeting and feeling her face grow warm.

There were so many things she could have asked her to lead up to her actual question, make the transition smoother.

She could have asked how she felt about everyone assuming she and her were a couple and getting intimate (and on a regular basis, no less), how she felt about learning that Weiss was a lesbian, too, and how she felt about everyone but Zwei walking on them in compromising situations.

She could have asked why she so readily offered to snuggle with her to make her feel better, what she really thought when she noticed Weiss’ more interesting reactions to her massaging her, why she lent her the Summer plushie even if it was obviously as precious to her as the Eluna plushie was to her.

She could have even tried to get some more information straight from the source, asked her why if human/Fae relationships were such a taboo for the rest of their society, why was everyone so unquestionably supportive and enthusiastic of them, just because Ruby was the Keeper?

“You want to try this again tomorrow morning, Weiss?” Ruby asked. “I really need to get ready soon.”

“Do you like me?” Weiss blurted. “As in, do you want me to be your girlfriend? Hold hands in public, and kiss, and...” she tried to make a sexy animal noise.

Ruby snickered.

Weiss frowned and blushed.

“Sorry.”

“Well?” Weiss asked. “Do you...?”

“Yes,” Ruby replied.

Weiss blinked. “… What do you mean, ‘Yes’?” she asked, her cheeks burning brighter red.

“I mean, ‘Yes,’ I like you, I want to be your girlfriend, I want to hold your hand in public, kiss you, and--” she made a sexy animal noise--”with you.”
Weiss stared at her, mouth slowly falling open.

“I'm being completely honest with you, Weiss, because I really, really, really like you, and more than that, I hate lying,” Ruby said before she got up and went to the equipment rack.

“If Aunt Raven hadn’t lied to dad, if dad hadn’t lied to mom, and if Uncle Qrow hadn't lied to the Council and the other Watchers, then maybe they wouldn’t be dead, and he wouldn’t have had to raise me alone all these years,” she said as she put her cloak on.

She picked up the Keeper’s mask, currently wrapped up in a magic-proof cloth. “And besides: I've watched enough holos to know that whenever someone is attracted to someone else, and they decide to keep it a secret, it just makes things all weird and awkward between them, and they all find out in the end, especially when it’s going to make things even weirder and more awkward between them than if they just came clean in the first place.”

Ruby picked up her scythe, then turned to Weiss. “Why would you even do that to yourself...?”

“...”

“I need to go, Weiss,” Ruby said, as she opened the door. “Good night.”

“... Good night, Ruby...” Weiss muttered, long after the door had closed behind her.

Penny was the only one left in the house with Weiss, and the two of them busied themselves with picking up and hauling her clothes both old and new into her and Ruby's room.

“I'm detecting a higher than normal level of stress hormones in your system, and a dramatic downwards shift in your mood beside, Weiss,” she said as they worked. “Is something the matter?”

“Yeah...” Weiss replied. “I... really need to ask Ruby to build some trunks or wardrobes one of these days, this place is a mess...”

Penny frowned, clearly unconvinced, before she nodded and said, “I'll inform her for you, and see what materials we can spare for it.”

“Thanks, Penny,” Weiss said.

Penny left to maintain herself before charging up in preparation for tomorrow. Weiss spent a long time laying in her hammock, gently rocking back and forth, the Summer plushie left in Ruby’s nest. Eventually, she fell asleep and found herself back in the dreamscape.

This night, it was just the blank white expanse.

Her grandparents walked up from behind, Nick put a rough, calloused hand on her shoulder. “You want to talk about it, sweetheart?” he asked.

“No...” Weiss replied. “Grandpa, grandma? Can you guys please leave? I... need to be alone right now...”

They nodded somberly.

“Call if you need us, we’ll be around,” Nick said, before walked away, and faded into nothing.

“We love you, Weiss—no matter what happens,” Freya said, before she did the same.

Now all alone, Weiss sat down, and began to think.
Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

It is time.

Up until puberty came with all its raging hormones and confusing changes to her body, Weiss had never really been interested in romance.

Didn't have crushes on her classmates, adults, celebrities, fictional characters, or androids; rolled her eyes and tuned out whenever any of her classmates began to gush over how attractive someone was; and only participated in the Valentino's Day events because she didn't want to get lumped in with the pretentious and insufferable crowd who loved bragging about how they were exercising their right to do whatever the hell they wanted, oftentimes claiming some form of inherent superiority for not “following outdated traditions like blind sheep,” or something to that effect.

It didn't really help that her father's only concern about her crushes was that she either get involved with the children of Avalon's other elite, famous, and ridiculously wealthy (sans the ones of those that were even more controversial than him), and Winter only ever seemed to have crushes on soldiers, professional athletes, and of course, Guadalupe Garron, who Weiss now knew was both the sole official voice actress of Eluna, and the actual “mythological” figure herself.

(In retrospect, there was something quite different about Winter's gushing over the Eluna plushie.)

But all that changed when Clarita Nguyen literally came swinging into her life.

To kick-off the start of the school year, the various instructors, facilitators, and some alumni had a live show of the many extra-curricular activities Arcturus offered. The students either watched with mixed levels of interest, or hacked their holo-projectors to watch something more to their interest on HV.

Weiss herself was seriously tempted to follow suit, until the Dance Clubs segment ended.

“And now, for a very different sort of dance, combining grace, coordination, and violence!” the MC said. “Kicking off the Combat and Martial Arts Clubs is Ms. Clarita Nguyen, of the Swordplay Society!”

A replica of an Ancient Old World pirate ship was warped in on stage, holo-dummies of ferocious (if historically inaccurate) buccaneers appearing on deck, armed with cutlasses and pistols. The lights began to dim except for the stage's. All was quiet but for the murmurs of students still chatting with each other.

Then, laughter—excited, confident, and just the right amount of unhinged.

A spotlight tracked Clarita as she swung in on a rope, flying over just over the students' heads before she somersaulted through the air, and made a graceful landing right in the center of the deck.

The buccaneers all readied their weapons and cried out in pirate slang, more Hollywood than history. Like the knights when Abner had cranked the difficulty up to max, there was no fairness here, all hands on deck swarming her and climbing out from the rest of the ship to drown her in a sea of
marauders.

But Clarita was more than ready for them, unsheathing her own sword and proceeding to decimate the entire crew.

Weiss was transfixed as Clarita effortlessly weaved around the pirates attacks between blade or bullet, somersaulting through the air, maneuvering through every space she could squeeze in through, launching of walls or balancing on the rails to use every advantage available to her as she took them with perfectly timed thrusts and swings, oftentimes hitting them where they least expected it.

Weiss heart beat faster as dramatic music played alongside the sounds of violence and fallen pirates—though in retrospect, that was probably more because of the way Clarita laughed and smiled, the way her ruffled shirt and tight pants fit on her lithe and muscular figure, the incredible flexibility, acrobatics, and fighting skill she was gladly showing off.

She devastated the entire crew in less than two minutes, dozens of combat-grade holo dummies disappearing one after the other, and her never taking a single slash nor shot. The crew's Captain burst out of his quarters, roaring with anger as he unsheathed his blade, fire in his eyes and his mouth og rotten teeth curled into a snarl.

Clarita merely laughed and taunted him, drawing a C with a little N in the air. The two clashed, swords sparking, blades locking, so close they could see the whites in her eyes and the tell-tale distortion of holo-dummies. The music swelled to a crescendo just as the Captain got the upper hand on Clarita, knocking her off balance.

The Captain let out a mighty laugh as he thrust his sword for the kill…

… Only for his opponent to suddenly “regain” her footing, twisting and dodging the attack by less than an inch, raising her sword up to his neck and making him slit his own throat from his momentum.

The Captain fell, surprise on his face before dissipated.

The music reached its end and faded away.

The audience erupted into cheers.

Clarita turned to the audience and bowed, her eyes sparkling, sweat dripping down her caramel skin. “And those, students, are the kinds of moves you can learn at the Swordfighting Society!”

Weiss signed up as soon as the prompt came up.

She had a plan all thought up in her head: become one of the best students in class, challenge Clarita to a duel, and the moment she bested her in combat, confess her love for her!

… And it all fell apart her first day in the Society, when a much calmer but no less cheerful Clarita put down her and the many other lovestruck hopefuls as gently as she could, explaining it would be illegal for her to get into a relationship with any of her underage students, it would feel wrong for her to become their mentor then their lover, and most importantly, she was already taken, and happily so by a woman who had already bested her in one-to-one combat two decades ago.

Some quit on the spot, unable to face such rejection—oftentimes the first they’d ever experienced in their lives with how sheltered Arcturus kids tended to be.
Weiss stayed, if only because she didn’t want her to know that her heart had been rapidly hacked apart like Clarita did a block of wood for the first day presentation.

The sessions passed, Clarita trained her and others in all the many types of blades, until they finally found her specialty in fencing. She taught her the proper form, the technique, and the rules, helped her discover just how fluidly and gracefully she could move, how devastating her well-aimed rapier thrusts could be, refine them both until Weiss was on track to becoming one of the best students in the Society.

It started to look like the plan might not have crashed and burned after all, that dogged persistence had paid off for her as it had for her grandfather, and she could challenge her to that duel after all. (People fell in and out of love all the time, she reasoned with herself.)

… And then, Clarita called her into her office in private, to discuss what she thought was stagnating her performance in the Society.

“Weiss, are you in love with me?” Clarita asked.

There was no malice, no annoyance, no slyness or suggestive undertones. Just curiosity, like she was asking her how her grades were.

Weiss began to sweat and blush. “N-No, absolutely not!” she stammered, lying poorly in the see-through, blatantly obvious, and poorly thought out way adolescents could. “What makes you…?”

“Oh, once upon a time, I was a teenager too, Weiss, and I remember very well how I acted when I was in love with a woman I could never have—exactly how you’ve been acting.”

Weiss hung her head, ashamed, angry, but most of all, hurt.

“Do you wish to change instructors, Weiss?” Clarita asked softly. “I feel that I’m only holding you back because of how you feel about me, and I how feel about that.”

Weiss looked her in the eyes, and said “Yes.”

Her own eyes were red and welling up with tears, but there was proper decorum to be followed, even if your heart had been sliced up into ribbons, just after you’d finally sewn it back together.

Clarita nodded. “I’ll go ask my colleagues and see who would be willing to take you on instead.” Then, she opened her drawer and pulled out a physical business card—a real rarity those days. “And also: a recommendation for someone who can help you out.”

That someone turned out to be Dr. Coriander “Connie” Corazon, a therapist who specialized in counseling people questioning their sexuality identities and orientations but mostly for women. In her words, “Society may stop blinking an eye at queer couples doing basically anything, but there will always be girls wondering if they have a girl crush or just an actual crush.”

Jacques was willing to pay for the therapy, if only because he probably made a cost-benefit analysis, and the price of a scandal of his adolescent daughter pining after a married woman three times her age (who had also been her instructor, and was notably close to her) did not even come close to the price of keeping Dr. Connie on for a decade or more.

It all worked out wonderfully for Weiss, as the first handful of sessions were spent in painful, awkward silence, making small talk, and squirming and fidgeting when she ran out of meaningless topics. Dr. Connie had the patience of a saint, was a firm believer in the value of waiting for your clients to come forward with their issues on their own volition, and was still getting paid handsomely
regardless of whatever happened.

Then, Weiss' broke like a dam and out came everything in a messy, disastrous flood of Teenage Angst, one that Dr. Connie dutifully waded through, sorted out, and tried to help funnel into healthy, mature drains and pathways so Weiss wouldn't drown in hormones, stupid impulses, and poorly thought-out plans.

The one session she remembered the most was when Weiss admitted that she wanted to try to ask a girl out--”and for clarification, we're in the same grade, she's less than a year older than me, and she's also a member of the Natural Body Improvement Club!” she snapped, her cheeks burning red.

“So, have you thought of what you're going to do on your date?” Dr. Connie replied.

“I… haven't actually thought of that yet…” Weiss admitted.

“Well why haven't you?” Dr. Connie asked.

And so began the recurring structure of their meetings: Dr. Connie asking questions, Weiss answering them, and the process repeating itself for however long it took for Weiss to finally admit or figure out just what exactly was the problem, if Dr. Connie didn't step in to explain to fill in the gaps of her knowledge and emotional maturity.

“… So what if she does say yes, she will go out on a date with you?” Dr. Connie asked.

Weiss groaned, her neatly tied hair now frazzled and a two strands less than when the session started. “I… I… I don't know!” she cried. “I guess we'll go out for chocolate shakes, or something? I haven't thought that far yet!”

“Because…?”

“Because what if she realizes what a giant bag of issues I am, and she decides to just lie her way out of the date, and say an emergency came up?! What'll it look like if I don't just take her on her word and decide to go launch an investigation, find out if she really did have something come up and she wasn't lying?! And what if she did have something come up, and she finds out that I made like a creepy stalker, and that just makes her so glad she couldn't go on that date because who knows what would have happened, now that she knows all these new horrible things about me?!

“How do I find out this a relationship with her isn't just going to crash and burn?!”

Dr. Connie smiled. “Ask her out on a date.”

Weiss groaned. “Isn't there some other way?! Preferably one I can use BEFORE I ask her out?”

Dr. Connie shook her head. “Last I heard, no one has cracked the perfect algorithm that'll completely, accurately decide who's going to be your 'perfect match,' and all the dating companies are still legally required to say that their algorithms can't 100% guarantee said match.

“So, we still have to find it out the tried and tested way: ask someone out, date them for a while, and see if you two will work out to the best of your abilities.”

“There has to be a better way!”

Dr. Connie smiled. “If there is, then none of us have figured it out yet.”

So now here Weiss was, sitting on the side of her hammock and hoping that the Fae had cracked the
It was morning when Ruby stepped back into their room, looking roughed up and tired, her clothes and scythe still faintly stained with blood and other stains. “Morning Weiss!” she said, waving lazily with one hand as she put away her scythe with the other.

She frowned as she began to pulled out her wrapped up mask from inside her cloak. “Rough night?”

“To put it lightly...” Weiss muttered. “… Hey, Ruby...? Can I ask you a question?”

“Could you make it an easy one?” she replied as she put away her mask and cloak. “I kinda really need to crash soon.”

Weiss blushed. “How do you know if you're in love with someone?”

“Oh, that's easy!” Ruby said as she walked over to her nest. “I kiss them.”

Weiss blushed. “Just like that...?”

“No, I ask them first, and most of the time there's a date before that!” she said as she sat down among her cushions. “Anyway, if it turns out I really like kissing them and want to do more of that in the future, I know I love them, not just like them.”

“Is that a Fae thing?” Weiss asked.

Ruby shook her head. “Just me. I can't be in a serious relationship with someone I can't kiss, let alone have fun making-out with.”

Weiss blushed even more. “How do you know that?”

Ruby sheepishly looked away, before she turned back to Weiss. “… Do you promise not to tell anyone?”

“Promise.”

“I tried making out with Lifira one time,” Ruby replied. “I hadn't kissed anyone real before, and I was really curious about how it was like, so I tried it on her.”

Weiss’ face betrayed nothing. “So how did it feel like?”

“Awful. And I asked her to be really into it, and man, she was! But the thing is, there wasn't that something, and it just felt weird and unnatural, and then Yang caught me, and…” Ruby trailed off. “… Yeah.”

“Do you Fae have a word for that for that 'something’?”

Ruby shook her head. “Nah, it's all on you on whatever you want to call it. I don't know what it is for me yet, exactly, but I know it's not just kissing because Lifira was a pretty great kisser, just not for me.”

She yawned. “Was that all you wanted, Weiss? Because I don't think I can stay up much longer...”

Weiss opened her mouth. “No--” she blurted, before she shut her mouth.

Ruby looked at her. “No…?”
“No… I…” Weiss' face felt like it was melting. “Ruby, do you promise not to tell anyone, either?”

Ruby nodded, her sleepy face turning alert and serious. “Absolutely.”

Weiss sheepishly looked away, before reluctantly looking back at Ruby. “Could you… kiss me…?”

Ruby's eyes widened, her ears perked up.

Weiss started to sweat. “I-I know you like me, and I'm not sure if I like you back, and I'm kinda leaning on yes, but also no, and I just want to--”

She stopped as Ruby got up off her nest, walked over, and sat down beside Weiss.

Weiss gulped. “… Make... sure...” she finished, her voice barely a whisper.

“Someone please walk in on us,” she thought to herself. “Please, please, please…”

Ruby smiled at her, her sleepy eyes twinkling in the morning sun. “You can say no if you don't want to, Weiss.”

Weiss took a deep, not-at-all calming breath, then forced herself to bring her lips right up to Ruby's, careful not to smash their noses or foreheads together in decidedly unromantic and painful ways.

Her whole body began to tremble, sweat poured down her face as she closed her eyes, her face so close to Ruby's she just knew she could feel the intense heat radiating from her cheeks.

“Do you still want to…?” Ruby whispered.

“Y-yes…” Weiss whispered back.

She felt Ruby hold the back of her head, fingers threading through her hair, her touch only light enough to keep her steady, so much of her power and strength being held back because she knew any more would hurt her.

Weiss swallowed the lump in her throat.

She always knew that Ruby was powerful, in combat skill and in physical strength. She could and had crushed an entire armed mercenary company of rank 6 Queensguard Nominees without resorting to killing any of them if crippling most instead; easily wiped the floor with Cardin and his men while unarmored if invisible; and fought the dangerous creatures of the Valley on a daily basis without the slightest hint of serious injury, and from what she'd seen of her at the hot springs, any injury at all.

She could crush her, easily.

And yet she wouldn't, being very, very careful, holding back so much of her power, putting this much conscious effort and attention to make sure she didn't hurt her.

And Weiss found that she really, really, really liked that.

She closed the distance between their lips, surprising them both.

Weiss frowned, feeling like she was kissing a rock: solid and unmoving.

Then, Ruby got over the shock, started kissing back, physically pushing Weiss back from the strength she put behind it, before she quickly toned it down to just enough for her to really feel her lips on hers. She began to move her mouth against hers, now soft and warm, feeling like it was
yielding exactly to the shape of Weiss' till they were a perfect fit.

Weiss felt a rush like the first time she'd held Myrtenaster, only instead of a dam breaking and her magic flooding out of her body, into the sword then back again several times as potent, she felt herself melt, delicious warmth spreading to every single part of her body, turning her into jelly.

Ruby caught her before she could fall and break the kiss, cradling the back of her head, cupping her lower back. Weiss could feel the touch of each finger send ripples across her skin, her grip tightening and loosening, too hard, too soft, until she found just right.

Weiss threw her arms around Ruby, pulled herself into her body, feeling her densely-woven muscles constantly shifting and tightening under her clothes. She made a noise, a sound she'd never made in her entire life, what sounded like a deep and guttural…

… Not a threat, but an invitation.

Ruby opened her eyes, half-lidded and with a mischievous look Weiss hadn't seen before. She broke away from the kiss for air…

… Or she would have, if she could.

Weiss' eyes fluttered open. She tried to ask Ruby what was wrong, before she found she couldn't move her lips anymore.

“Whut da phuck?!” Weiss mumbled.

“Ay fink yuu frovz arr lipsth togeverrr!” Ruby replied. “Ay geth datz wut da tinggling wath!”

“Gonthlet! Nid tu get my gonthlet!” Weiss said, her eyes opening wide in alarm, her face burning bright red—sadly, it didn't do anything to melt the enchanted ice sealing their lips together.

Knock-knock.

“Weiss? Ruby?” Qrow asked. “I'm not about to walk in on anything, am I?”

They tried to answer him, but it only managed to come out as panicked, unintelligible, and muffled mumbling.

“… Okay: I'm giving you guys till the count of five to cover up, or try to make whatever is going on in there look less awful, then I'm opening the door. One… two… three…”

Weiss made a little dying noise.

Ruby tried to give her a reassuring look, but it was difficult to do so with just her eyes and eyebrows, and more so with their lips frozen together.

“… Four… five!”

Qrow carefully opened the door, and peered in.

Weiss squeezed her eyes shut.

Ruby sheepishly waved.

Qrow stared blankly at them.
“… I'll go get Penny...”
Chapter 59

Qrow knocked on Blake and Penny's bedroom door. <Hey, Penny! I need you in Ruby and Weiss' room, stat.>

The two of them looked up from helping Blake improve her reading in Nivian. <What happened?> Penny said as she turned off her holo-projector. <Is it a medical emergency?>

Qrow paused. <It's uh… you should probably just go there and see for yourself, and fast.>

Blake and Penny looked at each other, before they got up and did so.

The door had been left open for Qrow's rushing, and Ruby and Weiss were still sitting on her hammock, lips still frozen together. They had tried to move, but it was both painful and difficult, and neither wanted to risk finding out first-hand what would happen if one of them broke away without melting the ice first.

Penny and Blake stopped in the doorway for a few moment, both of them processing the scene in front of them.

“Beginning dispelling and separation attempts...” Penny said as she walked in, her hands glowing.

Blake turned to Qrow. <Did Weiss…?>

<Accidentally freeze their lips together while they were making out?> Qrow replied. <Seems like it.>

Weiss made a frustrated noise and squeezed her eyes shut, her cheeks still burning red.

“Hey Whyss?” Blake asked.

“Mhmm?” she replied.

“Aym rilly sorry, but aym gunna lahf rilly hardd at yu guyz ryte naw,” Blake said, before she did just that.

Weiss grumbled under her breath. Ruby patted her on the shoulder. Blake tried reach for the door frame for support, missed, and ended up on the floor, curled up and clutching her sides from how hard she was laughing.

Penny put her hands near their lips, quickly separated the two of them, and healed any of the physical damage.

“Woo!” Ruby said as she smacked her healed lips, no longer severely chapped. “Thanks, Penny!”

“You're welcome, Ruby,” Penny said. “Are there any more concerns either of you have?”

“Nothing else from me,” Ruby replied.

“Can you revive the parts of myself that have died from embarrassment?” Weiss asked.

Penny shook her head. “Sadly, my mender protocols have their limits.”

“Then you can you at least help me forget everything before we I ended up freezing our lips
together?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t do such precision memory erasure unless I had access to much more complex equipment than I currently have, or you also had a chronicle installed.”

Weiss sighed and shook her head. “You know what? Just shock me unconscious again...” she muttered as she laid down on her side, away from the others.

“Can you do it for me, too?” Ruby asked as she got up to give her room. “I was planning on going to sleep, but Weiss got me all fired up, and I don’t want to nod off on my shift later.”

“I can and will, though I must advise against too frequent use of this!” Penny said as she began to charge up her hands with a different frequency of magic. “This was only ever meant for temporarily curing extreme cases of insomnia, and non-lethal take downs; repeated use will seriously disrupt—”

“Just do it already!” Weiss cried.

Penny paused, before she shrugged. “Administering treatment!” she said as she put her hand on Weiss’ back.

There was a brief flash in her vision, before she blacked out once more.

Weiss came to by noon, feeling somewhat better now that she’d caught up on her lost sleep.

Ruby was in her nest, still unconscious and drooling all over her pillow. Weiss bit her lip, debating whether or not she should wake her up and ask her all the new burning questions on her mind, before she decided not to.

She grabbed her work dress and her gauntlet, then tiptoed it out of their room and outside the house. Tending to her crops and her new orchard provided some much needed distraction for an hour, but the after she closed the lid on the storage box, there was no avoiding it anymore:

“I kissed Ruby.” Weiss thought. “And she kissed me back. And then I froze our lips together.”

She whined in distress as she leaned on the box, a flood of mixed emotions welling up inside of her:

Confusion, as she wondered just what exactly this new relationship would entail, as though Ruby wasn’t Weiss ‘first girlfriend, she was the first person she’d dated across species lines.

Excitement, as she remembered how amazing her lips felt on her, how well their bodies fit together, the way her touch brought all sorts of interesting reactions to her that she’d never felt before with anyone else.

Dread, as she worried if Ruby was going to change her mind about her now that she knew how quickly things could go south because of her lack of control over her powers.

Horror, as she imagined just how much worse that incident could have gone if her powers had leaked out in greater amounts, or if they had been doing much more than just kissing each other on the lips.

Arousal, when she imagined what exactly those acts would be, sans the mood-killing magical mishaps.

“Weiss?” Penny asked.
Weiss screamed and jumped into the air, face burning red. She looked in worry at the thin layer of frost that had formed over the lid, hurriedly dispelled it, before she turned to Penny.

“Y-Yes…?” she asked, trying and failing to act casual.

Penny hesitated a moment. “I just came over to remind you that you're due at the Weaver's Terrace in an hour, 2 PM as Elder Goodwitch had ordered,” she replied.

Weiss blinked. “O-Oh, right… I… should I do anything before I go?”

“I would heavily advise dressing in your full weaver's armour, and eating a heavy lunch as you skipped breakfast, preferably something high in carbohydrates as you will begin your Elemental Weaving training today. Even with your naturally high stores of mana, performing magic will still tax your physical body, if just your mind and willpower.

Weiss nodded. “I guess I should go get cooking...” she said as she prepared to head back up to the house.

Penny stopped her. “Actually, Weiss, I was wondering if I could ask you how is your relationship with Ruby, given your recently discovered powers.”

Weiss sighed. “Well, it'd be hard to tell how it is, given that the whole thing just started this morning!”

“No, no it has not!” Weiss snapped. “For the last time, me and Ruby are—we, well, I guess we are together now, but again, only since this morning!” she looked away uneasily. “We… we haven't really had any time to discuss it, either, so I guess I'm just assuming we're girlfriends now...”

She looked back uneasily at Penny. “… Do Fae have platonic friendships that happen to involve things like kissing…?”

Penny nodded. “Some do. But there are always long discussions beforehand laying out the terms exactly, and Ruby strikes me as the kind of Fae who would not just kiss someone unless she were romantically interested in them.”

She looked around, her ears rotating on her head like satellite dishes, before she leaned in and whispered, “And please don't tell Ruby, but I'm aware of the incident where she attempted to get intimate with Lifira in a Honeydream; as part of my duties as the Keeper's Chronicler alongside Qrow, I'm privy to the records stored in her and Yang’s dreamcatcher.”

With another check to make sure Ruby hadn’t heard, Penny leaned back and resumed talking to her normally. “Anyway… how would you say your relationship is looking, then?”

Weiss paused. “I don't know. I've… never really been good at this dating thing.”

“How so?”

Weiss debated it for a moment, before she shook her head. “I'm sorry, but I don't feel like sharing the intimate details of my love life, when I know there's probably an army of chroniclers itching to dissect every word after your next brain drain.”

Penny nodded. “Understood, and shall not ask again!”
“Thanks. By the way… did the Council happen to put you up to this?” Weiss asked. “Ask me questions about how me and Ruby are doing once you're unmistakably sure we're together…?”

Penny shook her head. “Oh, no, not at all! Aside from the fact that I had wrongly assumed you were a couple for most all of the time we’ve been together and had been treating you two accordingly, Keepers are actually given plenty of autonomy, and the Council rarely steps in their personal lives.”

“Exceptional circumstances aside, they’re more than happy to let them ‘do their own thing,’ as you humans might say.”

Penny suddenly looked away; she couldn't blush, having no blood nor modifications to her “skin” that could simulate it, but Weiss could tell she would have if she could. “… And in the interest of transparency, this was also motivated by my own desire to learn more about courtship and how to attempt it myself.”

“You want to try dating?” Weiss asked, more curious than incredulous.

Penny looked back and nodded. “My creators were mates, actually, and to use a shared expression between our cultures, they never let the flame of passion die out.

“It's been quite interesting observing them, how this arrangement that seems to cause such stress, conflict, and anger is also the same thing that gives them incredible relief, peace, and happiness.

“They had actually fed me a large amount of anecdotes, records, and sometimes even live observations of their moments together, as part of their attempts to make me more like an organic being, and expand my knowledge in general.

“The only thing they've excluded is whenever they get intimate, though that's more for avoiding the risk of my becoming collateral damage during the act itself.”

Weiss raised her eyebrows.

“One of them is a Water Weaver,” Penny replied. “Emotional arousal has been proven to affect your alignment's magic even more than that of Fire Weavers, if less destructive. Generally speaking, at least…”

Weiss looked at her gloved hand, and winced. “Right.”

“Back on topic: I became quite curious about romance in general, and even with the information available through me to the Codex and the Info-Grid, there's only so much you can learn from theory before you have to experiment.”

“So you tried dating?”

Penny nodded. “The Trance was great for that. I assumed false identities, and by that point my intelligence had been upgraded and grown to such a level where I could convince anyone I was, well, anyone I wanted to be!

“It helped that most assumed that you are not being entirely truthful about who or what you are 'IRL,' and identities and histories were easy enough to acquire then erase or obfuscate to avoid suspicion, so long as you know what you're doing—or alternatively, can hack and manipulate the server’s code at the machine language level,” she said, beaming with pride.

Weiss’ eyes widened. “Oh, sweet Shepherd, please tell me you didn't get swarmed with creeps like I did...”
“I had been, though honestly I'm not bothered by it these days,” Penny replied. “If anything, studying the data afterward left me feeling sad for them than anything else, especially when closely examining the records of our interactions and the trends in their responses and actions.”

Weiss shuddered. “Let's move on, please!”

Penny nodded. “As you wish. I fostered some 'serious' relationships, but eventually, I realized that though romance in the Trance is possible and there are numerous precedents, there was the caveat that many couples eventually decide to reveal who they are ‘IRL’ as a show of absolute trust, that they are truly committed to each other.

“And, well...” Penny gestured at herself.

Weiss nodded. “I could see where that'd become difficult.”

Penny hummed. “I attempted to construct a human identity for myself. One that was completely biological, had been born to normal parents, and had both the mental and chronological age of a 15 year old.

“But it just felt... wrong.

“So I decided to start going as myself, being honest about my identity as a completely artificial being, though obviously, my true origins and the nature of my creators were kept secret.”

“Were people... bothered by your appearance?” Weiss asked, eyeing Penny up and down. “Your design is kind of...”


“'Unusual!' I was going to say 'unusual,'” Weiss said. “I stopped being weirded out by your floating arm... thingies... pretty quickly, and considering everything else I've seen in the Valley, that's really saying something!”

“They weren't actually all that bothered by my design,” Penny said. “If anything, they wanted to know the schematics or at least the scientific principles behind them, so they could attempt to build their own prostheses similar to mine.

“I'm still getting requests for plans, with Non-Disclosure Agreement drafts, and reputable lawyers to modify them with at my discretion, though for obvious reasons, I've had to decline every one.”

“And they're not bothered at all by the fact that you're an AI? Or a golem, I guess.”

Penny smiled. “That would be surprising indeed, considering the community I ended up with is united by their mutual interest in cyborgs, androids, and artificial intelligences.”

Weiss blinked. “Wait... so that's what 'Mechanical Love' is? A dating site?”

“It's more a forum and centralized location for resources such as reputable independent prosthetic engineers for more 'exotic' enhancements, though yes, they do have a subset for those that would like to become romantically involved with cyborgs, or even completely artificial beings like myself.

“I'm actually well-known as one of the most advanced and 'human' of the latter.” Penny smiled. “The irony is not lost on me.”

Weiss chuckled. “You must get a lot of attention.”
“I do, though it's mostly intellectual inquiries, or those wishing to attempt to create personalities similar in complexity to mine. I've exes who wish there was something fundamentally different about my personality if with the same level of complexity and intelligence, or that they could clone me and try a second time with a fresh slate, so to speak.”

Weiss paused, before she laughed. “Of all the things I never thought I'd be talking about, it'd be a robot's exes...”

“It makes for interesting conversation at community events, that's for sure!” Penny chirped.

“So are you about to reveal I'm not the only human involved with a Fae here?”

Penny frowned. “Sadly, my search for a potential mate for a long-term relationship has been unsuccessful. Though, if anything, all those failures have helped me refine the my most important criteria—my 'type' so to speak.”

“And that is...?”

“Someone who is enthusiastic about my being an artificial being, first and foremost! There's something that irks me about people that simply ignore such a vital part of myself, than accepting that I was made, not born.

“Second is that they are 'nice' as you humans would say; the 'Mender' personality type who is caring, more concerned for others than themselves, and is generally reserved and polite. I get enough excitement from all of you, no offense.”

“None taken.”

“And lastly, they would have to be female, taller than myself, and a natural redhead, though the last is optional given the rarity of its occurring still, and the propagation of 'hair dye' mods.”

“Why natural redheads specifically?”

Penny smiled as she touched her own hair. “Because they're incredibly rare, just like myself; it's why I chose this combination of hair and eye colours, actually.”

The conversation came to an abrupt end as Weiss' stomach began to growl.

“Aw, crap, how long have we been talking here?” Weiss asked, pulling out her comm-crystal.

Penny's eyes widened. “Much longer I originally intended...” she muttered. “I'm sorry.”

Weiss sighed as she hurried back to the house. “You can apologize by helping me cook something up real quick!”

“I was already planning to!” Penny chirped as she followed after her

They came into the kitchen, where Blake was already sitting at the table reading, and enjoying a plate of sashimi from some fish she had caught last night.

As Penny got out pots and pans and heated up the oven, Weiss opened the fridge to see what she'd have to work with.

Inside was another plate of sashimi, carefully wrapped in plastic with a sticky note on it.

This time, the doodle of Weiss' face was much more flattering, with a checkmark beside it.
She pulled her head out of the fridge, and smiled at Blake.

She looked up from her reading, and smiled back.
Walking in the Weaver’s Terrace felt very different with Weiss’ robes and her gauntlet on, and her mask and Myrtenaster hanging on her belt alongside her mediums.

She could feel the magic radiating all around, like being submerged under a cool, calm river, feeling the water and an incredible calm wash over her, her body begin to hum and radiate with incredible power. Even the Fae there started to treat her differently, Weavers greeting her amiably, the other folks bowing respectfully and minding how they spoke to her.

About the only thing that hadn’t changed were that the monkeys were still assholes.

Weiss felt a disturbance, like rocks falling into a pond and sending ripples all over its surface. Faster than she thought she could ever move, she spun around and held up her bare hand, blasting cold mist into the air.

She smiled as the flying blueberries froze in mid-air, before they dropped to the ground and shattered. She looked up at the disappointed and surprised monkeys up in their branches, and stuck her tongue out at them.

The creatures hung their heads and looked apologetic.

Then she felt a second barrage of blueberries assault her from her behind.

The first troop of monkeys howled with laughter as Weiss spun around to glare at the second troop, who were instead congratulating each other and pointing at the foolish weaver they had caught by surprise.

Weiss gritted her teeth, freezing mist pouring from her nostrils and the sides of her mouth, before Penny grabbed her wrist and pulled her off to their destination—higher up the side of the mountain than inside it this time.

She walked up a series of staircases and gardens thriving with plants and wild animals, before she stepped into the eponymous Weaver’s Terrace. She had to stop and stare in wonder, taking it all in, feeling the intense magic pour into her body, making her feel more alive than she ever had in her entire life.

The Terrace was divided into four quadrants, one for each element, with an elaborate raised altar in the center.

For Air: a lush forest, filled with tall trees, vines hanging from their branches, and small islands floating up in the air by tornadoes at their bases.

Weavers swung, climbed, and even flew all around them, propelled by bursts of electricity or flying devices of various designs, if they didn’t already have wings of their own. Those that weren’t nested in the branches and hollows, making music or experimenting with various magitech made of wood and plants.

For Earth: an arid desert, ancient mountains and tall spires of stone rising up from the ground, sand swirling and blowing over dunes, and caves, their insides glistening with gems and precious metals.

Weavers there sat and meditated in almost perfect stillness, if they weren’t stomping their feet and thrusting their hands through the air, the land shifting and changing as they willed it. Those that
weren’t carefully molded and sculpted clay and refined metals and stone, working on similar projects as their air counterparts.

For Fire: an island paradise, tropical plants, exotic flowers, and miniature volcano rising up in the center of it all, rivers of magma pouring down from its constantly bubbling and smoking mouth.

Weavers danced with and fought each other—sometimes both at the same time—going through a series of complex, energetic movements accompanied by jets of flame, balls of fire, and even pillars of hot lava. Those that weren’t participated in the loudest, most energetic, and entertaining cooking competitions Weiss had ever seen, the chefs often literally on fire as they tossed, chopped, and roasted their creations.

And for Water: a thriving swamp like Keeper’s Hollow, filled with giant mangroves with roots rising over the water, streams and rivers gently bubbling and trickling, with a few docks, boats, and buildings-on-stilts spread around.

Weavers there were almost constantly in the water, waist-deep as they harnessed it and turned it into playful bubbles, blasts of water, and miniaturized storms, or completely submerged, effortlessly moving through it like sharks in for the kill. Those that weren’t were carefully monitoring bubbling cauldrons or slaving over much more complex alchemy sets than the ones Weiss had at home.

As she and Penny headed there, Weiss noticed and watched a mixed team of weavers move as one in front of a long series of alchemy equipment, straining their necks and dipping low to the ground as they followed a solution’s trip through so many containers and tubes, before ending at a pitcher.

The others stepped well back as the alchemist leading them pulled out a dropper from inside her coat, and carefully added two drops.

The purple-blue liquid inside started to bubble and fizz violently. The other members of the team readied their hands and foci as their leader held the pitcher steady, keeping it from rocking itself right off the table.

Finally, it stopped. The alchemist called her fellows over, some of them fetching glasses and a ladle. A small sample was poured out, then handed over to their earth weaver who carefully swirled it around in its glass, before knocking it back.

Everyone waited in tense silence.

The earth weaver smacked their lips, and gave the thumbs up.

The group cheered, high fives going all around as they began to pour glasses of juice for the rest of them.

Weiss laughed.

“The Fae like to mix training with play, as a means to entice young children to attempt them in the first place, to help mitigate the effects of stress, and of course, just to have fun,” Penny explained, smiling.

“Please do note that this doesn’t mean you can take your training lightly,” Glynda said as she came up behind them, watchers on either side of her. “We Fae can also get extremely competitive and serious about our games.”

Both Penny and Weiss spun around, eyes and optics widening in surprise. “Elder Goodwitch!” Weiss cried as they bowed. “What are you doing here, ma’am?”
“It’s my day-off, and I’ve decided to use it to train you,” she replied coolly.

“You’re using your day-off to take on more work?” Weiss asked.

“Yes. Do you have an issue with how I choose to spend my free time...?” Glynda asked, a barely perceptible edge to her voice.

Weiss shook her head. “Not at all, Elder Goodwitch! I'm just... surprised, is all.”

Glynda nodded. “Do know that I will only be able to attend to you once a week; the rest of your visits here will likely have you training under a different senior weaver, or even one of the Primals.”

“They’re the four of the most powerful weavers in the entire Valley, second only to Elder Goodwitch,” Penny explained.

Weiss nodded. “Who are they, anyway?”

“Most of them are incredibly busy with preparations for the Eve of the Ether tomorrow, but one is currently around,” Glynda replied. “A word of warning: Primal Salamanca has quite the--”

“YYYYEEEEAAAHFFFFFF!”

Weiss flinched and turned to the Fire quadrant of the Terrace, staring as a weaver shot out from inside the volcano, rocketing up into the air before he began to arc downwards towards where she was.

A Chinchilla Fae with his hair done up in a giant, fluffy afro landed just before Weiss, blasting jets of fire from his palms to slow his descent. He crouched low on the floor with his head down, and said, “Ladies, gentlemen, and non-binary genders…

“RORY SALAMANCA, PRIMAL OF FIRE IN THE HOUSE, YO!”

Fwoosh!

Giant pillars of flame erupted behind Rory as he sprang up into the air, landing with his arms and legs in the shape of an X and his hands in the Horns.

Weiss staggered back, her arm in front of her face.

Glynda sighed. “… Personality…” she finished.

“Haah-haah…!” Rory laughed as he walked up to them. “What is up, my homies?!” he said, his arms spread wide.

“What the hell was that all about?!” Weiss cried as she put her arm down.

Rory grinned. “What, this?”

Fwoosh!

Weiss yelped and threw up an ice shield in front of her. “Yes, that!” she yelled.

“Relax, homie: it’s just some fire!” Rory said as the flames disappeared once again. “I got this— wouldn’t have become the Primal of Fire if I didn’t! Besides, what’s so wrong with fire? You know how much better life would be, if we had a lot more pillars of motherfucking fire shooting out behind people?
Imagine: one of those service at the Holy Shepherd’s place, right? Custodian’s gets to the end of the sermon and they go, ‘Praise be to Piper!’ then--"

**Fwoosh!**

“Trust me: people are gonna be lining out the door, standing outside and looking in through the windows, watching those sermons on HV just for fun!”

Glynda sighed as she stepped up. “Please excuse us, Salamanca, Weiss and I have a lot of training planned for today.”

“Sure I can’t take over for you, Goodwitch?” Rory asked. “It's your day-off and all! Besides, the things she's capable of, and a little one-on-one time with me, and we can do some **beautiful** things, man, **beau-ti-ful** things!”

“Sorry, but I’d rather train with Elder Goodwitch thanks,” Weiss said as she stepped up beside her.

Rory shrugged, still smiling. “Eh, suit yourself! But if you ever want to learn how to do tricks like **this**--”

**Fwoosh!**

“Just give ole Rory a call, yo!” He said before he crouched low, and pointed his palms down to the ground. “Salamanca **out**!”

Weiss raised another ice shield as Rory went rocketing through the air once more, and back inside the volcano. “Are all the other Primals like that?” she asked Glynda.

“Primal Aeilana is also of a similar disposition, but Primals Logan and Wenua are much calmer, if with their own quirks.”

“Weavers of exceptionally high power and skill tend to exhibit highly visible forms of neurodivergence, though the exact causes are still heavily debated,” Penny added.

“However, that's a conversation for another day, when the clock isn't counting down,” Glynda said. “Weiss, I'm assuming Maker Abner warned you of the Eve's unique effects on weavers like ourselves?”

Weiss nodded. “He did. Let's get these powers of mine under control.

Glynda smiled for a moment. “That's what I like to hear.”

---

Weiss’ training area turned out to literally be the shallow end of the water.

Weavers much younger than her were learning how to swim, or harness their powers in the first place, oftentimes in the form of shooting galleries like at arcades, but with magic than toy guns and holo projectors.

Because her biggest issue was control, Weiss was doing what they called the “Blast Back.”

The mechanics were as follows: Glynda would man five magical rings floating in the air, all the same size. She would throw a certain amount of water at Weiss, her job was to harness it and redirect it into a specific ring with the right amount of power, as denoted by whichever ring was lit up and in what colour.
If she got it right, the ring would retain the magic until it was full, and taken out of the game. Too weak or too much, and it would come right back in her face, giving the game its name.

“This is going to be easy!” Weiss said as she prepared to wade into the water, only up to her shins.

Glynda stopped her. “I was about to mention: this is going to be without your gauntlet, Myrtenaster, or your mask,” she said.

Weiss eyes widened, before she nodded sheepishly. “Oh… right…”

Penny came up, and took her equipment and mediums away from her, leaving Weiss with just her clothes.

Glynda sent the rings floating up in the air at different heights. “Ready?” she asked as she drew a stream of water up into her hands, lazily curling and winding it around her body.

Weiss held out her hands. “Ready!”

_Swoosh!

Glynda sent a blast of water like garden hose.

Weiss caught it, bit her lip as it began to surge and spiral around her arms, more powerful than it was before.

“Don’t think too hard!” Glynda cried. “Relax, feel the flow!”

_Ding!

One of the rings lit up.

Green. Lightest you could make it, like spitting out a mouthful of water.

_Swoosh!

Weiss ended up sending a fire hose blast into it. The ring made an awful noise, before sending it right back to her.

“Agh!” she cried as she staggered back, eyes squeezed shut.

“Are you alright?” Glynda asked.

Weiss wiped the water from her eyes, blinked until her vision was clear again. She stepped back into position, and nodded. “I’m fine!”

“Good!” Glynda said, waiting a few moments before she tossed a tiny orb at Weiss.

She caught it, sliding it back and forth between the palms of her hands, keeping it moving before her magic could begin to gather in it.

_Ding!

Orange. High-pressure, like a pipe that just burst.

Weiss bit her lip as she suspended the ball between her palms, magic swirling into it and growing it larger and larger, until she let it go.
Whoosh!

Off it went! … Several inches to the side of the ring, exploding into the protective barrier around them before returning to the water below.

Weiss cried out in frustration.

“We’re not stopping now!” Glynda said as she wound up like a baseball pitcher.

“I don’t intend to!” Weiss said as she readied herself once more.

Glynda threw her fastball at Weiss.

She held her hands out to catch it just a moment too late, the ball exploding right in her face.

Splash!

Weiss fell back into the water, knocked down from the surprise and the momentum, looking up at world from under the surface.

Ding!

Blue, middle of the road, like a garden sprinkler.

Bubbles escaped her nose, as the rings turned off and floated down to the shore.

Glynda waded over and pulled her out. “Are you alright?”

Weiss gently spat at some water. “I’m fine…"

“Then, I hope you’re ready for more, because we’re doing this again.”

“Great, because that's exactly what I was about to say,” Weiss said.

Glynda smiled. Weiss felt some of her magic surge through her hand and into her body, energizing her, washing away the sting of the fastball-to-the-face.

The rings started to float up in the air once more as Weiss and Glynda got into position.
Chapter 61

Weiss and Glynda trained through the afternoon and well into the evening, going through a handful of the many, many games/training exercises meant to help weavers improve their skills.

They kept playing Blast Back until Weiss messed up far too often for Glynda's liking, sending the wrong pressures into the rings, missing them entirely, or even failing to catch the water she was sending over in the first place.

After a short break and several canisters of mana-water for the both of them, it was off to the next game:

“Whip-It”

Here, Weiss had to fish orbs of the water, or knock them down from the air with only a water-whip spell, avoiding certain targets, and minding the pressure after she caught the right ones, or else they would burst.

She played a few rounds, until her arm began to hurt from whipping it back and forth and flicking her wrist for extra control, and the fingers on her other hand were starting to get crooked from her using it to control the pressure.

They took a longer break after that, Weiss getting herself examined by Penny as Glynda explained the last game for the day:

“Ripple Rider”

Here Weiss had to maneuver a little boat through a pond littered with obstacles, only allowed to move it with waves and ripples made however she chose. At Glynda's recommendation, she sat on the edge of the pond, stuck her feet into the water, and tried to move the boat using just her lower body, making sweeping movements with her ankles and feet, and precise movements with her toes.

It was all going well, until a mistimed wave got her boat tangled in a mess of weeds. Weiss struggled to pull out, gently nudging it, trying to blast it out with a rogue wave, then attacking from a different side of the pool, but it just ended up getting more and more caught in the plants.

“That's enough, Weiss,” Glynda said as she put a hand on her shoulder.

Weiss eyed her boat, almost completely unseen for the weeds, and sighed. “Okay…”

Glynda and Penny worked to pull her out of the water, and they went to towel off and rest one last time.

Weiss supposed she was well on her way to becoming an honourary Fae when she wasn't the least bit horrified by how wrinkled and pruney her hands and feet gotten from being submerged and exposed to water for so long, the way her formerly smooth and supple skin had become tough and calloused like her grandfather's from all her farming and walking barefoot everywhere.

On the bright side, her complexion had gone from “porcelain doll” to “rosy white.”

On the downside, she still felt like she'd just gone through a battery of brutal written tests of all her weakest subjects.
“Gaah...” Weiss groaned as she lay spread out on a dock. “Is it time for yoga, or whatever it is you Fae call it…?” she asked.

“That's for physical training,” Glynda replied as she sat beside her. “We use a different form of meditation for magical training.”

“Well what is it?” Weiss asked.

“Sitting under a waterfall,” Glynda replied.

Weiss paused. “Seriously?”

“There's a reason it's a cliche for every martial arts holo,” Glynda replied.

Once Weiss felt well enough to walk, they headed over to a massive fountain built into a tree, niches carved out of its trunk, on its branches, and even hidden between its submerged roots.

Numerous waterfalls poured out from it, falling out onto several nests for weavers to sit on. Weiss peered into the water below, noticed some of them were under the water, wearing their masks or enchanted cloth tied around their mouths and noses.

She stopped as she noticed some of them not wearing any equipment at all, be they amphibious Fae like Frogs, or even what looked to be various types of fish and other aquatic creatures—fins for ears, gills on the sides of their chests peeking out of slits in their robes, and even some with “hair” made of tentacles.

“During the Fury, the amphibious and aquatic subspecies of Fae generally live in settlements outside of the Bastion, such as Calmwater Commune near the Timeless Depths,” Penny explained. “Those that do live in the city spend most of their time in the Weaver's Terrace.

“While not impossible nor that dangerous to go on dry-land for long periods of time, and they do have equipment and public facilities for it, it's oftentimes painful, uncomfortable, and/or inconvenient for them to do so, to the point where most just choose not to, until the Flood comes.”

Weiss nodded. “Guess that explains why I've never seen them before...” she muttered they looked for free spots above the water.

Weiss was the only one meditating that time, sitting cross-legged with her head under a waterfall; she closed her eyes as it began to drip into her eyes, struggled to breath without inhaling it.

Glynda busied herself with fixing her posture. “Maintain your form,” she said as she put her hands on her shoulders, pushed them back down. “You won't reap the benefits otherwise.”

“I'm trying over here!” Weiss snapped, before she regretted it as a mouthful of water poured straight into her mouth.

“Breath deeply and slowly, empty your thoughts,” Glynda said as Weiss spat and gagged. “Don't intentionally think of anything, don't dwell on your emotions, just let them come and go as they please.”

“... And above all, please don't fall asleep.”

Weiss mumbled an affirmative noise as she tried to do just that.

A few moments of silence passed.
“You're still not relaxing,” Glynda said flatly.

Weiss pulled her head out from under the waterfall. “I'm trying to reach a state of calm and peace here!”

“Well don't try, that's ruining the entire point of the exercise,” Glynda said as she gently pushed her head back under the waterfall. “This meditation isn't to calm you down, it's to help you become more attuned to yourself and the Flow.”

“The Flow is how Water Weavers refer to the specific wavelengths of Avalon's magic that naturally resonate with them—your alignment, in other words,” Penny explained.

“And the only way you can do that is if you are able to become completely in the moment,” Glynda said. “The Flow isn't a state of mind, a place you have to go to from somewhere else—you are always in it, you just have to know where exactly at any given time.

“Don't think, just be. And before you complain that nothing's happening: the results don't start to become noticeable until at least a month to a year in of daily practice.”

Weiss sighed heavily.

“Just think of it like your physical training,” Penny hummed.

Weiss made a little affirmative noise, and continued to meditate; she tensed up as she felt Glynda's hands on her once more, fixing her posture yet again.

“Be like the water over your head,” Glynda said, “constantly moving and changing, never static, nor exactly the same drop when it falls on you again. Whatever emotions or thoughts are going through your mind, let them come freely, then go freely.”

Weiss didn't reply, focusing on maintaining her posture, ignoring the strong urges to fall asleep, trying to figure out just what letting her thoughts and emotions come and go actually felt like, so she'd know if she was doing it right.

She could still feel the constant hum of power and energy from the Terrace, same as when she had stepped out the Tube station, but she guessed that wasn't what Elder Goodwitch meant.

The experience didn't improve the whole half-hour of her meditation.

Weiss continued to struggle to breath without inhaling water, fidgeted or unconsciously went out of the proper posture, and Glynda constantly had push her shoulders back down, pulled her back up straight, and even made sure her thumbs were just touching each other than pressing into each.

By the end of it, she was soaked, frustrated, and miserable.

“How are you feeling?” Glynda asked as she helped her back up to her feet.

“Soaked, frustrated, and miserable,” Weiss grumbled. “I thought meditation was supposed to make me all calm and peaceful!”

“It's not, that's just an unfortunately common misconception,” Glynda replied.

“Those who have been practicing them religiously for years generally tend to be much more emotionally stable, happier, and less stressed out, however!” Penny chirped.

Weiss glared at her.
Glynda put a hand on her shoulder. “Don't worry, you'll get it right eventually. Most everyone is terrible their first time meditating—myself included.”

Weiss continued to scowl, before she was just too tired to be angry. “Please tell me there's someplace to eat around here...” she muttered as her stomach growled. “I'll take whatever.”

Glynda nodded, and they headed for the Earth quadrant.

Dinner was a “Forgotten Pot,” a Sekhmet specialty that was a stew of meat, vegetables, animal bones, spices, herbs, and a dash of bacteria culture, before being buried underground and left to ferment for at least a month.

“The original recipe really was a pot of stew that had been forgotten in the wake of a cave-in,” Penny explained as a weaver poured Weiss a bowl. “Three months later, the team in charge of reopening the tunnels managed to find the clay cookware intact, and as it happens, their supplies had been raided by subterranean pests earlier.

“Their mender deemed it reasonably safe to eat still, and a staple of every table and feast spread was born!”

Weiss picked her bowl up, looked dubiously at the bones, the meat, and the vegetables floating in the rich, golden stew. “Are you sure this won't mess my gut up?”

“Positive,” Penny said. “The ingredients were originally imported from Sekhmet, but they have been grown locally in the Valley.”

“Try sucking out the bone marrow first,” Glynda said. “Can't speak for it myself for obvious reasons, but I hear it's quite good.”

Weiss' uneasily fished one of the bones out of her soup, put it to her lips, and did as the carnivores and omnivores among them.

The golden marrow hit her tongue, Weiss eyes widened as it all but melted in her mouth, coating her taste buds in a medley of powerful, delicious flavours. It felt like getting smacked in the face with a large rock, except you'd have an amazing taste in your mouth and warm, liquid gold trickling down your throat as soon as you swallowed.

You'd still be plenty dazed, though.

Weiss stared blankly ahead, her bowl resting on the flat slab of rock they were all dining on.

Glynda pulled her bowl from her lips, and smiled. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Holy shit...” Weiss muttered, still dazed.

Glynda chuckled, before she continued eating.

“If you wish to continue training at this intensity on a regular basis, I would highly advise you increase your food intake, especially simple and complex carbohydrates,” Penny said. “Elemental weaving is hungry work.”

Weiss made an affirmative noise before she went to look for more marrow-filled bones in her soup.

The dinner ended with Weiss full and feeling much better, her bowl empty but for the bones sucked clean of fat. As she soon found out, it was polite in Sekhmet to pile them all up in the center, free for
those who could to chew on.

The sounds of idle conversation and bones cracking and splintering filled the air, surprisingly pleasant to listen to even if Weiss could only understand bits and pieces of what they were saying.

“Weiss, will you please walk with me?” Glynda asked as she got up.

Weiss looked down at her distended stomach, frowned, and got up. “With pleasure, Elder Goodwitch,” she said as she followed her.

The two of them walked a good distance away from the others, to the side of a cliff-face. It was peaceful and quiet, the weavers meditating in the carved out niches silent like statues, the light-stones and the moonlight beaming through the canopy bathing everything in a soft, friendly glow.

“I'm assuming this isn't just to help our digestion?” Weiss asked.

Glynda nodded. “Weiss, you are aware of the effects our emotions can have on water weavers like ourselves, correct?”

Weiss winced. “I got a firsthand experience of it earlier this morning, yes. Don't worry: I'll make sure to get control over my powers, and wear my gauntlet much more often,” she said.

“It'll take much more than that for you gain full control over your powers, Weiss,” Glynda said as she slowed to a stop. “Your training here is just one half, teaching you the specifics and the techniques to harnessing your power; the other half is for you to master what is much more dangerous and destructive, even more so than that aqua laser you decimated Abner's army of golems with.”

Weiss looked at her, waited for her answer.

Glynda gently touched her on her chest. “Yourself.”

Weiss blinked. “Seriously…?”

“Yes, seriously,” Glynda replied flatly. “In all my years of being alive, I have not met a weaver that didn't have considerable personal issues, and those that seemed completely put together were always just very good at denial and maintaining outward appearances.

“Your powers are not some entity separate from yourself, like the difference between you and Myrtenaster—it is you, making up every single component of your being, physical, mental, emotional, or magical.”

Weiss held back a sigh. “Just get to your point, please, Elder Goodwitch.”

“Have you ever bit back your tongue, and never found a way to say it in a better manner, or just let the impulse fade away? Shied away from anything involving commitment and intimacy like serious romantic relationships, kept parts of yourself secret from others, put up a facade because you were afraid of what would happen if people saw the real you? Kept your feelings all bottled up inside, praying, hoping, it'll never become so much you'll break and it'll all come spilling out?”

Weiss didn't reply, but the way she looked away, and fidgeted was very telling.

“You remember what happened when you first held Myrtenaster?” Glynda asked.

Weiss nodded, her eyes cast down to the floor. “… Y-Yes… I… I completely lost control.”
“And why do you think that happened...?”

Weiss didn't answer.

Glynda put her hand on her shoulder. “There's a saying in Actaeon: 'You always know all the answers to everything—you just keep convincing yourself you don’t.'”

“So how do I stop doing that?” Weiss asked as she looked up at her.

“You keep on meditating.

“Fire weavers meditate in extreme heat, to burn away the false and the frivolous, then keep whatever survives.

“Earth weavers meditate it in isolation and silence, to know what they are truly made of without outside influences moulding and changing them.

“Air weavers meditate atop mountains and in forests, to let whatever is holding them down come blowing away until they are weightless and free.

“And we Water weavers meditate under or in water, to remind ourselves that we should let our thoughts and feelings come and go freely, like water flowing down a stream or the tide receding into the sea.”

“But what if those thoughts and feelings are bad, huh?” Weiss cried. “What if they're scary, and confusing, and will only hurt me and other people?!” she snapped, starting to tear up and shake.

Glynda put her hand on Weiss' chest. She felt her magic pour into her, the cold, icy dread gripping her melt and turn a wave of warmth spreading all over her body.

She smiled as she took her hand back. “Then you let them pass, or you turn them into something better.”

Weiss stared at her in confusion, eyes still moist.

“Water is the element of Transformation, Weiss,” Glynda said. “Taking whatever is dangerous and destructive, and turning it into something to heal and protect is our alignment’s ‘thing.’”

“Now if you'll excuse me, I need to leave now: lots of work for the Eve of the Ether festival here in the Valley, and it goes on till daybreak the next day.”


Glynda nodded back. “Good night, Weiss. You can take the teleporter, if you'd like to return to Keepers' Hollow quickly,” she said as she began to walk away. “Don't worry: we have charms to keep you from getting sick.”

Weiss thanked her and watched her go, before she stood in silence for while, lost in her thoughts.

She was brought out of it by by her comm-crystal beeping.

Weiss reflexively answered it. A magical projection appeared just in front of her face.

“Hey Weiss!” Ruby said, waving.

Weiss blushed. “R-Ruby! Hi!” she started to sweat. “Why are you calling…?”
“Just wanted to say 'Goodnight,' since it seems like you and Penny are going to go home late, and I want to get some sleep before the Eve tomorrow.” She rubbed the back of her head. “It seemed like a 'girlfriend' thing to do, you know?”

Weiss smiled awkwardly. “Yeah, it is.”

“And speaking of those... can we talk tomorrow morning?”

“About what...?” Weiss asked, trying to keep her voice level.

“You know, this new relationship of ours, especially because we're meeting you-know-who at Candela tomorrow, and she's going to be all over this. We never really got to discuss it earlier—hard to talk with your lips frozen to your girlfriend's, after all!”

Weiss winced.

Ruby frowned. “Too soon?”

“I'll think back to that and laugh eventually, Ruby,” Weiss said. “Just not any time soon.”

Ruby nodded. “Okay. Well, bye Weiss!” she reached for her comm-crystal.

“Wait, Ruby!”

Ruby paused, looking at her and patiently waiting.

“I love you,” Weiss said quickly, her face burning red. She paused. “Goodnight.”

Ruby blinked, before she laughed. “I love you too, Weiss, goodnight~”

Her comm-crystal automatically shut off. Weiss felt her mouth split into a grin, before she let out a happy squeal as she jumped around in place.

Several pairs of glowing eyes peered out of the caverns, many fanged mouths curling into scowls.

Weiss sheepishly looked at them, made apologetic signs at them, and hurried on back to Penny.
The Terrace’s teleporter was at the altar in the center, where all the quadrants met.

The place had the solemn air of a temple of the Holy Shepherd, weavers keeping mostly silent and moving about carefully, or otherwise chanting scriptures and singing songs as they practiced magic together—always with two different elements, and spells that required fusing them.

There was a raised fountain in the middle, four platforms before the four pillars that held it up, one for each element. It was currently running dry, but for the sheer power Weiss could feel radiating from it, she knew it wasn’t just for décor.

“The Terrace’s most important rituals happen there,” Penny whispered as they were escorted by another weaver. “I’d expound further, but you’re already rather drained from the training.”

Weiss yawned. “Yeah, the lessons can wait...” she muttered as they were led down a spiraling flight of stairs, into the underground caverns beneath the Terrace.

There was none of the colour, the life, the distinct flair and personality of each quadrant there, just closely guarded halls and tunnels, doors and entrances glowing with runes of protection and all manner of security systems beside.

“Is this a vault for artifacts?” Weiss asked as they went even further down.

“Among other things,” Penny said cryptically.

Weiss decided not to pry as they came to the bottom of the stairs, to a vast underground chamber, radiating with magic. Barriers surrounded the edges of the scaffolding they walked on, so no one would accidentally fall into the gently swirling concentration of pure magic in the center of it all.

A wellspring. A tiny one, true, but still a *considerable* amount of mana gathered in one place.

“This… isn’t how I remembered Ruby teleporting me out of my old room...” Weiss muttered as a weaver prepared them for the trip.

“It’s a different method,” Penny replied. “Teleportation via wellsprings are much easier to sustain and have less side-effects compared to the Air charms and totems used for emergency extraction, not to mention boundless utility beside.”

The barrier was let down, just enough for Weiss and Penny to stand side-by-side. Penny reached out and grabbed Weiss hand, she held on tight. The surface of the wellspring swirled and changed, forming a hazy image of Keeper’s Hollow.

Weiss took a deep breath, Penny counted to three, and then the two jumped in feet first.

It was a *very* different method indeed.

She was still transmuted into magic, but instead of being broken up into millions upon millions of tiny fragments, then sent screaming across Avalon, Weiss remained whole, floating down the natural lines of mana all throughout the realm, being pushed and pulled by invisible currents.

She opened her mouth in wonder, reflexively tried to shut it, until she found no water rushing into her mouth and lungs. As she floated by with Penny by her side, their hands still intertwined, she felt...
A sense of complete and total peace.

Her whole body brimming with endless power and potential.

Like she had become one with something bigger than herself, bigger than anyone, or anything.

No.

Like she was always part of it, she had just never realized until then.

And just like that, it was over.

Penny and Weiss came bursting out of the top of the fountain in Keeper’s Hollow, propelled by an arc of water, their forms translucent and steadily becoming more and more solid until they hit the ground, completely back to normal.

Penny eyes glowed and faded as she stood stiff for a moment. “All systems rebooted and recalibrated. Are you alright, Weiss?” she asked.

Weiss nodded dumbly. “… Hey, Penny, did you--”

“Feel completely at one with Avalon while we were being transported?” Penny suggested, before she shook her head. “I’m afraid the Flow is exclusive to water weavers like yourself.”

Weiss nodded her head. She looked back at the fountain, made a note to set aside a half-hour each day to meditate under it. If that was what feeling the Flow felt like, she was going to do most everything in her power to experience it again.

For now, however, it was off to bed before she passed out where she stood.

Ruby was fast asleep in her nest by the time Weiss arrived. She took a moment to gaze at her, look at how cute she was at peace like that; she pondered slipping in with her until she noticed the usual flood of warm, sticky drool leaking out the side of her mouth.

Weiss frowned. “We are really going to have to do something about that...” she muttered to herself as she began to store away her equipment and change out of her armour.

The Summer plushie was waiting in her hammock, no doubt put there by Ruby; Weiss debated sleeping without it again, before she decided to do so anyway. “Don’t make this weird, alright...?” she muttered to it as she hugged it to her chest, and drifted off to sleep.

She was back in her dreamworld, sitting in the kitchen table of Keeper's Hollow. She briefly wondered where Summer and her grandparents were.

Boom! Pfrrrrt!

Weiss screamed and fell out of her chair as confetti and magic sparks rained down around her.

Thud.

Summer awkwardly blew her party-blower a second time.

Pfrrrrrrtt...
Weiss glared at her from the floor.

Summer pulled the party-blower out of her mouth. “Sorry.”

“Sweet Shepherd, you trying to give her a heart attack?!” Nick snapped as he pulled Weiss up from the floor with a massive hand. “You alright, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine,” Weiss said, thankful that nothing hurt in her personal dreamscape.

“Perhaps you should be more reserved about your congratulations next time,” Freya said as she and Nick helped Weiss back in her seat.

“Aww, but I made a banner and everything!” Summer whined.

“A banner?” Weiss and Freya asked.

“Yeah, here, let me show you!” Summer went off out of the kitchen, and came back with a rolled up banner. “Someone help me hold this up!”

The Schnees all looked at each other. Nick shrugged, and came over to help her. Weiss and Freya turned two chairs around, sat down and watched in morbid curiosity as the banner was unrolled and held up for all to see.

“‘Congratulations on Becoming...’” granddaughter and grandmother read, before they trailed off, confused.

“What *is* that?” Freya asked. “Some form of slang?”

“I tried to write”—Summer made a sexy animal noise—“in Nivian.”

Freya and Weiss blushed, Nick chuckled. “Of course it is...” he said, amused.

Weiss turned away, Freya rolled her eyes. “Please, Mrs. Rose, it was *just* a kiss! My granddaughter and your daughter are not yet--” she struggled visibly “--intimate.”

“Sure looked like they were heading there if she hadn’t frozen their lips together, though!” Summer replied.

“Yeah,” Nick said, “reminds me of when Frosty and I used to get all worked up, only this time there aren’t any bets about what we’ll be doing to each other later.”

“Grandpa!” “Nicholas!”

“What? I swear, you gals being so weird about fucking is *genetic.*”

“Why are you guys like that, anyway?” Summer asked. “You know, aside from you humans being crazy in general.”

Freya huffed. “*Some of us* like to maintain an air of decency and class, you know.”

“And if you ask me, it was because Frosty gone went and convinced herself she was never going to get any, till I came along and proved her wrong.”

Freya blushed. “Oh, *fuck you,* Nick!”

“What's the story behind that?” Summer asked, curious.

Nick opened his mouth, before Freya shot him a cold look. He shut up, she took a long, deep breath, then sighed.

“I was never really one for romance, alright?

“As I was born in Lumania, the very heart of Avalon’s scientific development pre-Candela, and there was always something better I could be doing with my time and my vast intellect than socializing and attempting romance.”

“Translation: she was the awkward nerd in school with no idea how to talk to people,” Nick said.

Freya gritted her teeth. “Yes, grossly oversimplified… I was that.

“I spent most of my time engrossed in education, research, or work. By the time the Resource Wars were well and truly underway, the grants that had been funding my lifestyle all dried up or were channeled elsewhere, I was well into my forties, and I certainly hadn't been taking care of myself as well as I should have!

Freya sheepishly stared at the floor. “I had long resigned myself to a life of permanent singlehood, and looking at myself in the mirror in those days just confirmed that yes, I was never going to find someone...

 “… And then one day, while our expedition team was completely lost in the mountain regions separating Acropolis and Heartland, Nick invites me up to a cliff, and when he's sure we're alone and no one else from our party can hear, he tells me he's 'pretty sure' he's in love with me.”

“Believe me, she took that news REAL badly,” Nick said. “Almost threw me off that same cliff!”

“I thought you were joking, you asshole!” Freya snapped. “Who the fuck just goes and tells someone they're in love with them?”

Summer raised her hand.

Nick snorted.

Freya blushed and scowled. “My point still stands…. I couldn't believe it. Even after I found out I was pregnant with Silsa, after we founded Candela and spent the rest of our lives building it up to what it is today, after we married and officially moved in together to start a family…

 “… There was always that fear in my mind, that one day, it was all going to fall apart, and I'd be all alone again...”

Nick handed his section of the banner back to Summer, came over, and put his massive hands on her tiny shoulders. “And it was my job to convince her it wasn't. That's the funny thing about smart people, you know: they can be idiots about the weirdest, most obvious things.”

Freya looked up at him and smiled. “And the funny thing about idiots is that they can be pretty smart about the weirdest, most obvious things.”


“Love you too, Nick.”

“Aww!” Summer said as she came over with the banner rolled up. “You two are so perfect
Nick and Freya paused, before they both burst into laughter.

“Hah! Perfect? Hell no!” Nick cried. “But it is pretty great.”

“That it is...” Freya hummed.

“Maybe you can share your secrets to life-long romance with Weiss here?” Summer asked as she came over and rested the tarpaulin on the table.

“Eh, it's just the same three things you'll find in my journals: communication, honesty, and always remembering you're no treasure yourself,” Nick said. “The rest is all the small details and specifics that only she and Ruby can hash out.”

He turned to Weiss. “Oh, and speaking of which: when you and her finally get down and dirty, don't forget the lube, and lots of it.”

“Grandpa!”

“I'm serious! If you're anything like your grandma, that Rubes is made of very tough stuff is going to be a very good thing for the both of you!”

“IT couldn't have been that rough, could it?” Summer asked. “I mean, Frosty's even tinier than me and human, too!”

Nick gave her a haunted look. “Oh, believe me, I thought the same thing...”

“Okay!” Freya said as she shot up off her seat, her face burning red. “That is enough discussion about my and Nick's relationship, let's move on out and give Weiss some time to herself!”

“Aww, but I still want to know!” Summer whined.

“Then do it some place in my mind where I'm not around!” Weiss said, her face also red.

“Oh come on!” Summer whined as Nick escorted her out. “It's not like we don't always end up discussing”--she made a sexy animal noise--”whenever we're all together, right?!”

“That's exactly why I'm seriously debating letting you three into my dreams anymore!”

Summer made a disappointed noise as she headed out the kitchen with Nick, Freya following suit.

Morning in Keeper's Hollow yet again.

Weiss grumbled, debated on having Blake and Ruby install some curtains on the windows, even if the sun beaming right into her face made an excellent alarm clock.

She shifted out of her hammock, sat over the edge with the Summer plushie still in her lap. She looked down at it, up at the still sleeping Ruby, and sighed. “Well, at least there's no question where she gets it...” she muttered to herself.

She left it behind as she walked over to Ruby's nest, sat down behind her, carefully put her hand on her arm. She didn't know how Ruby would react if she startled her awake, and she didn't want to find out.
Weiss touched her bare skin, flinched as she felt her muscles tense and harden immediately; she didn't *what* exactly to think about the way it made her excited, her cheeks burn red.

Ruby's ears started to twitch and move before she opened her eyes, frantically looking around until she noticed her. "Oh… hey Weiss!" she chirped as she slowly got up to a sitting position. “Morning~” she trilled, before she cupped Weiss' cheek and kissed her.

Weiss made a *noise*.

Ruby pulled away, worried. "Sorry! Should I have asked first?"

“N-No!” Weiss stammered, dazed and feeling like her face was melting. “Just… surprised, is all! In the *good* way, to clarify!”

Ruby nodded, smiling. “Never had any girlfriends who gave you good morning kisses?”

“Yes…” Weiss muttered.

They both felt a sudden, unusual chill in the air from the frost pouring out from Weiss' fingers, and the new mist floating over Ruby's nest.

“Gauntlet!” Weiss yelped.

She got up to fetch it, but Ruby already had it and was coming back. She handed it to her, Weiss shoved it on, dispelling the ice before it could freeze anything.

“Phew!” Ruby said as she sat back on one of her pillows. “Crisis averted!”

“Just barely,” Weiss grumbled, holding her bare hand in her glove.

“Just keep training, you'll get it eventually,” Ruby said. “I wasn't able to do all those fancy tricks with the Keeper's scythe when I got it—well, that was mostly because I was three when Uncle Qrow first let me have it, but still.

“Anyway… you want to talk about our being girlfriends now, or save it for after breakfast?”

Weiss blinked. “O-Oh, right,” she took a deep breath, willed the bullets of sweat back. “So… what is it you wanted to discuss?”

“Well, first up, Yang's going to tease us *non-stop* as soon as we tell her or she figures out that we're”—Ruby made a sexy animal noise—”so be ready for that.”

Weiss groaned. “I'll manage, don't worry…”

Ruby nodded. “Second, do you want to use pet names or anything? I mean, I'm fine with just calling you 'Weiss' and you calling me 'Ruby,' but if you want to do something else, I'm game!”

Weiss shook her head. “No, our real names are fine.”

Ruby hummed. “Okay, that's everything!” she said as she got up. “I'm going to go get some breakfast now!”

Weiss blinked, watching her go. “Wait, Ruby!” she cried as she reached out and grabbed her hand. Ruby stopped, and sat back in her nest. “Something up, Weiss?”
“Was that *really* everything you wanted to talk about...?” Weiss asked.

Ruby thought for a moment. “Uh… yeah! Yeah it was. Why, did you have anything you wanted to talk about...?”

Weiss bit her lip. She paused for a while, debating it in her mind, before she sighed. “Look, you probably already know this, but I’ve got *Issues*, alright? Really, *really*, *really* bad, *really* deep, *really* awful *Issues* that’ll probably make me do *really* mean, *really* stupid, and sometimes *really* creepy things for weird and irrational reasons.”

Ruby smirked. “I know, and I’m ready for that. Besides, you’re not the only one with *Issues*, Weiss. You realize Uncle Qrow raised me for the past 14 years, right...?”

Weiss had flashes of all the things she'd witnessed Qrow doing, always while in various stages of inebriation. It was easy to miss when she was so focused on just trying to get by day-to-day, but now that things had settled down, she was starting to realize the full, awful implications of letting someone like him raise a young child, all by himself, in a location far removed from the rest of the Bastion.

“… Right.

“Moving on: I'm not very good at the whole ‘girlfriend' thing, okay? So expect a lot of blunders and mistakes, because most of the time I probably have *zero* idea what I'm doing, and I'm just winging everything!”

Ruby laughed. “Weiss, it's fine! I think you just described pretty much everyone in a relationship ever, anyway.”

Weiss bit her lip, clearly struggling with whatever it was she was thinking about.

“You want to pause this until after breakfast, Weiss?” Ruby asked. “Penny told me you were pretty brain-fried yesterday.”

“No, I'm fine, it's just that—*usually* this is the part where myself and my exes discussed what we were exactly and what we were going to call each other, what we're going to tell the media and our parents, and how we're going to act in public and on the Info-Grid…

“… But now that everyone in the human territories thinks I'm dead, and pretty much *everyone* here seems to be fine with us being together...”

Ruby smiled, cupped Weiss' cheek as she looked her right in the yes. “Weiss...?”

Weiss' lip trembled, a lump forming in her throat. “Y-Yes...?”

“Don't think too hard about this relationship stuff, alright?” Ruby said. “We'll just make it up as we go along, and if it goes well, then great! And if it doesn't—well, it's not like I'm the only Fae in the entire realm that's into humans.”

She kissed her, a gentle, loving peck, before she quickly pulled away.

Weiss stiffened and made another noise, a thin layer of ice forming right over her lips.

Ruby grinned. “You got a little something...” she said, tapping her mouth.

Weiss quickly spun away from her, putting her gloved hand to her face before dispelling the ever loving shit out of it.
Ruby chuckled as she got up and left the room. “I love you, Weiss!” she called out.

Weiss didn't reply verbally, but they knew the frantic waving she was making was, “Love you too, Ruby!”
Weiss was in her lab, mixing, pouring, and cooking like a woman possessed—which wasn't entirely inaccurate, because alongside the wellsprings, weavers everywhere were experiencing an incredible power surge, exponentially larger than any other peak the rest of the year.

“Incidents of CIDs—shorthand for Catastrophic Involuntary Discharges—are at their most frequent this time of year,” Abner had explained while he ran Weiss through a battery of tests in his infirmary. “Though thankfully it's mostly for young ones and it's not nearly as destructive as an industrial collector overloading, even the older and more experienced weavers have to watch themselves.

“You drained all of your stores of mana in that fight earlier, but on the night of the Eve itself, I wouldn't be surprised if they are completely replenished with plenty of reserves—a nigh infinite supply of mana for everyone, regardless of if they are able to control it or not.

“I would highly suggest you drain your stores earlier in the day, either through productive efforts or more controlled destruction. Even without Myrtenaster or your gauntlet, magic can get to all sorts of mischief even if you're not doing anything!"

So here she was, making her second batch of hopefully potable moonshine for Qrow, more white cheese, and all manner of cosmetics and medical products for preventing and curing magical mishaps.

Weiss didn't know whether to be relieved or concerned that the Fae had found the need to make things like anti-freeze lipstick; mints that gave you lovely fresh breath and also prevented it from freezing your you or your lover; and nail polish that kept frost from pouring out your hands and toes, or them them turning into razor sharp claws if your lover was fond of surprises and you weren't.

(And that wasn't going into all the varieties for “special occasions,” “niche applications,” and “personal taste.”)

But she did know she was going to make them, and lots of them.

Weiss set fire to her gloves and burned off the leftover residue before she removed her safety mask. “How are my levels looking like, Penny?” she asked as she mopped up her sweat and cooled her skin with a little bubble of water, before evaporating it.

“Still strikingly high!” Penny replied. “You're not in any immediate danger of becoming overwhelmed again, though this is assuming you can handle the surges throughout the day and especially later tonight.”

“Oh for fuck's sake!”

“Want to go practice your magic after breakfast?” Penny offered.

“Let's,” Weiss said, heading back to the trolley to the house.

After a big breakfast full of sugar and chocolate—willpower and attention was vital to controlling her magic—Weiss was off to the training grounds with her mask and Myrtenaster, no mediums this time.
She spent all of her time at the “Punching Rock,” a giant slab of incredibly sturdy rock that the residents of Keeper's hollow had punched and blasted over the centuries to harden hands, train their magic, or just let off steam with something that would break them long before they could even come close to breaking it.

The surface was covered in scratches, dents, and magical burns; sometimes, there were what looked like names and words written in Actaeon and Nivian carved on its surface, but they had long been erased or rendered unreadable, intentionally or not.

The “mana bar” in Weiss' mask-overlay was blinking, with a little warning animation of a weaver standing around before suddenly exploding.

She sighed as she raised up Myrtenaster, began to channel her magic into it. “I know...” she grumbled.

Then, she started casting spells.

She pressure-washed the Rock with a jet of water. She assaulted it with a hail of ice bolts, shattering all over its surface like a ferocious storm. She cast “bubbles” at it, floating balls of concentrated magic that rapidly got more and more unstable until they exploded. She sent two tsunami slashes at it, the hard-packed dirt of the training grounds steadily turning into mud as the waves broke on the face of the rock and flew everywhere.

Then, for good measure, she spent a while stabbing and slashing it with her sword, all her attacks enhanced by her magic.

An intense ten minutes later, Weiss was sweating, panting for breath, feeling a soreness in her arms, and feeling hungry again even though she just had breakfast. She frowned as she looked at her mana bar—the CID warning was gone, though the it was still full and glowing ominously.

“Ugh!” she cried. “Am I going to have to do this every year?"

“With regular training, probably not!” Penny said as she came over to heal her. “Daily meditaiton and becoming more attuned to the Flow naturally increases your capabilities to store magic, use it, and control it. Senior water weavers liken it to the difference between being on battery and permanently plugged into an outlet:

“You're never at risk of running out, always have an available store of power, and can simply use as much as you need at any moment, and send back the excess.”

Weiss sighed as Penny pulled her hands away, her physical pains gone. “Guess it's time to meditate some more?” she asked as she turned to the fountain.

“That would be wise, yes,” Penny hummed.

Weiss sat down in under the waterfall in the center, getting into the proper position, Penny moving her about and guiding her instead of Glynda. It somehow managed to be an even worse experience than the first time, as she was constantly fidgeting, distracted by all the magic constantly pouring into her.

“Ugh! This isn't going to work!” Weiss cried as she pulled her head out of the water.

“Would you like to drain some of your reserves into mine?” Penny asked, holding out her hands. “Though I just finished charging, I have used a decent amount since then.”
Weiss looked at her uneasily.

Penny smiled. “Do not worry: I am equipped with protections against surges.”

Weiss slowly put her hands into Penny’s. She closed her eyes, began to pool her magic into her hands, and sent it into Penny. Ice blue tendrils of mana swirled around Weiss’ arms, curling around their joined hands until it flowed into Penny's and turned into her shade of green.

They did it for all of three seconds, before Weiss felt a thought intrude her mind:

“**Fully Charged: Please Disconnect Immediately.**”

Weiss let go of Penny's hands, excess magic dissipating in the air before she reabsorbed it into her body.

“How are you feeling, Weiss?” Penny asked, the magic in her arms and eyes glowing extra bright.

Weiss sighed. “Not much better to be honest…”

“We might need to invest in long-term storage for your magic, creation of mediums aside,” Penny replied. “For now, continuing your meditation is your only option—well, unless you want to miss out on Eve of the Ether later.”

Weiss frowned, and pulled her head back under the waterfall; she took a deep breath, and began to meditate again.

“Feel the Flow,” she thought to herself.

Less than a minute later, the water stopped.

“Err, Weiss…?” Penny asked.

Weiss opened her eyes, found a water elemental patiently “looking” at her, its “hands” politely held in front of its body as it waited for orders. She sighed as she stuck her hand into it, lines of power glowing on her submerged skin.

The elemental burbled, before it surfed across the ground, up the fountain, and rested at the top. It held its hands out over Weiss as it started pouring itself over her head, little by little.

Weiss sighed, and tried again.

Her mana stores were still obscenely high by the time she ended; on the bright side, she noticed that the numerical estimate of her stores had gone up by 2 points, for a total of 5,047 “MP” when the most focus-intensive spell she could cast she could cast—Tsunami Strike—was an estimated 108 MP.

“Is there ANY place I can drain all this?” Weiss asked as she siphoned the excess moisture off her body. “I don't care if I have to return to the Terrace.”

“I'd suggest against going there, actually,” Penny said. “The morning of the Eve, the weavers are all preventing the younger and more inexperienced among them from suffering CIDs. It tends to be… chaotic.”

Elsewhere, in the Weaver's Terrace…
<NO! NO, LITTLE BUDDIES!" Primal Salamanca screamed, frantically waving his arms in the air as the entirety of the Fire Quadrant burned. <THAT'S TOO MUCH FIRE!>

<GET BACK HERE BEFORE I BLOW YOU UP MYSELF, YOU LITTLE SHITS!> Primal Aeliana roared as she rode atop a tidal wave, stopping only to jump over the docks and buildings of the Water Quadrant before making a new one when she landed.

Primal Wenua let out Distressed Bird Noises as she and the older weavers flew about trying to catch her numerous charges, flying all about the trees and the floating islands of the Air Quadrant with their magic or numerous contraptions.

Primal Logan sat peacefully in the sand of the Earth Quadrant, a content look on their face as they let the young earth weavers around them climb them like a jungle gym, their punches, kicks, and thrown rocks and peers barely capable of making a dent on their massive, rock-and-steel body, nor on the young ones.

Glynda stood in the temple at the center, keeping the most troublesome charges in protective, elementally resistant bubbles, her eyes dead and her mouth permanently in a hard line.

Back in Keeper's Hollow…

“So what can I do?” Weiss asked. “Just hope I don't blow up today and hope I've gotten enough control of my powers by next year?”

“Well… given your elementals’ record of being completely harmless and well-behaved, perhaps you can attempt making more of them? Your cheese is about the only one I can guarantee will be safe, though.”

Weiss began to head back to the barn. “What do I have to do, exactly?”

“Very basic elementals are just a large infusion of magic with intent,” Penny said. “Sticking your hand in the solution, then thinking of what you intend it to be, or to do will be enough.”

So Weiss took off her gloves, washed her hands thoroughly, then opened up the container for her cheese. The bacteria had already gone to work, and Weiss could see the fast expanding colony already curdling the milk into thick, frankly unappetizing clumps. She closed her eyes, and stuck her hands right into the mix.

“Be food,” Weiss thought as her hands glowed with power. “Be delicious, make people happy when they eat you.”

Then, she pulled her hands out, wiped them on her apron, and covered the now glowing mixture; the bacteria didn't quite enjoy open air and sunlight as much as Fae and humans did.

Weiss looked at her palms, felt the mana she'd spent flooding back into her as Avalon continued to surge and pulse with excess magic.

She sighed as she put them down at her sides. “Here's to hoping I don't blow up…”

As everyone had the day off from work for the holiday, and there were several hours before they were headed to the hot springs then the Valley's backdoor to Candela, they spent their time rehearsing their fake identities (or practicing Blake's for her, as she was going to claim to have a speech impediment thanks to a malfunctioned mod she couldn't yet afford to have reversed), took amusing pictures of themselves in their costumes, then watched Rune Rangers: Lightning Legion for
“This is the most ridiculous and over-the-top thing I have ever watched in my entire life,” Weiss said after they finished the first episode. “How many episodes are this season again...?”

Ruby chuckled as she loaded up the next episode. “26 right now, for a total of 40.”

The day turned to afternoon turned to evening, and soon, Weiss, Ruby, Penny, and Blake were at the in the roots of the Tree of Life, one group among many who were being screened by the watchers and prepared by the weavers before they jumped into the Valley’s wellspring and to wherever the mysterious backdoor was in Candela.

Weiss had rarely ever seen a city-state's wellspring this close, let alone jumped into it.

For various reasons, the Schnee Power Company's actual facilities were kept under incredibly tight security, and all the many technomagical equipment strewn all over it to protect it and channel the power into the city weren't exactly conducive to tourists.

Here in the Bastion, the only equipment was the roots of the Tree of Life dipping into it; otherwise, the wellspring was left to thrum and pulse as wildly and erratically as it did before the Fae settled the Valley.

“Is this even safe?!” Weiss asked as they floated off to the center of the wellspring on a platform, the hum and crackle of the pure magic ringing in her ears, making every bone in her body sing to a mysterious, wordless tune.

“Of course it is!” Ruby replied. “I use this and the one at the Roost get around all over Acropolis and the Valley super fast! How do you think I was able to break into and out of Manor Schnee so easily?!”

“Where else does this thing lead to?!?” Weiss asked as they loomed ever closer to it.

“I'm afraid we can't answer that!” Penny yelled.

“Then where is this backdoor into Candela?!” Weiss asked as their handler told them to get ready to jump.

Ruby beamed. “You'll find out!”

They all linked hands, and jumped.

Traveling through this wellspring was a much more intense, awe-inspiring experience. She floated in a giant sea with the thousands of other Fae sneaking into Candela that night, looked around wide-eyed at the tens of thousands more streams of magic pouring out of the Valley’s wellspring and flowing to who-knew-where.

And then, they all began to spin around, caught in a massive vortex, swirling ever closer to one path in particular.

Weiss tightened her grip around the others as they rushed through the streams of magic coursing through Avalon, shooting through at a speed even greater than the Tubes. The stream started to narrow and break, protrusions in the shape of human wellspring collectors buried into it and siphoning it out. They curved and flowed all around them, coming far too close to getting sucked in to some before they shot on past, unharmed.
Weiss didn’t want to think of what would have happened if they didn’t.

Eventually they reached their destination and were caught in another vortex, individuals and groups spaced out so they could arrive in a neat, orderly fashion for the watchers and weavers on the other end.

Weiss could begin to see flashes of indoor lights and hear muddled snippets of Actaeon and faint music, before they emerged from an arch-like device, two pillars of carved out stone with crystals embedded all over its surface.

Robotic drones in nurse hats came to attend to them, scanning their vitals, checking their identities. Their handler checked their tablet. <Group of four: Keeper Ruby Rose and companions, Watcher Blake Belladonna, Mender Penny Polendina, Weaver Weiss Schnee. Clear. Please proceed into the lounge for debriefing on the rules and emergency extraction protocols,> she said in Actaeon.

She looked at Weiss specifically. “Ms. Scarlatina also wishes to talk to you specifically, Ms. Schnee,” she said.

Weiss blinked. “Wait, Ms. Scar-—”

She was interrupted by the drones herding them along, to make way for the other visitors still in transit. Weiss looked around them as they walked—fluffy pillows and cushions of Fae make, plants and trees strewn all about, Fae relaxing with their ears, tails, and other animal features proudly on display.

They stopped as a very familiar woman wearing a stereotypical Old World magician's outfit came up to them, a top hat much like Ruby's over her head.

Weiss’ eyes widened. “Velvet?!” she whispered. “You’re working for the Fae?!”

Velvet smiled. “Why wouldn't I be?”

She took off her top hat, a familiar pair of brown bunny ears springing up to their full height.

Only this time, there wasn’t a headband at their base.

“I am one.”

Chapter End Notes

I accidentally typed "Weiss Schnee" as "Weiss Rose."
Chapter 64

Velvet smiled.

Weiss stared blankly at her, her expression unreadable underneath her mask.

Velvet frowned. “Is something the matter, Weiss…?”

“I’m sorry! I’m just… SO disgusted with myself right now, for never connecting these dots!” Weiss cried as she threw her hands in the air. “I have known you for almost all of my entire life, how have I never realized your ‘fake’ animal ears and tails were real?!”

“The Order of the Seekers are extremely thorough with their cover-ups,” Penny explained. “It also helps that there is a unique quirk of both our human and Fae minds that find it much easier to accept the lie than the reality-shattering truth that the Fae are not mythological creatures, and have been lurking among you for over a millennium.”

“But it's just a headband and a belt with pieces cut out for her ears and tail!” Weiss whined. “How could it work so well…?!”

Blake patted her on the shoulder. “Naw yu nowh haw ay feele...”

“We really don't know!” Penny replied with a shrug. “Numerous makers and Fae-funded scientists have been attempting to crack the secret for all this time, but it looks like for however our respective intelligences and perspectives advance, we're just constantly blindsided by it.”

“It's kinda like how your facial recognition technology kept getting screwed over by people wearing eyeglasses until you figured out how to fix it,” Ruby added.

Weiss sighed heavily. “How many humans know about this?”

“A select few,” Velvet replied. “You're the first person from the Schnee family to have been made aware of this, actually.”

“You mean mom never realized there was something up about Granny Scar? They hung out all the time!”

Blake shrugged. “Wurkt fur us in Sellesschionn, still wurks naw.”

Weiss sighed again, her face falling. “So how many of your human employees know the secret?”

“None, considering we don't have them in the first place!” Velvet replied.

Weiss looked around at the Fae lounging about. “So all of these Fae…?!”

“… Are employees of the Plushie Palace?” Velvet finished. “Yes, yes they are.”

As if on cue, a group of Fae got up, put on the hats and elaborate costumes that were the Palace's uniforms. They easily hid their tails, horns, ears, and other Fae features under hats, loose pant legs, and coats, before they went to an elevator and back to the public areas of the establishment.

A different group of costumed employees took their places, sighing and talking happily in Actaeon as they threw off hats, pulled down scarves, and shimmied out of pants, horns, ears, and tails.
springing free and waggling about in the open air.

Weiss recognized some of them as the very same people that had been attending to her and Winter earlier that month. “… They aren’t even wearing contacts, are they...?” she asked, defeated.

Velvet shook her head.

“How do you need a moment to recover from your existential crisis?” Penny asked.

“No… I’ll just… pick up the pieces while we go around and enjoy the fair, it’s not going to last all night…” Weiss muttered.

“Then off we go!” Ruby said, cheerfully raising her scythe.

Before they left the Palace, a team of watchers, weavers, and seekers did a last minute check if they could remember their fake identities and stories, then enchant their gear with special magic that’d render their weapons harmless, and keep Weiss from using all but her most harmless spells.

She could feel it most strongly with Myrtenaster, still humming in her hand but muted, like it was trapped underneath thick soundproof material.

“I was wondering why we weren’t using your prop scythe,” Weiss said as she and the others holstered or concealed their weapons.

“It’s in case something happens back at the Valley,” Ruby replied. “Can’t waste time finding my real scythe, because shit goes down fast back there!”

Weiss nodded. “I can imagine.”

The four of them boarded an underground tram in one of the Palace's many secret tunnels and entrances, and off they went, through a complex series of fronts and outposts owned and operated by Candela’s many seekers and the handful of humans aware of the big secret, until they emerged from the back-doors of a gigantic high-end casino.

Weiss looked back at it as they walked along the sidewalk.

The place had a 100-foot flashing holo for a sign, many smaller ones boasting of all its facilities and its reputation among high rollers and small-time gamblers all over the realm, and of course, its very skilled and attractive staff.

To top it all of, it was named the “Snake Eyes,” with a sexy snake Fae waitress lounging on top of the letters winking at passersby, her reptilian lower half curled into the shape of the “S” in “Snake.”

She sighed and turned away. “Refuge in audacity indeed…” she muttered under her breath.

The group slowed down and were on high-alert as they crossed into the Dark Side of Candela, where the decorations and the Eve of the Ether specials stopped being so friendly and playful.

Now, they were for intense Trance simulations made affordable because the power companies were paying consumers to use energy to avoid overloads; “witches' brews” of a very different kind; and the kinds of costumes that wouldn't be allowed anywhere else in the city.

The few Peacekeepers assigned (or willing to be assigned) to the area paid them little heed; it wasn't unusual for teenagers to get up to mischief on the Eve, emboldened by their costumes and the spirit
of the holiday, and the Bureau was *much* more concerned with the official fair.

The adults manning the businesses couldn't have cared less—not unless you were willing to pay the exorbitantly inflated prices, mostly from the “discretion fee.”

“*Where are we going?*” Weiss asked as they crossed an overpass, wary of the bums laying on the steps.

“*To the one place I'm sure Yang is going to be waiting for me,*” Ruby replied, smiling underneath her mask.

That turned out to be the “The Shithole,” a bar that was exactly everything Weiss imagined it to be: dank, smelly, and full of unwashed and unsavoury types drinking cheap beer as they talked about their sordid lives or partook in ages old bar games like drunk billiards, possibly with the twist of the loser cracking their cue over the winner's head whilst accusing them of cheating.

The four moved in a tight formation, Ruby up front, Penny in the back, Weiss and Blake at the sides. The patrons noticed them and seemed amused to see this seemingly lost quartet of scared teenagers, but most of them quickly went back to their own business.

All except one, at least.

“Well lookie what we have here!” said a massive brute as she got up off his seat, a cheap beer in her hand and many more empty bottles on her table. “You lost, girlies? Because this doesn't seem like a place for gals like you to be in.”

“We're just here to meet up with someone, thanks,” Ruby said, trying to make her way around him.

The brute grinned, an ugly face with a several times broken nose, the look of someone that couldn't or wouldn't pay for the relatively cheap reconstructive surgery. “And who's that going to be, huh?” she chuckled, her awful breath making Ruby and Blake cringe and shudder.

Thankfully, Weiss' mask was proofed against it. “Step off and leave us alone, asshole,” she said as she raised her gauntlet to her face.

The brute laughed. “And what are you going to do if I don't, huh?” she asked, looming over her threateningly.

Ksshhhhttt!

The brute reared back and screamed, hands over her face, blindly bumping and crashing into everything in sight as low-grade elemental fire seared her eyes.

“Get out my pepper spray, is what,” Weiss hummed as the sounds of vile cursing and breaking bottles filled the air.

Blake grinned and gave her a thumbs up, before they made their way further into the bar and down a flight of stairs, to its illegal fighting arena. From their newfound sense of respect for them, or fear of becoming next, no one else bothered them until they got to the second bouncer standing at the gate.

“You don't have anything *particularly* nasty to worry about in that fancy glove of yours, do you?” they asked as Weiss held it up for inspection.

“*Not unless it's illegal to carry pepper spray, a taser, sand, and water in there!*” Weiss replied.
The bouncer chuckled and opened the gate. “Get in there, and enjoy the show, kiddos—we got a real great guest pair tonight, been wiping the floor with everyone! Might want to get out before the crowds riot, though—pretty sure they were lying when they said they weren't modded...”

Weiss discretely cast a look at Ruby. Even through their masks, she could tell she was smiling. “We will,” Weiss said, before they entered the arena and stood by the energy barrier—all the seats were long taken.

They were the only people in costume there, but no one minded, for the scene going on below was far more interesting.

The group spotted Yang and Taiyang, both dressed in leather dusters and cowboy hats, hands wrapped in bandages and old cloth, looking very much like the settlers of the Old World's Frontier. The two of them were in fighting stances, fists held up in front of them, no doubt because of the 300 pound, 6'7 titans coming out from the other end of the ring.

The MC came back on the mic. “This dynamic daddy-daughter duo's destroyed damn near everyone we could throw at them, but will they stand a chance against our local champions, the Bash Brothers Smash and Crash?!?”

“Hell no!” the regulars all roared.

The MC laughed. “All I'm going to say folks is that it's time to consult your guts then place your bets!”

Holo-screens lit up all over the arena, people frantically transferring money to the ever growing pot. Weiss would have spared a glance at the odds, if she didn't know the whole fight was a foregone conclusion.

Betting ended, people were on the edge of their seats and shouting, roaring for blood.

“Kick their asses!”

“I'm betting it all on you two, don't let me down!”

“Sweet criminy, just beat the shit out of each other already!”

All the lights dimmed, but for the ring's.

“Fighters! Are you ready...?!?”

Crash and Smash roared and beat their bare, muscular chests.

Yang punched her bare fists together, Taiyang opened his arms and made the “Come at me” gesture.

“Then let's rumble...!”

The horn sounded, and the two fighters rushed each other.

Weiss expected daring acrobatics and devastating strikes, Yang and Taiyang deftly avoiding all of their opponent's attacks. What she got was a bar brawl, fists flying, landing square on jaws and chests with meaty thuds and sickening cracks, unintelligible grunts and curses being thrown about with wild abandon as the four of them beat the ever loving shit out of each other.

If she hadn't been training with Ruby, aware of the Fae's many different forms of martial arts, she would have thought that Yang and Taiyang were just going all out and hoping they'd come out the
other side the victors.

But now, she could recognize the plan.

Taiyang absorbed most of their opponents blows, bracing himself for each strike, his whole body stiffening as he absorbed the kinetic energy—were the blood-stained concrete not already cracked and broken, the audience would have noticed all the new fractures appearing beneath his booted feet.

“The Earth-Fist style: stability and protection, standing tall against all your opponent's blows like ancient mountains, immovable and unbreakable,” Weiss thought.

Smash pulled him into the air by his arms, then headbutted him; Taiyang seemed to reel from the blow, before he rebounded and smashed his skull into his face, too. Dazed and confused, Smash cried out and dropped him.

Taiyang landed, shook his head, and was completely fine.

“The Water-Fist style: control and deflection, letting your opponents attacks slide harmlessly off you like water pouring over a smooth rock, or come straight back at them.”

At the same time, Crash wailed on Yang, pounding his giant fists into her braced arms, slowly staggering her back further and further into the wall. When he had her cornered, he pulled his arm back for an extra powerful punch.

Yang pulled back her arms down just enough to grin at him, before she thrust both her fists out, slamming them into Smash's stomach.

The audience cried out in surprise as he flew off and crashed on his back, all the wind knocked out of him, a bewildered expression on his face.

“The Fire-Fist style: power and retribution, using your opponent's power to vastly magnify your own, at the risk being snuffed out before you could take your fiery vengeance.”

Smash saw his fallen brother, roared and charged at Yang, clumsily swinging his arms through the air, trying to catch her or smack her on the back-swing. She easily dodged him, Taiyang slipped in in front of him, deftly moving back and forth just out of Smash's grasp.

Smash staggered to a stop, tried to punch Taiyang with one hand; he grabbed his fist and twisted his body to the direction of the blow, his other fist coming straight for Smash's face.

He braced himself, squeezing his eyes shut.

Nothing.

He carefully opened them, saw Taiyang's fist an inch away from his face.

Now, Taiyang punched him.

**Crack.**

No longer braced and ready, Smash screamed as his covered his face with his hands, his nose broken once again.

“The Air-Fist: speed and deception, tricking your opponents into letting their guards down, slipping strikes into the cracks in their defenses like a draft seeping into a home.”
Crash got up, crazed and furious as he raised his hands over his head, brought them down over Taiyang’s head. He raised braced his arms, absorbed the full force of the blow; Yang rushed over to him, her fist already pulled back and aimed for Crash's side.

Taiyang discretely lifted up his foot; what to those looking closely would seem like him accidentally crushing his daughter's foot in the heat of the moment was actually him transferring all of Crash’s kinetic energy into Yang—energy she happily used to amplify her punch.

*Pow.*

Unprepared for the sheer force, Crash flew off to the side, staggering for a few moments before he fell on his side and screamed in agony.

Weiss smiled as she and the others cheered. “And of course, to top it all off, they used all four at once, with the Tsunami-Fist, and the Firestorm-Fist,” she thought, grinning.

“Holy fucking shit!” the MC cried. “They actually did it!”

Taiyang pulled his foot off Yang before anyone could notice, she bit back a wince as she looped her arm around his side, hiding his holding her up as they waved and smiled at the audience.

“Get the fuck out of here!” the MC cried. “And forget your prize money until you can show us proof you two aren't modded to hell and back!”

“Cheaters!”

“We'll get you for this!”

“Fuck you! Probably got secret robot arms and shit!”

“It's called 'Martial Arts,' people!” Taiyang called out as he and Yang walked back to the stands. “Look it up!”

The two of them finally noticed the costumed quartet in the audience, calm amidst the raging and frothing audience members. Yang discretely mouthed “Train Station,” and they all began to make their way out of the bar.

They didn't talk, didn't look at each other, didn't give anyone a hint that they knew one other, for fear of them getting caught in the fast brewing riot.

And once they were at the nearest train station and well away from the Shithole, they dropped it faster than Yang and Taiyang had the Bash Brothers.

“Dad!” Ruby cried, pulling off her mask and dropping her scythe before she jumped right into Taiyang’s arms, smiling and crying as she lovingly nuzzled his face into his chest.

“Ruby!” Taiyang cried as he hugged her back, crying and smiling too. “Oh my gosh, you are still so tiny even though you've grown up so much, I love it!”

The others stood to the side as father and daughter reunited, tears, laughter, and excited chatting filling the air.

Yang smiled, sniffing as she wiped away the tears welling up in her eyes. She turned to the others, and paused. “Hey... how'd you afford to send all four of you guys here? Did Uncle Qrow stop spending his money on booze and invest it, or something?”
“Actually, we pawned my sister's Eluna plushie for money,” Weiss replied.

Yang’s eyes widened. “Shit. One of those super rare toys people have literally killed each other over?”

Blake, Penny, and Weiss all nodded.

Yang chuckled as she put her arm around Weiss shoulder. “Well you did a great thing there, princess; you're good in my book.”

Weiss smiled underneath the mask. “Thank you.”

“Hey, mind if I ask what's your costume?” Yang asked. “I feel like I should know it, but I can't put my finger on it...”

“It's a modification of the 'Keeper's Bride,'” Weiss replied.

Yang paused. “… And why would you wear that...?”

“… Because me and Ruby are”—she made a nervous sexy animal noise—”now…”?”
“What.” Yang said.

“We haven't gotten… intimate yet!” Weiss added quickly. “… But we have kissed, and agreed that we're girlfriends now…”

Yang slowly pulled her arm from Weiss shoulders.

Ruby and Taiyang stopped their conversation, sensing something was terribly, horribly wrong.

Penny and Blake both took a few steps back, either from instinct or sensing the dramatically rising levels of stress hormones in Yang's body.

Weiss began to sweat. “Uh… Yang…?”

“What the fuck?!” Yang yelled. “What the actual fucking-fuckity-fuck?!”

Weiss looked around as heads turned, and the peacekeepers at the train station debated stepping in.

“Yang, you're causing a scene--!”

“Fuck you, you are not getting away with this just because we're in public!”

Taiyang stormed up, a stern look on his face. “Yang, what's going on here?!”

Yang ignored her as she turned to Ruby. “Ruby! Are you and Ice Princess over here--” she made an aggressive sexy animal noise.

“Yeah, we are!” Ruby replied as she walked up.

Yang turned back to Weiss. “I thought you said you weren't interested in her!”

“People change their opinions all the time, it's not unnatural!”

Yang turned back to Ruby, frantic now. “I thought you said you and here weren't--” she made a desperate sexy animal noise.

“We really weren't!” Ruby replied. “But I was still interested in being--” she made a sexy animal noise--”with her, and then we did in between the last time we met and now.”

“What is your problem?!” Weiss asked. “Weren't you the one joking and having a grand old time teasing me and Ruby about being--” she attempted and failed to make a sexy animal noise.

Yang didn't laugh or smile this time. “I was trying to turn you off! What kind of sister thinks, 'Oh, I really want this person to date my precious, innocent little sister, better show her the fake girlfriend that looks disturbingly like her, and tell her all about the time I walked in on her trying make out with her'!?"

“NO SISTERS DO! NONE!”
Taiyang blinked, and turned to Ruby. “Wait, you did what...?”

Ruby blushed, and slowly put her mask back on her face. “It’s... it's a really long story we don't need to get to, ever.”

“Excuse me!” said a peacekeeper walking up to them, a squad of drones at her tail. “What's going on here?!”

“Oh, just me finding out this gal right here is now my sister's girlfriend after she explicitly told me she wasn't even the slightest bit interested in her!” Yang cried, thumbing at Weiss.

“Well take it somewhere private, or you can go solve your issues in a jail cell for disturbing the peace!”

“We will, officer, sorry for the disturbance!” Taiyang said as he stepped up, his hands out in front of him. He glared at Yang. “Yang, tonight's supposed to be a night of fun and catching up with your sister, not yelling at her girlfriend. Behave—your criminal record's already long enough!”

Yang looked at him in betrayal, before she groaned and threw her hands up. She sulked off to an uncrowded corner of the train station, and found a nice, solid pillar to punch.

Taiyang sheepishly turned to the peacekeeper. “Sorry, officer: you know teenagers.”

She sighed. “Do I ever...? Look, it's Eve of the Ether, and obviously, your kid's been looking real forward to seeing you again; I really don't want to have to take you all in and ruin your night, so how about you all just sign these statements saying you're not going to cause another ruckus, and aren't going to complain about the charges we'll slap on you if you do?”

Taiyang turned to the others.

“Fair enough!” Ruby said.

“That sounds like a reasonable compromise,” Penny said, nodding.

“It's the least we can do...” Weiss muttered.

Blake gave the thumbs up.

Taiyang turned back to the peacekeeper. “You have a deal, officer.”

The peacekeeper smiled. “Thanks—I mean it.”

Yang came sulking back, and they scanned their IDs—real or fake—into the peacekeeper's comm-crystal. She looked a little surprised at the records popping up. “Most of these kids are from the Country, huh?” she asked.

Taiyang nodded. “Yep! They've always been dreaming of going out to see what it's like in the city states, so why not do it on the Eve? Going to be a lot of loan payments to make, but so far it's been worth it just to see the looks on their faces...” he said with a happy smile.

“Well watch yourselves out there—Candela may be one of the safest city states in all of Avalon, but that doesn’t mean we don't have crime. Don't mean to insinuate anything bad about you folks, but it's a jungle out there!”

Ruby chuckled. “We live in tiny villages in the wilds, officer—we know wild.”
The peacekeeper smiled. “Don’t doubt it for a second!” she thumbed behind her. “I gotta get back to work, you folks try not to get into more trouble and just enjoy your evening, okay?”

“We will, officer!” Taiyang replied.

All of the group except Yang waved goodbye as she left, before they all simultaneously glared at her.

“Nice going, Yang—you almost got us all arrested!” Ruby spat.

Yang grumbled what might have been “Sorry” under her breath, before she glared at Weiss, before she began to burn holes into the floor.

Taiyang put his hand on Ruby and Yang's shoulders. “Let's just move on and enjoy our night, shall we ladies? The night is young, but it's not going to get any younger!”

Yang and Weiss forged a temporary truce, and soon they were off on a train to Goldleaf, Candela's commercial district and the heart of the Eve's celebrations.

Meanwhile, the peacekeeper they had spoken sneaked into a deserted part of the station. She dumped her stolen uniform with the unconscious sap she had stolen it from, revealing green locks of hair underneath her hat, alongside and a pair of hyena ears. She put on her real clothes, did a thorough perimeter sweep, before pulled out her comm-crystal.

“We've found them,” she whispered as she sent over the data.

It felt strange to be back in Candela, and stranger still that Weiss felt that way.

She'd only been away for a month or so, and yet staring up at its tall skyscrapers, floating islands, and the never-ending vehicle and pedestrian traffic flowing through every available route—sights she had been seeing regularly for a decade and a half—she couldn't help but feel like it was an alien world, as freaky and unfamiliar as the Valley was when she first got there.

Penny, Blake, and Taiyang were among the gawkers at the windows, marveling at seeing these sights in person, or after a long, long absence. Weiss debated joining them, if only to see if that would rid herself of the unease.

“Hey, you okay?” Ruby whispered as she stood beside her.

The other passengers were too engrossed in their own devices or their business to notice. If they were bothered by their mask modulators' effects, they just turned up the volume on their comm-crystals, or tuned it out.

Weiss hung her head. “… No, not really.”

“Well what's wrong?” Ruby asked. “Aren't you happy to be back home? Well, kinda back home.”

“That's just it: this doesn't feel like home. Not anymore.” Weiss looked up at the ceiling. “I'm kind of wondering if it ever was, and it just won by default...”

“I... really don't get where you're going here, Weiss.”

Weiss looked at Ruby. “I... never really had anything like you guys, back when I was living here.
You know: friends, someplace where I felt I really belonged, you—well, the you I know now, not the one the stories led me to believe.”

Ruby chuckled. “I don’t blame you—they can get pretty messed up.”

Weiss snorted. “To say the least...” she looked down at the floor. “There’s also something that feels really wrong about this place...”

“Maybe someone farted,” Ruby offered.

“My mask is air-tight and filtered beside, and it's not just here in the train—it’s everywhere since we got here. I just didn’t notice that much because of everything else happening at the time.”

“Huh... well, I'd suggest that maybe it had something to do with you being a you-know, but I've never really heard of anyone else saying something was wrong with the city. What does it feel like, anyway?”

Weiss closed her eyes, opened herself up to the magic all around her. Comm-crystals, tablets, the rails of the train, the power lines and conduits all around them, the buildings with their terminals, the many small magitechnical devices pretty much everything had from clothes, the roads, to even the light beaming from the streetlights as they acted as free Info-Grid data transmitters.

All of them, humming with magic, dull and thrumming like the sealed Myrtenaster, but however faintly, Weiss could feel something…

“…Tainted,” Weiss said. “Like there's something just wrong about… everything.”

Ruby paused. “…Now I have definitely never heard that before!”

“Now approaching Goldleaf Station,” the train's AI hummed. “All passengers, please step away from the doors, and make way for those disembarking. Remember: waiting your turn helps all of us get to our destinations on time.

“This announcement was brought to you by Sgt. Pick-U-Up: ‘When it's time for double-time, get yourself a can of Sgt. Pick-U-Up, soldier!’”

Weiss shook her head. “Eh, it's probably just because it's my first Eve of the Ether after you-know-what happened,” she said as the passengers began to shift and prepare to move out.

Ruby shrugged. “Probably.”

They didn't step out onto the platform so much as they joined a sea of slowly moving people, some of them in costumes, others in plain clothes, tied up at the numerous checkpoints in spite of the peacekeepers and their drones clearing completely clean people at lightning speed.

As it did every year, however, there were always several someones who either blatantly broke the rules, or toed the line so far that they had to call in a supervisor.

It took all of five minutes for them to come out one of the gates and into a busy city street; they were even more people here than inside the station, but thankfully they had much more room to move around in.

They all spent a moment patting themselves down, trying to discover if any one of them had been pickpocketed, and to their relief they still had everything they boarded the train with, their cash
Urochs and cred-sticks especially.

“How much money do you girls have, anyway?” Taiyang asked.

“Not much,” Penny replied. “Between the original cost of the tickets, and all the numerous other unexpected expenses we’ve racked up for a variety of reasons, we’ve had to dramatically cut down our original plans for spending money, and tonight’s itinerary beside.”

“How much have you and Yang brought, dad?” Ruby asked back.

Yang and Taiyang smiled sheepishly.

“We're uh… we're actually pretty much broke right now!” Taiyaing said.

Weiss stared at them. “Are you two fucking kidding me right now?!”

“We bet it all on the fights earlier back there!” Yang replied. “We were only supposed to go a couple of rounds, collect a couple hundred Urochs extra, but then we kept winning and the MC kept offering us more money, so…” she trailed off.

“… Yeah.” Taiyang finished.

“Then what are we supposed to do now?” Weiss asked. “We only budgeted for ourselves and assumed you were going to provide your own spending money; at this rate, we probably won't even make it till midnight before we have to go home—that or spend all our time at the crappy free attractions, and trust me, you really do get what you pay for.”

“Perhaps I can help…?” said a new voice.

The group turned to see a tall, muscular teen dressed up like Piorina “Piper” Nikos, complete with a real antique Starfarer Captain’s Cap and an energy lance, even if it was conspicuously missing its clip.

She smiled nervously. “I seem to have seriously overestimated how much spending money I needed for this trip, and only ask that you’ll let me join your group. The Eve's not very fun alone…”

Ruby smiled, stepped up and offered her hand. “Well climb aboard, Captain Piper, we'd love to have you!”

Yang frowned and stepped up. “Woah, woah, woah! Hold up there, sister—I know you like thinking and assuming the best of people, but just because someone's dressed up as the Holy Shepherd herself doesn't mean she's automatically a saint.”

“Will it help if she's a direct descendant of her, then?” Penny asked quietly.

“Piper” stiffened.

Taiyang, Yang, and Weiss all did a double take on her, their eyes widening as they recognized the face almost constantly paraded about the triumvirate of city states in Heartland, and plastered all over the Info-Grid and HoloVision beside.

“H-How did you know…?” “Piper” whispered, her eyes frantic.

Penny pointed to her eyes with one of her life-like fingers. “My optic sensors take a lot of factors into account, such as height, body weight, and notable facial features.” She leaned in and whispered.
“Don't worry: we'll keep your secret so long as you keep ours, too.”

She smiled as she tugged the sleeve of her costume down, revealed the glowing bits of rock suspended in magic underneath.

“Piper's” eyes widened. “You're Penny Polendina…?”

“If you're Pyrrha Nikos, then yes! Yes I am,” Penny replied as she pulled her sleeve back up.

“Huddle up, everyone!” Ruby called out. “Emergency meeting!”

Everyone including Pyrrha shuffled to a quiet alleyway and formed a circle.

“Okay, first order of business: Penny and Pyrrha—if that's who you really are—you two know each other?” Ruby asked.

Penny nodded. “It's rather hard not to know who Pyrrha Nikos is, given her constant presence on the media and in the public.”

“I… know her from an Info-Grid forum where she's very popular, yes,” Pyrrha replied, blushing and looking away.

“Hey, we're not judging!” Yang said. “It's not exactly unusual to like buns of steel, right…?”

Everyone but Taiyang, Ruby, Penny, and Pyrrha groaned. The last just blushed even harder and began to attempt to sink into the ground and into Avalon's core.

“That settles that!” Ruby said. “So what are you doing here by yourself? Shouldn't you be escorted by swarms of guards and stewards and stuff?”

“I snuck out,” Pyrrha replied. “They're probably already scrambling all over this city trying to find me, which is why it's very important to me that I mesh with a group that'll remove suspicion, like several people also dressed like iconic figures from history, myth, and pop culture.

“Those are excellent costumes, by the way!”

“Thanks! Blake made most of them,” Ruby said, pointing to her. “Who made yours, by the way? It looks so real, especially that energy lance! Why's it missing its clip, though?”

Pyrrha looked sheepish. “… That's because it is, and no one's manufactured ammo for it in centuries,” she muttered.

Yang's eyes widened. “Ho-ly shit. You stole the actual Sacred Vestments and Armaments of the Holy Shepherd…?”

“I didn't steal them!” Pyrrha sputtered weakly. “I legally own them as a direct descendant…!”

“Relax, I'm not judging you—I'm going congratulating you! That takes realm-sized balls right there!” Yang said, nodding and giving her the thumbs up.

Pyrrha blinked. “… I… uh… thank you…?”

“We're getting off topic,” Weiss said. “Do you actually have money on you, or was that just a lie to get in our good graces?”
Pyrrha nodded. “I do, and if I didn’t, who would be stupid enough to even attempt that?”

Taiyang chuckled weakly. “You’d be surprised…”

Weiss ignored him. “So how much do you have? Just cash-on-hand, we can’t use your credit line because that’ll just be a giant sign saying ‘Rogue Holy Shepherd Here.’”

“I know, which is why I brought a lot…” Pyrrha said as she pulled out and opened up her wallet.

Their eyes and optic sensors all widened.

“I also have a private account I can withdraw from, but I’d rather not risk it being compromised,” Pyrrha said as she put it away. “So will you please let me join you? I promise that if someone recognizes me, I will do my very best to limit the fallout to just myself!”

Ruby looked at the others. “Everyone in favour of letting Pyrrha join us, raise your hand.”

Everyone raised their hands.

Pyrrha sighed in relief. “Oh, thank you so much, you don’t know how much this means to me…” she smiled.

Ruby smiled at her underneath her mask. “No problem! And just so you know, if someone recognizes us, we’ll make sure you don’t get roped in with us, either…” she muttered.

Pyrrha blinked. “What are you…?” she muttered, before her eyes widened in alarm and horror.

Weiss quickly removed her mask and showed her face. “I’m fine! It was all a fake!” she said quickly.

Pyrrha stared at her, bewildered.

“It’s me—Weiss Schnee! I can’t explain everything because it’s a really long story, but I’m telling you: you can trust them!”

Pyrrha continued to stare at her, before she shrugged “… Well… I guess this wouldn’t be the first time a Nikos has made strange friends in even stranger circumstances…”

“So, you still cool with being with us?” Ruby asked.

Pyrrha nodded. “But, please, call me ‘Piper,’ so people won’t notice.”

“Got it!” Ruby said, giving her the thumbs up. “Now let’s set sail for the Eve of the Ether fair for real already!”

Weiss put her mask back on, and they walked out of the alleyway, walking freely amongst the crowds as if they weren’t wanted terrorists, her exiled family members, and a renegade religious figure hiding in plain sight.

“Hey, Penny,” Pyrrha asked, “I meant to ask: what are the specs of the optics you’re using?”

“I’m afraid those are classified,” Penny replied. “Though, I may be persuaded to tell you if you take me out to dinner first…”

Pyrrha blushed. “… I, uh… was that a joke?”
Penny chuckled. “Obviously! I don’t eat food, I’m an artificial being,” she said, before she winked.

Pyrrha’s cheeks heated up even further.

Yang chuckled as she listened in from the behind them. “I guess you could say the attraction between them is pretty... magnetic,” she whispered to Blake and Weiss.

They both punched her in either arm.

“Ow!”
“Wow, that Keeper of the Grove costume is amazing! I'd be scared if you weren't so tiny, kid, but you and your girlfriend are still pretty creepy.”

“Well ain’t you the best damn Piper I’ve ever seen all night! Why, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you were the Holy Shepherd herself come back from the Aether to bless us with her presence.”

“OH MY GOSH! NINJAS OF LOVE! I NEED A PICTURE WITH YOU, RIGHT NOW, OR I'M GOING TO DIE! LIKE, LITERALLY DIE!”

“Hello! We’re from the Old World Animation Society, and we’d love to take your picture and use it as part of our promotional material…”

“Well howdy there, cowboy! Mind if I ask y'all what time it is…?”

Taiyang grinned. “Well, pardner, I'd say it's… niinneee forty-five…!”

The other Old World cowboy laughed. “Thanks for the laugh and the memories, pardner,” he tipped his hat to Taiyang. “You and your gals enjoy your night now!”

He tipped his hat back. “Yer welcome, pardner, and y'all stay safe, too!” he said, before he resumed waiting at a bench with Weiss, watching over their bags of souvenirs and food while the others were busy with a game of “Shoot the Shade.”

Weiss sighed.

Taiyang turned to her. “Something wrong?”

“I can't believe no one's noticed,” she replied. “All of these pictures, all of these people stopping us, and not a single one has had even the slightest inkling, if I wasn't pretty sure they're also like us.”

Taiyang shrugged. “It's Eve of the Ether; 'weird' kinda becomes the new 'normal.'”

Weiss was about to reply, before she saw a group of Fae walk on by, dressed in their usual armour with their animal features out, shrugging off any suspicion by speaking in fluent Nivian. The difference between Fae and human fashion was so great the unsuspecting masses probably thought they were just dressed up as characters from a holo or a Trance sim.

“Are you fucking kidding me…?!”

“Yeah, they do that,” Taiyang hummed, smiling. ‘The 'costumes' Summer, Qrow, and Raven were 'wearing' when I first met them were just like those, actually!”

Weiss turned to him. “You met them on Eve of the Ether?”

Taiyang smiled. “In this very city. We met while we were in line at a 'Test Your Strength' game, where I was betting my last Urochs on breaking the record. I couldn't do it, but Summer broke the ever loving shiiiiiiiiiiit out of it and the machine, then split her prize money with me—so long as I promised
I’d buy Qrow that beer he’d been clamouring for all night with my share.

“It was at that moment that I’m pretty sure I fell for her, and though I didn’t realize it at the time, she was pretty interested in me, too.”

“What, couldn’t see her expression under the mask?” Weiss teased.

Taiyang chuckled and shook his head. “Nah, she was actually going without it that night, not scare the crap out of people for a while. Denial is a hell of a thing, though.”

“So how’d you end up dating her?”

“We spent the rest of the fair together, and had a lot of fun. By the time the sun was almost about to rise and we all needed to leave, I realized this was one of those once-in-a-lifetime opportunities staring me in the face.

“I was young, lovesick, and had only enough money for the return trip back under the boot of the coziest kleptocracy in Avalon. What was the harm in following these three strangers back to whatever wild place in the Country they came from, I thought?

“As it turns out: a heckuva lot!”

“But if I had a time machine to go back to the exact moment where I made that decision, I’d punch out Past Me, take his place, and convince Summer to take me home with her, so I could do it all over again without all the really bad decisions...

“How are you enjoying it out there, by the way?”

“Very much, actually!” Weiss replied. “My first two weeks aside, everything couldn’t be better. At the very least, it’s bounds better than what I left behind…”

Taiyang nodded. “You haven’t experienced a Soul Eater attack yet, have you...?”

Weiss slowly shook her head. “No, actually... should I be worried?”

Taiyang was about to answer when the others came walking back with their prizes and badges proclaiming them the “Slickest Shade Shooters in the Realm.”

“I suppose you’ll find out for yourself eventually!” he said as he got up to meet them.

Weiss sighed, figured that finding out how terrible something was from first-hand experience was just the way things worked in the Valley.

They eventually decided to go get dinner, and at Weiss’ recommendation, they ate at Fiorina’s.

For reasons of maintaining their cover, they chose a corner booth, Weiss and Pyrrha squeezed all the way inside and out of sight from the rest of the restaurant, Penny making sure that their bags of prizes and souvenirs were arranged in a way that would handily block the surveillance equipment without arousing any suspicion.

“This isn't amateur hour,” Ruby whispered to Weiss and Pyrrha. “We know what we're doing.”

They saw them in action as Taiyang talked to the waiter for all of them, and found out that he had followed the news very closely and had actually watched the fake ransom/execution holo several
times—enough to feel that there was something disturbingly familiar about Ruby and the sound of her voice.

Taiyang sighed. “Look, Marty, I know it was big news realm-wide, but come on: we're just here to eat and enjoy ourselves! You wouldn't want to get in trouble with your boss by making seven hungry customers lose their appetites all because you couldn't stop talking about that awful tragedy would you?”

On cue, everyone but Weiss and Pyrrha looked at Marty with a mix of uneasy, disgusted, and extremely annoyed expressions.

Marty groaned. “Okay! Fine! I'm sorry for bringing it up... I'll be back with your orders in a 'jiffy…”

They all watched him sulk off from the corner of their eyes, until he disappeared back into the kitchen. They let out sighs of relief, then started casually talking and discussing how to spend the rest of their night, as Pyrrha had essentially given them an effectively unlimited budget to do anything they wanted.

“**I wish we had some way of paying you back for all this, 'Piper,’**” Ruby said after they finalized their plans. “**We've spent a LOT tonight.**”

Pyrrha smiled. “Oh, it's fine! The memories I've made with all of you are more than worth every Uroch. My only regret is that we'll probably permanently part ways come morning...”

Yang smirked. “It's not to late to ask for our comms, you know—maybe you can just get Penny's, she's pretty well-connected after all,” she said, winking as she nudged Pyrrha with her elbow.

Pyrrha blushed.

Yang raised an eyebrow, then beamed. “Oh man! You already have, haven't you? Gimme a high-five, 'Piper!’”

Pyrrha tipped her cap lower over her bright red face, before she quickly high-fived Yang.

Penny smiled. “If I may interrupt: I do see a way we would be able to recoup our expenses,” she said as she pulled out her temporary comm-crystal, projected an advertisement out to the whole table.

“**The Candela Couple's Costume Contest?**” Weiss asked. “**But contestants have to have a clearly matching theme, and it's only open to romantic—oh, right...**”

“I'm game!” Ruby said. “**It might be fun.**”

“You'll probably score a lot of points with the judges for being relevant!” Taiyang added. “What is for sure is that you two going to get a lot of attention.”

“**Possibly the bad kind...**” Weiss muttered.

“Our ploy's worked very well so far,” Pyrrha said quietly. “I think it'll be safe to assume that it'll keep on working.”

Blake pulled out her own comm-crystal, typed something on it: “Make escape plan, just in case?”

Pyrrha nodded. “I can be bait for a distraction; I'm getting hell when I get home anyway, what's a little more trouble?”
Taiyang hummed. “Don't see how this can't work, if all of us work together!”

Yang raised her hand. “Yeah, that's going to be an issue, because I have several issues with this plan.”

Ruby sighed. “Can't you just let it go for tonight, Yang? We could really use the money.”

Yang glared at her. “No. You are my precious, innocent baby sister, and I am not okay with throwing you at the mercy of strangers for Urochs, especially when you'll be going in with Ice Princess over here!”

Weiss growled. “Everyone, could you please excuse myself and Yang? We'll just be going to the restroom...”

Ruby looked uneasily at them both, before she sighed and began to make room for them to leave, the others following suit.

Diners and servers gave them a wide berth as they walked on past, fearing the aura they were giving off—like an inferno coming up against a blizzard.

They kept their voices down for the benefit of the people actually using the facilities, but the tension came through loud and clear.

“What is your problem with me?” Weiss snapped. “What is it that ticks you off about me dating Ruby?”

Yang scowled and held up her hand. “I suggest you don't go there, princess, or else we're going to have to add broken furniture and walls to our bill later. Look: has anyone told you about the statistics of Fae/Human relationships? About how they're almost always doomed to fail?”

“Penny has, and in my defense, that's the same thing they said about my grandparents relationship, and look how they ended up.” Weiss huffed.

Yang groaned. “I'm trying to help you here, Weiss! You know one of the biggest reasons why the Shit went down? It's because dad thought he could handle a relationship with Ruby's mom!

“Now don't get me wrong: they were crazy for each other, and Uncle Qrow’s got the proof in his chronicle, but the fact is, dad just couldn't handle all the cons of dating a Keeper—though it probably didn't help that he was forced to live with his ex-wife, AKA my mom the Alpha Bitch.

“Dating Ruby is going to be crazy, it's going to be full of problems, and trust me: you may think you've got it all figured out, but then something's going to happen that'll turn your whole world round and round till you don't have the slightest clue which way is up or down!

“Trust me: I watched this shit unfold before my very eyes, and it was a helluva roller coaster of ups, downs, and seventeen-dimensional shapes beyond our comprehension! I was just a baby for all of it, but I know you know from personal experience that little kids absorb and understand a lot more shit than adults think they do.”

Yang's eyes softened. “Dad wasn't perfect, as a person or as a husband both times he tried, and he'll be the first to admit that! But he was a helluva lot more well-adjusted and had a whole lot less issues than you did, Weiss.
“You're going to end up getting hurt. Ruby's going to end up getting hurt. And with Keepers, you can bet there's going to be plenty of collateral damage. And I don't know if you'll believe me, but I sincerely wish none of that to happens to you—to either of you.

“So please: will you say 'No' to the contest…?"

Weiss looked Yang in the eyes, saw the sincerity, the desperation. She felt the anger and indignation inside of her drain away as she saw something far too familiar:

Someone who only wanted to protect her little sister.

Weiss slowly reached out and touched Yang on the shoulder. “Yang…? I believe you, alright? I don't want Ruby to get hurt either, and trust me, I'm already starting to get a pretty good idea of all the crazy shit that happens when you date a Keeper.

“But I'm entering that contest with her, and I'm going to keep on dating her, unless one or the both of us decide to break it off!”

Weiss carefully pulled off her mask. “Ruby's going to get hurt, Yang. You can't protect her from everything. And I know you know she doesn't want you to—even if you are her big sister.

“It's called the growing the fuck up, and there's nothing you can do about it.”

Weiss put her mask back on.

Yang looked down, defeated. “… If you two happen to win one of the big prizes, and you have to do the big victory kiss for the crowds, don't go full-on make out session, alright? The images my brain is offering are bad enough, I don’t need the reality broadcasted on live HoloVision for all of Avalon to see.”

“We won't, I promise,” Weiss replied. She looked away. “… Besides, we, uh, kinda know from firsthand experience that it's REALLY bad for me to get too excited…”

Yang looked at her in curiosity. “Why? What happens?”

Weiss slowly looked back at her. “… I accidentally freeze our lips together…”

Yang sniggered. “Well, at least I you're not giving her the cold shoulder, huh?”

Beat.

The both of them groaned.

“Oh, fuck me, that was a mistake…” Yang said, quietly gagging.

“Yes… yes it was…” Weiss grumbled.

They returned to their table, told the others that Yang had changed her mind and that she'd join the plan. “And just so we're clear here: this is only because I don't want Ruby to get in trouble,” she added as she and Weiss slipped back into their seats.

“That means she's starting to like you!” Ruby whispered as Weiss returned by her side.

Their food arrived shortly after. They could see Marty still being very suspicious of them, especially with how Weiss and Ruby noticeably kept their masks on as the others began to dig in, but
thankfully the other server with him told him to knock it off.

“Geeze, Marty, lay off the shock news for a while! That shit’s not good for you...” they muttered as they returned to the kitchen.

After a dinner spent with Weiss and Ruby's hoods up and heads down as they ate, they sent an entry picture of them for the contest:

The two of them in the center, satisfied and looking very much in love while the others were slumped over “dead” on the table, ketchup “bloodstains” everywhere.

Penny attached their fake identities, playfully captioned it “Dinner Date for the Keepers,” then sent it off before they paid their bill and left Fiorina's. Marty was still wary of them and none too pleased about the mess beside, but the generous tip Pyrrha convinced him to give it a rest, for now.

It had barely been five minutes when they got a message back from the officials:

“What amazing costumes and astoundingly bad taste! We love it, you're in.”

Chapter End Notes

As the author finally remembered, their saying “Sexy Animal Noise” in their “Dr. Nefarious” Voice:

https://soundcloud.com/ruff1298/dr-nefarious-sexy-animal-noise/s-s3hZu
Chapter 67

The Candela Costume Contests were all happening at Goldleaf Park, the very center of the district and one of its biggest open-air venues. Seeing the crowds that had arrived for the Singles and Group competitions allowed the gang to refine their contingency plans, in case someone recognized any of them and alerted the authorities.

So it was to Weiss amusement and concern that she and Ruby were offering themselves up to the peacekeepers, as part of the screening for contraband, illegal costume components and dangerous props, and potential problem contestants.

Sergeant Berg was convinced that the enchanted Keeper’s scythe and Myrtenaster were unable to hurt anyone any worse than the other items they were allowing on stage that night, but they ran into trouble with Weiss’ gauntlet.

“This is a real fancy piece of magitech you’ve got here, Ms. Vimana,” Berg said as he analyzed his scanners readouts. “Haven't really seen anything like it available anywhere, even with us in the Bureau…” he continued, eying her warily.

“It's homemade tech,” Weiss replied. “I'm sure you're aware that there's no shortage of engineers and inventors that prefer the Country to the city states?”

“That I am,” Berg replied. “So how dangerous is it?”

“I've already told you: no worse than if I were using all component gadgets at once! I trust the inventor enough to know that when they say they were strictly following safety standards, they were strictly following safety standards!”

“Shame I don't know 'em, they seem like a real stand up scientist,” Berg muttered, before he pulled out his comm-crystal. “Frisky Delta to HQ, I need someone for a hands-on safety test, over and out.”

“HQ to Frisky Delta, we'll see who's available and send them out ASAP, over and out.”

A few moments later, Berg was putting his hand on the newly arrived peackeeper's shoulder. “Ms. Corazon, Ms. Vimana: this is Private Clementine V. Kahlua, otherwise known as Clem!”

“Hey there!” Clem said, waving. “Great costumes, you guys, you look really cool!”

“Thanks!” Ruby replied.

“Save the compliments for the contest, Clem, we've got work to do—namely, seeing if this fancy glove is as safe as its owner says it is.”

“In the interest of full disclosure, how are we going to do that?” Weiss asked.

“Oh, it's easy!” Clem said as she stepped in front of her. “You just use it on me!”

Weiss stared at her, the hesitation on her face clear despite the mask. “You do realize this is loaded with pepper spray, among other things, right…?”

Clem nodded. “Yep! Read the scans on the way here.”

“And you know it's going to really hurt, yes…?”
Clem nodded again. “If it's done right like my Uncles' chili, at least!” she added, chuckling.

“Just show us your home-brewed ‘non-lethal defense gadget,’ Ms. Vimana,” Berg grumbled. “If they won't land Clem in the hospital or kill her, then you don't have any reason not to use them, right…?”

Weiss sighed as she aimed at Clem’s face. “*For what it's worth, I am really sorry about this.*”

“Don't be!” Clem said as she leaned in closer. “It's my job!”

Ksshhhttt!

Weiss barely used up any of her fire medium, but Clem still went down with her hands over her face, screaming and writhing in agony.

“*Sweet gibbly giblets!*” Berg cried.

Weiss knelt down and sprayed a harmless mist of water to cover up the dispel.

“Ohh, *man!*” Clem cried as Berg helped her back up on her feet. “That was even *hotter* than my uncles' chili! You mind if I ask you for the recipe? They'd love to have it!”

“Yeah, what *did* you put in that stuff?” Berg growled.

“*It's a family secret, sorry*…” Weiss muttered.

“Well in that case, in can stay secret, right, Sarge?”

Berg looked at Clem in surprise, then glared at Weiss. “Yeah… everyone's entitled to some secrets,” he grumbled. His expression softened. “You okay, Clem?”

“Just peachy, Sarge!” Clem replied, giving him a thumbs up. “Good thing Ms. Vimana had that counter-agent on her!”

“Good thing indeed…” Berg said as he patted Clem on the shoulder. “You sit this one out, Clem, I'm calling someone else for the rest of the tests…”

“I'm fine, Sarge!” Clem replied. “As a matter of fact: why don't we do the next test right now?”

Berg eyed her worriedly. “You sure about this, Clem?”

“Positive! You know I've had worse,” Clem smiled.

Berg sighed. “That you have…” he turned back to Weiss. “Alright, what's the next trick up your sleeve?”

Weiss held up her gauntlet, electricity crackling all over its surface. “*Concealed taser.*”

Clem smiled as she held out her hand. “Well put her there, Ms. Vimana!”

Weiss looked warily at Berg. “*Should I?*”

Berg sighed. “I feel like I'm going to regret this, but yes, yes you should.”

“It's not like she doesn't know what's coming, right?” Ruby added.
Weiss reluctantly put gauntlet into Clem’s hand.

“Ggh-ggh-ugh-ghh-uhh…!”

Weiss only intended to zap her, but unfortunately Clem had a strong, confident grip, one that only faltered after she fell twitching and writhing on the floor, static crackling from her body.

Berg watched in horror, before putting his hand on his pistol as he called for medics with the other. Without Penny nearby and unable to use her mender protocols without arousing suspicion beside, Ruby and Weiss could only wait for Clem to stop jerking and hope she wasn’t hurt too badly.

“Woo!” Clem cried as a Doc-Drone and two paramedics examined her. “Won’t need that can of Sgt. Pick-U-Up anymore, that’s for sure!”

“Yeah, a real plus…” Berg grumbled as he warily eyed Weiss and Ruby, his hand still on his pistol.

The two of them kept their cool, trying not to show just how hard they were sweating under their masks.

Clem was soon back up on her feet, with the help from the paramedics. “I forgot, what was the last thing we had to test?”

“A miniature seismic wave generator,” Berg grumbled.

“Oooh, dirt blaster tech? Never realized you could make it that small!” Clem said as she held her arms out. “Welp, hit me with it!”

“Ms. Kahlua, we seriously advise you not to go through with it...” one of the paramedics said, the other nodding their head grimly.

“They got a point, Clem,” Berg said as he coaxed her arms down. “Sit down, and I'll do it.”

“Oh come on, Sarge: it can't be that bad! Like you said: if it's not going to kill me or put me in the hospital, then Ms. Vimana here won't have any reason not to use it on me, right?”

Berg cringed. “I'm beginning to realize I should have kept my big mouth shut...”

Clem beamed. “I'll be fine, Sarge! Won't I be, Ms. Vimana?”

Weiss just nodded.

Clem smiled back at Berg, oblivious. “See?”

Berg sighed. “Clem, if this ends up killing you, know that I will forever regret failing you as your superior officer by way of letting you go through with this.”

“Aww, that's alright, Sarge, you know I don’t hold grudges!” Clem said. She turned back to Weiss. “So how’s it supposed to work, exactly?”

“It's for amplifying my own strength, in case I can’t spray or shock someone threatening me,” she replied.

“Neat!” Clem said as she raised her arms again. “Ready when you are!”

Weiss bit her lip, reared her hand back, and struck Clem in the chest with her palm.
Clem flew back from the strike, tripping backwards over a table before she went tumbling over it, taking out two chairs as she landed.

Berg glared at Weiss.

She pointedly refused to look at him.

“I’m fine! I’m fine!” Clem said as she grabbed onto the edge and pulled herself up. “Woo! Probably should have braced myself for that...”

The paramedics vaulted the table as their Doc-Drone flew over it. Fortunately for all of them, Clem checked out fine.

“It’d probably be best for her to sit the rest of tonight out, though,” one of the paramedics added.

“Then you go do that, Clem,” Berg said.

Clem saluted. “Got it, Sarge!”

“So what’s the verdict?” Ruby asked. “Are we clear?”

Berg sighed. “Given the numbers I’ve gotten from that scan, the contest’s regulations, and the fact that Clem here is fine… yes.” He narrowed his eyes. “Just be very careful with that thing, alright?”

Weiss nodded. “I will, Sgt. Berg, thank you.”

Clem happily gave them their backstage passes, and they went on through the checkpoint. As they walked, Ruby overheard Berg ask,

“Where in the hell does someone out in the Country get something like that...?”

For the sheer number of entrants any day of the year and time constraints, most of the actual judging in the Costume Contests was well before any of them even set foot on the stage, people scrolling through the holos on the Info-Grid and deciding which ones they liked until the top ten were called to appear in person.

To Weiss surprise and delight, they among them, and voted the “Creepiest Couple” beside. That was just bragging rewards and a section on the front-page, however; the actual monetary prizes after each couple paraded around the stage, gave a short Q&A, and performed a three-minute presentation showing off their talents and their costumes.

Most of them were dances or song duets, but some changed things up. Weiss and Ruby were particularly fond of the two show magicians (actually Fae weavers, the gentleman a rabbit, the lady a fox) taking a page out of Primal Salamanca’s book and having no shortage of impressive pyrotechnics.

“Break a leg out there, you two!” one of them said as they strutted back in, their clothes still smoking.

“Thanks! That was a really great magic show, by the way!” Ruby replied.

“To enchant and delight is our trade, darling!”
As the applause finally died down, the host returned to the stage and introduced them to the audience. “Our next couple sounds like something straight out of a romance holo: a city state girl fleeing the urban jungle for the Country, only to find herself in a very different kind of wilderness, and a girlfriend, too…”

“You ready for this?” Ruby whispered.

“Absolutely,” Weiss replied.

“… And now, without further ado, this Eve’s Creepiest Couple: Misses Beatrix ’Bea’ Corazon and Alani ’Vi’ Vimana as ’The Keeper of the Grove and her Bride!’”

With their weapons out, Weiss and Ruby strutted out to the stage, walking up and down its entire length, waving and showing off to the crowds, before they met the host at the center.

The host smiled as the camera drones hovered around for better shots. “Any plans to tie the knot out of costume, you two?” they joked.

Weiss blushed. “Not yet…” she muttered.

“We’re planning on taking things slow,” Ruby added. “Kinda the appeal of the Country, heh.”

The host reeled, surprised. “Sorry about that! Didn’t realize the creepiness was more than skin deep! Studio-grade voice modulators?”

“Yes!” Ruby chirped. “Cost us plenty of Urochs like the rest of our costumes, but so worth it.”

“I’ll say! If I didn’t know any better, I’d think those weapons of yours were real!”

Neither commented.

“So why did you two choose to go as the Keeper of the Grove and her Bride this Eve?”

“The Keeper is a pretty big thing from the village I come from,” Ruby replied. “It’d be hard to find someone who doesn’t know all the legends!”

“My older sister was rather obsessed with her, too,” Weiss replied. “I figured I should do something with all this obscure knowledge and trivia I’ve accumulated over the years.”

The host nodded. “So what kind of show do you Keepers have for us tonight?”

“A duel—my scythe vs her sword,” Ruby replied, raising up her weapon for emphasis.

The host chuckled. “Well, you certainly get points for novelty! We’re not going to have to worry about getting blood out of the stage after, do we?”

“Not at all!” Weiss replied as she pulled out Myrtenaster. “You might want to blink as little as possible, however—you just might miss it all if you do.”

“Better keep those eyes peeled then, dear audience!” the host said as they retreated to the side.

The lights dimmed, the fog machines activated, and the holographic background changed to a suitably spooky forest for a duel between two terrors.

Ruby and Weiss stood a good distance from each other, their weapons at the ready.
“Don’t worry, Vi!” Ruby said as she twirled her scythe around for show. “I’ll go easy on you!”

Weiss chuckled. “Don’t count on me to do the same, Bea!”

Ruby grinned. “You really think you can keep up with me?”

Weiss grinned back. “Let’s find out!”

Music began as the two clashed; it was a friendly duel, but if you didn’t know that the weapons were “props,” you would have thought they really were trying to kill each other.

Ruby held back on her full speed so the audience would see something other than a blur, but Weiss could still feel her putting her strength into each swing, forcing her to use both hands to block with Myrtenaster, ducking and dodging to avoid getting knocked into the ground from the sheer momentum.

In turn, Weiss didn’t hesitate to use every single spell she’d shown to the peacekeepers earlier, sending gusts of air whistling through the air, sparks and flashes in her vision, slick puddles of almost invisible sheets of ice on the floor to trip her up.

They laughed as they fought, dancing all throughout the stage with somersaults, flips, and twirls, locking weapons just to have an excuse to stare into the others’ eyes, feel the smiles underneath their matching masks.

Their fighting intensified with the music, steadily growing faster and fiercer, attacks and movements becoming more aggressive than playful, the audience on edge as they struggled to keep up. The judges watched, entranced, impressed, and excited, wondering who would end up the victor.

Weiss thrust downward, Ruby dodged, Myrtenaster's tip harmlessly stabbing the floor. She looked up, saw the Keeper’s scythe coming for her neck, slow enough for the audience to see, for Ruby to stop it just before it connected...

… And for Weiss to intercept it with her gauntlet.

Thoom.

Ruby’s eyes widened as she felt her scythe and herself swinging in the opposite direction, Weiss earth-empowered strike more momentum than she could handle. She recovered and braced herself, but not before she felt Weiss’ gloved fingers wrap around her neck.

Ruby stopped and stared, speechless as that suspicious-looking fox mask came right up to her face, the blue eyes twinkling.

“I win…~” Weiss growled.

The music faded, the lights turned back on, the fog was blown away, and the background turned back to normal.

A moment later, the audience erupted into applause.

Weiss blinked, quickly pulled her hand off from Ruby’s neck. “I-I’m so sorry, I--”

Ruby held up her hand and stopped her. Weiss could feel her smiling as she leaned in, brought her mask up to her face. “Don’t be—that was pretty hot.”
Weiss blushed, so flustered she all but fled to backstage as soon as she was able to, a smiling Ruby on her trail.

The other contestants for that night came and went, before there was a brief intermission for off-site voting, the judges finalizing their decisions, and their sponsors getting their holos and acts out.

The mood was tense backstage as they waited to see who would be called, save for a very affectionate couple still caught up in congratulating and complimenting the other on their performance. There were only going to be three pairs going back up on that stage to receive their trophies and their checks, and however the live audience's reaction, the Info-Grid voting was still a huge chunk.

And among the three were Ruby and Weiss, coming in at second place—however impressive their fight, it couldn't beat the universal appeal of ludicrous pyrotechnics.

Weiss was no stranger to awards—overachievement was the name of the game in Arcturus Academy, and her own pride kept her from putting anything else than her all. But after so many grand prizes, trophies, and commendations, it all started to feel empty—expected even, if her father’s lack of enthusiasm at hearing her latest achievements were anything to go by.

But as she stood there on the stage, her and Ruby holding up their check and trophy, she started to feel something she hadn’t felt after winning an award, not for a long time:

Pride, like she’d done something that truly mattered, that really did deserve all the fanfare and attention it did.

“… And now, for our time honoured tradition: the victory kiss!” the host said as they walked on by. “Pucker up, contestants—and don’t think you can get away with nuzzling masks!

“Let’s see those lips lock, ladies, gentlemen, and non-binary genders!”

Weiss was about to protest, before Ruby put her hands on the straps of Weiss’ mask, handily blocking the camera-drones from getting a good shot of their faces with her arms. Weiss smiled as she did the same to her.

“Ready…?” Ruby whispered, inaudible to the cameras for the audience’s chanting of “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

“Ready,” Weiss whispered back.

They unfastened the other’s masks, held them out for all to see with one hand as the other covered each side of their faces. Weiss couldn’t help but let out a pleased, delighted noise as they locked lips, chills running down their spines as she felt her mouth begin to ice over.

They pulled away, quickly held their own masks up to their faces with their own hands, fast enough to contain the mist pouring out of Weiss’ lips before it became noticeable, or for the camera drones to get a clear view of their faces. They pulled them down stared into each others eyes for a moment, wordlessly congratulating themselves on a job well done…

… Then they noticed the balls of fire appearing all around them, steadily growing brighter and brighter.

“… Huh…” the host muttered. “Don’t remember hearing anything about pyrotechnics at this part!”

They began to explode, the audience started screaming, and the pandemonium began.
Several things happened all at once:

Ruby tackled Weiss to the floor, their masks falling to the ground as flames engulfed the stage.

The two show magicians from earlier held out their hands, the gentleman forming an air shield that deflected the fire away from the civilians and into his wife as she absorbed the flames.

The people standing behind Taiyang and Yang grabbed them both, discretely cuffing their hands together and hauling them away under the cover of the panicking and fleeing crowds. The two struggled, but they were brought them down fast by two quick kicks to the backs of their knees with concealed prosthetic legs.

A swarm of girls dressed up as the female protagonist of Ninjas of Love sighed as the most brooding, mysterious, and appealing guy dressed up as the male protagonist of the same novel refused to sweep them off their feet and rescue them in this time of distress, instead fighting his way to Blake, who had pointedly ignoring him ever since they noticed each other.

Penny was stabbed in the back with an umbrella; her optics widened as the magic was drained from her, before she shut down completely, bits and pieces of her arms falling out of her sleeves. Pyrrha cried out and grabbed her as she fell limp, the horror on her face changing into rage as she saw an elegantly dressed girl smile evilly at them.

The alarms for Candela's Peacekeeping Bureau, the nearby Armed Forces of Avalon base, and Queensguard HQ all started blaring red.

Weiss opened her eyes, stared past Ruby's face and horns and up at the catwalk, saw a flash of glowing ember eyes before their owner fled. "UP THERE!" she called out.

Both the magicians directed their power upwards, shooting bolts of lightning and jets of flame from their hands. The neo-steel catwalks sparked and crackled with electricity as they melted and broke apart, the severed halves swinging onto the stage and depositing one stunned tiger Fae onto the stage.

The magicians stepped in front of Ruby and Weiss as they picked up their fallen weapons, putting up a wall of air as more fireballs were summoned and held at the ready.

"Who are you?!" Ruby cried.

The tiger Fae chuckled as she picked herself up, grinned at them with a mouth full of sharp fangs. "Who do you think...?"

"... No, seriously, who are you...?"

She blinked, then scowled. "Do you really not know who I am?!"

"Uh, no? That's kinda why I'm asking..."

The tiger Fae gritted her teeth, her golden eyes burning in hatred. "Listen very closely, because you're only going to hear this once," she said as her hands burst into flames. "My name is Cinder Fall, and I lead the Heralds of the New World Order."

The fires started to grow hotter and larger. "Avalon as you know it is doomed! Your precious Eldan
Council? Your human governments? All are going to burn, and we’ll be the ones rising from the ashes, make this realm what it always should have been...

“… Now please, do us all a favour and DIE!”

The magicians joined their powers into a single shield as Cinder’s jet of flames hit it; the two of them cried out, just barely holding the inferno back.

“RUN, YOU FOOLS!” they called out.

Ruby and Weiss didn’t need to be told twice. They grabbed their masks and jumped from the stage, just as the magicians’ shield faltered, and the couple screamed as they were incinerated.

There was no time to mourn them, however, for they had bigger problems to worry about:

The swarms of Fae and humans flooding into the park as the civilians fled, all of them armed with weapons from both cultures. All of them wearing their own masks and balaclavas, white with blood red streaks like vicious creatures straight from your nightmares.

The Peacekeepers on-site did their best to hold them off, protect the innocents still trapped there, but regulation firearms and body armour could only do so much against military grade hardware and weapons hewed from Ironbark.

Weiss swiftly put her mask back on, the threat sensors going wild. “What do we do?!”

Ruby calmly put her own mask back on. “We hold out until help arrives,” she said as she reached into her coat, pulled out her one dispel charm.

Weiss watched as she slapped the paper over her scythe, the seal breaking and the weapon becoming very lethal once more.

“You get Yang and dad, I’ll get Blake, then we both help out Pyrrha and Penny,” Ruby said as she held it out. “Ready?”

Weiss turned to Taiyang and Yang, still being dragged away and held still by two sickles on their necks. “Ready!”

“CHARGE!”

Meanwhile, in Queensguard HQ, all hell was breaking loose as agents swarmed all around, suiting up and getting ready to move out in every single supersonic jet they had in the hangar.

Ironwood stood in the center of it all, guiding the chaos. “All units, move out! I want you armed with every single thing we’ve got—you especially, Schnee! Time for the Mk. IV to make its grand debut!”

Back in Goldleaf Park, Blake was desperately trying to wrench herself free from her captor’s grip. <LET GO OF ME, ADAM!> she screeched.

He only held on tighter, making her cry out in pain. <NO! This is your last chance, my love! The rebellion is finally making its move! The Council, these humans, the disgrace we left behind in Solaris—they’re all going to fall, and the Heralds are the only place you’re going to be safe!

<YOU’RE CRAZY!>
GET AWAY FROM HER, YOU CREEP! Ruby yelled.

Adam turned his head, threw Blake out of the way. He pulled out his sword, just barely blocked Ruby’s scythe with it. Stay out of this, Council-Scum! he spat as they locked weapons, sparks of power falling from his blood-red sword. This is a matter between us lovers!

No, no it isn’t! Ruby spat back. Blake told me all about you, and as her new best friend, it is my sworn duty to protect her from all her assbutt exes, and physically fight them if necessary!

Adam broke off, jumping back before he dashed forward and attacked Ruby with a flurry of slashes. She swung her scythe just as quickly, blocking every single attack, blinding sparks and flashes searing the eyes of anyone who watched.

Blake cried out in frustration as she could only run from the melee, shield her eyes, and pray Ruby would win.

DO YOU REALLY THINK THE COUNCIL’S ATTACK DOG CAN STAND AGAINST THE LIKES OF ME?! Adam screamed before he sent his sword crashing down on Ruby’s head!

CLANG!

The blade stopped dead on the handle; while he was caught off balance, Ruby smashed her horns into Adam’s face.

He reeled from the blow, held his sword out in a defensive stance.

Ruby swung.

A horrific screeching noise rang through the air as the scythe went right through Adam’s sword, blood-red magic exploding from the break.

Ruby smiled as she twirled her scythe around her, the echoes of Adam’s fallen foes and prey flying into her weapon, her weapon glowing as they gave it even more power.

Adam held up the two cleanly severed halves of his sword, its formerly brilliant blood-red glow now dull and dead.

He scowled. MOTHERFU--!

POW!

Ruby headbutted Adam, he crumpled to the ground, unconscious. She turned to Blake in the distance, gave her the thumbs up. She smiled at her in relief, before her ears and tail perked up and she frantically pointed behind her.

Ruby turned around, saw Cinder flying in the air, her whole body engulfed in flames. She raised her fiery hands at her. I guess if you want a job done right, you’ll HAVE TO DO IT YOURSELF!

Ruby braced herself.

CLANG!

Cinder was hit by a flying car and knocked to the ground.

The doors of the small convoy opened, armed and armoured Watchers with white and blue masks
began to jump out and join the fray, clashing with the Heralds and faring much better than the Peackeepers.

Qrow hung out of the last one, waving a familiar attachment Ruby hadn’t seen a long while. <Special delivery!> he yelled, before he threw her scythe’s Farslinger attachment to Ruby, complete with a belt of high-grade mediums.

Ruby began to fasten it to the handle of her weapon, the barrel parallel to the back of the blade. <Thanks, Uncle Qrow!> she cried as she loaded a Water clip into it, smiled as the indicators on the side began to glow a cool, icy blue.

Cinder groaned and picked herself up from where she landed. She shook her head, turned back to Ruby just in time to see an ice bolt coming right for her face.

She raised her hand, incinerated it into nothing with a wall of flame; she turned it into a bubble as more and more bullets, bolts, and bombs came flying in from all around her, the watchers and Ruby pumping everything they had into her.

Blake received a dispel charm from the reinforcements, one she happily slapped on her weapon before she rushed over to help Pyrrha.

At the same time Ruby was clashing with Adam, Weiss tangoed with Yang and Taiyang’s captors: Mercury, the silver-haired cyborg dragging father and daughter off with their cuffs, and his Fae partner Emerald, holding her sickles to their necks.

“You people should really learn how to be better kidnapping victims, you know,” he said as he dragged them through the deserted park. “Just think of it: if you hadn’t fought earlier, then you two could have been sitting in our nice, comfy getaway car right now, plus your knees wouldn’t be hurting so much from where I kicked you.”

He smiled. “Doesn’t that sound nice...?”

“Not really, no,” Weiss replied from behind them.

Emerald brought her scythes away and prepared to attack.

Kssshhhtt!

She screamed and staggered back as elemental fire burned her eyes, the strongest dosage Weiss could make at the moment.

Mercury kicked his leg back, Weiss felt the wind knocked out of her as it connected with her gut; through the pain, she grabbed his ankle with both hand-, pumped as many volts as she could into him.

She didn’t sent him dancing and jerking about like Clem earlier, but it was enough to cause Mercury to fall over as his one foot on the ground suddenly malfunctioned and lost balance.

Yang and Taiyang ran to Weiss, she looped her arms into theirs, and they helped her limp a good distance away as Mercury and Emerald recovered.

Weiss examined at the cuffs binding their hands together, and frowned. “I don’t think I can break these without hurting you two...” she murmured, still winded and aching from Mercury’s kick.

“That’s fine!” Taiyang replied. “Just give me as much juice as you can—trust me!”
“And make it fast, Weiss!” Yang said.

Weiss looked at them both, before she grabbed both of Taiyang’s hands and started charging him with as much magic as she possibly could. Thankfully, the seal spell didn’t affect that aspect of her powers, and soon, his arms were glowing with bright, golden lines of power.

“That’s enough!” Taiyang cried. “Now stand back!”

Weiss and Yang did.

<IRON-FIST!>

Taiyang’s shackles snapped off as the skin all over his hands and arms turned into ironbark, glimmering in the light. “HOLY SHIT!” he cried as he casually ripped apart Yang’s cuffs with one hand. “I CAN’T BELIEVE THAT ACTUALLY WORKED!”

“You mean you didn’t know for sure...?!” Weiss wheezed.

“Less talk, more saving the other’s asses!” Yang said as she tugged at her arm, pointed her to Pyrrha losing her fight with the umbrella-wielding girl, and badly.

Weiss turned back to Mercury and Emerald, already recovered and looking ready to go. “Are you sure you can take them on by yourself?”

“Positive!” Taiyang replied. “I survived being married to a Keeper, didn’t I?”

Before Weiss could reply, he was off.

Mercury and Emerald tried to overwhelm him, kicking and slashing in a frenzy, but Taiyang took every blow in stride, their attacks bouncing and glancing off him like his entire body had been made of metal.

“Let’s move, princess!” Yang cried as she hauled Weiss over to Pyrrha.

She was no stranger to martial arts and unusual combat styles, but she had never seen anything like the one her opponent was using: snaking and effortlessly dodging all of her attacks by moving just to the side of each strike, absorbing the blows with her umbrella, pulling her off balance with well-timed kicks and counters wherever she was most vulnerable.

The girl with the pink-and-black hair grinned as she casually poked Pyrrha in the chest with the tip of her umbrella.

Pyrrha cried out and staggered back, feeling like she had just been punched full-force by a Tinman. “Who are you...?!” she gasped as she fell back beside Penny.

Her opponent just put her umbrella on her shoulder and smiled.

“Her name’s Neopolitan, and I’m Roman Torchwick,” said a well-dressed man waltzing in with a cane. “No need to introduce yourself!” he said as he raised it up, the tip crackling with magic. “We both know who you are, Ms. Nikos...”

Roman and Neo grinned, Pyrrha closed her eyes.

The tip of a breakneck wrapped around Roman’s arm, jerked him to the ground, and caused his shot to go wide, the magic blowing up an unlucky trash can instead.
Blake pounced into the fray, making a point to land on Roman’s crotch, before she launched off him and into Neo.

Roman’s eyes widened as *excruciating* pain exploded from the lower half of his body. He groaned and aimed his cane at Blake; the flashes from her and Neo’s flurry of attacks, parries, and dodges made it hard to see, but he had no doubt Neo wouldn’t get hit by it.

The tip crackled, and he was about to fire, when Weiss’ fell out of the sky and landed square on his chest instead. The wind was knocked out of him once more, he barely had any time to realize what had happened when Weiss reared her hand back, and smashed her earth-empowered palm into his face.

*Wham!*

“*Thank you* for flying with Air Xiao Long!” he heard Yang call out, before he lost consciousness.

“*Pyrrha!*” Weiss called out as she crawled off him. “*Are you okay...?!*”

“Never mind me—what about Penny?!” Pyrrha replied, pointing to her.

Weiss knelt over and examined her body, heavy, lifeless, and cold. “*I’ll see what I can do,*” she said as she put her hands on her chest.

“And I’ll help Blake!” Yang said as she rushed off.

Weiss closed her eyes, started to channel her magic into Penny again. It was different this time, none of the warmth of her hands, the steady thrum of her sensors monitoring the flow; her magic flowed down her arms and into Penny’s chest, but it didn’t seem to be having any effect.

Pyrrha frowned hung her head… then she noticed a flicker of green in her eyes. “*It’s working!*” Weiss intensified the flow.

At the same time, Blake and Yang fought Neo, mixing their sword slashes and punches, attacking from all manner of angles, trying to grab her and set her up for the other, but she smoothly dodged or blocked every attack with her umbrella.

Neo swung her umbrella right into Yang’s side, hitting her with all the force of their combined attacks.

Yang gasped in pain; she clumsily threw a punch at Neo in return, amplifying it with as much power as she could.

Neo cheerfully grabbed her wrist, redirected her strike towards an unsuspecting Blake.

Yang’s fist connected, she flew off, tumbling and skidding along the pavement until she came to a sudden stop on a tree. Yang watched in horror as she crumpled to the floor, hands clutching her side.

Neo beamed at her as she curtsied, her eyes closed and a smile on her face. She opened them, saw a concentrated blast of bright green heading straight for her.

Her smile disappeared.

A concentrated burst of Penny’s magic exploded on her clothes, burning and searing Neo’s clothes; she silently panicked and flailed about as she struggled to open her umbrella against the rest of the
barrage, Pyrrha firing her energy lance until Neo was forced to retreat.

Kneeling on the ground, the barrel braced over her shoulder, and her hands wrapped around the ammo receiver, Penny smiled.

Sprawled out on her back and breathing heavily, Weiss groaned.

“1,100 years…” she muttered. “1,100 years, a decades long trip from the Old World on a decaying fleet held together by scrap metal, duct tape, and prayers, and who-knows-how-many raids and fights with Aether Pirates, and that thing STILL fires!”

Pyrrha chuckled. “Thank the Stewards for taking such good care of it!” she said as she and Penny went off to fetch Blake and Yang.

They had just laid them down beside Weiss and healed the worst of their injuries, when jets appeared over the night sky, flashing red-gold holo indicators appearing all over the square with a familiar logo of a crown and a shield.

Everyone stopped.

The Council forces’ eyes widened as they all began to run for it, hauling themselves, their injured, and their fallen back into their cars and flying off, or disappearing into nearby buildings and teleporting out of there.

Cinder dispelled her bubble, she and her Heralds stared up at the sky as the Queensguard dropped down from the sky like shooting stars, making craters in the pavement as they landed, glowing bright and radiant as they acquired their targets, and began to decimate them with the very best Candela had to offer.

Taiyang and broke off from Mercury and Emerald, Qrow and Ruby split from the rest of the watchers and joined him. Taiyang punched his fists into the ground, all three of them flew up into the air on a pillar of upturned earth, right into the open doors of a flying car heading towards Weiss and the others.

Ruby leaned out, and waved at Weiss; she couldn’t see her smile underneath the mask, the expression on her face that told her everything was going to be alright now, but she could just tell. Weiss smiled back, until she saw a lone figure rocketing after them in highly advanced armour she’d never seen before, brilliant and radiant with technomagic “wings” that made its wearer look like an angel from the Old World’s myth.

If Old World angels came with highly advanced energy-weapons that had enough firepower to level a small city state district, at any rate.

“GET AWAY FROM MY SISTER!” Winter cried.

Her shoulder-mounted cannons charged, then fired a beam of pure, concentrated magic straight at the flying car Ruby, Taiyang, and Qrow were on.
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Qrow noticed the beam, pushed Ruby out of the car before he and Taiyang jumped out themselves, just barely avoiding getting incinerated along with it.

The flaming, falling wreck kept on going, headed straight for the others still on the floor, Yang, Blake, and Weiss unable to run for exhaustion or their injuries.

Winter rocketed through the air, stopping the wreck with a tractor beam before she threw it away to a deserted area of the park. Then, she zoomed over their heads, taking Pyrrha and Weiss along with her while leaving the others behind.

Qrow, Taiyang, and Ruby rolled on the ground, and hauled ass to the others, Taiyang stomping his feet and raising up walls of rock, dirt, and concrete behind them. The Queensguard reacted by destroying them almost as fast as they went up, with magnetically-accelerated bullets, energy blasts, and high-explosives.

Cinder screamed and fled up into the air, started blasting fireballs, blinding beams of superheated light, and making magma erupt all over Goldleaf Park to give both the surviving Heralds and Council forces cover to get the hell out of there as the Queensguard pulled back.

Weiss looked around as Winter sent her and Pyrrha zooming across Candela, suspended just in front of her in bubbles of energy.

The streets were deserted but for the peacekeepers and AFA roaming around in squad vans and tanks, thundering through the forgotten booths and stalls, helping tourists and citizens still trapped, and warding off looters and other criminals trying to take advantage of the chaos.

She frantically turned back to Winter, her face hidden underneath her helmet. “Winter, is that you?!”

“Snow Queen to Castle: both VIPs secured, en-route to Marhalika Avenue, and need extraction ASAP!” Winter barked. “I don’t know what the hell else these Tangos are capable of, and I don’t intend to find out!”

Then, she spared a glance at Weiss, and said, “Yes, yes it is, Weiss!” She smiled underneath her helmet. “We’ll get you both back someplace safe, somewhere where we can undo whatever the hell it is those people have done to you….”

Weiss tried to beat at her armour, found herself turning round and round inside her bubble. “Take me back! Take me back! Those people are my friends!”

“Mine too!” Pyrrha cried.

Under the helmet, Winter’s eyes widened. “Sweet Shepherd, it’s even worse than I thought….” she muttered as she made a hard bank to the right, Pyrrha and Weiss’ internal organs spared from the laws of physics with the help of the fields.

“You’ve got it all wrong, sis!” Weiss screamed. “They’re not the bad guys! They were trying to help us get away!”

“I second that!” Pyrrha cried.
“You mean take you two back to wherever they’re holding you hostage and brainwashing you!” Winter cried as she sped up, straight to Maharlika Avenue. “I got your message from Kajiki, Weiss—I’ve got a pretty good idea of how badly they’ve screwed up your head!”

“I meant every single word of it!” Weiss screeched, her voice getting hoarse from the strain. “I’m not going back! The Valley is my home now, and if you’ll just listen to me, we can go back there together!”

“What the hell are they doing to you back there?!”

“Everything I told you! Feeding me! Keeping me safe! Giving me things to pass the time with! I’m on parole now, actually, and now I work on a farm… and… well… I’ve even fallen in love with Ruby!”

Pyrrha blushed. “… I have too but with Penny instead, so I would really appreciate it if you please turn us around, and back to them, if it’s not too much trouble…!”

Winter looked at the both of them in turn as she began to fly down to Maharlika Avenue, and to a waiting jet with well-armed guards waiting. She gave Pyrrha to them, before she set Weiss down on her feet, and gently put her armoured hands on her shoulders.

“Weiss, as soon as things quiet down, we are having that talk about Stockholm Syndrome again, okay?...?”

Suddenly, their comms crackled with Ironwood’s voice: “All units in Maharlika Avenue: MOVE OUT! I repeat: MOVE OUT!”

“What’s wrong, sir?!” Winter asked.

“Tango coming in hot on your position, and she’s bringing serious firepower!”

She frowned. “What the hell do they have, sir?!”

“JUST MOVE! And if you have to engage, you’re authorized to use every single thing you’ve got!”

They all looked up to the sky as a missile rocketed up to their position, before it stopped, revealing itself to be Cinder, her entire body not covered in flames so much as made of them. They all stared as she raised her hands, and meteors began to rain down from the sky.

“RUN!” Winter cried as she blasted off towards her.

“WINTER, NO!” Weiss cried as soldiers hauled her and Pyrrha off.

The meteors crashed into the street, leaving molten craters in the ground, destroying gigantic chunks of the faces and sides of the buildings around them, turning the jet into twisted wreckage as the whole place began to burn.

Winter and Cinder clashed, dashing and weaved through the air, trading bursts of energy, fireballs, missiles, jets of flame, lasers of pure concentrated magic and superheated light, the flames around them growing ever hotter and larger as their surroundings began to collapse and crumble.

“How the hell are you flying and fighting like this?!” Winter cried as she fired a lance of energy at Cinder
“With the same magitech you’re using!” Cinder cried as she dodged it.

“That’s impossible!” Winter cried as she readied seven more of them. “My Mk. IV’s the only one of its kind in Avalon!” she yelled as she fired them all at once.

Cinder destroyed them with a giant wall of flame, before she rushed through the smoke and fire, tackling Winter and pinning her to the side of a building. “In the human territories, at least...” she growled, before she raised a hand of pure fire with molten magma claws.

The temperature alarms in Winter’s suit were going insane, she could feel Cinder’s heat begin to melt her armour, blister her vulnerable skin underneath. She scowled at her as Cinder pulled her hand back, prepared to plunge it into her.

Suddenly, she screamed in agony.

Winter watched as ice exploded over Cinder’s body before it almost instantly turned to steam. More and more blasts began to land on her, coming in at a steady, rhythmic pace, like a squad were firing two sniper rifles as quickly as they possibly could, one after the other.

Back down on the ground and in the nearest safe intersection, Ruby continued to fire her scythe’s farslinger, Blake feeding it a constant stream of every medium they had on them, Taiyang holding the barrel steady and keeping them from flying off from the recoil.

Beside them, Pyrrha did the same with Penny holding her energy lance steady, and Weiss’ gloved hand on the receiver feeding it a constant supply of her unsealed magic. Some distance away, Yang and Qrow loaded the last of the unconscious or severely injured AFA soldiers into an unmarked van from the Plushie Palace.

“Sorry, boys, girls, and NB’s: nothing personal,” Qrow said as he and Yang grabbed the doors.

“Trust us: you’re going to hear about the reports tomorrow morning and think to yourself, ‘Man, I am so glad I got the shit beat out of me, or else I would have been right in the thick of that shit!’” she added before they slammed them shut.

The van took to the skies and away from the scene as news teams, Queensguard, and AFA started to rush in all around Maharlika Avenue, erecting energy barriers, keeping their distance, and watching with long-range optics as they tried to figure out exactly how the hell they were supposed to engage Cinder and the others without getting killed.

All the while, the group continued to fire elemental bolts at Cinder.

From what little Winter could see of her from her darkened optics, she was writhing in agony desperately trying to drive her flaming claw into Winter, stopped only by the constant rain of ice, electricity, fire, and metal.

Finally, she could take no more, screaming in pain and frustration as she flew off, her body turning back to normal as she fell to the ground…

… And just in time, too, as Ruby had completely run out of mediums, and Weiss’ once full mana bar was finally dipping dangerously close to empty.

Winter pushed off from the crater she was stuck in, reactivating her wings and blasting through the burning street to the only safe haven in sight—ironically and unfortunately, where one of the very, very, very few things she was terrified of was standing with her companions.
“Will someone please tell me WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON RIGHT NOW?!?” Winter screamed as she landed between Weiss and Ruby, frantically looking back and forth at them in turn.

“We’ll explain back at the Valley!” Weiss replied as they began to holster their weapons and pull out several air teleporation charms for all of them.

Winter blinked. “I’m sorry, you don’t mean the Viridian Valley, where the Keeper over there lives, right…? This is some other ‘Valley’ elsewhere in Avalon, right?!”

Weiss was about to reply, before they all saw a giant fireball heading straight for them.

Winter blasted forward and put up an energy barrier in front them.

Standing in the remnants of the broken and molten street in front of them, Cinder just sent another fireball, and another, and another, a constant rain of explosions erupting in front of Winter, her shield barely keeping it from the others.

“I hope you’ve got a plan, because I can’t keep this up forever!” she cried as she looked at her helmet’s HUD, noted the flashing red warning sign of her suit’s power supply.

“We’ll think of something!” Ruby cried. She turned back to the others. “Does anyone have anything?”

“ARE YOU F**KING WITH ME RIGHT NOW?!” Winter yelled.

They ignored her and started thinking. Then, Taiyang snapped his fingers, sparks flying from his still metallic fingers. “I got it! Penny, Weiss: give me as much juice as you can possibly spare!”

“The hell are you planning, Tai?!” Qrow snapped.

Taiyang grinned. “Same thing we did for episode 38 of Rune Rangers: Guardians of the Grove!”

Qrow groaned. “You took seventeen takes to get that right!”

“That just means I have a lot of practice!”

Without much choice, Penny and Weiss grabbed either of Taiyang’s hands and began the transfer.

Winter’s energy barrier began to flicker, Cinder made a giant fireball and threw it at her.

Boom.

The shield and Winter’s power core gave out, she rocketed past them and to one of the barriers further up the street; her fellow Queensguard rushed out to catch her and brought her back behind the wall.

“WINTER!” Weiss screamed.

She let go of Taiyang’s hand and tried to run after her, before Yang grabbed her and pulled her back.

“FOCUS!” she yelled. “We’re ALL f**ked if we don’t stop her!”

Weiss screamed in frustration, before she put her hand back onto Taiyang’s

Cinder panted for breath, shivering and aching from the bolts still ravaging her system. Penny and
Weiss fell into Pyrrha and Ruby’s arms, exhausted from the transfer. Taiyang ran up, his ironbark arms now glowing golden.

Cinder let out a harsh, strained laugh. “The hell do you think you’re going to do, soft-skin!?” she barked.

“Why don’t you find out?” Taiyang called out, making the “come at me” gesture.

Cinder sucked in a deep breath, and let out a roar of pure rage as she sent a giant fireball at Taiyang.

He grinned as he snatched it out of mid-air, spinning around from the momentum before he sent it flying back at Cinder.

Her eyes widened.

*Boom.*

Cinder staggered back, surprised.

Taiyang laughed. “Tsunami-Fist, baby! It’s a hell of a technique. Come on, give me all you’ve got, see what happens!”

Cinder growled, her ears pulling back as she began to circle a hand in the air, little flickers of light winking in front of her.

Taiyang’s smile disappeared. “Uh… you’re not casting more fireballs, are you...?”

Cinder chuckled as a halo of light appeared in front of her.

“No.”

Everyone had to shield their eyes as a blinding, searing beam of light erupted from Cinder’s hands. Taiyang braced himself, his arms reflecting it away from him and the others. Aircraft began to take evasive maneuvers as he started to get pushed back from the sheer power, the laser veering all around searing the faces of the buildings and the scorching the air around it.

He stomped his feet into the ground, burying himself into the street for support. “Does anyone have anything else?!” he asked through gritted teeth. “*Preferably a better idea than what I had!*”

They all wracked their heads, their expressions growing more and more desperate as Cinder kept on intensifying the beam, Taiyang struggled to reflect it.

And suddenly, Weiss had an idea. “*Can Taiyang use the Tsunami-Fist to absorb Cinder’s power then into Ruby’s farslinger like a conduit!?*” she asked.

“Theoretically, he could, but blocking Cinder’s beam is taking all of his concentration!” Penny replied. “We’ll need someone to do it for him!”

“*Can I do it?*” Weiss asked.

Penny frowned. “All that energy going through your body at once will likely *kill* you… unless you can distribute the excess energy among the rest of us.”

Qrow nodded as he stepped up. “How do we do that?”

“I’ll put my hands on Weiss’ body, and you all hold onto me in turn. Brace yourselves—this is likely
going to be extremely painful!”

“Beats getting finding out what a well-done steak feels like!” Yang cried. “I’m game!”

“Count me in!” Pyrrha called out.

<Me too!> Blake said.

“Let’s do this!” Ruby yelled as she rushed forward beside Taiyang, planted the head of her scythe back in the ground.

“Do you really think this is going to work?!” Cinder snapped.

“We’re going to find out!” Weiss called out as they all got into position.

She put her gauntlet hand on Taiyang’s back, and pointed Myrtenaster’s tip into Ruby’s farslinger. Penny grabbed her waist, the others held onto hers, and on the count of three, Taiyang began to absorb the full force of the laser, and Weiss siphoned it out of him.

It hurt.

Like every single inch of Weiss’ body, her very being was being incinerated. Cinder’s magic ravaged her system, chaotic, uncontrollable, a force of pure, absolute destruction; she almost let go of Taiyang, gave up before she burned to ashes, when she felt something:

Penny’s healing magic pouring into her and keeping her together and redirected the brunt of the damage to the others; sweat poured down their skin, their knees shook and buckled, their knuckles were ghostly white as they just kept holding on, refusing to let go, refusing to let Cinder win.

It still hurt, but now, Weiss could focus just long enough to transform the white-hot light into freezing-cold ice, then send it straight into Ruby’s farslinger.

And then, when they could all take no more, she pulled the trigger.

A giant beam of freezing cold water shot out from Ruby’s scythe, the air around it turning to frost, the molten and scorched ground turning to ice, Cinder’s eyes widening as she saw it coming just a little too late.

The farslinger attachment exploded in a cloud of icy blue magic.

Everyone but Ruby collapsed to the ground and on top of each other, overwhelmed and exhausted.

Cinder was trapped in a giant iceberg, her horrified expression clear for all too see under the several inches thick layer of pure, crystal clear ice surrounding her.

Ruby fished out all of their teleportation charms from their pockets, activated them all at once as a twister of green magic swirled all around them.

All of Avalon watched as they literally vanished into thin air.
Chapter 70

Candela, Acropolis

“Well… it is NOT a ‘Good Morning’ today, Avalon.

“I’ll be honest with you, listeners: it was a hell of a night for me, for all of us in Candela, and not for the good reasons. For those of you who’ve been shuffled off to the evacuation centers so fast they couldn’t check the news, had slept through the whole thing, or still can’t wrap your head around what happened last night:

“We’re under attack.

“A terrorist organization calling themselves ‘The Heralds of the New World Order’ just made their public debut last night, in the middle of Candela’s Eve of the Ether festival right there in Goldleaf Park—well, what’s left of it, anyway. They crashed the end of the Couple’s Costume Contest, blew up the stage just as they were announcing the winners, before their troops on the ground swarmed in as the crowds were running.

“You could tell who they were by the freaky, highly-advanced magitech and weapons they were carrying, and their masks, all white with red markings—so might want to seriously reconsider your choices in case you’re going to a masquerade party one of these days.

“Though they mostly seemed to be interested in raising hell and fighting the PKB than shooting up innocent folks, we’ve still got thousands injured, and hundreds dead, missing, or in critical condition at the hospitals.

“The numbers are still being tallied, but I’m looking at them on a screen right now and it’s not looking good, listeners.

“Then, in a turn of events that the phrase ‘mixed blessing’ was made for, a different terrorist organization we only know as the ‘Council’ clashed with them, fighting with the very same alien magitech the Heralds were using, up until the Queensguard arrived, at which point they turned tail and ran, leaving the Royals to finish the job.

“The AFA is playing it safe for now and declaring the Council a fellow terrorist organization and threat to all of Avalon, but the fact of the matter is that a lot of people and peackeepers owe their lives to those folks in those blue masks fending off the Heralds while they ran.

“Only time will tell if this is a case of ‘allies in the shadows,’ or an ‘enemy of my enemy situation.’

“I’m sure you’re all waiting for me to tell you all about the chaos that happened in the radioactive disaster zone that was Maharlika Avenue, but unfortunately, we’re scarce on any concrete details; you’ve got the Info-Grid for all the theories, guesses, and footage your hearts desire; and we here at Good Morning Avalon are going to commit to our dedication to only delivering you the facts, and reasonable, well-argued opinions, so I’ll tell you what we all know for sure:

“The Heralds are a new, extremely dangerous terrorist organization, equipped with magitech we’ve never seen before.

“They’ve got all three branches of the Armed Forces of Avalon scrambling to figure out where they got it, how we’re going to fight them, and why they escaped our attention until it was too late. We don’t know what their goals are, exactly, but going from their leader Cinder Fall’s speech last night,
our best guess is this:

“They want to watch Avalon burn, and build something new over the ashes.

“The Council is the same except opposed to the Heralds, and hopefully not fighting over who gets to pour the gas and light the match. What we are sure is of is that they are definitely connected to the whole Keeper of the Grove business with the Schnee family less than a month ago, and that things weren’t as clear cut as we once thought they were, now that Weiss Schnee turns out to be both alive and working with them.

“I’d love to discuss my own thoughts about it, but again, Truth and Reasonable Opinions over Ratings, so here’s the Public Service Announcements:

“The AFA is still putting a cap on civilian use of the Info-Grid, but you may still queue up your messages to your loved ones, which will all be sent out as soon as possible. We know you need to tell them you’re alright, but right now, the protectors in platinum need those information highways free as they make sure that we all stay alright.

“All businesses and schools, public and private, are shut down until further notice by order of the Peacekeeping Bureau. Any enterprises or institutions found violating this order will be severely sanctioned, and forcibly closed for the day—possibly permanently, so think twice about trying to make a buck off this tragedy.

“The Candela International Airport has canceled all commercial flights, to make way for emergency evacuations out of Acropolis. If you have any complaints about refunds or any other concern, please take them to the respective agencies you brought your tickets or travel packages from.

“Travel within six blocks of and especially into Goldleaf Park and Maharlika Avenue are restricted. We know you want to see what the aftermath is with your own eyes, folks, or maybe even try to find whatever it is you dropped in the chaos, but the fact is there is some serious magical radiation going on there in both of those places.

“A cool selfie at ground zero is not worth the permanent, lifetime health complications, or even death by exposure.

“The Peacekeeping Bureau is making their rounds, distributing medicine, food, and water to everyone affected by this tragedy. Please, line-up in an orderly fashion at the designated evacuation centers and distribution sites, and wait for your turn.

“We’re living in Candela, people: having an abundance of everything for everyone is kind of our thing...”

The Nexus, Heartland

A Wolf in Shepherd’s Clothing?

By Halili Hyenhyota

The very foundations of the Church of the Holy Shepherd have been rocked with the biggest scandal they have ever experienced: collusion with terrorists at the very highest level.

Holos, eyewitness accounts, and confirmed reports from the Peackeeping Bureau, the Armed Forces of Avalon, and the Church itself all show that the current Holy Shepherd, Pyrrha Nikos, is guilty of
aiding and abetting the operations and escape of members of the terrorist organization known ‘the Council’ during the terror attack at Goldleaf Park, Candela.

Only making matters worse are the circumstances of her disappearance from the Nexus and subsequent appearance in Candela last night, as authorities are only just finding out the details of a masterfully executed escape plan a year in the making; and the conclusive, undeniable evidence that she and the suspects were obviously extremely close and familiar with each other, openly enjoying themselves at the Eve of the Ether fair for hours beforehand, and even entering the Candela Couples’ Costume contest—an event personally attended to by thousands, through the Info-Grid by billions over the Info-Grid, and broadcasted live on realm-wide public-access Holovision.

They had escaped suspicion and attention from the authorities by going undercover, wearing “costumes” of their true identities. It was an audacious ruse that worked all too well as they were only exposed during the attack by the Council’s rivals, the “Heralds of the New World Order.”

Questions abound:

How long have they known each other? Was this just a brazen night out on the town, or a cover for something much more sinister? And just what exactly is going on inside the highest echelons of the Church of the Holy Shepherd, that their Head of State felt the need to escape in the night, to the company of Enemies of the Realm...?

What is for sure is that the faith of even the most devoted is shook, Church officials are scrambling to control the damage, and that the future of Avalon’s first government is in serious question once more.

Lumania, Heartland

In the lobby of the Curie Nikos College and Research Center (or as it was affectionately known as, “The Academy”), the media, scientists, and curious souls all rubbed up against each other’s shoulders in the suddenly too-tight space, the rest tuning in on their HoloVision devices of choice.

The speaker on the podium took a moment to review her words, before she began the press release, holos broadcasting on the screen beside her, “Our medical examinations and autopsies of the members of the terrorist organization ‘The Heralds of the New World Order’ are now complete, and have turned up some incredibly disturbing details...”

“It’s of little surprise to anyone that majority of them are heavily modded, with genetic and/or cybernetic enhancements, but the sheer depth and complexity of many of them boggle the minds of us here at the Academy, and worry us greatly beside.

“In simple terms, these are extremely precise and dramatic modifications to a patient’s body, helping them easily exceed the limits of the most highly advanced procedures and cybernetic implants we are currently aware of—ones we haven’t even come close to attempting to create or even consider for development from the sheer number of things that could go wrong, the highly questionable and unethical implications and necessities of creating and testing them, and the limits of our own capabilities beside.

“Of particular note are those bodies that have animal ears, tails, and other traits. At first glance, this just seems to be nothing more than the incredibly popular animal-themed cosmetic mods used by a sizable niche interest group, until further examination yielded such extreme changes to their DNA that we find ourselves hesitating to even call them ‘human.’

“In every level, from their physiology, to the sequences of their genomes, and the structures of their
brains—it’s almost like they’re an entirely new species…”

Valentino, Heartland

Two peacekeepers held on tight to either side of a raving, ranting, homeless man dressed in rags, trying to wrestle him into a waiting squad boat.

He kept on shouting his message, spit flying from his mouth full of rotting teeth. “The End Times are here! The Truth has been revealed to me! The Lies of the Holy Shepherd, what lurks within the Viridian Valley, what you will find at the end of the Endless Sea!”

They grunted as they tried to push him into the brig, but the man was possessed, fighting back with more strength than his emaciated body would hint at.

“The Heralds are here, and the first trumpet has been blown! Flee from the Wolves in the Flock, their Mistress and her Hunters! Piper will not protect you—she never had!”

Slam!

The door was shut in his face. The peacekeepers sighed in relief; the raving man was still pressing his face up to the glass, but now they couldn’t hear him, and sensors beside would alert them if anything was truly wrong.

They got back behind the wheel, and jetted off through Valentino’s numerous canals and waterways.

Most of the residents went back to their business walking through the streets, enjoying themselves in their homes or at the numerous business, or puttering on through with their own boats, but some couldn’t help but have the message linger in the back of their heads...

Solaris, Celestion

In a secure, secret Trance server…

“What the fuck do you mean ‘We don’t know’?!” a shadowy figure with a question mark on their head screamed. “We are Jahiliyah! The entire point of our organization is that we know EVERYTHING, and more so, that our name is IRONIC, not LITERAL!”

A talking toilet stepped up, its lid flapping up and down as it spoke. “But Nobody, we are being offered extremely generous sums from our clients for exclusive access—”

“FUCK the money!” Nobody cried as they threw their hands up. “I want EVERYONE to dig up EVERYTHING they have on these fucking Heralds, then throw all that shit out on the Info-Grid for everyone to see, on the off-chance someone out there will help us see where the fucking dots are, let alone connect them!

“This isn’t about money any more, people—this is our reputation, our very existence! Who the HELL is going to trust an information broker that doesn’t know shit?!”

The various Trance avatars of humans, pop culture characters and celebrities, animals, and inanimate objects all looked at each other nervously.

“WELL?! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?! GO BEFORE I SEND SOMEONE TO WHEREVER YOU ARE IRL TO KICK YOU IN YOUR PHYSICAL ASSES!”
The Jahiliyah operatives all started DC’ing or heading elsewhere on the server in a hurry.

In the boardroom of Adel Enterprises in Ciel Solaris…

High-profile members of the Black Cross all sat in a long, elegant dining table, finely dressed servers quietly pouring fine, ancient wines which were downed without a second thought, their drinkers more interested in getting drunk than savouring the rich, complex flavours.

At the head of it, Coco Adel let out a long, heavy sigh. “Well… at the very least, we now know what Roman’s been up to these past few years…” she said as she looked at two conspicuously empty seats on the side, their place cards summarily removed.

In room 314 of the Marimar Hotel in Terre Solaris…

Yukino Aguilar sat in her favourite chair, facing out the window of her favourite spot in her suite, the one that had the most perfect view of the Endless Sea and lovingly preserved streets of the original Terre Solaris, tourists and locals alike going about their business that fine evening.

Despite the incredibly heavy security presence, the android entering the room was waved on through without so much as a second glance.

They stepped up beside Yuki, a grim expression on their face.

“Andrei,” Yuki hummed.

“Yuki,” Andrei replied, bowing.

Yuki took a sip of her tea, before she slowly put her cup back on its saucer. “How bad is it...?”

“The weapons deliveries we have intercepted our stumping all of our suppliers,” Andrei replied. “No one knows how they were made, where they got the materials, or what they are made of, as they are nothing they have ever seen.

“The data the Academy is publishing also do not match any of our modifications, legal or otherwise, in development or awaiting deployment into the black market.”

“And finally...” Andrei paused, their normally stoic, expressionless face worried, if only for a moment. “… Xiaoyu and Nikolai Wu have called an indefinite truce, until further notice.”

Yuki frowned. “Begin stockpiling weapons, supplies, and soldiers—this is war.”

Zeal, Sekhmet

It was business as usual in the Grand Bazaar, nomadic traders and permanent residents trading goods, services, and information, biding their time till nightfall, acquiring what they needed to survive, and just generally making the long, hot days a pass little easier.

“Did you hear about what happened over in Candela?” asked a man buying fruit.

“Yeah, terrible stuff!” the stall owner replied. “It’s why I moved here—at least I expect loonies wielding freaky weapons to come attacking the city every once in a while!”

“Praise be to that! Now how much for this watermelon…?”
Chapter 71

Ruby walked into the high-security ward of the Bastion’s hospital, carrying a sack of cookies, a few bottles of milk, and a stack of disposable cups. Though the watchers assigned there trusted her not to cause any trouble, protocol was still protocol and they had to thoroughly search her whole person.

<Our apologies, Keeper Rose,> one of them said after they finished.

She waved them off. <It’s fine! It’s your job, after all.>

And with that, she began her visits.

<Hey dad, hey Yang!> Ruby chirped as she came to Taiyang’s and Yang’s, carefully hugging her father around his waist, and her older sister anywhere but there.

<Hey Ruby!> they replied, smiling.

They would have hugged her back, but both of Taiyang’s arms were currently submerged in a tank of special microbes and enchanted water, healing or completely replacing the skin on them for the severity of the burns he had sustained last night; and Yang could barely move any part of her body below her neck, as a consequence of all the damage she’d sustained from injuries and her using the fire-fist.

<Okay, so I’ve got good news and bad news!> Ruby said as she opened up her sack of cookies.

<What’s the good news?> Taiyang asked, before they kept their mouths open.

<Because you guys are now wanted criminals all over Avalon, and the Heralds were obviously targeting you guys specifically, and it’s a lot easier to just keep you guys in Fae territory where the Council knows where you are at all times, you both get to go back to Keeper’s Hollow with me!> Ruby chirped as she fed them cookies.

Taiyang beamed. <That’s great!> he said before bit off a chunk and chewed.

<What’s the catch...?> Yang asked as she held hers in her teeth, before she maneuvered all of it into her mouth.

<After you guys get discharged from the hospital, you’re both going on parole, like Weiss,> Ruby explained as she started pouring them cups of milk. <You’ll have to work with us as part of the Watchers or help at home, and Dad’s going to get a governor installed.

<The Council themselves are pretty sure you’ve learned your lesson from last time, but a LOT of people want insurance.>

Taiyang swallowed. <Fair enough.> he said as he picked up the rest of his cookie with his mouth.

<Aw, man!> Yang said through a mouthful of half-chewed chunks. <I’m just the victim of shitty parents and their terrible life decisions here, why am I part of it?>

<Well, there is your HUGE criminal record back at Valentino!> Ruby replied as she held up Taiyang’s cup for him. <How did you get a public indecency charge AND cause seventeen boating accidents at the same time, anyway...?>

Yang swallowed and sheepishly looked away. <Ah, yeah... some friends of mine needed a
distraction to get away, so I decided to flash my tits at a camera… didn’t realize just how many receivers that thing was connected to…>

Ruby looked at her in confusion. <They’re just your boobs, what’s so distracting about them…?> she asked as she moved to help Yang drink her milk.

Taiyang winced. <Can you girls please talk about this some other time? Preferably when I’m not in earshot…?>

<Aww, fine…> Ruby said, her ears falling as she pulled Yang’s empty cup away.

<Don’t worry, we’ll talk when we get back to the Hollow, Rubes.> Yang said, smiling. <Then, I’ll help you get abreast of everything I haven’t told you in our Honey Dreams!>

Taiyang shook his head, the two sisters laughed, until Yang’s sides started hurting again.

<Oh! Ahh! Fuck! Fuck! Rubes?>

Ruby the button for her vitae vine to send down more painkillers.

Yang sighed in relief. <Oooh… thank you, that is good shit, good shit right there…>

Ruby smiled. <No problem! I need to go see the others now, before visiting hours are over. Bye dad, bye Yang!>

<See you, Ruby!> <Later, Rubes…>

Ruby headed over to the next set of beds.

<Hey Uncle Qrow, hey Blake!> Ruby said.

<Heya, Rubes,> Qrow replied.

Blake looked up from her reading, and smiled.

<You guys feeling better?> Ruby asked.

<I will if you mixed some booze into that milk—I haven’t had a drink in way too long…>

<It hasn’t even been half-a-day.> Blake said.

<Exactly.>

Ruby smiled and shook her head. <Sorry, it’s just regular old chocolate chip cookies and milk…> she said as she opened up the bag, and poured them milk.

Qrow sighed as he took his. <Oh well, I guess I’ll just pretend to get well and fucked up from this…> he muttered as he knocked back his cup like a shot of whiskey.

<Or you could just enjoy it for what it actually is, like a normal Fae,> Blake said as she bit into her cookie.

Qrow smiled as he put his cup down. <Now where’s the fun in that?>

Ruby chuckled. <… Hey, Uncle Qrow? You mind if I pull up the curtain? Me and Blake have something personal to discuss.>
Qrow said, wrapping his pillow around his head.

Ruby said, before she did just that. She lowered her voice as she went up to Blake’s bed. <You want to talk about you-know-who..?>

Blake frowned, then nodded slowly. <Thanks for the save last night… I don’t even want to think of what would have happened if you hadn’t shown up when you did...> she shivered, her ears pulling back in fear.

Ruby said as she reached out and touched her hand. <He’s gone now, and if he comes back, just call me and I’ll come and kick his ass for you again.>

Ruby frowned, and took her hand away. <Just because I can, doesn’t mean I should—your dad should have taught you that...>

Blake sighed. <Is it really worth it, though...?>

Ruby replied. <I need to go now, want me to pull back the curtain?>

<Please don’t, I could use some kinda-alone time, actually...> Blake said, staring at her sheets.

Ruby nodded. She told Qrow he could unplug his hearing-holes, and went to the next bed.

“Hello Ruby!” Pyrrha said, waving.

“Hey Pyrrha!” Ruby said, waving back. “How are you feeling?” she asked as she gave her a cookie.

“Wonderful, thank you! I’m still plenty sore from the events of last night, but it’s nothing new to me,” she said before she took a bite.

Ruby nodded. “That’s great to hear! I’m sure someone’s already told you, but in case they haven’t, we’ll try to clear your name and get you back in the human territories ASAP!”

Pyrrha choked on her cookie. After she and Ruby got it to go down the right pipe, she muttered, “Oh... oh no, please, please don’t...”

“Do what?” Ruby asked as she patted her on the back.

“Send me back to the human territories,” Pyrrha replied as she held up her cup of milk. “Please. I like it here.”

“Don’t you want to go back...?” Ruby asked.

Pyrrha shook her head, before she took a drink. “I’ve been trying to find something—anything to get away from the Church of the Holy Shepherd, start afresh somewhere new, ideally permanently, or even just temporarily, like I originally planned last night.”

“But don’t they need you back there? You’re part of their Eldan Council, right?”

Pyrrha sighed. “My family hasn’t had any real sway in how the government or the church is run ever since Piorina herself—maybe even during her time. All I really do is appear in public events, be the center of ceremonies, and maybe even visit some people in their homes every once in a while...
“The Sacred Stewards are the ones really running the show!”

Ruby blinked. “Wow. I never knew...”

Pyrrha sighed. “And that is exactly the problem...”

“Excuse me, may I interrupt your conversation?” Penny asked.

Ruby turned to her and smiled. “Oh, no, not at all, Penny! I was just about to finish up and leave, actually.” She paused. “What’s with the new outfit...?”

“Pyrrha requested it!” Penny replied as she walked up in an Old World Nurse’s outfit straight from pop culture. “It wasn’t an unreasonable demand, and clothing does not affect my mender duties in the slightest, so why not honour it?”

She smiled as she turned around, showing it off. “Besides, I look good in it, don’t I...?”

“You really do!” Ruby replied, giving her the thumbs up. “Doesn’t she, Pyrrha?”

Pyrrha blinked, her cheeks slowly turning red. “I’m sorry, were you saying something...?”

Ruby and Penny chuckled. The former shut the privacy curtains on her way out, while the latter walked up to Pyrrha, gently wiping the trickle of drool from the side of her mouth.

“You’ve got a little something...~”

Finally, Ruby made it to the last bed. Because of the special circumstances, there were magical barriers erected all around the patient, and a weaver/mender team was on-hand just outside it. She knocked on one of the walls, ripples of energy spreading all over its surface.

“Weiss? I’m coming in!”

Ruby through the barrier, like she was diving into the surface of a pool, only sideways.

“Ugghh...” Weiss groaned as she lay face-down in her bed, the Summer plushie in one arm, and Winter’s Eluna plushie in her other—Velvet had learned of their pawning it off, and bought it back, even if they still had to continue the payments for how large their debt was.

She offered much more generous terms compared to the Guild, though, with offers of contract jobs from the Palace aside.

Ruby smiled as she climbed in next to her. “How are you feeling, Weiss...?” she asked as she put a hand on her back.

“My entire world is pain, every fiber of my being is suffering, and I hate everything and everyone in it, including you...” Weiss mumbled.

“That’s just the magical exhaustion talking,” Ruby hummed.

Weiss turned to face her, her eyes full of murder. “No it isn’t.”

Ruby smiled, dug into her bag of cookies, and put one to her lips.

Weiss glared at her, before she took a bite of it. After she chewed and swallowed, she downgraded to ‘manslaughter.’ “Okay, so maybe it is...” she muttered as she took another bite.
“You’ll feel a whole lot better once we get your levels back up,” Ruby said, gently touching her vitae vine drip of pure mana water.

“It can’t refill fast enough...” Weiss muttered after she swallowed her latest mouthful. She looked at Ruby. “Hey… Ruby… do you have any news about what happened to Winter, after we left?”

Ruby shrugged. “The seekers tell me she and a good chunk of the Queensguard went off to Manor Schnee, turn it into a temporary evacuation center and military base while they fix up Candela. They couldn’t sneak someone in without it looking real suspicious, so we’re in the dark...”

Weiss sighed. “I wonder what she’s going through right now… or what happened to her since they took her away to Queensguard HQ, for that matter...”

Ruby shrugged again. “I guess we’ll find out eventually!” she gently rubbed her on her back. “Don’t worry, I’m sure she’s fine...”

Weiss hummed as she buried her face back in her pillow. “I sure hope so...”
The dining hall of Manor Schnee had been temporarily turned into a combination situation room/planning area/mess hall for the space and the slapdash nature of their operations.

Among other Queensguard, Agent Gumshoe waited there, pulling out a Fizzle Stick from her breast pocket, putting it into her mouth, and lighting it with her antique Zippo. The tip of the candy started to crackle, the sugar inside it melting and pouring out the other side, and she began to chew.

“They say we were all lucky that we came when we did, guns blazing and putting all kinds of holes in the plans of the Heralds and whoever the hell the ‘Council’ are,” she said. “Poor bastards don’t realize we Queensguard didn’t have the winning numbers on our tickets, and probably never will.”

Used to it, and with their own eccentric quirks beside, none of the other agents commented.

“It’s a hard life, being a Queensguard.

“You got your personal issues, your awful pasts, and your honest desire to make a difference in this world and help people out by putting holes in others, wondering if you’re a fuckin’ hero who deserves a parade, or just a gun with two legs someone else is throwing into the fray for them.

“Then you join the program, and everything goes to even deeper shit.

“Physical training that’ll make the Old World’s Marine Corps weep. School, the kind of eyebrow burning usually done by people lookin’ to tack some fancy letters to their name, have people callin’ em Dr. Whoever-The-Fuck. And don’t get me started on the third part of our training…

“Psychological Conditioning’ they call it, if only because ‘Mental Torture’ doesn’t sound as nice.

“They build us up, then seni through straight through hell and back, then send us back for however many go-arounds it takes before we break. Then they pick the pieces up, glue ‘em all back together best as they can, rinse and repeat, until they either wash out, or they come out the other side one certified Badass Motherfucker who can take on goddamn anything.

“You can’t do something like that without leaving plenty of scars, though, some of them more obvious than others.

“Take Agent Qi, here. Fuckin’ obsessed with the number 7, and his fancy revolver.”

“Seven is life,” Agent Qi said. “Six bullets, one barrel—seven.”

“Won’t say no to a mission that doesn’t have anything—and I mean anything—about it that is or adds up to seven, be it the time the shit’s going down, the letters in the name, or even the coordinates on the map.

“But if it does, you can be sure as shit he’s going to coast through all that with a smile on his face, like he’s the luckiest man in all the realm.”

“Then there’s Agent Gwendolyn, AKA ‘The Knight.’

“Lost her whole team in a mission where she was shadowing all the other functioning nutcases we call ‘Queensguard Agents.’ Almost died along with them—had actually, for a few seconds before her suit’s revival protocols kicked in and zapped her brain back to life, but either something went
wrong in the process, or it was that particular moment that she cracked like the rest of us Rank 7’s did, got it in her head that the only way she was going to get through this and more if Gwendolyn died, and was reborn as someone better.

“So now she goes around narrating everything like me, except she calls herself ‘The Knight.’”

Everyone stopped as a new agent walked in, carrying a tray of food in her still armoured hands.

“Hello everyone,” Winter said.

Gumshoe pulled out the free seat next to her.

“Thank you,” Winter said as she sat down, and began to eat.

“You’re welcome, doll. If’n you don’t mind, I’m gonna continue my whole shtick with you.”

“Go on ahead, Gummy, it’s not like it isn’t all over the Info-Grid,” Winter replied.

“Thanks, doll.” Gumshoe replied. She chewed what remained of her fizzle stick for a few moments, then continued.

“And then there’s Winter.

“You’d think the name was her call sign, seeing as she’s got a reputation for keeping her cool through everything; melting her walls and becoming the warmest damn person you’d ever met in your entire life if it’d serve her mission well to butter you up before she cut straight to your heart like a hot knife; and being more than a little bit of a bitch, but no:

“That’s what her grandma named her, like she could see in the future and decided to save a future lover the trouble of nicknaming her her own version of ‘Frosty the Snowbitch.’

“So what’s wrong with someone who sounds like the mythical Queensguard Agent that makes it through training completely intact? Even someone who looks about as well-put together as can be like Ironwood has got his issues.

“Five words: The Keeper of the Grove.”

Winter choked on her food. Gumshoe picked up her drink for her, she took a long swig then sighed in relief.

“You need me to stop, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine...” Winter whispered.

“If you say so. Anyway...

“As Fear is a pretty helpful emotion for getting your ass in gear when you need it to, she didn’t beat it out of her so much as she made it so that she was scared of as few things as possible. Maybe she might get startled or uneasy, but never shitting-your-pants terror.

“It had seemed like a good idea at the time: she was already pretty well and tramautized from a horror show way back when she was still a sweet and innocent kid, and what would be the problem with being scared exclusively by someone that only existed in myth, pop culture, and really bad costumes on Eve of the Ether?

“When it turns out they live in Reality too, that’s what!
“As the Keeper was terrorizing her and her little sis in this very mansion, us crazies in the Queensguard thought Winter had finally broken for good, that this time, there would be no picking the pieces back up and gluing them back together. All we thought we were doing when we hauled her conked-out ass back to base was fix her as much as possible before we set her up for a nice, quiet civilian life with a hefty pension and a whole lotta perks beside.

“Then we all watched the Keeper 86 her sister on live holovision, and it turned out that the only thing in little tiny pieces that couldn’t be put back together was what we thought was reality.

“Nothing new, really, considering all the other crazy shit that happens in Avalon that necessitates an even crazier bunch of loons willing to protect it—AKA the Queensguard—but it still caught us all off guard.

“By the time we realized our big mistake, her sister was dead, the rest of her whole family was in the ground or may as well have been, and since she only ever kept working for us to keep her sister safe, she had pretty much lost everything she ever gave a fuck about.

“And what do you do with someone with nothing to lose?

“Give them everything to gain—namely, the Shepherd Suit Mk. IV, the latest in the line.

“First, Piper’s gearheads strapped guns and sturdy pieces of scrap metal to exo-suits originally made for hauling boxes around, then we started slapping armour and weapons designed specifically for getting shot and shooting right back, and then we shrank it down so you if you wanted to enter a building, you’d only have to duck to avoid banging your head, than break down the door and take a good chunk of the wall while you were at it.

“So where do we go from there?

“You make it smaller, faster, and strap some wings and the very cutting edge in energy-weapons to it, is what you do.

“There’s only three things that are keeping the Big Guys Upstairs from equipping every single trooper with these:

“One, it’s expensive as hell to mine, refine, and use this much Exanite and a shit-ton of other super-rare metals that all the armour, the weaponry, and the wiring needs.

“Two, it eats up power like a bus full of relapsed alcoholics at last call for Happy Hour, which is why it’s a damn good thing it can take out entire armies in the blink of an eye.

“And three, once you put it on, you can’t ever take it off—unlike its older siblings, the spine-jack on this thing becomes part of your actual spine.

“We thought we were just making the best of a very bad situation like usual, squeezing out some more use out of someone we thought we were going to have to put out to pasture, and who didn’t want to go there yet, either.

“But it turns out, the timing couldn’t have been better, because now the little sister turns out to be a whole lot less dead than we thought, we’ve got a messiah gone missing and possibly rogue, and a whole bunch of loonies with alien magitech and animal ears running about the whole realm causing hell and talking about something they call ‘The Truth.’

“You could be blind, and still read all the signs pointing to the one place that has the answers to all the latest mysteries Avalon is throwing at us:
“The Viridian Valley.

“So how many of us loons are going with you out there, soon as it gets dark and we don’t get turned to people-jerky soon as we step out the barrier?” Gumshoe asked.

“None,” Winter replied. “I’m going in with two Tinmen, and that’s mostly for recharging my core.”

Surprise came over all the agents faces.

“Seriously, doll?” Gumshoe asked.

“Yes, seriously,” Winter replied, her serious expression the most serious the others had ever seen.

“Sure you won’t end up putting your waste-management subsystems on overdrive when you eyeball her?” Gumshoe continued.

“I’m sure,” Winter replied. “I may have been absolutely terrified of the Keeper for almost all my life, but that ends now, because the face of my nightmares has kidnapped my little sister, brainwashed her, and seduced her.”

She raised her fists to the sky and started screaming.

“DO YOU HEAR ME, KEEPER?!

“YOU SEALED YOUR FATE WHEN YOU ‘KILLED’ MY LITTLE SISTER ON LIVE HOLIVISION, AND I’M ONLY MORE DETERMINED TO UTTERLY ANNIHILATE YOU NOW THAT YOU’VE KISSED HER ON LIVE HOLOVISION, TOO!

“I’M SCORCHING YOU WITH MY LASERS LIKE BOTH THOSE SCENES WERE SCORCHED INTO MY BRAIN—ESPECIALLY THE SECOND ONE!

“SERIOUSLY! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?!”

Winter sighed and got up from her seat. “Excuse me, everyone, I need to go get some last-minute repairs and upgrades before my big mission...”

“You do that!” Gumshoe yelled, as she and all the other agents were gathered up at the furthest corner away from Winter as possible, holding up their guns and projecting shields.

Winter left the dining hall, the agents slowly returned to their seats.

“Turns out there’s a fourth downside to the Mk. IV!” Gumshoe muttered as she chewed the last of her fizzle stick, pulled out a new one with shaking hands. “If it turns out the person you put it in is STILL pretty batshit insane, getting them out of the suit is going to be a LOT harder than putting them in...

“Like I said: we thought it was a good idea at the time...”
Except for Yang and Taiyang, everyone was discharged from the Bastion’s hospital by noon, enough time for them to head back to Keeper’s Hollow, dress up in their formal attire (or patch-up Pyrrha’s armour, as it was already a ceremonial uniform), then head to the Tree of Life for the citywide memorial service being held for all the victims of the Heralds’ attack last night.

Weiss had expected a solemn affair, and it was as one of Glynda’s secretaries went through the Fae’s funeral rites, speaking the names of the dead, pictures of them in life being projected on a giant holoscreen.

The weaver couple that had sacrificed themselves so she and Ruby could get away came up: Aziz and Jade Rourke.

Weiss found herself tearing up.

Ruby took her hand, she held on back tight as she tried her damndest to keep it in, if only from force of habit.

“Don’t hold your tears back,” Penny whispered from beside her. “Crying is a natural and healthy way to express grief, and suppressing it like this will only make it worse.”

“I’m sorry, I’ll try...” Weiss whispered back, voice trembling.

Eventually, the ceremony was over, and the assembled crowds dispersed to their own little groups, or to offer up mementos and keepsakes for the weavers. Laughter and friendly chatter slowly began to fill the air as family and friends reminisced on the fallen; touched, kissed, hugged, or watched the echoes of the deceased; or eagerly lined up for the food prepared for the occasion.

“This is how you mourn your dead?” Weiss asked, more confused than anything else.

Ruby nodded as she sat beside her. “Fae die in our territories all the time—whoever you are, it’s coming, whether you get killed and eaten by predators, or your body decides it’s finally time to just, you know, stop living!

“So when it does come, those that are still alive grieve and cry, talk about how much they miss them to feel better, then keep on living—and what better way to do that than with a party...?”

Weiss looked at the colourful decorations and flowers strewn all around, some reused from last night’s Eve celebrations before they got interrupted, most added that day to add cheer and life to the surroundings.

“It still feels wrong to me, though...” she muttered as she picked listlessly at her food.

Ruby smiled and shook her head. “You humans are just crazy, as always. You should be treating death a lot more like we do! Maybe start by making your Eve of the Ether parties less about spooky and scary things, and more about death and the dead, like we Fae do.”

“So is that how you celebrate Eve of the Ether? A giant party for the dead?”

Ruby nodded. “What better time than when you can see their echoes all around, whether you want to or not...?”
Weiss nodded, and started to eat; aside from figuring it’d be best to get used to Fae celebrations and traditions, she was hungry.

Eventually, the leftovers were wrapped up and given away, the decorations were taken down, and the attendees returned to their homes to grieve, or got back to work—the judge from the Job Gauntlet hadn’t been exaggerating when she said there was always something that needed doing in Fae territories.

Weiss and the others returned to Keeper’s Hollow, changing back into their normal clothes (or in Pyrrha’s case, wearing her new Fae-made clothes for the first time), removing the purely ornamental pieces of their Eve of the Ether costumes, and repairing the damage the clothes underneath had sustained last night.

<Good thing already armour,> Weiss said as she helped haul spare materials and supplies for Blake to fix their gear.

<Never thought happy be broke,> Blake said as she grabbed a bottle with a picture of a Fae cow on it. <Don’t know what happen if just for show.>

Weiss nodded her head gravely.

She stayed and watched as Blake began to pour the bottle’s contents onto her armour, the cuts, the bullets, and the magical burns all over it disappearing as she worked it into the leather until looked almost new.

<Always fix armour?> Weiss asked.

Blake nodded. <Older, more fights, better, stronger,> she said as she continued to repair it. <Helps if really well made in first place.>

<You made?>

Blake shook her head. <Mother made,> she said, pausing for a moment to feel the hand-stitched seams.

Weiss frowned. <She know?>

Blake shrugged. <Probably!> she paused. <Never called since got here.>

Weiss tried to figure out how to say it in Actaeon, her face straining visibly, before she gave up. “Call her,” she said as she put her hand on Blake’s shoulder. “You never know when you might not be able to anymore.”

Blake just turned her eyes to her armour, and continued working.

Weiss left for the barn, where Ruby, Penny, and Pyrrha were converting the stalls into temporary lodgings for Pyrrha, Yang and Taiyang when they got discharged, plus the extra parole watchers that had been permanently assigned there to help keep the Hollow secure.

“There!” Nora said as she slid a sheet curtain back and forth across the entrance of Pyrrha’s stall/room. “Now you can get complete privacy whenever you want to! Well, not actually complete privacy, considering the sides don’t reach all the way up, and anyone can just climb into the next one and peek in if they’re tall enough or have a ladder, but don’t worry:
“We Fae know how much you humans like your privacy! You can do anything in there and we won’t bother you! Not unless it’s illegal, anyway, but I don’t think you’re going to do anything illegal, are you...?”

Pyrrha shook her head. “Believe me: unlike what I did last night, I intend to be a completely law-abiding citizen of the Viridian Valley.”

Nora beamed. “Great! Oh, and before I forget: when I say we won’t bother you if you do anything that isn’t illegal, that also includes”--she made a sexy animal noise.

Pyrrha blinked, then her face began to burn red.

Nora winked and nudged at her. “So yeah, if you ever find a cute Fae you want to take back to your nest, go right on ahead, we won’t mind! Just don’t forget the lube—ever!”

Pyrrha burned even brighter. “I... uh... I...”

“Yeah...” Weiss said as she put a hand on her shoulder. “Get used to it—the Fae are pretty open about sex in general. And speaking of which: why the hell does EVERYONE keep reminding me of how important lube is?

“Can’t we just, oh, I don’t know, just take it slow and be careful...?”

“Actually, aside from the obvious function of helping reduce the chances of injury from excessive friction, Fae sexual lubrication also acts as a very cheap and easy means of preventing infection from bacteria, yeast, parasites, and so on,” Penny replied. “As you all know or have noticed, Fae do not bathe on a regular basis, and spend most of their time outdoors in constant contact with nature, and more often than not animals, be they living in the case of tenders, or dead in the case of watchers and food makers.

“Fae do frequently wash their hands and have numerous other means of disinfecting themselves if soap and water are unavailable, but as you humans might say, ‘It never hurts to be careful,’ especially when one or both parties have sharp claws meant to rip and tear into flesh.

“And finally, with humans like yourself and Pyrrha, inter-species intercourse is likely to cause all manner of injury sexual and physical, without or without lube, but particularly in the latter case; taking it slow and being careful is what you should always be doing time you are intimate, as once again, the human body was not designed to be able to even remotely keep up with what Fae are capable of.

“Especially when highly aroused.”

Weiss slowly nodded, her face red. “Okay, that was... very educational and thorough... Ruby, can we go talk outside?”

“Sure thing!” she said, before she walked away with Weiss.

Pyrrha’s face was now almost as red as her hair. “… I’ll just be… I’ll just be in my nest...” she muttered as she stepped into her stall, and shut the privacy curtain behind her.

“We’ll just be here moving in and not bothering you!” Nora cried.

Weiss and Ruby walked all the way to the training grounds without saying a word. Upon reaching her meditation/practice fountain, Weiss stuck her head under the waterfall, letting the cool water pour
over her face until it no longer felt like it was melting.

“Okay...” she muttered as she siphoned the excess moisture with her gauntlet, the water forming into a bubble. “That was... something,” she said as she tossed the back into the fountain.

“Mhmm!” Ruby hummed. “So what did you want to talk about?”

Weiss sighed. “Well, before I made yet another ill-fated inquiry into the intricate details of Human/Fae intimacy and got much more information than I wanted...”

She frowned. “how are you feeling?” Weiss frowned. “Last night was pretty crazy, to say the least...”

“I’m feeling great, actually!” Ruby replied, smiling. “Yang and dad are finally coming home after all this time!” she frowned. “I mean, I still feel awful that all those people and folks got hurt or killed when the Heralds attacked, but, eh” --she shrugged--”not much we can do about that, except hunt them down, keep on living, and try and make sure nothing like this ever happens again...”

Weiss nodded. “I feel really stupid now, thinking us humans had a monopoly on violent rebellions against government… do you Fae get rebellions like this often?”

Ruby shook her head. “We don’t, actually; the seekers and the watchers root them out pretty quickly, and if they don’t, they tend to collapse when the members get impatient and give up, turn on each other, or they can’t get enough money or resources to really do anything.

“… And even then, they’ve never worked with humans before—not this openly, anyway, and not since the Valley was first made...”

Weiss blinked. “Humans helped make the Valley...?”

Ruby nodded. “We don’t really like it getting out... but yeah.”

“What happened?”

“Well, ideally, we’d have Uncle Qrow for this, but he’s over at the Roost with all the other senior watchers, so I guess you’ll have to make do with me,” Ruby said.

“I’ll be happy with some answers in general, Ruby, it’s fine,” Weiss replied.

They found a comfortable spot of ground to sit down on, and Ruby began the story.

“You know what happened when the First Settlers landed in Heartland, right?”

Weiss nodded. “They were all happy that Piper finally made good on her promise of a new home, they began to try and settle Avalon, then they found out that both the wildlife and plants everywhere were dangerous and potentially lethal.

“Am I going to learn that it wasn’t all just wild animals now...?”

Ruby shook her head. “Nope! Just all the critters you’d find in Heartland—before you humans started extinting them or crossbred them with your own animals, anyway. We Fae weren’t even there at the time, seeing as we couldn’t really travel long distances like humans do—let alone across realms—plus, we had everything we needed right where we were, so why would you?”

“Where were the Fae settled, 1,100 years ago?” Weiss asked.
Ruby counted off with her fingers. “Sekhmet, Celestion, and the Cradle.”

“Haven’t heard of that last place before...”

Ruby smiled. “We like to keep it a secret—it’s where most of us Fae live. It’s kinda like... the Cradle is the Nexus where it all started, and the Valley is kinda like our version of Candela, where a lot of us ended up moving later!

“Anyway, back to the story: you humans went through, what did you call it again, a Black Age...?”

“The Second Dark Age,” Weiss replied. “When we found out we couldn’t repair or integrate any of the local materials to the technology we brought from the Old World, so we had to go back to horses for transportation, campfires for cooking, and candles for light...”

“Right, that! We thought you humans weren’t going the last the year, actually! We were all terrified by these weird, giant metal birds flying in from the sky and these weird creatures that were riding inside them.”

Ruby chuckled. “You should read some of the theories they made up at that time, it’s hilarious!

“We all relaxed when realized there weren’t a lot of you in general, you couldn’t really do much, and since we were on the other side of the Endless Sea, we figured we Fae would just stay where we were, and you humans would stay where you were...”

She frowned. “… But then you started expanding all over Heartland, learned how to siphon magic from the wellsprings, made all sorts of new magitech, and we started getting worried all over again—even more than when your aether-ships made landfall.”

“How did you Fae know, if you were so far away...?”

“The senior weavers could feel it. ‘Where once there was the Song, wild and free, there is now only a dull, toneless hum,’ they said. So we hid some seekers on your ships to find out what was going on, and the information that they managed to send back had us really worried.

“You know how we Fae like to develop technology, right?”

Weiss nodded. “Slow, steady, and sustainable—after the third Great War where Sekhmet went from a rain forest to the barren hellhole it is now.”

“Exactly. So you can understand why we were really, really scared of these new ‘soft-skins’ doing what we were doing way, way back, only faster, better, and whole lot more aggressive. We thought humans were some kind of walking plague, you know—spreading all over the place, tearing down forests, turning mountains hollow, dumping all kinds of nasty stuff everywhere…

“... And now here the humans were, starting to make it to the Cradle in your giant ships, complete with guns, explosives, and big-ass drills for reaching wellsprings—OUR wellsprings, in our cities, which we all needed to, you know, live.”

Ruby looked down. “The theories the made up that were a LOT less funny…”

Weiss frowned uneasily. “… I can imagine.”

“The Eldan Council then didn’t know what to do—you humans were the most alien thing we had ever known, someone from out of the realm, that we’d never seen before, couldn’t understand, like us in a lot of ways but different in so many others.
“We needed you humans gone from the Cradle, and the First Settlers were more inclined to shoot first than try to understand what the freaky animal humanoid were trying to say—and it’s hard to blame them, considering the Cradle is even more dangerous than Heartland!

“So we thought: why not sneak some of our makers into your society, help you figure out how to make what you had work better, than move onto new places when you ran out? And it worked! You humans had your Neo-Renewsauce—”

Weiss chuckled. “Neo-Renaissance, you mean!”

“Yeah, that! You gave up on exploring the Cradle and went back home to Greatland, and we Fae could relax and not be wiped out by aliens. I guess it really helped that you humans were just finding out that Avalon really does not like it when you take too much and never give back.”

Weiss nodded.

Her books had explained it as “The unique, then-alien ecosystem of Avalon was far more sensitive and reactive than the First Settlers had thought, to the point where the ecological disasters were compared to the wrath of the of the Old World divine beings.”

“It sounded like your plan worked beautifully, what went wrong…?”

Ruby paused, and looked around. The hesitation was clear on her face, before she wrote a name down on some nearby dirt:

“Salem”

Then, she quickly erased it.

Weiss frowned. “Who’s Sa--!”

“Don’t say it! Don’t say her name…” Ruby muttered. “We’re already toeing the line by writing it down…”

Weiss had a brief flash to her experience with Talos, and nodded. “Okay... so who was she…?”

“She was a rogue weaver from way back when. She would have been the candidate for the new Archweaver—Elder Goodwitch’s title in Nivian, kinda—until something about her turned the Archon off, and she chose someone else.

“She was really pissed off about that—enough to give up with the Council entirely. But, she didn’t want to work under Eluna in Celestion, or rough it out in Sekhmet, so she gathered up lots of Fae like her, sailed across the Endless Sea, recruited some humans, and together, they all founded the Viridian Valley.”

“She was very quiet about it, and as you know, we Fae are really good at hiding—by the time the Council realized what had happened, they had already crossed the northern mountains into Acropolis, and were already building this place up.”

“Why Acropolis of all places? If I were looking to establish a new civilization from scratch, this isn’t exactly the location I’d choose for it!”

Ruby pointed to Weiss’ gauntlet. “Magic. Because there weren’t any plants or animals here back then, all the power from the wellsprings just stayed there—a LOT more than you could find anywhere else at the time, just waiting for someone—anyone—to tap it...”
“So what happened next?”

Ruby shrugged. “Lots of things! That’s why I said you’d want Uncle Qrow, because the original settlers did a lot more in a decade than you humans did in a 100 years, or we Fae could in a 1,000!

“The short version of it is: as soon as the humans and Fae started to realize they could do, well, anything, they started getting really high from the power—both figuratively and literally from all the raw magic that was going around everywhere.

“They wanted to leave the Acropolis, take over the Heartland, then go all the way back to the Cradle, then spread to the rest of Avalon; turns out that Salem never really got over being passed over for the Eldan Council, and the humans and Fae she brought here weren’t exactly very nice, either...”

Weiss sighed. “Let me guess: power-hungry, morally-bankrupt people like my father...?”

“Pretty much, yeah! They weren’t ALL like that—Gabija was one of them, after all, and everyone agrees she’s a hero, whichever split of Fae you come from—but what’s that saying about apples and rotten ones...?”

“One bad apple spoils the bunch,” Weiss said.

“Especially when the rotten apples make something like Soul Eaters...” Ruby said, nodding.

“Are they really that bad...?”

Ruby was about to answer, when her comm-crystal started flashing red. It automatically answered, and Qrow’s face appeared in front of her face.

In the background, it was pandemonium in the Watcher’s Roost, everyone scrambling to get ready, alarms blaring, Fae bent over the heat-map gesturing wildly and talking even more frantically.

“Ruby! We need you here at the Roost, ASAP! Weiss, you get to Abner’s lab!”

Ruby got up, alarmed. “Why, what’s going on?!?”

“Well, it’s good news and bad news:

“Good news is: Weiss, your sister’s coming over to visit!”

Ruby paused. “Oh! That’s great!”

“Bad news is: we’re PRETTY sure she’s coming here to kill Ruby, then all of us Fae with her scary death lasers!”

Weiss face fell in horror. “Oh… that’s… not great!”

“Yeeep! We’ve got a plan, but you girls need to haul ass! We’ve only got a few hours till nightfall, and she’s leaving soon as the sun is down!”

They didn’t need to be told twice.
Chapter 74

Alarms were blaring all over the Valley, millions of Fae all running through the streets, shuttering up and barricading homes and businesses; hauling their valuables, animals, and loved ones to the Tree of Life; or fortifying the streets and bridges, setting up turrets, shields, and elementals, be they for traps or to bolster their forces.

The watchers flew all around on the backs of giant birds, calling out to each other and warning civilians, airlifting to the young, the elderly, the disabled, and the sick, to safety, or providing air-support and visibility should worst comes to worst and the communication crystal arrays went down.

Civilian use of the Tubes was restricted, the coordinators working overtime to get as many watchers all over the Bastion as possible, with Ruby and Weiss as priority passengers; they stopped for a brief kiss, before off they went, to the Watcher’s Roost and the Heart of the Maker’s Forge.

It was still noisy as ever in that underground foundry, only instead of work songs, it was panicked shouting and barking orders. Makers slaved over the assembly lines triple-time, hurrying to produce as many munitions as possible, emergency supplies, and materials for repairing and rebuilding the Bastion.

Weiss ran straight through the organized chaos and to the Thumper, not even aware of the sweltering heat for the pounding of her heart, the sweat already pouring down her skin. She skirted around a large congregation of Fae all desperately praying to the statue of Talos, or lining up to get their slips for their last wills and testaments.

There was already a bullet waiting for her this time, watchers waving their arms and calling out for her to hurry.

She got into it along with a handful of other weavers, before down they went, into Abner’s laboratory.

The normally quiet and peaceful halls were already swarming with makers, weavers, and watchers; Weiss was rushed through the crowded halls as they all helped bring Abner’s golems to life, armed themselves with salvaged and hybridized technology from the human territories, or secured and protected the most vulnerable and valuable of Abner’s equipment, supplies, and experiments.

She finally ended up in the observation room for giant prison cell, like the Raucous Room, except the walls all glowed with the ethereal gold-white of 100% pure etherite. She had to shield her eyes until Abner’s spider limbs handed her a protective mask and water.

Weiss put the mask on, and began to drink. “What the hell is all this?” she asked in-between much-needed sips.

“How we’re planning to save your sister AND the Valley at the same time!” Abner said as he manned several controls at once. “This, my dear, is the ultimate in prisoner confinement: a nigh indestructible cell that will be impossible to escape from, physically or magically, and will happily absorb the very worst Winter can do with the Mk. IV, and then some!”

“Are we going to just keep her here?!”

“Up until you can convince her not to annihilate us all, at least!” Abner replied. “We CAN forcibly remove her from the Shepherd Suit Mk. IV, but as I’m sure you suspect, it will be MUCH more difficult, risky, and costly than if you can convince her to surrender.”
Weiss nodded. “Can we get someone to get something from Keeper’s Hollow?”

“Well, it’d have to be EXTREMELY important, I’ll tell you that!”

Under the mask, Weiss smiled. “Trust me, it will...”

Meanwhile, at the Watcher’s Roost, Ruby was in full-gear and being lead straight to the heat-map, the entrance to the Valley flashing bright red with Winter’s armoured face atop it. Things had quieted down as most of the watchers had already deployed, but the mood was tense and grim, the senior watchers all huddled over refining their strategies and monitoring the progress of the others out in the field.

Ruby waved at Qrow, he grabbed her hand and pulled her straight up to the chair specially reserved for her. <What’s the plan?> she asked as she stood on the seat, leaning on the edge of the heat-map for support.

<The plan is that you stay here while Qrow engages Winter,> Glynda replied via holo.

Ruby’s eyes widened. <What?! She’s going to vaporize him! I’m the only one that can stand a chance against her!>

<We know,> Qrow replied, <which is why the plan isn’t to fight her, it’s for me to distract her long enough for us to set up a trap.>

The heat-map disappeared, to show a schematic of a barren crater somewhere far away from the Bastion or the rest of the Valley’s settlements, with live-feeds of weavers hurriedly making a giant teleportation circle in the very center of it, infusing it with magic before they as much as they possibly could to hide the signs that they had ever been there.

They explained the rest of the plan such as Abner’s cell, Weiss being there to calm her down, and worst comes to worst, how they were going to forcibly remove Winter from her suit, hopefully without killing her from the trauma of the spine-jack’s removal.

<And what if it doesn’t work, and she gets away and kills you...?> Ruby asked.

Qrow pulled out several teleportation charms. <Then that’s where these come in. They’re connected to my vital signs—I get fried, all your gear comes straight back to you, and hopefully you can get her on the second try.>

Ruby reluctantly pulled her mask and cloak off, then handed them to Qrow. <Why are you doing this, Uncle Qrow...?>

Qrow smiled. <Killing your girlfriend’s older sister isn’t exactly the best way to win her over,> he said before he put on the mask.

Ruby’s eyes moistened. <I love you, Uncle Qrow,> she said as she wrapped her arms around his waist, buried her face in his chest.

Qrow grunted as he felt her horns digging into his chest, before he hugged her back, burying them back into the old, familiar scars under his clothes. <I love you too, Ruby... I’ll try not to get horribly murdered out there.>

<You better not!> Ruby cried as she pulled away.

Qrow put on her cloak, a pair of fake reindeer horns and ears, before Ruby handed him the Keeper’s
scythe. He hurried on the Roost’s wellspring with a group of watchers; it was all going fine until he suddenly felt horrible pain shoot up the arm holding the scythe.

<AGH!> he cried, clutching it with his other hand, trying to get it stop it from shaking.

<Qrow! What’s wrong?> one of the watchers barked as their mender ran up to him.

Qrow grunted, shook his head. <I’m fine, let’s go!>

The others didn’t look like they believed him, but it wasn’t as if they had much of a choice.

“Please...” Qrow whispered to the scythe as the weavers prepared him for the trip and fortified him with last-minute spells. “Let me protect her... just one last time, I swear!”

He felt pain shoot up his arm again. He stiffened, bracing himself for more agony, before it faded away into nothing. “Thanks...” he whispered into the scythe. “… And I promise I’ll mean it this time.”

The weavers cleared him to go, and Qrow jumped into the wellspring.

Winter’s ride to the Valley was quiet, taking a rover to conserve her suit’s power, the two specially modified Tinmen she was bringing with her currently shut down to the same. She passed the time reviewing her suit’s newly added and modified systems and weapons, optimized for the unique conditions of the Viridian Valley, and of course, her main target.

At the very back were all of the crates of plushies she had brought from the Plushie Palace less than a month ago, sans Eluna for obvious reasons.

“ETA at five minutes,” the rover’s AI said.

Winter shut off the holos in her HUD. “You can come out now,” she said as she spun her chair around to the back. “I won’t report you—I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

One of the crates opened, and out climbed an AFA soldier in full combat armour, a sword in its sheath attached to his belt alongside the one sidearm and his comm-crystal. His foot caught on the edge, and he went ungracefully tumbling out onto his back.

Winter didn’t comment. “What’s your rank and name, soldier?”

“Ah—Private Jaune Arc, ma’am...” he muttered, debating if he should stand at attention, or take off his helmet then stand at attention.

“What are you doing here, Arc?” Winter asked. “You know where this mission is taking place, what it’s about, who we’re fighting, right?”

Jaune passed. “Uh... were those rhetorical questions, ma’am, or did you want me to actually answer them...?”

“Take a guess, Arc,” Winter replied as she spun her chair back around, looking out the windows of the rover to see the twin mountains of the Viridian Valley looming ever closer.

Jaune sighed heavily as he walked up to the seat next to her, sitting down with his head hung. “I’m a disgrace to my family name, ma’am. I’m the latest in the line of the Arc family, and every single generation, at least of one us was a soldier or a war hero of some kind—except me.
“I’m just a failure...”

“You had to have passed the entrance exam, didn’t you?”

Jaune paused. “… I faked my records, ma’am.”

Silence.

“… That’s a very serious crime, Arc. The test is there for a reason—it proves you’re capable of surviving out there, of protecting others when the time comes. What if someone has to rely on you, and you both find your skills lacking?”

Jaune groaned. “I know! … That’s why I stowed away. If I come back, I can live with myself and happily take my dishonorable discharge! If I don’t… well, at least I’m sure I make pretty good bait.”

“Heroes don’t throw themselves into battle hoping to die an honourable death, Arc,” Winter said. “They do so to protect others, to fight for what they believe is right, to stand up when no one else will. The act of sacrificing yourself for others is not inherently good—sometimes, it’s just an unneeded, unavoidable casualty that causes more problems than it solves.

“I’m not going to use as bait, Arc! You’re a human being, not a worm.”

Jaune raised his head up and smiled a little. “Then maybe I can hold her off for a while with this...” He said as he pulled out the sword on his belt, revealed the sheath to be a shield, too.

“That looks like a First Settler relic...” Winter muttered as she examined the intricate detailing on the metal and the hilt.

“It’s because it is,” Jaune replied. “It’s been passed down to every Arc who goes into the AFA as a good luck charm—even when we reinvented guns, it’s helped us all survive.”

“I’m surprised you’re not worried it’ll break in combat’

“Pfft! These can withstand pretty much anything.”

“What is it made of...?”

“That I... really don’t know. I’d say it was etherite but it doesn’t glow. It is pretty light, though—well, for an ancient sword and shield, at least.”

“ETA at less than a minute.”

Jaune sheepishly looked at Winter. “So does this mean you still want me on this mission, or should I just stay in the rover?”

Winter stood up and put a hand on his shoulder. “Get ready, Arc,” she said as walked past to power up the Tinmen.

Jaune nodded, and held his head up high. “Yes ma’am!”

The rover began to slow down as it reached the entrance of the Valley, managing bumps and rough terrain until it was simply faster to walk.

As the Tinmen booted up, Jaune noticed the markedly different designs of them, like they were just power cores on legs. “What’s up with those Tinmen, ma’am?” he asked as the inside of the rover was filled with the bluish-purple colour of Candela’s wellspring.
“They’re more power banks for my suit than fighters,” Winter replied as she headed to the hatch. “Watch yourself, Arc—if one of those things blow, you do not want to be anywhere near it!”

Jaune gulped. “I will, ma’am…”

The rover stopped, and they all stepped out, the Tinmen first. To make up for the complete lack of offensive systems, the androids were producing a powerful repulsion barrier all around them; even several feet away, Jaune could feel himself being pushed away.

“That is a LOT of power…” he muttered as he pulled out his sword and shield, held it close to him.

“We’re going to need it,” Winter muttered as she readied her weapons systems.

At his request, Jaune took point, the Tinmen between them, and Winter taking up the back.

She was fine with the arrangement, up until she found him screaming from, wary of, and stopping for every last noise and suspicious movement, becoming more frequent and dramatic the thicker the foliage and the trees around them got.

Winter sighed. “Halt!”

Jaune screamed, jumped into the air, and spun around, his shield and sword raised. He couldn’t see her exasperated face as he sheepishly lowered his weapons, but he could just tell.

“Arc: retreat back to the rover, and stay there until I return, or go back to Manor Schnee evening the next day if I don’t. The emergency rations will be more than enough for you.”

“Sorry, ma’am, but I’d rather not… I’d feel a lot safer with you and your lasers around. Besides, the Keeper might come for me and kill me while you’re away…”

“Assuming you don’t end up getting killed by all the other horrifying shit that lurks here in the Valley…” Qrow said from just behind him.

Jaune froze.

Winter raised one hand. “Duck!”

Jaune dropped to the floor.

A huge chunk of the tree behind him exploded into ash.

“Missed me!” Qrow cried from a tree branch above them.

Winter gritted her teeth, activated her wings, and rocketed off after him.

The Tinmen rushed on after her, Jaune got up and clumsily scrambled on after them.

“Wait!” he called out, before he tripped on a root and fell on his face. He picked himself up, spat out the leaves in his mouth, and continued running, a little more carefully this time. “AGENT SCHNEE! WAIT FOR ME!”

Animals big and small ran, branches and leaves exploded, the night was lit with flashes of blue laser-fire. Qrow continued to evade her, using his own natural speed and the cloak’s teleportation runes to just barely avoid getting vaporized. Winter’s helmet sensors were going crazy like the cameras at Manor Schnee, crackling and spiking with magic and error messages, not to mention the sensation of a plasma knife cutting into her brain and twisting all about…
… But she wasn’t letting that stop her.

All the while, everyone at the Roost, the Tree of Life, and Abner’s laboratory watched through spy cameras, or figures on the maps as they got closer and closer to the trap.

The Tinmen thundered through the forest with ease, their hoof-feet and reverse-jointed legs managing any terrain they found themselves in, if they didn’t come crashing through the bushes and vines, crunching roots underfoot.

Jaune panted for breath as he followed the path of destruction they were leaving, tripping and falling into a ditch that the Tinmen easily jumped over.

Qrow burst out of the trees, and into the crater; he teleported down to the ground, just before a giant laser almost scorched him into non-existence.

Winter shot out of the missing chunk of forest soon after, her shoulder-mounted cannons smoking as she flew up into the air. “STAY STILL AND LET ME KILL YOU, DAMN IT!” she cried as she fired a barrage of missiles, explosive orbs raining down on the crater.

“How about I DON’T?!” Qrow yelled back as he flashed in and out of existence, the magical rose petals he left exploding into blinding crimson clouds.

Winter screamed in frustration, blind firing into the fog, before she flew in.

“It’s working!” Abner cried, laughing. “It’s working!”

The Tinmen reached the edge of the crater, stopped as they detected the fighting going, redirected power to their shields and linked them together. Jaune smacked dab into their expanded and reinforced barrier, getting knocked flat on his back.

Inside the fog, Winter had realized her mistake, her optics completely failing from the overload of magic in the air. “Do you think this is going to work?!” she screamed as she prepared to fly back out.

“Yes~” Qrow said from just beside her.

Winter fired a blast there.

“Missed me!” Qrow said from her other side.

Winter fired another shot in that direction.

“Nope!” he said from in front of her.

Winter cried out as she thrust her hands forward, energy blades extending from her wrists.

“Jeeze, did they lower the standards for Queensguard or something…?” he said from behind her.

Winter whirled around with her blades, Qrow just barely avoided getting slashed.

“I don’t need to see you to kill you, you know!” she cried.

“Well might want to open your eyes, honey, and see what you’ve found yourself in.”
The red mist cleared. Winter looked down, finally noticed the glowing lines of power radiating from all around her, the circle in the center that she was standing smack dab in the center of.

Tendrils of magic erupted around her, wrapping around her body, and her HUD spitting out all manner of errors and warnings as she began to float up into the air.

Qrow casually strode in front of her, casually took off the mask, and smiled.

Winter opened her visor to glare at him. “You mother-fucker…!” she spat.

“You’ll thank me later, Ice Queen!” Qrow chirped as he casually saluted her goodybe.

Jaune’s shield came flying in from the side, slipping onto space between the ground and her feet. The tendrils were chopped off as the shield began to spin round and round like crazy on top of circle as the metal disrupted and absorbed the magic.

“AGENT SCHNEE!” Jaune cried as he threw himself at her.

Winter flew off from the circle, Jaune taking his place; the shield flew up and rejoined its owner, the tendrils wrapping all around him, instead.

Everyone watched in horror as they pulled Jaune through a rip in reality, and spat him out into the center of Abner’s etherite containment unit.

All was quiet everywhere in the Bastion.

“Well…” Abner muttered. “WE’RE FUCKED!”
Winter turned her attention to Qrow, every single blaster, cannon, and missile launcher she had charging up to full-power.

Qrow watched the night turn into a very ominous day. “Can I get like five seconds to explain myself…?” he asked as he began to subtly look for escape routes.

Winter scowled.

“No.”

Ruby began to cry, Weiss hugged the Eluna plushie and looked away, Jaune looked around in confusion at the walls of his prison.

Then, just before Winter fired, a monstrous, unholy roar echoed all around, the very air twisting and breaking from the sheer force.

Winter and Qrow turned and watched as out from the other side of the basin came the bastard child of an alligator, a shark, and a tank that had also been heavily irradiated with magic, then injected with several gallons worth of steroids, because apparently whoever had designed it thought it wasn’t terrifying enough.

A Soul Eater.

As the giant, walking collection of claws, teeth, and hate came bounding towards the both of them, powerful claws and gigantic legs tearing out huge chunks of the ancient rock out of the ground like they were made of sand, Winter unloaded the blast into it—as much pure, concentrated magic as she could in a single burst.

She watched as it hit the target dead-on, and made it flinch for about a second before it kept on going.

“RUN!” Qrow cried as he put the mask back on, readied the scythe as he dashed into the woods.

“AND GET IT AWAY FROM THE TINMEN!”

“LIKE HELL I’LL LISTEN TO YOU!” Winter cried as she flew up well out of its reach, rained a barrage down it.

Lasers and missiles exploded all over the Soul Eater and directly on its armoured hide; they barely made a scratch as rushed for the Tinmen still in their barrier.

“DAMN IT, WINTER, I’M TRYING TO HELP YOU HERE!” Qrow said as he rushed around the basin in the cover of the trees. “GET IT AWAY FROM YOUR BATTERIES, OR WE’RE ALL Fucked!”

The Fae and humans in the Bastion yelled at their holos for her to do the same; it did all of nothing, but it did make them feel like they had done something about their impending doom.

The monster began to swipe and smash at the barrier, roaring with frustration as all of its blows harmlessly bounced off despite its best efforts. Winter took the opportunity to charge her shoulder-mounted lasers, fired a constant, massive beam straight onto its back, slowly but steadily wearing away at its hide.
Qrow cried out in frustration as he burst back into the crater, heading straight for Winter with the scythe in his hands.

Ruby burst into tears again, just after the rest of the watchers had helped her accept Qrow’s fate.

Weiss found a corner, sat down in it before buried her face into the Eluna plushie, sobbing into it.

Jaune waved his arms, trying to look for a window or a sign that there was anyone who knew he was in Abner’s cell.

The Tinmen’s barrier began to crackle and fizz from the strain. Already beginning to feel the searing heat burn through its hide, the Soul Eater raised both its arms and brought its claws down over and over again, desperate. Winter intensified the beam, keeping one eye on her target and the other on the fast draining numbers on her power indicator.

Qrow jumped into the air, raising the Keeper’s scythe up high into the air.

Clang!

The blunt end of the head smashed into the side of Winter’s head. It wasn’t where the full might of the weapon was, but 1,000 years worth of echoes from slain animals, Fae, humans, and Soul Eaters gave any attack with it plenty of punch—enough to overwhelm the shock absorbing qualities of Winter’s armour, and send her falling out of the air dizzy.

The beam automatically stopped, power redirected into her shielding as she crashed into a brand new crater in the basin.

Qrow landed, turned back to the Soul Eater, just in time to see it clamp down its nightmarish jaws right on the “head” of one of them as the other ran away.

Winter pulled herself out of the crater, her optics and her own eyes recovering and letting her to see the Soul Eater drain every last drop of magic from the Tinman, leaving it a lifeless, powerless hunk of metal and circuitry.

The Soul Eater let go of it, what damage Winter had done to it healing in an instant as its scales began to brim and glow with dark purple magic. It reared its head back and roared, a gigantic laser beam searing the sky and the canopy above it in an instant.

The Fae stationed out in the open in all saw it, shielding their eyes from its blinding radiance. Several miles away in Candela, the faces of the Queensguard and AFA began to fall, citizens screamed and panicked as they saw the very sky above them was torn asunder.

“That’s… not one of our lasers, is it…?” General Ironwood asked.

The soldiers next to him all shook their heads gravely.

In the Watcher’s Roost, Ruby stared in horror.

In Abner’s laboratory, a dangerously pale Weiss asked, “Do Soul Eaters do that…?”

An even paler Abner replied, “Well… now we know they do!”

In the containment unit, Jaune sighed and sat down, closed his eyes even if that did little to stop the constant glow of the etherite from hurting his eyes.

The Soul Eater turned around, humming in pleasure as it felt the magic surge through its systems,
much more than its usual diet of animals and the odd humanoid for special occasions. Its good mood disappeared as it noticed that the rest of its prey had long escaped.

It sensed their magical auras, and bounded into the forest; ancient, massive trees were felled in an instant, brought down and split apart at their bases by the sheer size and speed of the creature rampaging through them.

“What the hell is that thing…?!” Winter screamed as she flew through the canopy, her remaining Tinman in her tractor beam.

“A soul eater!” Qrow replied as he bounded from tree to tree, launching off the branches and the trunks.

“Is that yours?!”

“Like hell it is!”

“Why should I believe you?!”

As if on cue, the soul eater fired another beam, slicing apart several trees all at once. Winter blasted well away from the scene, Qrow had to make do with dodging and ducking all the giant trees crashing all around and almost crushing him to death.

The soul eater broke straight through the trees as they fell, grabbing Qrow out of the air, grinning at him as a tree broke over its head with no ill-effects.

Winter watched in horror as the soul eater began to crush Qrow in its claws with audible, sickening cracks. He screamed in agony, before it started to repeatedly smash him into the ground, making giant crater in the dirt before it threw him into the trees, through several feet-thick branches until he finally came to a stop on one of them.

Then it turned to Winter.

She flew away, taking the herself and her Tinman away as she blasted the soul eater with everything she could. Energy bursts, beams, lances, missiles—all of them hit their target head-on, the problem was that the monster didn’t care.

Then, it opened its maw and started firing back, more of those concentrated beams, and haphazard hails of energy orbs sent it kept charging after her.

It was a terrible shot, wrecking more of trees and the surroundings, but what it lacked in accuracy like Winter it had in power, her damage sensors screaming for mercy whenever one of them landed and seared her armour, making her keenly aware of just how little it would protect her.

Meanwhile, hanging precariously off the branch he had landed on, Qrow groaned, pulled out a healing potion from within his cloak and smashed it on himself. He winced and groaned as the magic seeped into his body, forcibly and rapidly repairing most everything the soul eater had broken.

He chugged another one before he dashed after the soul eater and Winter. The one good thing about fighting them was that it was easy to tell where they were: just follow the trail of death and destruction.

Winter’s boosters and wings started to reach their limits, the soul eater kept on coming after her barely, lagging even after everything she had thrown at it. Her proximity sensors blared: she was about to hit a cliff, nowhere left to run.
And the Soul Eater knew that, bracing its hind legs, closing its mouth as purple magic gathered in its jaws.

Winter shut off all her weapon systems, grabbed her Tinman with both tractor beams, and rocketed herself straight up.

The Soul Eater roared, another beam shooting from its mouth, carving a deep, ugly scar on the mountain behind her, the beam getting closer, and closer, and closer--

--Then suddenly, it stopped, the Soul Eater roaring in pain as Qrow swung the Keeper’s scythe through its body, the weapon suddenly glowing an ethereal silver.

Winter set herself down on a sturdy branch, watching the fight as she cooled her jets and got a desperately needed recharge from the Tinman.

The Soul Eater whipped its muscular, spiked tail back, Qrow barely teleporting out of the way. He reappeared in front of it, slicing a deep, silver gash in its stomach; the monster roared and tried to grab him again in return. He just barely ducked out of the way, getting to a safer position before he pulled the scythe back to him, the blade cutting through the monster again.

He left no physical scars on the creature’s armoured, glowing hide, but she could tell that it was hurting, growing panicked as Qrow attacked its one weakness… enough for it to retreat, clawing its way up to the trees, desperate for the one thing that could help it:

Magic, pure, raw, and just waiting to get siphoned out of her Tinman.

Winter kicked her boosters into high gear and rocketed straight up, branches breaking on her helmet and her back, leaves falling all around her in a storm, until finally, she broke through the canopy.

She spread her wings and hovered, struggling to keep herself and her Tinman up. The Mk. IV just wasn’t made for sustained flight—and more importantly, fights where the target could take everything you had and still keep going.

She began to debate flying away, letting the Keeper take care of this beast, when out from the canopy burst the Soul Eater.

It grabbed the Tinman in its jaws, yanked itself backwards, and stretched the tractor beams past their limits. IT started to free fall straight back down, confident its armoured hide would protect it from anything it’d hit on the way down, ground included.

Winter aimed her shoulder-cannons straight down at the still undrained Tinman in the Soul Eater’s mouth. As they charged to full-power, she cried:

“SMILE, YOU SON OF A BITCH!”

A single, focused beam struck the Tinman’s power core, annihilating the containment fields and safety measures in an instant, forcing all the magic out all at once.

She grinned as she zoomed into the Soul Eater’s face, saw that universal expression that said it knew it had made a huge mistake.

BOOM.

Qrow shielded his eyes as a massive explosion rocked the canopy, the tops of ancient trees disintegrating from the heat, the dim forest suddenly awash with moonlight and the glow of purple-
blue magic.

He heard a second whistling in his hearing-holes, teleported out of the way, the Soul Eater’s now-headless corpse came falling past.

Winter and Qrow came back down to the ground, carefully approached the radioactive zone the carcass had made, thick purple magic oozing out of its body and bleeding into the surroundings.

“Holy shit..!” Qrow muttered. “You killed a Soul Eater!”

Winter beamed. “I did, didn’t I?” she hummed as she aimed her weapons at Qrow again, charging them to full power. “And now, I’m going to kill you…!”

She stopped as all that that radioactive ooze began to shrivel up and dissolve, the now pure purple magic floating upwards and beginning to swirl and gather together—a wellspring.

Winter shut off her weapons. “What the hell is happening now...?!”

“What happens when you kill a Soul Eater!” Qrow replied as he readied the scythe.

A stream shot out of the wellspring and into Winter’s chest, turning into a white-blue just before it entered. She saw her almost empty energy bar fill in an instant, the fatigue and the aches from the fight disappearing, before she felt pure power surging into her system.

A lot of power.

FAR too much power.

Her eyes widened, her body shook as every single part of her began to glow with that white-blue light, only getting brighter and brighter...


“A CATASTROPHIC INVOLUNTARY DISCHARGE!” Abner yelled back. “REMIND ME TO HAVE YOUR SISTER TESTED FOR HER MAGICAL CAPABILITIES IF SHE DOESN’T EXPLODE!”

Weiss punched him, before she all but strangled the Eluna plushie.

Winter saw her vision turn to that white-blue, beams of magic shooting out of her eyes.

Qrow slashed her with the Keeper’s scythe, the blade ethereal and glowing for a moment before it solidified back into ironbark.

A silver rip glowed all over Winter’s body where he had cut her, before all her magic came roaring out like a waterfall, arcing straight into the Keeper’s scythe.

Qrow closed his eyes, he held on tight with both hands, and sighed. “I hate this part...”

“AAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGHNNNNNNNNNNNN...!”

Winter spun around, fell on her back. She watched, stunned, confused, and terrified as Qrow screamed and writhed with agony, struggling to hold onto the Keeper’s scythe as all her stolen power surged into it, the white-blue magic turning into silver, crackling and sparking all over the weapon.
The last of it was absorbed, the scythe turned dim.

Qrow shuddered, knuckles white from gripping it so hard, before he collapsed, shivering and shaking violently.

Winter’s suit warned her that it was going into emergency power-saving mode, only able to keep her life-support systems on.

Then, she passed out.

She came to laying on her back, staring up at a ceiling made of pure exanite.

“Huh...” she muttered. “So this is what the Aether is like for dead people...”

“Actually, it’s really not!” an unfamiliar male voice said. “Also, you’re in prison, not dead.”

Winter raised her wrist blaster, trying to find whoever had spoken, only finding more of those white-gold walls.

“I suppose you have a lot of questions right now...” the male voice said.

“WHO ARE YOU?!” Winter cried, standing up. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?! WHERE THE FUCK AM I...?!”

“Maker Abner Ignatius Jordan; we picked up your unconscious body, treated the worst of your injuries, then brought you here; and ‘here’ is currently my 100% etherite cell, name pending. I’m thinking of something like ‘Gilded Cage,’” but I feel I have to put in much more luxury in there before I can rightly call it that...”

Winter stared blankly at one wall. “… Abner Ignatius Jordan... As in, Dr. Abner Ignatius Jordan, from 500 years ago, one of the historical figures the Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove is based on, with the character ‘Abner.’”

“The one and the same!”

Winter slowly, carefully sat down on the floor. “Doctor...”

“It’s ‘Maker’ now, actually—no one’s called me ‘Doctor’ for—well, centuries!” Abner chuckled.

“Maker Abner...” Winter muttered, “I swear, if you release me from this prison, I will bring you back to the human territories with me alongside Ms. Nikos and my sister, and we will find some way to break your curse.”

Abner laughed. “Oh, my dear, please! Don’t bother! I love it here and believe me, my entry into Fae society may have been forced but my staying in it is completely voluntary! And besides, we made up that part about cursed water of eternal life!”

“‘We’?!” Winter asked. “Who’s ‘we’?!”

“Myself and Ily—err, Keeper Ilaya, the Keeper of the Grove at the time.”

Winter paused. “… What the hell are you talking about?! Someone explain to me what is going on RIGHT NOW!”

Weiss groaned, and took the mic over for Abner. “Winter, it’s me, Weiss! I can explain everything!”
“No. Send in the Keeper, whoever or… whatever she is! You want me to believe you?! Show me that I can trust you!”
Winter sat in her cell, conserving what power she had left in her suit, watching the minutes go by.

“… We’ll go get her…” Weiss had replied, before there was nothing but silence from the other end—no doubt as they figured out just what exactly to do, what to say to Winter, who to actually send in.

She never thought she’d have this chance: to see the very real terror that had been haunting her for almost all her life, the one that had been terrorizing all of Avalon for over a millenium, the one that had caused so much suffering and loss of life from all those poor souls that just didn’t believe the stories, thought they wouldn’t become the latest victims, or just had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

And now, she had the chance to finally kill her.

She knew that she probably wouldn’t fear her weapons as her decoy Qrow had. In hindsight, it should have been much more obvious that the figure under that cloak was lankier and taller than the one on stage last night, and she would have noticed if only she hadn’t let her rage blind her judgment, let that one permanent flaw of Shepherd Suits get to her:

The feeling of limitless power, and the oftentimes lethal overconfidence that came with it.

But maybe, just maybe, even if she wouldn’t flinch at the sight of her weapons, they would vaporize her all the same. All she had to do now was wait, pray that these “Fae” were honest about their claim, or that they were stupid enough to send the real Keeper in.

“We’re sending the Keeper in!” Abner called out.

Winter stood at attention, watched as an all too familiar figure popped into the room through a tear in reality.

Ruby smiled and held up the sack she had in her hand. “I brought cookies!”

Winter started screaming and firing everything she had.

From the control room, reactions varied as the live-feeds exploded with white-blue magic, rendering them all but blind.

Weiss stared in open-mouthed horror as she strangled the Eluna plushie in her arms.

Abner slowly put his hand off the giant button that had teleported Ruby into the cell.

Lying in a gurney with his arms still in the tank, Taiyang watched, his face neutral, his mouth a hard-line. Beside him in a wheelchair, Qrow did the same. And on his other side, Yang scowled and struggled to break the bindings strapping her into her own wheelchair.

Pyrrha stared with wide-eyes, one hand squeezing Penny’s as tightly as she could.

Zwei whimpered in worry, Blake nervously rubbed one of his necks, all three sets of their ears pulling back in fear.

Between an armed Ren and Nora, Jaune sheepishly eyed all the people around him. “Is she going to be alright…?”
“Without a doubt,” Ozpin said as he and the other Council members attended by holo.

“Like the rest of her ancestors, Ruby has an impressive record of surviving and succeeding against much worse odds and situations—complete with evidence from whoever were the Keeper’s personal chroniclers at the time!” Oobleck added.

“They’re from hardy stock, they are!” Port hummed. “And though Winter certainly isn’t no slouch herself, well, the Keeper bloodline is hard to beat!”

“Even with the might of Soul Eaters,” Glynda finished.

Jaune nodded and turned his attention back to the live-feed.

Winter’s screaming turned into desperate, frantic sobbing as she kept firing, her already low reserves went ever lower, and Ruby kept on dodging and temporarily disappearing from reality, not a single one of those shots landing, or her being so far away from the center of the explosion that the damage was negligible.

Eventually, her suit could take no more, all of her weapons systems powering off lest she risk killing herself from exhaustion. She was blinded by the smoke of her leftover magic, before etherite hummed and glowted as it quickly absorbed it and healed itself, the blocks looking pristine in moments.

Winter panted for breath, sweat pouring down her body, her life-support systems trying its damndest to stabilize her levels, until it just gave up and settled for keeping her alive.

Ruby waved some of the leftover magic from her face. “You done…?” she asked.

Winter cried out as she threw her emergency combat knife at her.

Ruby caught it in her hand.

Winter threw the second one.

Ruby caught it in her other hand.

Winter threw her third and last knife.

Ruby deflected it with the first, caught it out of the air with the second, before she held all three blades in her hand, handles out in a fan. “Uh… do you want these back, or…?”

Winter whined as she curled up into a ball, and began to let out bitter, broken sobs. “What do you want…?!”

Ruby paused. “… For you to stop crying so we can actually talk…?”

Winter looked at her, before she broke into another round of tears.

Ruby turned back. “Guys…? Little help here…?”

Weiss sighed. “I’ve got this...” she said as she stepped up to the teleporter pad.

Abner looked back at Glynda.

“Let her in,” she said.
Abner pressed the button, and through a rip in reality Weiss went, until she emerged beside Ruby with the Eluna plushie. Ruby reached for her, until Winter desperately blubbered out something, unintelligible through her tears and hiccuping.


Ruby nodded. “I love you,” she mouthed back, before she stepped aside.

Weiss smiled, before she turned to Winter and carefully stepped up to her, holding the Eluna plushie out.

“Winter…?” Weiss asked.

Winter turned to her, shivering and sobbing still.

“It’s me, Weiss!” Weiss said, smiling. “I’ve got Eluna—your Eluna! The one we got from Velvet last month, I swear.”

“You can tell because it still smells like tears, snot, and despair!” Ruby added.

Winter sat up, whimpered as Weiss got ever closer to her.

“Do you want her back?” Weiss asked. “I think you really want her back.”

Winter sniffed and nodded.

Weiss kept on smiling. “I’m going to give her back to you, but I need to promise me that you’re not going to attack Ruby again, or anyone else for that matter, okay? We just want to talk, answer all of your questions, and answer plenty of mine, too!”

“Can you do this for me, Winter? Please…?”

Winter slowly reached up for her helmet with shaking hands. She disengaged the seals, threw it off to reveal eyes red with tears, snot pouring down her nose, her normally meticulously fixed hair everywhere in sweat-matted strands, the bun on the back of her head just barely holding together.

Weiss slowly knelt down to the floor, and placed Eluna between them.

Winter sniffed, warily looked at her, then at the plushie.

Winter sniffed, warily looked at her, then at the plushie.

Weiss gently pushed her forward, then smiled.

Winter reached out and snatched her up, pressing her up to her face with shaking, nervous hands. She rubbed her bare face into the plushie, felt its ridiculous warmth and softness once more, inhaled the faint smell of her tears, snot, and despair.

It was mixed with the smell of freshly turned earth, chocolate chip cookies, and sadness, but she could still tell it was hers.

Winter let out a whimper of happiness as she nuzzled her face into the Eluna plushie.

Most everyone in the control room smiled.

Then Winter mopped up her tears with it, before blew her nose on it.

Most everyone in the control room weren’t smiling anymore.
“Well…” Ren muttered. “Very glad I was forced to handle that with gloves…”

Weiss and Ruby stayed with Winter in her cell, sitting in a triangle with Abner teleporting in filtered water, cushions, cookies to replace the bag that had been vaporized earlier, “and some milk to go along with it, because really, what’s biscuits without milk, tea, or coffee?”

Winter clearly had her reservations about eating and drinking food from the enemy, but at Weiss’ insistence that it was safe, and reminding her the Fae had proven that they would do exactly as they said they would, she began to eat.

“Wow…” she muttered as she chewed. “This is actually really, really good!”

“Weird, the recipe’s--” Ruby started.

Weiss subtly glared at her.

“--really, really good!” she finished awkwardly.

Winter noticed, but decided the delicious chocolate chip cookies could be ruined after she had enjoyed them at least once.

“Are we good now?” Ruby asked after she finished the last of the bag. “You won’t try to kill me anymore, and we can talk?”

“I’m on emergency reserves, it’s clearly going to take a lot more than what I just used to kill you, and I’m trapped behind enemy lines, in an inescapable cell, with reinforcements capable of dropping in at the drop of a hat and utterly annihilating me.

“What do you think?”

Ruby paused. “So is that like a ‘Yes’ or--”

Weiss sighed. “It’s a ‘Yes,’ Ruby…”

Ruby frowned. “Fucking ‘Sarcasm’…” she muttered under her breath. “Okay, so as a show of goodwill, the Council is going to tell you almost everything that you’d like to know! So, ask us almost anything!”

“First and foremost, I want you to know what the hell have you been doing to my sister!” Winter snapped.

Weiss groaned. “Winter, they’ve--”

“I heard your message, Weiss! In fact, I can play it back to all of you right now, if you’d like a refresher!”

“Yeah, what did she say in her super secret post-not-death message?” Nora asked. “I’ve been dying to know!”

“No, then,” Gylnda said,

Winter activated her suit’s built-in comm-crystal, and replayed one of the few personal pieces of data she’d been allowed to store in it.

“Winter, it’s me—Weiss.”
“I sincerely hope you’re hearing this message personally and that you haven’t done anything drastic, because if you have, I am going to be really pissed off and devastated!” There was a pause for Weiss to take a few breaths, calm herself down. “… I’m fine, just… needed to get that out of the way… anyway… Winter:

“I’m alive.

“This isn’t a recording done before that disaster of a ransom holo we made. My ‘death’ was faked, and I want you to know… it wasn’t the Keeper that pretended to ‘slit’ my throat with that scythe…

“… It was me.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard of what father has done since you were taken away, but I was sick of it! Sick of him sending all those people to their doom, sick of the Keeper breaking in all the time, sick of how he was treating his own family and everyone around him like they were just business assets, means to an end, accessories to make him look better!

“Jacques Schnee, taking over the Schnee Legacy and the SPC!

Jacques Schnee, Family Man!

Jacques Schnee, ‘Tragic’ Widower of the Sekhmet Scourge!”

Weiss cried out in frustration; there were moments of muted chatter, the other voices modified so they would be all but untraceable and unintelligible, followed by Weiss sobbing and hiccupsing from the emotion.

“I’m done being his property—doing everything he asks of me, moulding me into exactly what he needs for his own fucking reputation, deciding everything for me regardless of what I think.

“I don’t know what kind of life I can make here—wherever the hell ‘here’ is!

“But I do know, I don’t want to go back home, if that’s what’s going to be waiting for me.

“Please don’t come find me, Winter.

“And please don’t worry: they’re taking care of me here! They’re feeding me, they’ve given me a warm, safe place to sleep complete with a permanent supply of hot water, and they’ve even given me this recorder and books to pass the time with!

“The books are HORRIBLE and I feel my brain cells slowly committing suicide with every predictable plot ‘twist’ I read, but I appreciate the thought!

“What I’m trying to say is: I’m staying here. And I’m never going back, if I can help it.

“I love you, Winter. Goodbye.”

Winter shut off her suit’s comm-crystal. “Did you really think I would believe all that, considering the circumstances?

“Even if you weren’t the face of my lifelong trauma, there was still all the very real people you’ve killed over the centuries for even daring to go into the Viridian Valley, and not to mention all the poor members of my father’s expedition teams that you’ve killed!

“You Keepers are mass-murderers and psychopaths, do you think I would believe anything you were saying?!”
“Err, if I may butt in: the Keepers have barely ever actually killed anyone by their own hand,” Abner said. “Most of the casualties sustained by the expedition forces were largely from the wildlife and the various dangers in the Valley; the Soul Eaters like the one you faced may be the worst of them, but that doesn’t mean that everything else are declawed kittens in comparison!

“Even the Keeper’s scythe was built specifically to be able to non-lethally siphon magic out of its victims, as you were personally witness to.

“We do have blood on our hands, but that’s only if you prove to be beyond reasoning with or subduing peacefully, or if humans are coming in such large numbers that the elaborate, non-lethal scheme we attempted to pull off with you are all but unfeasible!”

“Then what about all the stories?!” Winter cried. “The eyewitnesses, the matching dates and details, the hard evidence corroborating everything that points to the Keeper being real and these people being very, very dead?!”

“Just that: stories—oftentimes highly exaggerated or outright manufactured by us, our human allies, or naturally mutating by virtue of being shared and modified the more people speak of it,” Ooobleck said.

“As the Eldan Council’s Archivist, and the head of both the Orders of the Chroniclers and Seekers: we are very, very, very thorough about our operations, our secrecy, and making you humans believe what we want you to believe.”

“Take me, for example!” Abner butted in. “Most all of my debtors were completely convinced I had become the latest victim of the Valley! It was only because of Blue’s dogged determination and her strong, inexplicable hunch that I was somehow still alive that she ever thought of coming here!

“… And when she did find me and discovered the lie, she found herself unwilling to expose it for her own personal reasons.”

“Like what?” Winter asked.

Abner sighed heavily. “She fell in love with Ilaya, for one…”

Winter blinked. “She… fell in love with her…? How…? Why…?! Oh, sweet Shepherd, are you torturing them like you did with Samaria?!”

Weiss groaned. “That’s not what happened! They’re not brainwashing them! Or me, for that matter! I’m pretty sure that—and please, all of you back there in the control room don’t make me regret saying this—they all fell in love with the Keepers because they actually, legitimately liked them!”

“Oh, yes, all the relationships with the Keepers have been about as consensual as you can get!” Port bellowed. “Oftentimes, the humans were the ones to ‘make the first move,’ which is quite fitting considering the Keepers are of a prey subspecies of Fae!”

Winter paused. “… WHY…?!” she asked, panicked.

“Because they’re not actually cruel, heartless monsters who wantonly slaughter and terrorize humans for the fun of it,” Glynda said. “We only find it most useful for our needs that they are seen as the guardians of a cursed land that only fools who wish for death or are tragically flawed will even think of entering.”

“Ruby’s actually, really, really nice!” Weiss said. “She’s been nothing but kind to me, she’s got zero
ill-intent in her whatsoever, and even if she can be kind of a dolt... I... I really like her!” she paused and looked away.

“... I... love her, actually...”

Winter stared blankly at her. “So that kiss on stage...?”

Weiss sheepishly looked at Winter. “… was totally consensual, yes.”

“And you two are...?”

“... Girlfriends.”

Winter eyes slowly widened as her mouth fell open in horror.

“We haven’t”--Ruby made a sexy animal noise--”yet, if that makes you feel any better!”

“...”

Weiss handed Winter her Eluna plushie.

Winter took it and nodded. “Thank you.”

She began to make a long, continuous noise, starting as a quiet whine, gradually growing louder and louder to a wail of pure anguish, occasionally broken by hysterical sobbing.

“Why?!” she wailed. “Why are you doing this?! Why have you been kidnapping humans and keeping them here?!”

“...”

Weiss opened her mouth, before she paused, and turned back to Ruby. “… Why have you...?”

Ruby frowned. “Okay, one: we don’t kidnap humans.

“All of those Keeper stories are meant to scare you off, but your species is so crazy you keep coming back here anyway! We try and capture then send back as many as we can, but if they die, or come back to you guys ‘frothing at the mouth’ crazy, it’s not our fault!

“We are literally telling you that if you go into the Valley, something terrifying and awful will kill you—horribly and painfully!”

“Two: all of the Keeper’s mates were like Abner and you—they all stayed here because they all had their reasons, then they found they really liked living here and didn’t want go back!

“The ones that don’t work out we can easily smuggle back into human territories with a new identity and all the incentive in the realm not to spill the beans. You’ve seen the Plushie Palace, and how no one found out about our fake IDs until the Heralds attacked, right?

“That should tell you how good we are at this!

“And three: we need humans and mostly human hybrids to make more Keepers like me.

Weiss blinked. “Wait... you ‘need’ humans...?”

“What the hell is going on in this Valley?!” Winter cried. “What are you Keepers, really?!”

Ruby raised her hand. “For that, we’ll need my Uncle Qrow—he can tell this story WAY better than
I can...”
Chapter 77

Chapter Notes

Incoming Drama.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I’ll tell you in a Honey Dream,” Qrow said. “It’s a lot better if we have visual references, so you see the full effect of it.”

So, after setting up a dreamcatcher, and some convincing Winter that dreamer’s honey was safe, they were off into the blank, white space that was the dreamscape’s “lobby.” After a few moments to help Winter get her bearings, Qrow started narrating.

The world changed all around them, flashes and scenes of the First Settlers’ societies, and Fae settlements 1,000 years ago, the wilderness of Avalon steadily disappearing as the former expanded rapidly and makeshift settlements and towns turned into the gigantic city states they were now, while the latter made their cities and settlements one and the same with the giant trees, the massive caves, and the underground caverns.

“In a big, convenient coincidence for me that all three of your questions can actually be answered with the one story, because they all connect to one thing:

“The Viridian Valley.

“Our two species aren’t strangers to working together for a common goal.

“However, it’s usually with the Fae manipulating things from the sidelines to keep you guys from wrecking Avalon with your industry or scientific endeavours you don’t know the consequences of just yet, but we know all too well; sneaking in and posing as humans to combat politicians, movements, and organizations that’d make life hard for all of us; and sometimes even spreading rumours and legends to keep people out of places we’d rather they not be poking their noses in, such as the Valley as it is now.

“In short, we Fae have been using you humans as pawns. But before you go complaining about us being evil puppet masters, know that all we’ve ever truly wanted is one thing:

“To be left the fuck alone.

“Your First Settlers arrived and threw the entire realm for a loop—widespread ecological damage, the permanent disruption of the flow of magic, and not to mention there were all those times you made in to where we Fae were hiding out, looking for more resources and land.

“And even though our weapons were no joke even then, your guns and giant-ass industrial equipment weren’t, either.

“This is why we’ve been so secretive about everything, primarily with making you humans believe that we Fae are just fairy tales, people’s personifications of all the wildlife that is waiting to fuck your shit up out in the Country:
“Because we were and are still terrified that if you knew of the things we have, what we could do, what we are capable of, we’d have an alien force spreading out throughout our territories like wildfire, using our own magitech against us as you improve it at a pace we can’t even begin match, take over Avalon as the new dominant race and build your cities over the ruins of ours and the corpses of our kind.

“Don’t get us wrong: we know that not all of you humans are greedy assholes who just want to take everything they could possibly get from the world, damned the costs to everyone else.

“But seeing examples of people like Valentino and his ilk, the damage they could do in such a short time with the full blessing of most of your people… it was enough to make the Council and most of the Fae—Celestian or Eldan—agree its best if we just keep to our side, we corral you humans in yours, and we both keep on living.

“Then all of that changed with the Viridian Valley, the first and so far the only openly joint Fae/Human settlement in Avalon’s existence.”

They were now in the familiar layout of the Tree of Life, except with humans walking around with the Fae, both species deploying a combination of their technology as they changed the muddy swamp they were standing in, planted and hyper-accelerated the growth of trees, and raised the skeletons of both their architectural styles all around.

“The conditions couldn’t have been better for it:

“There have always been Fae that have been against how things are being run, but never really had the chance to do much of anything, because they lacked the numbers, the magitech, or the support, wondering if there was any sort of game changer they could use to their benefit.

“The humans were just going into their Neo-Rennaissance all because of the tech we Fae had been seeding and slipping into your society to encourage you to stay in Heartland and minimize the damage you were causing to Avalon, and they were wondering what more they could do with all this fantastic new magitech popping up everywhere.

“All that was needed was someone to bridge the gap, to lead the breakaway, to hold these two rebels, anarchists, and radical visionaries long enough to start to build something new.”

They were underground in the Valley’s main wellspring, a mix of Fae weavers and human scientists trying to harness its power with a mix of their magitechnology and elemental weaving techniques. At the head of it all was a leopard Fae, her hair and skin white as snow, hands glowing with purple Fae magic.

“And that someone was Salem.

“This is the only time you’re going to hear her name from me, by the way, as the one time it’s not going to jinx you to hell and back if you say it is if you’re just learning that, or teaching it to some poor sap before they doom themselves.

“The Valley was supposed to be a Libertarian Paradise: ‘No Shepherds nor Council. Only Progress.’

“No regulations, no governments, no traditions, no laws, no limits to what they could do, no guides on what they should do, how they would use the Valley’s titanic wellspring—your Old World Ayn Rand’s Objectivist wet dream where it was every one for themselves as they strived to push the boundaries of magitechnology and what you could do.

“And they didn’t just push, they fucking annihilated it, and we’re still trying to figure out where
exactly to draw the new line, if we even can anymore.”

The scenes flashed and changed, showing images of all the achievements of the original residents of the Valley:

The incredible speed and size that they could make the plants, animals, and minerals grow, the new and exotic combinations and creations that they could birth. Strange and alien fusions of their technology that they used to sculpt the landscape however they pleased. Both species with fantastic prostheses, their augmented bodies radiant with magic and vigour, even the dead rising up from the mortician's slabs to the joy of their loved ones, and the delight of the makers and scientists on the side.

“For less than a decade, it worked.

“Unfortunately, it turns out that a philosophy saying ‘the Strongest, Smartest, and Most Successful deserve everything, everyone else gets jack shit’ philosophy is great if you’re one or all of those, but not so much if you’re not.

“Pretty soon, the majority of the settlers were discovering that they really liked having protections against people robbing them blind or stealing their ideas and profiting from them without giving them a dime, taking care of them when they got sick or injured and couldn’t work let alone haul themselves to the hospital, and just generally keeping things safe and sane so they wouldn’t have to constantly watch their backs.

“And those at the top like Her found they really wanted to keep the power they had ‘rightfully earned.’”

Now, mass protests, chaos out in the streets and the wilds. Decrepit slums far off in the wilderness with shining, luxurious cities in the distance. Genetic experiments escaped from laboratories rampaging throughout the streets, marauders and looters taking advantage of the panic, humans and Fae forced to fend for themselves with whatever they had.

“So, among other measures to keep the masses from trying to leave, rising up, or calling the rest of the realm and telling your Holy Shepherd and/or the Council to ‘GET US THE FUCK OUT OF THIS HELLHOLE!’, She got her makers and scientists to make her the perfect attack dogs:

“Soul Eaters.”

This time, they found themselves standing in a laboratory, fluid-filled vats with the prototypes for the monsters all around.

“They worked perfectly. Aside from being really hard to kill, incredibly lethal, and way faster than anything that big should be able to move, they were also very smart, and were capable of completely absorbing the magic from everything they killed to grow stronger, smarter, and better.

“And unfortunately for all of us, they evolved to the point where they realized they really didn’t like working for Her and her flunkies.”

The scene changed. Death and destruction everywhere as humans and Fae ran or futilely tried to fight against the swarms of Soul Eaters pouring in everywhere, wherever or whoever you were in the Valley, the corpses of their victims dissolving into magic as they consumed and absorbed their entire being, each death only making them even stronger.

“We don’t know exactly how Gabija and her friends defeated her, overthrew Her kingdom and survived long enough for the Council to find a way to cross the Endless Sea and help clean up the
mess. Hell, maybe She just got eaten by her own Soul Eaters, seeing as She was one of the most powerful weavers to have ever lived, and by now we all know just how much those motherfuckers love magic.

“But what we do know was Gabija was really good at killing them, and all the other horrors in the Valley, whatever they were.

Gabija rushed into the scene with her scythe, the weapon glowing its iconic, ethereal silver as she slaughtered the Soul Eaters, saved the survivors with the help of an elite team of humans and Fae armed with weapons, magics, and magitechnology, all alien, slapdash hybrids that seemed to have been cobbled up on the spot and held together by duct-tape, multi-paste, and prayers.

“The Keepers were never meant to be a permanent position. The Council figured, we’d have just Gabija, maybe a second after she retired or got killed, then phase it out entirely once we shut the Pandora’s Box that was the Valley.

“Then we discovered just what kind of shit the Fae and humans could achieve working together, how many of them were almost impossible to contain and/or kill, and that the Soul Eaters had gotten smart enough to know how to hide, gather their strength, and only ever attack when they were pretty sure they could stand a chance of killing us all.

“And most importantly, Gabija and her descendants seemed to be our best shot of keeping them inside the Valley, prevent them from escaping, or getting into the wrong hands—Human or Fae.”

“So what’s Weiss got to do with all this?!” Winter snapped. “Why, if you’re so scared of us humans yet fond of manipulating us for when it benefits you, are you suddenly so fine with your Keepers having relationships with our species?”

“Because,” Qrow said, “like Ruby said, you humans and half-human hybrids are the key to keeping the bloodline alive.”

Images flashed in front of them, images of all the Keepers and their mates, starting from Summer and Taiyang, stretching all the way back to Gabija next to a silhouette with a question mark.

The Keepers were all more-or-less the same, younger, slightly different clones of what was in essence the same Fae. Their mates varied greatly—male, female, gender ambiguous, tall, short, heavyset, thin, and of no shortage of combinations of Old World ancestry—all unified by one key detail:

“Human...” Winter whispered. “… They were all human.”

“Or like you and Weiss, they were hybrids that were more than Fae, to the point where sometimes they never even had the slightest clue until we got them here.” Qrow added. “But whichever of the those they were, they also had one other consistent trait:

“Power.”

They returned to Maharlika Avenue, Taiyang blocking and reflecting Cinder’s laser beam with his ironbark arms, standing tall despite the rapidly disintegrating buildings around them, holding them off till Ruby could fire Weiss’ supercharged ice beam.

They came to the wilds of the Valley, where Samaria and Myala were fighting a giant snake larger than the trees they were fighting around, dashing and ducking through the branches and trunks as they slashed and shot at her opponent, siphoning its life essence and steadily poisoning it to death as it struggled to bite them even once.
They were in the middle of a raging storm at the peak of the Flood, watching as a giant named Reynault stood on the deck of a boat with the Keeper, other watchers, and weavers, aiming his massive cannon at an even larger sea dragon surging towards him with its gaping maw open wide, the both of them letting out earth-shaking roars.

More and more scenes flashed before their eyes, the Keeper’s mates, all human or mostly human hybrids, all utterly decimating the worst the Valley had to offer, by themselves or alongside the Keepers and their companions.

“We don’t understand why the hell it is that Keepers only ever seem to be able to produce more of them with humans or hybrids. Whatever we’ve tried, it just doesn’t work—parent Fae of equal or greater power, hybrids that were more Fae instead, and/or donating their cells to other parents.

“Don’t get me wrong: the kids from those unions and experiments generally grow up to be incredibly powerful watchers and weavers themselves. Just look at Yang and the shit she’s capable of, even if she only ever could rely on the Fae and hybrids hiding out in the human settlements.

“But they’re just no Keepers of the Grove.”

“We’ve studied the shit out of them and their mates, tried to find that Something, that gene or specific configuration of traits that let them kill Soul Eaters and other nightmares with ease, absorb the ridiculous amounts of power without going crazy or dying from the surge, and all with a complete and utter lack of any sort of selfish or evil intentions whatsoever.

“But 1,000 years later, we still have no idea what makes them best friends to all and slayers of giant monsters and threats to all of Avalon, which is why we need them so badly, why we take such great pains to take good care of them...”

The returned to the blank space of the dreamscape.

“... And why we are so damned eager to do everything in our power to make Weiss want to stay, to be with Ruby.”

Winter and Weiss were stunned silent.

“If it helps, we were making plans to get you back into the human territories,” Qrow added. “The Council was supposed to tell you about them and everything I just told you after you got back from the Eve of the Ether fair, because we could tell you two were getting serious...

“... Though with the all the heat and attention everything the Valley’s getting now, your fake death being exposed, and the Heralds running around, those plans have all shot to shit, if not utterly vaporized.”

Weiss turned to Ruby, her whole body shaking with anger, her eyes blurry with tears, her expression changing, from shock, to betrayal, anger, to confusion, to fear, and finally, sorrow.

Ruby frowned. “Weiss...?”

“That’s why you just took out my guards that night, didn’t you...?” Weiss asked, her voice trembling. “Why you spared me, saved me for last and offered me that fucking deal, kept breaking into my room to terrorize me until I got so sick of it I’d want to go with you just to get away from the hell you’ve made of my life...”

She was crying now, her words broken up by sobs. “Why you were so nice to me... why you did your damndest to make as much of my life here as comfortable as possible... why you gave me that
stupid plushie of your mother…”

She tried to blink the tears out of her eyes, struggled to speak. “You didn’t really mean it when you said you loved me, did you…?! All those times you kissed me, my first night in the Valley when we slept together, that fucking massage when I was so sore-stiff I couldn’t move—you probably didn’t even need to strip me naked, did you?!”

Winter blinked. “Wait, what…?”

Weiss ignored her, unable to see anything through her tears but Ruby standing in front of her those big, doe eyes of hers confused and terrified.

“Ruby…” Weiss whispered, “do you really love me…? Or am I just a part of your fucked up legacy…?!?”

“I do!” Ruby cried, her voice trembling. “I meant every single word I said! I’d never lie about that, because I hate lying, and more than I hate lying, I love you!”

“Prove it, then!”

“Okay! I will! Just… could you tell me how…?”

Weiss groaned as she grabbed the sides of Ruby’s face. “How else, you dolt?!” she screamed, before she kissed her.

Her lips were hard and unmoving like a rock, like the first time. Weiss kept on pressing, waited to see what she’d do, until she felt hands grab her shoulders and pull them apart.

“What are you doing?!” Weiss cried.

“Proving it!” Ruby shouted back. “Because if you really love someone, you don’t kiss them back when you can just tell they don’t want you to, you stop!”

Weiss wrenched her hands back, her expression changing, from anger, to self-disgust, to horror, until finally, regret.

Ruby sniffed, tears pouring down her cheeks, voice trembling as she whispered, “I love you, Weiss…! Please, believe me…!”

The dreamscape faded around them, and they returned to the real world.

Chapter End Notes

I spent a full 30-minutes refining the ending for this. I hope it ruined you as much as it ruined me.
For the etherite the cell was made of, the others in the control room could only guess at what had happened in the dreamscape as they all came to.

But a look at Weiss would easily tell you it wasn’t good.

She clutched her head, groaning in pain, tears suddenly welling up in her eyes as she was caught between the disconnect of what state she had left dreamscape in—a crying, sobbing mess—versus the state her real body was in—calm as can be.

Ruby rose up from the cushion beside her; she shook her head, before she wiped her moist eyes with her sleeve. She looked at Weiss, frowned, and reached out to her.

“Weiss…?”

Weiss slapped her hand away in a panic.

Ruby winced and pulled it back, ice beginning to seep into her skin.

Winter raised her head, her suit’s systems just finished rebooting; she saw Ruby nursing her hand, the frost and the ice pouring from all around Weiss as she scrambled back up on her feet and stepped away from Ruby.

“Weiss…? What’s going on?!”

Ruby ignored her. “Weiss… you believe me, right?” she asked as she slowly, carefully walked after her.

Weiss turned tail and fled, more frost pouring from her whole body, thin sheets of ice forming and spreading out from her feet; she ran into a wall with her palms out, an inch thick layer of ice exploded all over the surface, almost trapping her hands.

Her whole body began to shake. “Abner… take me out of here…!”

Qrow finally came to shook his head, reeling from the dreamer’s honey and the Soul Eater fight beside. He looked at the scene in front of him, at the ice that was the etherite was just keeping from spreading. “The hell did I miss now…?”

“Weiss!” Ruby called out, tears welling in her eyes. “You believe me, don’t you…?!”

Weiss looked at her, saw the hurt, the confusion, the fear on her face. “I… I don’t know, Ruby…!” she cried.

Ruby reached out for her again. “Weiss, please--!”

“I SAID I DON’T KNOW!”

Ruby yelped and jumped back as a wall of icicles erupted around Weiss, the sharp tips dangerously close to her piercing her.

Weiss’ eyes widened in horror, she looked down at her hands, and the rest of body, her skin covered in frost and ice.
Then, a rip in reality opened up beneath her, the world rushing past as she fell through it, back onto the teleporter in the control room.

They all yelped and jumped well back as frost began to pour out Weiss’ body, ice spread out on the floor. She ran past them and out to the halls, freezing the walls, the carpets, and the paintings as she did, her eyes stinging as she felt hot tears pouring down her cheeks, her skin prickling as they froze near instantly.

Weiss slipped on a patch of her own ice, instinctively threw her arms out in front of her; the soft, luxurious carpet turned into another inch thick layer of ice, her palms slid out, and her chin hit the floor.

Crack!

She cried out and whimpered as she curled up into a ball, eyes squeezed and frozen shut, shivering and holding her hands to her chin, feeling the pain ebb away as her nerves went numb from the cold.

She didn’t resist when she felt Penny’s hands wrap around her, warmth seeping into her body as she carried her off to the infirmary.

Because her gauntlet couldn’t hold back her magic anymore, and Abner had to take it back to his Foundry to study and upgrade it, Weiss had to be put inside one of his other, less fortified containment units for dangerous and/or highly radioactive specimens.

He had spared sheets and pillows from the guest rooms to line the floors, and for some semblance of privacy built a curtain in front of the barrier that separated her from the rest of the lab, but there was no making it feel like anything other than what it was:

A prison cell.

She sat on a pillow with her knees pulled to her chest, an enchanted blanket wrapped around her and keeping most of her warm. Her jaw still ached, but the Fae bandage wrapped around it constantly supplied a steady flow of pain-killers as it helped accelerate the healing process.

Her comm-crystal had been removed for fear of permanently damaging it, leaving her with no communication with the world outside, or a means of telling the time. Abner had offered to put up a tablet on a stand between the barrier and the curtain, queue up plenty of entertainment holos, but Weiss told him not to.

She was sure her magic would ice the barrier over and make it impossible to see out, anyway.

She didn’t know how long she stayed there, how long it took for her magic to finally calm down and give the air-vent’s defrosting mechanisms a break, how long she sat in a corner of that frozen prison, indifferent to the frost nipping at the soles of her feet and her butt.

But she did know her seclusion was nothing compared to the aching pain she felt in her chest.

There was a knocking on the barrier. There was a part in the curtains outside, the light from the halls flashed on the ice inside and blinded Weiss for a moment. She was prepared to scowl and make her displeasure clear, until she noticed that exactly the ice was so thick it was nearly impossible to see out.

She could see a familiar silhouette and a pair of reindeer horns, however.
“Weiss...?” Ruby asked, her voice muffled and faint. “Are you okay in there…?”

Weiss looked down at her feet, at the blankets and pillows she was sitting on.

“Weiss?” Ruby knocked on the barrier again. “You asleep in there? ‘Cause if you are, I’ll just wait a while and leave...”

Weiss sighed, watching her frozen breath linger in the air. “What are you doing here, Ruby?” she asked.

“I wanted to ask if you’re okay. Abner says the vitals scanners say you are, but I just wanted to make sure...”

Weiss scowled. “I almost killed you, I’ve just learned that everyone being so supportive of me and my relationship with you was because it’s vital for us to make more miniature clones of you for this ongoing 1,000 year old clean-up job of the huge, realm-threatening disaster zone that is the Viridian Valley, and I almost hurt several of my friends and damaged a good chunk of Abner’s lab because I can’t control my powers, so now I’m stuck in another prison cell until he can upgrade my gauntlet.

“What do you think…?”

Ruby paused. “… Was that the, uh, rhetora… did you actually want me to answer that question or...?” she trailed off.

“...”

“… I’ll just assume you were doing that... look, Weiss: I’m not mad, alright? I’m not surprised you freaked out like that. Most of the Keeper’s mates and especially the ones that didn’t work out also freaked out.

“Dad freaked out really bad, and it was a pretty big reason he decided to try a relationship with Aunt Raven instead.”

Weiss sighed. “Is that how the Council always tried to find mates for Keepers, Ruby? You keep them in the Bastion, give them enough time to get attached, before you reveal the secret to them when they’re high on hormones and least likely to say ‘No thanks, I’ll go see what my other options are’...?”

“Well, no, that’s not how it works. Like, at all.”

Weiss scowled. “Then how does it work, Ruby? Please, enlighten me! Expand my knowledge of how forces beyond my control and the authority figures in my life are once more emotionally terrorizing and manipulating me for their own self-serving purposes!”

“… I’m sorry, what was that you just said...?”

“TELL ME HOW OTHER PEOPLE ARE TRYING TO FUCK ME OVER THIS TIME, YOU DOLT!”

“Oh! Well, the Council doesn’t actually do any of the picking; it’s not like, you know, every time we capture a human and don’t try to release them back ASAP, there’s this committee that goes and tests how badass or how powerful they are, and think to themselves, ‘Oh, it looks like this human/hybrid will probably make a Keeper baby!’

“The Keepers and their mates just kind of... you know... happen!”
“How so ‘happen’…?”

“Did you know that dad met mom at the Eve of the Ether fair at Candela, way, WAAAY back…?”

“He told me, yes.”

“And did he tell you about how he was trying to break the record for a test-your-strength game?”

“Yes. I’m assuming that’s why she made her move: she saw the numbers, thought this was a very strong human, right...?”

Ruby paused, before she laughed, and laughed hard, so much Weiss could hear her horns banging against the barrier when she doubled over.

Weiss scowled. “What’s so funny?!”

Ruby laughed for a few more seconds, before she stopped. “Weiss… he didn’t tell you what he looked like then, did he?”

Weiss paused. “… He wasn’t always that strong...?”

“You look at a ‘Then’ and ‘Now’ photo of him, you’d think that ‘Now’ was just ‘Then’s’ bigger, stronger, buffer older brother than the same person after a few years!

“He was a poor kid from Valentino, Weiss; most of his meals were nutriblocks and vita drinks, and he fueled his strength training with protein paste—the batches that they were giving away or throwing out because they came out tasting even funnier than usual.”

Weiss winced, remembering the awful taste of nutriblocks when she’d made the ill-fated decision to try one so many years ago.

“The only exercise he got was lifting boxes for the people that couldn’t afford drones and were willing to break the law and pay poor kids way below minimum wage, getting into fights with others, and filling up old bottles with water for dumbbells.

“He did win a lot of his fights, but that was only because he could last long enough for the other guys to get so tired he could push them really hard and they’d still fall flat on their asses!”

Weiss blinked. “So why did he make that bet…?”

“Because he was desperate, and the guy at the test-your-strength game was a dick who was sure he couldn’t break the record. He didn’t even come close his first and second try, and it looked like he was about to fail at his third and his last, too…”

“So what did he do?”

“He stalled. Tried to psyche himself up, prayed to Piper, did some last-minute push-ups. None of these actually helped, but it did waste enough time that Aunt Raven got fed up and told him to get on with it already—mom REALLY wanted to try to break the record, too, and Uncle Qrow REALLY wanted that beer she promised him.

“Dad was about to do it, then, he got the idea to give them his last shot, said he’d pay for their own game if they couldn’t break it either.”

“Which he couldn’t, because he had bet his last Urochs...” Weiss muttered.
Ruby nodded. “Oh yeah! He was hoping that Uncle Qrow would do it, but the guy running the Test-Your-Strength game caught onto him so he gave the hammer to the person he thought was even less likely to break the record than dad.”

Weiss smiled. “Which would be Summer, a Keeper of the Grove.”

She could feel Ruby smile, despite the ice still covering the glass. “Mom broke the machine. The guy was in such shock, he gave them the money without a second thought, and by the time he snapped out of it dad was already buying Uncle Qrow that beer he really wanted at a bar ten blocks away.”

Weiss chuckled, before she paused. “… Why did she help him…?”

“Because, she saw that he was someone in need, and that she could help him out. Plus, she could get a free chance at the Test-Your-Strength game, so it wasn’t like she wasn’t getting what she wanted in the first place!

“You know, kind of like that night when you first went into the Valley, except I was looking for a way to stop even more of these expeditions without having to kill anyone.”

Weiss frowned. “So that’s what I was... a means to protect the Valley.”

“And someone that didn’t deserve to get roped into this messy business! I knew just from the chatter on the comms that you weren’t some foreman or a rich tycoon who wanted to oversee their latest project in person…

“… You were just a girl like me, probably out looking for adventure and excitement.”

Weiss looked down. “… I was actually trying to escape my father... find a new life somewhere else, where I could be free to decide what I wanted to do, without someone else trying to control me, dictate how I was supposed to live my life.

“I thought I’d found that here in the Valley… but in hindsight, I probably should have known better.”

There was silence on the other end for a long while.

“… You don’t have to be my girlfriend, you know? We could… you know… break up. It’s… it’s not like you’re the only badass human or mostly human hybrid in the realm, right…? Besides, what was that saying you humans have? About when you love someone…?”

“’If you love someone, let them go. If they come back to you, they’re yours. If they don’t, they never were.’”

“… Yeah. That, thanks…” Ruby paused. “… I guess… I guess this is my letting you go, Weiss. And whatever happens—whatever you do—I’ll… well I’ll try to be fine with it, like mom was with dad…”

Weiss felt tears well in her eyes. “Why…?”

“Because I love you, Weiss. And that’s what you do you love someone, right…?”

“No!” Weiss shouted, pouring down her cheeks. “Why do you love me, you doth?! What do you even see in me?! Haven’t I already proven to you several times over that I am a literal ticking time bomb of emotions and personal issues waiting explode and possibly kill you with my freaky ice magic?!”
Weiss sobbed, her voice trembling as she whispered, “Why...?”

There was only the quiet, almost unnoticeable hum of the air vent for a long while.

“... You have that something, Weiss—what wasn’t there with all the others. I don’t know what that something is, or if it’s a bunch of somethings... but I just know that you have it.”

Weiss sniffed, stared at the silhouette of Ruby standing outside her cell, before hung her head, wrapped her blanket around it.

“... I need to go, Weiss...” Ruby muttered. “It’s late, I’m tired, and the hunts are going to start again soon since the red alert’s over and we definitely won’t be having a Soul Eater attack until the start of the Flood, at least...”

“So soon...?”

Ruby nodded. “We can’t stay at home, watch the news, and panic for weeks or months like you humans do, Weiss. Besides, it’s not like we Fae don’t have our very lives threatened every day...”

Weiss sighed. “I suppose so...”

“Do you want me to stay for longer?”

Weiss thought about it. “No. You go get some sleep, Ruby—the last two nights have been crazy...”

“Okay. I will. Good night, Weiss...”

“... Good night, Ruby.”

Silence. Ruby didn’t move.

“Hey Weiss...?”

“... Yes...?”

“Do you still love me...?”

“I... I don’t know, Ruby. I don’t know if I can love you, knowing I’m going to be part of... whatever this Valley actually is, whatever’s lurking in it that makes all of us—human or Fae—need you Keepers around.”

“... Do you want to try...?”

“...”

“You can sleep with dad at the cabins, and I’m sure Yang won’t mind switching places with you. We could go on dates together—you know, go out to eat together, watch some holos, or we could just make-out for a while, if that’s what you’d like!”

Weiss blushed. “… Ask me again in the morning, Ruby... it’s... it’s been a really long night...”

“Okay. I understand. No rush, alright? I’ll wait for however long it takes.”

Weiss frowned. “That’s a bold claim to make, Ruby.”

Ruby chuckled. “Dad dated Aunt Raven for several years, had Yang, then went through an ugly
divorce before he changed his mind about becoming a Keeper’s mate. Waiting for the people we love to figure things out and become okay with the idea of a relationship with a Keeper is nothing new to any of us, stretching right back to Gabija.”

Weiss frowned. “And if I decide not to try, and if I find I’m happy with someone else, or if I do and we don’t work out?”

“Then we ‘never were,’ and I should go find someone else! That was what mom did, after dad told her he was going to become Aunt Raven’s mate as she was for sure pregnant with Yang.”

"..."

“So, is there anything I can do for you before I leave? For real, this time.”

Weiss thought about it. “No, nothing, thanks.”

“Okay. Goodbye, Weiss.”

Weiss peered out of her blankets, watched Ruby’s silhouette walk away to the side and out the exit of the specimen containment wing.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, even with the aching pain in her chest having grown worse in the meanwhile...
Chapter 79

Weiss was in her dreamworld, sitting on the side of her bed in her old room in Manor Schnee—before it had been vaporized by Tinmen with shotguns, at least.

The door opened, Weiss looked up and frowned.

Jacques Schnee sucked in a deep breath, and sighed. “Well, I do hope you’re happy now...” he said as he strode in, his hands behind his back, the disappointment clear on his face.

Weiss didn’t reply.

“How is this new life treating you, Weiss?” Jacques asked. “Enjoying your ‘freedom’? Literally living in the very swamp of civilization, forced to muck about in the dirt, sharing space with these animals?”

Weiss scowled as she looked up. “Those ‘animals’ are my friends, and have been treating me far better than you ever had!”

Jacques scowled. “Really, Weiss?

“All I have ever done, it was for your own good—I feed you, I clothe you, I educate you, I protect you, I go out of my way to provide you every single comfort and luxury you could ever want or need, I introduce you to the best possible connections and try to bring you into the company of success, talent, and genius, whilst keeping you away from the rabble you insist on associating with...

“... And then there’s the romances you’ve attempted.”

Weiss looked back down.

“First, there was your fencing instructor. What a scandal that would have been, had it not been to our mutual fortune that she would agree to settle this quietly and gracefully! I paid for every single session of that damned therapist believing she could tame your worst impulses, kill those naive dreams of true love, and teach you the reality of relationships.

“As you seem so keen on forgetting in spite of all my reminders: it’s a transaction, an arrangement, business, convenience, and practicality when it was invented in the Old World, and still is in spite of all the pomp, the irrationality, and misguided spirituality they’ve infused in it over the millenia.

“If I hadn’t been here to bail you out every singe time those ventures of yours failed, you would have long been bankrupt, pining for your lost loves in the squalor of one of those dwellings for the ‘unfortunate’—though I’m sure your sister would happily jeopardize her own life to coddle you like she had with the Queensguard.”

Jacques let out another heavy sigh. “Did you really think it would be different this time, Weiss?

“Did you really think that because this ‘Ruby’ is not even human, that the differences between you, this alien deathtrap you chose to live in, the questionable and worrying circumstances this relationship arose from, that somehow those would invalidate those problems that sunk every other ‘romance’ you’ve attempted?

“Did you really think, that after everything she has shown herself to be, the grand manipulations of these ‘Fae,’ the suspicious coincidences and exceptions given to you, that there wasn’t some ulterior
motive in all of this?"

“Do you really think that animal loves you...?”

Weiss balled her fists. “SHUT UP!”

Jacques blinked, before his face contorted in a rage. “What did you just say to me, young lady?!”

“I SAID: SHUT UP!” Weiss said as she shot up out of her bed and stormed up to him, frost pouring out of her hands. “Shut the fuck up, before I am forced to permanently shut it for you!”

Jacques was unfazed. “Threats, Weiss? Really...?”

“Don’t test me, father...” Weiss growled. “I’m not a helpless little kid anymore!”

“And what exactly do you call this temper tantrum?!”

“Standing up for herself, is what!” Nick cried.

Jacques whirled around, found himself facing the barrel of Nick’s lucky plasma pistol, a fresh clip in the barrel, the sides of it glowing bright.

Jacques mirrored the scowl on Nick’s face. “I thought you said you’d never use threats...” he growled.

“That’s because someone using force to get what they want tends to be a real good indicator of someone who shouldn’t have power in the first place, and dead bodies tend to cause more problems than they solve.

“Now scram before I have to throw your dead ass off the balcony.

Jacques pressed his forehead up to the barrel.

“Are you really sure you want to find out if I’ll pull the trigger, Jacques?” Nick asked coolly.

“Like you would actually do it...” Jacques growled.

Fzzshh!

Thud.

“As a matter of fact: I would!” Nick said as he knelt down and pressed the barrel to the back of Jacques’ head. “Since unlike you, I actually follow through on what I say I’d do—‘I’ll take good care of your daughter, your grandchildren, and your legacy’ my ass!”

Fzzshh!

Nick stood up, and waved his gun in the air to disperse the excess energy lingering around the barrel, before he holstered it in his back pocket. He stepped over Jacques’ corpse and to Weiss’ side. “You okay, sweetheart?” he asked as he put a hand on her shoulder.

“No!” Weiss cried. “I wanted to kill him!”

Nick frowned and patted her on the shoulder. “Sorry, sweetheart. Think you can stomach bringing him back to life?”
Weiss debated it. “I think I’ll just watch you throw him off my balcony, thanks.”

Nick nodded as he hoisted Jacques’ corpse over his shoulder. “Frozen or fresh?” he asked as he and Weiss walked over out to one of her balconies. “Whether he splats or cracks, I’ll be happy to see him where he belongs—in the ground.”

“Frozen,” Weiss replied as Nick stood him up by the edge. “I want to preserve that stupid look on his face,” she said as she readied her magic.

Granddaughter and grandfather spent a moment admiring the frozen corpse of Jacques Schnee, permanently caught surprised in death, before Nick threw him off the edge. They leaned over and watched it fall several stories down to a patch of Acropolis bedrock floating in the middle of a sea of white.

_Crash!_

They both smiled. “Thanks, Grandpa,” Weiss said as she and Nick waltzed back into her room. “I needed that.”

“Any time, sweetheart!” Nick said as he warmed his chilly hands.

“Where’s Grandma?”

“Somewhere around here in the recesses of your psyche, being repressed as part of this rather strange and frankly questionable coping mechanism/paranormal phenomenon’ as she’d say,” Nick said. “You could call her in if you’d like, but I think you and I both know there’s a reason you only called me over this time.”

Weiss nodded as she sat down on her bed. Nick sat down beside her, the mattress sank and Weiss slid right into his side. He put a muscular, gigantic arm around her shoulders, one that easily dwarfed her small figure like it did with Freya.

“What do I do, Grandpa…?” Weiss asked.

“Well, if you want to go by my example: I’d say try out the ill-advised, unorthodox-to-say-the-least romantic relationship, and see if it’ll work out fine eventually. It’s not like terrible, ill-advised romantic decisions made in even worse circumstances isn’t fucking genetic on my side, judging by Snowie, you, and Winter!”

Weiss nodded. “What made you sure you wanted to confess to Grandma?” she asked.

“Nothing, that’s what!” Nick replied. “I wasn’t sure of shit, just like I wasn’t sure that my little project to go find something to help us humans un-fuck ourselves over, but hell, I figured if the odds of dying horribly out in the Country and coming back with fuck-all didn’t stop me from assembling the original crew, then I shouldn’t let that stop me from telling Frosty I had the hots for her.”

“When did you realize you were in love with her?”

Nick chuckled. “Cliche as it sounds, since the day I met her. Always did have a thing for the older, intellectual types who’ve been around long enough to know that they ain’t taking anyone’s bullshit. Besides, there was something real sexy about a lady that always made sure to ‘properly enunciate’ her four letter words.”

“But didn’t you keep writing about how much you hated her, and how you only kept her on because she could help keep you all from dying of dehydration?”
Nick chuckled. “It’s not impossible to feel both sides of the coin about something at the same time, aint’ it?”

Weiss sighed. “True… but weren’t you worried about the consequences? What if she left?”

“That’s why I tried to find so many ways to try and purify water without Frosty’s fancy techniques and machines.

“For one thing, I didn’t like the idea of not dying of thirst to rely on the saltiest bitch I have ever met in my entire life, for both the risk of losing her and her having that kind of leverage over us; for another, the prototypes could be salvaged and integrated into all the other hodgepodge tech we built like my blaster”—he patted his pistol—"and for a third, I was damned sure she was going to find out eventually, so I may as well prepare for the inevitable.

“I’m pretty sure she wasn’t joking when she said she worked with a secret intelligence agency once —would go a long way to explaining why Frosty just loved herself her secrets and those ridiculous ‘Pythian prophecies.’”

Weiss nodded. “Was it worth all the diarrhea though…?”

Nick frowned. “That… that I really can’t say, considering those shits were horrifying. What did end up happening though was that Frosty was tired of having to stick needles in me to pump rehydration solutions to keep me alive twice or thrice a week, so she asked me:

"‘Nicholas, why the fuck are you trying to make all of these crappy water purifiers of yours? Don’t my creations work well enough for the all of us? Or is a doctor of Environmental Science, specializing in Water Management not good enough for you...?’"

“So I told her I wanted to talk to her—alone, far away from the rest of the camp, preferably with the same tricks she used to disappear on us when it was convenient.”

“What did Grandma think…?”

“She said she thought I’d finally reached the end of my rope, and she was finally going to see me use a threat for the first time since she met me, if she just didn’t decide to throw me off that cliff outright —she and everyone else knew I could pick her up and throw her one-handed, easily.”

“So what did you say to her?”

Nick took a deep breath. “I said: ‘Freya, I love you.’”

Weiss blinked. “And…?”

“And, that was it! I’ll be the first one to say that I’ve opened my mouth when I shouldn’t way more than when I should have just kept it shut, but in that moment, I decided that it’d just be best to get straight to the point, skip the explanations as to why I got there.

“Like she said, she thought I was joking. But it wasn’t funny to her. Not funny at all.”

Weiss frowned. “What happened…?”

“Much the same like you, actually: she freaked the fuck out. Unlike you, Frosty got physical and verbal, started tearing at me with the fury of people four times her size and six times her weight, so much I damn near fell off that cliff!”
“How did you survive? The journal for that day was corrupted past that point.”

Nick shrugged. “Guess I managed to catch my footing, or Frosty found the leverage to pull someone like me back. Piper knows it wasn’t my first dodge by pure luck, nor the first miracle she’d pulled off with all her science, smarts, and fancy degrees and doctorates.”

Weiss sighed. “And here I thought you could fill in the blanks in your stories from beyond the grave.”

Nick patted her. “Sorry, kid, but it looks like that’s a point for Subconscious Sock Puppets.”

Weiss grumbled. “So was it worth it, trying to make things work with Grandma?”

Nick smiled. “Hell yes. And before you ask: it’s up to you to decide, if you want to try and make things work with Ruby. Sure, me and Frosty were different as can be—about as close to a real world example of the old Fire and Ice analogy as you can get—and we still made it work!

“But, we didn’t have the fate of all of Avalon depending on us popping out some badass babies to kill whatever the fuck it is the Fae is trying to keep out of the walls of the Bastion but still inside the Valley.”

Weiss looked down. “How do I know if Ruby’s worth it?”

“Do what I did: try it out, see for yourself. But also like I did: think long and hard about how you’re going to do that, when you’re going to do it, and maybe go see if there’s anyone else that tried the same thing and see how it worked out for them.

“It’s why we pay so much damn attention to those reviews and ratings on the Info-Grid, don’t we?”

Weiss nodded. “Right. Who, though?”

“Aside from the obvious choice of Taiyang, try asking Abner. Sounds like he and Ily were pretty close, and he’s probably stayed close with all the other Keepers for the past 500 years. Could be a good source of info on Ruby, too.”

Weiss hummed. “I’ll make a note of it.” She hugged Nick’s side, her arms barely capable of wrapping around him for how large and muscular he was. “Thanks for everything, Grandpa—even if you are just probably a sign that this Valley’s driven me insane.”

Nick hugged her back, completely engulfing Weiss in his grip, careful not to squeeze too hard. “Anytime, Weiss, anytime…”

Weiss pulled away. “Can you please leave, and give me some time to think now?”

Nick let go of her and got up. “Sure thing—love ya, Weiss,” he said, saluting her goodbye.

Weiss waved goodbye. “I love you too, Grandpa.”

Nick went to the door, opened it, and left.

Weiss looked around at her old room in Manor Schnee, and frowned; it began to dissolve around her, rapidly replaced by the now familiar mud and dirt of the training grounds, her meditation fountain burbling quietly.

She smiled. “Much better.”
She sat down underneath the fountain, and began to meditate.

Weiss woke up to the sight of a magic-proof box that had been teleported into her cell while she was asleep. She opened it up, found her newly modified gauntlet inside, along with canisters of mana-water and some more colourful and appetizing looking versions of nutriblocks.

Abner’s notes beside it assured her that his “special mix tastes vastly better!” though Weiss found it was like halfway-decent granola bars.

“Better than cardboard and wood chips, though,” she thought as she ate.

She put her glove back on, flinched as she felt her magic muted like Myrtenaster during the Eve of the Ether. The leather hadn’t gotten any thicker, but the metals and crystals had been carved with intricate runes, plus a new switch-like mechanism—the “safety” for her powers.

Weiss tried to cast a puff of frost with the safety on. She felt herself putting in effort to produce it, fighting against the glove doing its damndest to absorb and stop everything.

Then, she turned it off, saw the new carvings light up and heard them hum, and tried again.

_Swoosh!_

Weiss’ eyes widened, pulling back from the blast of hail she had produced. She sighed as she flipped the safety back on, unconsciously wincing from the sensation—probably what a dog felt like when it was muzzled.

“Looks like the Eve still has some surprises up its sleeve...” she muttered.

She practiced by dispelling the ice around her, before she called for someone to let her out. It turned out to be one of Abner’s golems, dressed up like an Old World London police officer complete with the ridiculous hat.

“Where’s Abner and the others?” she asked.

A holo popped out of its chest, Nivian text explaining that most everyone had gone home to Keeper’s Hollow or back to the hospital, while Penny and Abner had stayed to properly test Winter’s magical capabilities, and were currently at the Raucous Room, seeing them in action.

Weiss asked it to take her there, down came the barrier, and off they went. She wondered just how exactly Winter’s powers were going to manifest, given what she knew of all the many different branches and specializations of Weavers...
Winter stood in the center of the Raucous Room, laughing with maniacal glee as Abner’s army of combat golems were utterly *decimated* by gigantic and ferocious water elementals, all resembling the animals and mythological creatures her plushies were based off of.

Bubblegum Sprinkles the Unicorn Doctor pranced about the vanguard, trampling melee fighters under his hooves with grace and deadly efficiency, icy sparkles flying from his majestic mane and tail, goring the larger golems with his horn, or sending it crashing down with deadly ice spikes erupting where it struck.

The back lines were being massacred by a swarm of exotic birds with colourful feathers and outlandish outfits, Tiki, Wala, Nunu, and Mei-Mei pecking, slashing, and dodging in perfect coordination, a graceful dance to the tune of music only they could hear, and the accompanying sounds of golems desperately trying to shoot them out of the sky before they were rapidly torn apart with sharp talons and beaks.

The giant fought off all manner of elementals in all manner of hats and clothes, such as komodo dragons, chinchillas, and woodpeckers wearing down its ankles (now with a very clear and obvious straight line across them where Weiss had dismembered it last time); dogs, wolves, and hellhounds holding down its arms or wrenching its sword away and playing keep-away with it; and cats, bears, and armadillos throwing themselves at its head and chest to blind it by latching onto its face, mauling it without mercy, or trying to knock it off balance.

The giant kicked, pulled, and punched, and when it was free it threw Winter’s elementals into each other, dispelling them almost as fast as she was resummoning them and siccing them on it once more. Finally, the assault stopped, all of them retreating or knocked off for the last time.

The titan kicked Cerby the hellhound in her tail on her way out, and seemed to sigh in relief, until it saw the light above it suddenly turn a distinct white-blue.

Flubber Butter the Whale Sailor hovered in the air for a moment before he began to fall.

The golem did not have features to make expressions nor a voice, but everyone could feel the *resignation*.

*Crash!*

Flubber Butter exploded in a giant tsunami of magic, crushing the titan from the sheer volume, washing away the few that were still left standing, and all of Winter’s elementals happily jumping in and being absorbed into the wave.

Winter was still laughing as she was hit by it and sent surfing a good distance away, images of the faces of all her elementals affectionately nuzzling their owner. The tide washed away and dissipated back into raw magic, leaving a wide-eyed, grinning Winter with her clothes soaked with residue, and her knuckles white from how hard she was gripping her new runeblade-and-dagger combination.

Abner, Weiss, and Penny frowned

“Err, Winter…?” Abner asked. “Are you alright…?”

No response, though the vitals still had signs of life.
“Oh dear...” Abner muttered. “Penny, prepare for immediate extraction!” he said as he readied the teleporter.

“At once, Maker Abner,” Penny replied, before she disappeared into the Raucous Room and began to examine Winter.

“Is she going to be alright...?” Weiss asked.

“Most likely!” Abner said. “It’s a very good thing she’s already used to the effects of magical exhaustion from the suit, though it’ll definitely be a much more unpleasant experience now that she can no longer rely on its life-support systems.”

“How did you get her out of it, anyway?”

Abner beamed. “By asking nicely and carefully!”

Weiss scowled.

“Okay, seriously: aside from the differences in materials and the modifications to the design to compensate for such, the Shepherd Suit Mk. IV is almost completely identical to the Exo-Armour technology the Fae originally developed.

“I recognized some of my own improvements to the design, actually.”

Weiss frowned. “Did the Fae give it to the Queensguard on purpose, or could someone have leaked it...?”

Abner shrugged. “We may never know! The Council may be far reaching, but it’s not omniscient, and we certainly can’t keep track of every last Fae in the realm—those in Celestion and wandering around independent in Sekhmet especially!

“Intentional leaks and internal subterfuge like with how the Heralds acquired their equipment do happen, but we can take comfort with the fact that we have control over the Valley, and they don’t.”

“Is this place your version of Candela, then?” Weiss asked.

“If by that, you mean it’s the both the youngest city state and on-track to becoming the largest with each generation, is the hub of technomagical advancement, and is about the most modernized, most advanced, and relatively pleasant place to live, then yes!

“Yes, we are certainly mirrors of each other.

“The key difference is that we humans were praying hard for some place like Candela, while the Fae wish this place would just magically disappear. Even a scientist like myself wonders if the costs and risk of the Valley are worth it...”

Their conversation was interrupted by Penny and Winter returning to the control room. The former wasn’t carrying the latter in her arms, but the way Winter was shaking, pale, and giggling quietly to herself was not encouraging.

Weiss noticed she was still holding her weapon, the dagger stashed inside the hilt of the saber. She looked at Abner and Penny, they both silently gave her the go-ahead, and she began to slowly, very carefully approach Winter.

“Hey Winter...” Weiss said. “That’s a really nice new runeblade you’ve got there!”
“IT IS!” Winter asked, raising it up. “THIS THING IS AMAZING! EVEN BETTER THAN THE MK. IV WHEN THEY FIRST PUT ME INTO IT! AND THEY DIDN’T EVEN HAVE TO STICK NEEDLES INTO MY SPINE THIS TIME!”

Weiss smiled uneasily. “Yeah, weaver foci are quite the trip! Now how about you let it go for now…?”

Winter frowned, then looked at her in a mix of confusion and worry. “But why would I do that…?”

Weiss opened her arms. “How are you going to hug me with those in your hands…?” she asked nervously.

Winter blinked, and dropped her sword. “Oh! Yes! Right! I might accidentally stab you with this and that would be BAD!” She let her runeblade clatter on the floor, before she tried to walk out to Weiss. “Come here, little sister!”

Penny gingerly let her go, they all watched as Winter managed three steps before she tripped and ended up on her knees.

Weiss rushed up to her. “Are you alright, Winter?” she asked as she held her up.

“I’m fine!” Winter cried. “Now get down here and let me hug you, Weiss~!” She paused “… Seriously, get down here, I can’t get up…”

Weiss did. To everyone’s relief, Winter didn’t end up crushing her any more than she usually could.

Winter burst into happy tears as she rested her chin on Weiss’ shoulder. “Oh, I missed you, little sister! I’m so glad I got captured and agreed to get out of my suit… even if I did bring you back, I’d never again be able to hug you like this without crushing all of your bones and internal organs!”

Weiss slowly, carefully hugged back. “That’s... great, Winter.”

Winter pulled away, and gently placed her hands on Weiss’ cheeks. “I still can’t believe I’ve got you back, Weiss...” she whispered. “All this time… I thought you were dead, then I thought you were a terrorist now and I’d have to kill you, and now we’re both working for a realm-wide conspiracy aimed at controlling and manipulating half of the species we belong to for their own selfish benefit!

“BUT IT’S ALL RIGHT BECAUSE WE’RE TOGETHER NOW! EXCEPT FOR THE PART WHERE YOU’RE DATING MY WORST NIGHTMARE BECAUSE WHO KNOWS IF THIS IS ALL AN ELABORATE RUSE MEANT TO FUCK WITH US, BUT STILL:

“WE’RE TOGETHER NOW!”

Weiss stared blankly at Winter.

She began to gently squish Weiss’ cheeks. “Your face… your face is so soft, Weiss...” she hummed, before she fell forward, unconscious.

Winter laid in one of Abner’s beds in the infirmary, on a vitae vine of mana water mixed with all manner of chemicals, but mostly sedatives. As she was temporarily incapable of doing anything but stare blankly up at the ceiling in a drug-induced haze, Weiss decided to examine her new gear.

She held the saber up, tested its impeccable weight and balance, unsheathed the dagger, and focused on how they felt in her hands. She could still feel the hum of her magic pouring into it and being
amplified, but not nearly as strongly as Myrtenaster, and with a distinct difference to it that just made it feel off.

Rather like wearing hand-me downs that were much too large, and not as fashionable on you as it was for their previous owner, she thought.

“Are these antiques like mine?” Weiss asked.

“Oh, goodness, no!” Abner replied as he produced more alchemical concoctions for Winter. “Silsa and Freya are entirely creations of mine, and as you’ve probably guessed, have been christened by Winter. My sincerest apologies for any unpleasant memories that may have brought up.”

Weiss shrugged and reholstered Freya into Silsa’s hilt. “It’s fine; it’s been a long time since we both hit the last stage of grief,” she said as she put it back in a box by Winter’s bedside.

“But it never hurts to be careful, especially with such a touchy subject like death! Though I suppose it’s very ironic, all this coming from someone who’s been cheating it for the past 500 years or so...”

Weiss watched Abner work, saw his precise, efficient, and mechanical movements, wondered just how much of his body was still organic, if his consciousness wasn’t housed in a very life-like golem.

“Why did you make yourself immortal?” she asked.

Abner didn’t reply, working quietly with his burners, siphons, and evaporators. When the finished products were dripping or building up in their final containers, he turned around, walked over to Weiss, and sat down next to her, his spider limbs acting as a chair.

“If I had the choice, I wouldn’t have gone through with the procedure and happily joined Ily, my parents, and all my friends when nature dictated I should have...” he said with a far-off look in his eyes. “… However, I made a promise.”

“To Ilaya?”

Abner scowled. “No, to Blue, her mate. She died well before Ily was due, and with her last breaths, she asked me for one last favour. With thanks to my governor-chronicle, I remember her words clear as the day she said them:

‘Doc, there’s something about these Keepers—why they’re the way they are, why there’s only ever one of them at a time, why they need us humans and human-hybrids to keep ’em going. There’s something out there, something big, that’s doing its damndest to keep us Human’s and Fae’s paths crossing, like someone’s playing the very long game, or is just trying again, over, over, and over again, until the Keepers finally do what it wants them to do.

‘I want you to find out what that is. And please: don’t stop until you find it.’”

“And you agreed?”

Abner sighed and nodded. “Yes, if only for Ily’s sake.

“Blue and I never got along—and why would we? We were inherently archnemeses, diametrically opposed, and destined to clash forever more: the most persistent and determined Valentinian Debt Collector at the time, vs the thorn in the entire organization’s side that was myself.

“Ilaya was about the only thing that brought us together, but even then, Blue originally conspired to turn my own best friend against me...” Abner spat, the disgust clear on his face.
“There’s a ‘terrible tale’ behind this, too?” Weiss asked.

“A very sordid story indeed…” Abner grumbled. “For some context, whereas I was the artful dodger that kept slipping my debtors’ grasp, Blue was my exact opposite, the most vicious, conniving, and determined bounty hunter you had ever seen! You could give her the flimsiest lead supported only by circumstance and gut feelings, and she’d be off like her target was already right in front of her and about to get away; give her a few months to a few years at the absolute worst, and she would have her target, or at least concrete closure for her employers and clients.

“It was why they nicknamed her that, you know, after an Old World cartoon: ‘Blue’s Clues.’

“Only instead of her being an adorable puppy leaving pawprints on objects for her owner to find, then figure out the common thread between them to know what it was exactly she wanted, she was a vicious human bloodhound who wouldn’t stop until she had her target—mysterious, all too convenient disappearances being her specialty.

“It was all a game to her, you see. A dangerous game filled with violence, blackmail, seduction, and subterfuge—whatever it took to catch her prey, damned the damage, the broken hearts, and the dead bodies she left in her wake.”

Weiss frowned uneasily. “She sounds terrifying.”

Abner shuddered. “She was! I’d never met someone more determined to stick her nose where other people most definitely did not want her to, nor someone who could find a way to infiltrate any place she damn well pleased, and show up at the most unexpected places when you least expected her to, at that!

“And this was BEFORE she learned how to blink and out of this realm of existence!”

Abner hung his head, put one of his humanoid hands to his face. “I still don’t know what in the realm Ilaya saw in her, but she had that Something she wanted, and I was forced to choose between an uneasy co-existence with Blue, or cut ties with Ily forever.”

He pulled off his hat and revealed a completely bald head, and deep wrinkles from stress that were usually hidden under the shade of the brim. “And this should likely tell you which option I chose,” he said as he put it back on.

Weiss nodded uneasily. “How did Blue react, learning that Ilaya was in love with her?”

“Positively delighted! Because now she had leverage, a potential tool she could use to bypass the Council’s numerous efforts to keep me safe and my own famed williness and evasive skills, to expose the lie that was my death, let the human territories take advantage of the Fae governor curbing my worst impulses for me, and the magitechnological advancements I have stored in my chronicle beside,” he tapped the back of his neck, where the two devices were.

“She used her…?!” Weiss asked, horrified.

“Gleefully and shamelessly! It almost worked, too, until Ily finally caught on. Make no mistake: I have tested her patience and faced her wrath numerous times before, especially during those first few months before my governor was installed.

“But the way she ripped into Blue that evening? The Bastion thought a legion of Soul Eaters had broken into the Hollow!”

Abner smiled. “Watching Ily personally drag Blue to the Hollow’s Tube station, and send her
rocketing off and out of our lives is one of the best moments of my life!” He frowned. “… Immediately followed by one the worst moments of my life, when Ilaya completely broke down before my eyes…”

Weiss frowned. “She still loved her, didn’t she…?”

Abner nodded. “That she did… it’s one of the many things with Keepers, something I’ve studied from records and my own personal observations: the moment they find someone, that’s it! No more interest in others, no more straying, and if they ever set their eyes on someone else, you can bet they have no intention of doing anything without the express and enthusiastic permission of their lover!

“It also seems as if the whole realm conspires to bring them together.”

“How, exactly?” Weiss asked.

“With Blue, she got stuck in the Tubes for several hours; I was the only one trusted to be able to fix the problem, and at the time, I had the much more urgent emergency of a heartbroken Keeper to attend to. With no way to escape her self-inflicted fate, an unpleasant death drowning in the aqueducts if she tried, and no new target and focus all her being on, she found herself left with no choice but to think, unable to run away from the things she had been dodging like I had been avoiding Valentinian debt collectors.

“And apparently, that was the few times in her life where she’d ever truly, genuinely felt regret for her actions—the very worst, in fact, now that she had realized just how badly she had fucked up, doing something so cruel to someone who had shown her nothing but love, honesty, and trust.

“Don’t assume this was the moment where the Tubes would magically fix themselves, send her to the Tree of Life station, and then after a brief moment to get her bearings, she’d rocket back to Keeper’s Hollow to tell Ilaya that she had learned the error of her ways, and then they’d kiss, and I’d be so moved by her first display of humanity that we’d stop fighting from that point on, and all of us would live happily ever after!

“No, the reality was far, far grimmer.

“It took several years for Blue to finally learn how to be and consistently act like a decent human being who didn’t treat others like assets and tools to be used for her own goals, and a few years more for Ilaya to warm back up to her. She was still very much infatuated with her but she wasn’t an idiot, nor would she be willing to let Blue get away with everything just because she was truly sorry.

“Even after Ily finally let her back into the house, they argued, they fought, and there were many more times when Ilaya dragged Blue right back to the Tubes and send her shooting on through—sometimes, Blue would preemptively do it herself and save her the trouble!

“And I must emphasize: Blue never did stop getting sick after every trip…”

Weiss cringed. “Sounds like a real rocky relationship...” she muttered.

“It was! Definitely not the ideal to which every couple should aspire to. But somehow, they still made it work, and that aside, the Keepers and their mates tend to be truly exceptional individuals, so it seems appropriate that their relationships would be the same.”

Abner smiled. “The Keepers are a real force of nature, don’t you know? As they protect the realm from Soul Eaters and other horrors, so do they tend to protect the Fae from themselves. It’s like they’re the humanoid embodiment of counter-balancing phenomenon in nature:
“You don’t lie about the exact numbers and fates of the humans that ‘don’t work out,’ they won’t *personally* lead an elaborate smuggling scheme that threatens to expose the big secret the Fae have been working so hard to keep.

“That was Samaria and Myala.”

“You promise to stay away from their personal lives and follow through on your word, they won’t jeopardize the future of the realm by finding all manner of new and interesting means of birth control, or just outright refusing to breed with their lovers.

“That was Reynault and Taliyah, and their adoptive daughter Moira, the first fully human Keeper of the Grove.

“You say you will do your *damndest* to keep this almost-drowned scientist delirious with diarrhea and dehydration alive, they won’t seriously jeopardize the safety and peace of the Valley by refusing to sign up for any hunts short of a Soul Eater attack to go visit said scientist in the hospital to make sure they don’t euthanize him while they’re gone.

Abner smiled. “As you could tell, that was myself and Ilaya.

“I’ll be honest with you, Weiss: relationships with Keepers are risky, dangerous, and oftentimes ill-advised—I’d be surprised if they *weren’t*, considering what they constantly choose to face and do on a regular basis are also risky, dangerous, and ill-advised! And though I have to say this is all totally anecdotal and subjective, all of their mates say it was all worth it.

“Kind of like your grandfather and your grandmother with their relationship, actually!”

Weiss sighed and looked down. “I’m not like them… either of them.”

Abner pointed at her. “True—but you are *still* their granddaughter.”

Their conversation was interrupted by Winter groaning.

“Oh, sweet Shepherd…!” she muttered. “What happened…?”

“Winter!” Weiss cried, running up to her side. “Are you okay?”

Winter shook her head, before she realized even that was too much effort. “What happened…? Last I remember was dreaming of storming a castle with an army of my plushies come to life, before a defector led me to where the Evil Wizard was keeping you captive…”

Abner chuckled as he stood back up on his two humanoid feet. “Well, it all went *something* like that…”
Chapter 81

Winter was taken off the sedatives, and thankfully, Abner had a device that could siphon it all out of her system and was no more invasive than the vitae vines. She had her reservations about letting symbiotic plants take root in her body, especially ones meant to suck out her blood, but it wasn’t as if she could do much of anything while her head was swimming.

She was still woozy after, but a cup of “black moss” tea solved that.

Winter cringed and gagged after only a small sip. “Oh, wow! This is really powerful stuff...” she muttered, before she reluctantly took a second sip.

“How best for the makers and watchers working through the night, and the next day, and sometimes the next night, too!” Abner chirped. “I’d offer the vast variety of flavourings and ingredients the Fae have for making the experience more palatable to your specific tastes, but I do believe that it’d be best if you keep your intake of Valley food and drink simple.

“You do have the ‘Iron Stomach’ mod but I don’t think they were thinking of anything even close to what you’ll find here...”

Winter nodded and tried to make it through the rest of the cup. “Gah!” she cried as she stopped halfway through. “Queensguard would kill to have this stuff, it could probably wake the dead!”

Abner chuckled. “It has, actually! Though the process wasn’t as simple as brewing the deceased a cup. If you have need of a palate cleanser, I can make you one of my favourite foods: pancakes!”

Winter nodded, her eyes squeezed shut. “Please, and thank you.”

“I could go for some myself,” Weiss added.

“Then please follow me to the kitchen!” Abner said as he began to march out of the infirmary.

“Though there might be a short delay while I help Penny get some upgrades, then get my racket ready...”

The sisters looked at each other, then back at Abner. “Your racket...?” they asked.

Flip! Whap! Fzz...

Weiss and Winter watched from Abner’s kitchen table as he cooked pancakes on his giant, Victorian Era style stove, by pouring batter with one of his spider limbs, holding the skillet and tossing half-cooked pancakes into the air with one of his humanoid hands, before smacking it back down with a tennis racket in his other hand.

“That’s... quite the way to cook pancakes...” Winter muttered.

“It was how Ily preferred me to do it!” Abner hummed.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just flip it over with a spatula?” Weiss asked.

“That’s exactly what I told Ily, actually!” Abner replied. “But then she replied, ‘Why do it the easy way, when you can do it the fun way?’”

“Well, I never did learn how to perfect the art of flipping pancakes—even now when I can fine-tune
my movements down to the most precise parameters for some bizarre reason—but damned if this didn’t put a smile on her face!” he said as he put the pancake onto a waiting plate, before pouring out another.

“You and…” Winter struggled. “… Ilaya… were very close…?”

“Absolutely!” Abner cried. “She was about the best friend I’d ever had, Fae or human…” He frowned. “… Probably ever will, but that’s not the kind of talk whilst cooking breakfast—especially Ilaya Style!”

Flip! Whap! Fzz…

“Besides, why focus so much on the past when you’ve still got your present to attend to, and a parole to get off of at that?”

Weiss nodded before she turned to Winter. “What are the terms of yours, anyway?”

“Almost exactly like yours, actually,” Winter replied. “About the only differences are that my visits to this ‘Weaver’s Terrace’ were already included outright, and I don’t have to live in Keeper’s Hollow, given who your parole watcher is…” she shuddered.

Weiss frowned. “Ruby’s not that bad, sis…”

“And none of the Keepers were, either!” Abner said as he put the pancake onto the growing stack, then poured a new one. “I say this having babysat the current one, lived with a previous one personally, helped raise her children, and then their own children when they grew up to have their own!

Winter sighed. “I’m starting to realize that, but it’s not like lifelong trauma goes away like magic…”

“You’ll get over it eventually!” Abner said. “My own experience with Ilaya was initially absolute terror and paranoia until she consistently proved she meant me no harm.”

“But not any time soon, that’s for sure…” Winter muttered.

Flip! Whap! Fzz…

“So does this mean you’re going to be living away from me again…?” Weiss asked.

Winter smiled. “No, actually—we could get a place of our own in the Bastion! We’ll probably have to stay at Keeper’s Hollow for a while I go house-hunting and get adjusted to life here, and we’d probably have to make all kinds of compromises for the sake of both our paroles…”

“… But from what Abner’s told me, I’ve come into quite a lot of money from that Soul Eater I killed, and our human governments definitely don’t say no to a little extra funding, I don’t see why the Fae would be any different.”

“They aren’t as easily swayed by just money, actually, but given your combat skills, your magical capabilities as is, and your being a former Rank 7 Queensguard, I can see you easily taking on high risk-reward jobs at the Watcher’s Roost,” Abner said as he put the pancake onto the stack, got a new plate out as he poured more batter onto the skillet. “Everything the Council does revolves around keeping the Fae safe—be they from predators, human kind, and especially themselves.

“They never really stopped being a species of highly aggressive and violent apex predators who value strength and authority above all else, you see—and given the regular dangers Avalon poses to
both our species, I can’t really blame them!”

Flip! Whap! Fzz…

Winter smirked. “Then it’s a good thing the Queensguard prepared me for anything!” she turned to Weiss. “So, what do you think…?”

Weiss looked down at the table.

A place of their own, just the two of them living together plus one or two watchers with them full-time like at Keeper’s Hollow… but then she thought of her farm and her laboratory, of the time she spent training, working, and having fun with the others, and finally, about Ruby.

“… I think I’d rather not,” Weiss said as she looked up. “I’ve got a farm to tend to, and a share of a loan to pay back…”

“The one you used to buy those tickets to Candela?” Winter asked. “Weiss, I can pay it all off if I wanted to—the bounty I received for that Soul Eater’s head was massive! Well, *proverbial* head, anyway…”

“It’s not just about the money situation, Winter,” Weiss replied. “Even if I’m still not sure how I feel about Ruby anymore, the others are still my friends, and I guess… Keeper’s Hollow is my home now!”

Winter frowned in worry. “Are you sure…?”

Weiss nodded slowly. “I’m sure.”

Winter squeezed her eyes shut, before she let out a heavy sigh. “Alright…! Not *ideal*, but… I suppose I could make it work, get used to living right next door to my the living incarnation of my nightmares…”

Weiss reached out and touched her hand. “There’s a tree growing out of the roof of the barn, and the makers made it so we could build a house on it. Then we’d have a place of our own still!”

However small, Winter smiled back. “Yeah… I think I can work with that…”

Abner finished up the rest of their pancakes, served them then excused himself to go back to work. “Lots of things to do, now that we’ve got a brand new arms race on our hands with the Heralds!”

“How are you planning to fight them, if I may ask?” Winter asked as she began to butter up her pancakes.

“I’d *love* to explain, but that would be time better spent developing new magitech to do just that!” Abner said as he put his cookware in the sink and stowed away the rest of the batter. “Don’t worry yourselves too much about it, either—generally speaking, the Order of the Seekers have ‘got this.’”

Winter frowned. “And who are the Seekers in your society, exactly?”

“In a nutshell: Black Ops. Spies, assassins, SWAT teams, propagandists, moles, and controversial research and development divisions,” Abner replied as he tossed his apron down a laundry chute. “All hush-hush, for obvious reasons…”

“So your version of the Queensguard,” Winter said.

“Precisely! Who knows? You might be able to join their ranks one of these days!” Abner said.
“Farewell, Weiss, Winter! I hope the next time I see you two will be for casual chats over tea and biscuits!”

“Goodbye, Abner!” “Farewell, Doctor—I mean, Maker Abner.”

They both started on their pancakes. They were actually quite good, especially with the honey and butter provided, and the grid marks from the racket were purely cosmetic, but they found they couldn’t really enjoy them.

“I don’t like this, the Council keeping so many secrets and giving all these half-truths…” Winter muttered as she handed the butter over to Weiss. “Though I do suppose it makes sense, considering I’m a prisoner of war turned conscript, and you being… uh... well…”

Weiss sighed as she took the butter from her. “Are you really sure you want to have this conversation, Winter?”

Winter nodded. “As the Queensguard say: the best way to face awful business is one after the other for as long as you possibly can, because it’s going to be so much worse if you take your head out, get some fresh air, and realize you still have to plunge it back into the thick of it,” she said as she poured honey over her stack.

“Besides, I’m your older sister! We should be able to talk about these things! And to be honest, I still feel incredibly guilty for never really being there for you when you first started dating…”

She forced a smile. “So, how is your relationship with…?” she struggled visibly “… Ruby, anyway…?” she asked as she passed the honey over.

Weiss took the jar from her, frowned and looked down as she poured it over her stack. “It’s… not going well right now. I’m not even sure if I want to stay in it, what with everything I’ve learned…” she muttered as she put the jar away.

“You want to hear my opinion on it?” Winter asked as she cut into her stack.

“Sure.”

“I think you should take a long break from each other, step back, cool off, and examine what you two are exactly, what you two need, and what really has been going on here once the emotions settle down; speaking from personal experience, I’ve made some people do some very crazy things for ‘love,’ even if it was never reciprocated, or genuine on my part,” Winter said, pointing her fork at her before she stabbed her pancakes with it.

Weiss nodded. “I think I will… this past month has been crazy…” she muttered as she began to cut into her stack.

“You can say that again!” Winter before her food into her mouth.

“Okay, so what if after we cool off, how do I decide if I still want to try a relationship with her? And let’s ignore the ‘fate of the realm really, desperately hinges on my having a Keeper baby with Ruby’ part for now…” Weiss said, before she did the same.

Winter chewed, then swallowed. “You can use my criteria for a healthy relationship.

“What’s it based on?” Weiss asked when her mouth was empty.

“Simple: everything grandpa and grandma’s relationship was, and everything father and mom’s
relationship wasn’t,” Winter replied as she put her utensils down. “Want to hear it?”

Weiss nodded and did the same. “Let me have it!”

“First and foremost: is Ruby honestly, genuinely in love with you? Are you sure she isn’t in love with the idea of you—say, ‘rescuing’ a damsel in distress and getting her to fall in love with her ‘saviour’—some aspect of you that they could easily get from someone else, or worse yet, using you for an ulterior motive?”

Weiss looked down at the varnished wood of Abner’s kitchen table for a long, long while, before she faced Winter again. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“And do you love her back in the same way?”

Weiss turned her eyes back to the table, and thought for much, much longer. “… Yes, yes I do…” she said without looking up this time.

Winter’s eyes opened wide in horror, before she took a deep, calming breath. “Okay! Second: do you feel that Ruby respects you? Does it feel like she cares about what you think, how you feel, what you believe in, in word and in deed?”

Weiss thought back to Ruby’s determined but ultimately ineffective and misguided attempts to end the expeditions into the Valley peacefully. Her holding her hand and leading her through the entirety of the hot springs to the private baths, then her voting with Penny to cut their time short even if it meant greatly annoying Blake. The first time they kissed, where she saw how nervous she was, asked if they wanted to stop…

… And all the many other times that Ruby clearly, happily did everything in her power to make sure that Weiss was comfortable, happy, and safe, even if forces outside of her control like Jacques were making it extremely difficult.

“Yes.”

“Third: if she has ever hurt you or done you wrong, intentionally or not, has she shown genuine remorse for her actions, made honest attempts to make it up to you, and is taking clear, obvious action to prevent something like that from happening again?”

Weiss thought of Ruby’s visit to her the night after Winter was hauled away by the Queensguard. Her going out of her way to convince the Council, the Watchers, and presumably the Seekers to let her send out one last message to Winter, even if it meant possibly exposing her ‘death’ as the fraud that it was and causing the Fae a whole lot of problems. Her entering Winter’s cell because she had demanded she do it, even though they all knew and she would later proved that she was still going to do her damndest to vaporize Ruby, because that was likely the only way they could get Winter to surrender peacefully and not risk the severe consequences of forcing her out of the suit.

Though to be fair, Ruby probably knew she going to get out of that just fine, like she had with the Tinmen and their shotguns.

“Yes.”

“Fourth: do you feel like you could live without her? That whatever it is she’s providing you, you can get it yourself, or you can find it with someone else in a non-romantic relationship? Be it intimacy, someone to confide in, or even just day-to-day living?”

Weiss thought back to her second week in the Valley, and her first few days out of jail. The disaster
that was the Job Gauntlet. Ruby encouraging her to go into farming. All the help, support, and friendship everyone else had willingly extended to her, and that she’d only just started giving back to—and that was largely because she was a weaver, a gift that they couldn’t have known or expected from her until all those disasters after she invoked Talos when she shouldn’t have.

“Yes.”

“Fifth: do you feel as if you two are equals? Is there anything that you feel might make it so that she’d be able to have power over you, or vice versa? And if there is, would either of you willingly use it to lord over the other to the detriment of the other and the relationship?”

She thought back to all the power Ruby had stored in that tiny frame of hers, the sway she held in Fae society. How she only ever resorted to the threat of killing her because Weiss had, how she was so reluctant to hold the fake scythe to her neck, how even though she could have easily overpowered or threatened and forced her to action on so many occasions, she simply chose not to.

“Yes.”

“Sixth: do you feel like you can compromise with her, and she can compromise with you? Yield and give as appropriate? Can the both of you willingly make sacrifices for the sake of the relationship?”

“Yes.”

“And seventh and most importantly… can you be vulnerable around her? When you let your guard down, when you put down your walls and let her in, when you’re at your worst and nothing is going right, what do you expect her to do:

“Protect you, respect you, and understand what you are?

“Or attack you, break you down, and remake you however she pleases?”

Weiss didn’t even need to think of it: “Yes, the former, and always.”

Winter sucked in a deep breath, and let it out very slowly. “Well…! Judging by my criteria, it would seem like yes, a relationship with Ruby probably would work out! But, with three very important caveats:

“One, she isn’t human, the Fae clearly have very different standards to what we’re used to;

“Two, it’s in all the Fae’s interest that you two get together and make some Keeper babies, which is why they will unquestioningly support a relationship between you, and the events concerning how you met and originally got together are questionable, at best;

“And three, father pretended to be the perfect lover then husband and son-in-law for years before he showed his true colours, and however doubtful it may seem, Ruby and the Keepers might just be as adapt at playing the long game like he is.

“So I suggest you wait and think long and hard before you do anything involving her, especially a relationship,” Winter finished.

“I’ll give her a year, I suppose,” Weiss replied as she did the same.

“And don’t be afraid to change your mind or extend that date whenever!” Winter cried. “This is a lifetime of potential regrets, plus your children’s, if you do have them…”
“I will, and I know.”

Winter nodded. “Good!” her face softened. “And if you need to talk to me for advice, or for any other reason—really, anything at all—I’m here for you, alright…?”

Weiss smiled. “I know, Winter.”

“Good. Now let’s get back to breakfast...” Winter said as she picked up her utensils, and tore into her pancakes—all that talking and thinking had taken up a lot of time.

“Hey Winter…?” Weiss asked.

Winter looked up, her mouth full of food. “Hmm...?”

“I love you.”

Winter smiled, teared up as she rapidly chewed up her food and swallowed. “I love you too, Weiss—whatever happens, and whatever this madhouse throws at us next.”

“It’s one hell of a rabbit hole we’ve both fallen down in...” Weiss muttered as she picked up her utensils.

Winter nodded. “Indeed. But just know that unlike Alice, you’ll have me with you every step of the way from here on out...”
Penny rejoined Weiss and Winter at Abner’s living room, now with new upgrades in the form of runes and markings carved all over her arms like Weiss’ upgraded gauntlet, or entirely new sections housing the new devices she had specifically for dealing with weavers, and medical emergencies of a magical nature.

“I’ve also had my clothing modified to have increased resistance against all four elements, upgraded elemental containment subroutines and equipment, and can even help you two produce soul stones now!”

“What in the world are ‘soul stones?’” Winter asked.

Penny opened up a new compartment in her upper-arm, handed over what looked like intricately carved coins with crystalline centers. They all hummed in their hands and resonated with their magic, but felt hollow and faint, like sound echoing in a cave.

“Soul Stones are used to contain elementals, either for capturing them in the wild, or for storing artificially created ones for later use, saving the weaver the effort, mana, and concentration of making them from scratch.

“Would you like to try it out, Winter? Simply summon one of your elementals, and either command it into the soul stone or throw it at it—either will work.”

“No time like the present, I suppose...” Winter said as she held up her new saber into the air. Magic flowed from her hand and into her weapon as she closed her eyes, before out jumped a water elemental resembling Winter’s first ever plushie, Idun the Arctic Fox.

Weiss laughed as the elemental affectionately nuzzled her leg, blatantly begging for affection with wide-eyed smiles and adorable yips. She reached out and brushed its blue-white “fur,” her hand going straight into its body, feeling like she was dipping it in a pleasantly cool pool of water.

Idun pulled away and looked at Winter, curious at the new coin in her hand.

“This won’t hurt her, will it?” Winter asked.

“Not at all!” Penny replied. “Any unpleasantness will arise from resistance to the sealing, and rarely do elementals resist their own weavers.”

Winter looked back at the soul stone, and at Idun, smiling peacefully at her like the original and the replica. “If you say so... Idun, catch!”

She threw it at Idun, she caught it into her mouth. Weiss and Winter watched as she was sucked into it head-first, until all that was left was the coin floating in mid-air, spinning round and round as it glowed white-blue. Winter picked it up, and inspected it.

On either side of the soul stone’s crystal center was Idun’s face, smiling.

Winter smiled back. “And how do I release her?”

“It’s up to you—a lot of weavers prefer to have a ritual, a catchphrase and/or a specific set of intentional moves to help memorize, simplify, and make clear their intent to summon that specific elemental.”
Winter and Weiss looked at each other.

“Can I...?” Winter asked.

Weiss smiled. “Go right on ahead!”

Winter grinned as she gripped the soul stone, and reared her arm back. “Idun, I choose you!”

She threw it out, the soul stone glowing bright as Idun reformed around it, landing gracefully on all fours, rearing her head back and letting forth a tiny, adorable yip. She turned back to Winter and smiled, the coin now glowing just above her eyes.

Winter held out her palm. “Idun, return!”

Idun pounced towards Winter’s hand as flew back into the soul stone. It landed in her palm, the crystal flashing once before it faded. It felt cool to the touch now, with plenty of life and magic humming where once there was none.

Winter stored Idun into her pocket, chuckled as she found a thin, cool film of magic on her palm as if she had licked it.

“You may wait for Maker Abner to finish his current projects, or simply hire another maker to produce a summoner’s gauntlet for you, and/or the many other specialized equipment for your specific class of weaver,” Penny said.

“How many of my elementals can I have at a time, exactly?” Winter asked. “I’m assuming my army earlier was a one time deal.”

“It wasn’t, actually! However, while you can have as many elementals your concentration and magic can handle, most summoners tend to have a maximum of six at the ready at any given time, with the rest being kept in storage.”

“And will I need soul stones for all of them?”

“Not at all! For the cost, convenience, and personal preference, many summoners store their other elementals in all manner of containers—your plushies will do quite nicely, considering all of them are made almost entirely of Valley sheep wool, and even in its raw form it’s an excellent storage for magic.

“About the only exception would be Eluna, given she already has a number of enchantments to give her her unique properties.”

“Aww, and here I was hoping I could have my own personal Moonlight Warrior...”

“Just saying that that’d be kind of creepy, considering she’s real!” Weiss said.

Winter blinked. “Wait, she’s real...?”

Penny nodded. “And alive and immortal! Though the name ‘Eluna’ may either refer to the original lunar wolf who led the breakaway from the Eldan and established the Celestian Fae, or her Fae successor, these days it’s almost always the latter.”

Winter paused. “… What does she look like?”

Penny projected an image of Eluna like Weiss had seen her in the Rune Rangers honey dream, atop one of the mountain ranges of Argos in Celestion.
Winter’s eyes widened, her eyebrows rose, and her cheeks turned pink. “… Oh…! Why… why does she look like Guadalupe Garron?…”

“Because it’s one of her many assumed identities over the centuries,” Penny replied.

“Do you… need a moment…?” Weiss asked.

Winter quickly shook her head. “No, no! I’m… just… let’s just head back to Keeper’s Hollow now, shall we?”

Penny shut off her comm-crystal. “Are you sure you don’t have any more business you’d like to deal with before we leave?”

“We’re sure,” Weiss said.

“How are we supposed to leave this place, anyway?” Winter asked.

“Through the Thumper, back into the Heart of the Maker’s Forge, then a ride through its Tube station and back to Keeper’s Hollow.”

“You might want to get a barf bag ready…” Weiss muttered.

Winter scoffed. “Weiss, please! I’ve done every single deployment and evacuation simulation in the Queensguard thousands of times, and done most of them in real life hundreds more! I’m sure I can handle whatever the Fae use for transportation…”

Winter knelt over the side of the Keeper’s Hollow Tube station, shuddering and heaving as she emptied the contents of her stomach into the water. Weiss rubbed back, Penny prepared a few canisters of filtered water, Idun alternately nuzzled her face and wiped it clean of leftover vomit.

Eventually, Winter stopped hurling and sat on her rear with her arms and legs spread out. “Oh sweet Shepherd…” she groaned. “How do you not throw up after every trip…”

Weiss shrugged as she helped her drink water. “You just get used to having your internal organs thrown about as you zoom around at hundreds of miles per hour, I guess…” she muttered.

They made their way down the well-trodden path, slowing down for Winter to recover and examine their surroundings.

It was the middle of afternoon much like the first time Weiss had ever trodden down that path, and the wildlife was still as noisy and lively as ever, flying about the giant trees, swimming in the water, scurrying about through the many nooks and crannies in the tree’s roots and the banks as they finish their business before it got dark.

“So this is where you’ve been living all this time, huh?” Winter asked.

“It’s actually really nice, once you get used to it,” Weiss replied. “It’s… peaceful. Noisy, but in the good way.”

Winter hummed. “… How far are we from the rest of the Bastion, out of curiosity?”

“About 12 miles and half-an-hour away from the rest of the Bastion, assuming you use a motorized boat or a mount capable of moving swiftly in swampy terrain,” Penny replied. “The trouble Keepers attract tend to be incredibly destructive, and the Council both wants to minimize the damage to the rest of the city, and give us time to prepare and evacuate in case it can’t be contained her.
“What kind of trouble are we talking about…?” Winter asked. “Soul Eaters?”

Penny shook her head. “They and the rest of the wilderness of the Valley are unable to breach the walls of the Bastion; *this* kind of trouble is Fae and man-made. Aside from their mates, Keepers tend to attract companions of *exceptional* strength and power, with incidents and accidents to match—the series of fiascoes leading to Weiss discovering her weaver powers, for example.

“There’s no telling what sort of chaos and disruption that would have caused, had the Roost and the Terrace needed to shut down *several* blocks worth of residential and/or commercial areas.”

Winter turned to Weiss.

Weiss sighed. “I’ll tell you about them some time… just know that now, things don’t explode unless I wanted them to.”

Winter nodded. “Is there anything in particular I have to worry about with your friends? The Kee—Ruby… aside.”

“Qrow’s constantly drunk and smells but is otherwise harmless, Blake can be really mean at first until she warms up to you, Nora’s an HV addict with the hyperactivity and the attention span to match, and Zwei is a giant mutant two-headed Corgi who’ll *definitely* cover you in slobber when he first meets you,” Weiss replied.

“I’m also *pretty* sure Yang wants to *literally* kill me for breaking Ruby’s heart last night, and there’s also the fact that you’ve *repeatedly* tried to kill almost everyone here at some point.”

Winter sucked in a deep breath, and let it go slowly. “Well… suppose this isn’t the most awkward social situation I’ve ever had to deal with!”

“If it’s any consolation, most of them are out touring the Bastion, or are getting debriefed of the new hunt schedules and duties at the Watcher’s Roost,” Penny said. “Taiyang is the only one here at the moment, to my knowledge.”

Sure enough, he was the only there when they arrived, hard at work planting new crops and tree seedlings where the very last of the overgrowth had been, evidently after taking care all of Weiss’ crops and trees.

He noticed them coming up, put down Weiss’ hoe and waved. As he came over they all noticed that his arms were covered with green plant matter, vines all over its surface pulsing and relaxing with the movements of his muscles underneath.

“Hey, I was wondering when you two would get here!” Taiyang said. “Weiss, and this is your sister, Winter, right?”

Winter smiled uneasily. “Err… yes and you’re Taiyang Xiao Long! I am *very* sorry for trying to kill you, your brother-in-law, and daughter several times over…”

Taiyang waved him off. “Eh, it’s cool! I can’t blame you, or anyone else that’s been trying to kill the Keepers and their friends!” He glared. “*The important thing is you don’t try that shit again.*”

Winter paused for a moment. “I won’t. I promise.”

Taiyang beamed. “Great!” He turned to Weiss. “Hope you don’t mind my using your tools and taking care of all of your crops for you; I know how protective tenders can be of their fields, but I *really* needed to get these arms moving after having them stuck in that damned tank for so long…”
“Oh, no, it’s fine!” Weiss said. “We’ve been looking for tenders to help out here, actually.”

Taiyang beamed. “Good thing I’ve been keeping up the farming habit all these years!” he turned back to the farm, and smiled. “Gotta say, it’s good to be back here and working this soil again; nothing ever grows as well as it does here in the Valley, nor does it taste as good.”

“Back here?” Winter asked.

“Taiyang and Yang have been in exile for the past 14 years,” Penny explained. “It was supposed to be permanent, but the recent crisis with the Heralds have forced it to be rescinded.”

“It’s a long, long story—I’ll tell you it later, when I’ve used up all this energy,” Taiyang said, thumbing to his new crops. “Why don’t you go check out the stuff stewing in your lab? Don’t worry, I haven’t touched any of them; I learned never to mess with a weaver’s stuff the hard way, and never forgot it since…”

“I will,” Weiss said. “Come on, Winter, I’ll show you my lab—and where we’ll be staying until the makers can fix up the old cabins, actually.”

“Have they been keeping you in a barn this whole time?!” Winter asked.

“Of course not!” Weiss replied. “… I’ve been sleeping in Ruby’s room.”

Winter’s eyes widened.

“Nothing’s happened!” Weiss added quickly. “Right, Penny?”

“You have my word that Ruby and Weiss’ cohabitation is as innocent as can be!” she chirped. “Well, except for--”

Winter held up her hand. “I’d like to be somewhere indoors, comfortable, and preferably with my Eluna plushie and a large supply of chocolate before I learn any more upsetting things, please…” she muttered.

Penny nodded, and shut her mouth as they went up the stairs to Weiss’ laboratory.

“What are you even making here?” Winter asked as she examined the complex and alien equipment sitting on the lab’s counters and running up the walls, taking up nearly half of the second floor.

“ Mostly elemental mediums!” Weiss replied as she put on her apron and safety gear. “It’s what the Fae call fuel for magic, like the ammo for the farslinger—uh, a Fae magic sniper rifle—for Ruby’s scythe.”

Winter frowned. “Never thought I’d see the day where you’re making munitions…”

“I’m not cleared for that yet, and won’t even try until I get my powers in check,” Weiss replied as she began to open barrels and pots, stir the contents inside or funnel them into jars and other containers. “For now, I’m sticking with safe things: medicine, make-up, and some preserved foods like alcohol and cheese.”

Winter’s stomach growled. “Any of that last one?”

“It’s over there,” Weiss said, pointing to the container. “It should already be done.”

Winter looked at Penny.
“With your genetic modifications and Maker Abner’s solutions, you should be safe for it,” she said.

“Cheese for breakfast it is!” Winter said. She washed her hands, went over to the container, and pulled off the lid.

The white cheese inside looked positively radiant, one of the most appetizing things Winter had ever seen.

Then it formed a face:

:D

Winter stared it at for a moment, before she turned to Weiss. “Weiss: does cheese from the Valley normally have faces…?”

Weiss’ eyes widened in alarm. She hurriedly put down the magic-frostbite ointment she was bottling and rushed over, where her newest cheese elemental had already formed into a blob with the same antenna as the first one.

“No, no, they don’t! It’s just that forgot I dumped a lot of my excess magic from the Eve into this thing...” she muttered.

“Should I eat it? Is it even safe?” Winter asked, watching it wiggle and beckon her to do so.

“It wants to be eaten, and yeah, Penny told me the magic in enchanted foods just help them taste better more than anything else.”

Winter thought it over for a moment, before she shrugged, and took a chunk out of the cheese elemental and ate it. She hummed in pleasure. “Goodness, this is delicious!”

The cheese blob started to bounce about in place, positively ecstatic.

Weiss picked up a chunk for her own, and ate it. “Holy crap—this even better than the first one!”

“Likely because you fully intended it to be enchanted and eaten this time, rather than by accident,” Penny replied. “A lot of the effectiveness of magic comes from the skill of the weaver.”

Weiss nodded as they ate sisters ate more of the cheese, the blob shrinking and reshaping itself when it lost too many chunks, smiling and seemingly singing in happiness as it served its reason to exist.

“I’m kind of sad it’ll be gone when we eat it all,” Winter said after she ate her fill. “It’s cute! In a weird, disturbing, and morally questionable kind of way!”

“You could store its essence in a soul stone, if you really wanted to,” Penny replied. “Then you could just transfer it to a new body while retaining its personality and original intent. A word of warning, though: soul stones aren’t cheap to produce.”

Winter chuckled. “It’s not like I’m wanting for that right now.”

“Then it’s all up to Weiss, then!” Penny said as she handed her one.

Weiss held it in her hand and held it over the cheese. “You ready?”

The cheese opened its “mouth” wide.

Weiss put the soul stone in, and watched as it “swallowed” it. It paused for a moment, its eyes
widening as its whole body glowed.

O_O

Then, it faded back to its original glow and smiled.

“Did it work?” Weiss asked.

The cheese spat out its soul stone. Its body turned back into regular, block-shaped cheese, Weiss caught the coin and looked at it.

:D

Winter smiled as she looked over her shoulder. “I’d say that’s a ‘yes.’”

“What should we name it?” Weiss asked as she put the soul stone back into the cheese, and the elemental reformed.

“Well, I’ve already got plushies named Blanche, Blanco and Whitey, so that’d get confusing so how about… Cheese?”

“Just ‘Cheese’?” Weiss asked.

Winter shrugged. “It’s not like we’re going to be using it to make anything other than that, right?”

Weiss nodded. “Cheese it is.”

Cheese bounced about happily.

“Hey Weiss?” Winter asked.

“Yeah, Winter?”

“Did I just seriously eat then name an intelligent, animated blob of cheese?”

“Yes. Yes you did.”

“Oh, good. Thought I was going crazy for a moment there!”
Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

Incoming Drama, and mentions of Raven being a TERRIBLE mother and Fae in general.

Everything was bottled, put off the burners, and stored away in boxes or long-term fermentation. Cheese was given a protective wax paper coating so it wouldn't get contaminated as it bounced off Weiss and Winter.

“So I guess this is our new life now...” Winter muttered as she and Weiss perched or sat on the counters.

“Maybe not permanently!” Weiss replied. “The realm will have moved onto something else by next year, and we won't be as high priority targets for the AFA, or that easily recognized by people.”

Winter huffed. “Doubt that! The way I see it, the only way we can avoid getting caught and executed for treason, kidnapping the current Holy Shepherd, and all the other crimes we're guilty for is if we stay here in the Valley, get shuffled off to the other Fae-controlled territories wherever they may be, or live in some backwater village out in the Country where our only company will be other fugitives and terrorists on the run.”

She held her hand up in the air. “These new powers of ours will also be a problem—even if we could get help from the scientists at Candela, no one’s had to treat or train human magicians for centuries...”

Weiss looked down at her gloved hand; she was starting to be able to ignore the muzzled, muffled feeling, but she doubted it'd ever truly go away, until she could permanently turn off the safety switch.

“At the very least, I can guarantee you this arrangement is a lot better than some of the forward bases I've lived in...” Winter said. “I've got serious concerns with the new organization I’m working for, though...”

“Mind if I butt in?” Taiyang asked as he walked by the lab, sweaty and dirty from all the work.

Winter nodded.

“The Council’s not that bad, you know,” Taiyang said. “They’re a lot like the governments in the city states: pay your taxes and stay within the law, and they’ll keep the walls up and the wild animals and Country warlords out, keep the peacekeepers equipped and trained, and the trains and social services running.”

“I've noticed, but the absolute power, the denial of information to citizens, and these ‘governors’ give me pause.”

Taiyang chuckled. “As someone who’s lived on both sides of the coins for decades, I can tell you the Council just skips the campaigning, the voting, and the convincing people they’re fit to lead; most Fae just don’t give a crap about most of the stuff their governments do, too; and the governors are
only if you **really** fuck up, or get on the Watcher’s bad side one too many times.”

“Well what in the world did you do to deserve a device that essentially turns you into a slave?”

Taiyang frowned. “It’s a long, awful story, and if you two don’t mind me eating the rest of that cheese, I’ll tell you it.”

“If it’s ‘The Shit’ I’ve been hearing so much about, you’ve got a deal,” Weiss said.

Taiyang nodded as he came over to cheese. “Might want to get out your plushies, and have Penny get **plenty** of chocolate and tissues from the house. It’s one of those stories.”

Weiss nodded. “We will.”

They sat in Winter’s temporary bed/nest, Winter holding her Eluna plushie in her lap, Weiss with a jumbo-sized box of tissues, and Penny on standby with her “therapy mender” protocols already loaded, along with equipment and ingredients for making homemade chocolate ice cream.

“We’re going to need them,” Taiyang said, before he sat down in front of them retold his account of how he met Summer and the others for Winter’s benefit.

“… I told her, ‘Summer, this could be the last time we’ll ever see each other. I’ve got **nothing** waiting for me back at Valentino, what’s left of my family’s content for me to holochat every once in a while, and I know that you know we’ve got a **connection** here—something that could be the start of something beautiful.

“‘So please: will you take me back with you guys to the Country? I won’t freeload or anything—I’ll do anything you need me to! I lived in Valentino, doing whatever it took to survive is second nature to me!’

“So, after a long emergency meeting with Raven and Qrow, and buying him as much beer as I could with the money that was supposed to be my airfare back to Valentino, they agreed, and I couldn’t have been happier.”

“Did they take you back to the secret teleporter at the Plushie Palace?” Weiss asked.

Taiyang shook his head. “Nah, Summer just told me, ‘Close your eyes, and don’t move; just trust me, alright?’”

“And you did it just like that…?” Winter asked.

Taiyang nodded. “Didn’t know what she was going to do, but I owed her for bailing me out from getting stranded in Candela, and one of the best Eves of the Ether I’d ever had. So you could just imagine my surprise when I was teleported away for the first time and found myself at the emergency evac totem at the Roost.”

“What did you do?” Winter asked.

“Well, first I screamed, ran around, then threw up. Then, I spent a long while in a corner crying and begging them to just bust me already, tell me that this was all one elaborate prank for a really, really, **really** high-budget holovision show with an actress I’d really like to get the number of later. Finally, after the watchers cleared me, I got my care package, and I was laying on my back on the couch staring at the ceiling, I realized:
“This was all real.”

“Did the Council tell you they could send you back home any time they wanted?” Weiss asked. “Because they only planned to tell me because me and Ruby were… together then.”

Taiyang shook his head. “Nah. Summer told me outright, and the Council confirmed that as she already outed the secret—I guess it helped that I was just a nobody from Valentino, no one could recognize my face on the street even if they wanted to, and I hadn’t faked my death on live holovision.”

Weiss looked down.

“So when do the Keepers or the Council tell potential mates they could help them leave?” Winter asked.

“Depends,” Taiyang said. “The humans that end up staying here were already on the run from the law like Abner, were already looking for someplace different to live in like myself and Weiss, had something that made it in their best interest to stay like you and Reynault, or had already fallen head over heels for the Keeper like Samaria.

“The Council usually has a maximum six month time limit, both to make all the arrangements so they can prove that they really did mean what they say, and give the potential mates enough time to get over the initial shock, see if they can adjust to Valley life.”

“Isn’t it incredibly manipulative that they don’t just tell them outright?” Weiss asked.

“Exactly, and they won’t say it’s anything else! But then again, if the fate of all of Avalon rested on one specific Fae making babies with humans and mostly human hybrids, I’d do everything I could to help make that happen, too.

“I’m not saying it’s okay, because it’s definitely not, just that I understand it.”

“I’m assuming this put a lot of strain with you and Summer’s budding relationship...” Winter said. Taiyang chuckled. “Without a doubt! It torpedoed everything, all prospects sunken down to the bottom of the Endless Sea. The only reason I stayed afterward was that being broke and penniless in the Valley isn’t as bad as it is back at Valentino—the food, the congestion, and the air’s way better for one, and it’s pretty easy to grow yourself a kickass full-course meal for cheap, if you don’t mind going vegan. But then, bit by bit, things got better.

“I bulked up now that I was eating properly, had plenty of exercise from the farming, and piggybacked on the equipment in the training grounds when the others weren’t using them. When I was strong enough, I joined them on their hunts to absorb the excess echoes from the prey they were killing, and eventually, I was tangoing one-to-one with all kinds of nasties!

“Have you ever punched a shark so hard it flies out of the water? I have! It was fucking awesome.

“Summer was all too eager to help me out however she could, to make up for all the trauma she’s caused me, and also because she was still interested in me. I was, too, but I had been in way too many relationships that weren’t entirely what they seemed, so I was wary of getting together with her.”

“So why did you choose to do it anyway?” Weiss asked.
Taiyang smiled. “Because things were going great! I was well on my way to mastering the Tsunami-Fist, could hold off a Soul Eater for a good long while and not end up in the hospital for weeks after, and had saved up enough money from working for the watchers that I could afford a place of my own elsewhere in the Bastion.

“And I found I really didn’t want to, even if I could. Since this also around the time my brain finally processed the idea that someone could like me without wanting me for an ulterior motive or trying to use me to get something, I decided, why the hell not?

“What’s the worst that could happen?”

Taiyang looked down. “… Well, I could learn that my kids were going to be destined to save the realm by throwing themselves into potentially mortal danger on a daily basis, all because people and folks long, long dead f**ked up, Big Time, and the Fae have given up on closing Pandora’s box and settled for standing on the edge of the lid and throwing back whatever comes crawling out.

He looked up at Winter and Weiss. “I loved Summer, alright? I just couldn’t be in a relationship with her. I couldn’t stomach the idea of my kids—our kids—having the fate of the realm thrust on their shoulders, just because of who their parents were.”

“So what did you do…?” Weiss asked.

Taiyang closed his eyes. He saw Summer’s face that day two decades ago, the hurt and the tears in her eyes, the way he could just tell that she wasn’t at all surprised that that was what he would say, what we he would do.

“Okay…” Summer whispered, her voice trembling. “… I understand.”

Taiyang opened his eyes, wiped his tears with the back of his hand. “She… well she, wasn’t okay with it. Not by a long shot. But she loved me still, and because of that, she tried her damndest to be okay with it.

“That probably would have been the end of any prospects of a relationship, if Raven hadn’t swooped in.” Taiyang paused. “Heh. ‘Swooped in.’”

Winter and Weiss groaned.

Taiyang ignored them. “For context, her and Qrow’s family, the Branwen Clan, are obsessed with power, determined to be the strongest in all the land, then have children who go on to become even more badass than they were. I guess it was kind of inevitable, since they were living in the dusty hellhole that we call Sekhmet.

“The generally aim for the position of, or power equal to that of the Council’s Huntsmaster—Port, at the moment—but Raven set her goal even higher, the one Fae who could kill something even they have trouble with:

“The Keeper of the Grove.

“It was why they moved here in the first place, signed up to be her personal watchers/chroniclers—she wanted to be as close to Summer as possible, learn everything there was about her, and piggyback on all the excess echoes she and the scythe can’t absorb from Soul Eaters, so eventually she could get strong and smart enough to beat her.”

“Did she ever suspect anything?” Weiss asked.
Taiyang shook her head. “Nah, but only because Raven told her outright she was planning to defeat her one of these days.”

“Why did she agree…?” Winter asked. “I’m not a Keeper, but having a subordinate whose primary goal is to attempt to overthrow you is not a very smart hiring decision!”

“Two reasons: Summer is just nice like that, and no one is exactly dying to sign up for Keeper support staff positions, knowing you’ll probably be in the thick of a fight with a Soul Eater, and have to deal with all the chaos the Keepers attract like industrial sized magnets.

“I don’t know how Blake ended up signing up to be one of Ruby’s watchers, but you just know she didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. And Penny only got the position because Abner can rebuild her if she happens to get destroyed, which saves the Council the trouble of having to find a replacement watcher-mender if we were using an actual Fae.”

Weiss and Winter paused, letting that information sink in.

“How did her plan work out, exactly?” Winter asked.

“She challenged Summer to one-on-one duels at the training grounds, same time every week, only ever interrupted by Soul Eater attacks.” Taiyang smirked. “She always lost, never even came remotely close to winning, and I guess it really rubbed her the wrong way that she could still lose that badly even if it was clear that Summer was holding back every time.

“So she decided that if she couldn’t become the strongest Fae in the land, she could just try to raise a child that would be. And to do that, she needed a second parent, someone who she was sure had power out the wazoo, and had some pretty damn good genetics to pass on, too…”

Weiss and Winter eyes widened in horror. “She used you like that?!” Weiss cried.

Taiyang nodded. “In her defense, she really did love me—in her own fucked up, unhealthy, crazy way. And I was young, even more of a bonehead that I am even now, and had… uh… needs.”

Winter and Weiss shuddered. “Let’s… please not get into that.” Winter muttered.

Taiyang chuckled. “That was all I was going to say about it! Back on track, it looked like things were—well, not great, but getting better: Summer had moved on and was looking for a different mate, me and Raven were starting a family, and even from birth Yang was proving herself to be a real powerhouse.

“She challenged Summer to one-on-one duels at the training grounds, same time every week, only ever interrupted by Soul Eater attacks.” Taiyang smirked. “She always lost, never even came remotely close to winning, and I guess it really rubbed her the wrong way that she could still lose that badly even if it was clear that Summer was holding back every time.

“So she decided that if she couldn’t become the strongest Fae in the land, she could just try to raise a child that would be. And to do that, she needed a second parent, someone who she was sure had power out the wazoo, and had some pretty damn good genetics to pass on, too…”

Weiss and Winter eyes widened in horror. “She used you like that?!” Weiss cried.

Taiyang nodded. “In her defense, she really did love me—in her own fucked up, unhealthy, crazy way. And I was young, even more of a bonehead that I am even now, and had… uh… needs.”

Winter and Weiss shuddered. “Let’s… please not get into that.” Winter muttered.

Taiyang chuckled. “That was all I was going to say about it! Back on track, it looked like things were—well, not great, but getting better: Summer had moved on and was looking for a different mate, me and Raven were starting a family, and even from birth Yang was proving herself to be a real powerhouse.

“Gotta say, it was a real eye opener when you have to replace the wooden bars of your baby’s crib with ironbark so she can’t break them off and escape. Even then, I always had to remember to bend them back into place or else she’d eventually make a gap big enough to go through.”

“How in the world was Yang that strong at barely a year old?!” Winter asked. “I was old enough to remember Weiss in her crib, and she didn’t nearly have that kind of strength!”

“Probably because most of your power comes from your magic, and you were eating Candela food—it’s not just the plants that grow and develop fast here in the Valley. It might have helped that Raven was a full-blooded Fae, than the hybrids I’m assuming one or both of your parents were.”

“Fair enough…” Winter said.

“Anyway, Yang was strong!” Taiyang frowned. “But not strong enough for Raven.
“Don’t get me wrong, I’d read all about Fae parenting, how they train their kids to be able to handle themselves for anything as early as possible, but Branwen style child-raising is something else. To give you an idea: where most people would consider bleeding hands a good time to stop, for the Branwen Clan, it’s time to bandage them up, then do the other half of your set.”

Winter and Weiss looked horrified. “How was that legal?!” Winter cried.

Taiyang’s turned serious. “Just barely. Raven knew how to toe the line, and she was a master at hiding things, lying, and dodging suspicion like a veteran seeker.

“She could also be pretty manipulative if she wanted to, convince others nothing’s wrong, trick someone who doesn’t know any better that this is just ‘how the way the world works.’ And sometimes, the people that suspect something is up give her the benefit of the doubt at the worst time possible.”

The two sisters fell silent.

Taiyang closed his eyes. “I’ll spare you the really ugly details. Just know the only reason Raven was allowed to stay was because the Keeper requires at least one watcher-chronicler at all times, and if folks weren’t lining up for the job in the first place, it’s an even harder sell to tell them that they need to get a gadget installed that utterly erases all semblance of privacy for the rest of their lives.”

He sighed. “The irony wasn’t lost on me, you know? Here I was, avoiding a relationship with Summer, because I didn’t want to bring someone into the world knowing that they were going to grow up and train for their whole lives to fight monsters, possibly even get killed by them.

“And there I was, looking back and realizing that I’d done just that.

“I didn’t get together with Summer immediately after things fell apart with Raven, just to be clear here. The divorce, going through therapy for Yang and myself, being forced to live and work with Raven still—it all fucked me up, and we all knew I was in no condition to be doing anything other than try and heal from all the scars Raven left in me—physical, mental, and emotional.

“But like they say, time heals all wounds, and though we certainly weren’t fine a year later we were… better.

“I guess it helps that because the Fae can’t just pick up and move whenever they want to as their lives and sanity depend on being near city-sized wellsprings 24/7, they just decide to make the best they can with what they have.

“And what I had was a permanently traumatized daughter with trust and anger issues who could potentially bring down the house if she punched enough holes in the walls and we didn’t fix them in time, a constantly drunk friendly asshole for a brother-in-law, an ex-wife who in the span of less than a year had turned from passion firier than the Heart of the Forge, to frostier than the very bottom of the Coldburrow Caverns, and a slayer of giant monsters and best friend to all that was just barely holding us all together.

“My life wasn’t just in the toilet—I was way in the bottom of the city state-sized sewage tank.

“And so I figured, since I had already proven to myself and everyone around me that despite my best efforts I couldn’t protect my future or present children from the monsters of the world—whatever or whoever they were—there really wasn’t any reason for me not to get together with Summer.

“She was more of a mother to Yang than Raven ever was, leaps and bounds more competent at child raising than me and Qrow could ever be, and if I thought Raven was the best relationship I’d ever
had in my life, she just proved to me how low I had been setting the bar in so many ways, so it wasn’t like anyone was going to lose out on this!

“Well, except for Raven.

“Because when Ruby was born, she was everything Raven wanted Yang to be, except better: she was stronger, she learned faster, she could use the Keeper’s scythe, and even Raven’s own sword would accept her as its wielder, whereas Yang managed to almost decapitate herself and lopped off a good chunk of Raven’s head-feathers when she tried to force her to use it.

“She never attacked Ruby—she knew better than to piss off who was going to be one of the most powerful Fae in all the realm. But seeing her plan fail, and see the living proof right before her eyes that it was her genes that were lacking, and not mine…?

“Well, you can just imagine how she felt about that.”

“What’d she do…?” Winter asked.

“She left the Hollow in the middle of breakfast one morning, and left us to send pack her bags and send it to her by mail—didn’t even pay for postage! Summer pleaded with her, the Council reminded her of her contract and her duties, but she had just had enough.

“The Keeper always needs a Chronicler, and should that member of her support team be sick or dead, or the position was unfilled, the rest of her team can make do with what’s essentially a chest holo-recorder. It’s not ideal as chronicles capture a lot more than just footage, but it was the only thing the Council could do until they found a replacement for Raven.

“They were essentially blind to whatever was going on in Keeper’s Hollow for those few weeks, and what we did tell them, they were trusting us to just tell them the truth, and the whole truth. And as you might expect, Raven didn’t walk out of our lives quietly, and left us with some choice parting words.

“We were all shook. We were scared. And I’ll admit, I got way too overprotective of Ruby after what had happened with Yang.”

“So what did you all do…?” Weiss asked.

Taiyang sucked in a deep breath, and sighed. “We left, too.

“Qrow doctored footage and reports, made a whole lot of shady deals, and we all called up some favours from friends both human and Fae, and we fled the Bastion and moved to a town in a peaceful, isolated island out in the Country—little place called New Hope.

“We left the scythe, the mask, and the cloak behind, thinking that the Fate would just do as it always did, find a replacement Keeper while a the current was dead or retired, and the new one was still growing up or hadn’t been born yet, as it had worked with Moira and all the other part-time Keepers over the centuries.

“And unfortunately, Fate chose Raven.”
“Wait...” Weiss said. “The temporary Keeper of the Grove was Raven? The same Raven who’d only been working with Summer for the sole purpose of trying to defeat her, who only ever worked with her to figure out her weaknesses, who’s on par with our father as ‘Worst Parents in the History of Avalon’...?”

“Wasn’t there anything you could have done to keep this from happening?!” Winter cried. “Surely there were others who could use the scythe!”

Taiyang shook his head. “If it were that easy, then the Council wouldn’t have gone to such great pains to make sure that the Keepers keep on making babies and working for them.

“There were plenty of other Fae who could wield the scythe, full-bloods or hybrids much like yourselves. But the problem was, they all fell short in some respect: they couldn’t fight as well, they couldn’t handle the Soul Eaters’ contingency plan of taking their killers with them by flooding them with more echoes and raw magic than most folks could ever hope to handle, or they let the power, the privilege, and the prestige go to their heads.

“The Valley was running out of volunteers, and running out fast. The Soul Eaters were starting to catch on, and for the first time in hundreds of years, the Fae were dealing with the pants-shitting realization that they might take advantage of Summer being gone, leave some of them to trap us in the walls of the Bastion while the rest ran out of the Valley to attack Candela, eat its wellspring, then tear through all of Avalon in no time, if they don’t just destroy the entire realm with death lasers like the one Winter fought.

“And here me, Summer, Yang, Ruby, and Qrow were, pretending to be a completely human, eccentric but harmless family in New Hope, an island that was literally out in the middle of nowhere, really difficult to find, who’s main appeal was that it was 100% back-to-nature:

“No Info-Grid; no magitech outside of lights, water filtration, and engines; no modern marvels except for medicine for the sick, and even then only as a last resort.”

“Didn’t you ever realize anything was wrong?” Weiss asked.

Taiyang sighed. “We did, but we were distracted on both sides. The Council couldn’t mount a thorough search of where the hell we’d gone with Soul Eaters threatening to trap them in the Bastion while they took turns going to the shining all-you-can-eat buffet on the horizon that is Candela, and me and my family were all finding out that it was easy to escape and establish a new life elsewhere undercover, but maintaining the secret was an entirely different story.

“Especially when your baby girls grow up way faster and stronger than they should be at those ages, they keep forgetting they should be holding back on their powers and the adults do too, and our neighbours got really curious about why Summer never took off her top hat for anything.

“If ever we felt something was horribly wrong in our guts, the Council just thought it was that a Soul Eater had slipped out at night, and we thought that someone was getting dangerously close to finding out secret.

“The Council had no choice: they gave Raven the scythe, the mask, and the cloak, if only ever for killing Soul Eaters.

“For a while, both our plans worked.
“Raven was never on Summer’s level, but she was no slouch herself, and could take on almost everything by herself except for a Soul Eater, and a handful of the worst the Valley has to offer. And eventually, Summer’s charm just won everyone over, and the rest of the townsfolk figured, hell, if never being able to find out what was underneath her top hat was what it took to keep her around, then they were just going to have to deal with that mystery never being solved.

“But then, both our plans started to unravel.

“Raven got the power she had wanted for so long, the kind that would make Soul Eaters hide out in the shadows until they could send out a champion, the kind that makes even the Council and everyone else bow down to your will.

“And while the Keepers were the kind of folks that would use that power responsibly, Raven wasn’t.

“Meanwhile, after a long, awful, sleep-deprived few days when Yang got really sick, Summer passed out during her daycare job, and little kids being little kids, nothing stopped them from trying to find out what was under her top hat and yanking on the antlers she was hiding underneath.

“All of the Keeper’s equipment suddenly stopped working for Raven, and though none of the adults saw what happened exactly, all of the kids stories about ‘Auntie Summer’s horns’ were scarily, suspiciously consistent, enough for one of them to all secretly gather up together and make concrete plans to finally find out what the hell was going on with our family.”

“… The parts after this are where ‘The Shit’ got its name, isn’t it…?” Weiss asked.

“Yeeep!” Taiyang replied.

“Raven wasn’t happy about being fired like that. She was a lot less happy to see that it had suddenly lowered its standards and was now letting pretty much every watcher except her use them. She was desperate to have that power again, so she did the unthinkable:

“She became a Soul Eater.”

Winter and Weiss paled.

“… Soul Eaters used to be Fae…?!” Weiss whispered.

Taiyang laughed. “Nah! They were just artificially created monsters whose creators unfortunately decided they really needed to be able to make Baby Soul Eaters on their own! What she did do, however, was steal the Soul Eater sword…”

He turned to Winter. “You know the Terrible Tale of the Keeper of the Grove, right?”

Winter nodded slowly. “This is the same sword Guillermo found in the cave, didn’t he?”

“The one and the same. Only Ruby’s great-great-great-grandma Amethyst didn’t give it to him, she was trying to stop him from getting it.

“See, it turns out that after You-Know-Who had the Soul Eaters, She tried to see if she could give her Fae and human goons similar power. She had weapons designed that were going to be much more powerful than anything they had ever made before, and because Fae gear are as powerful as they are because of the echoes they absorb from battles and hunts, it made sense that the more echoes it could absorb, the more powerful it would be, right?

“Well it worked!
“Too well, because they didn’t just absorb the magical essence, it absorbed everything including the victim’s physical body and consciousness. And it turns out that having the people you’ve killed screaming bloody vengeance at you 24/7 isn’t that good for your mental health, and neither is having more magical power than most humans and Fae should ever have. That it ends with bat-shit crazy soldiers capable of taking on entire armies, winning, and absorbing all of their power to take on even more armies killed the project before they could produce more than the one successful prototype:

“The Soul Eater Sword.

“They couldn’t destroy it because it was just too powerful, and the Council can’t keep it in the Terrace’s Vault as it just reeks of pure evil, so they just hid them where no one would likely be able to find them: deep in a cave full of some of the most dangerous creatures in the Valley. Even the Keepers can’t destroy it entirely, though they can kill whoever wields them as easily as the monsters, and siphon the echoes from the sword until its almost harmless...

“… Until someone tries to take it and feed it again, which someone always does, eventually.

“Maybe you’re Guillermo, after your party happens to get caught in the middle of Amethyst and a Soul Eater tangoing, and they unintentionally scare off the other monsters, giving you cover to run into the cave and find it.

“Or maybe you’re Raven, who had failed her one goal in life way too many times, and was desperate enough to try anything to be the strongest, whatever the cost.”

Taiyang hung his head and paused. “… We don’t know how many animals she killed to feed the sword before she broke into the Bastion, but we’re pretty sure at least one of them was a Soul Eater as we didn’t have an attack for a year after.

“And when she broke back into the city, thirty-seven people died, twenty-three of them watchers trying to stop her, the rest civilians who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hundreds more ended up getting horrific injuries that didn’t kill them but sure made them wish they did, and thousands more got hurt in the chaos.

“There would have been a lot more casualties, if all of the Eldan Council and all of the best Watchers in the Valley hadn’t personally shown up to hold her off, and that was only long enough for the Primals to use the Keeper’s scythe to find us and open up a portal to where we were and back to the Valley.”

“And you just came with them?” Winter asked.

Taiyang’s face fell. “We didn’t have a choice.

“Around the same time Raven was looking for the sword, the townsfolk had all gotten together and wanted some answers. They didn’t have torches or pitchforks, and they actually brought pies and chocolate chip cookies, but still we had to get out, and get out fast, because our cover was pretty much blown, and the consequences of them spilling the Fae’s big secret would be a lot worse than our leaving the Valley without its Keeper.

“We didn’t have an escape plan, because we assumed we could pull off the plan perfectly, and since we were panicking, none of us were seekers, and Qrow flunked out of the order ever since he left Sekhmet and discovered alcohol here, we didn’t ask any questions and just jumped through.

“We assumed we only had to worry about our running away, and what we thought was a Soul Eater attack they had to fend off for themselves, then Raven showed up. She had completely lost it from
the Soul Eater sword and all the Fae and creatures she’d killed, and for better or worse, she had agreed to stop attacking the Bastion on one condition:

“She’d have one last duel with Summer in full-gear—scythe, cloak, and mask—and she had to promise that she wouldn’t hold back this time.” Taiyang looked down, tears welling in his eyes.

“And Summer? Summer won that duel, like she always did…

“… Only this time, she didn’t walk away from it.”

“We humans... we say that when you fall in love with someone, they complete you, like there was a part of you that was missing and they just happened to be it. But the Fae? The Fae say it that you’re both two separate realms, complete on your own, and when you get together you just open each other up to new dimensions you never would have experienced by yourself, never even knew was possible.

“And when Summer died, when all the menders, the Primals, even the Eldan Council did everything they could and they just couldn’t bring her back…

“… It was like both those worlds just shattered right before my very eyes.”

All was quiet in the barn for a long, but for the sound of Taiyang, Weiss, and Winter’s sobbing. Penny came online, and started quietly patting shoulders and handing out tissues.

“The Council…” Taiyang sucked in a breath. “The Council, they have all the power to do whatever they want—they’d proved they could get it all by themselves, that they could handle it, that they would only ever use it to do whatever it took to keep the Fae and Avalon safe, whatever means necessary!

“But in the end, they still have to the answer to the Fae.

“And in those days, it was a bad, bad time to be me, Yang, or Qrow. Folks died because of what we did. We’d thrown the entire Bastion into chaos and fear, risked the fate of the entire damn realm wherever or whoever you were, and now we got to see for ourselves all the scars, the damage, and the trauma that would never heal all because of that fucking sword.

“The Council… the Council didn’t know what to do; somehow, in 1,000 years, no one ever tried to leave with the Keeper and succeeded, before we did.

“But the Fae? The Fae wanted blood.

“The Council had a potential total revolt on their hands and pandemonium in the streets because their Keeper of the Grove was dead, and we had no idea who the hell was going to replace her in the meanwhile, if the Valley would still be here by the time Ruby was old enough to handle the scythe, let alone kill a Soul Eater.

“The Council wouldn’t do an execution—they know from their long, long history that it just causes more problems than it solves, and what kind of punishment is giving someone who just wanted to die the very thing he wanted?

“No, they had to do their job, keep the Fae from trying to kill each other like they had in all three Great Wars, punish me in a way that wouldn’t make the Fae lose faith in their authority, and still they had to keep all the nightmares in the Valley from falling in the wrong hands or getting out.

“So what they did was exile me back to Heartland, give me custody of Yang so I’d still have some reason to live, but forbid me from ever talking to Ruby ever again, or using Yang to relay messages,
to hammer in to my head just how **badly** I’d **fucked up**.

“Meanwhile, Qrow had his governor-chronicle installed, and lucky for all of us, the scythe worked for him, but from what he tells me, it was only ever long enough for Ruby to start being able to use it, and it **really** didn’t like it if he was trying to keep Ruby from a fight she could handle.

“I didn’t protest my sentence—how could I? It was a **struggle** to even get up in the morning when all I wanted was for all this to be a **really** long, **scarily** real nightmare, and Summer would be there to wake me up and ask me what the hell it was I was dreaming about…

“… But it was all real.

“By the time I had finally recovered enough to get out of the halfway house the Fae keep for us humans who get a little too deep into the secret and want out, everyone had accepted that exile and being cut off from Ruby was going to be my punishment, Yang was starting to get involved with the wrong kinds of crowds in Valentino, and the Council had **much** more pressing matters to deal with than review my sentence—namely, making sure that Ruby would grow up to be the next Keeper of the Grove so Soul Eaters won’t end up destroying all of Avalon.

“And that”--Taiyang blew his nose on a tissue--”is the Shit That Went Down.”

“**Holy crap!**” Winter wailed, Eluna pressed up to her face to try and stem the flow of tears and snot. “And I thought our family situation was **fucked up**!”

“That is one of the **saddest**, most **horrific**, and **tragic** stories I have **ever** heard in my entire life!” Weiss cried in-between blowing her nose and wiping her eyes with tissues, Penny handing her fresh ones as she took away the used ones.  

Taiyang chuckled weakly through his own choked sobs. “Told you it was one of **those** stories…”

Eventually, they stopped crying, Penny got a new box of tissues to replace the empty one, and Weiss used her powers to siphon all the fresh tears and snot out of the Eluna plushie before setting the accumulated ball on fire.

“Is this what relationships for Keepers are like…?” Winter asked as Weiss blew the smoke out the window. “**Sweet Shepherd**, why would **anyone** put themselves through this much pain?”

Taiyang smiled. “Same reason as anyone else trying a relationship: because they think it’s worth it. Do I wish that things could have gone **way** better, that I had made the right decisions, and that I just got together with Summer in the first place?

“Hell yes.

“But if someone offered me a time machine to go back to that moment where I met Summer and live my life all over again, even if it meant having to do all the decisions that lead to The Shit Going Down, I’d do it in a **heartbeat** just for the good parts.

“Keepers are one-of-a-kind in a lot of ways, you know? I’ve never met someone like Summer, and never will again, and no one will ever come **close** to how it was like being with her. Not every person the Keeper falls for or falls for them work out—Summer had **plenty** of exes before she was with me, and apparently I wasn’t the first person she’d ever ‘taken home with her.’”

He turned to Weiss. “But if you think you can handle it: go for it. I **promise** you won’t regret it.”

Taiyang got up. “Now, who wants chocolate ice cream? The Earth-Fist is great for making those, as
it turns out!”

Weiss and Winter both raised their hands.
After Winter and Weiss smothered their sadness in delicious frozen dairy product, Taiyang left to go cook dinner ready for everyone, while Winter laid down in her nest, cuddling Eluna while Penny pulled out and placed as many of her plushies as she could around and top of her.

“Are you going to be alright, Winter?” Weiss asked as she sat next to her.

“No, not for a long, long time…” Winter replied as she stared up at the ceiling, eyes still red. “I just need to lie down for a while. Feel free to join me! … Actually, please do…”

Weiss frowned. “Sorry, sis, I think I need to get rid of my excess magic first…” she muttered as she looked at her gloved hand. “It’s starting to hurt.”

“Then can we have a sleepover later like we did last time?”

Weiss smiled. “I was already planning to.”

Winter smiled back. “I’ll see you later, Weiss.”

“See you later, Winter.”

“Would you like me to join you in case another incident occurs with your powers?” Penny asked as she opened a new crate of plushies.

Weiss shook her head. “I’ll just take a few soul stones and anti-magic grenades, thanks…”

Penny opened a compartment in her chest and handed them to Weiss, then back to her and Ruby’s room she went to collect Myrtenaster and the rest of her weaver’s armour.

It was strange how it could the room was almost exactly as she’d left it—warmly lit from the sun pouring in through the windows, her and Ruby’s piles of belongings scattered about everywhere in semi-organized chaos, that familiar smell of earth, mud, animals, and chocolate chip cookies—yet feel so different even if she was only gone for a day-and-a-half.

(Though be fair, it was a very long, eventful day-and-a-half.)

It used to be that just coming in through the door made Weiss relaxed and happy, as it was usually the end of another day of learning, training, and working; getting some much needed sleep and respite from whatever was going wrong in her life at the time; and time alone with Ruby, be they their more intimate moments, or just hanging out and relaxing.

But now it just made her feel… afraid? Sad? Angry? Regretful? Confused? She didn’t know what exactly, but she it caused than same aching feeling in her chest back in Abner’s holding cell.

As she left the room, she saw the Summer plushie sitting in Ruby’s nest.

Her words echoed in her head: “… Can I borrow her when I’m sad?”

How did Ruby react, after she left Weiss’ cell and went out of Abner’s lab, back to Keeper’s Hollow? Weiss knew from experience how good you could get at maintaining a facade, never letting other people know what it was you were feeling, holding them back and acting like nothing was wrong until you could let go in private, if the emotions hadn’t faded in the meanwhile.
She was interrupted by her hand aching—the feeling was starting to go from “muzzled snout” to “choke-chain being pulled far too hard.”

Weiss closed the door behind her, massaged her hand as she headed to the training grounds.

Weiss stood in front of the Punching Rock, its surface scarred by fresh blade marks and new, fist-sized dents since the last time she had trained there.

She flicked her gauntlet’s safety switch off, cried out and clutched her wrist as thick clouds of frost burst out from her hand. It didn’t freeze her skin thanks to her equipment, but her whole arm still ached and throbbed, like she had been sleeping on it wrong the whole night.

She thrust her gloved hand out to the Rock, a tiny blizzard erupting from her fingers and forming a several feet-thick sheet of ice over it. Once the magical pins and needles sensation started to fade, Weiss pulled out Myrtenaster, and set to work hacking and tearing it apart with barrages of icicles, beams of high pressure water, or slashes with her sword, magic flying out of the blade and lashing and slicing the ice like whips.

It started to cracked and break apart, in clouds of frost, rains of sharp shards, or giant chunks falling off and landing to the ground with heavy thuds. And when she could almost see the bedrock underneath once more, she summoned a new blizzard, and did it all over again.

The estimated cost of her spells hadn’t changed in the slightest, but her mana bar had doubled in size, and every spell was exponentially more powerful than it ever was before—as if all this time, something had been holding her back, and it only chose to break now.

Weiss wasn’t too bothered—it wasn’t as if the problems in her life had ever decided to be courteous and come one-at-a-time, waiting for one issue to be solved before the next arrived. “When it rains, it pours...” she muttered as she raised Myrtenaster up, magic spiraling out of the tip and turning into a giant, localized storm.

*Boom!*

It began to rain all over the training grounds, drops crashing on the frozen face of the Rock, the dirt turning into mud, and Weiss feet sinking into the ever growing muck. She stood there for a while, watching the ice rapidly crack and melt, feeling the rain pelt her body, drops pouring over her mask’s optics and the mist rising up from the ground clouding her vision.

Then she raised Myrtenaster up, and whirled it around in the air once more.

The clouds swirled around as they should have, but none of them broke apart, or rushed back into her sword.

Weiss scowled. “Okay, that’s enough! You can stop now!”

It kept on raining.

Weiss cast a dispel “bubble” at the clouds. It exploded, and the storm weakened for a moment, before it resumed pouring.

Weiss groaned. “I’m your *weaver!* I *made* you! You can’t just turn on me like this!”

*Splash!*
A concentrated burst of water hit Weiss in the face, she growled as she wiped it off with her gloved hand. She grabbed one of the anti-magic grenades on her belt, pulled the pin, and tossed it straight into the heart of the storm.

Whoom.

A wave of purple energy erupted from the grenade, the clouds shriveling up and rapidly dissipating back into the air as pure magic. The sky over the training grounds was still foggy and grim, and it had done nothing for the mud or the mist, but at least it wasn’t raining any more.

Weiss flicked the safety of her gauntlet back on, slogged through the mud and to the fountain on the side. She washed off the worst of the muck, before she pulled her mask and hood off, and sat down to meditate.

“Attune yourself to how you feel at that very moment,” Glynda had said, and right now, she was pretty sure she was feeling pissed, angry, and frustrated. But the longer she spent sitting under the waterfall, she felt those feelings drain away, new ones pouring in and making her feel depressed, lonely, and hurt.

Weiss sighed, feeling her eyes sting as her body tried to shed tears she didn’t have, not after earlier.

“Excuse me, Weiss?”

Weiss opened her eyes and mouth, flailed and sputtered as water poured right into them. She leaned out of the waterfall, blinked her vision clear and spat until her mouth was empty. She looked up, and saw Pyrrha standing a polite distance in front of her, wearing a simple red dress that had the sleeves cut off, her skirt and ankles covered in mud.

“Yes…?” Weiss asked.

“You form is off,” Pyrrha said. “Your shoulders are tensed, and you should really be trying to keep them relaxed.”

Weiss blinked. “How do you know how water weaver’s meditate?”

“It’s almost exactly like Misogi, from the Old World,” Pyrrha explained. “And before you ask: I learned that on a trip to Solaris, where I lived in a Shinto monastery in the mountains for a few months.”

“I, uh… thank you.”

Pyrrha smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Weiss paused for a moment. “Do you mind if I ask what you’re doing here?”

“I was planning on doing some training then meditation myself,” Pyrrha replied. “It’s how I relax, seeing as praying, reading Piper’s Logs, or seeking guidance from a custodian or a steward never really did it for me.”

Weiss blinked. “That’s, ah…”

“Surprising?” Pyrrha offered. “Ironic? Not at all what you expected from the direct descendant of the original Holy Shepherd, and one of the highest leaders of the Church itself?”

Weiss paused. “… Yes, that.”
“I can hold it off if you need me to help make sure your form is correct,” Pyrrha said. “Or if you need my help for anything else—it’s also what I’m doing here.”

Weiss smiled. “As the Holy Shepherd, swooping in to protect and comfort those in need?”

Pyrrha frowned. “As just Pyrrha, who would like to be your friend, if you don’t mind...” she smiled. “I can still offer counseling and advice, though.”

Weiss offered her bare hand. “Then I’ll take the second.”

Pyrrha took it, and effortlessly pulled Weiss up in spite of the deep mud she was standing in. Weiss paused as she found herself standing right in front of Pyrrha, feeling the strength and firmness of her grip, seeing how defined the muscles were all over her arms, the hints at much the same for the rest of her body.

She wasn’t exactly on Ruby’s level, but it was like the difference between 3rd and 1st placers at the Summit Games—a difference of just a few seconds, repetitions, or pounds.

Pyrrha smiled. “Like I said: training and meditation,” she said as she let go of her hand.

Weiss blushed and nodded as she turned around and picked her mask up from the side of the fountain, and clipped it to her belt. “Right...”

For all the mud, the two of them ended up perching on one of the giant roots of a tree deeper in the swamp.

Pyrrha climbed on first, then helped pull Weiss up; they stopped and enjoyed the scenery for a while, watching and listen to all the wildlife rushing back to their homes, or fitting in as much activity as they could before the day ended and night began.

“Would you like to tell me what’s eating at you?” Pyrrha asked. “Or would you like to just chat for a while?”

“The first,” Weiss replied.

Pyrrha placed her hands in her lap and smiled. “Then I’m ready to listen.”

“Have you learned about the big secret of the Keepers and their mates already?”

Pyrrha nodded. “Qrow explained it to the rest of us, after he got out of Winter’s cell.”

Weiss looked out to the water. “Then you know what’s my problem right now...”

“How do you feel about it?”

“That it’s fucked up, and it’s even more fucked up that no one ever bothered to tell me earlier—not even Ruby...” Weiss frowned, her voice began trembling. “I thought after all we’d been through, how much she knows I hate the Council keeping all their secrets, her commitment to being honest, she’d tell me something like this before we got together, before everything that just happened, before circumstances were forcing her to spill it...”

“I mean, isn’t this the most messed up thing you’ve ever heard?! Who would willingly start a family with someone knowing full well that their children are going to have the fate of the realm thrust on their shoulders from birth, and they wouldn’t have a choice in the matter?!”
Pyrrha smiled. “It’s not, actually considering it’s almost exactly the same as what happened with me and my parents—though I suppose ‘Head of State of Avalon’s Oldest and Largest Religion/Government,’ isn’t as impressive as ‘Slayer of Soul Eaters and Other Realm-Threatening Horrors.’

Weiss blinked. “Oh… right.” She paused. “… Sorry…”

Pyrrha chuckled. “It’s fine.”

It was quiet for a while, just the sounds of birds singing, frogs croaking, and the rustling of bushes and branches.

“… How do you deal with it…?” Weiss asked. “Having all this responsibility thrust on you just because of who your parents were, what you are because of them?”

“The only thing I could do: figure out what I can and want to do about it.

“I could have chosen to go along with the Stewards’ plan, played along with their grooming me from day one to be the perfect spokesperson and figurehead, do everything they asked me to do:

“Endorse candidates I know will stop being ‘for the people’ as soon as they get the position and start being ‘for themselves’; using my pardoning powers to save a very generous tither from going to jail for corruption, preferably before the investigators discover how many Church officials were in on it; smile and tell right to the faces of people who don’t know any better that everything the Stewards do is for the greater good, that the funding for their food bank is getting cut for some much more pressing need that has even more dire consequences for all of us.

“… Or I could go with what my conscience was saying, follow the standards my mother, her father, and our ancestor Piorina Nikos stood by:

“Refuse to give my blessing to any candidate, tell people to vote for who they think should lead them, not who their Church official of choice says; not sign the pardon, let the Peacekeepers find out just where those misled funds were going and who were getting cuts to keep it undercover; smile, and tell those same people that no, your funding will not be cut, and I will fight for your right to eat proper food—especially if the money that would have gone to them would put more in the pockets of people who’ve already lined the inside of their clothes with 1,000 Uroch bills with pure etherite thread for the stitching.

Pyrrha looked at Weiss and smiled. “Destiny isn’t inherently a bad thing.

“It’s good to have something to live up to, motivation to aim high and fly higher, something that can help give you direction, as Piper knows a LOT of us would really like someone to tell us exactly what we should be doing with our lives!

“But you should always remember that it isn’t inevitable, that you don’t have to follow it, and that you can always break away and forge your own path.”

She looked out to the water, got a far-off look in her eyes. “Especially when that legacy turns from something to keep a ragtag fleet of outcasts, refugees, and ex-convicts from killing each other, improve everyone’s lives, and become their guide for a better life in the New World, into something that drives them apart all over again, that ruins entire generations of their descendants for the benefit of a select few, that becomes the very thing they fled the Old World for in the first place...”

All was silent for a while once more as Pyrrha hung her head, eyes turned to the water.
“Are the problems in the Church really that bad…?” Weiss asked.

Pyrrha sighed as she looked up. “Worse. As it was from the time when Valentino was its head, the Sacred Stewards are VERY good at keeping awful secrets secrets, and putting a positive spin on anything that leaks out, no matter how terrible.

“The Holy Shepherd had its time, but it is long past. It’s why I’m not planning on going back to the Nexus any time soon—preferably, forever.”

Weiss frowned. “Are you sure this is a good idea? Your defection’s already causing a LOT of chaos all over Avalon.”

Pyrrha shrugged. “Only time will tell! But what I do know is that I may still be supporting something I don’t fully agree with, but at least here, I can be just Pyrrha Nikos—no forced appearances at public events and major holidays, no PR teams drilling me on exactly how to act and talk, no one forcing me to keep a giant charade alive, even if it kills me inside to gives so many people so much false hope.

“Sure, the Council is still a manipulative and secretive government who’s morally questionable at best, but at least they’re honest about it, and try to be constructive about how they shape the world around them to their benefit—after all, where would we all be, if it weren’t for the ‘groundbreaking innovations’ of ‘our’ great scientists during the Neo-Renaissance…?” she said, pulling out her Fae-made comm-crystal before idly turning it in her hands.

“The Fae still aren’t the company I’d keep if I had the choice, but it wasn’t as if Piper didn’t do great things in spite of who she had for her crew, the people she had to rely on when it was all hands on deck.

“But at the very least, the Council is offering me an out, and unlike the Stewards, I feel I can trust their word on that.” She paused and blushed. “… That I can be with Penny without people judging me is also nice.”

“Do you really think you two could work out?” Weiss asked. “I’m asking honestly here, to be clear.”

Pyrrha shrugged again. “I don’t know, but I’m willing to find out!” She smiled at Weiss. “You know, I’ve always had a problem with people saying they ‘we just knew we were perfect for each other’ as if they could see in the future, like there’s someone out there for whom you will magically, effortlessly click with just you, like those model-specific cables they had for computers in the Old World, before everything went completely wireless.

“But to quote your grandfather: ‘What we should really be saying is “I knew I was willing to take a risk, and make it work.”’”

She looked at Weiss. “I suppose that’s what you should be asking yourself, with you and Ruby: are you willing to take the risk, see if you can make it work? If you can be with her in spite of you and your children being roped into the thick of a millennium-old institution? If, like my parents and all my ancestors before me, being in a relationship and starting a family with that specific person would all be worth it?”

Weiss looked down. “I don’t know...”

Pyrrha patted her on the shoulder. “You’ll figure it out eventually—your meditation should help greatly, as it did with mine.”

“Could you help me do it right, then?” Weiss asked.
Pyrrha smiled. “Of course.”

Pyrrha jumped down, caught Weiss, and the two headed back to the training grounds and to the fountain.

Weiss’ form was still off and she was clearly a long, long way from being able to sit perfectly still like the senior weavers, but it was a lot less unpleasant with Pyrrha helping her out.
Chapter 86

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Weiss meditated until night fell, her stomach started rumbling, and Taiyang had sent her and Pyrrha messages telling them that dinner was ready, and “Nora said she’ll try her best to leave some sweet potato fries for you guys, but she isn’t making any promises.”

Pyrrha helped pull her up again, this time because her legs had fallen asleep from how long she’d tried and failed to stay perfectly still. “Are you going to be alright?” she asked as Weiss tried to walk on her own.

“I’ll be fine!” Weiss replied as she winced with every step. “It’s just pins and needles, I’ve had worse!”

“Well don’t overexert yourself!” Pyrrha said. “All the progress you make in one hard day of working out and pushing the limit will all go to waste if you spend the next few days unable to move.”

Weiss cringed. “I know, but thanks for the reminder. Are you going to head back to the house, too?” she asked as she thumbed to the lights of Keeper’s Hollow off in the distance.

Pyrrha shook her head. “Not ideal to workout and build an appetite after you already ate,” she replied.

Weiss nodded. “Weights are in the shed over there,” she said, pointing to it. “Don’t worry about breaking anything: Fae creations were made to last.”

Pyrrha chuckled. “So I’ve seen. Good night, Weiss.”

“Night, Pyrrha,” Weiss replied, before she hobbled on back to the house.

Dinner was held outside, sitting on blankets and eating off banana leaves like the barbecue a little over a week ago.

Nora, Ren, Ruby, Yang, and Penny were all sitting together, helping Jaune with his Actaeon; from how most of them were trying hard not to laugh at whatever he said, Weiss figured it wasn’t going well. Blake and Qrow quietly kept to their own side, hungrily tearing through a giant pile of meat. On the other side, Winter bonded with Zwei, alternately petting him and summoning her elementals for him to play with, chief among them Idun.

Taiyang presided over it all in the center, standing over a giant cauldron full of bubbling oil, a massive pan of breadcrumbs and cut up ingredients beside him, and a rope fence around all of that. He looked up from the pot, waved with a gloved hand as the other manned an extra long pair of tongs. She couldn’t see his grin underneath the protective mask, but like Ruby, it was just too big and radiant to ever be hidden.

“Hey Weiss!” he called out as he turned over some food in the pot. “We ran out of sweet potatoes a while back, but we still got a little bit of everything else! Anything you want in particular?”

Weiss shook her head. “I’ll just take whatever.”

He nodded. “Got it! Just sit down someplace, and I’ll bring it over in fifteen minutes or so. Don’t
step into the danger zone—hot grease splatters suck a whole lot more when you’re using Valley oil!”

Weiss eyed the pot, bubbling like crazy with a roaring fire underneath it. “I’m surprised you’re deep frying dinner, considering what got you in the hospital in the first place,” she said, eyeing the “bandages” still pulsing and wrapped around his arms.

Taiyang laughed. “What can I say? I missed Valley-style fried foods! Besides, just because you can end up getting hurt doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do something—what’s life without a little danger and risk?”

Boom.

Taiyang shielded his face as a bubble of oil exploded. Weiss jumped back and made an ice shield.

“Just gotta make sure you’re prepared for it,” he said as he put his arm down, pointed at the grease stain on his apron, and the greasy patch of grass well within the rope fence.

Weiss dispelled the ice. “Right...”

“By the way, is Pyrrha coming back any time soon? Freshness charms be damned, you gotta have fried stuff fresh out of the pot!”

Weiss shook her head. “She’s training; might be an hour till she gets back.”

“Ah well, guess I’ll just restart the fire later,” Taiyang said as he started fishing food out of the pot and set them to the side to drain.

Weiss turned around and looked for someplace to sit.

Ruby caught sight of her, and suddenly stopped laughing; Yang did, too, and gave her a look that said it’d be best if she not join them. She turned to where Winter was, decided not to as she saw Zwei and her elementals showering her with wet, slobbery affection, physical or magical. She turned to Qrow and Blake, the latter’s ears perked and she waved her over.

“Hey,” Weiss said as she sat down.

“Hi,” Blake said in-between bites of a porkchop.

“Sup, princess,” Qrow said as he munched on a giant drumstick.

Then, the three of them settled down for a wordlessly, mutually agreed upon silence.

Dinner was eaten, Jaune gave up on learning Actaeon for the moment, and Winter finally ran out of magic to sustain her elementals, Idun and the others sadly nuzzling and waving goodbye to Zwei before they returned to their soul stones or dissipated into the air.

Taiyang stayed behind to clean up while waiting for Pyrrha to come back. “I just got my arms out of that tank this afternoon, let me stretch them out some more; I’ll get sick of doing chores eventually, don’t worry,” he said when a few of the others had protested.

“Well, looks like it’s time to hit the hay!” Yang said as she stood up and headed to the house. “Get it? Because most of you guys are sleeping in the barn?”

Weiss and Blake groaned.
Nora snorted. “Hah! ’Hay,’ that’s great! Seriously, though, I am beat! Don’t know about the rest of you, but I am ready to get off the black moss tea and into the dreamscape! These past few days have felt like the longest multi-episode season finale ever!” she said as she walked into the barn.

Ren nodded as he followed after her. “Even for the Valley’s standards, this has been a lot...”

“Or the Queensguard’s!” Winter said as Zwei handed her a jar of dry bath. “I’ll just go get rid of the dog and elemental slobber smell before I head inside...”

“You don’t have to, you know!” Nora called out as she went up the stairs. “We’re all used to way worse smells!”

“I’d rather it not spread to my plushies, thank you,” Winter said as she headed off to a secluded area. “My Eluna already seems to permanently smell of tears and snot...”

“And despair!” Nora added. “There’s a LOT of that too!”

“What does despair even smell like?” Weiss asked.

“Like a combination of helplessness, terror, and regret,” Ren replied.

Weiss looked at him, before she shook her head and began to head inside, too.

“Hey Weiss?”

Weiss froze. She slowly turned around. “Y-Yes, Ruby...?” she asked as she forced a smile on her face.

Ruby hesitated for a moment. “Can we talk for a while? Alone? It’s really important stuff...”

“Can it wait till morning?”

Ruby shook her head. “It’s about your parole. Elder Goodwitch said I should tell you ASAP because she won’t have much time for anything once the Council kicks the fight against the Heralds into high gear.

“I also really want to talk to you about some other important stuff.”

Weiss reluctantly. “Uh, sure... where to?”

“Well, I’d say my room, but Yang’s sleeping over tonight, and I was going to say the barn, but then your sister might make that difficult, so you mind if we take a boat out to the water?”

Winter and Yang looked back from where they were, eyes wide in alarm.

Nora ran down the stairs and peered over the side. “Oooh, snap, I see dramatic build-up to a highly emotionally-charged scene that’s going to change everything!”

Weiss ignored her. “Could you let me change first? My clothes are all muddy.”

Ruby nodded. “Sure! I’ll just be waiting by the Tube station”

Ruby left the Hollow, Weiss headed back to the house to change. She tensed up as she neared Yang.

Yang raised her finger at her. “Just so you know: I promised Ruby I wouldn’t say or do anything about whatever you two are going to talk about, so say whatever you need to say. You’re safe—for
now.”

Weiss nodded, before she headed up to the house, wondering just what exactly was in store this time...

The original waterway leading to Keeper’s Hollow had rarely been used ever since the Tubes were invented; save for large-scale construction work, clean-up for a week after the Flood, or the system suffering a catastrophic break-down, few ever took a boat out there, and rarely the whole distance to the second most remote residential areas in the Bastion.

It was a very different kind of swamp out there, the only signs of Fae civilization being the roots and plants that had been sawed off or hacked back to keep the way mostly clear, and the signs pointing the way to Keeper’s Hollow and back. Moonlight streamed in from the breaks in the canopy; frogs and birds sang their songs; ripples traveled over the surface of the water as Ruby rowed at a slow, steady pace.

It was a peaceful, beautiful scene, marred only by the tension between them, growing ever worse as the minutes passed.

They hit the halfway point, Ruby pulled up the oars. Weiss kept on looking over the side of the boat, staring at the water, the trees, the animals that she could see. They drifted along in silence, until the tension grew too much.

“You don’t have to stay here in the Valley any more,” Ruby said.

Weiss blinked, turned to her. “Pardon…?”

“You don’t have to stay here in the Valley any more,” Ruby repeated. “I talked with Elder Goodwitch, and her secretaries are getting the paperwork ready so they can transfer you to Arethusa—it’s our biggest Fae settlement in Sekhmet. It might take a week or two because of everything else going on, and changing your identities since your family’s permanently banned there ever since the Scourge, and all.”

Weiss stared at her.

“You can take Winter with you!” Ruby added quickly. “And it’s not all hot, and dry, and full of sand like Zeal—Arethusa’s actually underground, smack dab in the middle of this HUGE oasis; it’s like an island paradise complete with a giant ocean inside a cave, and there’s plants, trees, and flowers everywhere!

“I’ve only seen holos of it, but they say it’s really nice! Elder Goodwitch even says she knows a senior water weaver who’d love to take you both on and train you.”

Weiss blinked. “Are you… are you getting rid of me...?”

“Well, not getting rid of you, exactly, since we won’t go through with the transfer unless you want to.” Ruby paused. “Do you, you know, want to move? Because—well, honestly I really don’t want you to, but it’s your choice in the end, and--”

“No."

Ruby paused. “Sorry, what was that?”

“No!” Weiss cried. “I’m not leaving the Valley! Ruby, in case you haven’t noticed as I have, all of
my attempts at fleeing from my problems in life have ended *catastrophically*, because it only ever seems to end with in me running smack dab into new ones that can turn out to be even worse than what I had in the first place!

“That things turned out so well for me in the Valley was only because I lucked out and ran into you, and not a Soul Eater or whatever the hell else is lurking out there that needs Keepers like you around!”

Ruby blinked, before her eyes brightened. “So you’re staying…?”

Weiss nodded. “Yes. I’m staying. My *complete* lack of desire to find out what sort of new problems I might run into in a place like Sekhmet aside, I’ve started to make a life for myself here, and most importantly, I don’t want to leave you guys behind here!”

“You guys are my friends!” she looked down. “… And I’ve… never really had those…”

Ruby put her hand on Weiss shoulder and smiled. “When we get back, I’ll go call Elder Goodwitch’s secretaries and tell them you’re staying.”

Weiss looked up and smiled back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Ruby said as he pulled her hand back.

There was another long moment of silence, their smiles fading as the tension from earlier returned.

“So… since you’re staying and all… can I ask you a really personal question? About us…?”

Weiss frowned. “I… uh… sure.”

“Do you still like me, Weiss?”

Weiss blinked. “I…” she looked down and sighed. “I still don’t know. I’m sorry.”

Ruby smiled. “Don’t be.” She blushed. “But… you know, do you want to try and find out? Same way we did the first time?”

Weiss stared at her, her cheeks burning red.

Ruby began to sweat. “I mean, it’s *totally* okay if you don’t want to and I can understand that *completely*, but you know, the last time we did this in the honey dream it was really *awful* though I couldn’t blame you, but still I *really* don’t want that to be the last kiss we ever--”

“Ruby?”

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

Ruby did.

Weiss reached out with her bare hand, cupped Ruby’s cheek as she slowly brought her lips up to hers. Sweat began to drip down her forehead, her fingers trembled, and she could feel her gloved hand aching as the runes on her gauntlet clamped down on her magic.

Ruby smiled. “We don’t have to if you don’t want to, you know…”
“I do!” Weiss cried. “I’m just… nervous, is all!”

“Want me to meet you half-way?”

“No!” Weiss barked. “You just… stay there, because I want to be 100% sure I 100% want to kiss you!”

Ruby chuckled. “Okay then…” she said as she closed her eyes and puckered up.

Weiss sucked in a breath; her whole body was trembling, sweat was pouring down all over skin, she could feel her gauntlet start to reach its limit as her magic only kept on building up.

Did she really want to do this?

Did she really want to risk finding out that she still loved Ruby?

Did she really want that fact affecting her decisions from then on out, prevent her from ever playing it safe and just assuming that she didn’t love Ruby, and then the both of them could easily move on?

Then, one of Nicholas Schnee’s most famous quotes came to mind:

“You know what? Fuck it.”

Weiss surged forward and kissed Ruby.

A lot of the romance novels she had read described a great kiss as “explosive.” In her case, it wasn’t figurative, as she could feel all of the magic body going crazy, every ounce of power inside her supercharged, and eager to escape wherever and whenever, damn the consequences.

Weiss whimpered, trembling, shaking, about to pull away before she froze their lips together again or worse.

Then Ruby took her gloved hand into hers, intertwined her fingers with hers, and pressed her palm right up to the leather. Without thinking, all that magic surged from Weiss’ body and into Ruby, ice blue tendrils arcing from her gauntlet like a blast from a fire hose, turning into a radiant silver just before they dove into the back of Ruby’s hand.

And just like that, Weiss felt completely calm, like a sea after a violent storm, the waves settling down until the surface was almost completely still. Then she felt something humming, singing with immense power, stirring the waters all over again but in a good way:

Her magic, but resonating in perfect harmony with something much, much greater.

Ruby pulled away, eyes wide open. “Holy shit!” she whispered as she let go of Weiss’ hand. “Weiss, you okay…?!?”

Weiss responded by throwing herself at her, wrapping her arms around her back, pulling their bodies tight against each other as she locked lips with her once more.

She felt Ruby’s lips turn from hard like rock to soft like clay in an instant, moulding to the shape of Weiss’ mouth as she kissed back. She shivered as she felt Ruby’s muscles tensing and rippling under her clothes, more powerful than ever as every fiber of her body was infused with magic—Weiss’ magic.

Ruby sucked on her bottom lip, wrapped her arms around Weiss’ waist and made it impossible for her to pull away. Not that she wanted to—no, she wanted more, more of Ruby, find out just what
she could do to her with all that strength when she didn’t pull back, while all her magic coursing through her system made every last touch and kiss all the more intense, causing all sorts of strange, interesting reactions that didn’t even come close to anything she’d ever felt before.

Weiss moaned, a low, guttural sound in her throat, telling Ruby exactly what she wanted without saying a single word. But still, she broke the kiss, straddled Ruby’s lap, and put her hands on her chest and gently pushed her back, just in case she didn’t get it.

There was a mischievous, playful look in Ruby’s eyes as she tilted back… and proceeded to lose balance, fall right off her seat and to the back of the boat.

*Thud.*

“*Ow…!*” Ruby muttered, her neck awkwardly craned for her horns catching on the edge.

Weiss’ eyes widened in horror. “*Oh my gosh*—are you okay?!” she cried. “I’m so sorry, I don’t know what—!”

“*Weiss?*”

“*Yes…?*”

“Could you help me up…?”

Weiss blinked, before she did, then quickly retreated to the other seat further up the boat, turned away from Ruby, her whole body shaking, and her face buried in her hands—it looked and felt like it was melting for how hard she was blushing, and all the sweat pouring down her skin.

Ruby sat back down on her seat and smiled. “Heh…” she as she rubbed the back of her neck. “I’m guessing that’s a ‘Yes, you still like me’…?”

Weiss didn’t reply.

“*Should I start rowing back to Keeper’s Hollow?*”

Weiss looked back at her and hurriedly shook her head, before she buried it in her hands once more.

Ruby giggled as she settled down and got comfortable. “Take your time, Weiss… I can wait.”

Chapter End Notes

For those curious, yes, this scene will get an alternate version when the main story ends and I begin the “Sexy Animal Noise” spin-offs.
They drifted along the water for half-an-hour, Ruby’s eyes closed as she listened to the sounds of the swamp around them, Weiss waiting for all the excess blood to leave her cheeks, her heart to calm down, and for her to stop feeling all warm, lightheaded, and tingly inside—figuratively and literally, as she could still feel her magic resonating, making her whole body feel like a tuning fork that had yet to stop ringing.

She debated speeding up the process by jumping into the water, but the shadows of creatures and lush vegetation under the surface convinced her otherwise.

Eventually, her body relaxed, the feelings passed, and Weiss felt like she could think straight again. She took a deep breath, let it go slowly, before she mopped up the dried sweat off her face with her magic. She rehearsed what she was going to say in her head, ran it through several times over, refining it, editing it, and even picking out which parts of it she would emphasize, much like how Actaeon words got their many, many contextual alternatives.

She turned around to face Ruby, her expression confident. “Ruby?” she asked.

Ruby opened her eyes, blinking for a few moments as her eyes readjusted to the moonlight. She smiled. “Yeah, Weiss?”

Weiss stared at her her mouth slowly falling open as her eloquent, well-constructed, and absolutely perfect speech went flying out the window.

“I… uh…”

“Do you need more time?”

Weiss sighed. “Screw it, I’ll just wing it,” she thought, using Nick’s second favourite quote. She took a deep breath, and tried again.

“Ruby…? You are the most confusing person—folk—Fae—hybrid—whatever!—that I have ever met in my entire life.

“You start out by terrifying the living crap out of me, making me fear for my own life whose span I assumed to have been vastly shortened, made worse by your well-meaning but misguided plan of breaking into my room every other night to try and stop my father’s expeditions peacefully. Not to mention, you are also directly responsible for getting me my older sister back and having her taken away from me again when you drove her to a nervous breakdown.”

Ruby was about to speak, before Weiss held up her hand and stopped her.

“Then, after I make the mistake of thinking that helping you kidnap me and hold myself for ransom would finally work unlike your plans, fake my own death, and essentially trap myself here in the Fae territories forevermore, you end up being the most caring, friendly, and supportive person that I have ever met in my entire life, someone who seems completely devoid of any sort of selfish motive whatsoever, and has been wholeheartedly helping me out with my numerous problems simply because I was a completely useless teenage girl way in over-head in an alien world.

“You’ve made me happy. You’ve made me comfortable. You’ve helped me turn this new life of mine into something great.
“But, intentionally or not, you have also caused me no shortage of grief and distress in a variety of ways; incited new, confusing feelings inside of me; and have been instrumental to my finding out some things about myself and this world that I’m not entirely comfortable with, among them the fact that apparently one of my ancestors was hiding a pair of animal ears and a tail from the rest of us!

“It is a surprise to me still that I fell in love with you, even though it’s clear that you’re capable of bringing out the worst, most recklessly impulsive and emotional side of me. It’s even more of a surprise that after everything that’s happened, a lot of time to think about it, and talking it through with the others…

“… I still love you.”

Ruby’s eyes brightened. Weiss held her hand up again.

“I love how you try to be completely honest and up front as much as possible. I love how you’re determined to do the right thing even if how you go about that can be questionable at best. I love how you’re warm, friendly, and caring. And I’ll admit, I really, really love the things you make me do and feel when we…” Weiss blushed and struggled for a moment, before she made a poor attempt at a sexy animal noise.

Ruby sniggered. “Sorry.”

Weiss ignored her. “But however much I love you, I’ve seen enough or been in plenty of relationships that relied just on that, and things consequently didn’t work out, or outright crashed and burned in top-ten-headline fashion because love isn’t the only thing that a relationship needs to work.

“There’s things like honesty and trust, which I found you weren’t giving me as much as I needed from you. So now, I’m going to ask you this:

“Ruby, why didn’t you tell me about the Keepers and their mates sooner?”

Ruby sighed, and hung her head, before she looked Weiss in the eyes, and said, “I didn’t want us to end up like mom and dad. I was afraid if I told you right away like she did, it’d just end up with you freaking out and not wanting to have anything to do with me, period.

“I was scared. And it wasn’t about you getting together with some other Fae. ‘Scared’ like how you would react, how you would feel about me before you even got to know me past being the ‘super scary evil psycho’ Keeper of the Grove, how that’d just make your life even more confusing and full of problems than it already was!

“Please, Weiss: believe me when I say that I really was going to tell you all about this!”

“And just when were you planning on doing that?”

“Just after the Eve, too, when we got back. I… didn’t want to ruin it, you know? I just wanted us to have just one date, enjoy ourselves with our friends and my family, even if the next day we probably wouldn’t be together anymore.”

Ruby sighed, and hung her head again. “Guess I didn’t really learn from all those holos about keeping secrets from people you like, huh…?”

Weiss scowled. “No, no you did not! Couldn’t you have told me earlier? Before we all got those tickets to Candela, and fell right for the Heralds’ trap?”

Ruby looked sheepish. “This sounds really bad, but I really did just keep forgetting to because of
everything else going on at the time! I was hoping to slip it in when things quieted down, but then things just kept happening one after the other:

“First you were all sad and hopeless in your first night in the Valley, and the day after, too, when you first run through the Job Gauntlet; then you were dead tired or brain-fried from all the training we were putting you through to get your strength up, learn Nivian, and some useful skills; then, we were all busy teaching you and having fun with the Rune Rangers honey dream; then Yang told me about the tickets to the Eve of the Ether; then we were pawning Eluna and trying to make enough money to get her back; then we discovered you’re a weaver after you made that moonshine and killed Uncle Qrow with it; then you were busy with weaver training and learning alchemy so you don’t end up blowing yourself or everyone else up with your powers; then it was already Eve of the Ether, and we were making our costumes and getting ready; then the Heralds attacked us at Candela; then your sister attacked us here at the Valley…”

Ruby threw her arms up in the air. “… This last month and a half’s just been crazy, is what I’m saying! I’m surprised we even got time to have this conversation, because I keep expecting something new to come up and throw even more problems on you, and I didn’t want to add to the pile!

“It’s not like you can just go, ‘Oh, hey, I know you’re all tired and busy wrapping your head around your new freaky magic powers and dealing with all the other problems that Fate just dumped on you all at once, but do you want to go listen to me talk about how half of my ancestors have been human or mostly-human Fae hybrids because we Keepers can only make more of us with them, and we’re important because we’re the only thing keeping Avalon from getting destroyed by realm-threatening dangers, one of which are Soul Eaters?’”

There was silence for a few moments.

“… Okay, I’ll give you that!” Weiss said. “But even though I can understand why you did it, how things ended up like this… learning all of that the way I did still fucking hurt, you know?!”

She started tearing up. “All my life, I just happen keep ending up in relationships where people just wanted to take advantage of me! I hate that—ever having a reason, real or imagined, to fear that someone doesn’t want me for me, that they’re just using me as a means to get what they’re really after!

“I thought you were different, Ruby, and I realize now that you are!” she whispered as her tears began to fall. “But it was really fucked up that I ever had a reason to think that wasn’t the case, especially when we could have avoided all this…”

Ruby frowned and reached out to her.

Weiss held up her hand, wiped her tears away with the other. “No. Stop. I don’t need you touching me and doing that thing you do where every inch of me goes crazy for you—at least not until we get some new rules, so we can avoid shit like this happening ever again!”

Ruby nodded as she pulled her hand back. “Okay, I’m listening; what did you have in mind?”

Weiss took in a deep breath, and started. “For one thing: no more secrets, from either of us, okay? If one or the both of us feel like there’s something the other should know, especially if it’s something as big as the nature of the Keepers and their mates, you tell me, or I tell you.

“I’ll understand trying to wait for a good time to say it, but no more waiting until after big events and celebrations because you don’t want to spoil them—it seems like all the worst things that have
happened so far chose those specific times of the year to ruin everything for everyone!”

Ruby nodded. “Got it.”

“Next: I want some physical distance between us, seeing as I’m pretty sure I’m not capable of temporarily breaking up with you for a year like I originally planned. All this time it’s just been the two of us almost constantly together, and I want to know if this relationship will still hold up when we aren’t.

“Winter’s planning to build a house on top of the barn, and I want to move in with her. Will you let me?”

Ruby frowned, then reluctantly nodded. “Okay… I understand… is there a third?”

“Yes, and this by far the most important, my deal-breaker: I need you to guarantee me I can back out of this relationship if it turns out we won’t work out after all, any time I desire.

“My parents’ relationship had a lot of problems, but by far the biggest one I’ve seen was how mom always felt like she couldn’t get out of it for whatever reason, and father was all too happy to use that and keep her around.

“Ther e are few things I fear more than one day finding myself looking my future child in the eyes and trying to tell her ‘E verything’s going just fine!’ with my life when it clearly isn’t!”

Ruby nodded. “Just saying: you already had that, and always will.”

“Well, it never hurts to make sure, does it…?”

Ruby pulled out her comm-crystal. “If you want, we could write this down on our comm-crystals, and have the Honours make it an official document! Then you’d have legal basis, and I’d have to break up with you if you wanted to.”

“What, like a prenuptial agreement…?” Weiss asked.

“Yes, but we’re dating, not getting married!” Weiss cried, blushing.

Ruby shrugged. “Not the first time it’s ever happened, especially with us Keepers! Look, Weiss, we Fae understand that relationships are complicated, you can’t expect someone to remember everything just like that, and it never hurts to write things down so you can point to exactly what it was that was you agreed on!

“Especially when everyone’s always at risk of getting killed or eaten by predators on a daily basis, and you really can’t ask them anymore if Tuesday was date night.”

“That’s…!” Weiss paused. “… That’s actually a pretty good idea.”

Ruby nodded. “I don’t understand why you humans don’t do this more often, especially when you’re dating more than one person.”

“I suppose we’re just crazy like that...” Weiss muttered.

“So should I write it down and tell Elder Goodwitch’s secretaries to work on that instead?” Ruby said as she activated her comm-crystal’s holo-keypad.
“Yes, but before you send it, I want to know what it is you need out of this relationship.”

Ruby nodded. “Okay, one: I want to call you my ‘girlfriend,’ and call us ‘girlfriends.’ I know I messed up with not telling you about the Keeper’s mates sooner, I can understand why you were so confused, angry, and hurt, and I really can’t blame you!

“But: I don’t want us to suddenly be ‘friends with benefits,’ or whatever it is you humans call it when two people are getting together just for”—she made a sexy animal noise. “Especially when they both know it’s a lot more than just that.”

Weiss blushed and nodded. “I can do that. What else?”

“Two”—Ruby made a sexy animal noise again. “I’m game, you’re game, there’s really no big reason why we shouldn’t at the moment, we do, okay? All the rules—being able to back out when you don’t want to; stopping to talk and explain what you want before, during, or after; no forcing one of us to do something we have said we really don’t want to—still apply.

“Look, Weiss, I REALLY like how excited and eager you can get in no time flat, but I REALLY don’t like how we never seem to get very far because something always happens to interrupt us. It’s not your fault, I get that, but still: it sucks!”

Weiss blushed harder. “We’re not going to, you know, put in the exact details of how we’re going to… do that in the contract, are we…?”

Ruby shrugged. “Not unless you don’t want to! Besides, it’s not like it’s anything new to them.”

Weiss paused. “Okay… I… I can do that, I suppose…?”

“How about we put in a renegotiation clause so you can change it later?”

Weiss nodded. “I would like that, thank you. Now is there anything else?”

Ruby’s face turned serious. “Yes, and three is my deal breaker, alright? You can’t agree to this, then I’m telling you right now, there is no way in hell we’re ever going to work out.”

Weiss nodded, and prepared to listen.

“I need to be able to kiss you, say that ‘I love you,’ call you my girlfriend, hug you, and—this the most important part—hold your hand in public and in front of the others. We can not, if there’s a good reason like either of our sisters are around or it’s just a bad time in general, but otherwise, if we’re going to call ourselves girlfriends, and we’re going to act like girlfriends, I want everyone to know we are girlfriends, okay?

“There’s a special kind of suck in having a girlfriend who won’t call you that to other people’s faces.”

Weiss closed her eyes and winced. “… I know. I’ve been there…”

“Then does that mean you’re okay with this?”

Weiss opened her eyes, and nodded. “Yes.”

Ruby smiled. “Great! That’s a really good sign that we’ll work out after all…”

She typed all of their conditions in Nivian for Weiss’ benefit. “The honours are probably going to have to call us in at the Tree of Life, so they can ask us exactly what we mean when they translate it
into Actaeon and we actually sign it,” she said as she showed it off to Weiss for editing and clarifying.

“It’s not the first time lawyers have called me up for clarification, don’t worry,” Weiss replied.

Eventually, the contract was drafted, and sent to the Tree of Life, alongside the message that Weiss was staying. They waited until they both got confirmation a few minutes later, and an appointment there for four days later.

“Never thought I’d have a contract made for dating someone…” Weiss muttered as she noted the date in her comm-crystal's planner.

“A lot of couples actually prefer it like this; it gets way more complicated and messy after you go through the unification ceremony with someone,” Ruby replied. “Anyway, is there anything else you wanted to talk about?” Ruby asked.

Weiss nodded. “Yes: what was it you were going to do earlier, before I stopped you?”

“I was going to come over and hug you. Do you still want me to?”

“Yes but…” Weiss blushed. “… Can I… sit in your lap instead?”

Ruby smiled and patted her lap. “Come here~”

Weiss blushed even harder, and did. She nuzzled up against Ruby’s chest as she wrapped her arms around her, her grip firm, strong, but not too tight as it always was.

Weiss purred. “This is nice…”

“Mhmm…” Ruby hummed.

Weiss glared at her. “Don’t think you’re off completely off the hook just yet.”

“I figured as much, don’t worry~” Ruby chirped.
“I suppose I really shouldn’t be surprised things turned out this way...” Weiss mused as she sat beside Ruby. “As it was with my grandparents, we Schnees really don’t know when to quit a good thing once we start...”

“What’s the story behind that?” Ruby asked as she began to row back to Keeper’s Hollow.

“After my grandpa to my grandma got together, they just couldn’t away from each other—or more accurately, she couldn’t. Grandpa talked and wrote a whole lot about how she always seemed to be working, scheduling, and acting as efficiently as possible so she’d have as many opportunities to be with him.

“It surprised him, everyone else on the team, and grandma says she never realized she’d act that way, too.”

“What was she like?”

Weiss smiled. “Cold. Logical. Almost constantly annoyed about something. It was why grandpa called her ‘Frosty,’ and the first time he said it, it wasn’t as a pet name. She didn’t change that much after they got together, but at least she wasn’t hostile, secretive, and defensive all the time—just most of it.”

Ruby chuckled. “At least now I know I know where you got it from!”

Weiss blushed. “Yeah… I always felt like me and Winter take after our grandparents more than we ever did our own parents.”

“You hung out with them a lot?”

Weiss sighed. “Well, both of us did, but mine was when I was too young to remember most of it; everything I know about them is from second-hand accounts, holos, or what’s left of grandpa’s journals—a lot of them got corrupted or destroyed, while he and the rest of his team were out in the Country, trying to find Candela.

“How about you: did you spend a lot of time with your grandparents?”

Ruby shook her head. “They were both dead long before even Yang was born. It’s one of the problems with Keepers: we don’t really last all that long, because eventually our bodies are going to crap out, and the Soul Eaters are just going to keep on coming.”

Weiss frowned. “How long are we talking about, exactly?”

“Well, about 40-60 years old if they don’t get killed earlier than that.”

“That’s… not very long, is it…?”

“Nope! It’s not that weird, though; watchers tend to live up to just past 60 at best, or they retire once they hit 40; all the hunting, the action, and even the echoes we absorb just become too much, and we have to quit, go into another job, or train the next generation of watchers.”

“What about the rest of the Fae?”

“If something bad doesn’t happen to you, like getting eaten by predators or getting really sick?
Probably about 70, little over 100 years at best. Even the Eldan Council is constantly shifting soon as it feels like someone’s gotten too old for the job.”

Weiss blinked. “… Oh.”

“How long do you humans tend to live, anyway?”

“250 years or so if you can afford the best healthcare we have; even the average citizen lives to about 80-110…” Weiss replied.

All was silent for a while.

“Ruby… even if we work out, we’re not going to be together for very long, are we…?”

Ruby shook her head. “Abner says he can’t back it up with science, but he says it’s probably why Keepers and their mates tend to fall in love so quickly and so hard; they’re making up for the time they do have.”

“… Ah.” Weiss looked down. “I see…”

Ruby stopped rowing, put a hand on Weiss’ thigh. “Weiss… don’t think too hard about it, okay? Just enjoy right now. That’s what water weavers try to be with the Flow, right? Never where you were, never where you will be, but always wherever you are.”

Weiss didn’t reply. “Ruby…” she whispered as she turned to her. “This is really your only shot at a serious relationship, isn’t it?”

“Well, technically no! We can still date and start families when we’re older, it’s kind of one of the first problems we solved with our genetic engineering!” Ruby looked away. “… But yeah, with how much more likely it is that we’ll be killed by something or we just conk out when we get older, and how important it is that there’s a new Keeper to replace us eventually, we really have to get it right the first time with whoever we chose as our first official mate.”

She looked back at Weiss and smiled. “So it’s a good thing we also seem to able to know who it will be, just like that.”

“But what if I’m just a fluke? You’ve dated before, surely you felt like this for other people?”

Ruby nodded. “I have.” She gently butted her forehead against Weiss, looked her right in her eyes. “But they never came anywhere close to the way it is with you.”

Ruby gave her a quick kiss on the lips, before she pulled away, and continued rowing.

Weiss blushed, before she looked out to the water, lost in her thoughts.

They returned to the Tube station, Ruby climbed out first and helped Weiss onto the dock, before the two of them returned to Keeper’s Hollow, hand-in-hand.

“I’m really glad we had this talk, Weiss,” Ruby said as they neared the barn, lights all off. “I promise, no more keeping secrets like this!”

“I’m glad we did too, Ruby,” Weiss replied. “And speaking of secrets: any more you’d like to share with me before they become a problem?”

“Just one for now: I really want to sleep on your chest, and use your boobs like pillows.”
Weiss blinked, her face turning bright red. “I… but… what…” she quickly down at herself, then back at Ruby. “I don’t really have…”

Ruby smiled. “Small boobs are still boobs.”

Weiss blushed even harder.

Ruby kissed her again. “Good night, Weiss.”

Weiss blinked, her face feeling like it was melting again. “I… uh… good night, Ruby.”

The two of them began to go their separate ways.

“Oh, wait! Weiss!”

Weiss turned around.

“I’ll get started on those wardrobes and trunks you wanted for your stuff when the Makers finish making your and Winter’s new home on top of the barn; it’s easier for all of us if I know how much space I’m working with, and if I just build them where they’re going to go in the end.”

Weiss blinked. “Oh. Thank you…”

Ruby nodded. “Also: I love you.”

Weiss blinked again, then smiled. “I love you too, Ruby.”

Ruby crossed the farm and climbed up the side of the house and into the house, Weiss washed up at her laboratory’s sink, before the both of them joined their older sisters wherever they were staying.

“Weiss!” Winter cried as she sat up from being buried underneath her plushies. “You’re back!” she said, lowering her voice for the others’ sake.

“You really shouldn’t sound so surprised, Winter,” Weiss said as she sat down in front of her. “Ruby’s not nearly as bad as we’ve been led to believe.”

“I know, but I’m your big sister,” Winter said as she leaned over and hugged her. “It’s in my job description to worry about you constantly.”

“So, how’d the Big Talk with Ice Princess go…?” Yang asked as she let go of Ruby and pulled away.

“It went great, actually!” Ruby replied. “I was really worried that things were going to get ugly and this was when we’d break up, but it went a lot better than I could have expected it to.”

“We discussed boundaries, what we need out of this relationship, our feelings about recent events like mature individuals,” Weiss continued.

Winter nodded. “And did you tell her that you needed a year’s time to figure things out?”

Weiss looked off to the side. “Uh, yeah… about that…”

“We’re actually back together now!” Ruby and Weiss said. “We’ve even got a contract with the honours about how things are going to work out from now on.”

“It’s been less than three days!” Winter whispered frantically. “This was a whirlwind of a romance, not to mention all the other disasters and crises that you’ve gone through all in the span of a month! Shouldn’t you be giving this more time?!"

“You only get one chance at this, Ruby!” Yang cried. “Are you really sure you want to spend that with Weiss?”

Ruby nodded. “Yes, because I know she’s got that something I’ve been looking for, what I didn’t see in everyone else.”

“And even though I won’t be completely separating myself from her like I originally planned, I’ll be living with you from now, and I will also be doing my best to spend a lot less time around her, figure out what it’s like to just be me again, hang out with my friends, make up for all the lost time with you,” Weiss finished.

Winter scowled. “She’s not pressuring or rushing you into this, is she?”

“Because if she is, just say the word, and I will personally teach her ‘Hand’ for ‘Fuck you!’” Yang added.

Ruby held out her hands. “Okay, Yang: one, please don’t punch my girlfriend unless you’re sparring, and two, she’s not pressuring or rushing me into anything!”

Weiss looked sheepish. “… As a matter of fact, if anyone’s been rather overenthusiastic and keen to escalate things… it’s me.”

“How so…?” Winter asked.

Weiss looked away. “Uh, how do I put this…?”

“We almost totally”—Ruby made a sexy animal noise. “But then Weiss pushed me back to make more room for herself, I fell off my seat, hit my head on the back of the boat, and that just ruined the mood.”

Winter started quietly screaming.

“It was completely consensual!” Weiss added quickly.

“Really?!” Yang cried. “Because it seemed to me like she was trying to tear your clothes off and ravage you—which by the way is a word I never thought I would ever be using seriously in a sexual context!”

“Well, duh? Besides, I like it when she gets super aggressive like that—it’s pretty hot!”

“Okay!” Winter cried as she began to hyperventilate. “I… this… Weiss, you know you can talk to me about anything, anything at all, right?!”

Weiss blushed. “I’d rather this be all we talk about on the subject, thank you.”

“Weiss, please, I won’t judge; I’ve been pining after a cartoon wolf for the past decade, even before I learned she was both real and a Fae, I can understand what interests us can get very… strange.”

“But even if you aren’t so innocent anymore, you’re still my darling little sister, and I will protect you from anyone who dares try to corrupt you or use you!” Yang cried as she hugged Ruby again.

Ruby rolled her eyes. “Yang, I haven’t been innocent since I was--”
“Shh...” Yang whispered as she stroked Ruby’s hair. “Shh… let me maintain this illusion just a while longer, please...”

Weiss groaned. “Winter, I believe I am old enough now to make responsible decisions for myself, and more so, I can safely determine when I can handle those things just fine by myself!”

Winter sighed. “I know that, Weiss, but still: growing older didn’t stop grandpa from making terrible impulse decisions, and we both seem to have inherited that same tendency from him! I don’t want you to get hurt or do something you’re going to regret for the rest of your life, okay?”

Ruby’s eyes softened. “Yang, I know you’re only trying to protect me…”

“… But there comes a time when trying to make decisions for me will just do more harm than good, and you’re going to need to let me make my own choices and deal with whatever the consequences will be,” Weiss continued.

“I’m not a little kid anymore.” Ruby and Weiss finished.

Winter sighed. “True… but you won’t hesitate to come to me if you need to, right?”

Ruby smiled. “Well, duh? I thought that was pretty obvious!”

“I’m never going to completely outgrow my need for my big sister, don’t worry.” Weiss said.

Yang teared up as she hugged Ruby. “I love you, Ruby.”

“I love you too, Yang,” Ruby said as she hugged back

“I love you, Weiss,” Winter said as she leaned out and hugged her.

Weiss nestled her face into her chest as she hugged back. “I love you too, Winter.”

“Man, never realized I’d ever be back here with you, and that it’d take a massive terror attack, and the Heralds trying to kidnap me and dad specifically for the Council to change their minds...” Yang said as they laid down to sleep.

“I’d rather not think about that please,” Weiss said as she and Winter snuggled up together. “Like Abner said, the seekers have got this, and we’ve got our own problems to deal with...”

“… So so long as we don’t try to leave the Valley any time soon, or accept any more suspicious tickets anywhere, we should be fine!” Ruby finished.
Chapter 89

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jacques Schnee stood inside the center of a sea of news articles, messages, and holos all floating around him, waiting to be pulled to his attention. He barely read, listened, or watched any of them, but the scowl on his face grew ever deeper with each one.

“The End of Times? Terrorist Group Heralds of the New World Order Seeding Chaos and Unease All Over Avalon in Wake of Terror Attack at Candela”

“Trust Ratings For Armed Forces Of Avalon At Record Lows; Panicked Civilians Ask, ‘Who Will Save Us Now?!’

“No Clear End In Sight For Candela’s State of Emergency”

“This just in, the Queensguard have formally declared ‘Absolutely no intention’ of investigating the disappearance of Agent Winter Schnee, 24 hours after the botched rescue operation into the Viridian Valley. Asked for comment, General Ironwood replied, ‘We sent the best we had, and it turns out our best just isn’t enough. All we really can do is figure out a way to protect what we still have.’

“Peacekeeping Bureau and Halls of Justice Collaborating in Investigation of Possible Collusion of Mega-Corporations, Country Governments, and City States with Terrorist Group ‘Heralds of the New World Order’”

“… Goldleaf Park is set to be reopened by ‘next year, at the least,’ while Maharlika Avenue is to be indefinitely closed off until further notice. ‘It’s like a wellspring blew up in there, all we really can do is wait for time to do its thing,’ says Containment Specialist Nickson after all clean-up operations were ceased for the danger to personnel, and cost of the equipment being redirected to much more pressing needs such as…”

“‘He Treated Her Like A Prisoner’: New, Disturbing Details Arise From Manor Schnee Break-Ins And Kidnapping Of Weiss Schnee By Anonymous Former Staff Member.”

“No Better Matches Made In Hell: the Church of the Holy Shepherd and the Schnee Power Company Rocked by Defections of Key Figures to Terrorist Organization ‘The Council,’ Ostensibly made for Romance”

“The Foundations Are Crumbling: mass protests and chaos all over Heartland as centuries of scandal and corruption reach its Climax with the defection of the current Holy Shepherd, Pyrrha Nikos, and new, disturbing rumours and currently uncorroborated evidence of collusion with unknown entities stretching back from the time of Piorina Piper’ Nikos”

“Citizens of Solaris and the Halls of Justice ‘gravely concerned’ about increased activity in all four major criminal organizations The Black Cross, Jahilliyah, The Jade Empire, and The White Fang. ‘It’s like they’re gearing up for war,’ says Judge Kaine.”

“The Macabre Money Maker: In wake of the Plushie Palace discontinuing all ‘Keeper of the Grove’ plushies and variants, prices in the second-hand market skyrocket as collectors rush to acquire toys produced before the announcement.”

He was interrupted by an alert popping up in the corner of his vision, telling him he had a visitor.
With a gesture from his hand, the holograms all disappeared, and he was in the empty, spacious “entertainment center” of his bungalow, a room made almost entirely of top-of-the-line holo-projectors with the rest of the space allotted for seats, food, and other luxuries.

He stormed up to door and waved it open, his fiercest scowl, and the foulest, most cruel words he had in his vocabulary at the ready for whoever was unfortunate enough to be on the other side. He paused when there was no one.

Neo raised her hand and waved, a Fae teleportation charm hanging from her fingers.

Jacques snatched it from her, strangled it in his hands as a whirlwind of magic swirled around him.

In a flash, he found himself taken away from his bungalow, and into the center of some ancient, alien temple elsewhere in Avalon. He had long lost any sense of wonder or fear from the reliefs on the walls, the massive statues that stood in the sides like sentinels, the power radiating in the air knowing what beings called it their home.

“Catch a bit of a cold recently, Ms. Fall?” Jacques snarled.

Cinder scowled as hard as she could at him, her fangs bared, her ears pulled back, and her eyes flickering with fire.

The effect was completely ruined by her sitting on a chair and shivering violently, the enchanted blanket wrapped around her, the fever patch on her forehead, her feet soaking in a tub full of steaming hot cure water, and the disgusting amounts of snot dripping down her bright red nose, being very reluctantly wiped up a pair of masked goons armed with tissues, a wastebasket, and a bucket.

“Whiff all dew respect, Mishterr Sshnee: phuck you!” Cinder snapped, before she went into a coughing fit.

Jacques recoiled and took a few steps back. “So is this what you call ‘results,’ Ms. Fall? Not only did you fail catastrophically at your objectives, your enemy ‘the Council’ handily decimated your forces, and blindsided you with the addition of their newest members—among which is my own daughter.”

He threw his hand out. “Is this what you mean to say when you have a ‘foolproof’ plan, of which you’ve been preparing for ‘the longest time?’ Because it seems to me that you were vastly exaggerating the capabilities of your forces, what you could do with the incredibly generous funding I am now seriously regretting giving you, and indeed, your own competence as a leader, and your intelligence beside.”

Cinder growled, before her eyes widened, and she shoved her face into the bucket.

Jacques sighed heavily as awful, gross sounds of suffering filled the air.

“Uggh...” Cinder groaned as she turned back to him, and a mook wiped her mouth off. “Okay... I will admit, Plan B didn’t turn out so good...”

“To say the least...” Jacques spat.

Cinder ignored him. “... But in the grand scheme of things, everything couldn’t be going better!”

“Then please, Ms. Fall, enlighten me!: Just how is this not the death knell of your schemes, the Heralds’ own Hindenburg?”
Cinder grinned, a mook wiped up the trail of snot dripping down one nostril. She pulled a violently shaking hand from underneath her blanket. “Why don’t you sit down, and lemme tell you ALLL about it?!”

Click.

In a flash of magical fire, Jacques found himself pulled onto a throne made of molten magma. He screamed and writhed as the heat seared through his clothes and onto his skin, tendrils of fire weaved around his ankles, his wrists, and his mouth, before everything quickly hardened into solid, black rock.

Where most people would cower and fear for their lives, Jacques only glared at Cinder as he futilely struggled against his bonds, felt his skin burning and scarring from the heat.

“D’y humans ever wonder, how exackly Nhicholash Shhnee and his ragtag bunch of assholes ever found a place like Candela?

“IT WAS ALL BECAUSE OF ME!”

Cinder went into another violent hacking and coughing fit. After she pulled her head out of the bucket, her mouth was wiped clean, and she had caught her breath somewhat, she continued.

“That phucking expedishun of his was doomed from the start—you humans had jhack shit, Nhick was BARELY keeping his team together through sheer force of will, and even the phucking Council was about to step in again like they did ‘your’ Neo-Renaissance, if only so they could keep your spesheesh around as breeding stock for their Keepurs.

“But me? I thaw an opportunity—an opportunity to make this world a better place, what it always should’ve been!

“So I planted a mole in his ranks, one named Freyahh Bolkoth. I trusted her with all the schematics and magitech my people died trying to sneak out of the Eldan and Celestion Fae’s hands, trusted her to do her damndest keep this band of desperate idiots from dying out there in the Country with her magic or her knowledge, trusted her to worm her way into their good graces, so they would listen to ‘her gut feeling’ of a possible wellspring for a city:

“Candela’s.

“You see, while it was a big phucking surprise for you humans, the Eldan Fae knew all about it! They just wouldn’t use it, though they had enough trouble with the Viridian Valley and how you humans just can’t seem to stay away from it!

“But me? I could have really used that, and it was almost mine, if I didn’t run into three unexpected problems:

“One: that asshole Nhick just refused to die, no matter how many times he should have from all his plans that shouldn’t have worked as well as they did, and not even when I set Freyahh to sabotaging all his attempts at making potable water, poison him to death and make it look like it was his own fault!

“Two: Freyahh bonded with those assholes, grew fond of them and their stupid little hopes and dreams!

“And three: Nhick had to fall in love with her, and she fell for him back, enough to tell him her big
“So what did Nhick do, when he found out his darling ‘Frosty’ was a spy, that she’d been sent in to kill and replace him, that she’d been lying to him about everything?!” Cinder paused to cough and blow her nose. “When she forsook all we’d ever done for her, the sacrifices we made, all we could have accomplished if she just followed the phucking plan, all for this band of assholes that should have died three days after they set off from the Nexus?!

“He helped her run for help, all the way to the Viridian valley, where they struck a deal with the Eldan Council:

“You humans get Candela, and all the magitech and schematics you could ever want from them to end the Resource Wars, ensure you’d never have a crisis like this ever again! But in return, they had to guard it from me, from anyone the Council says ‘would abuse that power,’ and unfortunately for all of us, Nick was all too happy to play along with their plans, so long as it meant he could keep his love the traitor and raise their phucking miracle baby Snowie.

“Every piece of news I hear from that phucking city, every holo I see of your ‘Shining Beacon of Hope,’ I’m reminded of everything that should have been mine, what you humans and the Council stole from me!”

Cinder chuckled as she stood up from her chair and stepped out of the tub, one shaking, dripping foot at a time. Her goons followed her, holding the bucket at the ready and wiping away as much snot as they could.

“I suppose I should be thanking you, Jacques…” she said as she came closer. “In hindsight, if Plan A worked perfectly, the Council would have swoop down and wiped us all out before we even got anything close to what you humans have built.

“But now? Now there’s a whole city state, loaded with all the resources, the magitech, and the infrastructure that I could ever want or need for my plans, and it’s only a matter of time before I take it all, all because of you!”

She placed her shaking hands on Jacques’ wrists, leaned in and put her red-nosed, snot-dripping, wild-eyed face right up to his. “Because unlike that asshole Nhick, you don’t have this thing called ‘Morals.’”

Magic began to surge from Cinder’s body into Jacques, bright orange like a raging fire. He began to let out muffled screams, writhing in agony as he felt it coursing through his veins, setting fire to his whole being, burning ever brighter and hotter until his whole body was engulfed in flames.

Cinder smiled as she saw the fire in Jacques' eyes go out as his body turned to magical embers, floating in the air for a moment before they rushed into her body. She shivered in delight as she felt his life essence become hers, all the new knowledge rushing into her mind:

Secret, untraceable accounts and warehouses loaded with Urochs, precious metals and resources, and cutting-edge magitech. Backdoor deals, blackmail on his numerous associates and clients, executive passwords and clearances to the Schnee Power Company’s most carefully guarded patents and information. All his little personality quirks, traits, and mannerisms that her golem makers could use to make a dummy that could fool anyone, have Avalon think Jacques had finally learned his lesson and retired.

She chuckled as one of her mooks wiped away the dribbles of snot from her nose. “You Sshnees… you Shnsees have ruined my plans twice already, but I’m not going to let you ruin them a third
She threw her head back and **laughed**, raising her arms in the air as the sound echoed all throughout the chamber… then, she went into another hacking, coughing fit, and stumbled backwards onto her ass. Her mooks quickly rushed to her aid, Cinder wrenched the bucket from their hands and proceeded to shove her face in it.

“**Guhh-huh-huh-huhhh...**” she whimpered pathetically. “Nhick…? Freyahh? Wherever the phuck you two are in the Aefher, know that I **hate** you two and your spawn **so much...!”**

Chapter End Notes

Freya’s maiden name is Volkov, Cinder was just mispronouncing it.
Chapter 90

Nicholas, Freya.

Nick nodded. Ozzy.

Freya bowed. Archon.

<How are you two?> Ozpin said, before he took a sip of his coffee.

<Oh, you know: pissed off ole Sparky actually went and did it, trying to find a way to stop her this time around while trying to help sweep back what little we can under the rug, squeezing in some worrying about all three of our granddaughters now being in that hellhole you call the Viridian Valley, if we can we find the time…

<You know, the usual.> Nick replied. <Now what's up your end?>

<We attempted to offer Weiss a transfer to Arethusa.>

<And what did she say?>

<She refused.>

<Told ya.> Nick said. <Ya know, this would have gone a whole lot better if you were all a lot more honest with her in the first place; now she’s probably going stay there digging and digging till she turns up every last dirty little secret you have.>

Ozpin looked mildly annoyed. <So says the two that have been covertly communicating with their second youngest grandchild via the dreamscape.>

<Say what now?> Nick asked, confused.

<Penny has been reporting matching accounts from both Ruby and Weiss that the latter has been having dreams involving incredibly vivid conversations with both of you, sometimes with that of Ruby’s mother, Summer Rose.>

<You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?>

<First time I’ve ever heard of this!> Nick replied. <If it helps, I have been having dreams about Weiss and Winter for the past two months, the two of them in the thick of some sticky business or trapped somewhere, and I have to help them and talk ‘em out of their funks.>

<I’ve been having much of the same, too, actually,> Freya said. <It might be that her first exposure to such intense levels of magic has forged some sort of connection between us all. Well, that, or my family’s tendency towards mental illness is finally rearing it’s ugly head, and Nicholas here has finally lost his mind, too.>

<Eluna knows incredible water weaving powers aren’t the only things that run with the females in my family…>

Ozpin nodded. <Indeed. Speaking of family, we of the Council have been discussing your current
Nick and Freya’s eyes widened. They thought about it for a moment, before they both shook their heads.

<… Nah, not worth the risk; the fight against ole Sparky’s going to be a lot easier the longer she doesn’t realize me and Frosty are still around to fuck up her plans.> Nick said.

<Surprise and secrecy have always been the seeker’s greatest weapons.> Freya added.

Ozpin’s eyebrows rose. <Are you quite sure about this, you two?>

They both nodded. <Positive.> Nick said.

<I assumed you would be eager to take this offer.> Ozpin said before he took another sip.

<We assume a lot of things, Ozzy.> Nick said. <And look at where assuming too much got all of us.>

Ozpin nodded gravely. <The Council is, in the end, just a group of mortals who happen to be a cut above the rest…>

<Yeah, yeah, we know—you just focus on foiling Sparky again with the Fae, and we’ll figure out how we’re going to rope my species into helping you do just that now.>

<A word of warning: it looks like our best chance is arming them with new magitech weapons and armour, ones that will be much more capable of handling and resisting the dangers of the Valley, and consequently that of the Cradle.> Freya said.

Ozpin nodded. <We’ll deal with that problem once we get there.>

<Anything else to report, Ozzy?> Nick asked.

<Nothing you can’t see for yourselves through Penny’s eyes. I have to thank you two for your continued service; the amount of sacrifices you have made and are still making have been tremendous, and yet you two continue to deliver without fail or question.>

<You just keep up your end of the bargain, Ozpin, and we’ll keep up ours.> Nick said coolly. <It ain’t that complicated.>

Ozpin nodded, and shut off the link.

Freya turned to Nick. <So are when are we going to tell them, now that our plans have been shot to shit once again?>

Nick shrugged. <I say in a year. It’s been a rough life for all of them; best we give them some time to know what it’s like to just live before we rope them into all this realm-wide conspiracy business, especially Weiss is still reeling from learning about the Keeper’s mates.>

Freya sighed. <I still can’t believe, of all the humans and hybrids in all of Avalon, it had to be her…>

Nick chuckled. <I’m not surprised, honestly—we Schnees tend to aim high.> he said, putting a hand on Freya’s shoulder. <Whether they were born or made.>

Freya sighed. <I have to wonder though: what sort of chaos will arise when we all three of our
granddaughters, the Holy Shepherd, and the Keeper of the Grove together in one location…?>

Nick squeezed her shoulder. <They’re going to be fine, Frosty—they’re in good company, and even if they weren’t, they’re made of real tough stuff, just like me.>

Freya hummed and smiled, before she playfully looked at Nick. <Speaking of tough stuff: care to put that that alleged immortality of yours to the test again?> she winked as her tail began to wag behind her.

Nick grinned. <Ha-ha-ha—yeah, no. I’m still reeling from last night, and I’m not as young as I used to be, Frosty.>


<Why don’t you go spend all that energy out on the training dummies instead?> Nick said, coaxing her to their Raucous Room. <If things go the way I think they will, we’ll probably be back out on the field soon enough.>

<Plus, seeing you in your old seeker suit might make me change my mind in a hurry!>

Freya smiled, before it quickly faded. <I’ve been out of the Great Game for a really long time, Nick…>

Nick patted her on the back. <Yeah, but that ass of yours sure hasn’t quit.>

Freya snorted. <Nick, you are terrible.> She smiled warmly at him. <I love you.>

<And so are you, which is why I love ya too, Frosty,> Nick replied. <Now you go enjoy ravaging the ever loving crap out of something that isn’t me, for once.>

Freya hummed as she sauntered away. <I will, Nick, I will~>

Morning again in Keeper’s Hollow, and for the first time in memory, Weiss didn’t wake up because of bright morning sunlight searing her eyes; instead, it was the smell of something delicious wafting in the air.

“Rise and shine, everyone!” Taiyang said as he, Qrow, and Zwei hauled in a giant pot of food alongside bowls for everyone. “Breakfast is ready! We’re having one of my favourites: Daybreak Porridge, everything you need to get your ass in gear in the morning, then kick ass till lunch!”

“Also does wonders for hangovers, just so you know,” Qrow added.

Nora rocketed out of her and Ren’s stall bouncing in excitement as she grabbed a bowl from Qrow. “Oh man, breakfast! And Ren didn’t even have to make it first! Isn’t that great, Ren?”

“Yeah, it’s a nice change of pace,” Ren said as he came out at a much more leisurely pace.

“Thank you for breakfast, Mr. Xiao Long,” Pyrrha said as she joined them.

Taiyang laughed as he poured Nora an extra generous serving. “Please, just call me Taiyang—we’re all the same out here.”

Weiss and Winter came out of their stall, saw Jaune looking conflicted, and still dressed in his uniform sans the heavier body armour.
“Something the matter, Jaune?” Winter asked.

“… Should we be eating this stuff, Agent Schnee?” he asked quietly. “I mean, we’re kind of in enemy territory…”

“Unless you want to starve to death, or see a way to feed yourself without relying on the Fae, you should,” Winter said. “Also, it’s just ‘Schnee’ or ‘Winter’ now, considering I’m not a part of the Queensguard anymore.”

Jaune’s eyes widened. “You quit? Just like that?”

“I only joined the AFA because I wanted to protect my little sister,” Winter replied. “I can’t do that when I’m on the side that wants to arrest and/or execute her, now, can I…”

Jaune paused. “… Right.”

“Don’t worry, you guys!” Taiyang said. “I made sure to make this stuff with filtered water; not the best way to enjoy it, but better bland than sick!”

Jaune debated it for a moment, before he lined up with Ren and Nora.

“Shall we?” Winter asked, gestured as the other sat down and started eating.

Weiss shook her head. “I always tend to my crops before breakfast.”

“Enjoy yourself, then, little sister,” Winter said, smiling as she hugged her goodbye.

Weiss left the barn, heading back to Ruby’s room to get her work dress. She had to stop and pause as she noticed Ruby, Yang, and Blake making two new scarecrows to protect all the new crops:

One massive, with short cropped salt and pepper “hair,” a full “beard,” wearing a tattered shirt and a red scarf, and wielding a stick that looked somewhat like a ceremonial AFA officer’s sword in one hand, and a pair of sticks shaped like pistol in the other; and the other much smaller, hair pure as snow tied in two parallel buns atop her head, a makeshift “lab coat” draped around her shoulders, her eyebrows and mouth slanted downwards in annoyance.

“Are those my grandparents?” Weiss asked as she came over.

<Yes,> Blake replied as she carefully adjusted Freya’s eyebrows, trying to find the right angle that would convey the most amount of disdain and annoyance for everything and everyone around her. <Ruby’s idea.>

“We were supposed to make both our moms, but then I’d be too tempted to punch mine whenever I pass her by,” Yang said as she tied Nick’s “gun” to his “hand.” “So since we already had one of your dad, and these two always came in a pair, we decided to do them instead!”

“You don’t mind, do you?” Ruby asked, smiling nervously.

“No, not at all!” Weiss said. “I love it, actually.”

Ruby beamed.

Yang pulled a little too hard to make a knot, ended up cracking one of the sticks making up Nick’s “hand.”

“… I’ll just be going back into the house now…” Weiss muttered as she began to leave.
“You do that,” Yang muttered as she picked up the severed halves.

Ruby glared at Yang as Weiss made her way to the elevator, Blake just ignored them and kept on working.

Penny was in the living room, all of Weiss’ belongings, Myrtenaster, and her box of mediums on the table and neatly tied up in her hammock. “Good morning, Weiss! I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of packing all of your things for you, as you’ll be moving out later.

“I’ve also hung your work dress behind the door to Ruby’s room, in anticipation of your changing before you tend your crops as you usually do.”

“Oh, thank you, but you really shouldn’t have!” Weiss said. “I could have done all that by myself…” Penny chuckled. “It’s no trouble at all! In fact, do you need my assistance with anything else?”

“Nothing at the moment, thank you,” Weiss said before she stepped into—well, it was just Ruby’s room, now.

As she changed, she got a good look at the empty room, noticed how different it was without all of her belongings among Ruby’s piles of stuff, her hammock hanging just by one of the windows.

Weiss sighed. “A lot of things are going to be very different from now on…” she muttered as she left the room, and went down to her crops.

Taiyang was patiently waiting for by the tool rack. “I harvest and weed, you water and replant?” he asked.

Weiss smiled as she picked up the watering can. “Sounds good to me.”

The two of them got to work tending to the farm; the others all headed to the training grounds; and another small army of makers and their pack animals were starting to filter into the Hollow, ready to rebuild the cabins and Winter’s new house atop the barn.

When Weiss first set off for the Viridian Valley, she had imagined her new life there would involve a lot of staying inside camp, trying to pass the time inside a heavily guarded bunker as the workers and the mercenaries did most of the actual work trying to find resources and a wellspring to tap into, maybe venturing out for a quick stroll once her guards were reasonably sure it was safe, or once they had established a proper settlement around a claim.

She had never expected it to actually involve all of the crazy, disastrous, and confusing events of the past month-and-a-half, ending up with her being a wanted terrorist in the human territories, running a farm while trying to get a handle on her new magical powers, and trying a relationship with the not-so-mythological and not-nearly-as-evil-or-horrifying guardian of the Viridian Valley—even if it did mean she’d be part of a giant, ongoing containment project for a 1,000 year old realm-threatening disaster area.

She didn’t have the slightest clue what the future was going to hold, what new crisis fate was going to throw at her, but she did know she’d have her new friends, her older sister, and a loving girlfriend to help her out.

And at the very least, she was sure she wouldn’t ever get bored here.
Three months back, I started Keeper of the Grove on a lark on my tumblr. I was just writing 1,800 words on a lack of sleep, after a long day at school, and some caffeine, in an attempt to get myself to write more.

I thought this would be 10 chapters or so, not the beginning of my first novel series, the birth of this expansive and complex universe, of which there are many more sequels planned.

I’d like to thank you all for reading, all of you who have left kudos, reblogged, and left comments for me to read and enjoy, and sometimes figure out where I had gone wrong in this story like with my constant flip-flopping about whether or not the Council and the Fae are a good or a bad thing.

It’s been a hell of a ride, and for now, it’s time to pull into the station, refuel, make repairs, and get ready for the next trip.

See you all back on April 7, 2018, for “The Viridian Vanguard.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!