Pull Yourself Together

by AeschylusRex

Summary

A routine hack and slash mission through the Vacuan desert gives Weiss entirely too much time to dwell on the feelings she’s trying not to have.

Notes

1.29.17
Hello again! (RIP Pyrrha)
Not to be trite, but here is the White Rose fic nobody asked for! Literally! Not even me! I literally didn't ask for this! I have a job, people! *sob* Anyway, all hail my excellent beta bleufeenix for talking me off multiple ledges while I was working on this fic, and thanks to all of you for reading!
~Enjoy!

P.S. extra thanks to showmethegreyspace for creating some amazing artwork for this story!
i posted it at the end :D

See the end of the work for more notes
The end of your second week in the desert begins without fanfare.

You pack up the camp, pour dirt on the fire, and head north into the dunes. Your objective looms on the horizon. Dark, distant mountains, like the spines of a dragon, run from east to west, creating a natural boundary for the verdant grasslands beyond. Team RWBY is the tip of the spear for a massive operation, and your job is simple. Clear out the largest, oldest Grimm first, cut a swath through the treacherous Vacuan wilderness, and let the army do the rest. Behind you, prospectors wait in the city to come test new locations for dust mines. It’s a half billion lien investment, and a very high profile contract. The work itself, however, is fairly monotonous.

Monotony has never been your friend.

For the 14th straight day, you focus on keeping your thoughts shallow, listening for wildlife and distant Grimm as the ground beneath your feet gradually transitions from crumbling rock and arid, brown dirt to shifting sand.

“Jeez, who knew there was so much space out here,” Yang says, arms behind her head, head tipped back. “It seems like it goes on forever.”

You sigh and nod your head in agreement.

Indeed.

At midday, you stop and lift up your tinted goggles to clean the grit from your face. It’s been two weeks since you properly washed your hair and two days since you took a moment to rebraid it. Stray filaments whip against your cheeks in the breeze, silky white strands stained a faint tan from the dust. Your eyes adjust slowly, but the view is the same. Heat shimmers over a golden sea of shifting dunes. The sun beats down from a hazy blue sky. A single bead of sweat snakes down your temple toward your jaw, and you hastily wipe it away. Your fingers taste of salt and sand.

Tan military boots sink into the loose sand beside your own. “All good?”

You blink through the glare, and nod slowly.

Twenty paces ahead, Blake is perched up on Yang’s broad shoulders, scouting the dunes with her superior eyesight and a pair of binoculars. Her long hair is tied back in a low, side-ponytail, and it spills down the front of her desert cloak in black waves, rippling with the breeze. She’s wound a white, shemagh scarf around her nose and forehead to protect from the stinging sands, but her goggles hang loosely from her neck under the shadow of her hood. She looks nothing at all like Blake, and every bit like the desert warrior she’s intended to be. Below her, Yang looks more like a truck stop brawler, sporting shocking yellow knee high socks that clash magnificently with her camo shorts and violet tank top under her dusty cloak, but they make a good pair. Yin and Yang, figuratively and literally.

Your cracked lips sting as they part. “This endless heat is getting to me.”

“Heh, yeah.” Ruby flips up her own goggles and scrubs away the itchy outline of sand stuck to her face. “I know what you mean.”

“I loathe to think how hot it gets here in the summer.”

“I wouldn’t have taken the job during the summer.” She winces after a beat. “Probably.”

“Hmph.” You cross your arms. “Well, at least Blake doesn’t seem to mind it.”
Ahead, Yang tips back and pretends to drop Blake, who shrieks and claws at her golden hair while the blonde cackles. It’d be more amusing if you were properly hydrated. As it is, your emotional range has been stunted by exhaustion.

Ruby shrugs. “Cats love the sun.”

“So I’ve heard.” You catch her silver eyes, intending to shoot her a wry smile. Instead, you forget yourself, holding her gaze until you can see the question starting to form behind it.

“Grimm!” Blake calls.

The spell is broken.

Your heads turn in unison toward your faunus teammate, pointing off into the distance with the binoculars still pressed to her face. Beneath her, Yang’s teasing smile has evaporated. Her muscles are coiled and tense, hands wrapped tightly around Blake’s calves.

“It’s that thing with the antlers that’s been stalking us! It’s got a pack of beowolves with it!”

“How far?” Ruby calls back, slipping seamlessly into her leadership role.

“Five miles! Northwest!” Blake drops her binoculars and slides gracefully from Yang’s shoulders.

You glance sidelong at Ruby, taller now, and lankier, but with none of Yang’s bulk or Blake’s innate grace. She’s got the same tan cloak and military boots as the rest of you, but her remaining outfit is simple and functional, a grey neck wrap, long-sleeved henley and desert-camo cargo pants tucked into her boots. She’s still a teenager, technically, just a couple years older than you were when you first stepped foot on Beacon’s campus. By then, however, you’d grown into your body with all the elegance and poise expected of a Schnee. Somehow, you doubt Ruby will ever completely grow into hers.

She smiles ruefully at you, silver eyes turning the color and consistency of mercury as they catch the light. “Duty calls,” she says.

You watch her jog away through the sand with your vision flickering and your pulse stuttering. An opportunity arises to analyze the tide of emotions beating against the bulwarks of your heart, but you dismiss the idea outright. You may be trapped in an endless desert, but your resolve is still as hard as ice.

ii.

At first, you convinced yourself you’d made your decision for the sake of the team. Ruby fights recklessly when she’s distracted, and you fight clumsily, but that excuse didn’t hold up to scrutiny. A tempest of anger and anxiety overwhelmed you a few months later when she traveled up to Atlas to meet a new boyfriend. You’d been naive enough to assume she was coming to spend time with you while you worked for your family between missions. Instead, a boy picked her up at the station, and your guest room stayed empty. That he didn’t last doesn’t matter.

You have no more illusions now about your motivations for secrecy.

“Weiss!”

Ruby calls out to you, and you nod once, the only sign of understanding you’re capable of giving.
Your lungs are choked with dust, hands slick against Myrtenaster’s metal hilt. You’ve wrapped it in gauze three times over to compensate, and still your fingers slip as you twirl, summoning glyph after glyph to aid Ruby’s speed. Sweat beads on your forehead, pooling against the edges of your goggles. Ruby’s pushing harder today than usual and you’re struggling to keep up. The next glyph you fire is uneven, and she misses a step.

“Careful!” Yang shouts, over the crack of gunfire.

You grit your teeth, eyes narrowing in frustration. “Ruby, slow down!”

Her aura is nearly depleted, and you’re notfairing much better. You won’t be able to keep this up much longer.

Suddenly, Ruby emerges from her vortex of speed in a tight spiral, slamming, scythe-first, between the eyes of the creepy, humanoid Grimm. Crescent Rose fires twice before she twirls away to make her landing, left leg skidding out in a wide arc across the sand. The creature roars, shaking its antlers and grapples at its face with clawed fingers. Ruby seems to think she’s finally killed it. She only lets her guard down for a second, but it’s enough. A cold bolt of panic shoots up your spine as the Grimm, rears back, raising an unnervingly long arm. You’re preparing to shoot off a repelling glyph when Yang beats you to the punch, sliding between her sister and the angry Grimm in time to block the downward strike that would’ve lobbed off her head.

You adjust immediately. You spin your dust barrel to blue, fire off a jet of ice to freeze the monster in place, and take off at a sprint, digging into your last reserves of energy to summon more glyphs. You leap up into the air, bouncing from platform to platform until you’re directly over the Grimm’s head. Then, executing a tight flip, you slam, blade first, between its broad shoulder blades, deftly severing its spinal cord. Furious howls cut through the air, but the fight is over. You plant your feet on its gnarled antlers and use the leverage to pull Myrtenaster free, backflipping neatly onto the ground as the body in front of you begins to disintegrate.

Yang whoops and hollers. “Yeah, Weiss!” She punches a stray beowolf in the snout as it cheats closer, and the creature’s head explodes into a shower of red. “Nice moves!”

You duck away from the rain of blood, wrinkling your nose. Behind you, Gambol Shroud fires in quick succession, punctuated by the dying cry of the last of the pack. At long last, the fight is finally over, and not a moment too soon. You can hear Blake and Yang celebrating behind you, but the fog of panic has narrowed your attention to a single point of focus. You only have eyes for Ruby, hunched over on the ground, blood squelching between her knuckles as she grips the handle of her scythe. Your heart lurches painfully at the sight.

“Ruby!” You slide to your knees beside her in the sand. “Hey, you okay?”

She’s wheezing, and her aura is gone. The gash on her face is bleeding freely, staining the collar of her cloak.

She tenses as you touch her shoulder. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, you’re hurt.”

“I’m fine.” She dodges your gaze. “I’m just a little burned out. It’ll heal.”

She’s okay.

You close your eyes for a short moment to compose yourself. The tightness in your chest ebbs, but a tide of irritation immediately rushes in to take its place.
“What the hell was that?”

Ruby flinches, and you withdraw your hand. “Weiss-”

“-Don’t you Weiss me! You almost got yourself killed!”

She winces, whether from the pain or your caustic tone you can’t tell. “I had it under control.”

“Oh, really? Well, it’s a good thing your sister got there in time, because otherwise you’d be minus one thick head right now!”

She grumbles and clucks her tongue, pushing you away as she staggers to her feet. “You’re overreacting.”

Your temper flares white hot and you seize the front of her cloak, wrapping the coarse fabric around your slick knuckles. “Don’t you get it? You almost died, Ruby! Don’t. Do that. Again.”

Ruby’s silver eyes widen with surprise, and her mouth opens, but no sound comes out, just a faint rasp as her breath escapes. You realize, a second too late, that your faces are only inches apart, that your heart is beating like a drum, blood roaring in your ears. Your glare widens into shock and you release her, turning and stumbling away to collect yourself.

“What was that about?” Yang asks behind you, but Ruby says nothing.

Your hands creak against the handle of your rapier, tightening until your knuckles turn white. You dare not articulate the jumble of confused feelings expanding in your chest.

“Let’s go.” Blake’s steady voice dampens the noise in your head. “If we hurry we can make that hill in the distance before dark.”

She squeezes your shoulder as she trudges past, and you suck in a shuddering breath. Maybe, if you’re lucky, you won’t completely unravel before this mission is over.

You only wish you knew when the situation became this dire.

iii.

The campfire flickers in your eyes when you look up from your lap, and you see it, the exhaustion on Ruby’s face. Her silver eyes are grey. Her sun-kissed skin is dull, and puffy through the cheeks. There’s constellation of bruising on her chest, and a cut along her jaw that will definitely scar. She wouldn’t let any of you near it earlier, but you’ll ambush her in her sleep if your have to. You’ve been on edge since your outburst earlier, and her brooding, melancholy moods drive you crazy.

“Eat your meat,” you snap at Ruby, who’s been staring listlessly at the skewer in her hands. “You’re aura’s still weak and you need the nutrition.”

“It’s tough and gamey.” Her nose wrinkles. “It gets stuck in my teeth.”

You roll your eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you said you were a huntress.”

Ruby glares at you wearily. “C’mon, Weiss. Let’s not do this right now. Can’t we just play nice?”

“Nice gets people killed out here.” You gesture toward the dark expanse of desert beyond your hilltop hideout. “It’s a risk even lighting this fire, so eat your food, and be grateful you weren’t
decapitated earlier by that Grimm.”

To her credit, Ruby looks properly chagrined, and glances sidelong at her sister, fast asleep in a bedroll next to Blake at the edge of the fire. You watch, critically, as she takes a tentative bite of her roasted meat and swallows.

“Do you chew anything you eat, or just gulp it down like a golden retriever?”

“Weiss.”

You turn away and apologize for nothing. You’re a Schnee, not a savage. It’s not your fault that you still cling the vestiges of your formal etiquette training. Only Blake seems to understand proper table etiquette, a feat considering she was raised by, at best, political activists, and, at worst, terrorists.

Ruby resumes eating and you pretend not to notice the effort she makes to chew more slowly. Instead, you gaze up. The sky is more beautiful out here in the wilderness. The stars are so ethereally bright. You focus your attention on that while she finishes her food and tosses her makeshift skewer in the fire. The air is cold as midnight approaches and you wish, not for the first time, that you were back in Atlas in your giant tub.

“Sleep, Weiss,” Ruby murmurs, fiddling with Crescent Rose in the firelight.

It’s her turn to watch, and your turn to rest, but you’re not tired, just exhausted. Just bone weary.

“Let me stitch up that cut,” you nod at Ruby’s jawline, and she flinches back.

“I’m fine.”

“Seriously, what is your problem? Stop moping around!” You don’t realize you’re being so shrill until Blake mumbles in her sleep, and you lower your voice. “It’s deep, Ruby. It’ll get infected.”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine!”

“Weiss-“

You stand abruptly, effectively cutting her off, and round the fire in two quick strides. Ruby scrambles up to meet you headfirst and she’s got a few inches on you now, but, somehow, you still feel taller. You’re both toe to toe with shoulders squared and fists clenched in a moment, and this is how you know Ruby’s grown up. She doesn’t prevaricate around you anymore. She always meets you head on.

The steel in her gaze makes your chest feel tight.

“I’m the leader of this group,” she grits.

You roll your eyes. “Because we elected you. You’re our leader, not our dictator.”

“You’re not giving me the respect I deserve!”

“Because I want to give you stitches?” You laugh, and it’s a little mean. “Ruby Rose, you’d better get over yourself.”

“I’m serious!”
“Seriously immature.”

“You’re so immature.”

Undermining her? You scoff as you cross your arms. If you were really trying to undermine her, she’d damn well know it.

“Is your confidence so fragile?” you snipe, and Ruby recoils like you’ve slapped her.

Bingo.

Blake turns over in her sleeping bag, and the two of you break away from your intense glaring contest for a moment to glance at her. Honestly, you’d forgotten about the other two. Blake’s pointed, black ears twitch, and she yawns. It’s cute.

“Why are you being mean?” she murmurs, sleepily, “don’t be mean.”

You bristle. “I am not being mean!”

Blake continues as if you haven’t spoken. “Ruby, don’t be stubborn.”

“I’m not being stubborn,” Ruby retorts, but it’s whiny, and she bites her lip at the end.

“It’ll get infected. You’ll get a scar.”

“Scars are cool.”

Blake’s eyes blink open in the dim firelight, and she looks so irate that you almost laugh.

Ruby’s shoulders sag. “Fine.”

“Great.” Blake rolls onto her side and pulls the lip of her sleeping bag over her head. “Try to keep it down. I have last watch, and I’d like to get some sleep before then.”

Ruby blinks at her for a few seconds, and you can feel your lips quirking into a triumphant smirk. Score one for Weiss Schnee. You open your mouth, ready to deliver a haughty retort, but when her quicksilver gaze flicks back to yours it’s fierce, and close.

You take an unconscious step backwards.

“Let’s get this over with,” she growls, and flops back down next to the fire.

You go to get the med kit once you’ve regained control of your breathing. Stitching up her face proves to be much more intimate than you’d imagined.

iv.

Six weeks in the desert sounded like a good idea at the time. Admittedly, with your parents breathing down your neck about coming back to SDC full time you would’ve taken just about any job to get away from Atlas for a while. However, that was before the chaos in your head started leaking out into the open.

As week three of the mission wears on, you begin to fear there might be something critically wrong with you. Your brittle self-control has worn dangerously thin, and now the littlest things set you off. Something as innocent as Ruby patting your shoulder is suddenly enough to send you
reeling. Why you ever agreed to a close quarters hunting mission when you were already feeling suffocated by your family is beyond you. Aside from the hordes of giant Grimm who seem so keen on attacking you throughout the day, the desert holds no distractions from your anxieties. Or, in this case, the object of your perpetual agitation.

Ruby, as always, tries to help.

“You’re my partner, Weiss,” she says, as fierce as she is cheerful. “Whatever’s bothering you, I want you to know can talk to me.”

“I know, Ruby.”

“Okay, just wanted to make sure.”

“This is the third time you’ve told me that today.”

“Really, really sure.”

“Okay.” You huff and glare at her. “Message received, loud and clear.”

She smiles nervously back at you, hopping on the balls of her feet as she turns to catch up with Yang at the front of the line. You allow yourself to watch her for a second, and note her hunched shoulders. You have no intention of telling her anything, of even forming the words in your own damn head, but you’re hurting her, and you hate it.

It hurts you, too.

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You’re more self-aware than anyone likes to give you credit for. They cite your meltdowns and your uncompromising attitudes over, what they consider, trivial details, but it’s not like you don’t know you’re difficult. It’s just that you haven’t had any success changing that aspect of yourself. You’re a very particular sort of person, rigid, exacting, driven, a Schnee through and through. You’re so much like your father in temperament it turns your stomach, but it’s who you are, and fighting it is a waste of energy. You’re only glad there are at least three other people in the world who are willing to stick up for you.

Generally speaking, you know why you’ve been brushing Ruby off. It’s not, as you say, because there’s a streak of coagulated Grimm blood in your hair, or because your face is chaffed from the wind and sand, or even because your pale blue tunic is soaked with sweat. Although, to be honest, none of those things help. You and Ruby haven’t really fought like this since your first year at Beacon, and you know it’s you who keeps picking at the scabs.

It’s just…

It’s what you do when you’re scared.

You ridicule her for anything and everything. You respond to her innocent inquiries with cool glares and biting remarks. By the time Ruby starts snarking back, Blake and Yang have become so exasperated with it that they’ve separate you both, Ruby in the front, and you in the back, glowering at the hazy blue sky and the scalding yellow sun. Ahead of you, Ruby’s cloak billows in the wind, hood up to protect her pale skin from burning. Her dark hair is longer than it’s ever been, and it whips around the edges of her hood from time to time, until she reaches up to brush it back with bandaged fingers.

You worry about her. You’re all tired, but her most of all. The desert is treacherous and unending.
Her determination even more so. It’s her who keeps the rest of you going, through scorching heat and sandstorms and Grimm nests. You should’ve turned back weeks ago, but she won’t quit, and you won’t quit on her. So, instead, you hassle her for being stubborn, you yell at her for being reckless, you pick on her for ignoring her wounds and refusing your help. You screech if you have to, but it doesn’t usually come to that. Blake and Yang jump in to mediate, and Ruby gives in, grumpy but outnumbered.

These victories only placate you for a minute.

In the end, your traitorous heart still beats too fast

v.

They start to talk about you when they think you aren’t listening.

“Weiss’s got a stick up her ass, or something. She’s been irritable all week.”

“Before that,” Blake mutters. “She stormed out of Ruby’s birthday party because Jaune stepped on her foot.”

Yang snorts. “Okay, but that was funny.”

Ruby doesn’t contribute anything to their speculation, but, then, she never does unless she’s worrying that you secretly hate her. Which is...less often now.

“It’s weird though, she seems really up and down lately. I mean, I know Weiss can be irritable, but this is different.”

“Yeah. Trouble back home?”

“Maybe.”

“Whatever’s bothering her, I’m sure she’ll bring it up when she’s ready,” Ruby says firmly, trying to end to the discussion.

“You don’t think we should just ask her what’s up?” Yang asks.

“She doesn’t like to be confronted about that kind of stuff. It makes her uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, well her mood is making the rest of us uncomfortable, especially you.”

Ruby sighs. “Just drop it, Yang.”

“Okay, sorry. I just thought maybe we could tackle this head on for once instead of tip-toeing around Weiss for the next two weeks, but apparently not.”

“Cool off,” Blake murmurs, and you hear Yang huff.

“Okay. I’m cool.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The group descends into silence, and you grimace into the bottom of your sleeping bag.
You make camp on a ridge in on the third evening of your fourth week, huddled together under a crumbling overhang of dark rock to protect your anemic little fire from the wind. Blake reads quietly from a history book and absently stokes the flames between pages. Ruby studies the map while Yang loads rounds for Ember Celica and chatters about her new boyfriend back in Vale.

“I just love that he’s so tall.” Yang sighs and leans back against the ledge. “And he’s got huge arms. He can actually pick me up.”

“I’m pretty sure I don’t want to hear how you found that out,” Ruby says, drily, and Yang laughs, reaching over to muss her sister’s dusty hair.

“What about you, Weiss?” Yang’s violet eyes are playful as you glance up. “What ever happened to that guy from Mistral? Seung Ju? Soju? Si- Siljo?”

You shrug, content to remain quiet, focused on polishing a sticky bit of Grimm blood off Myrtenaster. There’s not much to say about it, anyway. He pursued, and you got restless. It ended uneventfully.

“Aw, don’t worry.” Yang smiles in a manner she probably thinks is reassuring. “A hottie like you won’t be single for long.”

She winks as she turns back to Ruby, and you scrub harder at your rapier. The subject makes you uncomfortable.

You’ve never been in love.

You’re not even sure what that would look like for you. If your parents ever felt that way about each other you wouldn’t know, and your sister has always been publicly single. Blake’s filthy ninja books are garbage, and everything on the silver screen is performed by actors making millions of lien to pretend, so there isn’t much knowledge to be gleaned there. Maybe it’s all about the sex. You don’t know. You have no reference for it, not even the boyfriends you keep from time to time, the ones that make you nervous and fluttery. They all pass like the weather, and you’re still stuck in the dark.

Although, lately, you feel like there might be a light on the horizon.

Lately you feel like you’re standing on a precipice.

You catch Ruby flashing a sly smile at her sister and your heart lurches in your chest. An image of your fingers sliding along her jaw rises, unbidden, to front of your mind, and your mouth dries up at the thought. Panic tightens like a noose around your neck. Your hand slips against your blade, and you hiss through your teeth as blood drips onto your army boots.

“You cut yourself.” Rough fingers touch your hand and you flinch back. You peel your eyes open to find Ruby kneeling in front of you. “Whoa, it’s deep. Does it hurt?”
“Of course it hurts,” you snap, and Ruby frowns.

“Yang, can you hand me the med kit?” She takes your hand in hers and turns it over, frowning at the crimson rivulet dribbling down your wrist. “This needs to be cleaned and bandaged.”

Her touch sends a wave of heat up your arm and you yank it away. “Stop!”

Ruby freezes, startled and perplexed. Behind her, Yang arches a brow. Even Blake looks up from her book.

“Weiss,” Yang tilts her head, visibly confused, “what’s wrong?”

You swallow, and try to bluster through your outburst. “Ruby’s hands are dirty! I don’t want her to touch my cut with those grimy hands. It’ll get infected!”

Ruby recoils, and the look she gives you is pained. You may as well have struck her.

It sort of feels like you did.

“I’ll do it,” Blake says, quietly, setting her book aside. “My hands are clean.”

You look away.

“I think I…need some air,” Ruby says, standing abruptly, and stalks off down the side of the ridge into the brilliant, red sunset.

Yang sighs, and glares in your direction. “I’d better go after her.”

“Stay close.” Blake checks her watch. “You have about thirty minutes of daylight left.”

“We’ll be fine.” Yang raps her knuckles against her metal arm and grabs Ruby’s scythe. “Back in a jif!”

Her footsteps fade off down the side of the hill until all that’s left is the wind, the crackle of the fire, and the dull pounding in your ears.

God, you could’ve bungled this worse, but you don’t know how.

Blake startles you slightly when she settles down in front of you with the med-kit. Her fingers are cool and dry, efficient as they apply a bit of rubbing alcohol to the gash under your thumb.

“Hold still,” she mutters.

You hardly flinch at the pain. Instead you study the dusting of new freckles across the bridge of her nose, the way her feline eyes stand out so much brighter against her tanned and toughened skin. Her scarf is fraying at the edges, stiff, like yours, with salt, dirt, and blood. Her dusty cloak hangs open, pulled on haphazardly to ward off the chill. You miss her quirky outfits from the early days of Beacon, but the hazards of the desert require that you all blend in with your environment. Your own clothes are equally drab. Only the pale blue tunic, hidden away under your cloak, betrays your real color preferences.

“Thank you” you say, stiffly, as Blake applies a bit of ointment to your cut.

Her cat ears twitch. “Why didn’t your aura absorb this?”

“I was distracted. I didn’t have it up.”
“Hm. Why?”

Your teeth creak as they grind together. “Are you genuinely curious or-”

“-Not really.” Blake presses down to staunch the bleeding and you wince. “Unless you’re planning to tell me the truth.”

“A Schnee always tells the truth.” You feel like you’re reciting lines from a blackboard, even as you say it.

“Fine.” Blake smooths down your bandage and leans back on her haunches. “Then tell me what’s wrong.”

“This desert, obviously.”

Blake looks unimpressed. “We spent four weeks on a glacier hunting down giant ursas, and you managed not to injure yourself.”

“I prefer the cold.”

“Why are you mad at Ruby?”

“I’m not.”

“I thought Schnees always told the truth?”

You have a sharp retort waiting on the tip of your tongue, chambered and ready to fire, but you manage to hold yourself back. There’s no anger or irritation in Blake’s expression, only intense curiosity. She cares about you. She’s concerned about you. Your mouth snaps shut with a click, and she notes your silence with a slight narrowing of her yellow eyes.

“You’ve been a little off this whole trip,” Blake’s ears twitch, flicking toward some faraway sound, “but your moods have been even more erratic this week, and I can’t figure out why.”

“Yes, well,” you sniff, “you’re not the only one who can be dark and mysterious.”

Blake snorts. “I guess not.”

You stare irately at the bandage on your hand until Blake speaks again.

“Ruby thinks you’re upset about that Mistralian guy.”

“Ruby’s as dense as a rock.”

Blake hums, and takes a seat next to you on your bedroll. “Sometimes.”

“More like all the time.”

“Yeah... It’s kinda cute though, don’t you think?”

Cute? Yes. Definitely cute.

Blake waves her hand in your face and you jolt. Did you just space out? You can feel the blood rushing to your face as you try to turn away, but, of course, you had to get stuck having a heart to heart with the most observant member of team RWBY.

“Oh.” Blake blinks slowly. “Now it makes sense.”
“Now what makes sense?” You level her with your most imperious Schnee glare.

She smiles. “I won’t tell her.”

“Tell her what? There’s nothing to tell!”

“Weiss, I could fry an egg on your face right now.”

“Disgusting.”

“It’s a turn of phrase.”

“I know it is, I just– you wave your hands incoherently.

“You’re freaking out.”

“Of course I’m freaking out!” You don’t even realize you’ve launched onto your feet until Blake is there in front of you, hands on your shoulders, concern crinkling the corners of her eyes.

“-Weiss-“

“-Blake, don’t, okay? Just don’t!”


You exhale, and the emotional exhaustion slams into you like a wave of bricks. You’ve been keyed up for days. It’s just a little too much. The world tilts violently to your left, and you feel sort of seasick, dizzy and unsteady and even a bit nauseous. Blake tugs you close, and you all but collapse into the hug. Yes, you’re self-aware, but you had never actually planned to voice any of your anxieties aloud. There’s no room for secrets on a team of hunters. A distraction like this could get all of you killed.

You shudder and Blake hugs you tighter. “Hey, it’s gonna be okay.”

You sniff. “I really don’t see how.”

“I know, but these things have a way of working out.”

You nod and pull away, wiping at your eyes.

“How long?” Blake asks.

You stare at her. “How long what?”

“How long have you liked Ruby?”

“I don’t like her. Not like that, at least.”

“I don’t like her. Not like that, at least.”

“Okay?” Blake arches a brow. “I’m confused. I thought we were talking about–… no?”

You growl in frustration and tug at your hair, which, for long missions like this, is perpetually tied up in a hygienic and functional french braid. You’re distantly aware you’re not making much sense, but the reality is you’ve never examined your feelings too closely. It was always just the strange fluttering in your chest, the itch in your fingers, the daydreams, the jealousy, and then, of course, the fear. Until now.

“Look, I don’t know what this is, okay?
“It seems like a simple crush to me.”

“There’s nothing simple about it!”

“Okay, okay!” Blake puts up her hands in a sign of surrender. “Super duper complicated. Got it.”

You groan and flop down again in front the fire. The light over the ridge is finally starting to die, and the first stars are out, shimmering like a net of diamonds behind the shattered moon. Ruby and Yang should be back soon.

Blake settles in beside you, and you spend a few minutes like that in silence, each lost in your own thoughts.

“My father would be furious if he knew.” You pull up your knees and rest your chin on your arms. “He’d have a coronary.”

Blake pokes the tiny fire with the toe of her boot and leans over to add more sticks. “Why?”

“Well, first of all, I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but Ruby’s a girl.”

“I’ve definitely noticed.”

“And, second of all, she’s not the heiress to any fortunes I know of.”

“Maybe genetically, but otherwise...no.”

“And, third of all, she’s a huntress, like me. A pretty famous huntress.”

Blake frowns. “I think we’re all pretty famous at this point.”

You shake your head. “If my dad only cared about fame, this would be easy. Unfortunately, he’s controlling, conniving, and old fashioned to boot.”

“I’m sorry. Those are pretty crappy reasons for him to flip out about who you want to date.”

“I don’t want to date her!”

Blake rolls her eyes. “Um, yeah. It’s pretty obvious you do.”

You feel like you’re going to cry. “God, please don’t say ‘obvious’!”

“Don’t worry.” Blake pats your arm. “Whatever your feelings are, I don’t think the other two will notice.”

“And you won’t say anything?”

She mimes zipping her lips. “Not a word.”

You breathe out a sigh of relief. “I owe you one.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m your friend, too, remember?”

You flop down face first onto your sleeping bag, too exhausted to care about the ramifications of acknowledging this secret out loud. “How are you not freaking out about this? I just admitted to potentially having a secret gay crush on my partner, our team leader, and you’re all, ‘don’t worry, Weiss. Everything will work out okay in the end.’”
Blake huffs a laugh as she stands. “Well, it definitely explains why you’ve been acting so weird. Plus, I’ve had my share of secret crushes, and there’s nothing all that surprising about it. Love doesn’t follow any rules. It kinda just…happens.”

You groan into your sleeping bag. “I am not in love with Ruby.”

“Well, you just admitted that you’re still pretty confused, so who knows? You might be.”

Your weary eyes shoot daggers across the dark campsite. “Blake Belladonna, don’t you dare put that evil on me.”

Blake just laughs and pulls out a packet of Atlesian military rations. “Hungry?”

“Absolutely not.”

You tug off your cloak and kick off your boots. In the morning you’ll have to check them for lizards and poisonous bugs since you’ve all opted to sleep open air tonight, but better that than sand and rocks in your sleeping bag.

“Suit yourself,” Blake says. “Going to bed?”

“God, yes. I’m exhausted.”

“Same here. I’ll be joining you as soon as thing one and thing two get back from their evening stroll.”

You snort. “We should’ve called them that from the beginning.”


“Goodnight, Blake.”

You crawl under the quilted flap, zip yourself in, and breathe out a sigh of relief. A great weight has been lifted from your chest. For the first time in weeks, you feel steady again, like you might be able to control your wild emotions.

You drift off before Ruby and Yang return from their walk, letting the sounds of the desert lull you to sleep.

You dream of rose petals falling from the dark sky like crimson snow.

vii.

It rains for two days.

The driving wind has rendered your poncho mostly useless. You’re half drenched, and what little of you isn’t soaked in water is soaked sweat from the humidity. Wet sand chafes between your knees under your combat skirt as you walk, and your thick, hiking socks squelch in your boots with each sodden step. Lightning rips across the sky periodically, followed closely by sharp claps of thunder. You flinch each time, and Ruby shoots you sympathetic smiles that you ignore. Your snowy white bangs are plastered to your forehead.

You can’t even look at her.
The four of you alternate with the lead, sticking to high ground and low ridges to avoid getting caught up in a flash flood. Visibility is poor, and the footing is slick and muddy, but things go from bad to worse when Yang spots a pair of enormous death stalkers on the horizon. The wind throws off the aim of Ruby’s sniper, and you’re all stuck trying to dodge and parry on the ground, running slow, sloppy circles around both Grimm in the wet sand.

You’re forced to rely on your summons to keep the Grimm busy while you fire off glyphs to get some traction. You waste half a cannister of dust icing the terrain to help shore up the footing for your teammates, but the massive beasts only tear it up again a minute later. Ruby uses her semblance to stay nimble while Blake whips around on the ribbon end of Gambol shroud, but spongy ground foils Yang as she tries to dodge a swipe from a massive pincer. She takes a nasty blow to the face, spiraling backward through the air before crash-landing in a pool of water. Myrtenaster at the ready, you immediately parry a downward strike towards her chest from the stalker’s gold spiked tail, but your feet slide out from under you, glyph failing under the Grimm’s crushing weight. You fall face down in the mud and come up with a mouthful of dirt, rolling with just enough speed to avoid the next strike. Desperate, you slice at its spindly legs, spitting out mud with a triumphant cry when you locate a weak joint with the tip of your blade. The death stalker tips drunkenly to one side, distracted just long enough for Yang to front flip over its pincers and bludgeon it with half a dozen shells behind the eyes.

She collapses in a heap onto the ground as the creature dissolves and you smile, pounding the sand with your fist.

“Excellent timing, Yang!”

She raises a single gold gauntlet into the air, the only visible sign she’s heard you.

“Um, guys?!”

You turn to find Blake wrapped around the tail of the second death stalker, clinging on desperately as the appendage flails violently back and forth, trying to throw her off. You scramble to your feet, scanning the field.

“Where’s Ruby?!”

“Ahhhh I don’t knooow!” Blake hacks at the death stalker’s tail with Gambol Shroud and you wince, firing off yet another beam of ice to help slow the creature down.

Yang staggers upright on shaky legs, punching the air to reload her shotgun rounds. “Find her, Weiss!”

“But you’re-!”

“I’m fine!” Yang cracks her neck and crouches down, jaw set. “I’ve been in Grimmer situations before!”

“Really?!” you shout, as she launches up, rounds propelling her higher. “Bad puns at a time like this?!”

“Find my sister!” she yells back, sailing through the air, and you turn about, wet, dirty fingers slipping awkwardly against Myrtenaster’s handle.

You curse aloud and squint through the rain. If only Ruby were wearing her trademark red cape this would be easy.

“God damn ugly clothes and their god damn camouflage!” you screech, sprinting from glyph to
glyph in a wide arc around the battlefield. “Ruby! God damnit, where the hell are you?!?”

Your heart is thumping, thoughts racing, muscles burning when you spot Crescent Rose, long, wicked blade embedded point-first in low, rocky shelf. You vault over, using your rapier to balance your clumsy landing, and there, on the other side, lying at the bottom of a narrow ravine in a stream of muddy water, you find Ruby.

You nearly have a panic attack on the spot.

The last time you found her like this…

“Ruby!”

You scramble into the ravine, slide your knees, and lift her out of the water. A bit of blood trickles from the corner of her mouth, and there’s a shallow laceration across her abdomen, but she’s breathing, and otherwise appears unharmed.

Her eyelids flutter, and she blinks up at you. “Oh…hey, Weiss.”

You could cry from relief. “Ruby…”

“I’m okay.” She tries for a smile, and manages a wan approximation of one. “I just conked out for a second there.

Lightning flashes overhead, and your arms tighten around her reflexively. “Did you hit your head?” You hate the way your voice shakes.

“Mmm, I don’t think so.” She reaches up to feel her scalp and you catch her fingers.

“Let me.”

She looks at you with a blurry sort of wonder. “You’re being so nice.”

Your fingers glide over her wet hair, probing gently for wounds, and you loathe yourself for ever daring to fantasize about this, getting to hold her like this, getting to touch her so intimately. Your pulse pounds in your ears.

“No bumps,” you announce after a second, and release the breath you’d been holding. “Good.”

“I used my aura to break my fall,” she says, gaze clearing finally. “I think the impact just sort of stunned me for a minute.”

Your eyes well up unexpectedly, and she blinks at you. “Weiss?” Her fingers extend as if to touch your face, curling back at the last second. “Are you okay? You’re crying.”

You shake your head. “It’s just the rain.”

Ruby’s silver eyes narrow in concern, flicking back and forth across your features, taking you in. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

You shake your head again, tears falling faster.

“Weiss-“

“-It’s okay. I’m fine.” You sniff and wipe your nose on the sleeve of your poncho. It’s not very effective.
“Are you sure? You seem pretty upset.”

“No.” You suck in a steadying breath. “I’m fine, really. You just looked- when I saw you down here I...”

You release Ruby as she moves to sit up. Her palms splash in the muddy stream running around you both. She looks like a drowned rat with her long hair hanging across her poncho in wet tendrils.

“I’m okay,” she says, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Really.”

In the distance, the sound of Ember Celica firing in tandem with Gambol Shroud draws your attention, but only for a moment. Ruby takes your hand and squeezes.

“O-okay,” you murmur.

You sit with her like that for a bit, chewing your lip as you stare at your joined hands. You should pull away, but you can’t. There isn’t enough strength in your body for such a feat. Her skin is warm and slick with rain, her touch gentle. You don’t know how much time is passing, only that it’s passing too fast. You could stay like this for an age.

“Guys!” You jump, and withdraw your hand. Behind you, Yang’s head pops over the lip of the ravine. “Is everything okay down there?!”

Ruby gives a little smile and a wave. “Fine, sis!”

“Awesome!” Yang offers an enthusiastic thumbs up. “Hey, you’d better get up here quick, though! There’s another wave of rain moving in! We’ve got to get to higher ground!”

You can actually feel your eye twitching as you glare up at her. “Are you kidding?! It never stopped raining!”

“I know, but it’s about to rain a whole lot harder!” A flash and an ominous crack of thunder punctuate her statement. “Come on!”

“Time to go.” Ruby glances at you, and you could swear, for a second, she looks reluctant, but you don’t understand it.

Blake rappels down the side of the ravine with Gambol Shroud to help you both clamber back up. At the top, Yang is waiting with a grin and all four backpacks, a nasty shiner forming under her left eye.

“You guys should’ve seen the sweet moves Blake put on that giant death stalker! Totally epic.”

Blake smirks. “You weren’t so bad yourself, blondie.”

Yang’s grin widens. “Aw, shucks.”

You shiver as another wave of thunder rolls over the valley, and reach out to take your pack from Yang’s metallic forearm. “We should get moving.”

Ruby nods in serious agreement, retrieving Crescent Rose out of the rocky shelf, then turning to shoulder her own gear. “How many hours of daylight do we have left?”

Blake checks her watch and frowns. “Two.”

“Crap.” Ruby winces, and you already know why. “That’s not enough time to get to other side of
the valley before nightfall. We’re gonna have to backtrack.”

All four of you groan in unison.

“Shit!” Yang snarls, kicking at the mud.

You concur wholeheartedly.

Ruby rubs the back of her head, and you worry, not for the first time, that she’s hiding the extent of her injuries. “That’s an awfully dark band of clouds heading our way.”

You follow her line of sight and frown. “This storm is never-ending.”

“We might have to run for higher ground before it gets here.”

You glance at her seriously. “Are you up for that?”

Ruby’s eyes narrow. “Of course.”

Oh yes. Definitely hiding something.

“Alright, well, give me a sec,” Blake grumbles, re-fastening the buckles on her pack. “I need to fix my hair. It’s driving me crazy.”

Hood long forsaken, dark hair wet and tangled, Ruby groans. “We’re all gross anyway. Does it really matter?”

“Are you kidding?” You shoot her an incredulous look. “I’d trade half my inheritance for a hot shower right now.”

Blake smirks. “Only half?”

“A girl’s gotta live.”

“I’d say a hot shower sounds nice, but-” Yang sticks her hair tie between her teeth as she fixes her ponytail, “-first of all, I’m already soaked.” She wipes at her wet face with equally wet hands, and replaces her hood. “Second of all, it’s like 80 degrees.”

“85,” you say, with a snort of disgust. The three of them turn to look at you quizzically, and you huff. “I’m sensitive to hot temperatures, okay? I can tell the difference.”

Blake hastily re-weaves the end of her long, black braid before tucking it back into her poncho and pulling up the hood. “Impressive.”

“Agreed,” Ruby adds, tone uncharacteristically flat. She sounds tired.

Yang glances at Ruby and arches a brow. “Alright, well, let’s head out, I guess. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover. I’ll take the front. Ruby, stick close to me so I can keep an eye on you.”

Ruby salutes. “Aye aye, Sis.”

You breathe out a tiny sigh of relief and catch Blake eyeing you from under her hood. “What?”

She shakes her head and nods at the siblings, marching off together toward the low hills looming in the distance. She starts off after them without comment, and you follow, suspicious, but content to not to push the issue.
You’ve been trudging along at a brisk pace for about a mile when Blake finally drops back to check on you.

“Hey,” she murmurs, “you okay?

“Fine.”

Blake is unfazed. “You look rattled.”

“I am rattled.”

“Why?”

You bite your lip, battling with yourself. “I…” You sigh and close your eyes for a second to steel your nerves. “I think Ruby’s hurt, and she’s trying to hide it.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, just check on her tonight in the tent.”

You exhale unsteadily, and your face flushes. “Right. Okay.”

Blake’s eyes widen. “What is that look for?”

You roll your eyes. “Last night, since our clothes were all soaked, she…stripped naked and…slept like that.”

Blake’s surprise morphs into amusement. “No wonder you were so tired this morning.”

“I swear to god, there isn’t a shred of modesty in that empty head of hers.”

“Good thing you have enough of that for both of you.”

Your fingers curl into fists. “Seriously, don’t tease me right now. I’m worried, and exhausted, and I’m doing the best I can.”

“Alright, sorry.” Blake chuckles. “Look, just talk to her. Tell her to put on a shirt or something.”

Now, even your ears feel hot. “Fine.”

“Cool. You good? You gonna be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” you grit. “I’ve survived worse than Ruby’s boobs bouncing around in my face.”

Blake chokes on a laugh. “Holy shit, that image.”

“Hey!” Yang calls. “What are you guys whispering about back there?”

“You don’t wanna know!” Blake calls back, smirking, and you almost punch her.

You regret all your life choices.

viii.
High up, near the top of the hill, you find a shelf of stable rock where it’s safe to set up your tents. It’s dark by the time you’re finished hammering in the pins and clipping everything down to withstand the wind. You duck in out of the deluge without so much as a wave to Blake and Yang.

Ruby’s already inside, and you’re prepared to avert your eyes from whatever state of undress she’s found herself in, but you needn’t have worried. She’s fast asleep in a heap on the gritty canvas floor, sleeping bag rolled up tight next to her head.

“Dolt,” you mutter, biting back a smile.

Ruby doesn’t stir, but you watch her for a few seconds anyway. You’ve grown so pathetically fond of her.

The next ten minutes are spent getting your own situation sorted out. You remove your poncho, hang it on a clothesline strung across the entrance, and manipulate a bit of fire dust in the lid of your metal thermos to start drying it out. The rest of your sodden clothes come off next, boots and socks shucked, stained tunic peeled off and hung with your muddy combat skirt and your poncho next to the entrance flap. Soon, you’ve stripped down to just a pair of skin tight, lycra shorts and your training bra. From your pack, covered with a plastic shield and thankfully dry, you pull out a pair of jersey-cloth shorts and a dark blue t-shirt, which you set aside. The storm has kept the desert unbearably humid, but also, somewhat warmer at night. You pause to think about it, and pull out a thin, fleece pullover as well. Everything is folded and set in a pile next to your packed up bed roll.

You run your fingers over the streaks of mud on your shins. Those will have to be washed off before bed, but you’ll have to make do with a moist towelette. You helped Yang rig up the extra tarp to capture some rain water overnight, so a real wash might be possible in the morning, but for now you’ll have to deal with being sticky and sweaty.

“Mmmph… Weiss… your skin is so fair.”

Goosebumps explode across your exposed back. You turn, half-covering your stomach with your arm, and find Ruby blinking groggily at you with the same blurry sort of wonder you saw earlier in the ravine.

She smiles. “How do you do it? Even out here in the desert…” she trails off, eyes fluttering.

“Sunscreen,” you answer, flustered, and reach for your shirt.

“Your face is red.”

“A common side effect of pale skin.”

“Why?”

“I’m not going to explain basic biology to you, Ruby.”

“No, I mean, why are you blushing?”

“I-… you…” You sigh in defeat. “I’m embarrassed.”

“Aw, don’t be. I’ve seen you naked before.”

You pull the shirt over your head and reach for your shorts. “We were kids then.”

“Your body hasn’t changed that much.”
“Yes, but yours has.” You glance over your shoulder at Ruby, curled up in a wet, sloppy ball, puzzling over your cryptic answer.

She always was a bit dense, thank god.

You turn away and close your eyes, pausing to take a deep breath. Get it together, Weiss.

You finish dressing in silence, then unfurl your bed roll, and sit down to scrub the mud off your shins. You waste an imprudent, second towelette to wipe off your face, neck, collar, and spine. Ruby dozes next to you, eyes occasionally blinking open to watch, before slipping shut again.

“Your legs are smooth,” she murmurs.

“Laser hair removal.”

“Smart. I should do that.” Her gaze flicks up to yours. “Hey, Weiss…”

You crumple up your spent towelettes and toss them away. “What?”

“What were you talking about with Blake earlier?”

“None of your business.” Ruby visibly shrinks. You almost curse your Schnee temper out loud. Not for the first time you wish you had more tact. “Take off your boots and your poncho,” you say, flatly. “You can’t sleep on the floor like that. And comb out your hair or it’ll mat.”

Ruby’s eyes lose a bit of their focus. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“…I’m too sore to move.”

Your eyes narrow. “You got hurt earlier, didn’t you?”

Her silence speaks volumes.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“Weiss-“

“-You don’t need to push yourself so hard! The rest of us are perfectly capable of picking up the slack.”

“But I’m your lea-“

“-Ruby Rose, if you finish that sentence I’ll make you wish you had never opened your mouth in the first place!”

Silence echoes between you in the tent, and it’s a full three seconds before you realize you’re breathing hard. You try to compose yourself, try to calm down, but you’re so tired, and so frazzled. You feel like you haven’t slept in days. Maybe you haven’t. Ruby’s looking at you like you kicked her dog, and you need a breather, but god, where can you go in the dark and the rain?

At that moment, the walls of the tent rattle violently in the wind, as if to remind you. Your head drops onto your knees.

“Hey, Weiss?” Ruby’s timid voice speaks into the silence. “I, um… I’m sorry.”
You say nothing. Truthfully, you can’t think of anything to say.

“I know you’re stressed out, and you’ve got a lot going on at home, and I’m sorry if I’m only making this mission harder for you.”

You sniff. Are you crying again? It’s not her fault. You want to lift your head and open your mouth and tell her it’s not, except you can’t, because it is. You can barely look at her anymore without losing your breath. Your chest hurts. Your heart hurts. You’re trying so hard to hold it all in and you’re not sure how much longer you can before you explode.

This is all Blake’s fault.

You’ve said it once, and now you want to say it again. Scream it, actually. You’ve protected your image carefully all these years, and you’ve never resented your own self control so much. Oh, to be like Yang, or even Ruby. To not give a damn what everybody thinks and throw caution to the wind, to take that leap, to tell the truth. The whole truth. That it’s becoming increasingly obvious to you, as the years go by, that you’ll never feel for a duke’s son what you feel for your hunting partner.

God, what a glorious mess it would be. A gay Schnee heir? The media would have a field day. Your father would…

You sniff again.

You are crying.

“Weiress?”

“I’m okay, Ruby.” You are not okay. “Just give me a minute.”

Ruby shifts, rubber poncho squeaking against the tent floor, and moments later a warm hand is resting on your shoulder. You flinch, but she doesn’t pull away. Her fingers tighten like a vice. A comforting vice. You wipe your eyes on your knee caps and try to look at her, but you can’t quite do it. The tears keep coming, faster and faster, until your chest is heaving, until your breath is hitching and catching, and your whole body trembles under the weight of your grief. The bedroll beside you dips, and next thing you know, Ruby is carding her fingers through your damp, dirty hair. Your hairband snaps when she pulls it off, and your scalp tingles like a sore muscle stretching out as she slowly unwinds the tight french braid arcing like a ridge over the crown of your skull.


You nod and bite your lip. You absolutely will not permit yourself to open your mouth. There’s no telling what’ll come flying out of it at a moment like this.

“Whatever it is, you’ll get through it. We’ve already been through much worse.”

You huff a laugh, wet with tears. “That’s true.”

“We never really got the chance to be normal students,” Ruby sighs, wistfully. “But, hey! It made us stronger, right?”

“Y-yeah.”

A quick swipe of your sleeve is all it takes to dry your eyes. You turn your head to look at Ruby, eyes drawn inexorably to hers, and your gazes connect with a spark. The air thickens around you,
and this time, Ruby looks away first.

“Um, hey so…”

You watch her fleeting eyes. “What?”

“…Wanna help me get my boots off?”

You scoff. “Your timing is completely tactless, as usual.”

Ruby winces. “Sorry.”

“What’s wrong? Too sore?”

“I mean… I could, but…”

Without another world, you lean over and unlace her boots, tugging until they pop off with a sickening squelch. Those are chucked in the corner. Next, you reach for the hem of her ripped poncho and tug until she gets the message. She lifts her arms slowly, jaw clenched, and you pull it over her head, lobbing it carelessly toward the little coffee cup of fire dust at the entrance of the tent. You don’t even bother hanging it, because who are you kidding? Fire dust or not, none of your stuff will be dry in the morning.

“Thanks.” Ruby rubs at the bruising on her chest.

“But thank me yet.”

Stripped of her poncho, you can now see the damage Ruby’s taken underneath. Her shirt is soaked through from the shoulders down to about mid chest, and sliced open diagonally across the abdomen where the death stalker gashed her. The fabric is dark with dried blood. That’ll have to be dealt with. First, you need to get her mangy, black mane under control. It’s driving you crazy.

You tear your eyes away from her stomach and reach into your bag for a brush.

“Tilt your head back,” you command, softly, and Ruby complies without question as you set about raking out the tangles.

“Ow!” She flinches. “That hurts, Weiss!”

“That’s why we’re braiding your hair tonight. You’re lucky I can salvage this wreck at all.” Ruby flinches again, trying to pull away, but you hold her fast. “Sit still.”

She whimpers under her breath as your silver brush snags on the next tangle, but she obeys, and you smile to yourself, thinking back to that first year of Beacon when she tried so hard to impress you. Ruby only ever wanted to be your friend, and you resisted her for as long as you could. In some ways, you’re still resisting.

“Jeez,” Ruby wheezes, when you’ve finished at last. “It feels like someone pulled all my hair out.

“Take better care of your hygiene.”

“Maybe I should just shave my head.”

“No, absolutely not.”

Ruby glances over her shoulder at you. “No?”
“You’d look stupid with a shaved head,” you mutter, irate. Seriously, the very idea…

“You like my hair long?” Ruby’s voice lilts a bit, like she’s teasing, like she’s secretly very pleased.

You really do. “I suppose.”

“Aw. Thanks, Weiss.”

Ruby grins. Distant lightning illuminates the roof of the tent and you reach for the ends of her hair, pausing for just a moment to wrap a long, damp tendril around your index finger. Thunder rolls across the sky. Your heart pounds sharply. Blood pumps into your fingers until they’re pulsing.

You’re not some blushing virgin.

You know this urge.

“T-take off your shirt.” Your voice is as composed as it can possibly be. You swallow thickly. “I’ve got to clean up that gash on your stomach, and I know you landed on your spine. I need to take a look to make sure you didn’t crack any ribs.”

Ruby pouts. “I think I’d know if I cracked a rib.” She breathes in smoothly to demonstrate her point.

“Off.”

“Okay, okay, but, uh…” She winces. “A little help?”

Your face is going to catch on fire. “Fine.” You reach for the hem of her shirt, clinically, professionally. *It’s like ripping off a band-aid, moron. Just get it over with.*

“Um, Weiss? You okay?”

You realize you’ve been staring at her midriff. “Yes!” You shake your head. “Yes, fine.”

You pull the shirt up the rest of the way, revealing far more skin than you were honestly prepared to handle. The gash on her stomach is angry and red, but shallow. You’ll be thanking every god in the galaxy tonight.

The med kit is the next thing to come out of your pack, set out and opened next to you on your bed roll. Ruby’s stitches, the last wound you’d mended, have already begun to dissolve, the gash along her jaw closing up cleanly and without issue. It won’t scar. You made sure of it.

Ruby flinches a bit when cold antiseptic touches her abdomen, but she relaxes, looking to you for reassurance. What you offer is shaky, and barely passable. It’s taking too much effort to keep your mind under control, to keep your eyes from raking up her chest, over her collarbones, over her red lips.

Red.

The color makes your throat constrict. You miss her red cloak.

“All done.” You breathe out unsteadily, and lean back. Everything is taped up and cleaned.

“Thanks.” Ruby rubs at her new bandage. “Are you gonna be okay?”

“I’m fine.”
“You always say that, but… are you sure? It’s okay if you aren’t! I mean, I definitely don’t mind if you wanna talk about it or something. ...Do you want to talk about it?”

Your fingers curl together in your lap. “No, I’m okay. I got it out of my system.”

“Right. Of course.” Ruby nods, but she doesn’t believe you for a minute. You can see it in her eyes.

“Turn around. Let’s braid your hair before you pass out.”

Ruby’s eyes flicker with something you don’t recognize, but her voice sounds strange when she utters a shy, “okay,” and goes to face away from you.

Suddenly, you’re so tired you could sleep forever.

ix.

You wake sometime in the middle of the night with Ruby curled around you in your sleeping bag, breathing softly against your shoulder. The air is still, the patter of raindrops conspicuously absent from the roof of your tent. All around you, like a cheerful ambience, you hear the sound of croaking frogs and chirping crickets, and you wonder, blearily, where all this life has been hiding in the desolate, Vacuan desert.

Beside you, Ruby’s breath catches in her sleep, and you can feel her abdominal muscles stretch and contract along your side. A shiver rattles up your spine, fizzing in your jaw and the back of your skull. You can’t remember how you ended up in this position, but you don’t have the wherewithal to push her away. You inhale and fill your nose with the scent of roses. She’s warm and solid and soft. You want to wrap her up and hold her in your arms until the stars burn out. You’re interrupted before you get the opportunity.

“Ruby?” Yang’s voice at the entrance of tent makes you realize what it was that woke you in the first place. “Hey, Ruby, it’s your turn to sit watch.”

The tent flap begins to unzip and your throat constricts. This isn’t a position you want to get caught in, but you can’t get yourself untangled fast enough. The sleeping bag is too small and the two of you are a veritable mess of limbs. Ruby’s bare leg is thrown across your naked thighs. Her arm is wrapped around your torso. Her fingers are wound into your shirt. How you ever managed to sleep through this will forever remain a mystery.

“Ruby?” The little dust lantern illuminates Yang’s spun-gold hair like a wild halo around her face, her expression obscured in shadow as she peers into the tent. “Ruby, it’s- oh!” She stiffens as she spots you, blinking in the light.

The lantern is lowered, and you can finally make out her expression a little bit better. She looks surprised. Your heart thumps.

“Uh… hey, Weiss.”

You swallow. “Hey.”

“So, you guys look pretty cozy.”
Your stomach twists, and some unconscious part of you immediately feels dirty, like you’ve been caught groping her sister in the middle of the night.

“Yes, well...” You hesitate. “I think Ruby crawled in with me after I fell asleep.”

“I see.” Yang squints through the gloom, and your face heats. “Oh, you braided her hair.”

“I did.”

“Thank god.” Yang looks visibly relieved. “It was such a rat’s nest yesterday.”

“Totally dreadful.”

“Thanks for taking care of it.”

“Of course.”

“Well, so, uh...” Yang scratches the back of her neck. “I was gonna wake Ruby up for her shift, but um. I think I’m not...gonna do that...anymore.”

You frown, confused. “You’re not?”

“No.” Yang shakes her head. “I think I’m just gonna let you guys... She just looks so cozy right now, doesn’t she?”

“It’s a little cramped.”

Yang laughs nervously. “Right, um. Sorry.”

“Yang-“

“No, no it’s okay!” Yang backs out of the tent, hand extended in front of her. “You guys get some rest. You both need it. I’ll just go wake up Blake in a bit.”

“Yang, wait-“

“-Goodnight!”

She seals up the tent flap with a crisp zip and that’s that. You’re left lying awake, blinking up into the dark, listening to the crickets and the subtle clink of metal as Yang cleans her prosthetic arm outside.

Ruby breathes steadily against your neck, and you wonder what could possibly be going through Yang’s mind, if Blake has spilled your secret, if you’ll get even a single hour of sleep with Ruby draped all over you in the world’s tiniest spandex shorts. On the latter point, likely not. Your muscles are too tense. Your heartbeat is too quick and too loud. You never really minded when she crawled in your bunk at Beacon, but it was different when Ruby was still a kid. You could set her apart. You could keep her at arm’s length. You could bring up the age gap whenever the lines got fuzzy and put her back in her rightful place. She was one inch shorter, and two years younger, and it was easier then to make such tidy distinctions. Now she dwarfs you, even in heels, and you can’t keep any of your feelings in their appropriate boxes anymore.

After some indeterminable amount of time, Yang’s voice carries in from outside as she goes to wake Blake for an early shift. Ruby mumbles in her sleep, nuzzling in closer to your neck. Her fingers draw back across your chest to curl into the fabric between your breasts.

Oh.
Your breath catches in your throat.

If it were possible for a person to spontaneously combust, you’d be a human firecracker. Your body’s response to Ruby’s touch is instant, autonomic, and powerful, and you can’t do this. You’re not a kid. You’re a full fledged adult with a hunting license and a libido and needs. The juncture between your thighs throbs once, in agreement, and you absolutely have to get her off of you.

Your right hand, the one not trapped beneath Ruby’s weight, closes around her shoulder to shake her awake, but her skin is warm through her thin shirt, and your conviction falters. You hate yourself for being so weak. All you had to do was shove these feelings down to the depths of your soul with everything else you’ve repressed over the years, but you couldn’t do it.

When did you start to want her this much?

Ruby sighs into your neck, interrupting your agitated thoughts. You stiffen instinctively, but she only presses in tighter against you. Your skin burns under her weight. Your heart begins to race. In a moment of weakness, your hand drifts down to her waist, gripping tightly to the curve of her hip where her shirt has ridden up.

Your fingers twitch and spread over smooth skin, throbbing lightly, soaking up her heat. The temptation to explore further grips you so tightly you nearly choke. You’ve forgotten how to breathe.

This is an unequivocal moral quagmire.

You have to push her off. You have to wake her up, but your traitorous fingertips only venture further across her lower back, and the instant shame you feel mingles with intoxicating arousal, a poisonous cocktail.

Ruby releases the barest of sighs at your touch, and shifts again, drawing her leg back across your body to slot, with no small amount of pressure, between your thighs. You gasp into the silence. Your back arches, and your hips instinctively rut against her leg, creating fiction that sends you spinning. Outside, you’re dimly aware of Yang and Blake talking in their tent, and you try, desperately, to keep yourself quiet, but Ruby’s fingers twist further into the fabric between your breasts, dragging the taught material lightly against your stiff, throbbing nipples, and a whimper escapes your teeth. She shifts again, inadvertently bearing down on your core, and you bite your tongue hard, chin jutting up, eyes rolling back into your head.

It’s illicit, and wrong, and...a furtive sort of thrill, but you can’t capitulate to this. It’ll ruin everything. You have to gather your thoughts together, get your wits about you, and put a stop to this before it gets-

Soft lips brush against the juncture of your neck and shoulder, puckering slowly, before drawing away.

You freeze, your body as stiff as a board, until they return to a new spot, just higher than the last, pressing, with obvious purpose, into the tender swath of skin below your ear. You shudder uncontrollably as a terrible realization comes over you.

Ruby’s awake.

“You-“

A sweaty hand clamps down over your mouth. “Shh.” You shake your head, trying to break free,
but Ruby holds you fast, bending up to whisper in your ear. “It’s okay. Let me help.”

You’re shocked into silence. She’s so close your breath hitches, and your pulse beats hard in your ears. You can’t hide how worked up you are. Has all of this been intentional? Has she been awake this whole time? What the hell is going on?

“Just stop me if I go too far, okay?”

A beat of tense silence passes between you, but finally, you nod.

Ruby’s fingers dip down to your navel. As they slide back up, the hem of your shirt comes them, rising until your bare nipples are hardening in the cool night air. There’s barely a second to dwell on the nervous anticipation flooding your body before Ruby shifts, sleeping bag rustling around her shoulders. Warm, wet lips find your left breast. You jerk, the sensitive bud inadvertently slipping into her silky mouth. The sensation is incredible. Your hips roll against her body, and Ruby’s palm returns to your mouth, prepared to stifle your incriminating moans.

Distantly, you’re aware of Yang and Blake conversing over something in their tent, something innocuous about rations that you could probably listen in on if you had half a mind to do it, but Ruby’s lips make an illicit sort of suckling sound every time she swirls her tongue around your nipple, and her free hand is creeping into the waistband of your shorts, and the clandestine intensity of it all has you so worked up you can’t remember your own name, let alone how to pump the brakes.

God, none of this makes any sense.

Ruby’s fingers slip into your briefs, pushing past the elastic with obvious impatience, and practically glide into your soaking wet folds. She gasps against your chest, forgetting herself for a moment. Your thighs shudder and shake. You lip trembles. Your knees rise, jogging the sleeping bag. You arch like a cat stretching in the warm sun. It’s embarrassing how wet you are. You lift your hand to push her away, but it disobeys, sliding into her hair, tugging at the braid until she lifts herself up to hover over you in inky darkness. A beat passes, and then she lowers her mouth to yours.

The kiss is sloppy.

She misses the mark at first, seeking your lips out mainly by touch without the ambient light of the campfire to see by. Her fingers twitch, slipping over your clit and you gasp against her mouth. You’ve had sex a handful of times in your young adult life, but never has it proven such a challenge to stay quiet. Ruby swallows the sound with a wet, open-mouthed kiss that leaves you panting, and you have only half a second to wonder how she got so good at this before the fingers in your underwear start up a quick, deliberate rhythm. She doesn’t even have to penetrate you. You’ll come just like this in less than a minute if she maintains her current pace. Ruby seems to know it, too, stroking your most sensitive spots with ruthless precision. Tension mounts inside you like a coiled spring. The shaking in your legs picks up until it reaches a fever pitch. Your hands grasp uselessly at her back, seeking purchase in her t-shirt. She doesn’t falter. Her lips stay glued to yours until you’re forced to break for air.

“Quietly, Weiss,” she whispers, into your ear, and you have to jam your fist in your mouth as you tumble over the edge, convulsing in her arms, sleeping bag rustling softly around you.

You can’t catch your breath.

Ruby peppers silent kisses along your neck and your jaw, rubbing slow circles with her fingers to bring you down. There’s cotton in your ears and sparks of light in your head, and your body is so
heavy you could have lead for bones. You feel like you’re spinning in a very pleasant way.

“Sleep,” Ruby whispers, hand slipping gently from your shorts.

She straightens your clothes with clinical efficiency, wipes the evidence of your orgasm on the hem of her shirt, and snuggles back in against your side like nothing happened.

“Ruby,” you start, your voice little more than a rasp, but damp, pungent fingers press against your lips.

You can taste yourself on her.

“Sleep, Weiss. You’re exhausted.”

Her hand strokes your bangs from your face, and your heavy eyelids close.

You suppose it can wait until morning.

x.

You wake again just after dawn, alone and disoriented. A rare birdsong filters in from outside, coaxing you into awareness, and you realize, with a start, that your body is cold.

Where is…?

You roll over and peer across the tent, only to find Ruby sitting atop her own rumpled sleeping bag.

“Morning,” she mumbles, neutrally.

She mentions nothing further as she yawns and smiles at you in her normal way, putting one last knot in the laces of her boots before she crawls up and out of the tent.

You lie perfectly still, carefully blinking the sleep from your eyes.

Something doesn’t seem right. You’ve always been a light sleeper. It was weird enough that you managed to sleep half the night with her lying on top of you, but how did she manage to disentangle herself, crawl out of your sleeping bag, and set up her own bedroll without you noticing? Or did your delirious mind just invent a steamy, febrile dream to torture you with? Your hand slides into your briefs and finds a telltale crust on the seam between your legs, but, of course, that means nothing except that you’re a sexually active young woman with an agonizingly vivid imagination.

You lie awake on your back for several minutes, replaying the hazy events of the previous night in your head. In the light of day, it all seems like a pipe dream. Ruby’s no sex-crazed vixen. She’s definitely not the sort of girl to initiate midnight trysts and then pull a straight face in the morning. She babbles. She blushes. She gets clumsy and trips over everything whenever Yang tries to talk to her about the boys she’s dating. You think back to Ruby’s blank smile across the tent, and frown in confusion.

Maybe you’re finally losing it.

No one says anything to you as you emerge from the tent. Yang waves silently, chewing on a toasted bagel. Blake hardly glances up from her book. Ruby pushes a few slices of bacon around
in the travel-sized skillet over the fire. You blink at them, foggy and unnerved. The air is crisp and the sun is shining, and when you turn your head, you see that the desert valley is carpeted with pale streaks of blue and pink flowers.

“What’s up, Weiss?” Yang asks, looking up from her food.

You twitch, realizing, with some chagrin, that you’ve been staring out at the valley for some time. “Nothing.” You take a seat next to the fire, and Ruby wordlessly hands you a plate of bacon. “Just a weird dream.”

“What was it about?” Ruby asks, innocently enough, and you’re struck speechless for a moment.

“Probably a sex dream.” Blake eyes you mischievously over her book. “I heard her thrashing around in her sleeping bag last night.”

Heat flares in your cheeks, and you glare across the fire at her with extraordinary venom. “Shut up, Blake!”

Her startled expression only makes you more upset. You’ve overreacted to her teasing, and given yourself away.

“Weiss…” Yang starts, concern passing over her features, but you hold up a hand, and climb to your feet, cutting her off.

“I’m going for a walk.”

Ruby watches you, but says nothing as you grab Myrtenaster from the tent and stalk off down the side of the hill.

You’re acting like a basket case.

You have to get your shit together.

When you return to the campsite twenty minutes later, the tents are already packed away, sleeping bags and all. Blake is cleaning up the campfire. Ruby and Yang are nowhere to be found.

“They wandered off to use the bathroom,” Blake says, by way of explanation, and you wrinkle your nose, responding only with a silent nod.

Blake’s tufted ears twitch. She lifts her head to study you, a bright, unnerving curiosity manifesting itself on her face.

“Hey, are you okay?”

You wrap your arms around your middle and sniff. “What do you think?”

“Hm.” Blake dumps a bit of dirt over the smoldering coals. “I think you’ve been unraveling since the day we set out.”

You bristle at the implication. “I can hold my own.”

“That’s the problem.” Blake sighs and leans back on her haunches, golden eyes locked on yours. “You’re too tightly wound. You come unglued whenever you’re dealing with something you can’t control. Your anxiety is ruling your emotions.”

“Nothing rules a Schnee but their iron will.”
Blake scoffs. “Right.”

Your face flushes. “Stop winding me up, Blake! I thought you were on my side!”

“How am I supposed to be ‘on your side’ if I let you lie to yourself?”

“I am not lying to myself!”

Blake shakes her head and moves to stand in your space, looming over you with several extra inches of height. Her feline eyes are narrowed, and you fight the urge to shrink away, feeling suddenly very small.

Her hand finds your shoulders, squeezing gently. “I don’t know what’s going on with you and Ruby, but all this angst could definitely be settled with an adult conversation. Talk to her.”

“I can’t.”

“You can. You’re a huntress, remember? You’ve openly defied your father. You’ve stared death in the face more times than I can count.” Blake’s smiling face dips into your downcast gaze. “You’re one of the bravest people I know.”

A reluctant smile tugs at your lips. “Says the girl who took down her evil ex-boyfriend and saved the White Fang.”

“Fine.” Blake smirks. “We’re all transcendent badasses. That doesn’t make my point any less salient.”

“‘Salient’. That’s a good word.” You rub at your eyes, surprised to find them damp, yet again. “You’ve always had a great vocabulary. Why couldn’t I have fallen in love with you?”

“So, you admit you’re in love.”

You grind your teeth. Why do you have to have such obnoxiously observant friends?

“I admitted no such thing.”

“Jeez, you’re so stubborn about this.”

“Because I don’t think you understand what’s at stake.” You pull away from her, stalking to your pack with stiff shoulders and a sore jaw. “I don’t want to be in love..”

“When it’s unrequited, yeah, I get that.” Blake shrugs. “But it’s pretty nice when it’s reciprocated.”

“No, it’s a virus.” Your tone is acerbic. “It’s a distraction, and a constant source of misery, and I don’t want any part of it.”

Blake’s eyes widen infinitesimally. “Even if she loves you back?”

Your shoulders hunch further as you glare out over the valley. “Especially if she loves me back.”

“I…don’t believe you.”

You whirl on Blake, a snarl forming on your lips. “Believe whatever you want! I don’t care! I’m sick and tired of feeling like a slave to these feelings! I only want to be free, and if you can’t understand that, maybe you aren’t the friend I thought you were!”
Your shouts echo off the surrounding rocks, rolling down into the valley like a shrill sort of thunder, and the shock on Blake’s face quickly melts into an unreadable, neutral mask. You want to slap her.

“Okay,” she says, evenly. “I get it. We don’t have to talk about it anymore.”

“But, Weiss,” your back stiffens, “you need to **pull yourself together**. If you continue to be this unfocused while we’re hunting, someone’s gonna get hurt.”

“Your concerns are noted,” you say, frostily, and pack the rest of your gear in silence.

It’s going to be a very long day.

xi.

“Weiss, get down!”

You duck a swipe from the Grimm’s tail with barely an inch to spare and leap straight into a barrel roll across the ground. There’s a gash over your right brow, and warm blood pouring down your face, and by the time you stagger to your feet, there’s sand stuck everywhere. You weep freely from your clean eye as you try to scrub blood and sand from the other. You can barely see enough to dodge the next strike from the hooded serpent in front of you, but you try, stumbling to the side. The ground lurches, and the shockwave sends you flying. A boulder breaks your fall, and you crumple like a rag doll into the sand, choking. All the air’s been knocked from your lungs. Your aura’s completely on the fritz. You can’t see a goddamn thing.

You cover your head, helplessly, as the serpent rears back to deliver its killing blow, bracing for impact, but Crescent Rose sails through the air, blade first, pinning the monster to the rocky cliff mid lunge. You nearly sob with relief. In a second, Yang’s fired four rounds straight down the monster’s throat, and it’s over. No thanks to you.

You’re a useless mess.

“Weiss!” Ruby’s voice carries across the battlefield, but you can barely make her out. Your vision is too blurry, and your chest is on fire.

You can’t stop weeping.

“Weiss?” Strong hands grasp your shoulders, and you fall forward into her arms. “Weiss? Oh, my god! Your face! Are you okay?”

“F-f-f-i-“ you gasp and try to catch your breath, but your eye stings so badly and your nose is running, and you’re 70% sure the wound on your forehead is still bleeding freely.

You might also have a concussion. It would explain the dizziness. The world rolls under your knees.

“She’s bleeding.”

You feel a second pair of hands against your face. Yang’s.

“Oh, man. There’s a bunch of gunk in her eyes.”
“We’ve gotta get her cleaned up.”

“We don’t have enough water left.”

“There’s a river four miles from here, over the next ridge. After all the rain we’ve had it shouldn’t be dry.”

“Guys!” Blake’s voice carries over to you from a short distance. “We’ve got company!”

Yang curses under her breath. “Crap, Ruby, you’ve got to get her out of here!”

“No way! I can’t leave you guys alone!”

“We’ve got this, okay? Get Weiss to the river and hunker down. Keep your scroll on. We’ll come find you in a bit.”

The next thing you hear are the shotgun rounds in Yang’s gauntlets chambering and Ruby’s anxious goodbye as her sister sprints away. In the distance you hear a chorus of angry hissing.

More giant snakes.


Ruby’s nervous. If you could roll your eyes at her, you would.

“Can you-? No, dumb question. Um.” You can literally feel her fidgeting. “I’m going to carry you, okay? We’ve gotta use my speed to get to the river so I can get some fresh water on that eye.”

“Okay,” you croak.

Your head is pounding and the sun is so bright. Your eyes are still weeping. Blood continues to trickle down the side of your face. You’re a gooey ball of pain and adrenalin, and you’re completely at Ruby’s mercy.

She hoists you up into her arms, bridal style, like your body weighs nothing. You start to wonder when she got so strong, how it escaped your notice, but the memory of a warm hand, clasped tightly over your mouth in the dark, rises unbidden into your foggy mind, and you have to will yourself to focus on the moment.

You’ve got to pull yourself together.

“Myr-Myrtenaster,” you rasp out, groping blindly.

“I’ve got it right here.”

Ruby presses her forehead to yours, and you shiver. She mistakes your reaction for fear.

“It’s alright. I won’t drop you.”

“B-better not.”

“Ready?”

You nod, and a half-second later, Ruby’s bracing herself against the dirt. The next thing you feel is the pressure of pure gravity pressing against your body as Ruby uses her semblance to sprint toward the river at superhuman speed. The wind screams in your ears. Colors bleed past your
blurry vision. Ruby’s heart thumps against your temple, and you cling to her, arms curled tight around her neck. It feels like you’re flying.

You may as well be.

She covers the whole stretch in under four minutes, staggering to the finish beside a swollen stream nestled in a bed of red rock.

“Made it,” she gasps, and takes a few seconds just to breathe with you.

Your nose rubs against her shirt when you nuzzle closer to her, inhaling as deeply as you can. She smells of sharp sweat and fresh roses and a scent so distinct to Ruby you’d be hard pressed to describe it in words. You wonder when you got this bold, but then a sharp pain throbs under your skull, and you realize, with a whimper, that you’re not all there.

Ruby stumbles to the riverbank, throws down her cloak, and lays you gently on top of it. “Okay, okay, um…” You let your burning, weeping eyes close while she digs through her pack. “Gotta get the water filter. Gotta filter some of this river water…aha!”

You listen to her footsteps as she stumbles around in the sand. There comes the distinct sound of a metal cap unscrewing, and then water sloshing around in a plastic canister.

“This’ll just take a minute, Weiss. Hang in there.”

You give her a shaky thumbs up, wheezing slightly through your teeth. The fire in your chest has become a sharp, incessant throb, and it’s difficult to breathe.

“Hey.” Warm, rough hands caress your forehead. “You okay?”

“I c-can’t—” You cough, and cry out abruptly as sharp pain rips across your chest. “S-shit!”

Ruby’s hands push open your cloak and lift your shirt, and you feel the warm sun on your skin as her fingertips sweep across your rib cage. It’s some kind of twisted heaven, lying here prone on the sand, in terrible pain, breath snagging on Ruby’s gentle touch. You can almost imagine it’s a lover’s touch. You’re delirious enough.

“Oh, shit, Weiss.” Ruby’s concern draws you back. “Shit. You… You broke some of your ribs.”

Oh… That’s worse than you’d thought.

“Fuck!” you wheeze, teeth gnashing against another wave of pain. It really hurts to breathe.

“This is bad. This is… We have to get you out of here.”

“We have to get you to a doctor.”

You almost curse again, but you know she’s right. It really is that bad. You can’t fight with one eye, a concussion, and several broken ribs. You’d be little better than Grimm bait out here, more likely to get the rest of your team killed than to actually help, though it wounds your pride to admit it.

“Ruby?” your voice cracks, and you reach blindly for her.

It hurts, you dolt.”

“We’ve just gotta…” she trails off. “Just gotta wash this sand outta here.”

The water stops flowing for a moment, and then you feel the gentle press of a towel to your eyelid. Ruby wipes away the excess moisture, fingers brushing your brow and your cheek. She digs in a bit, trying to scoop out some of the gunk. You realize you can taste your own blood on your lips.

“Am I-” your ribs throb and you wince, “…still bleeding?”

Ruby hums. “Just a trickle.” You feel the pressure of her towel increase on your forehead. “It’ll stop soon. Can you open your eye?”

You try, but you can’t get it to stay open. Everything is blurry, and it burns. Ruby has to hold it open with her fingers. Your eye weeps freely as she peers down at it, trying to assess the damage.

“It’s scratched.” Ruby sighs and lets your eyelid slip shut again. “Damnit.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is though. Kind of.” She groans in frustration. “You’ve been anxious and distracted this whole trip. It was only a matter of time before you got hurt.”

“Still…not your fault.”

“I should’ve kept a closer eye on you.”

You snort, despite the spark of pain it causes. “I can take care of…myself.”

“I know you can, it’s just-” Ruby huffs, you blink up at her blearily with your one good eye. Her brows are drawn and her gaze is dark. “I feel responsible for you. More than my sister or Blake. I just…you’re my partner, you know?”

You do. You know it better than you know your own name.

“Ugh, I’m useless sitting here getting mad at myself.” Ruby shifts and returns to her pack. “I’ve got to get the cut over your eye stitched up, and then, as soon as Blake and Yang get here, we’re getting you to a doctor.”

“You’re a good leader, Ruby Rose,” you breathe, and Ruby feigns a gasp.

“Weiss Schnee, are you giving me a compliment?”

“Absolutely not. I’m only telling the truth.”

Ruby huffs a sad little laugh. “Well, it’s nice to know I’m still good at something, even if I am crappy partner.”

“Shut up, dolt.” Wheezing like you are, you sound less angry, and more weary. “You’re… You’re not a bad partner. I never… I never…” You grit your teeth.

“Hey, it’s okay. Don’t push yourself.”

“No-“ You cough, and for a few seconds, your whole body is wracked with searing,
breathtaking, pain, but you refuse to let it get the best of you. You have things you have to say. You might not ever find the courage again. “Ruby, I… No matter what happens…even if we go our separate ways…you will always be my partner… Okay?”

Your eyes are closed, but you can hear the waver in her breath, the pause as she steadies herself. “…Okay”

Ruby takes your hand in hers and squeezes.

You hold on for as long as she’ll let you.

xii.

You’re vomiting into the weeds by the time Blake and Yang come jogging into view. You’re bent over on your knees, and your right eye is swollen shut, so you hear them before you see them. Blake’s boots drag along the ground. Yang wheezes under the weight of an extra backpack. Behind them, the blazing sun has just begun to dip below the horizon.

“I was starting to get worried,” Ruby says, rising into a sweaty hug with her sister. Blake just taps her coolly on the shoulder as she stalks past.

Ruby’s filtered a couple gallons of river water into a suspended plastic tarp, and you splash cool water on your face to keep from blurting out the truth, that Ruby’s been worried for hours, that her fingernails are bitten down to the quick.

Your partner handles stress about as well as you do, but she’s better when she’s busy. While you waited for the others to catch up, she taped your ribs and cleaned your wounds, erected the tent to shield you from the sun, and then spent an hour gathering enough kindling to build a fire. After that she told you stories from her childhood to keep you from slipping into unconsciousness. You’ve heard most of them a half dozen times already, but you didn’t actually care. You hung on every word, through the dizziness and the skull-splitting headache, until you finally started getting sick.

Since then, Ruby’s just been humming quietly while she rubs your back.

It’s an amazing thing, actually. No single touch, from any other person at any point in your life, has ever been so immensely comforting. If you had your wits about you, you’d be terrified, but right now you’re only terrified of her leaving you alone.

Blake kneels beside you and pulls your long braid back while Ruby’s distracted. “You look terrible.”

You spit into the dirt and grit your teeth. ”Fuck. Off.”

“Using big kid swears, huh?” She rubs your scalp, and it feels good, but it’s not Ruby. “I’m sorry you’re in pain.”

Your wounded eye is sticky now, and swollen shut, but you peel the other one open to glare at her as you sit up. “Thanks so much.”

“I mean it.”

You know she does, and you sigh, because right now you’d really rather be a bitch. The world rolls suddenly beneath you, and you lose your balance. Blake catches your shoulder before you
can fall into your own vomit.

“When there!” Blake’s eyes widen. “You gonna be okay?”

You open your mouth to snark something back, but a wave of nausea washes over you, and you gag.

“She hit her head.” Ruby skips over to help Blake lower you back onto your hands and knees. “Weiss?”

You wave her away and retch into the spiky little patch of desert grass.

Everything hurts.

You feel indescribably awful.

“She’s gotta be dehydrated after all this vomiting.” Blake tucks your braid into the back of your sweaty shirt. “Yang, do we have any of those vitamin gel packets left?”

“Yeah! Gimme a sec.”

Yang thumps down next to you on the ground, and now your whole team is sitting around you in a ring, watching you puke. Fortunately your head is throbbing so hard you can barely think, else you’d probably die of embarrassment.

Ruby’s hand returns to your back, and you can tell it’s hers from the size and the weight and the thick callus across the top of her palm from years of hefting Crescent Rose. You spent the afternoon memorizing her feel. You could pick it out of a million. A wave of relief washes over you, and you blink your good eye open, glancing up into the waning, evening light only to catch Blake watching you.

She smiles, a barely there quirk of her lips.

You scowl back at her and her smile only widens.

“We need to call Winter,” Ruby says, because they all know better than to call your parents. “She can get an airship out here tonight.”

The smile on Blake’s face evaporates. “You think she’ll agree to do that?”

You hear the distinct click of a scroll taking a photo and cringe.


Blake’s eyes narrow. “Winter’s gonna freak out.”

Ruby’s fingers lift your chin and the camera clicks again. “I’m kinda counting on it.”

“Alright,” Blake sighs, “I’ll get the sat comm. You remember the number?”

“Yeah, I’ve got it saved in here.”

Ruby pulls your head into her lap, and you watch deliriously as Blake attaches a stubby black antenna to the top of Ruby’s scroll. Moisture leaks from both your eyes as Ruby offers you a sip of clean water to rinse out your mouth. The pain in your head is getting worse. You’re legitimately struggling not to cry.
You’re so fucking sick of crying.

“Aha!” Yang’s gauntlets clink against the zipper as she pulls a handful of plastic packets out of her pack. “Got ‘em.”

Ruby reaches for one without hesitation, and rips it open, pressing the opening to your lips. “Suck.”

Yang snorts. Blake rolls her eyes. You cough, tweaking your throbbing ribs, and swat away hazy images of Ruby engaged in that very activity over your-


“C’mon, Weiss,” Yang teases, forever oblivious. “You know you want to.”

Oh, for the love of-

You swallow your pride, take the packet in your hand, and obediently start sucking orange-creamsicle flavored goo into your sour mouth. It tastes better than it ever has. You’re surprised it doesn’t immediately turn your stomach.

“I’ve got a signal,” Blake says. “I’m trying to dial through.”

Yang slaps her thighs and hops up. “I’ll get the tent and bed rolls set up.”

“I’ll um, keep doing this,” Ruby says, awkwardly.

Yang and Blake each offer her a wordless thumbs-up in perfect unison.

You’ve all been working together way too long.

Ruby looks down at you. “Weiss, as soon as you stop throwing up, I’ll give you some more painkillers.”

You nod, swallowing down the last of the sickly sweet gel before dropping the packet into the dirt. “I think I’m good for a while.”

“Sweet. Yang, can we get some more painkillers?”

“Oh it, sis!”

Blake waves her hand around. “Everybody hush! I think I’ve established a connection!” She holds up Ruby’s scroll as the call screen flickers to life. “This is Blake Belladonna of hunting party RWBY. I need to speak with Specialist Schnee. It’s urgent.”

“Hello, Ms. Belladonna. Please state the nature of your call.”

Blake glances over the top of Ruby’s scroll, bites her lip, and looks back down at the screen. “It’s regarding her sister, Weiss. She’s sustained critical injuries in the field. We need air support to get her to the nearest hospital. I’m transferring the visual confirmation now.”

“I’ll relay the message, but you should be aware that the military is not supposed to interfere in family ma–” Static crackles down the line as a hushed conversation takes place at the other end just off screen. “Um… Ms. Belladonna, where are you currently located?”

“150 miles northwest of Vacuo.”
“Can you send your exact coordinates?”

“Of course.”

“We’ll dispatch a patrol ship to your location as soon as those coordinates are received.”

“One moment.” Blake punches the coordinates into a message and fires it off. “Done.”

“Alright… ETA four hours. Please stand by.”

“Thank you.” The line blinks as it disconnects and Blake sighs with relief.

“Looks like our rescue party is on the way.”

Ruby smiles and strokes your hair. “Big sisters rule, eh Weiss?”

You give her a tense, one-eyed smile in return.

They really, really do.

xiii.

Your injuries officially bring an end to the mission two weeks early. Of course, being a Schnee, you try to protest. You can fly back on your own. There’s no real reason for them to stay with you, but Ruby absolutely insists on it, spouting cheerful, mind-numbing platitudes about doing things “as a team”.

It’s only mildly humiliating.

The airship’s medical officer examines your injuries en route. Your prognosis isn’t grave, but it’s inconvenient, more than your aura can knock out in a fortnight. You have three fractured ribs on your right side and a cracked bone in your right shoulder. Your concussion is bad enough that you need to see a neurologist, and your damaged eye is still too irritated to see out of properly. The doctor refers you to an ophthalmologist to make sure your vision won’t be permanently damaged.

Winter is irritated to learn you aren’t on the brink of death, and your video call with her in the conference room aboard the airship is clipped. You sag in the hard plastic chair as she lectures you about responsible use of government property. Sometimes it’s hard to remember she’s more than just your sister, that she has military operations to direct, the weight of an entire kingdom on her shoulders. Even with all that in mind, it’s hard not to be jealous of her time. You wish she’d ask how you were. You wish you could tell her why you got hurt in the first place, why this thing with Ruby is making you feel crazy, but you can’t. Her curt sign off stings as the screen goes black. Ruby helps you back to your bunk, and you throw up bile into the trashcan.

12 hours later, you’re back in Atlas with an eyepatch, a bottle of Vicodin, and some antibiotics, puttering around your penthouse flat like some ridiculous, high class pirate while the rest of your team prepares to head back out into the field. They’ll have to finish out the remainder of the mission without you. You haven’t felt quite so useless since the fall of Beacon, when you were trapped in the Schnee manor under the thumb of your domineering father. It makes you quietly furious.

You’re stuck watching from the couch as your teammates re-pack, rolling up the tents and sleeping bags they’ve been airing out on your living room floor. You’re woozy and tired, blurry from the pain pills, resigned to bitterness. Your ribs protest if you move too suddenly, if you laugh
or speak with any force. Your head pounds every four hours between doses. Your wounded eye itches under the light grey patch strapped across your face. You’ve had more severe single injuries in the past, but none that have ever combined to be so incredibly annoying, and anyway, you’re a terrible patient, terrible at being helpless, terrible at letting others take control.

Yang carts you off to bed when she’s finally had enough of your griping. “Get some sleep, Weiss. You’re being obnoxious.”

In the morning, Ruby forgets about your ribs and hugs you before she leaves, mistaking your grimace of pain for a wince of disgust. She pulls away sheepishly.

“Don’t worry, Weiss.” Her smile is a bit tentative. “We’re borrowing Velvet for the final stretch. I’ll make sure everyone stays safe.”

“Just take care of your hair, dolt,” you say, glaring at her, and rap her on the head with your knuckles.

Ruby, to her credit, just grins and salutes. “Aye aye, Cap’n!”

She bounds off down the hall to follow Blake and Yang, and you’re so caught up watching her leave you don’t even realize she’s made a pirate joke at your expense until she’s already gone.

Recovery is, as it always is, slow and painful.

However, it does keep your mind occupied. More or less.

You spend hours every day in the gym, maintaining your strength and conditioning as best you can. The doctors prescribe aura supplements, but you also hire a physical therapist to help you train, especially to work some flexibility back into your muscles. You’ll be damned if you let an injury get the better of you.

Your mother and father swing by to visit in turn, alternating seamlessly between fussing and condescending, their own uniquely toxic version of showing they care. Winter insists on calling you up over your scroll to give you a lecture about proper safety in the field. Your brother sends a smirking message to the effect of being so relieved to hear you’d survived your harrowing encounter with a big, scary snake. You weren’t particularly keen on any of them to begin with, save Winter, of course, but after only three days, you’re sick of them all. You don’t need much excuse to start dodging their calls.

The rest of your time is open, and it’s a terrible burden trying to fill it. You’d drink, but the doctors forbid alcohol while you’re healing, so you pay regular visits to the spa instead, whiling away the hours between mud baths and massage tables, trying to get your scaly, sunburned skin back to its former milky white. Afterwards, you sit in coffee bars consuming premium teas and artisan sandwiches while you review SDC earnings reports and study your old dust theory books. At the end of the first week you discover that Blake has left you a book on the medical uses of dust, and you devour that too, brushing away biscotti crumbs as you pour over the pages.

The nights are long and quiet.

You try absolutely anything to keep from thinking of Ruby. You scrub your kitchen counters with a toothbrush and cup of baking soda. You take Myrtenaster completely apart, twice, and put it back together again. You convert your living room into a makeshift lab and test out new dust
combinations that you’d never been bored enough to try before. When all else fails, you actually
waste your time watching movies or playing some of the games Yang’s downloaded onto your
scroll, but, in the end, your avoidance gets you nowhere.

Your dreams are filled with silver eyes and the heady scent of roses.

xv.

High up in your penthouse, the city lights shimmer from your panoramic windows. It’s early yet,
only just past six, but Atlas winters are famous for being cold and dark, and this winter promises
to be gruesome. In the distance, through the arctic haze of snow and mist, your family’s sigil burns
brightly from SDC’s corporate spire, lit up a bright, luminous blue to match the color of your eyes.

“Hey!” Blake’s face peers up at you from the screen of your company-issue scroll. “I just got
back. What’s up?”

“Not much.”

Your eyepatch is gone.”

You scoff quietly. “Finally.”

Blake squints. “Why’s it so dark over there?”

The fingers of your right hand slide along the windowpane, leaving long, greasy streaks the maids
will have to wipe away in the morning. Snowflakes flicker past on the other side of the glass, but
you can barely see them from where you are, huddled up on the floor of your flat with the lights
off. It’s been a few hours since you got Ruby’s message.

>home safe and sound! miss you!

By home, you realize she means Patch.

“I was napping,” you say, peering back down at the screen, and Blake doesn’t press you.

“Come have dinner with me.”

You sigh. “I’d really rather be alone.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

The scroll flickers in your hand. You consider just hanging up.

“Fine.”

Blake smiles. “Cool.”

“Just tell me the time and the place.”

“Now, and Edohana Sushi.”

“Now? As in right now?” You glance down at your rumpled white yoga pants. “No way. I need
some time to get ready.”

“You should have thought of that an hour ago.”

“An hour ago I was on an airship.”

“You mean you literally just got back?”

“Yep.”

“Have you even showered?”

“Just got out.” Blake tips the camera back to focus on her wet, black hair. “See?”

“Okay, well I can’t be seen in public like this. I’m a Schnee.”

Blake just rolls her eyes.

“What?! The people of Atlas have certain expectations of their social elite!”

“You’re a huntress, Weiss! Everyone knows you spend six months out of the year sleeping in tents and village inns. They can’t honestly expect you to look perfect all the time!”

“They can, and they do.”

“Ugh, whatever. You’re just vain.”

“As if taking care of one’s physical appearance is a bad thing,” you snipe, and Blake grumbles something back that you make no attempt to decipher.

“Whatever, I’m too tired for this. I’m heading over to Edohana in ten minutes. Don’t make me wait.”

“Bring a book,” you sneer, as the call cuts out.

You spend an extra ten minutes on your makeup just to spite her.

Blake’s already eating by the time you get to the restaurant, dressed down in her old black training hoodie, tight black jeans, and black snow boots. The only pop of color in her outfit is the yellow beanie pulled low over her damp hair. The outlines of her pointed cat ears are just visible through the top.

You flounce down across from her in the booth with a scowl on your face, and start stripping off your parka. “Starting before your guest? Rude.”

Blake casually reaches over to snatch a plate of tuna nigiri off the conveyor belt. “Rude is making me wait 20 minutes while I’m starving.” She lifts the plastic lid and inhales, eyes slipping shut in ecstasy.

You wrinkle your nose. “Get a room.”

“Grab a plate and stop whining. You sound ‘hangry’.”

You aren’t ‘hangry’, just regular old angry, but that’s nothing to be alarmed about. You’re always angry. You’re the daughter of Jacques Schnee. You’ve been angry since you were two years old.

It sure beats being sad.
You select a shrimp tempura roll as it rattles past on the belt and eat at least half of it before you trust yourself to speak again. Blake gives you time to collect yourself. She’s the only other member of your team who doesn’t hate silence. It’s what drew the two of you together in the first place. You set a bit of ginger on your next bite and take a moment to be grateful Blake is keeping a flat in Atlas. She’s been helping to the revive the local chapter of the rehabilitated White Fang.

“Sorry,” you say, wiping your lips primly on one of the restaurant’s flimsy paper napkins, “it’s been a long couple weeks.”

Blake hums her agreement. “How are the ribs?”

“Almost fully healed. I’ll be 100% in a week.”

“Wow, good job!” Blake smiles up at you. “That’s amazing!”

You smile back in spite of yourself. “It wasn’t like I had much else to do around here with you lot gone.”

“True.” Blake’s golden eyes narrow. “How’s the fam?”

“In rare form, as usual. We’d make an entertaining TV show, I’m sure. One filled with drama and political intrigue.”

Blake snags a plate of spicy papaya salad, the kind that always makes your toes curl, the kind you secretly love, even though it makes you sweat. You steal a bite with your cheap, wooden chopsticks, and she smirks into her food. She never gives you a hard time for breaking the rules of your formal etiquette training.

“I have no idea how you deal with it,” she replies at length, reaching for a passing bottle of sake. “Drink?”

You hesitate. “Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to have a little at this point. I’ve already cleared my concussion protocol.”

Blake nods, unscrews the bottle, and pours a bit into one of the plastic cups resting face up on the tray. If her choice of sushi establishments has a few less stars than the ones you’d instinctively frequent, you don’t mind. Spoiled as it makes you sound, you’ve decided you actually like the adventure of eating with regular people. Even if that means drinking 10 Lien bottles of sake out of plastic cups. It’s a small price to pay for Blake’s companionship, and an educational experience either way.

“A toast to a successful mission,” you say, clicking the dull plastic edge of your cup against Blake’s. “Cheers!”

“Cheers,” Blake agrees.

She pauses to watch as you kill your first cup in a single gulp and immediately go to pour a second. She takes a modest sip while you polish off your second, a curious expression resting on her face.

“God, I missed alcohol.” You add your empty tempura plate to the stack and grab a spider roll. The plastic cup is back to your lips in a second, filled up for a third time. “Mm. So good.”

“Better slow down, or you’ll be spending the night on my couch.”
The answering look of horror on your face is real. “Hell no.”

Blake’s ears twitch under her hat as the door to the restaurant swings open, jingling the little bell on the handle. The thin wail of a distant siren carries inside off the snowy streets. You shiver, and reach behind you in the booth to pull your parka back over your shoulders.

“Either your tolerance is higher than I remember or…” Blake trails off with a smirk, eying the cup in your hand.

“I can call a cab. You know I love you, Blake, but I am not sleeping on that disgusting old couch.”

“It’s only a few years old.”

“Sun slept on it for like, a year!”

“It was only six months, first of all, and second of all, he used sheets.”

“Still.” You reach for your sake, down half of your third glass in one swallow, and dig into your spider roll. You can feel Blake’s eyes on you, but you refuse to acknowledge her until it becomes unbearably awkward. “Staring is rude, you know.”

“What’s wrong, Weiss?”

Blake’s serious tone catches you off guard, and you glance up, an easy lie waiting on your tongue. “You mean besides my various bodily injuries?”

Blake waves off your non-answer. “I mean, you seem kinda… Why are you drinking so fast?”

“I’m not.”

“Is this about Ruby?”

You slam your cup down, sloshing a bit of liquid onto the laminated table top. A few heads swivel in your direction and you can feel your neck heating up. You only hope they won’t realize you’re a Schnee, unlikely as that is with the shock of white hair cascading down your back.

“You promised to stop bringing that up!” you hiss, but Blake only frowns at you.

“I’m concerned. I thought you guys would finally talk after you hooked up, but now you’re both acting like it never happened.”

You freeze. The blood in your veins turns to ice. All around you, the restaurant seems to move in slow motion, the plates on the conveyor belt ticking by at half-speed, the whirling knives of of the sushi chefs behind the bar slowed to a normal pace, and then you, in the center of it all, as still as a statue.

Your lips barely move as you hiss at her. “What did you say?”

Realization dawns on Blake’s face half a second too late. “Oh, shit! Weiss, I’m- I’m sorry! I wasn’t thinking, I just- I thought I heard you guys, and then I smelled it in your tent the next morning and I assumed-“

“-Blake, shut up!” You fix her with a hard glare, and her mouth snaps shut. “You…you heard us?”

A crimson blush spreads like wildfire across her face. “I- I’m sorry. I know it’s kind of creepy -“
“-Blake, just answer the question! Are you sure you heard us, both of us? Yes, or no?”

“…” she frowns in confusion. “Yes? I’m pretty sure I heard Ruby whispering at one point. Yang said she was in your sleeping bag when she went to wake Ruby up for her shift, and then the smell the next morning… I sort of just assumed, and then I just blurted it out without thinking. I really am sorry, seriously!”

The features of the restaurant start to blur around you. All the blood drains from your face. You think you might burst into tears.

“Weiss?” Blake waves a hand in your face. “Are you okay? What’s going on? You look like you’re gonna pass out.”

“I might.”

“Um, holy shit. Okay.” She looks around. “I’ll go pay. Can you hold on for just a minute?”

You seize her wrist as she tries to get up from the booth. “Did Ruby say anything?”

Blake bites her lip.

“Blake.”

“No! No… I mean, not aside from just acting like a total weirdo for the rest of the mission, which was sort of a dead give away in and of itself.”

“Does Yang know?”

“I haven’t discussed it with her.” Blake eyes you critically, and correctly guesses your next question. “Or Ruby.”

You swallow thickly, close your eyes, and lean back in booth.

“Weiss…?”

You crack one eye open, read the confusion on Blake’s face, and decide to go with honesty for once in your life. “I thought it was a dream,” you murmur.

Blake’s yellow hat, clearly borrowed from Yang, you now realize, twitches as her cat ears perk up. “Um, what?”

“A dream. What happened with Ruby, I thought I dreamt it.”

Blake blinks at you for a long moment. “Wait…you…”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah.”

“Weiss.”

“I know, okay? I know. Please just, don’t even-“

“But how?”
You glare at her.

“Sorry! But seriously, Weiss. How?”

Blake’s expression is wide-eyed and incredulous, and there’s a lump in your throat you can’t seem to swallow, and now that the floodgates are opening you just want to tell her. You just want to tell somebody. You’ve been holding this secret in for weeks, shaming yourself and trying to forget. Now, to learn it’s real? To learn you aren’t the only one? That you might not be crazy after all? That Ruby might-

No.

No, you won’t go that far.

“It…” you bite your lip and look down at the table where the rest of your spider roll sits untouched. “I need more sake.”

Blake reaches out and seizes your hand, lacing your fingers together. “We can drink at my place later. Talk to me. Please?” Blake squeezes your hand. “I’m your friend. I’m sick of watching you look so miserable. Please just talk to me.”

You suck in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well, if you must know, it all happened so fast I’m still not really sure how it started. The details are hazy at best.”

“It’s okay.” Blake strokes her thumb over the back of your hand. “I don’t need a play by play. Keep it high level if you want.”

Your tongue flicks across the ridges of your teeth as you mull it over. “Alright, fine. Here goes nothing.” You take in a deep, steadying breath. “I think I fell asleep braiding her hair on my bedroll, because it’s the last thing I remember before I woke up in the middle of the night with Ruby in my sleeping bag.”

“And you don’t know why she was there?”

“No.”

“Hm, another mystery involving Ruby.” Blake snorts. “For someone so peppy and bubbly, she sure is enigmatic.”

You snort and brush your bangs back. “Seriously.”

“Okay, so she crawled into your sleeping bag with you. Probably.” Blake munches on another bit of papaya salad. “I think I fell asleep braiding her hair on my bedroll, because it’s the last thing I remember before I woke up in the middle of the night with Ruby in my sleeping bag.”

“How could you not? The whole thing plays just like a bad tv drama.”

“Well, those bad tv dramas are based on something.”

You roll your eyes. “Anyway. Yang popped in to wake Ruby up, saw us together, and got all weird about it.”

“I remember.”

“Yes, and then I couldn’t get back to sleep with Ruby draped all over me, so I put my hand on her waist to try and wake her up, and the next thing I knew she was climbing on top of me and kissing my neck. I just-” You rub your hands over your burning face. “She told me it was ‘okay’, that I
should ‘let her help’, whatever that’s supposed to mean. I’ve been trying not to think about it.”

“Wait, hold up.” You glance up at Blake, whose yellow eyes are wide with surprise. “Ruby initiated this?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, weird, but still, after all that, why would you think it was a dream?”

You swallow hard, but the lump in your throat only grows. “Because the next morning I woke up alone and she was in her own bed, acting like nothing had happened. It was so weird and out of character I was convinced I’d made it up. And then you made that joke about me having a sex dream and I just…” You shrug.

Blake looks mortified. “I’m so sorry. I was trying to goad a reaction out of Ruby by making a joke at your expense.”

You shoot her a glare. “That’s the sort of stunt I expect from Yang. You normally have more tact than that.”

“Yeah, well, she’s been rubbing off on me lately.”

You squint at her, and Blake blushes. “What does that mean?”

“Another time.”

You cross your eyes and groan. “No more sex drama, please. I can’t take anymore drama right now. My cold Schnee heart is ready to explode.”

Blake tops off your sake and pours the rest of the bottle in her empty cup. “Even the coldest hearts can be thawed.”

“Oh god. I’m gonna be such a mess.”

“Probably.”

“I’ve got to talk to Ruby.”

“It would probably help.”

“Oh god.”

“Here.” Blake pushes your plate of unfinished sushi toward you. “How about we eat now, and freak out later?”

“Fine, but we’re stopping on the way home to buy some Vacuan tequila.”

“No need. I’ve got a bottle in my pantry.”

“Who knew you were such a drinker?”

Blake’s smile is wry as she grabs a spicy tuna roll off the conveyer belt. “Who knew Ruby was a top.”

Blake’s superior faunus reflexes are the only thing that save her from the balled up napkin you chuck at her face, but you pay her back later by pelting her with snowballs on the walk home.
You do end up sleeping on the couch.

Much as you dislike your father and would rather take after your softer, kinder grandfather, you are, unequivocally, Jacques Schnee’s daughter. As such, you have a tendency to deny yourself the things you love.

The rules are simple.

Sentimental affectation of any kind is the enemy. Desire for anything apart from excellence is only unchecked weakness. Your father’s ambition was never slowed by trifles like love and affection, and you need only look to Winter for an example of his exemplary breeding. He may detest her choice of career, but she is a creature of his making, brilliant, driven, and severe. He can’t deny her rigor or her discipline. Your sister perfectly embodies his lessons in control and composure, and if Winter is anything at all, she is composed.

All of you, however, share one glaring flaw in a common, a veritable fly in the ointment. That fly is your temper. The Schnee temper is perhaps more legendary than even your trademark aloofness, burning red hot through the cracks in your icy veneer. Your triggers? Chaos, failure, embarrassment, and, really, anything you can’t control. The Schnees are a hardworking bunch, but they are prone to arrogance, over-confidence, and a dispositional rigidity that seems brittle in the face of change.

Flexibility is not something your father ever valued. It is also, ironically enough, the character trait that most easily distinguishes the two of you.

It took years, and the whacky machinations of Yang, Blake, and Ruby combined, but you did learn how to bend. You’ve changed, significantly. You’ve learned to pick your battles. You’ve learned to give ground. You’ve learned how to compromise, how to adapt, how to deviate from the expected norms that were laid out for you as a child. To the others, you might still seem like the ice queen of Beacon, but you, yourself, can feel all the ways in which you’ve evolved. If nothing else, your father’s disapproving eye dispels any lingering doubts you might’ve had about your success in your quest to become a softer, kinder Schnee.

In light of this personal growth, it would be easy to blame your softer side for the feelings afflicting you. You could say it was your weakness that fell for Ruby, your weakness that pines for her, but you don’t have a “weakness” anymore. You don’t split your personality into facets like you used to.

There’s only you. Weiss.

It’s you who loves her. All of you. And as far as you’re concerned, there’s nothing weak about love. It’s the strongest, most consuming force you’ve ever come up against. As a professional fighter of evil, you think you’re qualified to say a thing or two about consuming forces. It’s why you hold yourself back, denying yourself the things you want in order to protect yourself from… from what? Losing your composure? No. Losing your control. You’ve had your power taken from you many times before, by your father, by your teammates, by the forces of evil that stalk through the shadows of the world, but you’ve always been able to wrest it back. With a little elbow grease and determination, nothing could ever hold you down. Except this. This might. Because this is different. You can’t beat love. You can’t bludgeon love into submission. You have to embrace the fall, and there’s no telling where you’ll land.
If Ruby doesn’t catch you, it’ll hurt, and even if she does catch you, well. It might hurt anyway. Love does more damage than hate. It burns brighter and hotter, and it leaves wounds that never heal. To say you’re scared would be an understatement. You’re terrified. Ruby terrifies you.

It’s why you hold yourself back.

It’s why, like your father, you deny yourself the things you love.

Love isn’t weakness.

You are.

- You promise Blake you’ll talk to Ruby, but you don’t. Instead, you shut yourself away in your penthouse and brood for two weeks. You lock your door, turn your maids away, and ignore your scroll. Blake leaves a litany of messages and voicemails, pleading with you to be less of a monumental ass, but you don’t respond to any of them. Day after day, you train in your private gym until you’re ready to drop, until even Yang would be exhausted, and, afterwards, soak in your tub for hours listening to classical music, lighting candles that smell like vanilla and cardamom, nothing that reminds you even vaguely of roses.

In the evenings, you make instant dinners from your freezer and read by the firelight, curled up against the wintry air in a blanket on your favorite armchair. The television is too much of an intrusion into your little cocoon of solitude, a herald of the outside world, and a harbinger of your responsibilities. Instead, you devour books with a voracity that would impress even Blake, pouring through page after page until your eyes cross. When you’ve finally spent yourself completely, you avoid your bed altogether and sleep on the couch.

You don’t sleep much.

In the mornings your spend hours meditating on your balcony in the snow. To what end, you’re not sure. You haven’t thought about it. In fact, you haven’t thought about much of anything in days. You can’t. You won’t.

At the start of the third week, Blake starts pounding at your door. You regret ever giving her a key to the elevator. She tries to get in more than once, but you’ve already flipped the deadbolt to keep out the maids. She’s stuck yelling at you through the wood.

“Weiss! I know you’re in there! Open the door!”

You do not open the door.

Blake eventually stops banging.

- She comes back the next morning with a little more determination, and you wish your neighbor was home to call building security. You can’t quite bring yourself to do it. In part because Blake would never forgive you. In part because she’s your friend, and you know she means well.

“Open this door or I’m calling in reinforcements!”

You do not open the door.

Again, Blake eventually stops banging.
She doesn’t return for two days.

A little part of you is sad she gave up so easily.

You squash it.

It’s half past seven on Friday morning. You’re dead asleep on your sectional couch with the curtains drawn, when the sound of brisk knocking at your front door filters into your consciousness. The leather cushions creak as you stretch and roll onto your side. You don’t even bother opening your eyes. It’s likely the maids again, or possibly Blake back for round three.

You ignore it.

Not even two minutes go by before you’re jolted awake by the ear-splitting crack of gunfire ripping through your locks. A half-second later, the door is kicked in, flying through the air and landing with a deafening crash on your marble floor. You leap to your feet, icy aura crackling, furious and fully prepared to hit Blake between the eyes with a nasty glyph, but the distinct click of a sniper bullet chambering catches your attention. It sounds nothing like the 9mm rounds Blake loads into Gambol Shroud.

The long, red barrel of Crescent Rose peeks through your smoking doorway, and your hands drop to your sides, eyes wide, mouth hanging ajar.

“Sorry about your door, Weiss, but you kinda left me no choice.” Ruby’s boots crunch on shattered plaster and splintered wood as she steps over the threshold and into your flat. “I’ll just, uh, put this back here.” She picks up the totaled door, lock and handle completely punched out, and mashes it roughly back into the damaged frame. “Okay!” She smiles at her handiwork. “That’s better. Oh, and don’t worry about the damages. I’ll cover them.”

“You probably couldn’t afford them,” you croak, still numb with shock.

“Nonsense! I’ve got savings!” Ruby turns back to you with a bright sparkle in her silver eyes. “Good morning by way. You look good! Not that the eyepatch was a bad look. It kinda added a grrrr factor to your whole…Weiss thing.”

You scowl at her as the shock begins to wear off. “My Weiss thing?”

“Yeah! Uh, you know. Your…delicate snow princess…aesthetic.”

“I see,” you reply, frostily, and allow yourself a moment to look her over.

Your flat is dark, just a sliver of sun peaks through the curtains drawn over your panoramic windows, but even in the dim light you can still clearly make her out. Her style has changed somewhat as she’s aged, less frills and more clean, elegant lines. Still, similar elements remain. This time, she’s wearing wool-lined tights stuffed into her worn, black combat boots, and a tight black mini-skirt to go with her typical corset and cream-colored turtleneck. Over the top of the whole ensemble, to account for the cold, she’s put on a long, downy, red parka with fur trim around the hood. Her long, crimson-tipped hair is loose, flowing out of a grey, knit beanie, and she looks so incredibly well put-together that your mouth runs dry.

Ruby’s not a kid anymore.
Cheeks flushing, Ruby packs up Crescent Rose and sets it aside on your kitchen island. Her gloved hands awkwardly dig into the pockets of her coat, and her shoulders hunch forward. Coming back to yourself, you instinctively glance down at your simple blue nightgown. You feel monumentally underdressed.

“So,” Ruby starts, biting the inside of her cheek, no doubt to keep from babbling, “how’ve you been?”

You fold your arms across your chest. You aren’t wearing a bra. “Blake put you up to this.”

Ruby shrugs nervously. “She might’ve mentioned a thing or two about your…opinions on certain subjects.”

You squint at her, trying your best to stay irate despite the pounding in your chest. “My opinions?”

“Um, yeah. Like…” Ruby trails off, toeing at the floor. “Like, how you feel about certain things. About me, for example.”

Your body goes completely rigid. “And?”

“And, I came here to apologize.”


Ruby sucks in a deep breath, dragging her eyes back to yours, and the connection feels tenuous, like a gossamer thread strung between you, poised to break at the slightest provocation. You brace yourself.

“Weiss, I’m sorry about what happened in the tent.”

A sharp pang sears across your chest, and your eyes slip shut. The world tilts sharply around you, as if the ground were disappearing right beneath your feet. You feel dangerously unsteady.

“I…I didn’t know the extent of your feelings,” Ruby continues, “and after we…did that, I didn’t know how to bring it up, so I just went on like nothing happened. It was probably really confusing, and…I’m sorry if I made things more difficult for you.”

Tears spring from your eyes and streak down your face. Your posture is still rigid, back still ramrod straight, but the ice is melting. You suck in a trembling breath, feeling as if, at any moment, you might fly apart into a million pieces.

Ruby opens her mouth to say something more, but you hold up a hand. “Stop.”

She bites her lip, looking miserable.

“Tell me why.” Your voice cracks, and you swallow thickly.

“Weiss-“

“I want to know why. Why did you do that?” Your vision blurs as the tears fall faster and thicker. “Why did you touch me like that? Why did you kiss me?”

Her eyes widen as you unravel in front of her. She takes a step closer, hand straining free of her pocket to stretch out toward you. “Weiss, I’m sorry.”
You back away, nearly tripping over the coffee table in your haste to put some distance between you. “No, I want to know why, Ruby! I spent the last month thinking I was losing my mind, and I need to know what was going through your head when you decided to have sex with me!”

Ruby hangs her head as your anger flares. Your voice grows shriller and shriller, volume building up to a crescendo of hurt and frustration, until you’re nearly screaming at her across the living room.

“You know how I am! I don’t do meaningless flings or midnight trysts, and you know that! You know me better than anyone else! We’re supposed to be partners!” Your hands ball into fists, crackling with energy. “Why would you ever think it’s okay to mess with my head like that?!!”

You lift your arms, and twin glyphs fire straight out of your hands at Ruby’s chest, bowling her over in a wild cloud of rose petals. She lands hard on her back under a shower of ice, your white, marble dining room table crumbling into pieces underneath her. You’ll probably care about the damage later, but right now, you’re only struggling to hold back your summoning glyph. A single white tusk flashes through the portal before you force it back with gritted teeth. The glyph evaporates with a sharp little crack of energy. You stagger and drop to you knees, breathing hard.

Across the flat, rubble scrapes against the floor as Ruby clambers to her feet. The smell of roses is nearly overpowering.


You wipe your tears on the back of your arm, and gingerly ease yourself back into a sitting position on the high pile carpet. “I trained with the best.”

Ruby steps out of the debris and makes her way toward you. She pauses to strip off her coat, hat, and gloves, draping all three over the back of the couch, then kneels down in front of you on the floor.

“I didn’t say you could stay,” you sniff, grinding the palm of each hand into your leaky eyes.

Ruby sighs. “So, you slept out here last night?”

“It’s really none of your business what I’ve been doing.”

“I know. I just…” She trails off, eyes downcast. “Weiss, do… you still want to know why?”

Against all of your better judgement, you meet her gaze. “Yes, but I swear to god, Ruby, if it was just because you were horny or some other moronic reason like that you’d better leave now before I-”

“It wasn’t!” Her expression turns wild. “It wasn’t anything like that!”

You sniff, and arch a brow.

“I, um…” Her eyes fall to her lap. “It was kind of an impulse.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No, I’m serious! I didn’t mean to go that far. I have no idea what came over me, I just…” Ruby bites her lip, and you wait, temper held temporarily at bay. “You smelled really good, and your skin was so soft. You of all people know I’m totally obsessed with my weapon, and hunting, and sometimes there just isn’t any room in my head for other stuff, but that night, more than anything else, I wanted to touch you.” Ruby’s voice dips to a murmur. “I wanted to be closer to you, and
the closer I got, the closer I wanted to be, until I was just…” Ruby trails off, eyes glazed slightly, and you realize you’ve been holding your breath.

You exhale, and blink the tears out of your eyes. “So…”

So, I…” Ruby swallows slowly. “I’m sorry. For being so impulsive and not considering your feelings.”

A heavy silence falls over the room, broken only by the wind whistling outside. Her hands curl into fists. Yours tremble.

“What about now?”

Ruby looks up at the sound of your voice. “What do you mean?”

You trace a pattern in the carpet. “Do you still want to touch me?”

She hesitates for a moment, but her answer, when it comes, is firm and honest. “…Yes.”

The knot in your chest loosens. You reach out and settle a hand over one of her fists. Ruby’s breath catches. Her long hair has fallen over her face, and you lean forward to brush it back over her ear with your other hand. Nothing has ever felt as natural as this.

“Half of me is furious at Blake for telling you before I got a chance to do it myself,” your thumb swipes over her cheek, “but the other half knows I probably would’ve chickened out if she hadn’t, so I guess I can’t be too mad.”

“It’s okay.” Ruby uncurls her fist, turns her hand over, and laces your fingers together. “You weren’t ready to talk about it. I get that.”

“No, you don’t understand. My feelings a-are- they…” You shake your head. “I like you, Ruby. So much it scares me.” Tears blur your vision and you have to take a moment just to breathe. “I like you so much it feels like I’m panicking in slow motion. I like you so much I probably wouldn’t have ever told you for fear it would have driven a wedge between us. I can’t imagine my life without you in it, even if we’re only friends.” You chance a glance up at Ruby’s face and recoil at the tears you find there.

“I love you,” she whispers. “I’m in love with you.”

Your heart stops dead in your chest. “What?”

“I’m sorry, I just—” she wipes her eyes on her sleeve. “I’ve been thinking about it all month, since after you left and…”

She’s going to be the death of you. Seriously.

“Oh my god, why couldn’t you have just lead with that?!”

“Yeah…” Ruby laughs humorlessly. “That would’ve been better, huh?”

“Infinitely.” You rock forward, grab her cheeks, and kiss her softly on the lips, lingering just until she starts to respond before pulling back. “Ruby. I destroyed my dining room table.”

She blinks at you, wide-eyed and red-faced. “I um…sorry about that.”

You sigh, and lean back. “Whatever, it’s fine. I’ll just ask Klein to order another one,” you smile, your first in ages. “He did say I should get something softer for the room, though I don’t think he
was thinking about potential crash landings when he said that.”

Ruby returns a sheepish smile. “Who would?”

“Maybe Nora?”

“Oh, definitely Nora.”

You glance down at your joined hands and squeeze. She squeezes back.

“How did you know?” you ask. Your heart is still beating like a drum, but it’s not unpleasant. It’s wholly new and exciting.

“Well, it was pretty simple, really.” Ruby shrugs, and you almost kiss her again. “The more I thought about it, the more I started to figure some things out about myself. Like why I always insisted on sharing a tent with you. Or why my boyfriends never seem to work out.” Her smile dims slightly. “Or why my heart always beats a little faster when I see two girls holding hands. I wanted that with you. I just never really examined it.”

“Well…” You reach out and run a finger along her arm, “I’m free now, if you maybe wanted to spend a little more time examining it.”

A relieved little laugh bursts from Ruby’s mouth, and then she’s reaching out to pull you into her arms, fingers threading up into your snow white hair, lips pressing fervently against the skin between your shoulder and your neck. It’s a tangle, and a mess, but you yield against her, shuddering under her touch. Fresh tears drip onto your cheeks, but these are tears of relief, not anguish, and Ruby takes her time kissing them away before ducking down to steal your lips.

Somebody moans.

“Weiss?” she murmurs, panting against your lips.

You suck in a stabilizing breath. “Yes?”

“Yang thinks we should take this slow. Do you think we should take this slow?”

“You talked to Yang about us?”

“Yes?”

You roll your eyes and kiss her thoroughly, drawing another moan from her lips. “Dolt.”

“But do you-”

“-No.”

“No?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, good.” Ruby loops her arms around your neck and pulls you down. “I was kinda hoping you’d say that.”

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Fin
*some amazing art depicting Ruby's outfit in the final scene of PYT*

"Ruby's not a kid anymore" by showmethegreyspace

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End Notes

A/N: hey new friends! thanks for reading and please remember to leave a comment!
comments make all the blood and tears worth it :D

come hang out in my trashcan on tumblr @ aeschylusrex

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!