



BOUNDLESS

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Chapter 1

The weather in Vacuo was nice this time of the year - pleasantly warm, but not yet blisteringly hot. The mild sun made walking outside an enjoyable experience rather than a chore, especially when a chance breeze rustled through the streets.

Weiss was just one of many people on the sidewalks in a strange little neighborhood known to be more 'artsy' than the others. It was for this reason that tourists gathered here, taking pictures of the colorful murals covering large, sandy walls and the unique architecture born more out of necessity than a desire to impress outsiders.

It was quaint, she must admit. The murals were wonderfully done and worthy of the small crowds they garnered. The buildings were...different...but she'd seen more exceptional designs before.

Not that she was here to judge. She might be a stranger to this place, but she was far from being a tourist. A tourist was a visitor - a temporary traveler who came for the sights and experiences before heading back to the place they called home. She had a far more important reason for being here and, if all went well, she had no plans of returning to Atlas - at least, not alone.

Fortunately, she'd left the bulk of the crowds behind several blocks ago and was now walking through less populated areas of Vacuo. She was grateful for the space, as it allowed her to clear her mind of distractions and focus on her destination, which was just up ahead.

Nestled in the middle of the block was a small restaurant with equal parts outdoor and indoor seating. It was moderately busy at the moment, but not overly crowded. The lunch rush must've ended hours ago, and now the

restaurant was in that peculiar state somewhere between lunch and dinner.

There were plenty of empty tables outside - a sign that she could be seated right away. The patio was covered by a generous number of large, white-and-red striped umbrellas that provided respite from the sun. The shade was less necessary on a pleasant day such as this, but wouldn't be unwelcome over the course of a long meal.

A hostess stood behind a thin podium positioned at the entrance to the restaurant - the young girl looking bored by her current duties as she examined her fingernails. Paying the girl no mind, Weiss' eyes swept the rest of the people visible within the confines of the patio and through the glass windows to the interior of the café.

From the limited information she'd gathered, this was the right time of day to pay a visit - towards the end of the lunch shift when the dinner servers would soon arrive to handle the evening rush.

Weiss checked every table, marking them off one-by-one in search of -

Her feet abruptly stopped moving, opting instead to freeze to the sidewalk while her mouth went suddenly dry. Her heart pounded as the unquenchable longing she'd held at bay for so long was unlocked and set free in her chest. All this time, she'd been under the impression that she knew what to expect, but the emotions burgeoning inside of her were powerful in a wonderful, incredible way she could never get enough of.

The waiting and searching were finally over.

Flying out of the restaurant with a plate of food in each hand, a young brunette zipped over to a table and set each meal in front of its respective owner. After exchanging a few words and more than enough smiles, the girl dashed to another set of diners to check on how they were doing.

She wasn't stingy with those smiles, which were bright enough to lift Weiss' spirit from a distance. Her movements never stopped, and there was a skip that found its way into every step - as if there was something truly enjoyable about rushing around a café in the middle of the afternoon.

She was different - it was painfully obvious to anyone who bothered looking that this girl was different from the rest. She had an aura that shone far more brilliantly than anyone around her. She was, in a single word, incomparable.

When taking a deep breath did nothing to quell the excitement tingling through her veins, Weiss spurred her feet to carry her over to the hostess. The young girl finally looked away from her fingernails and even managed a smile when she noticed Weiss' approach.

"Hey! Welcome to Stella's - just one today?" Making an assumption on the answer, she pulled one menu from the stack on her podium.

"Yes, just one," Weiss answered with a polite smile. "If possible, I'd like to sit in that waitress' section."

Surprised by the special request, the hostess followed the direction of Weiss' point and located the waitress being referred to.

"You want to sit in Ruby's section?" the girl clarified, to which Weiss nodded and failed to suppress a smile at the name.

"Yes," she repeated, her eyes getting caught on Ruby as she buzzed past. "I'd like to sit in Ruby's section."

Saying the name out loud was always incredible, but speaking it here - where a louder voice might be overheard by the name's very owner - was indescribable.

"Uh, ok," the hostess responded before waving to the patio. "Is outside ok?"

Weiss merely nodded before being led to a small, two-person table bordering the sidewalk. After laying the menu in front of one of the chairs, the hostess left with a quick, routine, "Your server will be right with you!" and nothing else. There was no inquiry into why Weiss made the specific request of server, but there rarely was. If her motives *had* been questioned, she'd prepared a foolproof explanation - that they were old friends, and she was there as a surprise.

Both were true, in a sense.

Taking her seat, Weiss pushed the menu away as her anticipation built. She wasn't nervous, per se, and why would she be when she had a plan? Not just one plan, but innumerable plans she could call upon if needed.

She wasn't nervous - she was expectant and excited. But, as impatient as she was to move past this introduction, she reminded herself that this wasn't all for her - that there was a reason to proceed slowly and carefully. At one point she hadn't been as patient, but today she was able to call upon the calm

of experience to hold her eagerness at a reasonable level.

That being said, even though her eagerness was held at a *reasonable* level, that didn't mean her knee stopped jittering underneath the table while waiting.

After delivering another set of plates, Ruby glanced around the patio and caught Weiss' eyes. The casual gaze was enough for Weiss' heart to race - the rhythm growing faster as Ruby cut through the tables, managing to trip over an empty chair before righting herself and making it to Weiss' side.

The moment had arrived - and Weiss could hardly breathe.

"Hey! How's it going?" Still blushing from her near tumble, Ruby gave her signature smile while pulling a small pad of paper and a pen out of her black apron. "Is it just you today?"

"For now," Weiss answered, smiling up at Ruby and wishing beyond wishes that it was socially acceptable to kiss someone she'd just met.

But patience was a virtue - one that she had learned over time. It allowed her to put off her own desires in favor of accepting Ruby's smile, which - on its own - was enough to restore Weiss' heart and soul in an instant.

"Cool!" For a moment, Ruby's smile grew a little brighter before settling back to its base state. "Well, I'm Ruby, and I'll be your server today."

"Nice to meet you, Ruby," Weiss replied, dipping her head in greeting. "I'm Weiss."

It was unorthodox to provide a name back to a waitress, but Weiss did it anyway. As patient as she was, she wanted Ruby to have her name as soon as possible.

"Weiss," Ruby repeated, mulling over the name before nodding. "That's a really pretty name!"

The first response that popped into Weiss' head was 'It's even prettier when you say it.' Fortunately, she held her tongue and silently cursed a certain playful blonde for being such a bad influence.

"Thank you," she replied instead. "Ruby is a very pretty name, too."

"Eh, I guess." Shrugging off the compliment with a modest blush, Ruby grinned again and tapped Weiss' menu. "Do you know what you want?"

Hearing another inappropriate response flicker through her head, Weiss did her best to turn off that spigot of unfortunate pickup lines for the rest of

the day. None of those were useful to her right now. They might be later, but she needed a better feel for Ruby's personality first.

"I'm actually not sure," she said, glancing at the menu she hadn't even opened before returning Ruby's gaze. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Oh, totally! The meatball sub is *amazing* - I'd recommend that if you're into sandwiches." Weiss nearly laughed at the suggestion, which was absolutely something Ruby would enjoy. Thankfully, Ruby quickly realized she was speaking to someone who wasn't *exactly* a meatball sub type of girl and stammered on. "O-or, I mean, if that's not your thing, I've heard the tuna salad is really good."

Ruby's nerves were encouraging, and hopefully suggested what Weiss thought they did. She *had* put extra time and effort into selecting the perfect outfit for today - a nice white blouse with striking black buttons that paired perfectly with a white skirt and boots.

She didn't want to make Ruby nervous, but she wanted to ensure Ruby *noticed* her. When she crossed her legs and Ruby glanced down before immediately averting her gaze and blushing, it looked like that mission had been successful.

"Do you mean a tuna salad sandwich?" Weiss asked, greatly enjoying the blush on Ruby's cheeks. "Or tuna on a salad?"

"Oh! Uh, right." Re-finding her smile, Ruby met Weiss' gaze again. "I mean tuna salad. I mean, tuna on a salad."

This time Weiss couldn't help but laugh at the adorable fumbles, while planning on bringing up this conversation again at a much later date. 'Do you remember repeatedly offering me tuna salad?'

Not at all ashamed to laugh at herself, Ruby chuckled along too, running a hand through her short brown hair and resuming that smile.

"That sounds good," Weiss answered. "I'll have the tuna salad."

"Great!" Ruby was about to write the words down before freezing and giving Weiss a second glance. "Wait. Do you want a salad, or do you want it as a sandwich?"

None of Weiss' numerous plans had anything to do with tuna salad, but that's what made this so incredible - Ruby always came up with *something*

that lay outside of Weiss' realms of planning. After so much time that should be impossible, yet...it continued to happen.

"That's up to you," Weiss replied, turning this amusing situation into a little test of what Ruby would do.

At first, Ruby looked like she wanted to ask another question, but instead she smiled, jotted a note down on her paper, and stuck it back in her apron.

"You got it! Oh! What do you want to drink?"

"Water's fine."

"Ok, then I'll be right back." Backing away from the table, Ruby nearly collided into another server who was rushing behind her. "Oh - my bad!" she apologized before shooting Weiss one last smile and hurrying off. Weiss watched Ruby leave and smiled all the while.

It was so refreshing to be back together again, like it always was. Ruby was this incredible breath of fresh air that swept away all the bad in Weiss' life. Now that Weiss was here, it didn't matter what was happening in Atlas or anywhere else in the world. All that mattered was Ruby - figuring out what she was like and what she was willing to accept.

Weiss had been pleasantly surprised when she learned that Ruby was working as a waitress in Vacuo. Being in the service industry, it was Ruby's job to speak to people - which made it much easier for Weiss to strike up a conversation without seeming out of place.

If she needed to, she would come back to this restaurant every single day - starting trivial conversations and ordering tuna salads - for as long as it was necessary. But, from their initial greeting, she was beginning to think that it *wouldn't* be necessary. What she'd learned so far was that Ruby was just as adorable as ever, just as prone to smiling, just as prone to laughing, and just as prone to making a slight fool of herself.

There were a million reasons to wait, but there were a million reasons to see if Ruby was willing to accept the unexpected.

When Ruby reappeared from inside the restaurant carrying a glass of water, Weiss straightened in her seat and watched intently. Ruby tripped over her feet once while navigating through the maze of tables, but managed to catch her balance without spilling anything and made it the rest of the way

unscathed.

“Here you go, Weiss!” After setting down the glass with a grin, she hurried towards another table motioning for her attention. “I’ll bring your tuna salad out as soon as it’s ready.”

Hearing Ruby say her name out loud put Weiss in a temporary state of blissful paralysis, her mouth permanently frozen in a smile while her mind replayed the moment over and over again. It may seem silly that such a simple action made her so happy, but she’d accepted long ago that Ruby affected her in ways no one else could.

It was in this blissful state that she took a sip of water and watched what was going on around her. There were several other people - mostly couples - sitting on the patio, and a good flow of foot traffic on the sidewalk just outside, but she found everything else horribly mundane compared to the bubbly brunette zipping around.

It was always a mystery how other people missed it. How did they miss the radiance shining from within Ruby, brighter than anyone else around her? She glowed with compassion and kindness, and selflessness fueled her every step. Weiss might one day go blind from staring too often at such brilliance, but it would be worth it if Ruby was the last thing she ever saw.

The restaurant was only modestly busy, yet Ruby buzzed from place-to-place with never-ending energy and motion. She had a smile for anyone and everyone, as well as easy laughter that lifted the atmosphere of the patio. Besides doing her own job, she helped the other servers every few minutes - carrying trays of food, delivering requested condiments, and clearing off dishes when customers left.

Weiss was staring rather openly at the moment, but she didn’t think she could stop. But there wasn’t a reason to stop when Ruby glanced over every few minutes and blushed every time their gazes met.

Just when Weiss started feeling antsy - wanting them to speak again - Ruby walked out of the restaurant with a single plate in her hands. As she navigated towards Weiss’ table, Weiss smiled out of pure relief and excitement for whatever the impending interaction would bring.

“Hey Weiss!” Ruby said, using Weiss’ name again and sending butterflies

fluttering through her chest. "Here ya go."

When Ruby set down the plate, Weiss looked at her lunch and nearly laughed at what she found.

"I had the chef make the sandwich for you," Ruby explained. "Cuz it's not actually on the menu."

Sitting next to the tuna salad sandwich - made as a special order - was a bowl containing the ahi tuna salad Ruby had originally suggested.

"You're something else," Weiss replied, grinning up at Ruby and shaking her head in amusement. "This is lovely. Thank you."

"Oh, sure - no problem!" Waving one hand, Ruby blew out a breath of air - managing to look nonchalant even though her cheeks were turning red. "It's no big deal, really. Just doin' my job!"

"And doing it well."

The compliment succeeded in deepening Ruby's blush.

"Ah, uh, I'm glad you think so," she managed to get out, slowly backing away from the table and gesturing over her shoulder. "I should probably see if anyone else needs help, but...let me know if you need anything?"

At Ruby's hopeful gaze, Weiss nodded as she picked up her fork.

"I definitely will."

Satisfied with that answer, Ruby grinned before hurrying off - looking slightly lost for a second before finally picking a direction and going to check on another table. Weiss chuckled at the flustered behavior while picking at her salad and watching Ruby get back to work.

Now that they were in each other's space, Weiss felt content in a way she never had before. It was amazing and freeing at the same time. It was a peaceful acceptance that happiness was nearby - that Ruby was nearby.

Cutting the sandwich in half, Weiss took a bite and found that it was surprisingly good. At least, it was something she would order again if she had a craving for a tuna salad sandwich.

The thought of someone craving a tuna sandwich immediately brought her thoughts to Blake, who this lunch would be perfect for. Thinking about Blake gnawed at her heart, causing her restlessness with the current situation to grow. She was patient, but she would love to be having lunch with Blake

at the moment - the two of them talking about their lives and commiserating over the crazy partners they had.

But patience was a virtue, and Weiss had learned to be patient. She was more than happy to move at whatever pace Ruby needed. But when Ruby was exhibiting signs that she might be open to hearing what Weiss had to say *sooner* rather than later...

If there was an opportunity to skip this introductory phase and move right to getting to know each other in a more intimate fashion, Weiss was going to make full use of it. It wasn't impatience. It was judicious judgment of Ruby's acceptance to peculiar happenings.

Nibbling at her lunch, she considered her options. From the flustered behavior, it seemed that she already had Ruby's attention. From here, it shouldn't take much effort to embark upon a traditional relationship - beginning with small talk and working their way up to unconditional love. The process would take time, but they had plenty of time.

Or...Weiss could take a calculated leap of faith and tell Ruby now. They could skip the beginning parts of a relationship and start somewhere in the middle - that much closer to the unconditional love side of things.

What was the worst that could happen? Ruby might think Weiss was crazy, but honestly, she'd worked her way back from worse than that. So when she said she was willing to be patient, she really meant that she would give Ruby as much time as needed...*after* explaining the truth about their connection.

Spotting the object of her affection heading to a nearby table, Weiss pushed her plate an inch away to symbolize she was finished. Almost on cue, Ruby finished speaking with the other pair of diners before walking over.

"Are you done?" she asked with a wave towards the partially-eaten sandwich and salad.

"Yes. It was marvelous, but quite a lot."

"Do you want me to box it up?"

"No, thank you. But feel free -" Weiss gestured towards the half sandwich, which she cut cleanly with a knife specifically so that she could offer it to the perpetually hungry girl. This was the final test, albeit a small one. Would Ruby accept the offer of food from a relative stranger? If she was willing to

do that...

"I'll totally take you up on that," Ruby replied with a laugh. "I have like *no* food at home right now."

That sounded like the perfect opening for a dinner invitation, but Weiss held her tongue. Instead, she smiled while Ruby reached for the plate and embraced the excitement rushing through her veins. Admittedly, she loved this part - when she finally put the truth out in the open, then guided Ruby through the process of believing it was true.

"How's your sister?" Weiss asked, and elaborated when Ruby gave her a curious glance. "How's Yang doing?"

"Oh, she's doing great!"

Regardless of their past difficulties, Weiss was happy to hear that Yang was doing well. While an eternity with Ruby was a blessing, the ever-present addition of Yang might be a curse - or so Weiss liked to claim. In actuality, Yang was like a sister to her...as annoying and frustrating as that may sometimes be.

"Has she found Blake yet?" she asked, and her heart lifted when Ruby chuckled at the question.

"They've been together since like...the beginning of high school. Yang's actually gonna propose soon!" As soon as the words slipped out, Ruby cringed and looked around to see if anyone overheard.

"Shoot. I was supposed to keep that a secret..."

Weiss smiled at the answer, happy that the two had found each other so early. Personally, she considered it much easier to deal with Yang when Blake was already in the picture. There was something about Blake's influence that...calmed Yang, in a way. She could still be a handful at times, but she had far more restraint when Blake was nearby.

"Don't worry," Weiss replied with a reassuring wink. "Your secret's safe with me."

Ruby beamed at the reply, but then her brow furrowed as she caught on to something important.

"Wait - how do you know Yang?"

If time could slow down, it would after that question.

This was it. The moment of truth.

"I know her through you," Weiss answered, using honesty so it was easier to remember the story later on. "Since she's your sister, I inevitably end up spending lots of time with her."

For an instant, it looked like Ruby was going to nod - as if the explanation made sense to her, seeing as how she and Yang were practically attached at the hip. But she froze in the midst of that nod while her confusion doubled.

"But...we've never met before."

"Are you sure about that?" The question came out teasing and coy, which was a bit of a mistake on Weiss' part. In the midst of confusion, Ruby took it seriously and searched for an answer.

"I mean, yeah. I'm positive I'd remember someone as prett - uh, I mean, nice as you."

The slip-up unleashed another set of butterflies in Weiss' chest while she silently congratulated herself on a successful outfit. This was precisely why she always took extra time to pick out something perfect. She *loved* catching Ruby's eye and imagination.

"You're right, in a way," she replied, watching intently as she prepared to deliver the truth. "I haven't met you in *this* life - that doesn't mean I haven't met you in others."

With the truth out in the open, Ruby stared in jaw-dropped surprise. Weiss smiled in an attempt to alleviate some of the disbelief, but it was only after several moments of silence that Ruby shook her head and tried to respond.

"Uh, what? Are you saying...that we've met in past lives?"

The tone suggested that Ruby was on the verge of thinking Weiss was crazy, but she was fully prepared to deal with that label if she had to.

"Yes," she answered. "Exactly. We've met in past lives - many, many past lives. I know you don't remember them, but I do. I remember all of them - and I remember that we're together in each one."

For the longest time, Ruby just stared - but that was a good sign, and proved Weiss' decision more correct. If Ruby wasn't willing to believe, she would have scoffed and written off the idea as crazy. If she didn't *want* to believe, she would have played it off as a joke.

Instead, she stared, and Weiss smiled. She really did love this part. Actually, she loved everything after the searching ended. As long as they were near each other in some capacity - even if it was only as friends - she felt whole again.

“Ruby?”

The voice tore Ruby’s attention towards another server - the same waitress Ruby had helped multiple times this afternoon.

“Can you help me with a new table?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” Ruby mumbled, glancing at Weiss with surprise still swimming in her eyes. “So, uh...”

“I’m willing to explain further, if you’d like,” Weiss offered before Ruby walked away. And Ruby thought about the offer for only a second before nodding.

“I get off in fifteen minutes,” she said, and almost walked away before stopping and picking up Weiss’ plate. “I’ll, uh...I’ll be back.”

With that said, Ruby hurried into the restaurant and flew out a few seconds later with the plate no longer in her hands. Wearing a big smile, she accompanied the other server - who, based on her general uncertainty around people, must be relatively new - to a group of diners. Ruby led the conversation for a few seconds, got the entire table to laugh about something, then handed the duties over to the other waitress.

As soon as that was done, Ruby shot a glance towards Weiss, blushed, and finished up with the tables she had left. Another waitress joined the rotation of servers buzzing in and out of the restaurant, and this new server went over to Ruby’s tables once Ruby disappeared inside.

Only when Ruby was out of sight did Weiss lean back in her seat and tap her fingers on the table, lost in thought. In her experience, that went really well. There was no freak out, no rapid questions, no instant disbelief - there was nothing, really. And nothing was a great sign. Nothing meant that Ruby was willing to listen. Weiss was willing to talk, that was for sure. She was more than willing to explain as much of their story as Ruby was willing to hear.

It was only a few minutes before Ruby exited the restaurant - this time

without her work apron and with a casual red zip-up. Upon seeing her, Weiss' heart beat faster in anticipation.

For a split second, she worried that Ruby might decide to leave - to categorize Weiss as crazy and leave both her and the restaurant behind - but then Ruby altered her course, walked over to the table, and sat down across from Weiss.

Looking at Ruby, Weiss was drawn into other memories just like this - sitting at a café together - but focused on this particular one, wishing to savor as much of it as possible.

"So...were you just messing with me earlier?" Ruby asked, pulling at her sleeve before meeting Weiss' eyes.

"No," Weiss answered, shaking her head but finding it impossible not to smile at the conversation they were having. "I'm completely serious - we're destined to be together, in every universe."

Ruby nodded and opened her mouth - leaving it open for quite a long time while rapid thoughts flitted through expressive silver eyes that Weiss had spent years dreaming about. Eventually, the emotions Ruby settled upon were...miffed and confused, but not upset.

"I mean, isn't that something you tell someone *after* you've known each other for a while?" she finally asked, her voice rising with a bit of a whine.

The response only made Weiss chuckle. This was turning out better than she could have hoped for, and she couldn't wait to tell Ruby even more.

"I don't always tell you right away," Weiss replied, resisting the urge to reach across the table and hold Ruby's hand. "Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. Sometimes you believe me, sometimes you don't. That doesn't change our relationship in the end."

Savoring the furrowed brow and perplexed gaze, she waited patiently for Ruby to digest those words.

"How do you decide then?" Ruby asked. "Why tell me now? Was it, like, because of the tuna salad thing?"

"No, although that was super adorable." Smiling when Ruby's cheeks turned a satisfying shade of pink, Weiss carried on. "I normally decide based on the clues you give me -"

“So what kind of clues did I give you?” Ruby quickly asked.

“You’re open, honest, and receptive. I think you’ll believe me - or at least, not run away.”

Ruby nodded at the response, as if it was what she’d expected.

“Yang says I’m too trusting.”

“You usually are,” Weiss agreed, not minding that fact one bit. Ruby’s faith in the world was one of the traits that set her apart from everyone else. Sometimes it got her into trouble, but often it was what made her incredible.

“So...you remember every time we’ve met,” Ruby added. “Theoretically.”

“I do.”

“How many times are we talkin’ about? Like ten? A hundred? A thousand?”

With every subsequent number, Weiss’ smile grew.

“More than you can imagine,” she replied, her smile growing even larger when Ruby’s mouth dropped and formed a nearly perfect ‘o’ of surprise.

“A lot then?”

Sometimes, Weiss wished she was better at hiding her emotions when Ruby was around. But it was impossible, and at this moment she didn’t care. Instead, she beamed and nodded while thinking about how many lives ‘a lot’ added up to.

“Yes. A lot.”

Blowing a breath through her lips, Ruby looked like she was going to collapse back into her seat, but scooted closer instead.

“Ok, sorry, but like...how is that even possible??”

“That’s something I don’t have the answer to,” Weiss answered honestly. As much as she searched for the cause of all of this, most of the time she was perfectly fine not knowing. If she’d been granted a magnificent gift, why would she question it? Why not accept that she was blessed and spend her time enjoying Ruby’s company?

“I can only tell you what I know,” she added, “So feel free to ask me anything.”

“Uh...ok...” Ruby replied, looking around the patio of the restaurant as if there might be clues written around them. “I guess, like, how did this start?”

“What do you mean?” Weiss asked in return.

“When’s the first time we met? There’s gotta be a beginning, right? I mean,

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assuming it's true."

Weiss grinned at the question, which was brilliantly on point. Every story was best told from the beginning, and this story was no different.

"Are you asking me to tell you about the first time we fell in love?" she asked, watching Ruby's cheeks flush and her eyes lower to the table.

"I mean, I guess..."

"I'll tell you," Weiss said, her excitement building at the prospect of revisiting this memory together. "But it was in a world far different from our own..."

Chapter 2

“I’m gonna read now!”

As Ruby hopped over to the nightstand, where her precious ‘Weapon Maker’ magazine had laid since yesterday, Weiss swiveled in her chair to follow her partner’s movements.

“Have you finished the assignment for tomorrow?”

“Yup!” Ruby replied, grabbing the magazine and flopping down on Weiss’ bed. The action was so commonplace by now that Weiss’ mind hardly registered it. She was far more focused on making sure Ruby was prepared for class.

“Are you sure you did the *right* assignment?” Weiss clarified.

“I wouldn’t do the wrong assignment by mistake!” Ruby whined. But when Weiss arched one brow at her, she added, “At least, not again...”

Satisfied with the answer, Weiss chuckled to herself while turning back to her own studying. That unfortunate accident had only happened once, but she (playfully) refused to let Ruby live it down. What Ruby *didn’t* know was that the same thing once happened to her, but she finished the assignment in a mad rush right before it was collected.

Ruby was supposed to be the forgetful one, but...well, they all had their flaws, didn’t they? Accepting imperfection was new to Weiss - something she was still working on, but finding success with every so often with Ruby’s never-ending help.

The door to the room suddenly opened, but Weiss didn’t lift her eyes from the book lying open on the desk in front of her.

“Are you saying you wouldn’t want to?” Yang asked as she and Blake

CHAPTER 2

returned from their practice and tossed their weapons onto floor - to be put away later, hopefully, but sometimes Yang decided that was 'too much effort.'

"Not that I wouldn't want to," Blake replied. "But I'm pretty sure we're not allowed up there - the doors are always locked."

* * *

"Wait."

Pausing her story, Weiss looked across the table at Ruby, who was holding up one hand and staring with wide eyes.

"*Blake's* in this story? Like, the same Blake that Yang's dating - that Blake?"

"Yes," Weiss answered with a nod.

"But...how is she there??"

"She's always connected to our lives in some way," Weiss explained. "In this case, the four of us enrolled at the same school, and she's one of our teammates."

For a long time, Ruby stared. From expressive silver eyes, Weiss knew that Ruby's mind was racing - trying to catch up with the information. Weiss was willing to wait...now that their secret was out in the open, of course.

"That's...just..."

Words trailing off, Ruby shook her head and waved for Weiss to continue. "Sorry for interrupting. I'll listen now."

Smiling at the cute apology, Weiss launched back into the story.

* * *

"You're *literally* a ninja," Yang said. "Are you saying you couldn't make it up there?"

"I could absolutely make it up there."

"Then why don't you prove it to me, huh?" Yang goaded her partner, the constant teasing finally breaking Weiss' focus on her homework. "I wanna know what's up there! And if you're *so* sure you can do it..."

"I'm not falling for that again," Blake replied with a light laugh. "Professor Goodwitch might *actually* kill us next time."

"Or she'll put you both in detention until graduation," Weiss added, spinning around in her seat and watching Yang sit on the edge of Blake's bed to pull off her boots.

"So you *were* listening!" Yang gasped, dropping her shoes on the floor before walking over and shaking Weiss by the shoulders. "I didn't think anything could pry you away from that textbook! I swear, the entire world disappears when you look at one of those things."

"Hey!" Ruby piped up from her spot on Weiss' bed. "Weiss would stop studying if you asked nicely!"

After sending Ruby a look of gratitude, Weiss met Yang's eyes and attempted a scowl.

"Unfortunately, your voice is uniquely grating. It would make a deaf person cringe."

By this point in time, Weiss didn't even mean the insult. But she said it anyway - because it made Yang laugh, and Weiss had never had a friend who thought she was 'funny.'

"I'm glad talking annoys you so much - because that's something I'm *uniquely* qualified to do." Letting go of Weiss' shoulders, Yang shot a grin towards Blake - who nodded in agreement - before turning back with a friendly smile. "But now that I have your attention, Blake and I were wondering what we're doing for your -"

"Nothing," Weiss said, interrupting Yang before she finished that question. "We're not doing anything for my birthday."

"Uh, what? Why not?" Turning to the side, Yang shared a look with Ruby and Blake before letting out a small huff of disbelief. "Your birthday's this week - we should celebrate."

All three of her teammates were watching now, as Weiss shook her head. She had her reasons, but she didn't want to discuss them right now. She'd hoped that no one would bring up the unfortunate day, but now that they had...

"I don't want to celebrate anything," she said. "It's just a regular day."

“It’s not every day you turn eighteen -”

“I don’t want to do anything special. Really.”

When Weiss put extra emphasis on the last word, Yang gave up with a solemn shake of her head and walked over to Blake’s bed. Blake gave Weiss a thoughtful expression before focusing on the girl who collapsed beside her.

Noticing that one person in the room was conspicuously quiet, Weiss found Ruby watching the interaction with a furrowed brow.

“Do you have anything to add?” Weiss asked, softening her tone when addressing Ruby directly. It looked like Ruby wanted to say something, but instead she shook her head and smiled.

“It’s your day, Weiss. We’ll do whatever you want!”

The response warmed Weiss’ heart, and was exactly what she’d hoped to hear.

“I’d like to be treated normally - no special attention or ‘happy birthdays’ necessary,” she replied, to which Ruby nodded.

“Then that’s how it’ll be.”

Weiss smiled at the proclamation, relieved that Ruby took her side.

Ruby’s support meant the world to her, in ways that grew every day. She didn’t have the courage to admit this out loud, but she relied on Ruby now. Surprisingly, relying on another person wasn’t as scary as she might’ve thought, because she trusted Ruby more than anyone else at Beacon. They weren’t partners in name only anymore. They were *partners* - the true meaning of that term being learned over time.

With the stress of her impending birthday alleviated, Weiss resumed studying until it was time to go to sleep. She appreciated that her teammates didn’t press her. Once she made her wishes known, they would honor those requests. After surviving her childhood, with her father’s wants overruling everyone else’s, it was nice to have her wishes respected. Even if her teammates didn’t understand, they would do as she asked and know that she had a reason.

In this case, it was a personal reason, but a reason all the same.

Waking up on the morning of her birthday, she felt a freedom and levity that had never before been associated with this inauspicious day. There would be

no surprises, no unwanted attention - it would be a normal day filled with normal responsibilities and a normal routine.

As her teammates woke up, they did exactly what she'd asked of them. Blake headed into the bathroom first, uttering the customary "Good morning," as she walked past. Yang jumped off her bed and stretched in between their bunks, making her back do that sickening pop she knew Weiss hated before flashing a grin.

"What's up, buttercup?" Yang said, making up another stupid nickname that was only meant to annoy Weiss further.

"Buttercup is a cute name!"

Ruby appeared the next second, landing beside her sister and already sporting a big smile. "Do you like that one, Weiss?" she asked. "I mean, do you like that one, *buttercup*?"

Ruby giggled at the term of endearment while Weiss' cheeks grew warmer. She had no problem reacting with disdain when Yang pulled that act every morning, but it was growing more and more flustering when Ruby sometimes tagged on.

"It's ok..." Weiss muttered, avoiding Ruby's cheerful grin and heading to the dresser to find her outfit for today's classes. When Blake walked back into the room a few minutes later, Yang disappeared into the bathroom next.

Four girls sharing a single bathroom was a nightmare in the making, but they'd come up with a fair method to keep everyone happy. They always went in order of their team initials, but the person who went first switched every morning. Ruby was first one day, Weiss was first the next, so on and so forth. Having a defined order worked wonders in keeping the arguments at bay.

While waiting for Yang, then Ruby, to get ready, Weiss read over her notes from the night before. No matter what Yang said, there was no such thing as too much studying. This was their livelihoods they were preparing for, after all. Being over prepared was a *good* thing - it meant they would come home safe and sound.

When a soft breeze and the smell of fresh roses swept across her, Weiss packed her notebooks into her bag and walked towards the bathroom. Being last meant there wasn't much time left to get ready, but she'd perfected a

routine that took minimal time.

Even though she'd made a big deal about today *not* being a big deal, she spent a few extra minutes styling her hair to perfection. There was no shame in looking well-dressed on *any* given day - her birthday or not. If she wanted to look a little fancier today, that was her decision to make.

After giving her appearance a nod of approval in the mirror, she walked out of the bathroom and immediately sensed that something was out of place. Or rather, *someone* was *missing*.

It was strange how connected she was to Ruby recently, where she could sense Ruby's presence and absence without thinking about it. But that's exactly what had happened again, because only Yang and Blake were in the room.

"Where's Ruby?" Weiss asked, her eyes sweeping the room a second time, as if Ruby was somehow hidden in the miniscule space.

"She ran out for something," Blake answered. "Said she'd be right back."

"Oh."

Weiss was disappointed by the news, then mentally scolded herself for being disappointed. *She* was the one who made a big deal about everyone treating her normally, yet she was disappointed that Ruby left the room early on her birthday? Ruby was only doing what Weiss requested, which was really kind and sweet of her. So why did Weiss suddenly wish that Ruby hadn't listened?

There was no time to overanalyze the emotion since Yang and Blake were ready to go. Picking up her bag, Weiss gave them a nod. Together, the three of them stepped into the hall at nearly the same moment Team JNPR's door opened.

"Good morning," Pyrrha said upon seeing them, then smiled when her eyes fell upon Weiss. "Happy birthday, Weiss."

"Oh yeah! Happy birthday," Jaune added with a grin.

"Thank you," Weiss replied with a slight bow of her head.

They'd only just left the sanctuary of the room behind, and already she had two birthday wishes. That was alright though - she could handle birthday wishes. It was when people started getting into birthday *plans* that she wanted

to leave the conversation.

“Are you doing anything special to celebrate?” Pyrrha asked, as if she’d just overheard the thought flit through Weiss’ mind.

“We should *party!*” Nora added with that slightly manic smile of hers. Jaune nodded in agreement, but Weiss shook her head at the suggestion.

“She doesn’t want to do anything,” Yang answered, causing the four members of Team JNPR to look at Weiss in shock. Well, three of them looked at her in shock, and Ren nodded his head in understanding.

“What??” Jaune asked. “No party? No gifts? No cake??”

“It’s just a regular day,” Weiss replied, suddenly wishing that birthdays didn’t even exist. “There’s no need for any festivities.”

Yang raised a hand as if saying ‘see?’ while the rest of JNPR stared.

Weiss didn’t expect anyone to understand her true motivations behind foregoing her birthday, nor did she want to explain it to everyone. But if this was how they were going to react, it was going to be a long day.

“If that’s what you want...” Pyrrha finally replied, always willing to honor someone else’s wishes.

“Weiss!”

Weiss’ heart leapt at the sound of her name, and Ruby appeared by her side a second later. A wave of rose petals fluttered past them in the hall, but by now they were so used to the phenomenon that no one blinked.

“Oh, hey guys!” Ruby added with a wave towards Team JNPR.

“Hey Ruby,” Jaune replied, thankfully turning his attention to the newest arrival. “What’re you up to?”

“Oh!” Reminded of whatever she’d run off to do, Ruby turned and grabbed Weiss’ hands, sending a thrill of excitement down Weiss’ spine. “I went to talk to Professor Oobleck. He said the two of us can go on a super-secret mission today!”

“What??” Nora gasped.

Feeling a much more muted version of Nora’s reaction, Weiss gave Ruby a curious look.

“What super-secret mission?” she asked while Nora appeared by her side.

“Yeah! What mission? Can I come??”

“Sorry guys, it’s just me and Weiss!” Ruby replied with a grin. “So you’ll have to go to class without us. Oh, and probably no practice today either.”

That last piece of news was positive, as Yang turned to Blake and smiled.

“Sweet. That means we can hang out?” Yang asked while gesturing between the two of them.

“That sounds nice.”

“But what about *me*?” Nora butted in. “What am I supposed to do?”

The rest of Team JNPR chuckled at Nora’s whine while walking away from their dorm room. “Come on, Nora,” Ren said as they went. “Let’s go to class.”

“See you guys later!” Jaune called out, throwing a wave over his shoulder. Team JNPR hadn’t yet turned the corner when Yang and Blake turned to Weiss and Ruby.

“Guess we’ll catch up later?” Yang asked.

“You bet!” Ruby said. Nodding once at the answer, Yang took Blake’s hand to lead them after Team JNPR for class. Meanwhile, Ruby opened the door to their room and rushed inside. Curious, Weiss followed and watched Ruby fill a backpack with snacks from her overflowing ‘snack drawer.’

“What is this mission?”

“Oh - we need to collect some plants for Professor Oobleck.” Pulling a folded piece of paper out of her pocket, Ruby handed it over to Weiss. “He needs them for some experiments or something.”

Unfolding the paper, Weiss found a short list of plants scrawled in their professor’s messy handwriting.

“Why?” It wasn’t that she minded helping Professor Oobleck, but this seemed like the type of activity that could be done outside of class hours.

Briefly pausing her packing, Ruby looked up and gave Weiss an apologetic smile.

“Sorry...I know it’s not a ‘normal’ day like you asked for, but I figured you wouldn’t want everyone to keep asking you about your birthday. So I asked him if we could help out with something in exchange for skipping class.”

With that same smile, Ruby went back to packing as if her thoughtfulness was nothing.

But it wasn’t nothing. Not to Weiss. It was one of the most thoughtful

things anyone had ever done for her.

“Do we really need that many snacks?” she asked, looking at the list of plants again. “This should only take an hour or two.”

“But what if it takes us a *really* long time to find everything?” Ruby asked in return. “Like, maybe they aren’t very common and we have to search *really* hard? Then it could take like...all day.”

Catching on to the implication, Weiss lowered the list and smiled. Spending the entire day away from her classmates asking why she didn’t want to celebrate her birthday? Spending the entire day with Ruby instead? It sounded like her best birthday yet.

“You’re right. Some of these are pretty uncommon,” she agreed, smiling when Ruby beamed in success and hopped to her feet.

“Then we’d best get going,” Ruby said, pulling on her backpack, slinging Crescent Rose over her back, and giving Weiss a thumbs up. “Lots of plants to find!”

With another smile, Weiss grabbed Myrtenaster and followed Ruby out the door. It wasn’t very often that she willingly missed class, but today was an exception. Not that today was *special* - it was still a normal day filled with non-birthday activities. But they would spend the day together, and that was always enjoyable.

Walking across Beacon’s grassy lawns towards the forest, Weiss looked up at the early morning sun and sighed in content. Any chill left in the air would soon be gone, and the day would likely be beautiful and warm. What better time to be outside versus stuck in a classroom listening to a lecture?

“It’s so nice out,” Ruby remarked, adding a hop to her step to emphasize how she felt about the weather. Weiss smiled at the comment because, as usual, Ruby said out loud what Weiss thought in her head. This was another strange occurrence happening more and more often - like Ruby was in Weiss’ mind reading her thoughts.

She liked it. She knew she could come off as abrasive or demanding, but Ruby said everything in a way that was worthy of a smile.

They were just about to enter the outer edge of the forest when Ruby swung the bag off her back and pulled out a granola bar.

“Already hungry?” Weiss asked while watching Ruby eat half of the bar in a single bite.

“Jush a bit.” Ruby motioned with her fingers, but Weiss laughed and walked into the forest.

Based on the list and what Weiss knew of the plants on it, they wouldn’t need to venture far. That was good news, as the last thing they needed was to run into some Grimm while searching for plants.

“Do you know what we’re looking for?” Weiss asked, keeping her eyes trained on the ground as they picked their way through the trees and shrubs.

“Uh, well, I was kinda hoping you did.”

Shaking her head, Weiss was about to comment on Ruby’s lack of preparedness when her eyes caught sight of one of their objectives.

“Here,” she said instead, walking over and kneeling by a thorny little plant with blue-green leaves and small purple flowers on top. “These are the stark violets.”

“Ohhh good find.” While Weiss carefully pulled several of the prickly plants from the ground, Ruby knelt by her side. “I knew you’d be great at this!”

The compliment heated her cheeks, but thankfully Ruby didn’t seem to notice. Weiss could mention that they’d learned about the plants just last week in class...or she could remain silent and accept the praise.

Holding the plants in one hand, she turned towards Ruby and realized a fundamental flaw in their packing. *Technically*, she’d had nothing to do with their packing, but she was willing to take a bit of the blame anyway. They were partners, after all...

“Where are we supposed to put these?” she asked, gesturing with the plants. “Do you have room in your bag?”

Quickly shrugging off her backpack, Ruby held it up in between them. Seeing the stuffed pack, Weiss shook her head. There was definitely no room in there, unless they wanted to bring Professor Oobleck crushed versions of what he’d asked for.

“I think you need to leave some of your snacks behind...”

It was the most obvious solution to their predicament, but would also make Ruby unhappy.

“But I haven’t gotten to eat them yet!” Ruby whined as expected. Sighing, Weiss held up the violets and gave Ruby a look that begged for another solution. Biting her lip, Ruby looked around before her expression brightened with an idea.

“I’ve got it!” she exclaimed. “Why don’t we find a place to eat first? Then we can eat enough to make room for the plants!”

The answer was genius, in its own way. It was exactly what Weiss expected from Ruby - intelligence bundled up in a sweet, caring wrapper. And, while it was a deviation from the plan, she was willing to agree with the proposition if it made Ruby happy *and* allowed them to accomplish their goal.

“Ok,” she agreed before motioning with the stark violets. “I’ll carry these with us, but where should we eat?”

They were in the midst of the forest, which wasn’t exactly the best place for an impromptu picnic. Ruby seemed to feel the same, as she glanced in all directions before her eyes sparked back to life.

“I know,” she said, waving Weiss after her before jogging deeper into the forest.

Even though Weiss had no idea where they were going, she willingly followed, trusting that Ruby could lead the way. They were headed up - that’s all she knew. The ground sloped in a gradual way that was unnoticeable at first but made her legs subtly burn the longer they progressed.

It was several minutes later, right when she was going to ask where they were headed, that Ruby abruptly stopped and pointed towards a wall of rock that had appeared beyond the trees to their right.

“Think we can make it up there?”

The question had a simple answer - between the two of them, they could make it anywhere.

Forming several glyphs on the wall, Weiss waved her hand towards them. “After you,” she said before watching Ruby shoot up the sheer wall of rock with ease.

Gazing after her partner, Weiss took a deep breath as rose petals drifted down from above. After taking a few seconds to savor the scent, she set a series of glyphs for herself to use for a rapid ascent, taking care to hold onto

the stark violets on the way up. As soon as she landed safely atop the rock wall, she froze.

During their walk it was difficult to determine how far they'd traveled, but Beacon was now lying below them in the distance - the buildings glistening in the sun while students passed back and forth between class or practice.

"Wow."

That was the most succinct description Weiss could find for the view. This was yet another moment when she was grateful for the path she'd chosen and the experiences that had opened up to her. Very few people had the chance to experience something like this.

"Blake told me about this place once," Ruby explained while walking to the edge of the plateau and sitting down. "Isn't it perfect? Plus, it'll be hard for anything to sneak up on us up here. Just gotta keep an eye out for Nevermores." Looking in all directions, Ruby nodded when she found no Grimm in the air. Satisfied that they were safe, she started pulling food from the bag.

Taking a look around for herself and finding no black shapes in the sky, Weiss walked over and sat down with Ruby for their meal of...

"You only brought snacks?" she asked, picking up a package of cookies and giving Ruby a curious look.

"Uh, I mean, that's all I had in the room..."

Shaking her head, Weiss grabbed a small bag of crackers and opened it up. Thankfully, she wasn't hungry enough for a full meal at the moment, and this was exactly what she'd expect a picnic with Ruby to be like anyway - beautiful scenery, wonderful company, strange selection of food.

"I wonder how Blake found this place," she commented, trying one of Ruby's tiny cheese-filled crackers and finding it actually somewhat enjoyable.

"Pretty sure she just explores out here," Ruby replied, pulling out three cookies that she likely intended to eat at once. "Yang's been going with her more often. Which is good, I think - partners stick together!"

After making the claim, which Weiss wholeheartedly agreed with, Ruby stuck all three cookies in her mouth and chewed contentedly. Finishing those off, Ruby emptied the rest of the package for another way-too-big bite, and she was still chewing as she opened another package. Meanwhile, they would

be lucky if Weiss finished her single bag of crackers, but at least she was helping somewhat.

“So -” Ruby said, polishing off half of the cookies in a matter of seconds. “Why don’t you want to celebrate your birthday?”

As soon as Ruby asked the question, Weiss sighed. There was no way she couldn’t answer when it was Ruby who wanted to know. And if Weiss explained her reasons to anyone, it would be to Ruby.

Setting her crackers aside while Ruby continued to plow through the contents of the backpack, Weiss dusted off her hands and searched for the best place to start.

“My father always made a big deal about my birthday,” she explained, her brow creasing at the memories. “There would always be a big party, and all these important, powerful guests were invited.”

“That sounds...kinda fun?”

“It was anything but. I was forced to attend, I was forced to sing for people I didn’t know and didn’t like, and I was forced to smile the entire time - as if I was enjoying myself.” Sighing again, she shook her head. “I dreaded my birthday. I wished people would forget, or that I could pretend it was a normal day.”

“We won’t make you sing for us...” Ruby whispered, her warm silver eyes providing as much reassurance as her words.

“I know, Ruby. I just...can’t escape the feeling that this day is meant to be taken away from me.”

In the moment that followed, Ruby furrowed her brow while crumpling an empty wrapper in one hand.

“If someone takes this day away from you, I’m gonna take it right back from them!” she finally said, the certainty in her words succeeding in making Weiss laugh. And as soon as she laughed, she felt better - lighter...like she was allowed to be happy on her own birthday.

“I really appreciate what you’ve done for me today,” she said with a wave towards their strange picnic in the forest.

“Anything for you, Weiss,” Ruby replied, beaming before pulling the backpack over to her. “Oh, and I know you probably didn’t want anything,”

she said while flipping the bag open. "But I got you a little something anyway."

While Ruby spoke, she pulled out a small cardboard box - a box that Weiss hadn't noticed Ruby putting in there before they left the room.

"It's not much..." Ruby said, holding it out to Weiss. "And you deserve something way nicer, but I hope you like it anyway."

Accepting the box, Weiss felt excitement spring into her veins. It was true that she would have said that she didn't want any presents, but now that Ruby had given her one...she was excited to find out what it was.

Pulling the lid off the box, her heart jumped in her chest when she saw what was inside.

"I realized you're constantly picking petals out of everything," Ruby explained while Weiss stared at the gift. "Thought it'd be nice to give you a whole one for once."

Reaching down, Weiss gently picked up the single red rose that was resting inside.

"It's gorgeous," she said, twirling it between her fingers as she tried to soak in every small detail.

It was one of the most exquisite roses she'd ever seen, but that wasn't even the beginning of the meaning behind the gift. This rose represented Ruby, in more ways than one. To Weiss, this was her partner in inanimate form - beautiful, sweet, and pure.

Lowering the flower, Weiss caught Ruby's gaze.

"Thank you, Ruby," she said, her heart beating loudly with gratitude. "This is a really wonderful gift."

"Ah, well, no problem," Ruby replied with an embarrassed little wave. "You're a really great partner, so..."

The compliment was left hanging in the air, as Ruby let the sentence trail off while searching for another topic to latch onto.

"I think we have room now!" she suddenly remarked, patting the bag and hopping to her feet.

Accepting that the moment was over, Weiss looked at her gift one more time before storing it safely in the box and standing as well.

Of all the people she could have been partnered with at Beacon, she'd ended

up with Ruby. Of all the highly-qualified, highly-trained and specialized students, she'd ended up with a cookie-loving, hyperactive bundle of energy.

And she couldn't be happier. Her feelings for Ruby had grown by leaps and bounds over the course of their time together, and now - after receiving such a wonderful gift on such a thoughtful day - she felt that it was only right she gave Ruby something in return.

Weiss knew exactly what she wanted it to be, too. Something she'd imagined with increasing frequency lately...

"I'd like to give you something too," she said while Ruby collected her empty wrappers. "As a 'thank you.'"

"Aww - you don't have to do that!"

"But I want to," Weiss insisted, giving Ruby a sincere look. "You've done so much to make this day special for me, and I'd like to thank you for that."

Ruby was unsure about accepting a gift in return, but Weiss had expected as much. Ruby was selfless to her core, and she might feel bad about receiving a gift in exchange for giving one, but...Weiss was more and more certain that this was what she wanted to do.

"Ok," Ruby eventually agreed. "I mean, only if you want to..."

"I'd like to give you a kiss."

As Ruby's cheeks instantly flushed, Weiss felt her own heat up to match. But she couldn't take the words back now. They were already out in the open, waiting for Ruby's response.

Not that she wanted to take them back. She'd already missed too many moments - *they'd* missed too many moments - which had felt right at the time, yet neither of them had the courage to take that next step. That ended today - on her birthday, of all days.

At first, Ruby just stared, her jaw hung open in surprise. Next, she closed her mouth and started to sputter.

"I-I mean, i-if you want to? That's...that's ok with me..."

It was the response Weiss had hoped for, but with permission granted her nerves doubled in size. This wasn't exactly how she'd imagined this moment to be, but the timing felt right. That seemed to be the case with Ruby - the right moments appeared when least expected.

Standing on this rock outcropping, with a beautiful view of Beacon...this seemed like the right time, if there ever was one.

Taking a deep breath and leaning forward, Weiss pressed a quick kiss to Ruby's lips - her heart fluttering in butterflies as soon as she felt Ruby's soft lips against her own. No sooner had the sensation appeared did she pull away, unprepared for the spike of passion that surged through her veins.

Ruby was sweet, pure, and beautiful through-and-through...but her touch was electric. Even after Weiss backed away, energy flowed through her like a current searching for an outlet.

"Thank you for the best birthday ever," she whispered.

Ruby's blush deepened, but Weiss' heart was soaring. That had been more amazing than she'd ever dreamed it to be, which she wouldn't have thought possible.

No wonder Yang and Blake were always sneaking off to 'hang out' together. Weiss would never be so obvious with those intentions, but she certainly wouldn't mind doing it again - if Ruby was willing.

"Y-you're welcome, Weiss," Ruby stammered. "Anything for you."

When Ruby smiled, Weiss smiled in return.

"Now let's find the rest of these plants," she said, picking up the backpack and offering it to Ruby. "Maybe Yang and Blake will make a special dinner with us if we get back to Beacon in time."

"You mean...like a celebration?" Ruby asked while slinging the pack over her shoulders.

"I think a small team celebration would be fine," Weiss said, sending Ruby a thoughtful glance. "Does that sound good?"

"Yeah! I'm sure Yang and Blake would love to do that. Oh, maybe we can make you a cake?"

"Have you ever baked before?"

"Nnnope!"

The answer made Weiss smile as they headed out to complete their quest, leaving the outcropping of rock behind and dropping back to the forest floor below.

"Then that sounds like fun."

Allowing Ruby to walk a little ways ahead, Weiss smiled while remembering their kiss. Knowing herself and knowing Ruby, there was a long, slow path ahead of them - but the first step was finally complete, and now she could overanalyze and overplan for what their future might bring.

Her heart fluttered at the thought, as visions of years from now crowded her mind. There was nothing stopping them from being together for the rest of their lives, if that's what they wanted. And, it might be far too early to say, but she was certain she wanted Ruby in her life, in some way, forever.

"Uh, Weiss? What the heck are we looking for next?"

Smiling at the question, she sped up to catch up with her partner.

The day wasn't even half over, but it was already the best birthday she'd ever had - and maybe the best birthday she would ever have.

* * *

Having said everything she wanted to say, Weiss watched Ruby process the story. Her silver eyes were wide and her mouth hung open, but she was still sitting at the table, and apparently still willing to listen.

"That...that sounds..."

The words Weiss would use to complete that sentence were likely far different from what Ruby was thinking at the moment. Amazing, sweet, exceptionally caring and kind.

"I mean, that sounds really, uh, crazy?"

'Crazy' wasn't a bad response. Weiss could work with 'crazy.'

"You gave me a rose every birthday after that." Weiss smiled while remembering the myriad of ways Ruby found to give such a simple gift - through treasure hunts, trivia games and, one year, buried underneath a thousand white roses (each of which Ruby had meticulously de-thorned herself). "I loved each and every one."

"I mean, at least you were easy to buy gifts for?" Ruby replied with a nervous laugh before sweeping a hand through her hair and shaking her head. "Sorry, this is just...like - I don't get it. That's how we first met? Wait - how do you even know that's the first time? Aren't there like...tons of lives to choose

from?”

“There are,” Weiss answered with a nod. “But I’m positive that’s the first time we met.”

“How do you know?”

Weiss smiled thinking about her explanation, which she was certain was correct.

“Because that’s the only memory I have where I know exactly who gave me the rose on my birthday.” When Ruby only looked more confused, Weiss explained further. “On my 18th birthday, I wake up and find a single, red rose. It might be on my pillow, out in the hall, on the cabinets - somewhere I’ll notice it early in the day. I have no idea how it gets there - I just know it’s always there.”

“What does it do?” Ruby asked, her persistent questions proving her interest in Weiss’ words.

Thinking about the most recent rose, Weiss smiled. It was the most beautiful flower she’d ever seen - at least, up until that time. They all paled in comparison to the first rose - the one Ruby gave her at Beacon.

“When I pick up the rose, I see all these visions,” she explained. “It’s not a sudden rush of memories, but more like...” Pausing, she struggled to think of a way to describe the feeling. “When I focus on the rose, I start to sense pieces of the past. It feels like my mind is waking up - slightly asleep at first, then growing more and more aware. The harder I focus on the rose, the more memories I get. I see you, I see us...I see everything.”

“That sounds like a lot...”

“It is,” Weiss agreed. “But I can slow down if it becomes too much. All I need to do is put down the rose.”

When Ruby accepted that statement as is, Weiss didn’t elaborate further. She didn’t explain how she rarely put down the rose - opting instead to let the memories crash over her in one giant wave of love, laughter, and happiness. It was overwhelming but absolutely amazing. No matter where she was in her life at that point in time, her heart woke up - she found a purpose.

And that purpose was Ruby.

“I know that Beacon is the first time we were together because that’s the

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only memory I have where someone gives me the rose on my birthday,” Weiss repeated. “It was you, Ruby. And it’s always been you, ever since that day.”

This version of Ruby might be staring at her. This version of Ruby might think she was crazy. But Weiss was positive that they were supposed to be together, and she was willing to spend the rest of her life proving it. Starting today, at this small café in the middle of Vacuo.

Chapter 3

After staring for several moments, Ruby finally shut her mouth and cleared her throat. No words came out, but that was to be expected.

Weiss understood that she'd just dropped a bomb of information on Ruby's life, but she would help pick up the pieces. Plus, she was certain that Ruby could handle the information - and that she could accept it in some way, shape, or form before they left this table behind.

If not, Weiss had Plans B, C, and D already prepared. Plan A was simply the quickest and easiest way to reclaim a fraction of their current lives. More than anything, she wanted to hold Ruby in her arms again...which was why she was willing to attempt the shortest route possible.

"Ok, so...you get a rose on your birthday, then you get all these memories, so you come find me and tell me that we're supposed to be together?" After the summary, Ruby gave Weiss a searching look. "And I just...believe you?"

"Well...not always," Weiss answered, again opting for the truth. "Plus, sometimes I wait years to tell you. Sometimes I tell you right away. And there's rare instances where I don't have to tell you at all."

Her lips curled with a smile as she thought about some of those memories, which were amongst her favorites.

"What do you mean?" Ruby asked, her curiosity again piqued by the comment.

"Sometimes you just...know. As concretely as I know you're the one." Taking a sip of water, Weiss sighed. "I'll admit to being particularly fond of those..."

"But how would I know? Do I get a rose too?"

“No,” Weiss answered with a smile. “No rose. But...have you ever thought about what other worlds might be out there? What those other universes might be like?”

“Uhhh, I mean...sometimes...”

“Do you imagine they’re exactly like this?” Weiss waved her hand at the restaurant patio, the cars passing by, the buildings and the bridge in the distance. Ruby followed the path of Weiss’ hand while her brow furrowed in thought.

“I guess so? I haven’t really thought about it that much though...”

“Well, sometimes things are...different. Sometimes, the laws of society revolve around different goals and wishes.”

“Uh...like what do you mean?” Ruby asked. Weiss smiled at the question - because Ruby *was* asking questions. She wasn’t discounting these stories just yet. She was listening and seeking out more information on her own.

“Are you willing to hear another story?” Weiss asked anyway, and smiled when Ruby nodded. “Keep in mind, this world doesn’t work quite like our own...”

* * *

“But what if they’re like...super ugly?”

While a majority of the class seriously considered that question, Weiss rolled her eyes and sighed. This was her punishment for arriving early. Actually, this was her punishment for arriving early when the professor was late - now she was forced to listen to her classmates pontificate on what their ideal soulmate would be like, and how the tiny compasses hanging around their necks would lead them to the person of their dreams.

Of course, because they were in college, much of the discussion centered around how ‘hot’ or ‘ugly’ that person would be. Regular scholars were admitted to this university, apparently.

She used to hate the compasses, whose only purpose was to guide them to their true loves or soulmates or whatever term they wanted to use. The damn things wouldn’t even tell the direction in the meantime. Instead, the

needle was perpetually listless until that special day arrived, when it pointed straight towards the wearer's true love.

Personally, she thought it was a gimmick - that the company manufacturing the compasses predetermined which ones 'spoke' to each other. To swing the odds even more in their favor, there were probably multiple matches for each compass, but how would anyone ever find that out? The contraptions stopped working after meeting the first match.

Everything changed when she turned eighteen.

Knowing that Ruby was out there, somewhere, Weiss now saw the compass as a potentially helpful tool rather than useless accessory. If it worked, it would point her to Ruby while simultaneously erasing Ruby's concerns that they were destined to be together.

In the meantime, she would continue searching on her own while attending classes as her father stipulated. She wished that she could drop everything and find Ruby right away, but she didn't have the necessary resources to launch a full-scale quest. She needed access to her family's money first, and to gain access to her family's money she needed to finish school. If it meant she waited a couple more years, then so be it. She was willing to wait for Ruby, as she always did.

However, she *did* already have an important piece of the puzzle...

"Can you believe them..." Blake muttered, her tone annoyed as they overheard the lengthy debate taking place at the front of the class.

"It's the same thing every day," Weiss replied before placing her hand on her chest and mimicking her classmates' voices. "Oh my god - so-and-so found their soulmate yesterday! Their compass led them straight to the captain of the football team!"

When Blake chuckled, Weiss smiled and dropped her hand to the desk.

It was fortunate that she ran into Blake at one of the campus libraries during their first year. Knowing Blake's importance in her life, Weiss made sure they became friends - not that that was entirely difficult, seeing as how they shared the same mentality when it came to schoolwork and responsibilities. Now the two of them aligned their schedules whenever possible, and even shared an off-campus apartment together.

Keeping Blake nearby was dual-purposed. First, and most important - they got along well and Weiss enjoyed having Blake as a friend. Second, Weiss knew that Blake might lead her to Yang, and Yang could lead her to Ruby. In this way, she almost guaranteed that they would find their true soulmates around the same time.

“Oh thank god,” Weiss muttered when their professor finally raced into the room.

“Sorry I’m late!” he shouted to the class while dumping a haphazard stack of papers onto his desk. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

After sharing an amused glance with Blake, Weiss picked up her pen and prepared to be enlightened - or at least entertained - by the lecture to follow.

Due to her...condition...she remembered multiple lectures on the very subject they were learning today. Some universes varied the laws that applied to science, of course, but for the most part the fundamentals remained the same.

Essentially, she was coasting through her classes and only showed up because a substantial portion of her grade was tied to attendance. Her rigid upbringing meant that she took notes regardless, but most of the time her mind wandered to Ruby - wondering what that ball of energy might be up to right now.

What type of person was Ruby becoming? Was she in school somewhere? Had she decided to forego school and pursue something greater? Probably not yet, as she should be finishing up high school right about now...

The answers to those questions were far more important than the information strewn across the board at the front of the class, but Weiss paid half-attention regardless.

When class was dismissed an hour later, she calmly packed her bag while the rest of the students raced towards the exit. Seeing as how this was the end of the school day for her, she was in no hurry to join the crush of people at the door. Instead, she and Blake took their time and were last to leave the classroom for their walk home.

Stepping out of the building and into the warm, springtime sun, Weiss took a deep breath and allowed her thoughts to drift back to Ruby. The rose she

found on her 18th birthday had smelled like Ruby...and she would admit to spending her fair share of afternoons sniffing the fragrant flower while wishing their paths had already crossed. But one day she would find Ruby - she was certain of it. It was only a matter of when.

“What do you think they’ll be like?” Blake asked while they walked towards the edge of campus, the sudden question pulling Weiss from her thoughts.

“Hm?”

“The people at the other end of these.” Blake held up the small compass attached to her necklace to show Weiss what she was talking about.

“Oh.” Already knowing the answer to that, Weiss smiled as Ruby’s image filled her mind. But Blake was probably curious about her own soulmate - a certain blonde with a penchant for mischief.

There were so many times when Weiss nearly told Blake the truth about everything. They were best friends, after all, and she thought Blake would believe her. However, she always talked herself out of it. This secret felt like something that should be shared with Ruby first. After Ruby knew, then Yang and Blake could be included. They were often told eventually, but Ruby spearheaded those conversations - usually by accidentally spilling the beans.

But Weiss really wanted to tell Blake about Yang...

“Hmm...” she replied while conjuring several memories of Yang to mind. “I bet your soulmate is a loud, peppy blonde.”

Blake burst out laughing at the statement.

“Are you serious?” she asked, giving Weiss an amused look - to which she nodded.

“Yes. She probably reads fashion magazines and makes horrible jokes nonstop.”

Still chuckling at the thought, Blake shook her head. “I don’t know if I see myself with someone like that...”

“What if she’s really pretty?” Weiss asked, knowing that Yang was always some shade of ‘too pretty.’

“She doesn’t read though?”

“She does - magazines.”

Laughing, Blake shook her head again. “I think it would be someone

more...mellow. Someone intellectual and well-read.”

As they left campus behind, Weiss smiled at the irony. The person Blake just described was herself, but that was far from who her soulmate would be - and that was a good thing. Blake didn't need to spend the rest of her life with a clone of herself. She needed someone to break her out of her routine and keep her on her toes. Plus, she had no idea how Yang would bend over backwards making all of her fairytale dreams come true.

“What about you?” Blake asked after a few moments of silence. “Who do you see yourself with?”

That question was easy. Weiss could describe her soulmate down to their shoe size.

“Someone...sweet and bubbly,” she replied instead, thinking that those two words summed Ruby up nicely. Surprised, Blake gave Weiss a sideways glance as their apartment building neared.

“Sweet and bubbly?” Blake repeated. “I'm not sure I see you with someone like that...”

“I wouldn't have either,” Weiss replied with a grin. She never would've imagined herself with someone like Ruby, but now she couldn't unsee it. They were *perfect* together - so perfect, they weren't bound by the laws of the universe.

“Well...if that's who the compass leads you to, it's supposed to work out, right?”

“That's the idea,” Weiss agreed. Hearing her stomach grumble, she paused on the sidewalk instead of following Blake up the steps to the building. “I think I'll go buy lunch. Want anything?”

“That sounds great, actually. Anything with fish is good with me.”

Weiss nearly shook her head but smiled instead. Across the universes, Blake always had a predisposition to liking fish.

“I'll catch up with you in a bit then,” Weiss said, separating from Blake and crossing the street.

Their apartment was located off campus but in an area comprised mostly of students. As such, there were shopping centers nearby that catered heavily to a younger, less sophisticated crowd. Only a few blocks from their building

was one such shopping area, complete with a small theater, grocery store, and several different eateries.

Ducking inside one of the nicer establishments, Weiss ordered lunch to go - a tuna sandwich for Blake and a salad for herself. It was while she was standing there waiting for her order that she felt something...different.

It started as a soft buzz but quickly became a low rattle against her chest that was impossible to ignore. Surprised, and a bit concerned, she looked down - and her breathing stopped.

The needle on her compass had stopped its constant swaying. Now, it was pointed in one definitive direction while rumbling to get her attention.

It was telling her that Ruby was nearby.

Her first thought was that she wasn't ready - she hadn't dressed for this moment, and she hadn't prepared anything to say.

Her second thought was that she had to get to Ruby as soon as possible.

Forgetting lunch, she hurried out of the restaurant and re-joined the rush of students finding places to eat for lunch. She paid them no mind as the compass led her away from the restaurant, across the walkway, and towards the businesses on the other side of the shopping center.

With every step she took, her heart beat wildly while her anticipation rose without limit. She wasn't prepared, but she was beyond ready to finally meet Ruby and start their next happily ever after.

When she turned the corner, the compass vibrated even more, demanding her full attention as it pointed towards the storefront directly ahead of her. Following its orders, she walked across the path and...

The compass suddenly stopped rattling with its needle pointing straight ahead. Her breath catching in her throat, Weiss looked up and found...

Frowning, she re-checked the compass only to find it still pointing in the same direction - directly towards a young man with blonde hair sitting outside of an ice cream parlor. He was looking at her curiously, his spoon held mid-air while he waited for her to speak.

This couldn't be right.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked, upset and annoyed that the compass - which should've made her life easier - had made it more difficult instead.

“Oh, uh -”

“Don’t tell me,” she cut him off, raising one hand. “Just leave.”

He didn’t need to be told twice, dropping his spoon into his cup before standing and hurrying away. Sighing out loud, she ignored the look he sent over his shoulder - probably wondering why she’d rushed over only to demand that he leave her presence.

She had no idea who he was, but he wasn’t her soulmate. It didn’t matter what the broken piece of useless metal around her neck said - that wasn’t her soulmate.

Lifting up the compass with a frown, she suddenly realized something important.

The needle hadn’t followed the boy out of the shopping center. It was still pointing forward - through the frosted glass of the business in front of her. Glancing at the sign one more time and reaffirming it was the ice cream shop, she had barely scolded herself for being so naive when the door burst open. Dropping her necklace, she breathed out a single word - “Ruby.”

Ruby didn’t hear her name - too busy staring at her compass to see where she was going and nearly walking into Weiss in the process.

“Oh - sorry!” she said, finally looking up and freezing when she caught Weiss’ eyes.

No matter how many times Weiss experienced this moment, she never grew tired of it. Her skin came alive with excitement in Ruby’s presence, and her heart thundered like a drum in her chest. A smile instantly lit her lips, and there was no possible way she could prevent every part of her from singing with love.

“Are you looking for someone?” she asked, looping a finger underneath the chain of her necklace and holding up the compass hanging on the end. Ruby’s eyes went from Weiss’ compass, to her own, and back again - then her jaw fell open in shock.

“No way!” she said, dropping her hand and pointing towards Weiss’ compass. “That’s pointing at me, right?”

Testing out the theory, Ruby moved her compass side-to-side and watched the needle on Weiss’ swing to match.

“I believe it is,” Weiss replied, smiling widely. “My name’s Weiss,” she added, extending one hand to shake Ruby’s.

“Ruby! Oh, wow - I can’t believe - like...”

Taking a deep breath, Ruby shook her head and smiled - her smile not wavering in the slightest while she fidgeted in excitement.

“I can’t believe I met you here! In Vale! I mean, I’m only here for a soccer game, so like...I never expected you to show up now!”

* * *

“Woah, woah, *woah*.” Waving both hands in front of her, Ruby looked positively miffed while Weiss stopped speaking to see what the issue was.

“I played soccer?” Ruby asked in disbelief. “I can barely walk out the front door without tripping over my feet!”

The response nearly made Weiss giggle, being exactly as she would have guessed. Ruby was often blessed with below-average coordination, which made playing soccer a bit of a stretch in most of her lives.

“You weren’t the one playing,” Weiss explained, delighted that Ruby was participating in the stories. “Your friend was on the team.”

“Oh.”

After looking briefly disappointed, Ruby gave Weiss an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, totally interrupted you. Won’t do it again, I swear!”

“I wouldn’t mind if you did,” Weiss replied, sending Ruby another smile before continuing the story.

* * *

“I’m only here for a friend’s soccer game!” Ruby explained, shifting between her feet in a way that was familiar and comforting. “I’m home for break and my friend’s playing today, but like, I never thought - that here -”

Eyes widening in realization, Ruby looked down at her outfit and blushed. “I’m so sorry! If I’d known, I would’ve worn something nicer. Or like, not sweatpants.”

Weiss laughed at the response, feeling every bit of the excitement Ruby was openly displaying. "Don't worry about it - you look fantastic."

Her smile grew when Ruby's blush darkened. This was everything Weiss had simultaneously hoped and knew it would be. Even if the wait was long, Ruby made it all worth it within the first few minutes of being together again.

"Where are you going to school?" Weiss asked, since Ruby said she was 'home for break.' Weiss wanted as much information about Ruby as possible...so that she could be tracked down again, if need be.

"I'm in Mistral - at Mistral U."

Nodding, Weiss filed away the answer. No wonder she hadn't found Ruby yet. Her search was focused on the high schools in the area -

"Wait," she said when her mind stumbled over an important fact. "You're in college already?"

"Yeah! Second year."

Weiss' eyes widened at the disclosure. Ruby was supposed to be two years younger than her - how were they in the same year?

"You skipped two years of school?" Weiss asked, her voice coming out high in surprise. Ruby looked almost embarrassed by the question, running a hand through her short hair while nodding.

"Yeah...I mean, school was a little easy, so they kept moving me forward."

Weiss stared in both surprise and absolute delight at the response. Ruby was always smart, but the subjects she mastered rarely matched up with schoolwork. It was rare to find a version of her that excelled in what the general public wanted her to excel in - basically, school.

This was quickly shaping up to be one of Weiss' favorite scenarios. Although...if she actually tried to create a list of favorites, it would be next to impossible to come to any actual decisions on which were 'better.' They were all fantastic.

"Ruby!"

Both of them turned towards the voice, and Weiss found Yang standing several shops away - holding a bag of food in one hand while waving Ruby towards her.

"Come on, we're gonna be late!"

“Shoot - uh...” Scrambling for something to say, Ruby suddenly brightened up. “Oh! Why don’t you come with us?”

A ‘yes’ was on the tip of her tongue, but Weiss paused. Ruby was here to watch a friend - did Weiss really want to barge in on that?

Yes, she did, but that was unfair to whoever Ruby’s friend might be. Plus, a little extra time would give her the opportunity to prepare for a true first meeting.

“How about you meet me after?” she suggested. “I live right over there -” She pointed in the right direction before pulling a piece of paper out of her bag and finding a pen to write her address. “Here’s the address,” she said, handing it to Ruby. “Come over as soon as you’re done?”

“I will!” Before Ruby could rush away, Weiss reached out and touched her elbow.

“That wouldn’t happen to be your sister, would it?” Weiss asked, playing dumb while gesturing in Yang’s direction. Seeing as how the two of them looked nothing alike, Ruby was slightly baffled by the question but grinned anyway.

“It is! Her name’s Yang.”

“Can she stop by too? I’d like to meet her.” The statement was mostly true. Weiss would like to see how Yang was doing, but there was also a certain avid reader who needed to meet Yang.

“Sure! I’ll ask her to come. Then we can, I dunno, hang out or something? Talk and stuff?”

God, Weiss loved the way Ruby rambled. She was the only person in the world who could make ‘talk and stuff’ sound so appealing.

“I’d love to. Maybe we can get dinner, as well?”

When Ruby grinned, Weiss’ heart skipped a beat.

“Yeah! Let’s do that!” Ruby said while slowly backing away. “The game should be done at three - I’ll see you around then?”

A big part of Weiss didn’t want Ruby to leave, but she knew their separation was only temporary. She could already feel, from this brief interaction, that Ruby would come back to her as quickly as possible. Still...she hated when they were apart.

“Looking forward to it,” she said with a nod, earning one last smile before Ruby turned and rushed after Yang.

Ruby was practically skipping now, and the instant she caught up to Yang she started gesturing excitedly with both hands. She must’ve told Yang who Weiss was, because Yang looked over her shoulder in surprise before both of them disappeared from view.

Frozen to her spot in front of the ice cream parlor, Weiss couldn’t dim her smile if someone paid her. Their interaction might have been short, but it was still one of the sweetest moments she’d had in this life so far. It left her nearly light-headed with giddiness as love and adoration flowed through her.

What an unexpected change to this day. Thankfully, she was already done with classes, otherwise she would skip them. And she had every intention of missing the rest of her classes this week - this month, if that’s how long Ruby was free.

The game would end at three...which gave her several hours to pull herself together and figure out how she wanted their first date to go. She needed to find the perfect outfit, make a dinner reservation, decide on what she wanted to say...there was a lot to be done.

About to rush home, she remembered at the last second that her purpose for coming here was ordering lunch. After picking up the food, she walked home as quickly as possible, hardly noticing anything happening around her while her mind was consumed by thoughts of Ruby.

Letting herself through the door to her apartment, she found Blake reading in the oversized armchair near the window.

“Were they busy?” Blake asked, her eyes never leaving the book as she turned the page.

Pausing to think about Ruby, Weiss broke into a huge smile. She was so happy, she might be able to levitate right off the ground.

“I met my soulmate.”

Blake immediately lowered her book.

“You what?”

“I met her,” Weiss repeated, taking off her necklace and handing it to Blake to prove that the compass was no longer working. Blake looked at it with

wide eyes before setting it on the table beside her.

“What’s she like?”

“She’s...”

Ruby was everything Weiss ever wanted or needed.

“She’s amazing...” Weiss sighed while sinking into the chair beside Blake. At this point, she didn’t bother trying to keep the smile from appearing. She was so happy - so, *so* happy that she’d found Ruby. This was years before she’d planned it, but that made it all the better. Now they could spend the rest of their lives together, from this point onward.

Blake smiled, and Weiss could tell that the happiness was genuine. Of course it was genuine - Blake was a great friend.

“What’s her name?”

It was the perfect question, as Weiss’ love was bubbling over at the moment, begging to burst out.

“Her name is Ruby. She’s in our year at Mistral University - she skipped two grades! And she’s...pretty and adorable...with a smile that makes you melt inside...”

Weiss knew she was gushing, but she didn’t care. She’d waited so long - all this time keeping her knowledge of Ruby to herself. It felt so good to finally get it out in the open and say a bit of what she truly felt.

“Wow, sounds like you’re already in love,” Blake replied with an amused smile before looking towards the door. “But where is she now? Shouldn’t you be spending more time together? Getting to know each other?”

“She’s watching her friend’s soccer game.” When Blake raised a brow in question, Weiss waved a hand through the air. “I didn’t want to barge in and steal all her attention. Plus, I need to find something to wear!”

Standing up and rushing to her room, Weiss smiled when she heard Blake chuckling from the living room behind her. Maybe she was acting like a lovestruck teenager at the moment, but...she wouldn’t be shy in saying that she desperately loved Ruby.

Pulling open her closet, she searched for the perfect outfit. She already knew what Ruby was wearing - and Ruby probably wouldn’t change after the soccer game - so she didn’t want to overdress. But she also wanted to look

very, very nice. It was a balancing act of assembling an outfit that wouldn't make Ruby uncomfortable but was still coordinated enough to make a great impression.

And, selfishly so, Weiss wanted Ruby to find her attractive. That meant she needed the perfect outfit - which meant she needed to try on basically everything in her closet.

While piecing together potential ensembles for the afternoon, she thought about what she wanted to tell Ruby today. There wasn't much point in bringing up the whole 'soulmates across the universes' secret at this time - not when Ruby was already ready and willing to accept Weiss as a soulmate based on the compasses.

No, Weiss wouldn't bring that up today - that could wait until later. Today should be about Ruby and what she's been up to - what she was studying in school and what their future plans would be. Being enrolled at Mistral University, Ruby would have to go back eventually. How would that work?

Realistically, Weiss didn't think she could handle being apart now that they'd found each other. Transferring was always an option...one that she was already seriously considering. She had the grades to transfer, and her father would approve based on Mistral U.'s reputation for excellence...

When Weiss finally decided on an outfit and brushed her hair to perfection, she still had some time to spare - which she used to secure reservations at several of the top restaurants in Vale. She wasn't sure what Ruby wanted to eat so kept their options open. Although, knowing Ruby, they would probably end up at some fast food restaurant - and have one of the best dates Weiss had ever had.

With everything in place, she took a deep breath and walked into the living room.

"How do I look?" she asked, doing a spin after Blake looked up from her book.

"Wow."

Taking that response as a good sign, Weiss smiled to herself and checked her reflection in the hall mirror. She did look rather nice, but in a way that wouldn't make Ruby uncomfortable. At least, Ruby wouldn't be insecure

about her own outfit, but if she was a little nervous because she thought Weiss looked really nice...that wouldn't be a horrible thing.

As an added bonus, even Yang should be impressed by Weiss' put-together appearance.

The thought gave Weiss reason to pause, as she glanced in the mirror to see what Blake was currently wearing. Blake had no idea she was about to meet Yang...and Weiss didn't want her friend to go through the same outfit conundrum she'd just suffered upon stumbling into Ruby.

"I have a great idea," she said while spinning around. "Why don't you dress up too?"

The statement earned her a look of disbelief.

"Why do I need to dress up to meet *your* soulmate?"

"Because I want her to really like you!" Weiss fibbed, immediately hearing how unconvincing that reasoning was. "Just humor me for once?" she added.

On an ordinary day, she knew that Blake's answer would be 'no.' But today was no ordinary day - today was the day Weiss met her soulmate. On such a special occasion, Blake had more reason to agree. Which she did - playfully grumbling under her breath while putting her book down and heading towards her room.

With everything coming together, Weiss ran her fingers through her hair and smiled. She knew Blake was curious to see what Ruby was like - both for Weiss' sake and for her own imagination. Little did she know that she was going to find out what her soulmate was like sooner rather than later.

Glancing at the clock and finding that it was just after three, Weiss' heart sped up while her sense of expectation doubled. Blake was still finding an outfit...but Weiss was rather unwilling to delay her reunion with Ruby for a second longer than necessary.

"I'll meet you downstairs?" she called towards Blake's room.

"Sure - I'll meet you outside."

Happy with the answer, Weiss grabbed her bag and quickly left the apartment behind. She flew down the steps and out the doors to the building, her eyes already searching - and finding Ruby walking down the sidewalk towards her.

The second their eyes met, Ruby broke into a jog - her face lighting up with a giant smile as she crashed into Weiss for a hug, lifting Weiss' feet right off the ground and spinning her in a circle before setting her down.

The greeting was unexpected, but Weiss laughed at how stunningly perfect it was.

"I'm so happy to see you again!" Ruby said, her honesty warming Weiss' cheeks with a blush.

"I'm happy to see you, too," she replied with a smile.

"I was thinking about you the entire time," Ruby continued, not at all shy to admit these thoughts out loud. "It was really hard to pay attention to what was going on."

The candor was like a ray of sunshine, warming Weiss' soul and encouraging her to respond in turn.

"I was thinking about you, too," she admitted. "I'm really looking forward to spending more time together."

When Ruby smiled and nodded, Weiss thought that she could stay in this moment forever - accepting Ruby's smile forever. But, hearing another set of footsteps approach, she turned and spotted Yang walking towards them, removing her sunglasses and perching them atop her hair. As expected, Yang was something of a looker - with the trademark blonde hair, lilac eyes, toned muscles, and perfect fashion sense.

"Oh! Yang, this is Weiss!" As Yang joined them, Ruby gestured between her and Weiss. "And Weiss, this is my sister, Yang."

"Nice to meet you," Weiss said while extending her hand to shake Yang's.

"You too," Yang replied with an easy grin. The smile was supposed to put people at ease, but Weiss felt that intent gaze scanning her closely, searching for any hint that she might be ill-suited for Ruby.

This was how their introductions always went, but Weiss couldn't say she'd ever grown accustomed to being analyzed so critically by someone so important to her. The situation always made her worry that maybe there was something there - something Yang would find and use as a reason to keep them apart.

But when her smile grew, Weiss sighed in relief.

“I didn’t believe Ruby when she said her compass went off,” Yang said, reaching over and rustling Ruby’s hair. “Looks like she’s a lucky son-of-a-gun, huh.”

“Yangggg.”

Chuckling at Ruby’s whine, Yang was about to say something else when her eyes widened. Grabbing the chain hanging around her neck and pulling the compass from inside her shirt, she glanced at it before looking in the direction the needle was now pointing.

When Blake stepped outside the lobby door, Yang’s jaw nearly dropped to the ground.

“Ruby...” Yang said, her eyes never leaving Blake as she looked down at her own compass. “Pinch me so I know I’m not dreaming.”

Reaching over to pinch Yang on the arm, Ruby giggled when Yang flinched and swatted her hand away.

“That’s her -” was all she said before giving Weiss a dumbstruck glance. “Excuse me.”

Without another word, Yang bounded up the steps and met Blake by the entrance to the building.

“Who’s that??” Ruby asked while she and Weiss watched the introduction take place.

“That’s my roommate, Blake.”

“That’s *your* roommate?”

“Yes,” Weiss replied with a smile that grew while she watched her two closest friends finally meet. Yang was beyond thrilled, talking amicably while gesturing with both hands. Meanwhile, Blake was blushing but unable to keep her eyes off of Yang.

“Wow, what’re the chances of that?”

Turning away from Blake and Yang, Weiss grinned at Ruby.

“You’re right...what *are* the chances?” she repeated, hardly able to control her own joy that Ruby was standing right beside her.

“This is so awesome though!” Bouncing on her toes, Ruby nodded back towards the doorway.

When Weiss turned back, she was just in time to watch Yang raise one

hand and gently caress Blake's cheek - before kissing her. Instead of being surprised, Blake kissed Yang right back - because it was Blake's unspoken dream to find this type of crazy love at first sight. Obviously, Yang was more than willing to oblige.

"Of course," Weiss mumbled, rolling her eyes and leaving the new couple to themselves.

"She's been saying for years that she'd kiss her soulmate as soon as they met," Ruby said before turning to Weiss with a grin. "Can't believe she actually did it."

"Can't say I'm surprised..."

"But, uh...what about you?"

Caught off guard by the question, Weiss looked into Ruby's eyes and found bashfulness looking back at her.

"Are you asking if I wanted to kiss my soulmate the first time we met?" she clarified, her heart pounding in her chest when Ruby shuffled her feet.

"Uh, yeah, or I guess...maybe the second time you met?"

Someday in the future, Weiss would explain that she'd wanted to kiss Ruby from the moment she picked up that rose on her eighteenth birthday. Right now, she was simply overjoyed that this was even an option.

"I think the second meeting sounds perfect," she replied, hiding a smile when her response sparked an abundance of nerves and waves of fidgets from Ruby.

"Y-yeah? I mean, because...this is kind of our second meeting..."

Smiling at the sputters, Weiss wasted no time wrapping both arms around Ruby's neck and pulling her down for a kiss. It was light and sweet, but perfect for a first kiss...a first kiss in this life, at least.

Loosening her arms and leaning away, she found that Ruby's cheeks were now burning red. The look was so adorable that she very nearly kissed Ruby again, but...they would have more than enough opportunities for that later. Now that they were back together, there was no rush. They had the rest of their lives to make more memories and share more kisses.

"I've missed you," Weiss sighed, unclasping her hands and running her fingers through Ruby's short hair. Unperturbed by the intimate gesture, Ruby

giggled and looked down at her.

“The game was only like three hours!”

When Ruby smiled, Weiss smiled in return. There was no reason to bring up that she waited years for Ruby to show up, or that she'd been prepared to wait several years more. One day she'd tell Ruby, but today they could just enjoy being in each other's company.

“I know,” Weiss replied, tucking several strands of hair behind Ruby's ear only for them to stubbornly fall back out of place. “It just felt like a really long time.”

“We have tons of time to spend together now,” Ruby said, sporting another heart-melting smile. “Yang said that when you find your soulmate, you're supposed to run away somewhere for like a whole week.”

“Did she?” Weiss shot a glance at Yang, who was still far too preoccupied with Blake to notice anything else going on around her. When Ruby nodded, clearly believing her sister's words, Weiss did her best not to smirk. “Well, if Yang says so...I guess that's what we'll have to do.”

She was going to thank Yang for that one later.

“I can't wait! But...where should we go now?” Ruby asked, offering her hand to Weiss.

“Anywhere you want to,” Weiss replied while taking Ruby's hand and gesturing in a random direction. “How about we go for a walk and catch up?”

After Ruby nodded, the two of them set off down the sidewalk hand-in-hand - taking the first step leading towards their happily ever after.

Of all the thoughts flitting through Weiss' mind at the moment, there was one that kept popping out at her.

Those damn compasses worked. They really worked. All this time she questioned their usefulness, but she just proved their accuracy beyond a shadow of a doubt. Of course, no one would ever understand that except for her. That was fine though - she didn't need anyone to believe her. As long as she had Ruby in her life, there was nothing else worth searching for.

* * *

With the story finished, Weiss smiled. That life was one of the great ones, where she and Ruby skipped most of the pretense of dating and went straight to falling in love. Was it really so bad that Weiss wanted to do that again? She wanted to get right to the cuddles, snuggles, kisses, and holding hands in the rain.

“A compass?” Ruby asked in disbelief. “Like those things pirates use?”

“More sophisticated and fashionable versions, but yes,” Weiss replied, smiling at the analogy.

“So if I had a magic compass that pointed me to my soulmate, it would be pointing at you?”

“Yes,” Weiss answered with a nod. “It would.”

“You’re sure?”

“Ruby...I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

It was the one thing she was absolutely certain about, and she knew that one day Ruby would also believe her...she just hoped that day was today. But when Ruby sat back and let out a quick huff of air, Weiss felt a pinprick of uncertainty in her chest.

Chapter 4

Letting out a huff of air, Ruby motioned with one hand before dropping it to the table.

“Ok, so like, if what you’re saying is true, then…” Ruby’s words trailed off as her eyes unfocused with thought. After several seconds of silence, she shook her head and met Weiss’ gaze. “Then we’ve been together like…millions of times.”

“Yes.”

Weiss smiled at the summary, which was only the beginning of the story. They’d been together millions of times, across millions of universes, but it wasn’t as trivial as that. They’d been in love millions of times, for millions more years.

Through it all, Weiss never grew tired of the relationships they shared. If anything, she craved Ruby more and more with each passing life. She *needed* Ruby, and she liked to think that Ruby needed her - that they needed each other to live a full and complete life.

“Ok, uh… I just… I’ll be right back.”

The chair scraped against the ground as Ruby abruptly stood and hurried into the restaurant, leaving Weiss sitting at the table by herself. A slight bubble of worry grew in her chest at the sudden departure, as she finally considered that it might have been a mistake to tell Ruby right away. Maybe she should’ve done what she normally did - play the waiting game, lay a foundation through small conversations and interactions, become friends, and then - after days, weeks, or months of waiting - finally ask Ruby on a date. There was nothing wrong with that plan, besides the extensive waiting time involved.

...she was willing to wait lifetimes for Ruby, but her impatience showed through today, along with her never-ending greed for Ruby's affection.

But the signs were all there. She was *positive* that Ruby could handle the news right away. It was always a bit of a struggle, at least initially, but Ruby was probably more accepting than even she realized. Knowing this, there was no way Weiss could have left the restaurant without making a meaningful effort to move their relationship forward. If this ultimately set them back...it was worth the risk.

If Ruby wouldn't accept the idea today, how long of a delay would it cause? A day? A week? Several months?

Leaning back in her chair, Weiss sighed and tapped the side of her water glass while lost in thought. Her eyes never left the restaurant, but she couldn't see Ruby through windows anymore, not with the afternoon sun reflecting back at her.

For the briefest moment, she thought that Ruby ran - using the back exit of the restaurant and making a hasty escape from the conversation. However, the idea barely entered Weiss' thoughts before she dismissed it.

Maybe it was overwhelming, but Ruby had participated in the stories. She was involved and curious about what happened and how things worked. If she hadn't been, Weiss might worry. But she wasn't worried. Instead, her only concern was that her haste might have delayed their happy ending.

Why was she so hasty this time around? The answer must lurk somewhere in her upbringing - the culmination of a multitude of factors too difficult and abstract to quantify. She grew up with cold and distant parents, which wasn't unusual, and she became jaded with the concept of love quite early.

But what was it about this life that led her to rule out romance so young? The only theory she had involved Winter's absence - her older sister spending Weiss' entire childhood away from home. As a result, they weren't as close as they normally were, and Weiss lost the one source of love she would have known growing up.

Until her 18th birthday, when she discovered a love she never believed to exist.

So yes - she was patient, but impatient. She would wait for Ruby until the

end of time, but she was willing to take a risk with the potential reward of skipping a few steps. She wanted to move them closer to where they'd just left off...

Spotting a dash of movement exiting the restaurant, Weiss sat straighter when Ruby re-appeared on the patio. In one hand, she carried a plate with an empty glass balanced on its edge, while her other hand held a pitcher of water.

Any worry Weiss had felt disappeared when Ruby showed little hesitation navigating through the tables, being careful to avoid the chairs before finally rejoining Weiss. After setting the plate down - which carried the remainder of Weiss' sandwich and a fresh pile of French fries - Ruby filled her empty glass with water and quickly drank half of it.

"Sorry, I just kinda freaked out," Ruby admitted while filling her glass again. "And then I got really thirsty."

The honesty was refreshing, and a confirmation that Weiss made the correct decision. If Ruby freaked out and her only response was to slip away for a few minutes, that was a *very* good sign.

"That's ok," Weiss replied, smiling when Ruby reached over and refilled Weiss' water, too. "Thank you."

"No problem." Ruby took another long drink from her glass before setting it down with a sigh. "I'm also starving," she said before taking a bite of the sandwich.

Weiss smiled but internally kicked herself for not suggesting that Ruby get something to eat before they started their conversation. She *knew* how often Ruby needed to eat, especially in a stressful or uncertain situation - the mere process of eating calmed her, in a way.

"I know this is a lot to comprehend -" Weiss said, but Ruby waved her hand and quickly swallowed the bite in her mouth.

"I mean, it's not really *hard* to understand. You've seen like a gazillion universes, and we're supposed to be together in each one. Like soulmates or something. So you get a rose, you get the memories, then you come find me."

"Essentially."

The summation was a little basic but covered the most important points.

“Are you maybe a little, I dunno...” Lowering the sandwich, Ruby held up one finger and whirled it around in the air near her ear.

“Crazy?” Weiss asked before shaking her head. “No. I’ve had myself checked several times.”

In some lives, the memories were impossible to believe, but also impossible to ignore. There were times she would see someone to ensure she wasn’t losing her sanity, but she always left those appointments feeling more certain than before.

If there were only a few extra memories, it might be harder to believe. But she didn’t have only a few extra memories. She had lifetimes upon lifetimes of memories, all of them revolving around the same person - who was good enough and wonderful enough to turn around even the worst of lives.

If going insane meant witnessing innumerable lives filled with love and laughter, Weiss would gladly accept the label.

“I mean, you don’t *seem* crazy, so that’s good,” Ruby replied before sticking several French fries in her mouth. She immediately made a noise like she wanted to keep talking but chewed and swallowed first. “Have you ever thought that maybe you’ve got the wrong person?”

“The wrong person?” Weiss asked, tilting her head at the unexpected question.

“Yeah! Like, maybe I’m not the person you’re looking for. Maybe all your memories and stuff are trying to lead you to a different person somewhere.”

The idea very nearly made Weiss laugh, but she held her amusement at bay.

She was confident that Ruby was the one. She felt it in every fiber of her being, especially now that they were together again. It was as if her heart sang in Ruby’s presence, waking from its slumber and rejoicing now that its beating was needed once more.

There was no one else in the world who could make Weiss feel this way - that’s how she knew that Ruby was the one. And there was no way Ruby would convince her otherwise.

“Your name is Ruby Rose, right?”

“Yeah...but what if I had a twin?”

The response actually made Weiss sit back in her seat, shocked by the

thought of two versions of Ruby existing at the same time. Ruby never had a twin, which probably meant she was too unique to have any form of duplicate, but *what if* she did? What if there were two? Would they act similarly? Would they both be incredible, lovable bundles of energy?

Before her mind went crazy over the idea, Weiss shook her head and smiled. Two versions of Ruby would *not* be a bad thing...but she was more than happy with just the one.

“Do you have a twin?” she asked, but Ruby shook her head.

“No, I’m just saying - what if I did? Then how would you know?”

“Would you both be named Ruby?”

Ruby snorted with laughter at the question - the sound bringing an instant smile to Weiss’ lips. She loved it when Ruby laughed...

“Ruby-one and Ruby-two?” Ruby said before giggling at the thought. The moment was a vision of the real Ruby slipping through - the relaxed, comfortable version that wasn’t shocked by some stranger insisting upon being her soulmate.

That was the version Weiss wanted to see *all* of the time.

“I’m positive you’re the right person,” she said, feeling the conviction behind the words.

“But, I mean...there’s nothing special about me.”

Whenever someone dared make a similar comment about Ruby, Weiss had them arrested, fired, displaced, removed from the building, and several times she’d personally punched them in the face, stomped on their foot, or elbowed them in the stomach. *Nothing* angered her more than someone suggesting that Ruby was anything less than extraordinary. But when Ruby voiced doubt in herself...a different course of action was required.

“You *are* special,” Weiss replied, hearing a firmness in her tone that would hopefully convince Ruby to believe the words. “You’re incredibly special. You have such a kind heart and soul, and you’re constantly going out of your way to help others.”

“Eh...” Shrugging one shoulder, Ruby seemed entirely unconvinced by that argument. “Not any more than someone else though.”

“I just watched you help that other waitress with all of her tables,” Weiss

said, her eyes flitting in the direction of the orange-haired server. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know, but Penny's new! And she's a little awkward around people. I like to help her greet her tables, then she takes it from there."

"There aren't many people who would do that, Ruby. Especially not when they have their own jobs to do. You go out of your way to help her, and I think she appreciates it more than you realize."

Ruby glanced away from the table and sighed. It was evident in her expression that she wasn't entirely persuaded by Weiss' argument, but that was fine. Weiss had the rest of their lives to convince Ruby that she was special in ways others were not.

After staring off into space for a few seconds, Ruby shook her head and turned back to the conversation at hand.

"If what you're saying is true, and we're soulmates...then we're like, supposed to *be* together?"

"That's right."

Letting out another soft scoff, Ruby slumped in her seat. "That's just...really hard to believe. I mean, I haven't even *had* a relationship yet, and now I have a soulmate??"

When Ruby shook her head yet again, Weiss thought it might be a good idea to back away from the conversation. Clearly, Ruby was struggling to accept the knowledge, but that wasn't necessarily a bad sign - it could mean she needed a little more time to soak it in.

"Would it help if we talked about something else?" Weiss suggested, smiling when her question was met with a sigh of relief.

"Yes - please. Like, I dunno...tell me about yourself?" Ruby asked. "Like, not *this* stuff, but...where you're from? That type of stuff?"

To Weiss, that topic of conversation was rather boring - who cared where she grew up when the two of them were destined by the cosmos to be together? However, she understood that comfort was found in small talk, and she wanted Ruby to be comfortable.

"I live in Atlas," she explained. "I grew up there, went to school there, and started working at my family's company as soon as I graduated from college."

“What’s your family’s company?”

“We own a few manufacturing centers in and out of Atlas,” Weiss answered, leaving out the full scope of the company so as not to give Ruby any reason to feel intimidated by wealth. “We deal mostly in defense and metals, so nothing you’d be likely to use,” she added before Ruby asked what the company manufactured.

“Oh. That sounds...fun?”

“Not really, but it provided me with the means to search for you. And for that, I’m grateful.”

Weiss realized, too late, that she’d somehow found a way to bring the conversation back to Ruby. She hadn’t known that was a skill of hers until just now - however, Ruby ducked the comment and picked at the food on her plate.

“What do you like to do though?” she asked, rather skillfully directing the conversation away from herself. “Like, hobbies?”

The question was more difficult to answer than it should have been. What were Weiss’ hobbies? Did she have any? It was hard to remember what she’d been like before her eighteenth birthday now that this life was muddled with all the others. What types of activities had she enjoyed? What pastimes did she partake in?

All she knew was that ever since that day, her entire existence revolved around finding Ruby. When she was at school, she searched for Ruby in her free time. After graduation, she searched for Ruby when she was free from work.

“I like to sing,” she finally answered, pulling together some interests that spanned multiple universes. “I play piano when I can. I read often, but mostly the news or current events.” The last hobby was directly related to Ruby - a tireless quest that never ended. “But my favorite thing to do is...”

Feeling a pinprick of embarrassment, Weiss paused when she realized she was doing it again - she was directing the conversation back to Ruby. Maybe that was the real answer here - maybe Weiss’ favorite hobby was discussing Ruby.

“My favorite thing to do is spending time with you,” she said anyway,

wanting Ruby to hear this from her now. “Walking around and talking about anything. You always make such great observations on other people and the world.”

This time, Ruby didn’t avoid the conversation. Instead, she smiled.

“Yang calls it ‘spazzy insight,’” she replied, the term making Weiss chuckle and shake her head.

“I haven’t heard it called that before, but that sounds about right.”

‘Spazzy insight’ was going in her Dictionary of Ruby for future use. It was the perfect term to describe Ruby’s view of the world - equal parts innocent and surprisingly insightful. Sometimes it felt like she understood life on a level no one else could reach - sometimes it felt like she didn’t understand life at all.

“What about you?” Weiss asked. “What hobbies do you have?”

It seemed like a normal question for their normal conversation, but Ruby’s response was to stare before finally asking, “Uh, but shouldn’t you know everything about me already?”

The misconception was a common one - common enough that Weiss smiled as they fell into one of the multitude of grooves in their relationship.

“I know everything about the previous versions of you, but you have different interests in every case. There are threads of similarity, but...I’d like to know what *you* like.”

There were many similarities, but every version of Ruby was unique. How could she not be, when her personality was composed of too many facets to count? There was no ‘one size fits all’ when it came to Ruby, and Weiss loved it that way. She loved learning each and every difference - some so small it took years to realize they were even there, some so glaring she noticed them right away.

Every version of Ruby deserved to be treated as special, and Weiss made sure it was that way.

“Oh, uh...” Trailing off, Ruby seemed to have as much difficulty thinking of an answer as Weiss had. “Well, I like to watch movies...”

“What kind of movies?”

When Ruby chuckled at the question, Weiss had a good idea of what was

coming next.

“I like these really crappy horror movies,” Ruby explained, her eyes sparkling in delight just thinking about the subject. “Yang hates them, but I love ‘em - maybe *because* they’re so crappy.”

Chuckling as well, Weiss filed that information away for future use. The admission, however, was a common one. She had no idea why Ruby was so prone to enjoying hellaciously dreadful movies, but Weiss had also developed a certain affinity for them by this point. Although, that affinity could have sprung out of Ruby’s insistence upon watching them.

Cheesy horror films reminded her of Ruby, which meant that she loved watching them, too - which meant she’d spent the last few years watching the worst films to never grace the theater. It was less fun to watch alone, but she found some sense of comfort in imagining that Ruby was watching the same movie at the same time.

“Does that mean you’ve seen *Super Zombie Slayers 6*?” Weiss asked, picking one of the most popular movies amongst the awful and smiling when Ruby gasped.

“*Yes!* It’s only one of the most awesome movies ever! I just watched it again last weekend! The best part is when that guy emptied a box of grenades into that pit of zombies.”

Weiss’ nose crinkled at the memory of that particular scene, which was tremendously flawed from a logistics perspective, but she still chuckled at Ruby’s enthusiasm.

“Yes, that was...particularly gruesome.” Her diplomatic answer made Ruby laugh, which only made Weiss’ smile grow.

“I can’t believe you’ve seen that movie!” Ruby added. “You don’t strike me as a *Super Zombie* fan.”

“I don’t know if I’d call myself a fan...”

“Have you seen the first five?”

“Well, yes -”

“Then you’re a fan! No one watches those movies unless they’re a huge fan - or they’re forced to, like Yang.”

When Ruby burst into giggles, Weiss couldn’t help but to join in with

laughter - both amused by the conversation and relieved that Ruby's struggle with their prior topic was easing away. A break from the weighty subject was probably exactly what Ruby needed.

And, remarkably, the Super Zombie franchise provided just a means of relaxing their conversation. Who would've thought those films would be useful for something? That was ten hours of corny dialogue and over-the-top gore well spent.

"The seventh one will be out soon," Ruby added, coming to life over this strange topic.

"How do they make them so quickly?" Weiss asked, smiling when Ruby giggled and shook her head.

"I dunno...they probably skip editing or something to save time."

"Well that makes a lot of sense..." Weiss mumbled, and she had every intention of asking Ruby to go see this seventh installment of a lousy film series, but thought better of it. There would be a time for that later - right now, she wanted to see where the conversation went from here.

"What else do you like to do?" Weiss asked, her heart soaring at Ruby's cheerful demeanor. "When you're not watching horror movies, I mean."

"Well, I work a lot...oh, and I like to draw!" Picking up one of her French fries, Ruby moved it across her plate like a pen before biting off the end.

"What do you draw?"

"Uh, mostly designs and stuff...nothing fancy."

Sensing that there was more to the answer, Weiss waited patiently for Ruby to continue. Because she *was* capable of being patient sometimes.

"I make these little metal trinket things," Ruby explained, motioning with her hands as if she could make one appear before giving up and shaking her head. "I tinker with stuff, basically," she concluded.

Ruby's tone implied that her hobby was nothing special, but Weiss was willing to wager a large sum of money that it was actually exceptional. When Ruby put her mind to something, it always turned out remarkable - these were likely no different.

"I'd love to see them sometime," Weiss said, noticing Ruby's surprise at her interest.

“Really? I mean, they’re just...toys.”

Shrugging off the insinuation, Weiss smiled. “I’d still love to see them.”

At first, it looked like Ruby didn’t know how to take the response, but then she smiled too.

“Ok, then maybe I’ll show you sometime!”

The response was music to Weiss’ ears. It might not be a full commitment to spend more time together, but it was a step in the right direction.

For a moment, the two of them just smiled at one another, and Weiss could feel that the tension had lifted - a fact that grew all the more evident when Ruby blushed and looked down at her plate.

“Oh, sorry, did you want some?” she suddenly asked, pushing the plate across the table while Weiss waved one hand to decline.

“I’m alright,” she said, laughing softly at Ruby’s flustered behavior. “I just ate.”

“Oh, right. Duh.”

As Ruby pulled the food back to her, Weiss watched with what must be a permanent smile set in place. She’d already known that Ruby was adorable, but *remembering* that Ruby was adorable versus experiencing it firsthand were two completely different things.

If Ruby was willing, Weiss wanted the two of them to leave here together and never be apart again. Of course, she needed to do a little more explaining first, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t allowed to wish.

“So...” Ruby said, tapping her index fingers together before meeting Weiss’ eyes. “You get all these memories, then try to find me so you can tell me?”

“That right,” Weiss answered, encouraged by Ruby directing them back to this subject on her own.

“I wonder who sends you the rose though...” Ruby mused, her brow adorably furrowed while she tried to puzzle through the mystery. Weiss smiled - because of the expression and because she’d also spent many hours across multiple lives puzzling out the answer.

“Honestly, I think it’s still you,” she remarked, drawing a surprised gaze.

“Me?”

“Yes. I think that, somehow, there’s a version of yourself that transcends all

of this -" Weiss waved a hand at the patio of the restaurant, the other diners, and the pedestrians passing by. "I think you're watching over everything and making sure I get the rose when I'm supposed to."

"So there's two versions of me? One all-powerful and then...me?"

Weiss shook her head. "That's only a theory. I've never fully understood how this works. The only thing I know is that it *does* work."

Nodding, Ruby thought about the situation for a few more seconds before her eyes widened with a thought.

"Then the other me is all alone?" she asked, gesturing towards the sky as she spoke. "Isn't that kind of sad?"

"Maybe you're not alone," Weiss was quick to add. "Maybe I'm there too, and we're both watching the other versions of ourselves bumble around down here."

The thought made Ruby giggle - and the more the sound appeared, the more Weiss' heart beat with happiness. As far as she was concerned, there was nothing better than Ruby's laugh or smile.

"I wonder if we mess with ourselves then," Ruby said, shifting in her seat with a playful smile on her lips. "Like can I make myself spill this glass of water?"

Pausing, Ruby stared at her glass - waiting for it to fall over. When it did nothing but sit on the table, she relaxed into a smile and shrugged. "Or maybe we just watch."

A normal person might miss what was happening, but Weiss' heart soared with love and affection. Now that the initial shock had worn off, Ruby was participating in the theories. She was imagining herself in a different form than she had now - as some ethereal being watching over her earthly life. She was willing to imagine herself as the person Weiss knew she was, which meant they might be close to that all important acceptance of this new reality.

"So we've had this conversation like a thousand times?" Ruby asked. "Where I freak out and think you've got the wrong person - all that stuff?"

"Sometimes," Weiss replied, unable to contain her smile now that the Ruby was participating so willingly in the conversation. "But there are times you don't freak out at all."

“You mean, I’m just like - ‘We’re soulmates? Cool.”

“It’s not quite like that,” Weiss began, calling one of those memories to mind. “It’s more like...you’re already willing to believe what I have to say because you trust me that much.”

“Huh...” Thinking over the explanation, Ruby eventually asked the question Weiss was hoping for. “How does that happen?”

“Sometimes we already know each other when I find out,” Weiss explained, her smile growing as she thought about this one life in particular. “And sometimes we’re already in a relationship.”

“Really?”

“Really,” Weiss replied with a nod of assurance.

“But...what do you do then? Tell me as soon as you turn eighteen?”

“It depends,” she said with a subtle shake of her head. “When I turn eighteen, you’re only sixteen. Most of the time, I wait until we’re both older, so that we’re ready for that type of...commitment.”

Ruby’s cheeks reddened at the word, but Weiss had no regrets in using it. It *was* a commitment, plain and simple. A lifelong commitment to one another - and then each and every life after that. To some, it was far too great an obligation to make to one person, but Weiss made that promise without hesitation time and time again.

“How do I take it then?” Ruby asked, waving one hand in subtle encouragement for Weiss to explain further. And Weiss was more than willing to continue her stories, knowing that each subsequent one Ruby heard was another step in the right direction.

“Sometimes, you hardly bat an eye,” Weiss said, taking a sip of water before smiling across the table, ready to start her next story - ready to share another story of another wonderful life they’d shared.

Chapter 5

Snow was still falling, but it was lighter now than it had been overnight - when large clumps fell in frenzied flurries for hours upon end. By the time morning broke, there were sparse flakes drifting through the air to accompany the thick blanket of white laying over everything in sight.

It was a winter wonderland, and it was just as cold as it was beautiful. The frigid temperature couldn't keep them inside, however. Not when their daily routine included a morning walk - rain or shine. Or, in this case, rain or snow. A measly foot of snow wasn't enough to break that routine.

Bundled up in more clothing than she'd worn in quite some time, Weiss held Ruby's hand as they trekked through the snow in their snow boots. Wearing gloves meant she couldn't feel the warmth of Ruby's hand, which was one unfortunate sacrifice to keep the chill at bay.

The two of them walked where they knew the sidewalk should be, even though everything looked similar when covered in a thick layer of fresh snow.

* * *

"Ruby?"

Pausing the story, Weiss looked over and found a waitress - the one Ruby had helped all afternoon - approaching their table.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said before smiling hopefully at Ruby. "I know you're done for the day, but could you help me with one more table?"

Raising one finger, the girl pointed over her shoulder to a new couple who'd just been seated.

“Uhh...” When Ruby glanced at Weiss, Weiss smiled and nodded, silently saying she had no problem waiting.

“Sure, Penny!” Ruby answered with a big grin as she stood up. “Hold that thought,” she directed to Weiss before leading Penny towards the new table.

More than happy to wait, Weiss watched the interaction unfold across the patio of the restaurant. Ruby greeted the couple first, with that grin and bubbly personality getting them to laugh within seconds. Next, she introduced Penny, who swooped in with her pen and paper to take the couple’s drink order. It was a rather smooth arrangement - one that both girls seemed comfortable with.

With Penny happily engaged with the newest diners, Ruby hurried back to the table and took her seat.

“Sorry about that!”

“It’s not a problem - really.”

Weiss’ reassurance worked this time, as Ruby smiled and picked up her sandwich - prepared to resume eating.

“So we’re walking in the snow -” she prompted Weiss before taking a bite.

“Yes, we’re walking in the snow,” Weiss repeated, smiling at Ruby’s choice of words before continuing their story.

* * *

“First ones here!” Ruby remarked while they crossed the street and walked into the deserted park. The snow here was pristine and untouched - a fact Ruby took giddy pleasure in as their footprints marked the path they took.

“No one else wanted to wake up this early,” Weiss muttered, each word sending a visible puff of air from her lips.

“It’s not *that* early! Everyone’s just being lazy cuz it’s a snow day.”

Feeling the nip of a cold gust of wind, Weiss tucked her nose into her scarf while her cheeks burned from the chill. The sun was out but provided little warmth on a day like today. Not that they needed warmth when they had each other - well, not when they had each other and thick winter jackets.

Walking through the small park - their usual destination on these walks -

Weiss watched Ruby pick out a slightly-raised section of snow and step on top of it. It must be the curb that she'd found - a piece of cement raised several inches off the ground that separated pavement from grassy lawns that were nowhere to be found at the moment.

"Be careful," Weiss cautioned Ruby while she walked along the curb hidden under the snow.

"I will be!"

After flashing one of those blinding grins, Ruby focused her attention on the nearly indistinguishable bump in the snow that marked her path. Still worried that Ruby might slip and fall, Weiss maintained a firm grip on Ruby's hand as they walked.

"So..." Weiss began, watching Ruby with a wary eye when she wobbled. "Since classes are canceled, what do you want to do today?"

"Whatever we want! It's the first day of winter!"

"Ruby, the first day of winter was weeks ago."

"Oh..." Brow furrowing, Ruby lost the expression a second later when her grin reappeared. "Then today's the first unofficial day of winter. Cuz we finally got snow."

When Ruby giggled at the answer, Weiss shook her head and remained quiet. She'd discovered long ago that it was remarkably difficult to refute something 'unofficial' because, by its very definition, there were no fundamental facts to dispute.

And Ruby had quickly learned that calling something 'unofficial' meant that Weiss couldn't argue.

"What do you want to do on this *unofficial* first day of winter then?" Her heart jumped when Ruby teetered and nearly slipped off the curb, but resumed beating when Ruby regained her balance and kept walking.

"Hmm...I want to go for a walk with you in the snow."

Smiling at the response, Weiss nodded. "Done. Anything else?"

After pondering the question, Ruby grinned and hopped off the curb. Stooping over, she collected a pile of snow in her gloves and formed it into a snowball. Tossing it up and down in one gloved hand, she gave Weiss an impish grin.

“Ruby Rose,” Weiss warned. “You better have plans for that snowball that are far away from me.”

“I’d never throw it at you!” Ruby immediately fessed up before smiling once more. “I was actually gonna give it to you.”

Pressing the ball of snow into Weiss’ hands, Ruby then backed away with another happy grin.

“And see if you can hit me with it!”

As soon as the words left her lips, Ruby took off across what was normally a grassy area of the park. And by ‘took off,’ Weiss meant that Ruby slowly hopped her way through the snowdrifts while trying to make her brilliant escape.

Willing to play Ruby’s impromptu game, Weiss took aim, pulled her arm back, and let the snowball fly. Her aim was good, and the snowball hit Ruby in the back of the shoulder, exploding into a cloud of white dust upon impact.

The blow must have surprised Ruby, because she tripped over her feet and fell face first into the snow.

“Ruby!”

When Ruby didn’t immediately pop back up, Weiss tried to rush over, but her own feet refused to move quickly through the thick snow. Every step she took was like running through molasses, but eventually, she made it to Ruby and knelt by her side. “Are you ok?”

Rolling Ruby over and finding her eyes closed, Weiss panicked.

“Ruby??” she said, her alarm growing while she looked Ruby over to find what was wrong. Had she hit her head on something when she fell? Maybe there was a rock hidden under the snow?

When Weiss turned around, desperately searching for an answer or someone to help, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist - right before she was flipped onto her back in the snow, squealing in surprise as she fell.

“Gotcha!” Ruby called out, swinging herself on top of Weiss and giggling at her little ploy.

“Ruby!” Weiss shouted, annoyed but mostly relieved she’d only been tricked. She tried to get up, but Ruby was stubbornly sitting on her chest. “Get off of me, you - you miscreant!”

“Miscreant? That’s a new one.” Ruby grinned but didn’t budge an inch. Instead, she looked perfectly content to sit on top of Weiss in the snow - grinning like a cat at some prize she’d ‘won.’

“It’s cold, you realize,” Weiss complained while giving up her fruitless struggles and laying back in the thick cushion of snow.

“Is it? Lemme help.” Still not getting up, Ruby instead scooted down and laid forward to hug Weiss in the snow. Her short, downy brunette hair fell across Weiss’ chin while she snuggled closer, pressing as close as their bulky winter clothing allowed. “How’s that?”

Adorable was the answer, as it always was when it came to Ruby. In one simple motion, she melted all of Weiss’ annoyance or indignation at having been tricked by a rather clever ruse. Unfortunately, she didn’t melt the snow surrounding Weiss like a very cold blanket.

“It’s still cold.”

Laughing at the answer, Ruby hugged Weiss closer then rolled them over so that Ruby was laying in the snow instead.

“How’s that?” she asked, looking up at Weiss with joyful silver eyes.

“Better...” Weiss begrudgingly admitted, eliciting yet another laugh from Ruby. She smiled at the sound, unable and unwilling to be anything less than happy when the two of them shared moments like these.

“How can I make it better?”

The question was innocent - a genuine desire to make Weiss happy. What Ruby didn’t seem to realize was that *she* made Weiss happy. No matter what they did or what the circumstances may be, Ruby’s presence made everything brighter...warmer.

If there was one thing that could make Weiss even happier in this moment, it was a kiss.

So she leaned down and kissed Ruby, finding her lips were warm despite the red in her cheeks that suggested otherwise.

Ruby was quick to respond, one glove pushing Weiss’ hair out of the way while she returned the kiss in earnest. Gone were the days when she was hesitant or unsure about any type of physical intimacy. Now, she pulled Weiss closer and deepened the kiss, expressing emotions that could never be put

into words.

But Weiss felt and understood them, and did her best to express a fraction of her own love and devotion through fervent, greedy kisses.

It was only when she felt far too warm and their kisses felt far too passionate that she pulled away, looking into Ruby's eyes while the cawing of a nearby crow made it abundantly clear they were still outside - in a public place, no less.

Her breathing was heavy - sending billows of visible air out into the world - and she was now remarkably warm. If anything, it was too hot at the moment.

Clearing her throat, she looked down at Ruby - who looked up at her with one of those expressions of pure joy she never grew tired of seeing. And in this moment she thought to herself that...she didn't want to keep her secret from Ruby any longer.

She knew that Ruby loved her, and she loved Ruby in return. The only reasons she'd had to wait - for them to grow closer and a bit older - had already fallen by the wayside. So what was she waiting for? Why continue to leave Ruby in the dark?

"That's better," Weiss whispered, leaning down and pressing one last kiss to Ruby's lips before standing and reaching down to pull Ruby to her feet. "But come on, let's get up before we both catch a cold."

Ruby playfully grumbled but accepted Weiss' hand and quickly popped up. Once standing, she stepped close and gently brushed snow from Weiss' shoulders before straightening her scarf, ending the actions with a smile that warmed Weiss' heart through and through. It was little moments like these that made Weiss feel incredibly loved and treasured - a feeling only Ruby was able to create.

"How about we head home and make some hot chocolate?" Weiss suggested, knowing she had a great idea when Ruby's smile went from radiant to blinding in a heartbeat.

"That sounds awesome! And tea for you?"

"You know me well," Weiss replied, reaching out for Ruby's hand as they turned and headed back the way they came. But they hadn't made it more than a few steps before Ruby looked over her shoulder and giggled.

“What do you think people will think of that?” she asked, nudging Weiss’ shoulder and gesturing behind them. Turning around, Weiss blushed when she saw the patch of trampled snow that looked exactly like what had happened there.

“They’ll think someone was rolling around in the snow,” she answered plainly, the response making Ruby laugh as they left the park behind.

“I’m surprised you actually hit me!” Ruby remarked, swinging their joined hands while they walked. “Thought for sure it’d go sailing over my head or something.”

Weiss scoffed at the comment. “I have better aim than that.”

“But I’m super quick!” Ruby made a few rapid motions with her feet, but the helpless snow shuffling did little to prove her point.

“You’re unbelievable,” Weiss said in lieu of pointing out to Ruby just how slow the snow made her.

“That’s why you love me!”

Weiss’ heart gave an embarrassing jolt at the word - the same reaction it had every time she heard Ruby say it.

“I do,” she replied while squeezing Ruby’s hand. “Even though you’re a real dolt sometimes.”

She used the word playfully and was rewarded with another giggle that lifted her heart.

“A dolt you can’t live without! I know you missed me a *ton* while I was still in Vale.”

Under Ruby’s watchful gaze, Weiss thought about denying it for denial’s sake. But what was the point? She *had* missed Ruby - more than Ruby might ever understand.

“I did,” Weiss admitted. “I missed you every single day.”

The answer made Ruby happy, as she smiled and kicked her boots through the snow.

“I missed you a lot, too...but now we’re at the same school and get to see each other all the time.”

“That’s true,” Weiss agreed, sharing a smile with Ruby while their apartment building came into view.

They hadn't had the best timing in this life, as Weiss learned about their intertwined destinies *after* moving away for college, with Ruby still finishing high school in Vale. She wanted to move back right away, but her father wouldn't allow it. She'd seriously considered disobeying him and evoking his wrath, but instead found that Ruby was more than willing to wait two years to be together again.

Still, Weiss did everything in her power to remain close with Ruby - phone calls nearly every night, messages during class, flights back whenever possible - and they'd made it through the two years in flying colors. As soon as Ruby was accepted to the same university, Weiss asked her to forgo student housing so they could live together. Without knowing about their eternal connection, it should've been a huge step, yet Ruby willingly accepted.

Unfortunately, there was one person in Ruby's life who was unwilling to allow her little sister to move in with Weiss alone right after high school.

Fortunately, Yang was nice to have around, mostly. There were times when she was grating or overbearing, but for the most part she was a less abrasive version of some of her other selves. Weiss was still hopeful Yang would eventually move out, but the living situation wasn't bad as it currently was. They'd spent a number of years sharing apartments, houses, even dorm rooms together - this was no different.

"Think it'll snow more tonight?" Ruby asked, glancing towards the snow-covered streets before pulling open the door to their apartment building and holding it for Weiss to walk through.

"I think we'll get a little more today, but not much."

When Ruby let out a soft "hmm" and followed Weiss inside, she tried to figure out if Ruby was disappointed by the news.

"It was fun to be the first ones out," Ruby commented while they headed up a flight of stairs to the second story. "Putting our own mark on the world, you know? How often do we get to do something like that?"

Blessed with her knowledge, Weiss knew that it happened more often than not, and in ways that left a much larger mark than a set of fresh footprints.

"Next time it snows, we'll get up early again," she replied, giving Ruby a grateful smile when she opened the door to their apartment and gestured

Weiss through first. Walking inside, she was surprised by the sight greeting them.

“Hey guys!” Yang said, pulling on a pair of gloves to complete the full winter outfit she was wearing. “How is it out there?”

“Cold!” Ruby surmised in a single word, but with an accompanying shiver that made Weiss smile. “You’re up early.”

“Yeah, heading to the library to work on a paper.” Slinging her backpack over her shoulder, Yang missed the look of shock Weiss and Ruby shared.

“The library??” Ruby’s tone held an appropriate amount of disbelief, seeing as how Yang only set foot in a library if she needed to use the restroom. “But classes were canceled!”

“Yeah, but the library’s still open, and I’ve got a paper to work on. Don’t wanna fall behind.” Yang grinned at them, and Weiss couldn’t help but smirk when she realized what was actually going on.

“How was your date last night?”

Yang’s grin turned into a huge, dopey smile at the question - which was all the answer they needed.

“It was really great,” she answered, downplaying how she truly felt (although her smile gave it away). “She offered to help me out with this paper, so I’m gonna go meet up with her. Then maybe we’ll grab lunch or something after.”

Yang shrugged as if it was no big deal, but she was positively glowing at the moment. Glancing to the side, Weiss saw that Ruby was beginning to reflect that glow - beaming in delight that her sister was clearly so happy.

“How will she help you if she goes to a different school?” Weiss asked while Yang pulled on a pair of boots.

“She had a similar class last year. Plus, she’s just really, really smart.”

“That sounds nice of her.”

“Yeah, she’s super nice. Really smart, really funny, and just...a really great person.” As Yang’s eyes drifted off, thinking about the girl who’d already captured her heart, Weiss smiled.

“Well, have fun,” Weiss replied, snapping Yang out of her daydream and back to their apartment. And Yang returned Weiss’ words with a genuine smile - no teasing in sight.

"Thanks, Weiss. I'll see you guys later!" Hurrying out, Yang made a slight detour to rustle Ruby's hair before leaving the apartment behind.

The second the door closed, Ruby let out a small squeal of happiness - the excitement from seeing Yang's smile bursting from her in that cute little noise.

"I'm so happy they're seeing each other again!" she said, bouncing several steps forward and spinning around to give Weiss a grin. "I hope this one turns out better than the last one."

"I think it will, Ruby. I have a good feeling about this one." All Weiss needed was a name to know that Yang finally found the person she was meant to be with.

"I hope you're right," Ruby replied, unzipping her jacket and pulling her arms out of the sleeves. "Do you remember her name? Guess I should've tried to remember it..."

"It's Blake," Weiss answered, smiling as she said the name and looking forward to adding Blake to their lives once again. "Blake Belladonna."

"Blake..." Ruby repeated, trying out the name before nodding. "I hope she's nice. I wanna see Yang this happy *all* the time."

"I do too, Ruby."

In this world, Yang put her heart on the line too early and often. Unfortunately, this meant that she was normally the one getting crushed by people who didn't deserve her trust. Weiss had done her best to dissuade Yang from seeing anyone whose initials weren't B.B., with only moderate success.

Thankfully, the worrying ended now. With Blake in the picture, Yang's heart was in good hands.

Unfortunately, Ruby's brow was still furrowed while she mulled over the situation, still concerned about her older sister. She didn't know what Weiss knew, and this was just another reason why Ruby *should* know - so she could stop worrying, too.

Removing her gloves then unraveling her scarf, Weiss watched Ruby hang her jacket by the door before placing her hat on the shelf directly above 'her' coat hook. Her cheeks were still pink from the cold, and her hair was all kinds of disheveled from wearing the hat, but she looked as cute as ever.

And she looked even cuter when she bounced over to Weiss with a grin.

“May I take your coat, milady?” she asked, bowing her head and extending one hand for Weiss’ jacket.

“You may indeed,” Weiss replied, shrugging out of her jacket and handing it to Ruby, who grinned as she walked over to hang it next to her own. While Ruby did that, Weiss stepped out of her boots and left them by the door. The snow was already melting off the bottoms and creating a puddle on the floor, but they would clean that up later.

One unexpected benefit of Blake’s appearance was that they now had the day to themselves, with no place to be and - as far as Weiss was concerned - no desire to step into the frigid air again.

“I’ll make you hot chocolate?” she offered, stepping towards the kitchen but pausing when Ruby’s brow furrowed and she shook her head.

“Naw, not right now. I wanna show you something first!”

Brightening, Ruby waved Weiss after her as she hopped into the living room. Curious about what could possibly be more important than hot chocolate after a walk in the snow, Weiss followed Ruby and stopped when they both stood in front of the sofa.

Ruby was grinning about something, but there was nothing new here. It was the same living room it had always been - a sofa, a television, a bookshelf along one wall holding more movies than books...

“What is it?” Weiss asked, glancing around one more time in an attempt to spot whatever it was Ruby wanted to show her. When Ruby waved towards the TV, Weiss’ eyes snapped that direction in search of whatever she was missing.

“Ruby -?”

No sooner had the word left her mouth did two strong arms wrap around her waist and pull her off her feet. Again, she yelped in surprise - finding herself suddenly falling - but the fall abruptly ended when she landed on top of Ruby on the sofa.

That’s when she heard the giggles - *lots* of them coming from the girl still holding her close.

“Ruby!” she exclaimed, her heart thundering in her chest while Ruby continued to giggle. “What’s with you doing that today?”

“You’re so cuteeee,” was Ruby’s answer as she burrowed into Weiss’ neck, rustling through her hair and sending tingles of thrill down her spine.

That wasn’t really an answer, but Weiss only capable of a partial pout at the moment. Even so, Ruby sensed it without even being able to see.

“Do you want me to stop?”

Seeing as how Ruby’s arms were still wrapped around her while they lay on the sofa together, that was a question Weiss could easily answer.

“...no.”

“Good! Cuz I don’t wanna!”

Playfully rolling her eyes at the answer, Weiss resituated - pulling her legs onto the sofa and snuggling into Ruby’s side, while Ruby moved her arms to wrap one around Weiss’ shoulder and pull her close. Reaching up, Weiss dragged the blanket off the back of the sofa and draped it over them.

With the snowflakes lightly drifting outside, the blanket warming her cold feet after their walk, and Ruby pressed close, Weiss was quickly drifting into heaven.

Fumbling with the remote control, Ruby switched on the TV but turned the volume down until the voices were hardly distinguishable. It wasn’t for entertainment at the moment, but she liked having background noise - quiet spaces drove her a little crazy, with her hyper side showing up early and often.

Weiss was used to the soft noise by now, and she even found that a little background noise was nice if it was quiet enough. Right now, she could still hear the sound of Ruby’s heartbeat over the television, so the noise level was perfect.

In the pseudo-silence, Ruby sighed in content and absentmindedly played with Weiss’ hair. And Weiss secretly *loved* it when Ruby played with her hair - only Ruby though.

Weiss was like Yang in some ways, especially when it came to not wanting others to touch her hair. She spent quite a bit of time and effort in the morning making it look nice - why would she be ok with someone willfully messing it up? Of course, she spent the time and effort in order to look nice for Ruby, so if anyone was free to undo all of that work, it was Ruby.

Leaning into Ruby’s side, hearing and feeling her heart beating, Weiss was

at peace. There was no other way to describe it - this all-encompassing calm that washed over her like a warm ray of sunshine. She could fall asleep like this. She *had* fallen asleep like this. But it was in this moment of mutual harmony that she knew - now was the time to tell Ruby.

"Ruby?" she asked before hearing a soft "Hmm?" in response. Reaching over and holding Ruby's other hand in her own, she took a deep breath and asked the question that had been on her mind for weeks now.

"Do you believe in soulmates?"

"Like how you and me are meant to be?" Ruby giggled at her little rhyme, which made Weiss smile in turn.

"Yes, exactly like that. Do you believe that we're meant to be together because the universe decided it?"

She held her breath while waiting for an answer. Thankfully, with Ruby an answer was never far away.

"Hmm...I guess I do. I know it's always been so easy to be with you - like as soon as I met you, I just *knew* we were supposed to be together."

Weiss appreciated the sentiment, even though she *wasn't* easy to be with at that time. The two of them met before she turned eighteen and...suffice to say that she wasn't always the kindest.

Ruby, however, was a glutton for punishment. No matter how many times Weiss made her disdain known, Ruby kept coming back - and eventually wormed her way into Weiss' heart. It was nothing more than begrudging acknowledgement at first, then reluctant acceptance, and eventually confounded admission that her feelings meant more than she ever let on.

Then she turned eighteen, and...she's been making up for those early years ever since.

"Can I tell you something?" she asked, sitting up and immediately regretting leaving the warmth of Ruby's side. Sensing the seriousness of the question, Ruby also sat up and watched Weiss with intent eyes.

"Yeah, of course! You can tell me anything."

Truer words had never been spoken, as Weiss knew that she could tell Ruby absolutely anything and Ruby would still love her. That didn't keep the nerves at bay, however, because this was a rather big admission.

“What if I told you that we *are* destined to be together?” Weiss asked, reaching out to hold Ruby’s hand for support. “What if we’re meant to be together in *every* universe, no matter when or where that happens?”

“That sounds really awesome!”

The quick agreement gave Weiss more than enough assurance to continue.

“And what if I told you that I could *remember* those universes? All of those lives we spent together?”

This concept took Ruby longer to absorb, as she pursed her lips and mulled the confession over in her head.

“Are you joking?” she asked, giving Weiss a look that requested an honest reply. Weiss shook her head and squeezed Ruby’s hand, maintaining as much seriousness as possible so Ruby wouldn’t think this was an elaborate prank.

“I’m not joking, Ruby. I can’t explain how it works, but please believe that it’s true.”

Her words were more beseeching than she’d intended, but she didn’t care - she was far too focused on the way Ruby’s mouth was hanging slightly open while processing the new information.

“You remember *all* of them?”

“I do,” Weiss replied with a nod. “When I turned eighteen, I...I remembered all of these other realities that we lived in. So many of them, Ruby. More than I could ever dream of.”

She watched Ruby’s eyes closely, reading the emotions that flitted through them. There was confusion, then concern, but then Ruby laughed - not a ‘you’re crazy’ type of laugh, but a genuinely excited laugh.

“That’s so awesome!” she said, squeezing Weiss’ hand while her eyes sparkled with joy. “I mean, is your brain super stuffed then? That seems like a lot to fit in your head at once!”

When Ruby reached up and gently tapped Weiss on the head, she sighed in relief.

Making it through that moment, she always wondered what she was nervous about. Even if Ruby was disbelieving at first, she always believed in time - but maybe it was time that Weiss was scared of losing, loathe to miss a single moment they could spend in each others’ arms.

"It does get a little confusing at times," she admitted, smiling when Ruby grinned at her.

"So glad you've got the memories instead of me. No way I could keep that straight."

"You'd do just fine. I have every bit of confidence in your mind."

Briefly scrunching up her face at the words, Ruby then laughed and shook her head. "So that means this is actually like...the seven thousandth time we've been together?"

Weiss laughed at the number, relieved that Ruby was taking the knowledge with hardly a falter in her smile.

"I've never tried to count, but there's been a lot."

"Seven thousand sounds like a good place to start," Ruby replied, adding a nod while she leaned back against the sofa. "Man...seven thousand lives together...and you remember them all. That's so cool."

When Ruby's eyes unfocused in thought, Weiss smiled and inched closer.

"Thank you, Ruby," she said, meaning the words as much as her heart could express.

"Thank you for telling me," Ruby replied with one of those quirky smiles Weiss adored.

Ruby didn't have to believe her. Ruby didn't have to believe something that Weiss couldn't even prove was true. Yet Ruby always believed - sometimes in her own time, but she always believed Weiss in the end. She always believed in Weiss.

Leaning forward, Weiss pressed a kiss to Ruby's lips before pulling away and smiling.

"You're incredible, you know," she whispered, reaching up and tenderly tucking several strands of hair behind Ruby's ear. They stubbornly fell out of place again, but...they often did that.

"You're the incredible one."

Of course that was Ruby's response - not that Weiss minded. She loved being the one who Ruby thought so highly of.

Pulling her feet back onto the sofa, she leaned into Ruby as Ruby made room for them to resume their snuggling. This time it was Ruby who pulled

the blanket over Weiss, taking care to tuck in the edges so no cold air slipped underneath.

“So you remember when you turn eighteen?” Ruby asked, wrapping her arm around Weiss and leaning down to press a kiss to her hair.

“Yes. I found a rose on my pillow on my birthday. When I picked it up...I remembered everything.”

“But you liked me even before that!”

Pulling Ruby’s hand down to hold in front of her, Weiss smiled at the comment.

“That’s right, I did. Guess I don’t need to have those memories to know you’re special.”

Hearing a happy “Mhmm” from above her, Weiss snuggled in even more.

“So...why’d you decide to tell me now?” Ruby asked while her fingers ran through Weiss’ hair - the feeling very nearly lulling her to sleep.

“Because you’re being so cute today,” she replied, smiling when Ruby let out a playful huff.

“I mean, I figured, but why else?”

“I’ve wanted to tell you for a long time now,” Weiss admitted. “I felt like it was time you knew, and I didn’t want to keep it a secret anymore.”

Ruby made another soft cooing sound at the response, agreeing with Weiss’ words before they lapsed into a comfortable silence. Weiss could tell that Ruby was still thinking over the information she’d just learned - dissecting and digesting it in her own way. After her initial analysis was complete, she would have questions, but until then...

“And I had something to tell you,” Weiss added.

“Like secrets from other universes?”

“I’m not allowed to share the secrets.” When Ruby’s hand abruptly stopped its soothing path through her hair, Weiss quickly added, “Kidding. I’m just kidding.”

Ruby laughed at the joke while her hand resumed playing with Weiss’ hair.

“I thought you were gonna say there are crazy rules about sharing secrets or something!”

“No...no rules. I can tell you anything.”

“And everything?”

Weiss smiled at the question, which was exactly what she'd hoped to hear. She wanted to share everything with Ruby. Or, at the very least, as much as she was able to share in this lifetime.

“I'll tell you as much as I possibly can, but the first thing is rather relevant. You know the girl Yang is seeing today - Blake?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, she's very special.”

“Meaning...?”

“Meaning, she ends up with Yang in every life I can remember.”

When Ruby's hands paused again, Weiss craned her neck to find Ruby's eyes widened in shock.

“Are you saying what I think you're saying??” Ruby asked, her excitement already bubbling forth. Meeting Ruby's eyes, Weiss managed a serious expression and nodded.

“Yes. Yang finally found the one.”

Hooting in glee, Ruby abruptly jumped off the couch and did several hops in front of the TV.

“Are you serious?” she asked after her legs came to a stop, pointing both hands at Weiss.

“I'm serious.”

Weiss laughed when Ruby did another dance of happiness before rushing back to the sofa and grabbing Weiss' hands.

“Then we can totally mess with her, right?” Ruby asked, her eyes begging for a 'yes.' And after the number of jokes, pranks, and teases Weiss had suffered at the hands of Yang Xiao Long...maybe it was time to get a little even.

“Yes, we can,” Weiss answered, smiling when Ruby squealed with happiness. She was giddy now, and rightfully so, but Weiss reached out and beckoned her back to the sofa.

Thankfully, Ruby sat down and pulled Weiss into another hug. She was bursting with energy but still willing to snuggle together, which was all Weiss wanted to do today. Well, that, and discuss the other lives they'd shared.

“Ok, important question - which one of these universes was I the most

awesome in?”

Laughing at the typical Ruby question, Weiss snuggled closer, pressing into Ruby’s side to soak up as much warmth as possible.

“You’re equally awesome in all of them.” Without looking up, she knew Ruby was pouting at the answer so she added, “But in one of them, you were a queen.”

Ruby laughed, her chest rising and falling while Weiss listened to the sound with a smile.

“When you say we’re *together* in every universe...does that mean like, together forever?”

“Yes, it does.”

There was a short pause and, before Weiss could question what was going through Ruby’s mind, Ruby spoke again.

“So...does that mean that you’ll be with me forever?”

Sitting up at the question, Weiss swiveled around to look into Ruby’s eyes, finding hesitant, hopeful silver staring back at her. She hadn’t expected the conversation to lead them here right away, but she had no problem giving this answer. It was a commitment...and she was willing to make it.

“Yes,” she replied. “I want to be with you forever. If you’ll have me.”

She knew the answer from Ruby’s radiant smile - one filled with so much love and affection that Weiss’ heart swelled with happiness.

“That’s what I’ve always wanted!”

Smiling, Weiss stretched up and gave Ruby a quick kiss before pulling away.

“Me too,” she answered before sinking into Ruby’s embrace while all-encompassing peace and contentedness washed over her.

What a perfect start to a perfect day.

* * *

There was silence at the table after the story ended, the only sounds coming from conversations happening around them.

The memory left Weiss with a warm glow spreading through her chest and a smile on her lips. She loved recalling these blissful moments from lives that

were gone but not lost. She loved that she could share them with Ruby, even if Ruby was unsure if they were true or not.

“Wow,” Ruby finally said, sitting back in her chair and looking rather stunned. “I was *super* chill about that. Like, I took the news like a champ.”

“Yes, you did.”

That was one of the easiest and quickest versions of this conversation they’d had. It started and ended like a gentle breeze, barely enough to register as a bump in their relationship.

“Jeez...” Frowning slightly, Ruby shook her head and gave Weiss an apologetic look. “Sorry I’m struggling so much this time.”

“Ruby,” Weiss replied, shaking her head. “You have nothing to apologize for. Remember, we’d been dating for several years by that point. I don’t expect it to happen that way every time - it *doesn’t* happen that way every time.”

“Still...it sounds really cute.”

“It was. But every life we have is different.” Pausing for a moment, Weiss only continued when she had Ruby’s full attention once more. “I love that they’re always different, Ruby. I love that you react in new ways every time. It would be boring to have the same conversation over and over again, but with you...it’s never boring.”

Drumming her fingers on the table, Ruby wore a thoughtful expression while mulling over Weiss’ words and the most recent story. But then her fingers abruptly stopped, and her eyes widened in surprise.

“Wait, did you say I was a queen in one of these lives?”

Delighted that Ruby had latched onto that little tidbit, Weiss smiled and nodded.

“Would you like me to tell you about it?” she offered, receiving a blinding beam in response.

“Heck yeah!”

Chapter 6

Sighing into the mirror, Weiss reached up and removed the dangling, diamond earrings that were far too heavy for her liking. After setting them down on the chest of drawers, she removed the sparkling tiara from atop her head and set it beside the earrings.

It had been a long day, but it was finally over. Now the healing could begin.

The sound of footsteps approached her room, but stopped just outside the open door. The person who owned the sound was far too polite to come any further without a formal acknowledgement, even though an open invitation had been granted several times.

Two soft knocks rapped on the doorframe, representing the polite request for recognition.

“Do come in, Glynda,” Weiss said, stepping to the side so that her view in the mirror now included the stern woman standing in the doorway.

Removing a set of jeweled bracelets from around her wrist and pulling off a glittering ring that symbolized nothing more than wealth, Weiss set everything in front of the mirror before turning around as Glynda strode across the room.

“What is it?” Weiss asked, noticing the trademark furrowed brow her closest advisor was wearing.

“I wanted to say that I’m truly sorry for your loss, Your Majesty.”

When Glynda bowed her head, Weiss huffed in disbelief.

“Save your sympathy, Glynda,” she replied. “What are you sorry for? That tyranny has ended? That people will no longer be forced into suffering so that we may live in excess?” Letting out another scoff, she shook her head.

“There’s no need for sorrow. I’m glad he’s gone - we’re better off without him.”

“He was still your father...”

“Which only means I was closest to his ire,” Weiss pointed out, feeling not an ounce of sympathy for the miserable life that finally ended. “Truthfully, Glynda, I appreciate the concern, but I’m fine. I’m looking forward to making changes for the better.”

Only after studying Weiss closely did Glynda accept the words with a curt nod that would be the end of the matter for good.

“What will you do first?” she asked, back to business now that the emotional checkup was complete.

“There’s much to be done - much that needs to be changed for the better. I’ll need your help correcting his mistakes, but first...reach out to the Kingdom of Vale - I’d like to arrange a meeting as soon as possible.”

“Vale?” Glynda asked, her eyes widening in surprise. “But -”

“I want to discuss a truce. It’s time to negotiate an end to this pointless war.”

For a long time, Glynda stared - trying to read the intent behind Weiss’ words. Finding that Weiss was speaking the truth, Glynda nodded again.

“When would you like to leave, Your Majesty?”

“Right away. Tomorrow, if it can be arranged.”

“We won’t be able to send a messenger there and back in time -”

“Then I’ll set out without their response,” Weiss replied even though Glynda wouldn’t enjoy that idea in the slightest. “I feel strongly that they’ll want an end to this, as well. There’s no point in risking further bloodshed due to logistics.”

Again, that nod - which meant Glynda would do as instructed even if her pursed lips and furrowed brow gave away her true feelings on the situation.

“I’ll get started on that right away,” she said while backing towards the exit of the room, practically buzzing with restless energy now that she had multiple objectives to accomplish. “Expect to leave tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be ready.”

Without another word, Glynda disappeared through the door, making sure

to close it on her way out. Left in solitude, Weiss walked away from the extravagant jewelry and sat on the end of her bed to think about recent events and what her future might hold. And, for the first time in what felt like ages, she smiled.

She'd wanted to visit Vale for years but never found an opportunity that wouldn't result in her father having her hunted down and executed as a traitor. Even if she managed to make it - and even if Vale was willing to provide her sanctuary - he would have no qualms sending legions of assassins after her or Ruby for the rest of their lives.

Now that he was gone, Weiss could finally go - she could find Ruby and, hopefully, win her heart.

That night as she got ready for sleep and mentally prepared for the following day, she felt lighter than she had since she was a child - maybe even lighter, as during her younger years she'd been ruthlessly aware of the expectations placed upon her.

There were days she never expected to make it this far. There were days she thought her life would be cut short - another victim of her father's uncontrollable frost and anger. The only thing that helped her through was Ruby. Ever since her eighteenth birthday, Weiss knew there was a light at the end of the tunnel. One day, her father would be gone and, when that happened, she could find Ruby.

She'd dreamt of the moment for so long...and she would dream of it again tonight, on the eve of setting out in search of her happily ever after.

* * *

"Uh, sorry to interrupt again..."

Coming back to the table, Weiss focused on Ruby and smiled. "It's ok," she said, her attempt at reassurance doing nothing to ease the deep crease of concern in Ruby's brow.

"It sounds like your dad was a bit of a...jerk?"

Weiss sighed at the question and shook her head.

"He was extremely powerful and extremely volatile. You never knew what

would send him into a rage, and you never knew what he might do when that happened.”

“That sounds really scary.”

“It was,” she answered honestly. “But this was a different world, Ruby. It was a more dangerous world, and the people reflected that.”

When Ruby bit her lip, Weiss added, “And we made it through just fine.”

Finally appearing somewhat relieved, Ruby smiled again.

“But your dad now...?”

“Is much nicer,” Weiss answered with a smile that removed the rest of Ruby’s worries. “He’s driven and almost solely focused on work, but he tends to grow frustrated rather than angry - a much better situation, in my opinion.”

Comforted by the knowledge, Ruby nodded and waved a hand in apology.

“Sorry, I just wanted to know,” she said. “I’m excited to hear what happens next!”

Ruby’s concern over Weiss’ father was heartwarming, so much so that Weiss felt the incredible urge to give Ruby a kiss for being so caring. That would have to come later though. There were more stories to tell first...

* * *

The next morning was bright and sunny but not warm. Atlas was hardly ever warm anymore, but the chill bothered Weiss little as she was led towards the escort for her trip to Vale. Multiple carriages lined the front of the palace - some carrying advisors and negotiators while others carried various gifts to be used as an offer of peace. The largest of these carriages was reserved for her, built to provide as much comfort as possible over what would only be a few day trip.

The legion of soldiers accompanying the carriages was large, numbering nearly a thousand men and women clad in extravagant silver armor. It was surely more than necessary, but Weiss understood Glynda’s precaution. Relations with Vale had soured long ago thanks to her father’s demands of fealty. Hopefully, that would change soon.

Approaching the caravan while flanked by her most loyal guards, Weiss

examined the soldiers set to accompany her. They stood in crisp, straight lines with their weapons at their sides, while those on horseback sat rigid in their saddles. Each had plumes of icy breath billowing from their lips - the mark of Atlas and its frigid warriors. These men and women proudly displayed their element for her inspection, each of them assuring her through sight that they were capable of protecting her on this journey. She wished that the display of force was unnecessary, but until she spoke to Ruby there was always a possibility they would be attacked on sight.

Satisfied with what she saw before her, Weiss called upon the ice running through her veins - the constant chill that never went away. The cold deepened, approaching what would be a painful freeze if she wasn't used to the feeling by now. Drawing out this power and projecting it in front of her, she summoned ice to do her bidding - pulling shards into the loose shape of a towering soldier that dwarfed them all.

The figure moved like a swarm of crystals, coalescing and breaking apart as he walked to the front of the caravan while Weiss was escorted to her carriage. Once she was situated inside, she commanded the figure to point the way with his giant sword, spurring the soldiers to motion before she scattered the crystals by the wayside.

With the journey underway, she leaned against the window and sighed. She loathed posturing, but it was the way of life in this realm - a subtle reminder to those serving her that, while they may wield some semblance of power, it was her family that controlled the ice within them.

Their voyage would take several days, with most of the delay caused by the slow progress leaving Atlas. High mountains and snowy corridors at the edges of the kingdom were a boon as protection from invaders, but treacherous when it came to traveling between kingdoms - especially when travelling in such a large group. Of course, with the war going on, very little traveling was happening anyway.

Settled in for the long road ahead, she had plenty of time to think about what she wanted to say, and what response she might receive. She already knew she needed a way to calm Yang's fire - the older sister being notoriously hotheaded and fueled by flames. But what would Ruby be like? How had this

world shaped her? Weiss was excited and anxious to find out.

The first two days of travel were uneventful and long, but a commotion outside the carriage in the early hours of the third morning disrupted Weiss' breakfast. As she went to the window to see what was happening, the door to the carriage abruptly opened and one of her elite guard jumped inside. He shut the door behind him as the windows were shuttered and locked from the outside.

"What's going on?" she asked, her heart beating fast as fear and confusion flooded through her.

"Someone slipped into camp," he explained, on high alert while listening to the shouts and motion outside the walls. Weiss understood his caution. They'd left Atlas and entered the no-man's-land between Atlas and Vale - The Badlands, as it was called. In this place, they were susceptible to attacks or assassins. Her family didn't have the most highly regarded name, after all.

After a few minutes spent waiting on pins and needles, the commotion died down, and the windows opened back up.

"Sir," someone called while knocking in a very specific pattern on the door. When the guard immediately relaxed, Weiss did too, and she followed him out the door to see what was going on.

"She claims to be a thief, Sir," one of the soldiers explained as the lead guard approached him.

"Your Majesty, I advise you stand back," the lead guard said, pointing to a spot on the ground before continuing forward. Weiss didn't listen to him - because she didn't have to - and several guards moved to her side as protection while she walked towards the source of the uproar.

As soon as a split in the crowd opened up, allowing her a clear view of their new prisoner, her heart sped up in surprise. Kneeling on the ground, surrounded by more soldiers than necessary, was Blake. She was immobilized - her wrists and ankles bound with cuffs of ice - but she still held her head high.

This was the Blake that Weiss knew - and Blake would never be foolish enough to attempt stealing from such a heavily-guarded caravan.

"Who sent you?" one of the guards demanded, glaring down at her while

she refused to meet his eyes.

“No one.”

Thinking the answer was a lie, the guard raised one hand in the air, prepared to level it across Blake’s face.

“Stop!” Weiss ordered while encasing the man’s arm in a large block of ice. He yelped in shock when he was dragged to the ground by the dead weight, but she paid him no mind while shoving through the soldiers and kneeling in front of Blake.

Their proximity made every guard nervous, causing them to inch forward in fear, but Weiss looked into Blake’s eyes knowing that the girl would never hurt her - even if that had been the initial intent.

“Blake?” Weiss asked quietly, watching confusion swirl in Blake’s eyes at the sound of her name.

“How do you -?” she began to ask, but Weiss smiled.

“You have impeccable timing, don’t you?” she said before standing. With a small glance, she cast away the ice binding Blake’s arms and legs and freed the guard of his block of a hand.

“Has she been searched?” Weiss asked, finding it prudent to take a little precaution. Knowing Blake, there was a high probability that she’d allowed herself to be caught for a reason - which meant she might very well be an assassin, after all.

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Good.” Looking down, Weiss extended a hand to help Blake to her feet. “I’m going to need your help with something,” Weiss explained. “Please come with me.”

Ignoring Weiss’ hand, Blake stood on her own.

“What could you possibly need my help with?” she asked, disbelief and incredulity seeping into her tone. Something about this situation wasn’t playing out as she expected, which was good. Weiss needed to keep Blake curious - that was the only way she would put her original plan on hold.

“You’ll see soon,” Weiss replied, raising a brow at Blake thinking she was in a position to decline the request. “I think you’ll find it preferable to your other options.” After nodding towards the soldiers, Weiss waved towards her

carriage and took a step in that direction. The silent invitation took everyone by surprise, but Blake accepted it with narrowed eyes and a hesitant nod.

While Blake walked towards the carriage, Weiss held onto a higher sense of caution. She knew Blake was crafty in ways others were not. But Weiss wasn't defenseless, and she'd been smart enough to hide the depths of her powers from her father and anyone else.

It was still a risk, but a calculated one.

"Your Majesty," the lead guard said, reaching out to stop her before she followed Blake into the carriage. Blake paused with one foot on the lower step, turning around and watching the interaction closely.

The guard's eyes were fearful - approaching panic - as he glanced at Blake and then looked down at Weiss. "I strongly advise you not to trust her -"

"I'll leave the window open," Weiss replied, attempting to allay his fears. "If I need your help, you'll know."

He wanted to disagree but knew that he shouldn't. Instead, he nodded and straightened his posture.

"I'll be right outside." After giving Blake one last look, he rallied the soldiers back in order so they could resume their journey. Blake looked at Weiss for direction and stepped into the carriage when Weiss gestured that way.

When Blake took the seat on the far wall of the cabin, in plain view, Weiss wasted no time following. The door shut behind her, and the windows were opened on both sides for the anxious guards outside. Thankfully, the weather here wasn't nearly as frigid as in Atlas, and provided a nice, cool breeze that swept across them.

Sitting down opposite of Blake, Weiss couldn't help but smile at the surly girl across from her. If she had to guess, Blake's life had probably been difficult up to this point, but that would change now. Soon, the four of them would be together again.

But first...silence. Blake said nothing, and Weiss said nothing as the carriage spurred to motion. It was normally like this between the two of them, but Blake's curiosity always won out in the end.

"Where are we going?" she finally asked, glancing out the window before looking at Weiss.

“Vale.”

“Vale? Why would you go to Vale?”

“Your Majesty!”

Hearing the voice, Weiss left the question unanswered as she looked out the window and found a man on horseback riding beside them. Based on his casual clothes, he wasn't a soldier. He was a messenger - the one Glynda sent ahead to Vale.

“Your Majesty!” he called out again, looking through the window and spotting her. “I bring news from the high court in Vale!” he said, his breathing labored from what had likely been a long, sleepless journey.

“What is it?” Weiss asked, knowing that this was the first moment of truth. If the response was bad...

“The sister queens have agreed to meet upon your arrival to discuss a truce!” the messenger said with a smile. “They await your presence and wish you safe travels into Vale!”

Sighing in relief, Weiss gave the man a nod of appreciation. “Thank you for that message. Please return to Atlas and let Glynda know.”

Nodding, the man spurred his horse off for the final leg of his journey. Upon receiving the good news, Weiss sat back in her seat and smiled. If Ruby and Yang agreed to a meeting, maybe relations weren't as poor as they seemed. Maybe there was hope that a valuable alliance could be formed.

“You're negotiating a truce?”

The question brought Weiss out of her thoughts and back to the carriage, where Blake was staring at her - clearly surprised by the information.

“I'm going to try,” Weiss answered, watching Blake's eyes widen in response. “This isn't my war,” she added. “And I have no desire to keep fighting it.”

Knowing what she did about Blake, the words would make an impact. At the very least, Blake would be willing to stay if she thought that doing so would help the greater good.

“You want to end the war,” Blake repeated, sounding very much like she didn't want to believe the statement.

“Yes, I do.”

After saying the words, Weiss watched Blake's demeanor change - from

pent-up anxiety to confused and befuddled...relief.

"If Vale agrees...what will you do next?"

"Hopefully, fix what my father destroyed. Rebuild Atlas."

"What about The Badlands?"

In one question, Blake laid down her cards for all to see. *That* was the cause she'd attached herself to this time. That was what drove her forward, and what brought her into Weiss' life.

"The Badlands also need healing, which I mean to help with...if they'll allow it." Looking out the window and thinking about how ruined the world had become, Weiss sighed and shook her head. "There's so much work to be done..." Pausing, she sent a glance at Blake. "That's one of the reasons I need your help."

The Badlands had grown lawless as war ravaged the small towns and cities located there. The citizens now operated under their own rules - or lack of them. They wouldn't take lightly to the kingdoms stepping in, even if it was an attempt to restore order. But with an advocate...there might just be hope of healing the damage her father had caused.

"Why me?"

"You seem like someone they'll listen to," Weiss replied, shrugging as if she didn't understand Blake's importance to this world. But, based on lives past, Blake was likely already a leader in this roue area of society - earning respect by following her morality through thick and thin.

"Do you have any ideas on how we can make things right?"

The question lit a spark in Blake's eyes, saying without words that it was the right one to ask.

"I have a few."

"I'd like to hear them," Weiss added, nodding once to encourage Blake to speak.

And speak she did - launching into a list of suggestions both detailed and ingenious - so much so that Weiss actually found a pen and paper to write them down while Blake spoke.

For hours, the two of them discussed the state of the kingdoms, and what could be done to repair their way of life. When Blake asked questions, Weiss

answered honestly - even if that meant saying she didn't know the answer. But Blake appreciated the candor, and her walls were lowering by the time Vale came into view.

"Your Majesty," one of the guards said, appearing by the window and pointing up ahead. Following the direction, Weiss found herself staring at a sprawling metropolis hemmed in by towering walls that glowed red from the sunset. The palace was easily viewable in the distance, rising above the rest of the city and glittering in opulence.

"Have you been to Vale before?" Weiss asked, her heart fluttering when she realized that Ruby was right there, tucked somewhere inside those walls.

"Not in a long time," Blake answered, looking out the window before turning to Weiss. "What about you?"

Shaking her head in response, Weiss stared as their caravan stopped outside the city gates. The soldiers up front conversed for several seconds before the gates opened and they were admitted inside, but with a large contingent of Vale soldiers joining them as they traveled towards the palace.

Their grand entrance garnered the attention of everyone they passed - the citizens of Vale curious as to who was the cause of such a large procession. Weiss' attention was solely for the palace though, watching it grow larger as they approached.

Her heart, which had remained quiet for so long, now loudly announced its presence, determined to control her actions as her moment of destiny quickly approached. She had no idea what to expect inside the palace, but she expected Ruby...and that was enough for her hands to shake with nerves.

"I'd like you to come with me," she said as the first of the carriages arrived in front of the palace doors. Turning away from the window, she looked at Blake. "I'd like you to participate in our discussions as my advisor," she elaborated.

The request took Blake by surprise, but she hesitantly nodded. Satisfied that she had one pseudo-ally with her, Weiss took a deep breath and turned towards the door as it was opened for her.

"Your Majesty," the soldier said, bowing his head while holding one arm in the direction of the palace entrance.

Not showing any hesitation, Weiss left the carriage and stepped into the cool, Vale air. It was nowhere near as cold as Atlas, which was a relief to the ice running through her veins. But, while her element warmed, her nerves tripled as she followed her elite guards through the towering entrance of the palace. She glanced over her shoulder once, making sure Blake was close behind as they entered a foyer that was comparable to Atlas' own palace in terms of grandeur.

Spotting a group of people standing up ahead, Weiss felt her palms grow sweaty as they approached, knowing that the moment was almost upon her. As the opposing party neared, however, she realized she would have to wait a little longer, as the only person she recognized was tall, blonde, and wearing a smirk.

"The Ice Queen arrives," Yang said, stopping several paces away with a group of red-hued soldiers surrounding her.

In four words, Weiss knew this was going to be more difficult than she'd hoped, for a couple of reasons. One, Yang was cockier than average, as evidenced by the way she folded both arms over her chest and smirked. Two, Ruby was nowhere in sight.

"It's nice to finally meet you," Weiss replied as politely as possible before glancing around and finding nothing but soldiers and more soldiers. "May I ask whether or not your sister will be joining us?"

"She'll get here when she gets here," Yang answered, waving a hand as if she could care less about Ruby's whereabouts before nodding towards the large throne room beside them. "Let's get this over with, shall we?"

With Yang waiting for her to enter the room first, Weiss turned towards her royal guard.

"Wait out here," she directed them, the unanticipated demand making Yang's brow raise.

"No guards?" Yang asked before grinning and shooing her own guards away. "I like where this is going."

"I'd like my closest advisor to come with me though," Weiss added, gesturing to Blake. If Blake was surprised by the term, she did an excellent job hiding it. Instead, she returned Yang's questioning gaze with an impassive expression.

Eventually, Yang shrugged and waved them both through the doorway.

"After you, then."

Blake and Weiss shared a look before walking into the throne room, which was just as cavernous as Weiss would have expected. The ceilings towered over their heads, their footsteps echoed off the highly polished floors, yet it was the sight of the twin thrones sitting ahead of them that really caught Weiss' attention.

Where was Ruby? This conversation was almost destined for failure without her presence.

"So -" Clapping her hands, Yang stood in front of the thrones and sent Blake and Weiss a grin. "What's this I hear about a 'truce?' Doesn't make much sense coming from someone like you."

The words were intended as an insult, but Weiss tried not to let them bother her. If she let Yang get under her skin too early, they would be at each other's throats in no time.

"I want to discuss a truce," she replied as calmly as possible. "This war has done nothing but harm - it's time we put a stop to the needless fighting and focus on rebuilding the damage that's been done."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Blake nod in agreement - and that small gesture assured her that she had at least one person on her side.

Yang, however, scoffed and shook her head.

"Rightttt...so after years of fighting, you suddenly just wanna up and quit?" Again, Yang scoffed in disbelief. "What terms are you trying to negotiate then - you want the crown off my head? You want to march your armies into the city and take over?"

"That's not at all what I'm suggesting." Weiss lifted her hands - trying to show she wasn't playing a trick - but Yang stared her down, sending tendrils of uncomfortable heat across the room. "I want to end the war," Weiss repeated. "Your soldiers can return home, and so will ours."

"But..." Yang said, intuitively picking up that Weiss had more to say.

"But we'll need to work together to repair the damage. Especially The Badlands -"

"Oh that's just ripe," Yang interrupted, her frown turning into a full-fledged

scowl that rang alarm bells in Weiss' mind. "We'll *work together* to fix The Badlands. Vale and Atlas will *unite* to fix the problems that *we* caused. Maybe you don't remember that *you're* the ones who marched your armies through there, killing innocent people -"

"And *your* armies started torching villages!" Weiss retorted, her voice rising with a spike of indignation. Quickly shaking her head, she struggled to calm down, which would be easier to do if Yang's inner fire wasn't burning so hot. The element was pulling at Weiss' ice, bringing it to light.

"Those weren't my decisions," she added firmly. "I had no say in the matter -"

"Bullshit!"

As Yang shouted the word, flames shot from her. Weiss reacted with a wall of ice to deflect the anger, but in front of that ice a mountain of stone appeared, erupting from the ground as an impenetrable boulder. The flames hit the rock and dissipated, dealing no damage before disappearing completely.

The entire incident lasted no more than a second, but left Weiss staring at Blake - stunned by the display of power - while Yang laughed.

"I *knew* it!" she said. "Belladonna - the earth assassin! Walked right into my castle." Yang laughed again, her eyes trained on Blake while pointing to Weiss. "Are you here to kill her or me - or both? Because I think you'll find that more difficult than you're expecting."

Undeterred by Yang's response, Blake stood taller and never looked away from Yang's gaze.

"I'm not an assassin."

"Really?" Yang asked, tilting her head in clear skepticism. "Because they say you are."

"And they say you're hot-headed and reckless," Blake shot back. "It appears the rumors were right about one of us."

Weiss expected Yang to scowl at the fiery response, but instead she let out a short huff, looking almost amused by the quick wit aimed back at her.

"You're still an outlaw," Yang pointed out. "And what - you hitched a ride here?" Gasping for effect, Yang leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Were you planning to off the Queen of Atlas on the way?" Dropping the act and

chuckling, she leaned away and waved towards Weiss. "Because feel free - I won't stand in your way."

Weiss scowled at the response but dropped the expression when Blake turned towards her with eyes begging forgiveness.

"I'm sorry," Blake said, confirming Yang's words to be true. "When I heard your caravan was stopped nearby, I knew I had to take a chance - in hopes it would stop the fighting."

"Forgiven," Weiss replied before Blake could feel too badly about it. "I figured it was a possibility, anyway."

Again, Blake was surprised by Weiss' reply - pleasantly so. With a smile that felt like the beginnings of friendship, she continued.

"After hearing your plans, and what you hope to accomplish, I knew I wanted to help." Pausing, Blake turned back to Yang. "I believe her," she said, not at all intimidated by the raw power emanating from Yang. "And I have no reason to believe either of you."

"You believe *her*?" Yang asked, pointing towards Weiss and scoffing.

"Yes," Blake replied, unafraid to use emphasis in the face of the Queen of Vale. "You try to place the blame entirely on Atlas, but Vale hasn't cared about us either. The people at the fringes were left to fend for themselves - free to starve to death while *both* kingdoms ignored us or destroyed what little we had left. Why do you think we organized? Why do you think we fought back? You're deciding your politics on *our* land, *our* homes. We might never recover from the destruction, but you won't care about that either."

When Blake's impassioned rant ended, Yang stared - her mouth open as she searched for a response. But she wasn't given the opportunity as a giggle broke the silence in the room. Weiss' heart leapt at the sound - because she would know that giggle anywhere. It was everything she remembered it to be and more...even more incredible to hear in person than to imagine in a dream.

A breeze swept across the room, and Ruby finally joined her sister, playfully shaking Yang's shoulders to remove the angry stiffness from them.

"She's got you there, Yang," Ruby teased, her lighthearted voice working wonders in dispelling the rising tension. Then Ruby sadly shook her head,

understanding the situation far better than her years would suggest. “We knew people would suffer, but we had to protect those we could. Now Atlas wants a truce - why would we keep fighting?”

“I - because -” Searching for an answer and coming up empty, Yang shook her head and pointed at Weiss. “Because I think she’s lying!”

“Hmm...”

Thinking about Yang’s concern, Ruby met Weiss’ gaze and walked over. Weiss’ skin tingled the closer Ruby drew, buzzing with an energy unlike anything she’d experienced in this life. When Ruby was close enough, Weiss broke every custom she’d ever learned and curtsied.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Queen Rose,” she said, her inner ice melting under Ruby’s warm, silver gaze.

“You too,” Ruby replied, responding with her own curtsy that made Yang frown. “You can call me Ruby.”

“Ruby...” Weiss savored the name on her lips before smiling, fending off the waves of happiness that wanted her to kiss Ruby right then and there. “Please call me Weiss.”

Ruby was enjoying the interaction, and enjoying every bit of royal protocol Weiss was willing to break with her. If that’s what Ruby wanted, Weiss would willingly break every rule she’d ever learned.

“Are you lying, Weiss?” Ruby asked. Her expression was serious, but a smile threatened to break at any moment. “Are you pretending to want a truce to trick us?”

“I’m not lying,” Weiss replied, willing Ruby to believe her. “My father craved power and was willing to fight to take it. I’m not my father. I want nothing but peace.”

For the longest time, Ruby looked into Weiss’ eyes as if reading her very soul. It made her feel vulnerable, exposed, and...alive - alive in a way that only came from sharing everything with another person, trusting them to treat what they learned with confidence and security.

Finding whatever she was searching for, Ruby smiled and turned around.

“I believe her,” she said while walking back to Yang’s side, leaving Weiss wishing that the moment hadn’t ended so soon. “Why don’t you?”

Staring at Ruby, Yang opened and closed her mouth several times before finally snapping her jaw shut and shaking her head.

"Because her father was an ass," she grumbled, looking extremely unhappy with the turn of events.

Hearing the comment, Weiss burst out laughing. When everyone stared at her in surprise, she held up one hand and quickly pulled herself back together.

"I'm sorry," she said, chuckling several times before clearing her throat and shaking her head. "I'm sorry, but that might be the most succinct description of him I've ever heard."

"Well at least we can all agree on something..." Blake muttered under her breath.

Having found common ground - in despising her despot of a father - Weiss discovered an opening, a chance to present her case to Yang *and* Ruby.

"I understand your hesitancy," she said, her gaze inevitably drawn back to Ruby. "And I understand you have no reason to trust me, but please feel free to suggest some way I can assure you that my intent is pure."

Weiss waited, looking between Yang and Ruby while hoping that one of them had a suggestion she could willingly agree to. It didn't matter what it was - as long as it was somewhat reasonable, she would do it.

"I have an idea," Ruby spoke up, smiling at Weiss and melting her heart in the process. "I'll go back to Atlas with her."

"What?!" Yang shouted, while Weiss stared at Ruby in shock.

"I'll go to Atlas with her," Ruby repeated. "That way I can make sure she's keeping her word."

"I'm...more than willing to accommodate that," Weiss replied, still in a state of dumbfounded disbelief at the pleasant turn of events. This was actually turning out far better than she could have hoped for.

"And if she - I don't know - tries to *kidnap* you and use you for *ransom*?" Yang asked, but Ruby merely giggled at the serious question.

"I don't think they can catch me. And if they do, we know she lied and can unleash our secret weapon."

"Secret -?" When Ruby gave Yang a pointed look, Yang paused and slowly nodded. "Ohhh, right - uh, *that* secret weapon."

Weiss wasn't sure if they were serious or if this was some long standing joke between them, but she felt compelled to add her thoughts.

"I would never do that," she said, again searching out Ruby's gaze in an attempt to assure her. "You have my word that you'll be treated as the Queen you are and given access to the decisions our court makes. Atlas needs to rebuild itself - we could use someone with experience to help shape our future."

"I'd love to help," Ruby replied, dipping her head in acceptance of Weiss' response before turning to Blake. "And maybe you'd be willing to stay and help Yang restore The Badlands to what it was before it became...you know...bad."

Weiss could kiss Ruby for the suggestion, which took Yang by surprise. From the interaction so far, it was obvious Yang was used to getting her way - unless Ruby overruled her. Knowing Ruby, Weiss had to assume this hardly ever happened, which was the cause of Yang's current consternation.

Blake, however, was hesitant but willing to try to make this work for the better. Her inner desire to help the less fortunate normally led her decisions, and it continued to do so today.

"If you'd like my input, I'm willing to offer it."

Everyone's attention turned to Yang, who stared at Blake for a few seconds before laughing. "Sure," she replied with a shake of her head. "I don't mind an assassin moving in."

"I'm not -"

"Not an assassin," Yang interrupted with a wave of her hand. "I get it. I've heard the other stories - how people look up to you, follow you. You might not have a crown, but you're a leader - like us."

The compliment left Yang's lips easily, and she failed to notice Blake's blush at the praise while sharing a long look with Ruby - the two of them conversing without words. Weiss wished she understood what they were secretly discussing, but knew she'd develop that ability as she and Ruby spent more time together. Today, she was simply happy to see Ruby give a slight nod and smile once more.

"Ok, if Ruby's going to Atlas," Yang began, meeting Blake's eyes and - for the first time - looking pleasantly agreeable. "I could use the help."

When Blake nodded, looking both relieved and excited by Yang's acceptance, Ruby giggled, the sound drawing Weiss' intent gaze. Ruby was as joyful as ever, but had just navigated a room full of explosive personalities with aplum. Beyond that, she'd crafted solutions that would benefit the multitudes of people depending upon them.

Blake staying with Yang meant that Vale could provide aid and resources to The Badlands without it being rejected outright. And Atlas needed to recover from the tyranny from which they'd just been freed. The citizens needed to trust in leadership once more - and what better way to foster this trust than by bringing in someone as sweet as Ruby, who they would love in no time?

"I guess that's settled then?" Yang asked, looking at Blake and Ruby before her eyes landed upon Weiss. "The war is over? We'll call the troops back?"

"As soon as possible," Weiss agreed. "I'll send a messenger right away."

"Alright. We will too." Yang and Ruby shared a look before nodding in unison. With that answer, Yang broke into a big smile - one that reflected her true personality. "It'll probably take Ruby a couple days to get ready...you're more than welcome to stay here while you wait."

"That would be very nice. Thank you," Weiss answered, appreciative of the hospitality.

"Don't mention it," Yang replied with a wave. "So...how about a tour?" With the question, she turned her attention back to Blake. "Have you been to Vale before?"

"A long time ago," Blake replied, moving to follow when Yang motioned towards her. "But I can't tell you what for."

The teasing comment succeeded in making Yang laugh as the two headed out of the throne room, leaving Weiss and Ruby behind.

It was strange to think that it was that easy - that the four of them just ended the war and were now on speaking terms. That they would work together to bring peace and prosperity to their kingdoms. Of course, none of this would have happened without one person's influence.

"I appreciate your help," Weiss said, turning to the side and giving Ruby a sincere smile. The situation would've ended far differently if not for her timely arrival.

“I appreciate your honesty,” she replied with a smile of her own. “Please forgive Yang. She tried to reason with your dad quite a few times, and...it never ended well.”

The disclosure wasn't a surprise to Weiss, but she still shook her head in shame, wondering when she'd ever dig her way out of the hole her father dug for her.

“I'm sorry to hear that, but I mean to change things. And you'll always have my honesty.”

“I know,” Ruby replied. The certainty in the response caused Weiss to tilt her head.

“How are you so sure about me?” she asked, unable to escape the feeling that Ruby could see right through her.

“You can learn a lot about a person by watching them,” Ruby commented, lightly swinging her arms while never losing that hint of a smile.

“And what did you learn about me?” Weiss asked, willing her heart to stop beating so quickly at the thought that Ruby had been watching her.

But it beat faster when Ruby leaned close and whispered, “I learned...that I want to learn more about you.”

Leaning away and giggling, Ruby had no idea she'd just given Weiss a small heart attack - or she knew exactly what she'd just done, and that's what she was giggling.

“Can I show you around Vale before we leave?” Ruby asked, taking a step towards the door before turning back to Weiss with a heart-stopping smile.

This version of Ruby was...majestic. Maybe it was the air fueling her - flowing through her like a breath of freshness in a world of uncertainty - or maybe it was her upbringing as royalty, but her traditional kindness was layered with elegance that Weiss found impossible to resist.

“I'd love that,” she managed to reply, spurring her feet into motion as they left the throne room and rejoined Yang and Blake.

All these years, Weiss had dreamed of meeting Ruby - of finding the person she was destined to be with. Now that they'd finally met...she was dreaming of a kiss.

“Did we fix things?”

Weiss smiled - at the question and at the fact that Ruby had listened to the second half of the story with a French fry halfway to her mouth.

“We did. There were trials along the way, but the four of us always worked together to solve them. And we were...happy.”

The memory spread like a warm ray of sun through her chest. They’d formed a bond comparable to the one they’d shared in their very first life together. It was that closeness and trust that led them through all the evils the world threw at them. And, through it all, Ruby stayed by Weiss’ side - a constant source of love and devotion that got them through.

“You were a queen, too,” Ruby commented, finally taking a bite of the French fry before chewing thoughtfully. “And your family owns some businesses this time...it sounds like you’re usually pretty rich?”

Fortunate in wealth, never in love. That’s how Weiss’ lives worked - until she met Ruby, then her fortune changed. But she would gladly forego her wealth to stay by Ruby’s side, and in some instances she’d done just that.

“Usually,” Weiss answered. “I like to think it provides me with the resources to find you. But that’s not always the case. There are times when we both have nothing - but in those lives, it seems like we find each other far earlier.” Leaning forward, she smiled. “Those are some of the best ones.”

This time there was no hesitation in Ruby’s eyes. Instead, there was a sparkle of excitement as she picked up another French fry and leaned closer to the table.

“Will you tell me about one?”

The question was music to Weiss’ ears.

“I’d love to.”

Chapter 7

A book was propped open on her lap, but Weiss wasn't reading it. Even though it *looked* like she was reading it, she wasn't...because it was hard to read when she felt multiple sets of eyes watching her. There were at least ten other kids in the playroom right now, but the eyes watched *her* - because apparently she was the most interesting, even though the other kids played games while she tried to read.

Shifting in her seat, she stared at the same word she'd looked at for the past five minutes - 'unknown.' She tried to read the sentence around the word but immediately gave up. She hated feeling like she was under a microscope but knew better than to look at the people staring her way. If she made eye contact, it would make things worse - it would make her seem...friendly.

She couldn't look, but she needed to figure out how to make them to lose interest. What could she do? Throw her book on the ground? Tear out one of the pages?

"Weiss!"

Her heart dropped at the sound of her name, and she turned to find Ruby racing across the playroom towards her.

Ruby ran like she hadn't grown into her legs yet, which meant she nearly tripped herself every other step. Most of the time she caught her balance before taking an unfortunate tumble, but sometimes she didn't. That's what the bandage on her left elbow was from - skidding on the ground after falling.

Weiss remembered that scrape perfectly. Ruby fell outside on the sidewalk, so the scratches had to be cleaned out before they could be bandaged up. Ruby cried, but she got chocolate chip cookies afterward, which helped ease

the tears away.

“Weiss! Look what I made!”

Holding something in the air, Ruby slowed down - just enough to avoid crashing into Weiss at full speed - and extended her precious new creation for Weiss to see. Feeling the eyes still watching her and understanding what this looked like, Weiss knew she had no choice - she snatched the contraption out of Ruby’s hand, careful not to break whatever it was.

“That’s mine!” she snapped, raising her voice while waving the piece of wood in Ruby’s face. Silver eyes widened in surprise, but she continued undeterred. “I told you not to touch my stuff!”

Huffing in annoyance, Weiss stomped away with Ruby’s toy in hand. Out of the corner of her eye, she risked a glance towards the window and watched the people outside turn away while talking amongst themselves. Thinking they could still be watching, she marched to the other side of the room, leaving Ruby frozen in the middle of the playroom while her lower lip quivered.

* * *

“Um...wait,” Ruby interrupted, holding up one hand and giving Weiss a look of disbelief. “Aren’t we supposed to be soulmates?”

Merely *hearing* the word come from Ruby’s lips made Weiss smile.

“We are,” she replied with a nod, watching Ruby’s adorable dismay grow.

“But that was like...pretty mean! You just stole my toy, and now I’m going to cry!”

As Ruby heard the story, that’s exactly what happened. However...

“There’s a reason for it,” Weiss explained. “You’ll understand shortly.”

With a smile that likely wasn’t disappearing anytime soon, Weiss watched Ruby purse her lips and think about the answer. Her concern over the beginning of this memory went beyond adorable - it showed how involved she was, and how connected she felt to the past versions of herself.

The response was everything Weiss had wished for.

“Ok...” Ruby finally said while sinking back in her chair. Her moderate pout was so familiar that Weiss very nearly pointed it out. However, she

decided to get back to their story so Ruby would understand that there was nothing to be upset about.

* * *

Please don't cry, Weiss begged, sending Ruby a pointed glance before nodding towards the window. Of course, the window was empty so Ruby was only more confused after glancing that way. She clearly didn't understand what was happening, but of course she didn't - she was still too young to comprehend what these visits meant.

Motioning for Ruby to wait, Weiss walked over to the row of small baskets in a long cabinet along one wall and pulled out her personal cubby to put the toy inside. But, before she did so, she looked over what it was Ruby was so excited to show her.

It turned out to be a tiny wooden sword, made by gluing two small pieces of wood together and then grating down the tip. It wasn't sharp, and the 'hilt' was crooked, but it was definitely a sword.

Weiss didn't get why Ruby thought weapons were so cool, but this was a growing theme recently. Ruby was constantly sticking things together to make some new type of sword or saber that was more likely to break than do any harm.

After laying the sword on top of her stack of books, Weiss pushed the cubby back into its hole and knew she needed to explain herself to Ruby.

"Weiss."

Hearing her name, Weiss' heart fell. Instead of turning towards Ruby, she turned towards the door and found Miss Goodwitch motioning her over.

"Come here, please. Someone wants to meet you."

If possible, Weiss' heart fell even further. But she obediently did as Miss Goodwitch asked, even though her feet dragged across the floor while she crossed the playroom. She walked right past Ruby, who was still upset about her toy being taken away, and caught the worried glances Blake and Yang sent her way - the two of them pausing their reading to watch Weiss leave the room behind.

Reaching Miss Goodwitch, Weiss was given a quick smile before a soft, guiding hand led her out of playroom and across the hall - to the dreaded meeting room.

"They're a very nice couple," Miss Goodwitch explained while they neared the faded purple door Weiss had grown to fear. "He's a teacher, and she works in that big office building downtown - you remember the one, don't you?"

If Weiss hadn't been so nervous, she would roll her eyes at the way Miss Goodwitch was speaking to her - like she was still a child. She might be young, but she was smart enough to understand that the comments were meant to put her at ease for a meeting she didn't want to happen.

"They were hoping for a little girl just like you," Miss Goodwitch finally said, resting one hand on the door knob and giving Weiss a smile. "I think you'll like them," she added before opening the door and gesturing inside.

Taking a deep breath, Weiss walked into the room and immediately felt...really small. The man and woman from the other side of the window stood when they saw her, towering above her while stepping forward to greet her in front of the square table taking up most of the room.

The woman had short blonde hair and a nice smile - one that made her look friendly and welcoming. The man had black hair with streaks of gray, but his square jaw made him look stern and demanding.

"Weiss, this is Mr. and Mrs. Everson," Miss Goodwitch said, prodding Weiss to take another step into the room. The man and woman moved closer upon their introduction, and the woman knelt in front of Weiss to look up into her eyes.

"It's very nice to meet you, Weiss," she said with a warm smile.

"You too," Weiss mumbled before biting her lip and looking away. She hated feeling powerless, but that's exactly what these meetings were like for her. The adults controlled what happened to her, and all she could do was *hope* she could convince them to listen to her wishes.

"I'll leave you three to get acquainted," Miss Goodwitch said, backing out of the room and closing the door as she went. Left with two complete strangers, Weiss ducked her head and shuffled to one of the seats at the table while the Eversons took the seats across from her.

“We saw you reading earlier,” Mrs. Everson said, taking lead of the conversation. “Do you like to read?”

“I do.”

By now, Weiss had learned to answer in as few words as possible, forcing the adults to come up with ways to extend the conversation. It felt awkward and uncomfortable, but she hoped they hated it as much as she did.

“What do you like to read?”

“Anything, really.”

She noticed the glance the couple shared after her short response, but Mr. Everson decided to make the next attempt.

“Miss Goodwitch was telling us a little bit about you,” he said in a smooth, low voice. “She said you’re ahead of all the other students in your class. Do you have a favorite subject?”

This question Weiss actually thought about for a couple seconds before answering with a quick and succinct, “History.”

When Mr. Everson shifted in his seat, she knew that the short conversation was making this really uncomfortable. Hopefully, that meant she could go back to the playroom soon...

“Who was that girl you were speaking to before?” Mrs. Everson asked. “The one with the brown hair - is she your friend?”

“Ruby?” Weiss asked before scoffing, hiding her shaking hands in her lap. “She’s really annoying and young. All she does is trip over things and cry.”

The Eversons shared another look - this conversation clearly not going as expected.

“Do you have any friends here?” Mrs. Everson asked.

“Why would I want to be friends with them? They’re dumb.”

“Surely you’re friendly with *one* of the other children here,” Mr. Everson replied, glancing at his wife to read her reaction to the current predicament. Sensing that her escape might be close, Weiss shrugged.

“Not really, but I don’t care. They all want to be *adopted* anyway.” She said the word like it was bad, which caught their full attention.

“What’s wrong with being adopted?”

Weiss responded to Mrs. Everson’s question with another shrug, trying to

look like she didn't care while her heart beat loudly in her chest.

"Nothing, I guess," she said while crossing her arms and looking away from them. "But I don't want to be adopted."

From the stunned silence in the room, she knew her strategy had worked again. The parents who came to the orphanage *wanted* to be wanted, and the kids that went home with them were the ones excited to be taken away.

Weiss didn't want to leave - not without her family. She couldn't let herself be adopted without them.

Hearing Mr. Everson clear his throat, Weiss finally turned back to them. They were shocked, and the questions had stopped - that was a good sign, usually.

"Do you think I can go back to the playroom now?" she asked, scooting her chair back to signal that she was ready to leave.

"Of course," Mrs. Everson replied with that same warm smile. "Thank you for speaking with us, dear."

"You're welcome." Without another word, Weiss hurried out of the room and didn't look back.

"Done already?" Miss Goodwitch asked as soon as Weiss left the room.

"Yup! Can I go back now?" she asked, receiving a nod and taking off while Miss Goodwitch went into the room to speak with the Eversons.

Darting into the playroom, the first thing Weiss did was find Ruby, who was sitting in the corner by herself, sad and moping. The sight made Weiss sad too, and she wished Ruby was old enough to understand why she'd been so mean. It had nothing to do with Ruby.

Rushing over to her cubby, Weiss pulled out the toy sword and headed across the room. Ruby was moving a few toy blocks around - building a small tower - but lacked her usual energy. Weiss was going to fix that right now.

"You might just become a weaponsmith yet," she said, inspecting the sword as Ruby looked up in surprise. From that simple comment, silver eyes sparked back to life, and Ruby was smiling once more.

"You think so?" Scrambling to her feet, Ruby didn't notice the blocks she scattered across the floor.

"Look at this." Having captured Ruby's full attention, Weiss pointed to the

spot where the two pieces of wood connected in a cross. They were slightly crooked, but that didn't matter. "This is the best work you've done yet."

With a smile, Weiss handed the sword back to Ruby, who looked at it fondly.

"I can make one even better," Ruby mused while spinning it around in her small hands. "Just need some more tools..."

As Ruby concocted her next master plan, Weiss giggled and reached out to put one hand on Ruby's shoulder. She loved it when Ruby was happy and smiling.

"Weiss."

Again, her name - only this time in a tone that made her cringe.

"I'll be right back, Ruby," she whispered before slinking towards Miss Goodwitch. The woman's arms were crossed, and her brow was furrowed in that stern gaze she often had. Weiss immediately knew that the Eversons had told Miss Goodwitch about their meeting, and this conversation was probably not going to be a nice one.

Stepping into the hall, Miss Goodwitch closed the door and looked down at Weiss, who hung her head and waited for a scolding.

"You don't want to be adopted?" Miss Goodwitch asked, repeating Weiss' words. "Why would you ever say such a thing? Don't you want to leave this place? Don't you want a family?"

The rapid questions made Weiss feel like crying...because she knew the answers, but she knew her answers were 'wrong.'

She already had a family, but Miss Goodwitch wouldn't agree with that. If she had a family, why was she here at the orphanage? If she had people who cared for her, why was she living in a big building filled with other kids *like her?*

"Weiss -"

"I didn't like his jaw!" she interrupted, saying the first thing that came to mind. "And she smelled like too much perfume. And they didn't really care about me - they only thought I was smart because I like to read."

Her lip stuck out in a pout and her eyes stung with tears while she waited for her punishment. She knew she'd done something wrong, but she was scared of being taken away from the people she loved in order to live with

people she didn't know. She didn't want to leave the only home she'd ever known to go 'home' with strangers.

Instead of being angry, Miss Goodwitch sighed and knelt down on the ground so she could look up into Weiss' eyes.

"One day, you'll realize that no family is perfect," she said, reaching out and giving Weiss' hands a gentle squeeze. "I wish I could find the perfect homes for all of you, but sometimes we have to accept that someone might wear too much perfume, or their jaw might be too square. That doesn't mean they can't be good parents. That doesn't mean they can't love you."

Relieved that she hadn't been yelled at, Weiss sniffed and wiped one of her eyes.

Miss Goodwitch was stern but kind at heart. She wanted what was best for all of the kids at the orphanage. Unfortunately, she thought that finding them homes was in their best interest. She didn't understand that Weiss already had a family, and that being adopted would only split them apart.

"I'll try to be better next time," Weiss said, sniffing again as her tears and fear faded away. She always said that, but she didn't mean it. She actually tried to be worse, making herself less and less adoptable the older she became.

"That's the most I can ask for."

Standing up, Miss Goodwitch dusted off her knees before opening the door to the playroom and motioning Weiss inside.

"Ok, everyone," Miss Goodwitch said, clapping her hands once to get everyone's attention. "Let's clean up and get ready for dinner."

After a chorus of 'yay's - everyone excited to eat - Weiss helped clean up the room. At the end of every playtime, they were supposed to put the toys back and store any personal toys in their cubbies. The room needed to be neat and tidy before they could run over to the kitchen for dinner.

Picking up her half-read book from earlier, she stuck it on one of the bookshelves before picking up the blocks Ruby had knocked all over the floor. The blocks went into a basket by the window, and then Weiss searched for the toy sword, knowing that was the most important toy to put away.

Fortunately, the sword was already being taken care of.

"Let me keep that for you!" Yang said, reaching out for the sword in Ruby's

hands. Ruby happily gave it to her sister, who stored it in her own cubby before grinning and ruffling Ruby's hair.

Knowing that Yang was holding onto Ruby's most recent creation, Weiss sighed in relief. There were a few boys in the orphanage who loved to steal Ruby's toys because they thought it was funny when she cried. Those boys were too scared to try the same with Yang.

With the sword safely stowed and the playroom clean, Ruby skipped to Weiss' side with a big grin.

"What's for dinner today?"

"Probably chicken and vegetables."

Ruby wrinkled her nose at the word. "Grosssss."

"Vegetables are good for you," Weiss replied, holding Ruby's hand while they walked out of the playroom together. "So you're going to eat them, ok?"

Ruby wanted to complain more, but she didn't. Instead she said, "Oooookkkk..." and shuffled along beside Weiss.

Further into the building, there was a kitchen and dining area large enough to fit all of them at once. Only the older kids were allowed into the kitchen to help Miss Goodwitch prepare meals, while the rest of them waited at the long table in the dining room. It was pretty hectic, but they all managed to eat somehow. One of the older girls was actually really good at cooking now - good enough that Miss Goodwitch let her prepare some of the meals by herself.

"Watch your feet," Weiss said, motioning for Ruby to step back before pulling out one of the chairs. Last time, Ruby had pulled the chair right into her foot and given herself a bruise on one of her toes. Weiss wanted to avoid that again, if possible.

"Thanks, Weiss!"

Moving her feet away - maybe too far away - Ruby awkwardly leaned over to pull out 'her' seat at the table.

They didn't have assigned seats, but everyone had 'their' seat - the chair they gravitated to for every meal. In their case though, they had a group of four seats that never changed, but their order within those four chairs changed daily - it all depended on which seat Ruby chose first.

With Ruby sitting at the end of their 'reserved' chairs, Weiss sat beside her. Yang sat on Weiss' left, and the quietest member of their group sat on Yang's other side.

"Cut it out!" someone yelled from several spots down.

"Cardin..." Miss Goodwitch warned, looking over her glasses from the kitchen. "Leave her alone."

The rambunctious boy huffed like he hadn't done anything wrong but behaved himself anyway. He knew better than to try anything when he'd already been caught. Miss Goodwitch could spot mischief from a mile away.

With Cardin behaving, everyone settled into happy chatter while some of the older kids - the ones assigned to help today - walked around delivering plates of food.

"Carrots!" Ruby exclaimed when a plate was set in front of her. "Blegh!"

"They're good for you," Velvet replied with a kind smile before setting another plate in front of Weiss. "They help your eyes - don't you want to help your eyes?"

Without waiting for an answer, Velvet walked away to collect more plates. Ruby, meanwhile, stared at her plate in disgust.

"Not really..." she mumbled while using her fork to push the small mound of carrots to the very edge of the plate. "Being blind isn't bad, is it?"

Ruby looked at Weiss, and Weiss shook her head while pointing her fork towards Ruby's plate. "You still need to eat some," she answered before taking a bite of her own food.

As more meals were served, the constant chatter quieted to more peaceful conversations and the sound of silverware clinking against plates. When everyone had their food, Miss Goodwitch sat at the head of the table to eat her own dinner while making sure the rest of them ate and behaved themselves.

"How'd it go?" Yang asked before taking a bite out of a carrot. Blake leaned forward at the question, both of them waiting for Weiss' answer.

"They don't want a kid that doesn't want them," Weiss replied, watching Miss Goodwitch to make sure she wasn't paying attention.

"Sweet. That always works." Quickly reaching over, Yang stole a carrot

from Ruby's plate - leaving her sister one less dreaded vegetable she would be forced to eat.

"Miss Goodwitch wasn't happy though," Weiss replied, but Yang shrugged.

"Won't matter, we probably won't get a lot of visits anymore." Taking another bite, Yang was quiet while the three of them thought about that statement.

As they aged, they were less likely to get adopted. Most parents wanted younger kids with fewer 'issues.' With each passing birthday, there would be fewer moments like today - and Weiss was ok with that.

"RWBY meeting tonight?" Yang asked, and Weiss nodded while sneaking one of Ruby's carrots for herself when Miss Goodwitch turned away from them. Ruby cooed in delight at her smaller pile of vegetables, and Weiss smiled at the sound.

"Yang!" Ruby said, leaning into Weiss so she could talk to her sister. "Will you tell us another story tonight?"

"That depends...are you going to eat the rest of those carrots?"

When Ruby sat back and begrudgingly stuck a carrot in her mouth, Yang chuckled. "Then yes, I'll tell another story."

Happy with the answer, Ruby continued eating her dinner - by finishing her chicken. If anything, it made the vegetables worse because she left the entire pile for the very end...but she would eat them if she wanted a story. And Ruby always wanted a bedtime story.

Stealing a look at Miss Goodwitch, Weiss speared another carrot off of Ruby's plate and stuck it in her mouth before anyone noticed. When Ruby opened her mouth to say something, Weiss pressed a finger to her lips to silence her. This time she listened, closing her mouth and giggling before eating the rest of her food.

The remainder of dinner passed without a hiccup - minus the major pouting Ruby did at having to eat two carrots in a row. But she managed to do it, then the rest of them helped clean up the dishes and put everything away.

Their evening was spent in their room, which they shared with several other girls around their age. Ruby had earned her bedtime story, which Yang told with gusto, making Ruby squeal and giggle and gasp in all the right parts.

Officially, Weiss was too old for bedtime stories. Unofficially...Yang and Ruby's bunk beds were right across from her and Blake's, so it was hard not to overhear everything. Even Blake, who spent more time reading than the rest of them combined, set down her book in favor of listening to Yang's stories.

It wasn't much longer until Ruby was yawning every few seconds, cuddled into her sister's shoulder while trying to listen to the rest of the story.

"Ok, it's time for bed," Yang finally said.

"Nuh uh!" Ruby whined even though she could hardly keep her eyes open.

"Yes huh," Yang replied, standing up and giggling when Ruby fell right over on her bed. "Come on, kiddo. They're gonna turn off the lights soon anyway."

If Ruby had more energy, she might complain. Instead, she let Yang pull the covers over her and press a kiss to the top of her head.

"Here's Mr. Bearly," Yang said, holding out the stuffed bear for Ruby to clutch to her chest as her eyes drifted shut once more.

"Goodnight, Yang..." she mumbled before opening her eyes and looking across the aisle at Weiss and smiling. "Goodnight Weiss. Goodnight Blake."

"Goodnight, Ruby," Weiss replied softly, with Blake echoing her words before they prepared for sleep. Sending the two of them a questioning thumbs up, Yang grinned when they nodded in return.

After Yang and Blake climbed up to their beds, Weiss slipped into her own bed and stared at the bunk above her head. The lights went off a few minutes later, but she didn't bother trying to sleep. Instead, she thought about the day - about meeting the Eversons, Miss Goodwitch's words, and the little toy sword Ruby was so proud of making.

It wasn't long before the sounds of sleep filled the room, but still she waited.

The slightest rustle of noise drew her out of thoughts as her attention perked up. The bed above her hardly made a sound, but Blake lowered herself to the floor seconds later. Reaching over, Blake tapped Weiss on the shoulder before reaching up to tap Yang and then disappearing towards the far side of the room.

Yang rolled out of bed right after, trying to be as stealthy as Blake, but her footsteps were far louder when they hit the floor. Thankfully, they weren't loud enough to wake anyone up.

Carefully pushing the covers off and standing up, Weiss looked over at Ruby and found the girl still fast asleep with Mr. Bearly clutched to her chest. Weiss smiled at the sight but didn't wake her - Ruby was young and needed her rest.

Leaving her bed behind, Weiss crept towards the corner of the room, moving as far from the other beds as possible. The floor was old and creaked in some places, but she'd long ago memorized where those spots were and easily avoided them. Making it to their 'secret' meeting spot, she sat down on the ground with Blake and Yang - the three of them huddled together in a small group underneath one of the few windows in the room.

"Another RWBY meeting called to order," Yang whispered, grinning at the kind of dumb name she'd come up with for them. Using everyone's initials seemed elementary, but Weiss liked that it sounded like 'Ruby.'

"Supreme Commander is here," Yang continued, pointing to herself. "As is High Chancellor Blake."

Shaking her head at the title, Blake smiled regardless.

"And Holy Empress Weiss."

Rolling her eyes, Weiss asked, "Which of these titles is best?"

"None of them - that's the point. We're all equals here."

They didn't need titles, but Weiss and Blake shared looks at the response - each of them probably feeling the same thing. They were orphans. Sometimes, it felt like they had no control over their lives, but here - with each other - they all had a say. An *equal* say.

"What did you want to meet about?" Blake asked Yang.

"I just wanted to make sure we're still all with this plan - none of us gets adopted."

Weiss wasted no time nodding, and Blake wasn't far behind.

"Good," Yang replied with a smile. "Cuz there's no way I'm leaving here without all of you."

"No one will adopt the four of us together..." Blake pointed out.

"Then we're waiting it out," Yang said, lightly bumping Blake's shoulder and getting her to smile. "That won't be so bad, will it?"

"I guess not..."

“We leave when we’re eighteen, anyway,” Weiss added. “Then Yang can be Ruby’s guardian, and we can all stay together.”

Catching Weiss’ eyes in the small bit of moonlight coming through the window, Yang nodded.

That had been their plan for years now, formulated as soon as they realized being adopted meant they might not see each other again. Once they turned eighteen, they would leave the orphanage and bring Ruby with them. After that...well, there wasn’t really a plan for after that. All they knew was that they would be together, and that’s what mattered most.

“That’s a long time with Miss Goodwitch though,” Yang remarked with a sigh, leaning back against the wall at the thought.

“She’s not so bad...” Weiss replied, although she knew Yang got into more trouble than she did.

“We could always run away.”

Blake made the suggestion calmly - like it wasn’t a big deal to run away from the only home they’d ever known - but Weiss quickly shook her head.

“Ruby’s not old enough yet,” she said, earning Yang’s nod of agreement.

“Yeah, still too early for that. But if someone wants to adopt one of us...” Letting the sentence trail off, Yang gave Weiss and Blake a serious look. “Then we’re taking off anyway. Deal?”

When Yang stuck out her hand for a pinky promise, Weiss and Blake reached forward to agree.

“Deal.”

With their newest pact made, Yang smiled - but that smile quickly turned into a big yawn.

“We should get to bed,” Blake said before covering her mouth when she yawned next. “It’s getting late.”

“I second the High Chancellor’s suggestion,” Yang said, grinning as she turned to Weiss. “What do you say, Holy Empress Weiss?”

“I agree,” Weiss replied with a nod that Yang returned with a nod of her own.

“All three in agreement - this RWBY meeting is adjourned for the night!”

Blake and Weiss shook their heads at Yang’s enthusiastic sign off for their

quick meeting, which was unnecessary but still fun. Getting quietly to their feet, the three of them snuck back to their beds with well-practiced footsteps. After Yang and Blake climbed up onto their beds, Weiss snuck a glance at Ruby and noticed that Mr. Bearly had slipped away.

Knowing how important the stuffed bear was for Ruby's sleep, she walked over and picked up Mr. Bearly from the edge of the bed. After straightening the red ribbon around his neck - a ribbon frayed at the ends where Ruby had chewed as a baby - Weiss moved him closer to Ruby's hands until Ruby instinctively grasped onto him.

Smiling at the sweet girl and her treasured teddy bear, Weiss backed away and got into her own bed. Rolling onto her side so she was facing Ruby, she finally allowed her eyes to drift shut.

It had been a long and stressful day, but she still felt hopeful and happy. Instead of dreaming about being adopted, she would dream about the day the four of them left the orphanage behind. It sounded scary to be out in the world by themselves, but not as scary as being out in the world alone.

After the promise they'd made tonight, she knew that would never happen. No matter what, they would always be together. She would always have her family.

* * *

"Did we run away?" Ruby immediately asked. She'd listened to the story so intently, and perched so close to the edge of the chair, that Weiss worried she might fall out of her seat in suspense.

"We did." Nodding, she watched the surprise grow in Ruby's eyes.

"We - really? We ran away??"

"Yes," she answered with another nod before giving Ruby a loving smile. "Because someone wanted to adopt you."

She still remembered how difficult that decision had been to make. It was one thing to make a promise in the middle of the night at one of their little meetings, but when the situation was real...Yang had struggled with it mightily. On the one hand, she wanted her little sister to have the best

possible life. On the other hand...she didn't want Ruby to be taken away from her. In the end, it was Weiss who convinced Yang that the three of them could provide just as much for Ruby - and more, because they were family.

"Even after we told you the plan and you agreed, you were just...really horrible at pretending to be horrible." Thinking about that sentence, Weiss chuckled and shook her head. "We taught you so many ways to be unadoptable - Blake used silence, Yang pretended to be dumb and vain, and I invented reasons why the rest of the world was beneath me. You tried to use what we taught you, but it always came out...cute."

"Oh, uh, sorry?"

Weiss smiled at the apology and shook her head again.

"Don't be sorry. It's just not in your nature to pretend to be someone you're not. We ended up doing quite well for ourselves anyway," she added, in case Ruby wondered what their lives had been like as runaway orphans.

"Really?"

"Yes. We ended up meeting this...eccentric...man who lived in a big house all by himself, and you made such a lasting impression on him that he ended up taking us in." Pausing, Weiss laughed at the way Ruby had made an 'impression' - by nearly destroying the entire house with a weapon made out of old newspapers. "He was rough around the edges but had a good heart...and we eventually called him our 'uncle.' He taught you how to build real weapons - the type you'd always dreamed about - and you became really good at it. So good you were popular around the world for what you would create."

"Wow." For a second, it looked like Ruby didn't know what else to say. Then she smiled - a big, bright smile that made Weiss' heart flutter. "So I've been a weapons master, a queen, a genius..."

"And everything in between," Weiss added, pleased that Ruby was so fully embracing the idea that there were other versions of herself.

"That's pretty cool."

"It is cool," Weiss agreed, smiling at the typical Ruby term.

Making a soft noise of content, Ruby ate the last fry from her plate - which was surely cold by now - and chewed while deep in thought. When more

questions didn't immediately appear, Weiss felt that they were close - that maybe an acceptance was close at hand.

She loved telling Ruby stories about their past lives. It was something she did often, never running out of tales about what once had been.

Waiting a little longer, Weiss gave Ruby the opportunity to ask any questions she might have. But when Ruby finished her food and said nothing, Weiss decided it was time to speak up.

"I know it's a lot to take in at once," she said when silver eyes landed on her again. "And I know it might've been best to follow more conventional means of getting to know you first, but..."

Pausing while she thought about what she wanted to say next, Weiss smiled and continued.

"I'm not asking you to believe everything at once. I'm only asking that you give me the opportunity to prove what I'm saying is true."

Ultimately, she would do whatever it took to convince Ruby, even if that meant waiting. Because she waited often, and sometimes - like this time - she waited years to find the person holding the key to her heart.

She still hoped that what she'd said was enough. She wanted to skip to the part where they could hold hands, cuddle, kiss, and say how much they loved one another. She wanted to skip to the happily ever after, and start living it right this instant. She was willing to wait - she was willing to be patient - but she didn't want to be.

When Ruby finally cleared her throat, Weiss' heart sped up in anticipation of the words to come.

Chapter 8

It started out as a pretty normal day. She slept through her alarm (by accident). She rushed getting ready for work and forgot to put on socks (thankfully, Penny always brought an extra pair). She waited tables and brought other people food while silently starving (or loudly starving, when her stomach decided to speak up).

It started out as a pretty normal day, but then the prettiest girl in the world showed up.

On a regular day, that alone was enough to make things more interesting, but the new level of crazy didn't stop there. Not only was this girl prettier than anyone Ruby had ever seen before - including on TV or in movies - with the clearest blue eyes and the whitest white hair, but she had some...well...interesting things to say.

Basically, the most beautiful girl in the world said that she and Ruby were actually soulmates destined to be together through every single universe in existence.

Seriously, Ruby couldn't make this stuff up. She had an active imagination, but there was no way she could come up with stories as intricate and detailed as the ones Weiss told. Everyone wearing compasses that pointed to their soulmate? Being a queen with some crazy wind element power? Growing up in an orphanage? It sounded too crazy to be true, but it was also too crazy *not* to be true, right?

Now, the prettiest girl in the entire world - with the clearest blue eyes, whitest white hair, *gorgeous* smile and heart-stopping laugh - was waiting for Ruby to respond to the stories she'd just heard.

Did she believe it? Was Weiss telling the truth? Were they soulmates in this life and all others? Or was this just some big, elaborate joke that one of her friends thought would be funny?

Clearing her throat one more time, Ruby struggled to grasp onto a single thread of thought in her mind, which was pretty difficult to do when hundreds of thoughts were flying in every direction. Eventually, she stumbled over a temporary solution to this problem.

“Uh...can you hold on a second?” she asked, already scooting out of her chair by the time Weiss smiled - again, that really patient and *pretty* smile.

“Of course.”

“Great. I’ll be right back.” About to rush away from the table, Ruby abruptly stopped and turned back when she realized she should take her empty plate to the kitchen. “I’ll get this,” she mumbled, grabbing the plate and hurrying across the patio, weaving through tables while her heart beat loudly in her chest.

Walking into the interior of the restaurant, she made a beeline for the large, swinging door leading into the kitchen. Backing into it, she was greeted by the hectic bustle of servers rushing to and fro while the chefs clanged pots and pans around on the stoves. Dumping her plate into the wash bin near the exit, she then dodged around one of the servers hurrying out with a plate of steaming food in each hand.

Surrounded by the familiar chaos, she let out a sigh. Now that she was away from Weiss, maybe she could think straight. When she was at the table, it was really hard to think about anything other than Weiss...maybe because she was so pretty. It was like having lunch with a supermodel.

“Hi Ruby!”

Turning towards the chipper voice, Ruby smiled as Penny walked into the kitchen and lowered a stack of dirty plates into the washer.

“Hey Penny.”

“Who’s that girl you’re sitting with? She’s pretty!”

“Oh, uh, she’s uh -”

What was the appropriate answer to that question? Maybe-soulmate? Person she’d just met? World’s best storyteller?

“She’s a friend,” Ruby settled upon. Thankfully, Penny accepted the response with a grin before her attention was drawn to two plates of food placed on the warming rack and the soft bell that let them know another order was ready.

“It looks like you two are great friends!” Penny commented before heading over to pick up the two plates and take them to their table.

The remark was weird, because how could Ruby and Weiss look like good friends? They’d just met! They’d talked for only like...well, it had been a couple hours by this point.

Double-checking the clock hung above the kitchen door, Ruby frowned.

Had it really been that long? It didn’t feel like that much time had passed. Maybe that’s why they say ‘time flies when you’re having fun’ - only in this case it was ‘time flies when listening to stories about yourself from other universes from the supermodel claiming to be your soulmate.’

Shaking her head, Ruby flagged down one of the chefs in the kitchen.

“Can I make a quick call?” she asked, pointing towards the restaurant’s only phone. When he nodded in the midst of his work, she grabbed the phone and ducked inside the walk-in freezer, letting the door fall shut behind her.

They weren’t allowed in here often, but it was the best place to have a private conversation...mostly because no one wanted to come in here since it was frickin’ freezing. But she would deal with the cold because she needed a *little* bit of advice on what to do now, and when she needed advice there was one person she always called.

When the phone suddenly rang in her hands, she nearly jumped out of her shoes in surprise. Taking another full ring to collect herself and get her heart restarted, she accepted the call and lifted the phone to her ear.

“Stella’s - how can I help you?”

“Hi! I was wondering how late you’re open today?” the voice on the other end of the line asked.

“Oh, uh...eleven.”

“Great. Thank you!”

“No problem - hope you can stop by!” Ruby answered, using the line she’d memorized after using way too many awkward sign offs. Ending the call,

she stared at the phone and took a deep breath to steady her frazzled nerves. When that didn't work at all, she dialed the number she knew by heart and held the phone up to her ear.

"Please be home, please be home," she muttered to herself while it rang, her words sending icy clouds into the air. On the third ring, her heart jumped when the call connected.

"Hello?"

"Yang, it's me," she said, her words falling out in a rush. She didn't know why she was rushing, but it suddenly felt like she was in a hurry. Did she want to get back to Weiss that quickly?

"Hey Ruby! Weren't you supposed to be done with work already?"

"Yeah, but I...I got held up."

"Ah, got it. So, what's up?"

Her mind scrambled, Ruby searched for a good way to ask her question. Come right out and ask? Or beat around several bushes, lay down some smokescreens, and eventually get to the point?

"Do you believe in destiny?" she blurted out - her dumb, stupid mouth making the decision for her.

"Uh, what?"

Taking a deep breath, Ruby tried to slow down her words so that Yang could understand what she was asking.

"I mean, like...do you think you and Blake were destined for each other? Like you were *supposed* to meet and fall in love?"

"Oh...well...yeah, I'd like to think so."

If what Weiss said was true, that answer might be more correct than Yang thought.

"What if Blake just walked up to you and said that?" Ruby asked. "Like...before you even knew each other - what if she walked up and said you were destined to be together?"

Yang laughed at the *hypothetical* scenario, which was basically exactly what Ruby just experienced.

"Uh, you've seen how hot she is, right?" Yang asked with another chuckle. "I would've been stoked that she thought we were soulmates or whatever."

“So if the person is hot enough, you’d believe them?”

It that was the case, then Ruby had no reason not to believe Weiss...

“I mean, within reason,” Yang added. “I also had a gut feeling she was a sweetheart after she watched those adorable kittens for so long.”

“Right. The kittens.”

Having heard this story several times before - how Yang stumbled across Blake standing outside a pet store, watching the kittens in the front window play - Ruby tried to figure out what it meant in terms of her current predicament.

Yang had watched Blake like a creeper - Ruby had watched Weiss walk up to the hostess, *somewhat* like a creeper. Yang then asked Blake out on a date - Weiss then said they were destined to be together across the universes.

But...did that mean Ruby was Yang or Blake in this situation? Or neither, because this wasn’t at all the same?

“How did you *know* though?” she pressed. “How did you know you weren’t just...blinded by how pretty she is?”

If anything was going to be Ruby’s downfall, it was that. Weiss was *too* pretty. She made Ruby’s heart do these crazy flips and turns, and when she talked Ruby wanted to hang onto every word. And when she laughed...Ruby could die happily every time.

But that was normal, right?

“It’s just this feeling,” Yang tried to explain. “Like...you know there’s something special about them even though you don’t know them. And you want to be around them even though you just met. Does that make sense?”

Thinking about the explanation, Ruby nodded (even though Yang couldn’t see her). It did make sense, in a way. When she saw Weiss speaking to the hostess, her first thought was that an angel had just walked into their lives. An actual angel.

“So basically you’re saying...trust your instincts?” Ruby asked.

“Exactly. Wait - why are you asking? Did you meet someone??”

“Just curious! Gotta go - talk later!” Before Yang could protest, Ruby hung up the call and blew a puff of air through her lips.

Ok, so...Yang believed in soulmates.

Of course Yang believed in soulmates - she was basically one of the characters from those mushy romance novels Blake read. How many times had she professed her love for Blake in high school and college? How many times had she gone out of her way to find the most ridiculous and public ways to let Blake and *everyone else* know that they were in love?

Seriously, for the last four years of school, Ruby was known as 'that girl whose sister is in love with that other girl.'

Still, Yang was the best person Ruby knew for relationship advice. Yang had *way* more experience (although was it really experience if she'd only ever dated one girl?), plus...well, she'd convinced Blake to stick around this long!

And Yang believed that soulmates could happen - that it was possible for two people to be destined for one another.

The last question was...what did Ruby think?

Thankfully, it wasn't every day that the most beautiful girl on the planet showed up to say she was looking for Ruby because they were soulmates across every dimension. Although, if that *did* happen every day, maybe Ruby would be used to dealing with the situation by now. Instead, she was trying to figure out what she thought while keeping the most beautiful girl on the planet waiting.

She understood Yang's comment about knowing someone was special even though they'd just met. Weiss was *definitely* special, and Ruby could totally understand a girl like Weiss being blessed with some awesome superpower that gave her the memories of multiple universes.

Ruby just wasn't sure if she believed that *she* was the other part of the equation. Her. Ruby Rose. The one wearing Penny's green-and-white striped socks because she'd forgotten her own. The one that people in school called weird, and the one that waited tables because she wasn't sure what else to do with her life. She really hadn't done anything to deserve someone like Weiss.

Ok, so she didn't know how she felt right now, but there was one thing she was sure about - she was going to go back to the table and talk to Weiss some more.

Leaving the walk-in freezer behind for the blissfully warm air of the kitchen, she put the phone back on its cradle and waved towards the chefs.

“Thank you!” she said, sending them a grateful smile before heading out of the kitchen.

In the inner portion of the restaurant, she navigated through occupied tables before reaching the door leading outside. She was about to open it, but changed her mind at the last second. Instead of pushing it open, she moved off to one side so she could sneak a glance at Weiss unnoticed.

“Excuse me,” she whispered, moving past one of the diners and crouching down by an empty table to pretend she was tying her shoes. But she wasn’t tying her shoes. Instead, she looked through the window and found Weiss sitting at the same table outside.

She was still there.

One of these times, Ruby was positive that Weiss would disappear - that the prank would end, and Weiss would disappear, never to be seen or heard from again. Ruby’s heart ached at the thought, but it must be true, right? There was no way an angel would stick around *forever* - no one was *that* patient.

At least, that’s what Ruby thought, but Weiss seemed to have no interest in leaving. Instead, she looked perfectly content to sit and wait for Ruby to return.

While Weiss waited, she looked almost...serene. That was the right word. She was calm, relaxed, not at all freaked out by the idea of having Ruby as a soulmate. Instead, she took a sip of water and watched tourists pass on the sidewalk. She vaguely smiled at a dog that walked by. She didn’t seem crazy or like she’d just escaped from prison. If anything, she was really sweet and kind, and she made Ruby feel...special.

Untying her laces and then slowly tying them again (while trying to watch Weiss at the same time), Ruby suddenly had a thought that jumped right out and smacked her in the face.

If Weiss’ curse was to remember all these other lives and seek Ruby out over and over again, maybe Ruby’s curse was to blindly trust that a relative stranger was her soulmate.

Although, was it really a curse when a beautiful, smart, funny, kind person like Weiss said that she was Ruby’s soulmate? That she had loved Ruby over millions of universes and had sought her out just to love her again? And the

only thing she needed to do was accept that maybe it was surprising and unexpected, but it could actually be true?

That didn't sound like a curse. That sounded like a blessing - like Ruby did something *really* good in that first life of hers to deserve someone like Weiss seeking her out over and over again.

So, maybe this was just part of the deal. Weiss did the searching, Ruby did the accepting.

Really, her side of this was pretty easy - it was her job to trust an angel. That wasn't hard to do. Angels were super trustworthy beings! Plus, deep down she *wanted* to believe that everything Weiss said was true. Maybe that made her selfish - because she wanted to believe she was a queen at some point in time - but she'd be an idiot to let Weiss walk away.

Taking a deep breath and finishing with her laces, she stood and made her way to the door. Pulling it open and heading out into the late afternoon sun, she rubbed her hands together in an attempt to lessen her nerves.

When she'd seen Weiss talking to the hostess, her heart did this huge jump in her chest - the first of many that had happened since then. It was a sensation she'd never felt before, except on roller coasters and when an elevator started moving before she was ready for it. But for her heart to start flipping over another person...she knew she had it bad.

As Ruby wove through the tables outside, Weiss almost instantly caught sight of her and followed her path through the maze of seats. With the space falling away in between them, Ruby noticed how Weiss straightened in her seat while her eyes lit up with unmistakable happiness.

And that happiness was for *Ruby*. Weiss was happy to see *her*.

The excitement filling her chest right now made it feel like she could levitate right off the ground, like she might float away from the restaurant and up into the sky with nothing holding her down.

Instead of floating away, she wasn't paying attention to where she was walking and tripped over the back of someone's chair, nearly falling to the ground in the process.

"Sorry!" she yelled, catching her balance and reaching out as if she might've hurt the person sitting in the chair. Fortunately, they waved one hand and

said, “Don’t worry about it” before going back to their meal as if nothing had happened.

Glancing up, Ruby confirmed that Weiss just witnessed the entire ordeal. Because of course she had. Sure, Ruby was lucky enough to have a gorgeous, universe-remembering soulmate, but she wasn’t lucky enough to have her most embarrassing moments missed by that same gorgeous, universe-remembering soulmate. Maybe it was a package deal. In which case...yeah, Ruby would still agree to that.

Still, her cheeks burned as she scurried back to the table and sat down before she embarrassed herself further.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she said, trying to keep the conversation away from what just happened.

“That’s alright,” Weiss replied before nodding towards Ruby’s foot. “Are you ok?”

“Oh, that?” Making a soft ‘psh’ sound, Ruby waved one hand. “I’ve survived worse!”

Her foot was kind of throbbing from slamming into the leg of the chair, but that should go away soon. Her ego took the brunt of the damage, like usual.

“I just wanted to make a quick call,” Ruby explained, even though Weiss hadn’t asked about her most recent absence.

And the explanation wasn’t at all shocking to Weiss. Instead, she nodded as if it was what she’d expected.

“Yang?” she asked, nodding again when Ruby did the same.

“Yeah, I just...wanted to check in with her...”

“And now that you have?”

They’d ended up right where they started, with Weiss waiting for Ruby to respond to the very large elephant on the patio.

“How did you even find me?” Ruby asked instead of addressing her feelings head on, trying to delay the answer. “Do you put out wanted ads or something?”

When Weiss laughed at the joke, Ruby’s heart did another flip in her chest.

“I’ll admit to doing that once or twice in the past. But I have a few strategies - it depends on the life I’m living, really. I’ll search on my own if I’m capable

and have the resources. If the world is too...fragmented...I'll hire private investigators to help."

"You hire investigators to find me??" Ruby asked, her eyes widening at the disclosure while Weiss nodded.

"How do you think I found you this time?" Weiss replied, her eyes sparkling as she gave Ruby a playful smile.

The smile made Ruby blush. And the question made her blush. And the way Weiss was looking at her made her blush even more.

"I...just thought you walked up here..." Ruby stammered, gesturing towards the entrance of the restaurant while Weiss shook her head.

"I've been looking for you, Ruby," she said, leveling Ruby with blue eyes that were too clear to be real. "For years."

Ruby felt her jaw fall open at the words, but she couldn't find a way to respond. Years? Weiss had searched for years? All that time, Ruby was right here - oblivious to Weiss' existence, going to work and trying to figure out what life meant.

"It took longer than I thought it would to find you," Weiss explained, taking Ruby's silence as a cue to elaborate. "I hired an entire team of investigators, hoping they'd find you quickly. Instead, they found your graduation information and then...nothing. I don't know how you and Yang kept such a low profile for so long, but the lack of technology in this world certainly didn't help. It was impossible to find any useful information without searching through written records..."

"Oh, sorry. Guess we kinda stay out of trouble..."

"It's nothing to apologize for," Weiss replied, quickly losing the furrow in her brow and finding a smile once more. "I'm happy that eventually you turned up - in Vacuo, of all places."

"What's wrong with Vacuo??" Ruby asked, looking around like there was some visible problem she could find. Weiss shrugged but maintained her smile.

"There's nothing wrong with it. It's just...not usually somewhere we live, that's all."

Ruby had already nodded at the comment before realizing what Weiss was

actually saying.

They didn't often live in Vacuo. They - as in, the two of them together. Her and Weiss. Weiss and her. Living together, in the same place.

Cheeks flushing, Ruby looked at the table to escape Weiss' way-too-powerful gaze. If they were soulmates, that meant they'd been in love, which meant they'd lived together and...*been* together.

Looking up, Ruby's eyes went directly to Weiss' lips then flitted away again, hoping she hadn't just completely given away her thoughts with that glance. Any moment now, her cheeks would burst into flames - that's how bad she was blushing.

Turning to the side in hopes something would drag her mind away from the thought of kissing Weiss, Ruby watched one of her managers arrive for work. The moment she saw him, something clicked together in her head - something that hadn't made sense until right now.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, gratefully accepting the change in topic. "That explains the weird guy who was here!"

Weiss tilted her head at the comment. "What weird guy?"

"This guy!" Ruby replied, her mouth moving faster than her brain connected the dots. "This strange guy! I was like...really confused when he was here, but now it makes sense!"

Sensing that Weiss was now the one confused, Ruby waved her hands and paused so she could straighten out her thoughts.

"Last week this guy stopped in," she said, doing her best to speak slowly while her mind moved a million miles per second. "He asked to sit in my section, then only ordered a water. I thought it was weird, but whatever - he can order whatever he wants. But when I brought him the water, he looked at me and said, 'You're Ruby Rose, correct?' And I said, 'Uh, yeah.' Then he smiled and said, 'Can I take your picture?' Which was *so* weird! But like...we're supposed to be nice and helpful, right? So I said sure and he took my photo, then drank his water and left."

"That sounds like Jeremy..." Weiss mused, shaking her head and giving Ruby an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry if he made you uncomfortable."

"Oh, no that's fine. I just remembered because I told my manager about

it afterward, and he said if that guy comes back to let him know.” Thinking about the entire situation now that she knew what the weird guy was doing, Ruby sat back and laughed. “It makes a lot of sense now.”

“I was thrilled when he said he found you,” Weiss added, her gaze drifting off while another of those adorable smiles appeared. “I made arrangements to come here right away.”

“So you just jumped on a plane to Vacuo?” Ruby asked. She was mostly joking, but Weiss’ answer was an affirmative nod.

“Essentially. I canceled all of my meetings, reserved a hotel suite for the foreseeable future, and scheduled a flight.”

Weiss said the words so simply, like it didn’t bother her in the slightest to turn her world upside down and fly all the way over here for Ruby. Not only that, but it sounded like she was planning to stick around ‘for the foreseeable future.’ Why would she do that if she wasn’t *positive* that what she said was true?

She wouldn’t. At least, Ruby didn’t think so.

“Well, uh, I appreciate that...” Ruby mumbled, blushing again when Weiss smiled.

“I was more than happy to do it. I’ve -”

When the sentence cut off, Ruby watched while *Weiss* lightly blushed, looking suddenly bashful as she thought about the words before speaking them out loud.

“I’ve missed you...” she finally said, never turning away from Ruby’s gaze. Hearing the words, Ruby’s heart burst into a joyful song and dance that bounced all over her chest.

And suddenly, she knew.

Maybe she didn’t completely believe it at the moment - that they were soulmates and destined to be together across the universes - but she *wanted* to believe. More than that, she was willing to make every effort to believe it was true.

Because she liked Weiss. *Like* liked her. As soon as they started talking, Ruby knew she was something special. Ruby wanted to spend more time getting to know each other, and if that meant accepting that they were already

soulmates, then so be it. This was actually better, because now Ruby could fall totally head over heels in love and (hopefully) Weiss wouldn't be bothered.

Ruby had never been in love before, but she imagined it started out a lot like this.

"So...we're supposed to be soulmates..." she finally said, nervously drawing one finger in circles on the table while Weiss smiled at her.

"Yes."

Again, Weiss' answer was certain. There was no hesitation. No pause. She was convinced it was true.

"I...don't really get what that means?" Ruby asked. "Like, do we go off and fight crime together or something?"

Weiss laughed at the suggestion but still nodded.

"If that's what you want to do, then sure. I was thinking something a little less...risky."

"Like what?"

When Weiss smiled - that smile Ruby could never get enough of - Ruby felt happiness budding in her chest. Whatever Weiss suggested next, Ruby was ready to say 'yes' - that much, she knew.

"I'd like to take you out on a date," Weiss said. "If you trust me."

Trust was easy for Ruby - sometimes so easy it got her in trouble. In this case, Weiss was asking for a whole lot of trust, but did Ruby have any reason not to give it? What was the worst that could happen? Even if they *weren't* actually soulmates, she loved talking to Weiss and loved listening to all these stories about herself that she couldn't remember.

But it could be true. They could be soulmates. That would explain why she felt so strongly for Weiss from the very beginning of this conversation. That would explain why she could almost *see* and *feel* the stories while Weiss told them. Maybe Weiss was just a crazy good storyteller, but they didn't feel like regular stories. They felt like...long lost memories.

"Ok, that sounds like fun!" Ruby replied, nodding as unmistakable excitement built in her chest.

"Really?" Weiss asked, her smile growing.

"Yeah! Wait, is that surprising?"

Weiss shook her head and laughed, the reaction filling Ruby's heart with delight.

"It's *wonderfully* surprising. I thought I'd have to do much more to convince you."

The fact that Weiss was willing to spend more time convincing Ruby was all the convincing she needed.

"I mean, I don't know if I completely believe it yet," Ruby added, not wanting Weiss to get the wrong impression. "But I want to. And I'm willing to trust you."

The response made Weiss even happier, if that was possible. And it made Ruby blush, feeling a little overwhelmed by the sudden rush of emotions surging through her. She couldn't wait to learn more - about previous versions of herself, about previous lives they shared, and about Weiss. She was most excited to learn about Weiss, and hopefully learn how to be the soulmate someone like Weiss deserved.

"So, uh...I'm off work," Ruby said, trying to dispel the heat building in her cheeks. "Want to go now?"

"I'm ready when you are."

Nodding once, Weiss stood and Ruby scrambled to follow. Of course, in the midst of scrambling her knee knocked into the bottom of the table and knocked over both glasses, spilling water all over the table.

"Oh - shoot!" Righting the glasses as fast as possible, Ruby watched water drip onto the ground before looking around in search of something to clean it up. "I'll be right back," she told Weiss before rushing over to small server station sitting outside. Grabbing a stack of napkins, she hurried back and quickly mopped up the mess she'd just made.

"I can help -" Weiss offered, but Ruby shook her head and knelt down to dry water off the ground so no one would slip.

"I got it!" she said, wiping up the rest of the mess before popping back to her feet. Collecting her pile of wet napkins and the two glasses, she carried everything over to the server's station. Throwing away the napkins and setting the glasses off to the side (someone else would take them in later), she rushed back to Weiss and let out a big sigh of relief.

“Sorry about that,” she said with a grin. “I’m ready now!”

For a brief moment, they just stared at each other, with Ruby’s cheeks growing steadily hotter under Weiss’ unwavering gaze. Weiss was still the prettiest girl Ruby had ever seen, and she couldn’t believe they were about to go on a date. After the date, maybe they could spend more time talking, and then...maybe they could...kiss goodnight or something.

Not that Ruby wanted to presume or anything! It was just a wish that she totally wouldn’t mind coming true.

When Weiss suddenly chuckled - as if she’d just read Ruby’s mind - Ruby’s cheeks found a new shade of embarrassment in no time.

“You’re cute,” Weiss commented, succeeding in deepening Ruby’s blush as they walked away from the table. But they’d only taken a single step before Weiss paused.

“Oh, I never paid,” she remarked, looking around for the bill while Ruby tried to wave the comment away.

“Naw, don’t worry about it.” Unfortunately, the look Weiss gave Ruby said that she needed to explain exactly why it was acceptable to leave without paying.

“I-I mean, I got it for you,” she admitted, understanding now that her cheeks would be this red *forever*.

She never covered meals for diners other than her sister, but she’d never served someone so *pretty* before. The second she saw Weiss sitting at the table alone, she knew she was about to make a fool of herself in front of a beautiful girl. Wasn’t it only fair that she give the pretty girl a free lunch in exchange for watching her fumble through her job?

“When did you decide to do that?” Weiss asked.

“As soon as I took your order,” Ruby said, and Weiss laughed - this pure, unbridled laughter that made Ruby’s heart dance excitedly in her chest.

“Well that’s another pleasant surprise,” Weiss commented while leading them towards the exit of the restaurant. As they walked, she turned to the side and gave Ruby smile. “But that doesn’t surprise me - you’ve always been full of surprises.”

Weiss certainly knew how to make Ruby *blush*, which she did again while

they headed toward the exit.

“Have you been to Vacuo before?” she asked as they left the café behind, walking down the warm Vacuo sidewalk together.

“Many times,” Weiss answered. “But only once in this universe, and that was for work, so I didn’t have time to explore.”

“Does that mean you need a tour?”

When Weiss looked over with a smile, Ruby’s heart skipped with joy.

They hadn’t known each other very long (in this life, at least), but she already loved the way Weiss looked at her. Was it possible to fall in love with the way someone looked at her? If it was, that was happening right now.

“Are you offering to give me one?” Weiss asked in return, a hint of playfulness in her tone.

“It’s the least I could do!” Hopping a step ahead, Ruby turned around and walked backward while grinning. “I mean, you did travel across the galaxy to find me...”

The joke was successful, making Weiss laugh and shake her head.

“You realize Atlas isn’t that far, right?” she teased. “I took a plane here, not a spaceship?”

“Well that’s less fun.” When Ruby pretended to pout, Weiss laughed again.

“You’re right, Ruby. I took a spaceship here from the moon. It was quite the trip, actually.”

It was Ruby’s turn to laugh, overjoyed that Weiss was willing to play along with the silly joke - that made her even cooler than before.

“Anywhere you want to see?” Ruby asked, waving down the street. They were walking towards the main tourist attractions, so there would be tons to look at.

“Whatever you suggest,” was Weiss’ response. “I’d love to see your favorite places though.”

“Really?” When Ruby glanced to the side, she found that Weiss was serious - she *actually* wanted to go to all of Ruby’s favorite places.

In that case, Ruby had a favorite ice cream place, two favorite bakeries, a favorite restaurant for basically any type of food, a favorite shop for buying parts, and much more!

Hopping on her toes in excitement, she beamed and pointed them in the right direction.

“Then we’ve gotta go this way!” she said while reaching out for Weiss’ hand. As soon as she realized what she was doing, she dropped her arm and blushed.

“Uh, I mean, it’s not far,” she added, trying to save the day on that embarrassing moment. But, instead of letting the slip up pass, Weiss reached out and took Ruby’s hand in her own. The gesture immediately set Ruby’s heart ablaze, while Weiss’ loving smile added to the growing warmth spreading through her.

A few days ago, she was just a waitress. Today, she was a crime-fighting, universe-stomping superhero. Or...she was still just a waitress, but she was a waitress with a universe-stomping soulmate in her life. And it was...really, really awesome.

“Do you have any good stories about Yang?” she asked while they walked towards their first destination - the best bakery in all of Vacuo. Intertwining their fingers, which caused Ruby’s heart to flutter in the process, Weiss laughed.

“You know your sister...she’s always making something exciting happen.”

“That’s a yes, then!”

Smiling, Weiss nodded. “That is a yes - would you like to hear another story?”

“Yeah, of course!”

By this point, Weiss didn’t even need to ask - Ruby wanted to hear every single story there was. Holding hands and walking down the sidewalk together, she listened while Weiss launched into another story from a life far from here.

It was weird to think that Weiss remembered all these lives that Ruby had no memory of, but she loved hearing the stories. She loved the way Weiss told them. And she loved the idea that *maybe* it sounded unbelievable, fake, or too good to be true, but *maybe* it was still possible - if someone was willing to believe.

Ruby was willing to believe the unbelievable, and maybe that was one of the reasons they were meant to be together. Hopefully, just one of many reasons.

Chapter 9

On the verge of waking up, Weiss already sensed that it would be a great day. She was surrounded in soft blankets that were comfortably cool to the touch, she'd slept wonderfully, and everything smelled like roses - not the woeful roses she found at flower shops, but the single, specific rose she'd received on her 18th birthday.

And the single, specific person that rose belonged to.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

The whisper was followed by a giggle as the bed moved, someone resituating themselves atop the covers. Blinking her eyes open, Weiss nearly gasped out loud when she found herself looking into sparkling pools of liquid silver - Ruby leaning over her and staring straight into her eyes.

"Ruby -" Weiss murmured, raising her hand to rub the rest of sleep from her eyes. As soon as she closed her eyes to do so, she felt a pair of soft lips press against hers - a light touch that quickly disappeared with another giggle.

She was certainly awake now.

"You sleep so long!" Ruby commented while moving to the side of the bed and watching Weiss sit up and stretch. "You look like a princess when you sleep, so I really didn't want to wake you up."

"But you're hungry?" Weiss asked, connecting the dots between what Ruby said and what she meant.

"Uh, yeah." Embarrassed for only a second, Ruby quickly found another smile. "I've normally eaten breakfast and two snacks by now."

While Weiss chuckled at the unabashed honesty, Ruby popped out of bed and walked over to the dresser in the hotel suite that was reserved for the

indefinite future.

Unsure of how things would progress, Weiss had planned on staying here for a very, very long time. Little did she know that everything would go surprisingly well...and surprisingly fast.

She openly stared while Ruby pulled an outfit from the dresser - making her selection from the collection of new clothing they'd purchased while out shopping together. Ruby hadn't wanted Weiss to buy anything for her, but insistence won out in the end. One of Weiss' favorite hobbies was giving Ruby gifts, after all. What better way to do that than by going to a shopping mall and buying as many new clothes as they could carry?

But, even with the new clothes, Weiss' favorite outfit had to be Ruby's pajamas - a pair of red shorts that showed off long, tan legs and a white tank top that left her shoulders blissfully bare. It was the back of Ruby's left shoulder that drew Weiss' attention at this moment, where a small, icy blue snowflake resided.

Weiss had discovered the tattoo almost immediately, and it made her heart warm with happiness every time she saw it. She'd already explained the significance to Ruby, who'd designed the intricate pattern herself after losing a dare and being forced into getting it done.

In Weiss' mind, these small coincidences cemented that they were destined for one another. Not that she needed more proof, but it was nice to find pieces of their original lives strewn around them. A tattoo here, a birthmark there - every universe found a way to connect them back to their beginning.

They were different people - shaped and molded by different lives and upbringings - but there was a single thread stringing through the cosmos that bound them together.

"Ready to meet Yang?"

The question destroyed a good percentage of Weiss' blissfulness, reminding her that today was her scheduled meeting with Yang.

"How about we order room service and stay here all day instead," she suggested, wanting nothing more than to sit on the bed and talk for hours and hours more - just as they'd done the past couple days. In the process, they could postpone meeting Yang and spend more time with each other instead.

Unfortunately, Ruby's response was a giggle and shake of her head.

"I'd love to, but I told her I'd be back this morning. If we don't show, she's gonna come looking for me. And do you really want to meet her that way?"

Sighing at the voice of reason (when had Ruby become so reasonable?), Weiss decided that maybe it was time to get up, after all. Slipping out of bed, she stretched as soon as her feet touched the ground, and immediately noticed the sly glance she drew when her nightshirt lifted and revealed a bit of her stomach.

The look sent a shiver of thrill down her spine as she pulled her shirt down and sent Ruby a teasing smile.

"We've certainly had worse first meetings." Weiss remembered all too clearly the times she and Yang had started off on the *very* wrong foot. But she didn't want to think about those at the moment - not when she was on the cusp of their next 'first' meeting. As much as she didn't believe in 'jinxing' herself, she would love to keep her chances of a positive meeting as high as possible.

"What if we go say 'hello,' then come back here and order as much room service as you can possibly eat?" she suggested, her happiness growing when the offer was met by a big grin.

"But breakfast first?" Ruby asked.

"Of course."

"Then that sounds fantastic!"

Satisfied with that plan, Weiss walked into the bathroom to get herself ready for the day. If she was meeting Yang this morning, she needed to look as put together as possible. Not that she wanted to look disheveled on *any* day, but it was especially important to be presentable today. Looking sharp would go a long way towards Yang accepting her as a new person in Ruby's life.

This meant extra attention was given to her hair, making sure it was perfectly styled in just the way she wanted. A light touch of makeup was added while she mentally sorted through the clothing she had with her to put together an outfit. It should be casual but very chic - the type of trendy fashion Yang *normally* liked.

Unfortunately, Ruby was...very typically Ruby...and knew very little about what types of clothing Yang liked to wear. Weiss had tried to glean more information over the past few days, but the only bits of knowledge she'd learned were that Yang 'liked fashion magazines' and 'had lots of shoes.' Not exactly enlightening, but she could easily build an outfit based on current trends and hope it fit the bill.

"Oh shoot!"

Walking out of the bathroom and towards the dresser, Weiss found Ruby looking at a crumpled scrap of paper with a frown.

"What is it?"

"I forgot I have work today."

The news immediately brought a frown to Weiss' lips. Their perfect day of spending every second together was going to be ruined by some pesky job?

"Quit."

The word slipped out without a second thought, drawing a look of surprise from Ruby.

"Quit? Like...quit my job?" Ruby asked, her tone implying she was having a harder time believing that suggestion than the whole 'soulmates' thing.

Again, Weiss had gotten ahead of herself, but there was no turning back now.

"Yes," she said, nodding while reaching out to take Ruby's hand in her own. "You don't need to work anymore - I have more than enough money for the both of us, so why don't you quit?"

While Ruby stared - her jaw dropped in shock - Weiss suddenly realized an important part of that decision.

"Unless you like working there," she quickly added, mentally kicking herself for only thinking of her own wishes. "If you like working there, then of course stay as long as you want. Maybe I could work there too. Although I've only been a waitress a couple times before..."

Her words trailed off when Ruby started laughing - the sound so wonderfully joyful it lifted Weiss' heart with little difficulty.

"What's so funny?" she asked, smiling even though normally she would be embarrassed, frustrated, or annoyed that someone laughed at what she said.

“You are! Being all cute and stuff thinking about being a waitress.” Laughing again, Ruby shook her head. “What am I supposed to do if I quit? Stay home and be all soulmate-y?”

‘Soulmate-y’ wasn’t a word, but it was adorable that Ruby used the term so frequently. Every time the word left Ruby’s lips, in whatever form she decided to use, Weiss’ heart did flips of happiness in her chest.

“You can do exactly that,” Weiss replied, smiling at the idea of domestic Ruby staying home all day - as if that might actually be possible. “Or find something you’re passionate about,” she added, knowing that was the option most likely to occur.

Biting her lip, Ruby pondered the question for quite some time before flashing another one of those blinding smiles.

“I’ll think about it. And we can talk about it later?” When Ruby’s expression begged an answer, Weiss readily nodded.

“Of course. We can talk about it later.”

Happy with the response, Ruby grinned and shoved her tattered work schedule into the front pocket of the jeans she’d put on while Weiss was in the bathroom.

“Guess we should get going then! Grab food, meet Yang and Blake, then work.”

“I suppose that means we won’t be spending our entire day here...” Weiss remarked, mildly disappointed that their perfect plan was ruined by work obligations.

“Nnnnope! But you can hang out at the restaurant again? I’ll get the chef to make you another tuna salad sandwich!”

Opening a drawer and pulling out the pieces of her carefully selected outfit, Weiss sighed in pretend exasperation.

“I suppose that will have to do...”

Hearing Ruby giggle and hop onto the bed behind her, Weiss smiled and headed back into the restroom to finalize her outfit.

The last few days felt like a dream - a dream she never wanted to wake up from.

After leaving the café, they spent the entire day together - exploring Ruby’s

favorite places, then staying up late into the night talking while sitting on the bed in the hotel suite. The next day, they'd talked more - over breakfast, walking around Vacuo, over lunch, walking around some more, over dinner, then through the night again. Yesterday had been more of the same.

She thought exhaustion would've taken its toll by now, but that was furthest from the truth. The little sleep they'd gotten was some of the most restful sleep she'd ever had, leaving her rested and rejuvenated each morning. Ruby's upbeat energy only added to what she could only describe as a complete revitalization of her spirit.

Essentially...she felt better than she had in a very long time.

After putting the finishing touches on her appearance for the day, she stepped out of the bathroom and savored Ruby's reaction.

Even if Yang wasn't impressed, Ruby's reaction was *more* than worth the effort. It started as pure shock before morphing into flustered embarrassment combined with a blush - the likely result of thoughts that wandered a bit too far.

"Are you ready?" Weiss asked, her skin tingling when Ruby's eyes roved over her one more time.

"Uh, yup!" Jumping to her feet, Ruby quickly shook any ideas out of her head before joining Weiss by the door. "You, uh, look great, by the way."

The compliment was the cherry on top of this magnificent morning.

"Thank you..." Weiss replied, smiling when Ruby rushed forward to open the door and waved her through.

"After you."

But, instead of leaving the room behind, Weiss stopped in front of Ruby and smiled. It was still difficult to believe this was real - this was actually happening. Years of dreaming about Ruby had ended, only to be replaced by...Ruby.

Rolling onto the balls of her feet, Weiss pressed a kiss to Ruby's lips - this one light and sweet, but still charged with unreleased energy. When Ruby closed her eyes and leaned into the feeling, that energy surged through Weiss like a tsunami.

But she knew better than to relinquish control at this moment. There

would be time to unleash those feelings later on...when they had ample time alone. Right now, unfortunately, they had an older sister to meet.

Breaking away with a sigh, she smiled while Ruby's eyes fluttered open and a soft blush grew on her cheeks.

"That was really awesome..." Ruby breathed out, drawing out a laugh as Weiss placed another quick kiss to Ruby's lips before finally walking through the door.

She tried not to be a smug person, but it was hard not to be when Ruby issued such breathless compliments for every moment of intimacy they shared. It was quite the ego boost - one she might never grow tired of.

As they made their way down to the lobby of the hotel, Ruby casually reached down to hold Weiss' hand - a small gesture that sent Weiss' heart soaring into the clouds. Ruby's willingness to be intimate so soon was a blessing Weiss would never take for granted - not when she'd spent the past few years pining and craving Ruby's touch, only to be rewarded in droves over the first several days.

"What do you want to eat?" she asked while the elevator doors slid open and released them into the bustling hotel lobby.

"Uh, can we just grab something quick?" Ruby asked, pointing in the direction of the hotel's snack bar. "I'll eat more when I get to work."

"That sounds good."

Even though she had no plans of buying anything for herself, Weiss accompanied Ruby into the small shop if only so they could continue holding hands. She watched Ruby make selection after selection as they walked through the narrow aisles - picking out a yogurt parfait, several large, freshly-baked cookies, and a glazed donut. The assortment could surely qualify as an entire meal, but probably wouldn't last Ruby until lunchtime.

It didn't bother Weiss in the slightest, and she willingly held the yogurt parfait in her free hand while they left the hotel behind. When they stepped outside, she found that the weather was warm and sunny - another typical day in Vacuo.

"Should we take a cab?" she asked, gesturing towards a line of them waiting to shuttle hotel guests to their destinations.

“Uhh...” Holding a half-eaten cookie in one hand, Ruby spun around to find her bearings in the city.

It was strange for Weiss to be so unfamiliar with a city and landscape, but she greatly enjoyed trusting Ruby to lead them from one location to the next. There were several moments when she was *positive* Ruby had gotten them lost, only for their destination to pop up out of the blue.

“It’s a little far,” Ruby answered. “But we can walk -”

Seeing as how Ruby had passed up a ‘real’ breakfast this morning, Weiss figured they were trying to save time. So, she shook her head and led them towards the first taxi in line.

“I think a taxi sounds nice today,” she explained as the driver leapt out of the vehicle to open the door for them. “That way you can finish eating and point out more landmarks as we go.”

Fortunately, the explanation was well-received, and Ruby slipped into the backseat with Weiss right behind. Ruby provided the driver with the address, which Weiss made a strong mental note of, before they were on their way.

Quickly ferried through the streets, she watched Ruby polish off the cookies and donut before eating the entire parfait in under a minute. The rapid eating might’ve been alarming if they’d just met, but it was actually comforting that Ruby still ate as usual.

Seeing as how they’d only been together for a few days - and significant milestones had already been reached - Weiss’ impatience had paid off. (Telling Ruby the truth right away was an act of utmost impatience, as much as Weiss tried to convince herself otherwise.) Ultimately, it was probably a bad thing that her impatience was rewarded so handily, as she now had good reason to consider telling Ruby earlier than expected in the future.

“We’re here!”

Looking out the window when Ruby pointed, Weiss discovered a row of relatively nondescript apartment buildings sliding by.

“It’s the brown one,” Ruby added as the taxi came to a smooth stop across the street.

Eyes fixed upon the light brown building looming through the window, Weiss quickly paid the taxi driver before exiting the vehicle and waiting on

the sidewalk for Ruby to join her. Looking up at the building - which wasn't intimidating in any outward fashion - Weiss' heart still sped up.

Acknowledging the surge of emotions rushing through her system, she silently scolded herself for being nervous. There was no reason to be nervous. Ruby was acclimating to the situation almost alarmingly well, having little problem accepting any of the stories Weiss told. Additionally, Yang and Blake were two of Weiss' closest friends - she was *excited* to see them again...but also nervous that they might not like her as they had in the past.

And, though she would *never* admit this out loud, she always felt a little bit like she was walking into the lion's den when meeting Yang for the first time as Ruby's...significant other.

"Ready?" Ruby asked, taking Weiss' hand and leading them across the street without waiting for an answer.

"I suppose..."

Hopping up the steps, Ruby held the door open for Weiss once again, but when Weiss attempted to walk through, an arm shot out to block her path.

"Woah woah! You've gotta pay the toll!"

Surprise rapidly morphed into amusement, as Weiss watched Ruby waggle her brow to make the situation clearer than it already was.

"Is that how this works?" Weiss asked, tilting her head and smiling while she waited for Ruby's answer.

"Yup! It's the new rule - I open the door, I get a kiss." Ruby grinned at her genius plan, before her eyes widened. "Unless you don't want to! Don't feel like you *have* to -"

Weiss silenced Ruby's stammers with a kiss, savoring their momentary closeness before pulling away with a smile.

"Was that sufficient?" she asked before nodding playfully towards the open doorway.

"Uh...y-yeah!" Dropping her arm, Ruby motioned Weiss through. "After you!"

Smirking at the flustered response, Weiss walked into the lobby of the apartment building and looked around while waiting for Ruby. It was a standard entryway - not rundown, but not extravagant either. The paint was

a bit faded, the mailboxes had long ago lost their metallic luster, and the tile on the floor held a clear path everyone followed.

“Are you nervous?” Ruby asked, re-taking Weiss’ hand and leading them along that worn-down path as they approached a stairwell at the far end of the lobby.

Under ordinary circumstances, Weiss would never answer that question honestly. But when it came to Ruby...very little was ordinary.

“A bit,” she admitted.

“But you’ve met Yang before,” Ruby pointed out.

“And Blake, but different versions of them.”

Blake and Yang were as destined for each other as Weiss and Ruby were, but Weiss wasn’t sure if the two knew about it or not. If they did, they’d never mentioned anything of the sort.

“Don’t worry, they’re really nice!”

Ruby’s assurance only partially worked as they climbed the stairs and exited the staircase on the third floor. Ruby was right that Yang and Blake were nice people, but she was severely underestimating their behavior when it came to protecting her from harm.

Being a stranger in their eyes, Weiss knew she was about to be thoroughly vetted by one of the most protective siblings to ever exist, along with that sibling’s extra sharp, extra intuitive partner.

“They’re gonna love you,” Ruby added, stopping in front of an apartment door with a gold number ‘8’ in the center before turning around to flash Weiss a wide smile. “I mean, how could they not when -” The sentence abruptly cut off, and Ruby flushed while reaching blindly for the door knob. “They’ll just love you,” she concluded.

The unfinished sentence peaked Weiss’ interest, but she was forced to leave that thought behind when Ruby opened the door and walked into the apartment beyond.

“Hey Ruby! Welcome back!”

Hearing the familiar voice, Weiss took a deep breath and summoned as much courage as possible before following Ruby inside.

She hardly noticed the decor of the apartment before spotting the two girls

who were nearly as important to her as Ruby. Yang and Blake stood by a small island in the kitchen, appearing to have been in conversation before Ruby's entrance. Both slid off the barstools as Ruby ran over, with Yang reaching out just in time to wrap Ruby in a big hug.

"Hey Yang!" Ruby said, her excitement upon seeing her sister after only a few days apart delightfully refreshing. The hug hardly ended before Yang's eyes caught sight of Weiss and locked onto her - with Blake's gaze close behind.

"Uh, are you lost?"

"Weiss Schnee," Weiss quickly replied, stepping forward and extending her hand for a formal greeting. "It's nice to finally meet you, Yang. I've heard so much about you."

Yang shook Weiss' hand in shock, her eyes flitting back to Ruby every few seconds.

"Yeah...nice to meet you too..." Dropping Weiss' hand, Yang looked at Blake, silently asking questions no one else could hear.

"Blake Belladonna," Blake said, reaching out for her own handshake when it became clear that Yang was too surprised to initiate a proper introduction.

"Nice to meet you, Blake," Weiss replied with a smile, ducking her head in greeting and closely watching Blake's more reserved response - a soft, genuine greeting that lacked some of her usual suspicion.

"Ruby?" Yang asked, finally turned away from Weiss. "*This* is the girl you were talking about?"

"Yup! My soulmate!"

When Ruby beamed at her, Weiss' heart soared.

Somehow, they'd bypassed 'friends,' 'girlfriends,' or any other relationship term and skipped right to soulmates. She couldn't be happier about Ruby's free use of the term - because it was correct, and it made her feel incredibly special.

However, it was a rather weighty word - one that made Yang and Blake share another look.

"Soulmate?" Yang repeated, giving Weiss another once-over as if trying to match her with the term.

“Yup! She came all the way from Atlas to find me,” Ruby added, sharing the knowledge almost giddily.

From Yang’s expression, Weiss couldn’t tell if the blunt honesty was doing more harm than good. But just as Weiss had told Ruby right away, Yang was hearing the news right away - hopefully with similar results in acceptance.

“Uh, ok. So you’re from Atlas...what do you do?” Yang finally asked, clearly making conversation with the intent of gathering as much information as possible.

“I work at my family’s company.”

“That sounds pretty cool. Any place we might’ve heard of?”

Of course Yang asked for specifics. She would probably also make several calls to make sure Weiss was actually employed as she said she was. However, the company name should save the hassle.

“You probably have. It’s called Schnee Global.”

Blake immediately perked up at the name.

“Schnee Global? Isn’t that one of the largest defense companies in the world?”

And of course Blake knew of the company already - Weiss wouldn’t expect anything less.

“We have many competitors that are also quite large,” she answered, attempting to downplay the comment. However, Yang already looked concerned by the knowledge that Weiss’ family was immeasurably wealthy. She knew coming into this conversation that money would be an issue - their difference in wealth often made it hard for Yang to believe in Weiss’ earnesty.

Thankfully, Ruby wasn’t at all taken aback. She was happily curious, just as she’d been the past few days. As always, Ruby’s willingness to accept Weiss as she was - no matter who she might be - caused her heart to drum loudly with love.

“So...your family owns one of the largest companies in the world,” Yang stated, disbelief in her eyes and voice.

There were a lot of ways Weiss could respond to that statement. She could use a slew of responses that downplayed the company’s size, or she could bypass answering fully. However, seeing as how she’d already downplayed

the first answer, she knew her best option was to be honest.

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “But my family’s company is only a small portion of who I am.”

The words had minimal effect but still worked to some degree, lowering Yang’s concern a fraction and removing Weiss’ growing worry that the conversation would quickly turn sideways. Instead, Yang glanced at Blake, and Blake immediately spurred into motion.

“Hey Ruby, can you help me take the trash downstairs?” she asked, gesturing to two bags that were already tied up and waiting to be carried out. From the look of it, Blake could easily carry both herself, but then that wouldn’t accomplish the clear goal of getting Ruby out of the apartment.

It was nice to see that Yang and Blake still had their silent communication locked down.

“Uh, yeah sure!” Ruby agreed with a smile. “I’ll be right back,” she told Weiss before grabbing one of the bags. Blake and Ruby then left the apartment together, with Ruby throwing another smile Weiss’ way before the door closed between them.

Left alone with Yang, Weiss could already feel what was coming next.

“Soulmates?” Yang led with, crossing her arms over her chest and eyeing Weiss suspiciously. “Is this a joke? Make her believe that you’re soulmates, then laugh when she actually falls for you?”

The mere thought playing such a cruel trick with Ruby’s heart made Weiss frown and shake her head.

“I’m not playing a joke,” she replied firmly, making sure to meet Yang’s eyes.

“You sure about that? Because one of the richest girls in the world showing up claiming to be Ruby’s soulmate sounds a *little* fishy to me.”

“I understand the optics aren’t great,” Weiss admitted. “But what could I possibly gain from doing that?”

“I dunno, maybe you really like breaking people’s hearts?”

Giving Yang a look, Weiss shook her head.

“I know we just met, but please give me *some* credit as a decent human being.”

Surprisingly, Yang didn’t argue that point. Instead, she sighed and ran a

hand through her hair.

“Sorry, I’m sure you’re a nice person. She’s just...my little sister, you know? I don’t want someone messing around with her just because they can.”

Her nerves from a few minutes ago long gone, Weiss smiled at the sweet remark. While they might not ‘know’ each other yet, she could already tell that she and Yang would get along - and it was a wonderful feeling to have her best friend back in her life.

“Yang...I’ve been searching for Ruby for years. I would never hurt her like that. I know it sounds crazy, but she *is* my soulmate. You don’t have to believe me, but at least believe that *I* do.”

The words came from the bottom of her heart, and she could see the immediate impact they had when Yang uncrossed her arms and dropped them to her sides.

“Are you crazy then?” she asked, and Weiss smiled.

“I don’t think so. But if I am, I’m crazy for Ruby.”

This time Yang actually chuckled at the answer, the sound like music to Weiss’ ears as they survived their first conversation together.

“I always figured she’d drive some poor girl crazy. Just figured it’d be from how hyper she is.”

“Oh believe me, that will drive me plenty crazy too.”

This time Yang laughed, and Weiss felt free enough to join in with a soft chuckle at the expense of Ruby’s hyperactivity. With that joyful sound, the tension in the room lifted completely.

“Well alright,” Yang said. “As long as she’s happy, I guess we’re cool. I have to say though - if you mess with her heart, there’s a price to pay. And you might be one of the richest people in the world, but you’re not gonna be able to pay it.”

How many versions of that threat had Weiss received by now? Too many to count. Some were thinly veiled, others were quite overt, and several were detailed enough to make her squirm. Fortunately, she’d never paid that price because she’d never done anything to hurt Ruby - and she never would.

After all their lives together, Yang’s threats had taken on a different significance. From alarming, annoying, or amusing, Yang’s protectiveness

was now appreciated. Weiss was grateful that Yang was keeping Ruby safe - that while Weiss scoured the globe on her massive search, Yang made sure Ruby was protected.

"I won't hurt her," Weiss replied, pouring certainty into the words. "I -"

'Love her' almost slipped out, but she grabbed ahold of the words and pulled them back at the last second. 'Soulmate' had already been thrown out into the world - did she really want to add 'love' to that mix? Maybe not for the first meeting...

"I only want to make her happy," she concluded. The words weren't a lie - it *was* her life's goal to make Ruby happy. Along with that mission came undying love and affection, which Yang would see over time.

"That's all I want for her, too." In the midst of a nod, Yang paused and looked at Weiss carefully, her eyes slightly narrowed in thought. "Have we met before?" she finally asked. "Did we have a class together or something?"

The response was an even more encouraging sign of good things to come, and Weiss couldn't help but smile.

"I've never lived in Vacuo. At least, not in this life."

Staring for a little longer, Yang eventually shook her head.

"It just...feels like maybe we've met before," she muttered before smiling. "But ok, I just wanted to talk to you. I know you guys just met, but given the...circumstances...I needed to make sure you weren't messing with her."

"I'm not. Really."

This time, it felt like Yang fully accepted the words.

"Good! Because I've got a lot of other things to worry about right now -" When Yang's gaze drifted towards the door, Weiss followed the look and nodded.

"That's right. Ruby mentioned that you have...big plans...soon."

When Yang shook her head and laughed, Weiss smiled in turn.

"I'm surprised she hasn't gone and told Blake yet." Grabbing her bag off the countertop, Yang gave it a meaningful pat. "I'm asking tonight at dinner, if I can find the nerve."

Hearing voices in the hall, Yang quickly lowered the bag and watched Blake and Ruby walk back inside.

“No way that would happen!” Ruby was in the midst of saying, waving her hands at the same time. “I could totally catch them without breaking anything!”

The moment Weiss saw Ruby, a feeling of disbelief swept through her once again.

This was real. Ruby was here. Yang was here. Blake was here. They were finally back together - their own little family.

“I think you’re underestimating how fragile they are...” Blake replied, appearing abundantly amused by the conversation.

“Maybe you’re underestimating how soft my hands are,” was Ruby’s response before she grinned at Weiss. “Don’t you think I could catch eggs without breaking them?”

Blinking at the unexpected question, Weiss quickly came up with an answer regardless of how silly it might be.

“Depends on if they’re cooked or not, and how fast they’re thrown,” she said, smiling when Ruby bobbed her head in acceptance. It was only after the moment passed that Weiss realized Yang had watched the tiny piece of conversation with a smile, evidently pleased with how it played out.

“Ok kiddo,” she said, reaching out and rustling Ruby’s hair. “Blake and I are heading out - I’m guessing you won’t be home tonight either?” Sending Ruby a questioning glance, Yang chuckled when Ruby enthusiastically shook her head. “Figures. Alright, well maybe the four of us can have dinner sometime?”

“That sounds like a great idea,” Blake said while Weiss nodded her agreement. “Maybe tonight?”

When Yang’s eyes widened, Weiss quickly replied, “Oh, I don’t think tonight will work because Ruby’s working, but how about tomorrow?”

With a relieved smile, Yang willingly agreed.

“That sounds good. Let’s plan on meeting here around five, then we’ll walk someplace?” An agreement was made in nods, and Yang smiled while reaching out for Blake’s hand. “Great. You two have fun!”

Walking towards the door, Yang sent Weiss a silent ‘thank you’ as she passed, which Weiss responded to with a nod and ‘good luck’ of her own. Not that Yang needed luck...Blake never said ‘no.’

After the apartment door closed, Weiss turned to Ruby and smiled - it was impossible *not* to smile when she found Ruby standing so close.

“Yang grilled you, didn’t she?” were the first words out of Ruby’s mouth.

“Only a little bit.” Seeing Ruby’s concern grow, Weiss rushed forward. “Don’t worry, she was very sweet. I think we could actually be great friends.”

Like magic, Ruby’s face lit up with joy at the idea of Weiss and Yang becoming friends.

“Really? You think so?”

“I do.”

When Weiss nodded, Ruby grinned and glanced around the apartment - a healthy amalgamation of Blake’s books, Yang’s clothes and entertainment choices, and Ruby’s clutter of random odds and ends.

“So...what kind of soulmate stuff can we do?” she asked, bringing her pure silver eyes back to Weiss.

“Soulmate stuff?” Weiss repeated, growing of newfound appreciation for any term with the word ‘soulmate’ in it.

“Yeah! Like...I dunno...do we do special things?”

“Spending time together is special,” Weiss replied, realizing that it was a horribly cheesy response but using it anyway. Reaching out, she took both of Ruby’s hands in her own. “Whatever we do, it will be special because we’re together.”

“So going to work can be special?” Ruby teased, swinging their joined arms lightly.

“Yes. Which means we should probably get going, shouldn’t we?”

“I guess...” Ruby attempted a pout, but the expression lasted only a second before her eyes lit up. “Oh! Can we order dessert from room service?”

Sensing where the conversation was going, Weiss playfully narrowed her eyes.

“Yes...”

“Then we can order ice cream and stay up talking again?”

Pretending to sigh in exasperation, she smiled when Ruby giggled at the sound.

“I suppose...” Weiss replied while internally rejoicing at the suggestion. It

was exactly what she'd wished for this morning, with just a bit of work mixed in. Not that she minded sitting at the restaurant watching Ruby work for a few hours...that would be fun, as well.

"New plan," Ruby said, bouncing on her toes as she said the words. "Work, then we head back to the hotel and spend the rest of the day eating ice cream while telling stories!"

"That sounds like an amazing plan."

Squealing in happiness, Ruby leaned forward and kissed Weiss right on the lips - the motion so unexpected Weiss hardly closed her eyes before the feeling disappeared.

"You're the best, Weiss! I'm so glad you found me."

Hearing the words, Weiss couldn't possibly be happier than right at this moment. Smiling, she reached up and brushed several strands of hair behind Ruby's ear - only for them to fall right back out of place.

"I'm happy I found you, too," she whispered before kissing Ruby. A real kiss this time - one that lingered and grew into the purest expression of love as they melded together.

There was much about Ruby that was new - and much that was similar - but this feeling was always the same. Ruby's lips moving against her own, a hand weaving through her hair while another clutched at her side and the smell of roses surrounded her. This was one of those moments she could easily fall into and never come out of.

To her, it didn't feel like they'd been together for only a few days. It felt like they'd picked up right where they left off in their past life, which itself was an extension of the life before that, which was an extension of the life before that...continuing on ad infinitum.

Maybe they'd followed the laws of the universe in their first life together, but now...their love was truly boundless. It would continue through this universe and the next, with no end in sight.

