

here i sit like a beginner beginning again

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by [nirav](#)

Summary

She turns her back on Yang and busies herself with the backpacks, leaving Yang with half a cup of coffee and an unfamiliar feeling in her gut, half the long-standing apprehension of trying to find her family and half something new and scalding and tied exclusively to the way her hands want to reach for the guarded set to Blake's jaw as much as they want to reach for the familiarity of Weiss's hand in hers.

Notes

Last Christmas, I wrote a [Bumbleby Tomb Raider AU](#) as a gift for a friend, and halfway into writing it realized that deep deep in my heart what I really wanted was for it to be a Bees Schnees fic. With the gracious permission of [maladyofthequotidian](#), I now present the single most self-indulgent thing I have ever written in my life, also known as adapting that fic into an OT3 version. If you've read the original fic, this will be super familiar because-- shockingly-- the first 80% of it required, like, the most minimal of tweaking, because the heart wants what it wants and apparently what my heart wants always is new and angsty iterations of Blake and Weiss and Yang getting together. I have literally nothing to say for myself at all.

- Inspired by [twenty_years asleep in a state of grace \(come together til we find a way home\)](#) by [nirav](#)

Chapter 1

*and now i'm standing disheveled at your door
covered in dust and dirt but full of hope
we might never be normal again
might never be normal again, but who cares?
i ask, who cares?*

Yang's just barely dodged one of the fists on its way towards her face when she hears her name from somewhere in the periphery, sharp and annoyed and unmistakable, and it distracts her just long enough that the next hit smashes into her cheekbone and sends her staggering back into the ropes.

"Come on!" she grunts out around her mouthpiece, shaking her head to steady her vision and barely dodging the next flurry of punches, barely getting her arms up enough to protect her face. A knee slams into her ribs and she's going to feel it for days, she's sure of it, with how it shoves the air out of her lungs and upends her balance, arms wavering for just a split second. It's enough for an uppercut to snap her head back and leave her legs unsteady, and suddenly she's on the floor with a forearm wrapped around her throat.

"Yang," Weiss says again, suddenly at eye level from Yang's spot on the floor, mouth set in a thin line and jaw tense in the way it only is when she's worried, tense enough that it pulls at the lines of scar tissue framing her eye. "Give up, you lost this one."

She glares back and struggles against the hold, trying to find a grip that will break the unwavering arm around her throat, even as her vision starts to blur and Weiss's sharp edges soften as her brain starts to fight for oxygen.

"Tap out, you moron!" Weiss snaps, eyes yanking from Yang's to behind her, and Yang finally relents, tapping out rapidly before Weiss can glare Pyrrha into letting her out of the hold.

"That's cheating," she gasps out, flopping down onto her back and flinging one arm out towards Weiss. "I can handle my own shit."

"You would've stayed there until you passed out and you know it," Weiss informs her. Her gaze shifts to Pyrrha, who's up on her feet and offering a hand down to Yang, smile bright and apologetic as always.

"I almost had you this time," Yang says with a groan as Pyrrha pulls her up to standing. "Until *someone* came in and started distracting me."

"It's true," Pyrrha says helpfully. Weiss rolls her eyes at the both of them, arms folded over her chest. "I thought you had work today."

"Plans," Weiss corrects. "And someone skipped out on them."

“I never agreed to anything.” Yang groans as she slides between the ropes of the ring, abdomen burning as she lands.

“Yang,” Weiss says, careful, quiet, and Pyrrha leans on the ropes, chin propped in her wrapped hands, watching the both of them.

“Fine,” Yang says. “Let me shower.” She holds a fist up for Pyrrha to bump against. “Next time, Nikos, I’m kicking your ass.”

“Sure you are,” Pyrrha says cheerfully, and Yang rolls her eyes and resists the urge to wrap Weiss up in a sweaty hug just to annoy her, instead skirting around her and making her way into the locker room, unwilling to accept the insult of having to keep herself in check while watching her training partner flirt with her best friend after the injury of her absolutely flattening Yang in a sparring match.

She takes longer than she needs to unwrap her hands, and spends as long as she can justify in the showers, dragging everything out as much as she can, toeing the line of procrastination until Weiss barges into the locker room with a sniff and glares at her.

“Stop procrastinating.” She leans against the door to the locker room and folds her arms over her chest, looking marvelously out of place in her perfectly pressed suit and the coat that probably cost as much as the entire gym itself, all sharp edges and clean lines amidst the blurred edges Yang consistently tried to lose herself in, a fixed point always keeping her from drifting too far away.

“You could have gone without me, you know,” Yang says, groaning as she pulls her shirt on. Her ribs are bruised, enough that she’s going to be feeling it for a few days, and they protest again when she bends over to tie her shoes.

“You know that’s not true,” Weiss says with a huff. “Don’t act like you don’t need this, too, you know.”

Yang doesn’t respond, instead focusing on gathering her hair up into a ponytail at the back of her head. “Come on,” she says, ignoring the way Weiss watches her with careful eyes and the soft set to her mouth that she only gets when she’s worried about Yang, like she always has since they were kids, since the week after Summer died when they were all still grieving and Yang had broken into her father’s study and found out that Raven-- cold, absent Raven from her parents’ company, who’d never expressed even the most fleeting of interests in Yang as a person-- was her biological mother. Weiss has always been the only one allowed to look at her like that, and Yang ignores it as best she can, slams her locker shut with more force than she needs to.

One of Weiss’s towncars is outside the gym, idling in a loading zone, and Yang flops into it without saying anything. It’s a long drive out of the city and she spends the whole time on her phone, texting everyone at work to see if there are shifts she can take tonight so she’s not stuck at home sulking. Weiss is on her laptop the whole time, spreadsheets open and fingers flying, and Yang keeps her focus on the cracked screen of her phone until the car pulls to a stop.

“You ready?” Weiss says, laptop shutting softly and disappearing into her briefcase.

“Ready as ever,” Yang says with a shrug, and she bounces out of the car before the driver can get the door for her, not waiting for Weiss to follow. Winter’s held on unseasonably long this year, dragging its feet into the end of April, and the wind slices cold across her cheeks. She shoves her hands into her pockets and scrunches her shoulders up against the cold, shivering under her wet hair, and makes her way through the overgrown grass of the unkempt estate to a towering mausoleum in the middle of the enormous backyard.

Her shoes scuff against the grass as she pulls up to a stop in front of the door, staring down at her laces instead of the oversized door in front of her.

Weiss appears at her side, wrapped up in a coat and with another folder over her arms. She offers it silently to Yang, holding it out unwaveringly until Yang relents and takes it, shrugging into it and sighing in spite of herself, the expensive cashmere soft and warm. It fits perfectly across her shoulders, even though she hasn’t worn it in years, since before she started fighting, before her shoulders had broadened and arms filled out, which means Weiss has had it tailored.

“Do you want to go in?” Weiss says softly.

“Do I ever?”

Weiss’s hand curls around her elbow and she waits, like she always does, until Yang pulls in a slow breath and steps forward, pulling the door’s key off the necklace she’s never stopped wearing and unlocking it. She holds onto Weiss’s hand, the way she always had to Ruby’s when they came here together, and they step inside.

It’s huge and cold, like always, white marble and polished granite amplifying the chill outside. The benches are clean and cold, and she focuses on the way it bites through the coat into her legs as she sits, staring up at her mother’s grave.

She keeps her focus there, instead of to the left, where her father’s empty coffin is interred, or to the right, where the same is all that’s left of her sister.

“I miss them,” Yang says eventually, after long minutes have gone by.

“Me too,” Weiss says, holding onto one of Yang’s hands with both of hers and leaning her head down onto Yang’s shoulder. She breathes in, slow and shattering, and pushes closer to Yang. “Ruby would’ve finished college--”

“Weiss,” Yang says, strangled and cracking. “I can’t.”

Weiss is quiet for long seconds, and Yang bites down on the inside of her cheek and wishes she knew how to talk about them. For Weiss, if not for herself, because Weiss has been a practically permanent fixture in their lives since they were toddlers, their parents’ companies too intertwined for them not to know each other, most of Weiss’s childhood spent at the Xiao Long estate with Yang and Ruby. Weiss has always been right at her side, Taiyang and Summer more parents to her than her own, attached at the hip with Yang since they were

toddlers, Ruby more a sister to her than Winter or Whitley ever cared to be for the Schnee's ignored middle child.

"I'm sorry," Weiss says eventually, not moving from where her head's pillowed on Yang's shoulder. "I know you don't like to talk about them."

"I can't," Yang starts, and then pauses, breathes, pulls air as deep into her lungs as she can. "If I talk about them like they're dead then I can't tell myself they might still be alive."

"Yang," Weiss says, so softly, so sadly that Yang wants to punch the granite in front of her.

"If their bodies were anywhere to be found, we would have found them," Yang says, firmly, desperately, repeating the same thing she'd said over and over again to Raven, to the police, to the countless therapists she'd been shuttled to over and over again throughout what had been left of her childhood.

"It's been almost ten years," Weiss says gently. "They would have found their way home by now if they were still alive."

Yang pulls her hand free, jerking away and pushing up to her feet and pressing the heels of her hands over her eyes, hard enough the pinpricks of light burst behind her eyelids. Her breath is ragged and sharp and she can practically feel Weiss folding in on herself at the movement.

"I'm not ready to give up on them," Yang says, pulling her hands away and turning her back to the empty coffins behind her.

"I know you aren't," Weiss says, carefully. Her hands are folded in her lap, her shoulders slumping in a way she never lets anyone else see except Yang, chin drooping down towards her chest. She breathes in deep, posture straightening with the effort, and sets her jaw. "I need to talk to you about something. And I need you to promise you'll listen."

"What, now? Here?" Yang gestures back towards her sister's name, the just shy of twelve years of her life marked into the granite.

"Yes," Weiss says. Her hands clench in her lap, knuckles going white. "Raven came to see me yesterday."

Yang freezes, jaw clenched tight and fists tighter. "Weiss--"

"Yang, please," Weiss says quietly. "They can't fill your dad's position permanently until you sign the paperwork and the board is tired of waiting--"

"Why should I care?"

"Because they're going to dismantle the whole company if they can't fill his seat!" Weiss says, loud enough that her voice echoes off the hard stones surrounding them, and the tension in Yang's spine evaporates. "All of it. There's only so much they can do when they can't have a permanent chairman, but they can't have one until either you sign the papers or you sign over the rights to--"

"I'm not giving my father's company to *Raven* ," Yang spits out.

"Of course not," Weiss says, mouth turning down in the particular way it does whenever she considers Raven and all the ways she's hurt Yang. "Don't be ridiculous. But if you sign the paperwork, then the rights pass to *you* ."

"I don't want the company," Yang says, her voice shaking. "I don't want it. I didn't even go to college, what am I going to do with--"

"I can help you," Weiss says. "You know I will, and you know you can trust me."

"-- and I don't want to act like he's dead," Yang carries on. "I can't just-- Weiss, you know I can't--"

Weiss pushes up to her feet, hands settling on Yang's arms firmly, and holds steady against the way Yang's body shakes and her breathing turns uneven.

"Yang, listen to me," Weiss says sharply. "Listen to me, okay? You're my best friend and I love you more than anyone else in this world, so please trust me, okay? You know I wouldn't tell you to do this if I thought it was the wrong play. But your family's company, the whole estate, the house and this--" She presses a hand, careful and reverent, to the cold marble edges of Ruby's coffin, of Summer's, and something hot and familiar, something Yang has held padlocked away for as long as she can remember, something that's deflated her relationship with every other person she's ever tried to date, flares against her sternum-- "Will be lost and chopped up and sold off in pieces if you don't save it. You don't have to do the legwork if you don't want, I will handle all of it, I *promise* you. I just need you to sign the paperwork so it doesn't all fall to Raven. You do that, and I will handle the rest of it."

Yang's hands shake, curling into fists, and she stares down at Weiss and the wide-eyed promise in her eyes, the solid set to her jaw, and thinks of her family's home, overgrown and falling into ruin after so many years of disuse, and nods, finally.

"Okay," she says, low and aching. "Okay."

"Okay," Weiss echoes, and her hands tighten on Yang's arms, practically holding her upright until Yang finally moves, curling down and around Weiss's smaller form, arms wrapping around her and holding tight. Weiss doesn't waver, because she never does when it's Yang, never has since the day Taiyang and Ruby disappeared, has always been a fixed point for Yang to cling to, an anchor to keep her from sliding off the edge of the world.

Minutes click past until Yang unwinds herself with a loud sniff, pulling herself back up straight, and Weiss regards her carefully, hands hovering at her side.

"Are you--"

"I'm okay," Yang mutters, swiping at her eyes.

"Let's get you home," Weiss says quietly, curling an arm around Yang's. "It's freezing out here."

“Yeah, well,” Yang says with a snort. “Heat’s out at my place anyways, so it’s not that much better.”

“What?”

“Landlord said he’d fix it tomorrow.” Yang shrugs.

“You know, once you sign, the funds will unlock,” Weiss says. She takes the key out of Yang’s hands gently when her fingers shake, bright red in the cold, and locks the door for her, offers the key back with a reverence that Yang hates and can’t help but appreciate anyways. “And you can finally move somewhere that isn’t a shoebox in Gowanus with the worst landlord in history.”

“I like my shoebox,” Yang says without any real conviction behind it.

“Yang, please,” Weiss says with a scoff. “The penniless martyr thing is old. You’re getting a new apartment immediately once you sign. I’ll buy your current building and evict you if that’s what it takes.”

“So bossy,” Yang mutters, but she smiles in spite of herself at Weiss’s familiar snap. She follows Weiss into the car, letting the driver shut the door for her this time, and blows on her hands, the heat in the backseat comforting. “Don’t suppose you want to buy me dinner after all this, do you?”

Weiss sighs and rolls her eyes, indulgent as always, and calls out a familiar address in Astoria to the driver. “Only because you got the shit beat out of you earlier.”

“I wouldn’t have, if you’d just stayed quiet and let me do my thing instead of trying to help Pyrrha by distracting me because you have the hots for her.”

“Don’t blame your failures on me, you moron,” Weiss says with a huff, and Yang laughs, loud and bright, and leans into Weiss’s side. She doesn’t feel better or lighter or like she’s healed over any of the grief burning in her chest since she was fourteen by agreeing to sign the paperwork declaring her father and sister dead, but it does feel like a step, even if it’s a small one, towards something, and a step is more than she’s managed in the better part of a decade.

The conference room is big enough for thirty people, towering forty stories over the street with enormous windows flooding the room with light that reflects off of the overly-shiny table. Yang stands behind the chair she’s meant to be sitting in, hands shoved in her pockets uncomfortably while Weiss sits silently, posture sharp and formal and every inch of it Schnee haughtiness. Yang feels ratty and underdressed, her leather jacket worn and boots scuffed, compared to the clean pressed lines of Weiss’s suit and the sharp edge of her tie. Her father’s lawyer, portly and disheveled in his overpriced suit, occasionally tries to make small talk with

either of them while they wait for the paperwork to be brought in, but Yang ignores him entirely every time and Weiss shuts him down politely.

The door opens and in strides Raven and a small team of lawyers, a heavy briefcase in her hand.

“What are you doing here?” Yang says flatly, hands curling into fists in her pockets. “You--

--are the acting COO for the firm,” Weiss finishes for her, standing with her arms linked behind her back. “Though I’m not sure you necessarily have the legal expertise needed to oversee such an endeavor.”

“Don’t worry, I brought backup,” Raven says coolly, gesturing blindly towards the lawyers. “Shall we?”

“By all means,” Weiss says, icy and level, one-upping Raven’s attempt to unsettle the both of them, and Yang thanks the universe for Weiss Schnee and the way she doesn’t have to be the one who tries speaking to the woman who signed Yang away the day she was born.

Raven hefts the briefcase up onto the table and flips it open, hauling a stack of papers out and offering them to the lawyer across the table. Weiss intercepts them with a chilly thanks and flips through them rapidly, impassive and silent.

“I think you’ll find that everything is in order,” Raven says, overly sweet, and Yang considers throwing one of the chairs at her.

“I’ll do my own due diligence, thank you,” Weiss says without looking up. Uncomfortable minutes slide past as she reads through the paperwork and finally offers it to Yang with a silent nod.

“So I sign this and they’re dead,” Yang says quietly. “That’s it?”

“They’re already dead,” Raven says, sounding almost bored. “This just acknowledges it.”

“Your input is neither required nor requested,” Weiss snaps at her. “Yang,” she adds, softer.

“I’m okay.” Yang stubbornly refuses to look at Raven.

Next to Weiss, the lawyer pulls his own briefcase out and produces a puzzlebox, setting it on the table with a quiet hum.

“What’s that?” Yang says, suddenly unconcerned with the paperwork.

“It’s for you,” he says, pushing it towards her sleepily. “Your father’s will indicated that you receive it upon his death.”

Yang reaches across Weiss for it, paperwork ignored, and pulls it towards her.

“What is it?” Weiss says quietly.

“One of dad’s puzzleboxes,” Yang says, turning the cylinder comprised of rotating pieces and levers in her hands. Her fingers slide across the carved symbols on it, tripping over familiar edges and turning pieces habitually. “We had a ton of them, they were more Ruby’s thing, but we both were always--”

She twists a final piece and the box pops open, ejecting a rolled-up photograph, edges worn and crinkled. Yang glances over at Weiss and unfolds it, revealing the Xiao Long estate courtyard and Yang's parents, in sweats and t-shirts like they always wore at home, a three year old Ruby on Tai's shoulders and a five year old Weiss on Summer's, Yang between them both swinging recklessly from their hands, all of them full of laughter and bright smiles.

Her hands shake, nearly crushing the already damaged edges of the picture, and she pulls in a steadying breath and folds the picture into her pocket rapidly, turning her focus back to the puzzle box and pulling the ejected cartridge further out. A yellowed slip of paper, carefully rolled around a key that's eerily similar to the one hanging around Yang's neck, falls out onto the table.

Raven sits up straighter, suddenly interested, and Yang immediately pushes her chair back with the key in one hand, unrolling the paper and tilting it so only she and Weiss can see it.

Weiss’s hand curls around Yang’s wrist, her posture careful and shielding. “That’s his handwriting, right?” she says softly.

“Yeah,” Yang breathes out.

“What does it--”

“We're going to find out,” Yang says, eyes locking onto Weiss’s for a short moment before she rolls it back up and steps around her to grab her coat and the puzzlebox.

“What are you doing?” Raven says sharply. “We’re not finished--”

“Call my assistant to reschedule,” Weiss says, saccharine sweet. “I have availability next Friday. I’m sure you can make that work with your schedule.” She slaps a business card down onto the table and hurries after Yang.

“Do you know where you’re going?” Weiss says once the elevator door closes, and Yang pulls the paper back out and offers it to her.

“Home,” she says firmly.

Weiss pulls in a careful breath and nods, staring down at the paper. “Do you think--”

“I don’t know,” Yang says over her, apology written into her eyes for interrupting even as she does it. “But I want to see what it means before I sign anything.”

“I’ll call the car,” Weiss says, handing the paper back to her, phone in hand before she hesitates. “Unless you don’t want me to--”

“Of course you’re coming,” Yang says. Her hand curls around Weiss’s automatically, holding tight to steady her breathing like always, and she nods, sharp and definitive.

Weiss’s business facade, the Schnee family coldness she wears like armor in public and at work, cracks to show Weiss, Yang’s best friend since they were three years old, and she nods with shining eyes.

“Okay,” she says. “Let’s go.”

“I’m not saying this isn’t what it said,” Weiss says carefully from where she’s inspecting a corner of the mausoleum. “But if there was some kind of door or something here, don’t you think we would have noticed by now?”

“I’m only here once a year,” Yang says with a shrug, running her hands methodically over her sister’s headstone.

“I’m here a lot,” Weiss says, so quiet it almost disappears into the dark corners of the room, and Yang pauses but doesn’t turn around.

“I know,” Yang says after a moment. She moves onto her mother’s headstone, pushing at corners and edges until suddenly marble gives under her hand, the *S* in her name suddenly depressing under her hand and opening into a keyhole. “The first letter of our final destination.”

“Shit,” Weiss breathes out. “You were right.”

“Always the tone of surprise,” Yang says, rolling her eyes, even as she holds her breath and pushes the key into the lock and turns it.

The floor starts to pull away under her feet and she leaps back, putting herself between Weiss and the hole appearing in the floor, but it stops abruptly, displaying a staircase down below the floor.

“What the hell,” Yang mutters.

“Are you up for this?” Weiss says, a hand curled tight around her arm. “We don’t have to go down there today--”

“I’m fine,” Yang says, already starting down the stairs, phone out to use as a flashlight. Weiss’s steps and annoyed mumbles follow her down the dusty staircase to the cavernous room that opens up below the floor. “Whoa.”

It’s filled to bursting with wooden crates and enormous dusty maps, artifacts and supplies and an oversized, pockmarked wooden desk just like the one that lived in her father’s study even

still. Half of the crates are open and filled with paperwork and folders full of files, binders and binders of legal documents spilling out in a disorganized mess.

“God, I’d forgotten what a disaster he was at organization,” Weiss mutters. She flips open the closest binder and brushes dust off of the first page, bending over the legal document and squinting at it.

“What is that?” Yang doesn’t look away from the desk and the chair, just like the one her dad had in his study, the one she and Ruby had used to steal and roll down the hallways in races to annoy the house staff.

“Looks like an acquisition,” Weiss says absently, flipping through the pages and sneezing irritably when dust kicks up into her face. “For-- oh. The Branwen subsidiary.”

Yang circles around the desk, fingers trailing over a shiny worn-down spot just left of center in front of the chair where her dad would have constantly leaned his elbow while he was taking notes. When Ruby was little, especially after the car accident that had killed Summer and Qrow, she’d spent hours in the study with their dad, sitting in his lap while he threw himself into his work, until he would inevitably fall asleep slumped back in the chair, Ruby forgotten and playing with one of the hundreds of puzzleboxes scattered around the house, until Yang came to put her to bed. She stares down at another remnant of her family, fingers pressing down through the dust.

She shakes her head and clears her throat, eyes watering, and turns her focus to the drawers, cracking them open and digging through them, ignoring the quiet concern radiating off of Weiss. She bypasses more folders and papers, flipping through the semi-organized files until she finds one labelled from the month they left and yanks it out.

“It’s travel plans,” Yang says slowly, absently, turning pages slowly, skimming over email chains about finding a guide through rural Hungary, Slovakia, Romania. “Why was all of this down here?”

“Taiyang was always a bit eccentric,” Weiss says carefully, half her focus still on the acquisition paperwork.

“That’s one way of putting it,” Yang mutters. She dips back into the drawer and finds an old camcorder. “What the-- they haven’t even made these since the nineties, I’m pretty sure.”

“It’s not that old,” Weiss says, rolling her eyes.

“Do you know how to work one?”

“What sort of A/V club nerd do I look like to you?” Weiss drawls out. “Really, I want to know.”

“So helpful,” Yang says with a roll of her eyes. There are cables attached to the camcorder still, and she squints at them, sorting out red from yellow and dragging it all over to a dusty old TV on the other side of the desk. She fumbles with the cables and the inputs on the side of the TV, flapping one hand out in irritation when Weiss tries to help, and finally gets them

plugged in. The TV flashes to life with a hum, and Yang circles back around the desk to stand by Weiss before hitting play on the camcorder.

Her father's face fills the screen, and an ache lances through her stomach. She reaches out blindly and grips onto Weiss's hand, tight enough that she knows it must hurt, but Weiss holds back just as tight, nails digging into the back of Yang's hand, keeping her from falling off the edge of the world at the first new glimpse of her father she's had in ten years.

"Hey, Yang," her dad says, his familiar voice burning into Yang's ears. "So, I-- well. If you're down here listening to this, I'm gone. And I know it's not fair of me to ask this, but I need you to do something important for me, and you can't tell anyone about it, okay? Not even Ruby. I don't want either of you caught up in any of this, but she's only eleven and I know you're still so young too, but you've always been more mature than anyone realizes, haven't you? Holding our whole family together after-- um-- well."

Weiss's other hand comes up to wrap around Yang's forearm, gentle and familiar and grounding, and Yang covers it with her free hand.

"So I'm sorry to ask anything more of you after you've had to shoulder so much responsibility, but I need you to burn everything in this office, okay? All the research, all the maps, the documents, all of it. Chuck it into a bonfire and let it all go up in smoke. I really can't tell you how important this is, there's so much at stake. It all has to go, okay? Please, Yang."

He pauses on the screen, somber and strained and so very much the same hollow shell he'd been for years after her mother died, nothing of the warm boisterous man he'd been once he recovered. Yang's fingers dig harder into Weiss's hand.

"Do this for me, and for Ruby, and Weiss, and everyone else. Burn it all." He pauses again and smiles, a flash of who he'd been before he disappeared, and Yang's chest burns. "Never forget that I love you, kiddo. So much."

The video cuts off, turning to static, and Yang exhales without realizing she'd been holding the air in her lungs.

"What do you think that's about?" Weiss ventures.

"I have no idea," Yang says slowly. She doesn't let go of Weiss's hand, dragging the closest crate over with her free hand and pulling out a stack of files. Weiss takes half silently and they flip through them, skimming through pages and pages of research.

"The wild girl," Weiss reads out after a moment. "Why's he concerned with some-- what is this, a folk tale? From-- Poland?"

"Hungary," Yang says absently, then pauses. "They were going to Eastern Europe."

"Yang," Weiss says, turning to face her, finally pulling her hand free. "It doesn't make sense. If whatever's down here is so worrisome he wants it all *burned*, then it can't be

connected to whatever they were doing on that trip. You don't really think he would've taken a seventh grader with him on anything connected to that?"

"They were just going to go camping," Yang says slowly, tilting her head back to stare at the ceiling, sorting through memories she's tried to avoid for the last decade. "For a few weeks along that river, the-- um--"

"Danube," Weiss supplies automatically.

"Yeah," Yang says, pulling her head back down. "The Danube. Ruby wanted to go camping, you know how she was about it, and they were going to do that for a week or whatever and then she was coming home. Dad was going to stay and work for a while after she came home."

Yang rubs her hands over her eyes, breathing in deeply and letting it out. She sorts through the folders on the desk until she finds the one with travel plans.

"Look at this," she says, pushing it towards Weiss. "He hired someone. A guide."

"Why would he need a guide--"

"I don't know, but he *did*," Yang says excitedly. "None of the search parties knew about this, the cops didn't know about it. I've read every single file they have and I know you have too, all of their searches started in Budapest and right outside, but he wouldn't have hired a guide for that. This is new information."

"Yang," Weiss says, hands hovering out towards her. "Slow down, don't--"

"Weiss, I have to try," Yang says over her. "I *have* to. I have to know."

"Just-- breathe, okay?" Weiss takes the paperwork out of her hands and sets it on the desk carefully. "This is a lot to take in in one day, okay, you need to just-- take some time to think. Please. Sleep on it and then we'll sort through all of this tomorrow."

"Weiss--"

"I want to know, too," Weiss says sharply. "You're not the only one who lost them."

Yang flushes, a different ache burning in her chest, and she nods after a long hesitation.

"Okay," she mutters. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Weiss echoes. She wraps a hand around Yang's arm. "This will all still be here then, okay? So let's just--come on. Stay at mine tonight and we'll come at this with fresh eyes tomorrow."

"Okay," Yang says, casting another glance down to the papers on the desk before nodding again and heading to the staircase, head still reeling over the fact that there had been information about her family's disappearance under the mausoleum this whole time, right under her feet, and she could have found it so much sooner if she'd just signed the paperwork when everyone told her to.

“Stop it,” Weiss says as the floor over the staircase slides back into place. “Stop overthinking it.”

“It’s been here this whole time.” Yang’s hands dig into her pockets, pushing against the nausea twisting in her stomach. “I could have--”

“You didn’t want to give up on them,” Weiss says, solid and unwavering like always. “You did nothing wrong. Stop blaming yourself.”

She watches as Yang slots the key onto her necklace and tucks it away, taking in big shaking breaths.

“Come on,” Weiss says eventually. “You need food, and a stiff drink, and a good night’s sleep, and we can look at this with fresh eyes tomorrow. Together.”

She’s right, like she so often is, and Yang trails after her silently, allowing herself to be taken back into the city and to Weiss’s apartment, high above the park, with a room for Yang that’s only rarely ever used.

Weiss does her best to keep her grounded, to keep her from disappearing into thinking back to the dusty maps on the walls and the collections of islands marked on them, the thick stacks of papers full of research on eastern European mythology, the diagrams analyzing riddles and *death queen must die to bring back life*, the trail of emails organizing someone to guide her father through the ever-shifting topography of islands and caves scattered throughout the Danube.

She does her best, but Yang stares up into the dark of the room kept for her just in case, and she dresses warmly and shoves her feet into boots and sets off. She pauses and considers leaving a note for Weiss, an apology, something, but knows it would probably just make things worse, so instead she just leaves and makes her way back to what’s left of her family’s estate.

Weiss’s driver takes her without question, leaving her at the estate with instructions to take the long way home that she knows he’ll ignore-- Weiss has a way of inspiring unwavering loyalty in people once they know her, and he’s never much liked Yang anyways, tolerating her only for Weiss’s sake and perfectly happy to deposit her anywhere that isn’t in Weiss’s immediate proximity-- and she disappears back down into the vault. She documents everything she can, memorizes maps, uploads pictures of research onto her phone and downloads as much onto it as she can from the fossil of a desktop on the desk. She watches the recording four more times and considers setting fire to the whole building, but her mother’s bones are resting over top of it all and she doesn’t have time to move it.

She leaves and takes the train to the airport and spends nearly everything she has left in her bank account on a one-way flight to Budapest.

Chapter 2

Yang's been to Budapest before-- they'd been just about everywhere in Europe at some point during their childhoods, the children of dynastic corporate families that practically controlled the global economy, for better or worse-- but not since she was a child, and she barely remembers it. She lands with barely any liquidity left and only a loose idea of where she's going, out past the outskirts of the city to a village too small to be more than an unlabeled dot on a map in search of the man who her father had hired as a guide.

Her back aches from the tiny airplane seat and the way she'd had to scrunch her shoulders forward to accommodate the elderly lady on one side and the middle-aged man on the other for almost ten hours from New York and then cramming herself into a bus to get into the city from the airport. Her Hungarian is nonexistent, but she manages to stumble through finding a bus that will drop her in the town closest to the village she's in search of, leaving her with ten kilometers to walk.

It's not ideal, but she grips the keys on her necklace and finds herself a spot on the bus. She can walk ten kilometers. It's not that hard.

What she hadn't accounted for was how it would be dark when she started walking. The bus took longer than expected and the bus driver argues in rapid-fire Hungarian when she tries to leave to start her walk, gesturing angrily towards the nonexistent shoulder on the road and the lack of any streetlights.

"I'm okay," she says, over and over again. She tries explaining in English, in her rusty French and Spanish, that she's capable of taking care of herself, but he just stares at her and shakes his head.

"Stupid," he says in English, and waves her off. "Stupid American."

She waves as politely as she can as the bus pulls away, and sighs. Exhaustion pulls at her bones, the better part of a day spent in small cramped seats leaving her sore and fatigued, but she hikes her backpack full of just a sleeping bag, a few changes of clothes, a tablet and charger, and the puzzle box, and starts walking. She's walked further than this in New York too many times to count, too stubborn to accept Weiss's offers of rides or friends' offers of spare Metrocards, when she couldn't afford a ride on the subway or her bike was broken. She can do this.

She's three kilometers in when a car whizzes by, engine roaring, and she freezes in her spot when the car slams on the brakes and skids to a stop. Her hands tighten around the straps of her backpack and then fall to her sides, stance widening and balance shifting when the car reverses back towards her and stops again and the window rolls down.

"Stop acting like I'm going to murder you," comes from inside the car, and Yang jerks back a step just before Weiss leans over the console and glares at her. "Honestly, you magnificent idiot, did you really think I would just sit home and wait for you? Get in."

“Weiss?” Yang says stupidly. “What are you--”

“Seriously?” Weiss revs the engine and glares until Yang relents and drops down into the passenger’s seat, and then barely waits for the door to shut before dumping the clutch recklessly and setting off again.

“Just going to waltz out to eastern Europe with no money, no plan, no *nothing* to try and track down your family, no big deal, just wait at home, Weiss! It’s not like you speak seven languages and have unlimited funds and can fly a plane and have connections all over Europe or anything!” She slams the car into the next gear and shoots a heated glare over at Yang. “Seriously, did you think I would just let you do this on your own and wait for you to come home or disappear just like they did?”

She takes a corner far faster than Yang would’ve guessed-- she knows Weiss can drive, even if she’s chauffeured around almost everywhere, because they learned at the same time, but she didn’t know Weiss could drive like *this*, leaning aggressively through corners and running the engine to the top of each gear smoothly, even if she shouldn’t be surprised, technically, that precision driving is yet another thing Weiss has perfected-- and lets out an indignant huff.

“Any day now,” she says impatiently. “I’d love to know why you thought walking on a rural unlit road in a foreign country in the middle of the night was a good idea.”

“I was fine,” Yang says, indignation rising in her chest, not least because she doesn’t want to admit how comforting it is to know that Weiss followed her.

“You looked like you thought I was going to pull a gun on you.”

“To be fair, you drove up like a crazy person and started yelling at me.” Yang braces her backpack on her knees and props an elbow on the window, leaning her head against it tiredly. “It’s not the worst of survival instincts not to trust anyone who does that.”

“What survival instincts,” Weiss says with a snort. She slows down drastically, pulling into the miniscule town, and takes a left turn down an unmarked road as if she’s been here a hundred times. “You didn’t have anywhere to stay, either, did you?”

“I’m fine camping,” Yang says, huffing, because she *is* perfectly fine sleeping in the woods and hadn’t come out here totally without a plan. “I know where to track the guy I need down, I just-- the bus situation didn’t work out as I’d expected, that’s all.”

“If only you knew someone who could’ve gotten a car for you,” Weiss says, rolling her eyes. She pulls up to a dark house and parks in the driveway. “Airbnb’s not really an option and there aren’t any hotels, but I got Klein to set something up. We can stay here for at least a week.”

She flounces out of the car, popping the trunk and leaving it open for Yang to empty, and up to the front door. There’s a key under the mat and she digs it out while Yang circles the car, hiking her backpack up onto one shoulder and slamming to a stop because the trunk is filled with enough supplies to support a small army. She digs the expensive leather duffel out and leaves the rest, rolling her eyes at Weiss’s melodrama.

“You need to rest,” Weiss says as soon as the door shuts behind Yang. “You can track this guy tomorrow, once you’re caught up on sleep.”

“I don’t need to catch up on sleep,” Yang says moodily, dumping Weiss’s bag on the floor at her feet.

“Yes, you do,” Weiss throws back. “Because you took a ten hour commercial flight and then a bus and then started *hiking*, and you never sleep on planes.”

“Fine.” Yang steps around her and stalks towards down the hall, finding a bedroom on the left and flinging her backpack into it. “You know, I don’t need you to babysit me.”

“I’m not babysitting you.” Weiss folds her arms over her chest and juts her chin out. She’s not wearing heels, for the first time that Yang can remember in years, and she’s so *small*. She stopped growing less than a year after Taiyang and Ruby disappeared and Yang had a growth spurt two years later, but Weiss has been the same height the whole time, as if her body gave up on moving forward after they were gone, and it *hurts* to remember how caught in the past they both are sometimes, in their own ways. “I don’t know how many more ways to say it, Yang. You’re not the only one who lost them.”

Her glare wavers and Yang drops her head, because she does know, of course she knows. Weiss was a practically permanent fixture at their house their whole childhoods, dragging her to archery lessons and fencing lessons and gymnastics training, going with Yang to dojos and soccer matches and climbing gyms, always there after Summer died and Taiyang disappeared into himself, leaving the two of them to look after Ruby. There’s no point in Yang’s life where Weiss hasn’t been standing right beside her, even when she was doing her best to disappear; there’s no point since grade school that Yang hasn’t loved her fiercely for it, silent and locked away behind the mess of her grief.

“I know,” she says with a sigh. “I’m not-- I didn’t leave because I thought you weren’t hurting just as much. I just didn’t want to drag you into it.”

“I’m in it whether you like it or not,” Weiss says. “I loved them, too, Yang. So let me help.”

Yang sighs again and leans against the doorframe, neck protesting the movement. Her ribs follow suit, still bruised from the sparring match with Pyrrha that feels like a lifetime ago.

“Let’s get some sleep,” she says eventually. “We can go talk to this guy tomorrow. I’ll even get you breakfast first if I can find somewhere to buy it.”

“You’ll *make* me breakfast,” Weiss says with a sniff. She hefts her bag and stalks past Yang to the second bedroom. “Take a shower, you smell like airplane.”

“Love you too,” Yang says over her shoulder, and then pauses. It’s too easy, sometimes, too easy after so long to pretend she hasn’t loved Weiss forever, hasn’t pushed it away every time someone managed to convince Weiss to go on a date. “Weiss?”

Weiss stops, almost into the other bedroom entirely, and her jaw clenches as she stares straight ahead instead of turning to face Yang.

“I’m sorry,” Yang says softly. “For leaving.”

“It’s okay,” Weiss says, level and automatic, and her jaw clenches again before she disappears into her room.

The pipes groan throughout the whole shower, and she collapses into bed with a head full of wet hair knotting itself into tangles, puzzlebox on the bed next to her and tablet in hand, hasty pictures of her dad’s research pulled up. She falls asleep eventually, but not before she’s read enough mythology to give herself nightmares of men lured into the woods and falling victim to violent spirits, leaving deflated corpses littered across eastern Europe, of chasms of souls and armies of priests left in place to keep people safe, of drained bodies of everyone she’s ever loved-- Ruby and Weiss and her parents-- left alone to disintegrate on forest floors.

“This is it?” Weiss says dubiously. They’re staring at a ramshackle house, shabbier than those surrounding it, the windows cloudy and stone foundation cracked. There’s a car in the driveway, in the sense that it has four wheels and a steering wheel, but little else to identify it as such.

“Sure seems to be,” Yang says, glancing down at her phone again. “You want to go first?”

“Yeah, right.” Weiss rolls her eyes and folds her arms over her chest, glaring up at Yang, who sticks her tongue out in response and bangs one fist against the door.

There’s no reaction for long seconds, and then shuffling footsteps sound from within the house. Yang glances back to Weiss, who’s standing six feet back from the door, arms still folded over her chest skeptically.

“Hello?” Yang says, and then shakes her head and tries again. “Szia?” The Hungarian trips awkwardly off her tongue, the syllables unfamiliar save for her middling attempt at Duolingo on the plane ride over.

There’s an unintelligible string of Hungarian from the other side of the door, and Yang blinks rapidly and looks back to Weiss helplessly.

“Sorry, um,” Yang says slowly. “We’re looking for someone? Do you speak English?”

There’s the sound of the lock turning in the door and another grumble of Hungarian, and Weiss suddenly appears at Yang’s side, knuckles rapping at the door and swift German spilling out of her mouth. She pauses, and then switches to French, then Russian, then Mandarin.

The door finally opens a crack, and Weiss shoots Yang a triumphant sneer and carries on in Mandarin.

"I don't speak Chinese," sounds from inside, and they're in the middle of a foreign country trying to find the last man who saw her family alive and it's *serious*, but Yang still snorts at the audible click when Weiss's mouth snaps shut. The door opens wider and instead of a middle-aged man, there's a woman staring appraisingly at them, dark hair melting into the shadows of the unlit house, eyes bright and sharp and burning gold in the dark.

"You speak English, though," Weiss says after a moment. "If only we'd asked that initially. Oh *wait*."

"I don't want to talk to anyone," she says, mirroring Weiss's aggressive posture.

"We're sorry," Yang says, hand on Weiss's shoulder. "We're just looking for someone."

"It's just me here," she says.

"We're-- uh." Yang scrambles for her phone and pulls up the picture of a printed email chain, squinting at the cracked screen. "Looking for-- um-- Adam Taurus?"

Her eyes flicker darker and then back to impassive, and she shakes her head.

"There's no Adam here," she says. "Not anymore."

"But you know him?" Yang says, pressing past Weiss and holding the phone up for her to see.

"I did," she says thinly, pushing the door half closed. "Haven't seen him in years."

"Please," Yang says, pushing her phone forward more. "I need to track him down, he's the last person who saw my family--"

"You don't want to find Adam," she says sharply, avoiding Yang's phone and pushing at the door, but Yang slams a foot in front of it and holds it open.

"Please, can you just-- please," she says, uncaring of how desperate she sounds. Weiss's hand settles on her arm, calm and comforting, but she's standing at the door of the person who took her father and sister into the woods and they never returned, and she has to *try*. "My dad hired him years ago as a guide, and he and my sister disappeared. I didn't know until now, but I just-- I have to know what happened to them."

There's something that could almost be sympathy flashing in gold-bright eyes, and Yang latches onto it, pushing further. "I just need to know where to find him--"

"If they hired him as a guide, then they're dead," she says flatly.

"Hey," Weiss says, sharp and burning, and something drops in Yang's stomach and she shoves at the door with one arm, flinging it open and sending the other woman stumbling back.

"I'm not looking for someone else to be a piece of shit and give up without trying," Yang says, stepping through the doorway and looming over the other woman. She's got a good

few inches of height, more if she pulls herself up straight over the other woman's slumping posture, and she takes advantage of it, broadening her shoulders and standing as tall and intimidating as she can, anger a warm buzz humming under her skin. "My dad was many things but he wasn't a complete idiot. If he hired this guy, he had a reason for it, and he took my baby sister with him. So either tell me where to find him or tell me where to find his fucking body, and then I'll leave."

"Yang," Weiss says softly, hand on her back, cool and calming, and Yang breathes heavily under it, glaring down at the woman who's glaring right back up at her, somehow more than an arm's length away.

"Adam was a piece of shit," she says after a long moment. "He hasn't been back here in ten years. He went out on a guide job, came back in the middle of the night to pack up a bunch of his things, and then disappeared. Haven't seen him since."

"Where would he have gone?" Yang presses on, unconcerned with Weiss's hand on her back or the irritation building in front of her.

"I have no idea, and I have no interest in knowing," the woman says, settling her hands on her hips and staring up at Yang. "He's a piece of trash. You shouldn't want to find him at all."

"I want to find him if he helps me find my family," Yang throws back. "Just-- *please*. Is there anything you do know?" Her hands are shaking and she curls them into fists, shoulders tightening under Weiss's hold. "My sister was *twelve*."

Something gives in her eyes, and the woman finally wavers, posture breaking and chin dropping and shoulders slumping.

"I--," she starts to say. "Let me look at that email again."

Yang scrambles to unlock her phone and holds it out, finally chancing a look back at Weiss, who's standing with reservation written into her jawline.

"The delta," the other woman says eventually. "The river delta, on the eastern border of Romania. Adam knew the islands in the delta better than just about anyone. Your father must have hired him for that. It's the only thing that makes sense. He'd only have taken a job from an American if it made him feel in control and that only worked if no one else could do it. Tons of people could have been guides for anywhere else but that."

"The Danube river delta?" Weiss finally says, curiosity overwriting hesitation.

"Yeah." The phone's handed back to Yang unceremoniously. "I wouldn't recommend you going there, though. It's a maze of islands and caves, barely anyone can navigate it."

"But this Adam guy could," Yang says hurriedly. "Can anyone else? Anyone you know? One of his colleagues or something?"

"No," she says after a long moment. "He didn't work well with others."

“You knew him well, though,” Weiss says. She tilts her head to one side, haughty and judgmental, and plants her hands on her hips. “Enough that you’re living in the house he last lived in, and can speak to his personality.”

Yang pulls back on her heels, looking from Weiss to the other woman and back again. She shoves her phone back into her pocket and keeps her hands there, as much to have somewhere to put them as to keep herself still while Weiss takes over for a minute.

“I-- used to,” she says. She seems to shrink back, dark hair and dark sweater blurring into the darker walls of the unlit hallway, flinching back visibly, and it’s enough to unravel the tension in Yang’s stomach, a momentary flash of curiosity, of sympathy, overtaking her frustration. “A long time ago.”

“Do you also know the islands in the delta?” Weiss says. “If you knew him so well.” She jerks her chin towards the wall behind Yang, and Yang swivels around to blink at a dusty framed map of the Romanian coastline and the Danube river delta.

The woman is silent, fingers curling into fists and then flexing outwards, in and out, three times that Yang can count before she speaks again.

“I think you should leave,” she says slowly.

“I think you should help us,” Weiss counters. “We can pay.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“But you want closure,” Yang says suddenly. “All of them disappeared at the same time. You want to know what happened, too, don’t you?”

“I don’t want to find Adam,” she says, thin and brittle.

“But you want to know,” Weiss presses on. There’s a bright burn to her cheeks, the same flush she gets when she’s about to close a deal at work or win a game of chess. “Don’t you? For better or worse, you’re stuck in traction just like we are. Whatever happened with him, you don’t *know* where he is, or if he’s alive, and you do want to know that.” She smiles, sharp and wolfish, and shakes her head. “Else you would’ve left this house a long time ago.”

She flinches again, shoulders jerking even as she glares back at Weiss, hands clenching at her sides, and Yang steps back, a distantly familiar discomfort settling in her chest and putting her between the two of them.

“Weiss,” she says quietly. “Don’t--”

“She can help us,” Weiss says. “You know she can.”

“Yeah, but--” she cuts herself off, glancing back over to the other woman and the way she’s glaring at Weiss, anger written into her jaw but something close to fear burning in her wide eyes, and shakes her head, and pieces click together in Yang’s head and her stomach drops out. “Not like this.”

“Yang--”

“Not like this,” Yang says over her, too loud for the narrow hallway they’re crammed into, and Weiss’s mouth snaps shut, jaw clenching visibly. She glares up at Yang for long seconds and then stalks out of the house, the door wobbling on its hinges at the force of her shoving it open, and Yang follows with a short mumbled apology over her shoulder.

“Hey,” she says, grabbing at Weiss’s arm. “What was that?”

“She knows where they went,” Weiss snaps. “It’s written all over her face, Yang, she knows exactly where he would have taken them. She can get us there and--”

“She doesn’t want to help us!” Yang throws back. “I’m not going to force someone who’s *scared* to--”

“She’s not scared, she’s being difficult--”

“Yes she is!” Yang yells, loud enough that a dog barks behind the next house and Weiss’s mouth drops open because Yang has always had a temper but it’s never once been directed at her because Yang *knows*, she’s always known, watching the way Weiss flinches at every raised voice and angry exclamation, the way she’d shrunk in on herself every time her parents sent another butler to bring her home from the Xiao Long house. Yang sucks in a deep breath, and then another, forcing herself steady and her voice lower. “I’m sorry, I just-- she’s *scared*, Weiss.”

“You don’t know that,” Weiss says. “You don’t know her at all.”

“No, but I know what you looked like every time you showed up at our house in the middle of the night.” Yang’s fingernails dig into her palms and her jaw aches at grinding her teeth together. It shuts Weiss up immediately, the recoil pulling her whole body back a full step, and nausea twists in Yang’s stomach because Weiss has never allowed anyone to pity her, has never let even Yang speak to the scar over her eye or the reason she spent so much time sleeping in one of the guest rooms at Yang’s house.

“Don’t,” Weiss says thinly, so unsteady that Yang’s chest aches and her arms tense instinctively, wanting to reach for her, to hold her steady and safe the way she always has for Yang. “Don’t you dare--”

“I know,” Yang says softly, hands out and open, pacifying, careful. “I know, and I’m sorry, but I’ve seen that before. It’s not fair to ask someone who’s--”

“I’ll do it,” sounds from behind her, and Yang whirls around, fists clenching instinctively, but it’s the dark haired woman, standing in the doorway. “For what Adam negotiated with your family, adjusted for inflation and plus ten percent. If you pay, I’ll take you to the delta.”

“Deal,” Weiss says before Yang can say anything, and then pauses, shaking her head and folding her arms carefully over her chest. “And I apologize for my outburst. It was-- uncharitable.”

“Pay me up front and I’ll accept your apology.” She mirrors Weiss’s posture, leaning one shoulder against the doorframe, and Yang blinks rapidly at the way her voice is light but her shoulders are heavy with tension. Yang’s never seen anyone pivot so efficiently from fear and distrust to dealmaking except Weiss, and it’s unsettling, the way she’s matching Weiss’s corporate mask with a raised eyebrow and a cool ease that would put anyone who wasn’t Weiss Schnee on the retreat.

“Half up front, half afterwards, including expenses,” Weiss counters. Her shoulders square and her chin lifts, challenging and unwavering, and she might be too small in her jeans and hiking boots instead of a suit and the towering heels she favors but for all of her posture she might as well be in a boardroom instead of a cracked driveway in rural Hungary, and Yang blinks and shakes her head at the way she’s never seen anyone go toe to toe with Weiss this way.

“Okay,” she says, nodding sharply from her spot still leaning against the doorframe, and Yang shakes her head.

“Hold on,” she says, pointing at the both of them. “Wait. Just-- hold on a second.”

“I know the delta as well as Adam ever did.” She shrugs, sighs, repositions herself against the doorframe. “And your friend is right. I want to know what happened on that trip, just so I can be done with it all.”

“Are you sure?” Yang says dubiously. “You were just--”

“I know.” Her voice is sharp, her eyes burning bright in the shadow of the house, and it sends a shiver down Yang’s spine. “But I’ll do it. We can leave as soon as I get some supplies--”

“I have supplies,” Weiss says. “We can leave today.”

“We also need a pilot--”

“I’m a pilot,” Weiss says smugly. “And I can get us a plane. Anything else?”

“A little less arrogance, maybe?” she mutters, and Yang chokes back a laugh at Weiss’s indignant huff. “Give me a few hours to get packed and we can head out to your fancy private plane.”

She turns back to the house, the door swinging halfway shut behind her, before Yang shakes her head and calls out after her.

“Hey.” She scratches at the back of her head. “What’s your name?”

There’s a long pause, and an irritated sigh from Weiss, before she shrugs. “I’m Blake,” she says, and then lets the door swing shut behind her.

"I seriously thought she was exaggerating about the pilot thing," Blake mutters, leaning against the car with her arms folded over her chest. Out of the dark house they'd found her in, under bright hangar lights, with her hair tied up casually behind her and eyes appraising instead of guarded, she seems lighter. Her hair is still dark and her clothes darker still, but there's a slant to her mouth, a lift to her eyebrows, that softens all of her edges, and Yang can't stop herself from peering around the open trunk over and over again, ostensibly sorting the supplies but instead mapping Blake's profile and the quiet tension of her posture.

She straightens up and follows Blake's gaze to the other side of the hangar, where Weiss is signing the paperwork for a plane, in full business mode as she so often is, rapid Russian spilling out of her mouth.

"She's not really the exaggerating type," Yang says, shaking her head and turning back to the first aid kit she'd been inventorying, zipping it shut and shoving it into a side pocket of one of the backpacks.

"Just how many languages does she speak?" She's still staring at Weiss, and Yang rolls her eyes, used to people marveling at the shining dictionary of accomplishments that is Weiss Schnee.

"Seven, I think." Yang sorts through one of the first aid kits, absently inventorying the contents, unsure how to approach the fact that they have enough medical supplies for ten people instead of three.

"Who the hell are you people?" Blake says. "Just up and buying a plane--"

"Renting, technically," Yang says distractedly.

"--in a foreign country, with no prior planning," Blake carries on as if she hadn't heard Yang at all. "With that sort of money, don't you think you could buy an entire army of private detectives to do this instead of doing it yourselves?"

"No one will even take our money anymore." Yang hauls one of the loaded backpacks out and settles it at her feet, keeping her focus on the still half-full trunk. "After they disappeared, after the Hungarian police stopped looking, my dad's com-- we hired tons of them. They looked for them for years. Eventually it was like the whole industry decided it wasn't worth their time. Dead end case, career killer, that sort of thing."

"But you're going to do what they couldn't?" Blake's mouth softens, a familiar sympathy-- the one that everyone in Yang's teenage years had held, every part of the house's staff who'd watched her hold her family together after her mother died and then crumple when she was all that was left, every teacher and tutor and therapist-- written into her jaw.

Yang flicks a pocketknife open, twirling it absently in her fingers, and then shut again, shoving it into her pocket. She slams the trunk shut and hauls one of the backpacks up and shoves it into Blake's chest, refusing to look her in the eye, unwilling to accept sympathy from someone she's known for two hours.

“We have information they don’t,” she says, shoving past her and stalking over towards Weiss with two backpacks hanging from her shoulders. Blake trails after her, bag slung over one shoulder.

“If they really disappeared ten years ago,” she says, then pauses. “The Danube dumps into the Black Sea.”

“I have looked at a map before, thanks,” Yang says shortly. It’s been barely two days since they found her father’s research, but the maps and diagrams he’d left behind are burned indelibly into her mind. She marches past Weiss and onto the plane, squeezing inside and settling in a crouch behind the seats to start securing the bags.

“I just meant that if something-- that whatever happened to them, they’ve probably been washed into the Black Sea by now,” Blake says softly, crouching in the doorway to the cockpit. “I don’t want you to have your hopes up that you’ll find anything.”

“Then what are you thinking you’ll find?” Yang pivots back to face her, elbows on her knees, and takes a small measure of satisfaction in the way Blake blinks rapidly at her. “This Adam guy, there’s clearly history there that you want closure on. So if they’re all dead and their bodies are washed out into the ocean, then what are you looking for out of this?”

Blake’s mouth opens and then closes again, jaw clenching and eyes going glassy and hard.

“Proof, maybe,” she says after a long moment.

“Of what?” Yang leans forward, close enough that she swears she can hear Blake’s teeth grinding together, and reaches past her to yank the backpack off her shoulder.

“That the son of a bitch died out there,” Blake says, thin and cracking. She leans back and hops off the stairs to the plane, landing lightly on the concrete and marching back to the car. Weiss watches her go and then strides over to the plane, one hand on her hip and the other holding a tablet tight against her chest.

“What’d you say to her?”

Yang stares after Blake, watching as she stalks away with hands in her jacket pockets and shoulders hunched. Something twists in her stomach, dark and discomfiting, frustration warring against guilt and both losing out to the need to find out what happened to her family.

“Nothing,” she says after a long moment. “Just--expectations, I guess.”

“Hey,” Weiss says quietly. She shifts to the side, putting herself between Yang and Blake’s distancing figure, as if her narrow frame is enough to block Yang’s view or the way her focus keeps drifting over to Blake and the tension in her stride. “How are you doing?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Yang says, tearing her eyes away from Blake’s infuriating pessimism and distracting jawline and hopping down to the floor. “Seeing as you just way overpaid for a plane you’re never going to use again.”

“I’m fine.” Weiss waves one hand. “I just--want this done. One way or the other.”

Yang leans back against the plane, letting her head thunk back against the side with a sigh. “She said we shouldn’t get our hopes up.” She stares up at the distant ceiling of the hangar, breathing in slowly. “She thinks they’re dead and washed out to the ocean.”

Weiss is quiet for long seconds, fingers flexing at her hip, knuckles white with the tension that’s left her whole body strung tight since they met Blake, and Yang tucks her hands into her jacket pockets and drags her chin back down, waiting for her to speak.

“I think it’s unlikely we’ll find them,” she says carefully, eyes locked onto a spot on the plane behind Yang. “But maybe we’ll find an indication of what happened. Something to close the loop on the whole story.” She shifts her gaze back to Yang and the way her jaw’s clenching tight, hands pushing so far into her jacket the leather creaks. “I think you need to prepare yourself for the possibility that--”

“I’d know if they were dead,” Yang says over her. “I’d *know*, okay? You would too. You wouldn’t be here if you thought there was no chance.”

“I’d be here no matter what,” Weiss says, eyes hard and bright, posture sharp. “Because you’re here and God knows I’d never let you do this on your own.”

Yang’s breath catches somewhere behind her sternum, mouth drying up, and she clears her throat, a dry scraping sound that echoes in the empty hangar because it’s true and they both know it. They’ve followed each other everywhere their whole lives, forever holding onto each other. She redirects her gaze past Weiss, to where Blake’s making her way back across the hangar from the car, and she clears her throat again.

“We good to go?”

“I-- yeah,” Weiss says after a moment, handing the tablet to Yang. She climbs up into the plane and settles into the cockpit, handling switches and levers and not looking back to where Yang’s still leaning against the plane, eyes locked onto Blake.

“She knows where we’re going?” Blake doesn’t look at Yang, focusing on Weiss in the cockpit.

“Assuming you know what you’re doing, yes,” Yang says, nose wrinkling. “You’re sure about this?” She unlocks the tablet and looks down at the map, the one from her father’s office with a series of demarcations along the Danube river delta.

“Based on weather patterns and the river levels when they headed over there, yeah,” Blake says with a shrug. “That whole area has a ton of islands and caves and some of them are above the waterline sometimes and sometimes they aren’t. Some of the larger islands are always visible, but not all of them, and there’s no comprehensive map of everything. Adam-- we spent a lot of time around there, so we know it, but it’s not officially mapped anywhere.”

She tilts the tablet towards her, pointing to a series of the marked spots. “There are islands that I know of for sure around these. Or there used to be. With climate change and all, it’s hard to tell until we’re out there on the ground, but it’s as good a starting point as any.”

“It still doesn’t make sense,” Yang mutters, an ache building behind her temples. “Why he would have taken Ruby out there when they were just going to hang out in Budapest and then go camping? If this was dangerous, why would he have taken her there?”

Blake is silent, knuckles going pale around the tablet until it shakes in both of their hands. She pulls her hand free after a long moment of staring baldly at Yang, lips pressed together tightly. She shakes her head and slips around Yang, climbing up into the plane.

Yang lets her head thunk back against the plane, hands still unsteady and threatening to let the tablet fall to the concrete under her feet. She pulls in a deep breath, and then another, and then one more before she can manage to pull herself upright. She crouches down and yanks the chocks out from around the wheels of the plane and tosses them inside ahead of her.

Weiss shoots her a glance when she settles into the copilot’s seat-- she doesn’t know the first thing about flying a plane-- but doesn’t say anything, instead offering her a set of headphones and something approximating a reassuring smile.

Behind them, Blake has her own headphones on and her head tilted back against her seat, arms folded over her chest and eyes shut. Yang only lets herself look back once after she’s buckled her seatbelt and then keeps her eyes on the sky in front of them as they take off, but it doesn’t stop her mind from ricocheting between Blake at her back, closed off and cynical, and the uncertainty ahead of them.

They land at Tulcea just as the sun’s starting to go down, and Yang’s back protests when she straightens up in her seat for landing from where she’s been hunched over the tablet, squinting at her father’s notes for the whole flight. Beside her, fatigue and tension are warring in Weiss’s posture, the flight not long but the stress of the whole situation and her determination to look out for Yang wearing her down. Blake stretches in the back, catlike and aloof, and Yang matches her dispassionate gaze with an annoyed glare as the plane touches down.

“This isn’t the delta,” Blake says flatly.

“It’s as close as we can get tonight,” Weiss says, too tired to be snippy, and Yang bristles defensively.

“Afraid of a little water landing, princess?”

“Hey,” Yang snaps out, anger a comforting heat on her skin, and Blake raises an eyebrow lazily at her.

“Even if this plane was capable of a water landing, I wouldn’t try in the dark in a river filled with practically invisible islands, no.” Weiss settles a hand on Yang’s arm. “We’ll head out in the morning and go from there. I think we could all use some sleep at this point.”

“I’m fine,” Blake says mildly, even as she follows them out of the plane.

“Good for you,” Weiss says. She rolls her eyes and gestures tiredly towards the backpacks still stowed in the back of the plane. “Can you two play nice enough to deal with that and find a hotel while I deal with this?” She tilts her head towards the two airport officials making their way over to her, pulls in a deep breath and closes her eyes for a short moment until she can set her shoulders and exhale, corporate armor fully back in place, chilly and intimidating as it always is.

“Yeah,” Yang mutters. She yanks at the straps and pulls the bags free, hauling all three of them up onto her shoulders and shoving past Blake. “Come on.”

“I can carry one of those, you know,” Blake says, trailing after her.

“You could also consider being less of a dick,” Yang offers. “You’re not the only one balls deep in stressful emotions here, y’know.”

“Apparently I’m the only one not deluding myself, though.” Blake grabs one of the bags and yanks, the sudden shift in balance sending Yang reeling and nearly stumbling into a wall. She drops the other two bags and pivots, hips twisting into a ready stance and one fist curling into Blake’s jacket and the other stopping an inch from her nose, breaths coming heavy and unsteady.

“Stop it,” Yang breathes out. “I don’t care if you’re convinced my family is dead, I’m still going to look for them. I don’t need your bullshit commentary, I just need you to be a map.”

“You need to be prepared for what you’re going to find out there,” Blake says, mouth set into a grim line, one hand gripping tight at Yang’s wrist. “Nothing good ever came from following Adam anywhere.”

“Yeah, well,” Yang says, and she barely recognizes her own voice, heavy with a sneer and disdain she didn’t know she was capable of. “You’re here following him now. So what does that say about you?”

Blake’s lips press together, so hard they almost turn white, and her fingers dig claw-like into Yang’s wrist. She glares up at Yang, eyes wide and unblinking and jaw set firmly, and Yang stares back, willing her heart rate to stabilize and fist not to shake.

“That I’m done running,” Blake says eventually, sour and quiet. “For once.”

She yanks Yang’s hand free from her jacket and steps back, bending to grab one of the backpacks and setting off without Yang.

“There’s a hotel a few miles from the airport,” she says without looking back. “If we want an early start it’s our best bet.”

She leaves Yang to watch her walk away, fists shaking at her sides, and Yang stares after her, wrist burning from where Blake’s fingers had dug into her skin.

“This was a good idea, right?” Yang drops her backpack and leans back until her spine cracks, vertebra popping in succession. She slumps down onto the bench outside the motel lobby next to Weiss.

“What, you think that running off to another continent with no actual plan of attack aside from ‘find the guy who lost my family’ might not have been your soundest idea ever?” Weiss drags her head up from where it had been leaning against the wall behind her to stare balefully at Yang.

“You don’t have to say it like I’m totally incompetent, you know.”

“I know you’re beyond competent,” Weiss says with a sigh. “But you also didn’t have to run out in the middle of the night and fly out here with no money or supplies so that you can wind up finding the single most insufferable Hungarian in the entirety of eastern Europe.”

“I had supplies.” Yang rubs at the back of her neck with a groan.

“You had a sleeping bag and a photographic memory.” Weiss pushes up to standing and twists to one side until her own back cracks loudly. “You’ve made better plans when it comes to Easter egg hunts.”

She twists in the other direction, and then stretches her arms over head, shoulders practically dislocating from years of gymnastics and popping just as loudly as her back, and Yang winces at the sound but reaches out automatically, helping Weiss push the stretch further.

“I’m not saying you wouldn’t have managed on your own,” Weiss says gently as she drops her arms and rolls her head on her neck with a sigh. She lifts Yang’s elbow without looking, pushes Yang’s hand back gently until the tension in her forearm, the kind that always drags along after sparring sessions, stretches and releases, and Yang offers her other arm wordlessly for the same treatment. “Just that you didn’t have to, and that we could have done some of this legwork from home.”

“I couldn’t wait,” Yang says, shaking her head and dragging her hands through her hair. “I had to-- I needed to do something.”

“And we are.” Weiss drops back down to sit next to her. “We’re trying. That’s something.”

“I guess,” Yang mutters. She drops her head back against the wall and stares up at the sky. Beside her, Weiss leans gently into her side, hand curling into hers habitually, and Yang closes her eyes and matches her exhales against Weiss’s as they wait until the door opens behind them and Blake steps back out with a key in hand.

“That’s only one key,” Yang says dully.

“Bad news is that they’re full up save for one room,” Blake says. “Good news is that room at least has two beds. Assuming a couple of rich kids like you can handle sharing a bed.”

“God, I truly hate you, I think,” Weiss mutters. She yanks the key out of Blake’s hand and shoulders her backpack, stalking off down towards the rooms.

“You’re welcome, princess,” Blake calls after her.

“Stop being an asshole to her.” Yang hefts her backpack, not bothering to stop it from swinging and smacking against Blake’s side. One side of her mouth hitches up into a smirk when Blake stumbles with the hit, and she sets off after Weiss.

The room is small and musty, the curtains full of dust and heater sputtering out too-dry air intermittently. Yang sighs and dumps her backpack at the foot of one of the beds next to Weiss’s. The bathroom door’s shut and the shower’s already running, and she flops down onto the bed with a groan.

Blake follows her into the room, shutting the door behind her and standing momentarily in the center of the small patch of open floor by the other bed before she sets her bag down and takes a seat on the bed. Yang watches out of the corner of her eye as Blake unlaces her boots and sets them by the door and stands awkwardly by the bed for another few seconds before kneeling by her backpack and digging a Kindle out of one pocket.

“You brought a Kindle?”

“Well, I didn’t bring a billionaire girlfriend to chat with, so I wanted something to occupy my mind.” Blake settles onto her bed, curling her legs up towards her chest and turning the Kindle on.

“We aren’t--” Yang starts to say automatically, but cuts herself off, choosing instead to glare at Blake’s profile.

Blake doesn’t say anything, focus set entirely on her book, and Yang sighs again and drops an arm over her eyes to block out the sallow light from the lamps. At least she’ll sleep soundly, if the exhaustion pressing against her eyes is any indication.

Instead, hours later, Yang’s still awake with an arm flung over her eyes. Weiss has long since fallen asleep, breath leveling out into something steady and calm, curled into Yang’s side like she always has since they were children, breath slow and warm on Yang’s arm. Blurry maps and translated riddles play on the back of Yang’s eyelids, her father’s research and theories burned into her brain. Ancient stories of men lured into forests and never returning, their corpses turned to drained and empty husks on the forest floor, haunt her thoughts and twine into the theories of disease and genetic mutations her father had formulated.

The blankets on the other bed rustle, and Yang tenses. There are soft footsteps, nearly silent, on the old carpet, and then the sound of the door opening and shutting quietly, and Yang pulls her arm away, blinking into the dark, and sits up, swings her feet down to the floor, pauses. Weiss rolls over into the warm sheets Yang’s left behind but doesn’t wake-- she’s always slept like the dead-- and Yang pauses and breathes, glancing towards the door and then to Weiss, and takes a moment to pull the ratty blankets higher up over Weiss’s shoulders, one hand reaching automatically for the line of her jaw and then pulling back with uncertain fingers. She slips out the door, looking left and right until she finds Blake’s silhouette sitting

on the curb of the parking lot, knees curled up to her chest and an unlit cigarette dangling from one hand.

Cold concrete bites into her bare feet, but Yang sits down on the curb as well, three feet away from Blake, and mirrors her posture, wrapping her arms around her shins and propping her chin on her knees. Blake's boots are untied and Yang wishes she'd taken the time to grab her own, but she flexes her toes and grits her teeth against the cold, because Blake is out here and she's the best chance they have of finding Yang's family, so this is where Yang needs to be.

"You should be sleeping," Blake says eventually.

"We all should." Yang tilts her head, turning until she can press her cheek against her knee instead and stare at Blake's profile. She's holding the cigarette, turning it slowly in between long fingers and staring absently down at it. "You smoke?"

"I used to." Blake rolls the cigarette between her thumb and finger, shaking her head minutely. The half-burned out streetlights of the parking lot glint off the dark sheen of her hair with the movement, drawing Yang's attention from the captivating movement of the cigarette in her hand. She has delicate hands, like Weiss, narrow and wiry, long fingers graced with silvery threads of scar tissue that glint in the moonlight and flash against her darker skin. "When I-- a long time back. I quit years ago."

"But you still have them?"

"Asked the night manager." Blake tilts her head towards the office.

"Why'd you quit?"

It's not the question Blake's expecting, and her eyebrow lifts briefly. She mirrors Yang's posture, chin propped on her knee, and stares unflinchingly at her for long seconds, until Yang's skin prickles under the scrutiny.

"I met Adam when I was twelve," she says instead. "At school. I was always getting in fights because my mother's Roma and people are horrible towards us, and he was older, and popular, and stood up for me once. Beat the shit out of someone for being racist. He was so angry about how we were treated, I thought he cared about--" She pauses, shaking her head. "He was just looking for an excuse to be violent. He grew up poor and had a chip on his shoulder and wanted an excuse to hurt people so they couldn't hurt him."

She turns the cigarette slowly in her fingers, unfocused and lazy, and shakes her head again.

"He's the one who got me started smoking. I quit after I left."

"So why'd you go looking for one now?"

"Thought it might make me feel better." She shrugs, lazily, and rolls the cigarette between her palms.

"Better how?" Yang taps her fingers against her own arm, watching as Blake's profile shifts, her lips pressing together and then relaxing, jaw tightening, eyebrows creasing. She thinks

back to Hungary and the way Blake had shrunk back at the first mention of Adam Taurus, the way she'd folded in on herself, so obvious even when Yang had barely known her for two minutes, the way her arms had curled around her abdomen protectively and she'd glanced towards the exit. The same way Weiss had been when the Schnee family butler had showed up at their house in the middle of the night carrying a sixth grader with bare feet and bloodied pajamas, a fresh gash skidding over her eye and her whole body shaking in his careful hold, and almost every day after that for months and years until she'd practically moved in to live with them, sleeping some nights in a guest room and most curled into Yang's side.

Blake is still silent, the cigarette tapping against her palm rhythmically.

"Better about how you're going looking for someone who abused you?" Yang ventures, slow and careful, keeping herself still, like Blake might bolt at the words.

Blake smiles ruefully, cigarette stalling. She shakes her head eventually, and snaps the cigarette in her hands in half, slowly and carefully, never looking over at Yang.

"How'd you know?"

"You learn to recognize it," Yang says quietly. "You see it and just-- you know."

"You?" Blake props her chin in her hand and finally turns towards Yang, carefully impassive.

"Not me, no." Yang shifts on the curb, turning to face Blake more fully. There's something burning in the back of Blake's forced neutrality, something solid and unwavering under the antagonism and disdain, and Yang grinds her teeth together and waits. Waits for Blake to understand, waits for her to put the pieces together, waits for her to maybe finally-- finally-- start to understand who she's working with.

"Oh," Blake says belatedly. "I-- really?"

"I told you not to be such a dick to her," Yang says. "She'd kill me for bringing it up. But money can't save you from everything, you know. She's been through a lot and still come out the other side stronger for it."

"You're in love with her," Blake says after a long silence, a statement instead of a question, and Yang leans back on her hands, concrete biting cold into her palms, head dropping back to stare up at the sky. She stretches one leg out and digs her hand into the pocket of her sweatpants, extracting the picture she hadn't left off her person since the puzzlebox opened in New York days ago. She unfolds it and stares down at it, smoothing the edges carefully with fingers that shake no matter how hard she tries. A beat passes, and she holds it out to Blake, waiting until she finally takes it carefully.

"You both look happy," Blake says eventually. She holds the picture carefully, reverently, and Yang shoves her hands into her pockets to keep from grabbing it back.

"We were." Her hands fist in her pockets, tight enough that her forearms burn and her knuckles creak. "Weiss was over at our house practically every day. She's been my best

friend since before I could walk.

“Mom died not long after that picture was taken,” Yang adds quietly. “Car accident. Dad wasn’t really around for a while, he was-- it was hard for him, losing her. Me and Weiss, we did our best with Ruby, but it was hard. She was over with us all the time, but she basically moved in after her dad--”

She cuts herself off and shakes her head, and Blake is mercifully silent.

“Dad and Ruby disappeared when I was fourteen. I’m only here now because of Weiss. She’s always been-- good, at everything she does, and she kept doing more and more. Even when I was a total disaster holding her back. She just-- she stayed on track, even when I didn’t. Kept me from ever falling too far off the edge of the world, I guess.”

“And now you’re off looking for the edge of the world,” Blake says. She hands the picture back to Yang gently. “And you brought both of us with you.”

“I have to know what happened to them. Everything my family cared about will disappear and be sold off if I don’t sign the paperwork saying my dad’s dead, but I can’t-- not now, I can’t not try. Even if all I do find is that they did die, it’s better than giving up without trying.”

“You know the delta is like four thousand square kilometers, right?” Blake says softly. “The chances of us actually finding anything--”

“We have a starting point,” Yang says. She looks down at the picture, at her parents, at her sister, at Weiss with no scar over her eye and a wide unreserved smile, and folds it carefully back into her pocket. “The maps my dad had, they’re-- that’s got to be where he would have been. No one had that when they first disappeared. It’s a starting point.”

“A starting point isn’t going to be enough,” Blake says, and it’s gentle and warm and nothing like Yang’s seen from her so far. It wraps around the stubborn determination Yang’s held around her like a shield for years and slips between the cracks, unwinding and disarming, because Blake is a stranger, Blake is their guide, Blake is sure that this is a lost cause, but she’s sitting in front of Yang at two in the morning in a parking lot looking at her like she wants to protect her from the truth they’re hunting down. “They-- nothing good ever came from trusting Adam. I would know. He was selfish and spiteful and cruel.”

Yang leans back onto her elbow, letting her head fall back until she can stare up at the sky. It’s clear and cold and there are more stars than she’s ever been able to see in New York, even with the lights from the nearby airport polluting the sky. A chill runs down her spine, the concrete too cold for her sweatpants and hoodie, but she ignores it and stretches her legs out and focuses on the burn in her muscles.

“I’m not an idiot,” she says eventually. “I know what the odds are. This much time, and the number of search parties and investigators we sent out, there’s-- I know the odds. But I have to try.”

Blake rotates one half of the ripped cigarette in her fingers and Yang ignores the sky in favor of staring at the sharp line of her jaw, the curve of her cheekbone. One side of her mouth hitches up into a smile, and she shakes her head, closes one fist around the cigarette pieces. She turns to face Yang, slow and deliberate, a soft set to her mouth and a burning warmth in her eyes that overturns the chill that's settled into Yang's bones from the late winter air.

"Your family," she says after a long silence, after holding Yang's gaze for long seconds and refusing to blink, after staring her down like she's seeing her for the first time. "Whatever happened to them out there. They were lucky to have someone like you."

She pushes up off the curb, rocking up to her heels smoothly, and walks back to the room without looking at Yang. Yang watches her go, the smooth balance to her strides and the uncertain hunch to her shoulders, until she stops by the door and still doesn't look back but waits until Yang pushes up to her own feet and follows her.

Chapter 3

It's still early when Yang wakes up next, mouth cottony and throat dry, the sky outside the murky grey of a dreary morning sunrise. Weiss is still asleep, but Blake's sitting at the foot of her bed, tying her boots, and Yang pushes up onto her elbows.

"What are you--"

"Coffee," Blake says quietly. She stands up and stretches, reaches smoothly for her coat and studiously avoids looking at Yang, who's staring dumbly at her, instead staring past her to where Weiss is still dead asleep. "I think they have some in the lobby."

She disappears out the door and it's the snap of it shutting that finally wakes Weiss, who rolls over with an irritated huff.

"What was that?" she mutters, eyes still half shut.

"Blake," Yang says after a long moment of staring at the door. "She said there's coffee in the lobby."

"I desperately do not want to know how old it is," Weiss says with a groan as she stretches. Her shoulders pop and it makes Yang wince like always, but also finally draws her attention away from the door.

"You good to fly?" She stands with a stretch of her own, muscles stiff and sore after too much time in tiny airplane and bus seats. Weiss watches her, bleary, as she swings her arms around habitually, forcing warmth into her muscles, and drops to the floor to do a series of pushups.

"Show off," Weiss mutters. "And of course I'm fine to fly. I just need coffee."

"I honestly expected you to have brought your own," Yang says between pushups, pausing at the top of one rep to look up at Weiss and cock her head to one side before continuing on. Weiss rolls her eyes and flings one of the musty pillows at her. It hits dead on, smacking into Yang's face hard enough to make her sputter and laugh, and she pauses at the top of another rep to raise an eyebrow at Weiss. "Y'know, Pyrrha's the one who convinced me to do these. She does a hundred, every morning, first thing."

"I don't," Weiss starts, and then pauses, and her face closes off, one hand rubbing at her eyes tiredly.

"You should ask her out, you know," Yang says lazily, as if it's as easy to push Weiss towards Pyrrha as it is to knock out her morning pushup. "She likes you."

"Yang," Weiss says with a sigh. "I don't--"

The door opens and Blake appears, three paper cups of coffee balanced precariously in one palm.

“Don’t what?” She kicks the door shut and shifts one of the coffees into her other hand, offering it silently to Weiss. Her eyes flick carefully, unsubtly, over towards Weiss’s left eye and the line of scar tissue tracking over it, before she leans lazily back against the windowsill, drinking her coffee nonchalantly, as if she hadn’t been staring blatantly at the visual representation of Weiss’s history that Yang had spoken to in the parking lot.

“Um,” Weiss says slowly. “Thank you.”

“Weiss was about to tell me how she totally--”

“Nothing,” Weiss says sharply, and Yang pauses in her pushups again, looking quizzically up at Weiss, who’s looking intently down into her coffee cup. “Nothing at all.” She takes a large sip of her coffee and winces at the heat. “God, why is hotel coffee always terrible?”

“Tradition, probably,” Blake says with a shrug, sipping at her own and wrinkling her nose. She points with her coffee towards Yang, who’s still doing pushups. “Does she do this every morning?”

“She also has definitely ruined my doorways doing pull-ups,” Weiss says, one eyebrow arching up, and she digs a foot into Yang’s side indignantly.

“One time,” Yang mutters. She shakes her head and stands back up, dusting off her hands, the skin over her side humming pleasantly from where Weiss had shoved her. “There, no more pushups. Everyone happy with that?”

“Delighted,” Blake deadpans, but she lifts an eyebrow and tilts her head towards Weiss, one side of her mouth slanting up into a smile. “Now that you’re done showing off, can we get going?”

“Not until she’s had at least one more coffee,” Yang says, shoving at Weiss’s shoulder affectionately and knocking her loose from where she’s staring uncertainly at Blake and the way every bit of anger and disdain had vanished overnight. “She’s the exact opposite of a morning person.”

“It sure seems that way,” Blake says in a slow drawl, eyes tracking slowly from Yang to Weiss, back and forth, scalding and unhurried.

“God, I hate you both so much,” Weiss mutters. She drains the rest of her coffee and yanks her shoulder free from Yang’s hand with a sniff, skirting around her to claim the third coffee cup. “This is mine now.”

She disappears into the bathroom with a huff, leaving Yang to flop on the bed and stretch again with a sigh. “Give her fifteen minutes and she’ll be ready to fly,” she says to the ceiling. It’s easier to look at the paint on the ceiling than Blake and the way she’s almost a completely different person from yesterday, relaxed and cajoling, calm and casual, almost *warm* towards the both of them.

“What about you?”

Yang lets her head roll over to one side, staring at Blake and the way she’s leaning against the windowsill, ankles crossed and free hand in her pocket, sipping lazily at her coffee.

“I’m not the pilot here.”

“I meant are you ready for this,” Blake says, head tilting to one side, somehow familiar now that Yang’s seen it once and had it burned into her chest, and Yang’s pulse trips over itself.

“Yeah,” she says automatically. “Of course I am.”

“I’m really not sure that you are,” Blake says slowly. “Just--be careful, okay?”

“That’s why we have a guide, you know.”

“I meant with your-- just, try not to get your hopes up,” Blake says quietly. She straightens up and offers her coffee cup to Yang, holding it out awkwardly until she takes it. “I tend to just drink tea anyways.”

She clears her throat and turns her back on Yang and busies herself with the backpacks, leaving Yang with half a cup of coffee and muscles buzzing from the pushups and an unfamiliar feeling in her gut, half the long-standing apprehension of trying to find her family and half something new and scalding and tied exclusively to the way her hands want to reach for the guarded set to Blake’s jaw as much as they want to reach for the familiarity of Weiss’s hand in hers.

“Is this it?” Yang says into the microphone, barely audible in the headphones over the sound of the plane’s engine.

“Yeah,” Blake says after a moment from her spot in the rear seats, and leans forward with an elbow on Yang’s seat and one on Weiss’s. She holds the tablet with Yang’s father’s map up between the seats, and then points out to a spot to Weiss’s left.

“Stop that,” Weiss mutters into her own mic, slapping at Blake’s arm, but there’s no venom in her voice or weight to the strike. “It’s distracting.”

“That’s probably the best place to start,” Blake says, ignoring Weiss and leaning forward enough that she can prop an elbow on each of their shoulders. “Depending on water levels we can get to most of the other marked spots from that one.” She offers the tablet to Yang, who takes it automatically, still staring out to where Blake had pointed as Weiss banks the plane over to the left.

“You good?” Blake says, not quietly, her voice sharp and firm in their headsets, and Weiss glances over to where Yang’s gripping too-tight at the tablet.

“It looks like Florida,” she says after a moment. “Not what I expected.”

“I’ve never been.” Blake’s arm drops from her shoulder and her hand curls around the corner of Yang’s seat, knuckles brushing against her jacket, and Yang shakes her head.

“Lucky you,” Weiss says. “Wouldn’t recommend it.” She levels the plane off and drops lower, leaning forward to peer down towards the intractable maze of shallow meandering waterways and inconsistent stretches of land. “You’re sure this is it, yeah?”

“Yeah.” Blake leans back, fingertips dragging along Weiss’s shoulder momentarily and her other hand pulling away from Yang’s seat, skidding past her arm and reclaiming the tablet. She taps one of the marked spots on the map and then points towards a copse of trees.

“That’s right there. Looks like the water levels have risen and swallowed up some of the shore, but that’s it.”

“Okay.” Weiss circles them back around again. “We can’t land here, not in this, but we can head back to Tulcea and get a--”

The plane shudders and rattles suddenly, cutting her off, and Weiss’s hands go tight on the yoke. The tablet flies out of Blake’s hands and clatters onto the metal floor of the plane’s cabin, the screen shattering.

“What the--” Yang herself up straighter in her seat, glancing over at Weiss and then the ground, and then another spray of bullets shatters the windscreen and rips through the left side of the plane and they lose power in the engines. “Shit!”

“Someone’s *shooting* at us?” Weiss snaps out, thin and shaking. Another spray of bullets slams into one of the wings and the plane dives towards the trees. “Where the hell are they--”

“Can you land?” Blake says fervently, slammed back into her seat by the sudden dive they’re in.

Weiss doesn’t answer, and Yang barely has time to realize that they’re going to crash, that Weiss’s jaw is set and clenching and she’s straining to pull the nose of the plane up, and then they slam into the tops of the trees and Yang’s head smashes back into her seat.

A sharp pain lances through Yang’s side and she’s flung into consciousness with a heaving breath. Pressure pushes at one shoulder, holding her down, and she claws blindly at it, blinking mud out of her eyes and flailing against--

“Stop, stop,” Blake hisses out. “It’s me. *Breathe.*”

Yang sucks in an unsteady breath and then another one, dragging one arm up and wiping uselessly at the mud all over her face. Her side protests and she lets out a groan, and Blake’s hand slaps over her mouth.

“There’s someone out here,” she says softly. “Stay quiet.”

Yang shakes her head, jerking away from Blake and pressing a hand to her side, looking around as best she can. They’re in what feels like a swamp of cold mud, dense vegetation all around them, and muffled voices sounding rapidly. There’s an abrasion spreading down past Blake’s shoulder and her collarbone, the skin ripped and inflamed and bloody from impact, and Yang looks down at her side and bites down on her fist because there’s a stick protruding from under her ribcage. The violent bruising along her side from her sparring match with Pyrrha is a distant memory, overwritten by a brutal pinpoint of pain, flaring out around the puncture wound, so overwhelming she feels it in her fingers and toes.

Blake’s hands come into her view, dirty and steady, and stop inches from the stick. Yang looks up at her, eyes wide and apprehension building behind her sternum, and she starts to shake her head, because she knows just enough first aid to know that they should leave it.

There’s a rustle of motion nearby, a man snarling something out, and Yang reverses and nods her head rapidly. Internal bleeding will have to wait until after they deal with whatever *that* threat is. She shoves her fist further into her mouth and shuts her eyes and draws blood out of her knuckles when Blake yanks the wood out of her side. Less than an inch had buried itself in her abdomen, and she focuses on that instead of the way she wants to throw up from the pain.

“Come on,” Blake whispers, pointing away from the voices. Yang nods and moves into a crouch, moving as silently as she can even when all she wants is to cry and yell at the pain in her ribs, and Blake tenses, ready to move, only to be interrupted by more loud voices and then, suddenly, something in English.

“Don’t move!”

They both freeze, glancing around with wide eyes, looking for the guns that must be pointing at them, but there’s nothing. Yang’s brow furrows and dread starts to coil heavy in her stomach, and--

“Don’t touch me,” Weiss’s voice snaps out, distant and wavering, and fury overwhelms the pain in Yang’s side and she launches out of the vegetation. She collides with a man with a machine gun and a bulletproof vest, a fresh wave of pain radiating out from the impact, but she has surprise and six years of cage fighting under her belt and he crashes into the ground under her. She slams an elbow into his face, the crack of his cheekbone disappearing into the sound of guns cocking and people yelling, and Weiss’s voice cuts through the noise abruptly, sharp and thin and shaking.

“Yang, stop,” she says urgently, and Yang freezes, fist pulled back, and finally takes in the scene she’d thrown herself into: Weiss, with a gun pointed at her, standing on one leg, her ankle clearly broken; Blake with her hands up and blood still congealing on her damaged shoulder, more guns pointing at her; a circle of heavily armed men all pointing their guns at Yang.

“Who the hell are--”

“Shut up,” one of them says sharply, swinging his gun between the three of them. “Wrap ‘em up,” he adds, jerking his head of silver hair towards one of the other men. Yang nearly growls when one of them shoves her feet further apart and pats her down quickly, finding nothing but her bloody damaged side and her wallet, which he tosses to the leader.

“Hm,” he mutters, eyes narrowing at her ID, and he glances back up at Yang. He catches the wallet thrown to him from Weiss’s pocket as well, and his eyes go wide for a moment before he shoves them both into his pocket and clears his throat sharply. “Boss is going to want to see this.”

He pauses and turns back towards Yang, glancing down at the man she’d tackled, and then back up at her with a grimace. “Cuff that one. She packs a punch.”

Yang bristles but glances over towards Blake, who shakes her head and keeps her hands out, and then Weiss, who’s pale and unsteady, and fights the urge to spit at the man who’s glowering at her as he pulls his colleague to his feet. Instead, she holds her arms out, mirroring Blake’s posture, and lets one of them wrench her arms behind her back and slap a set of steel handcuffs on her wrists.

“Don’t break her arms,” the leader snaps out. He circles back around Yang and shoves the nose of his rifle into her back, pushing her forward a step. “Yet. Start marching, blondie.”

“She can walk without you pushing her,” Blake says sharply, and Yang glances back to where Blake’s suddenly at Weiss’s side, wrapping an arm around her and taking as much of her weight as she can.

“Come on, princess, lean on me,” she mutters. Yang’s stomach turns at the way that Weiss doesn’t protest at all and instead just holds tight to Blake and presses her lips together until they go white. She leans towards the soft sound of Blake murmuring to her, too soft for Yang to make out but loud enough that the comfort of her tone washes over Yang as she watches Weiss’s forehead drop momentarily onto Blake’s shoulder and Blake’s hand curl around the back of her head protectively. Blake bares her teeth at the first guard who moves towards them, arms tensing around Weiss and violence snapping into her posture.

“Where are we going?” Yang says as neutrally as she can as she starts walking in the direction she’d been shoved, drawing the attention away from Blake and Weiss and back onto her.

“Shut up,” he says, prodding at her back again with his gun.

“Can you really blame me for asking?” Yang ducks under a branch, grunting as a fresh line of blood tickles out of her side.

He doesn’t say anything, instead shouldering in front of her and unsheathing a machete at his hip and setting to slashing through the brush, cutting a path.

“What a gentleman,” Yang mutters, taking the moment to glance back to where Weiss is hobbling along and Blake is holding her up, mouth pressed into a thin line. Yang raises her

eyebrows and waits for Blake to nod, short and sharp, before turning back to face forward and following their captors through the bush.

Nausea builds in her stomach, percolating into a sticky sweat coating her skin the further she walks, and the ground wavers periodically under her feet. Every time she ducks under a branch, the trees around her spin and her legs shake, and she digs her fingernails into her palms to find a grounding point, a focus, something to keep her mind occupied. She glances back to Weiss and Blake as often as she can without falling over, trying not to look at Weiss's broken ankle or Blake's bloody shoulder, trying instead to focus on where they are, what direction they're going, how they're going to find a way out.

It takes almost an hour of seemingly aimless wandering, long enough that the blood has started to clot and congeal on Yang's side and Weiss is down to hopping on her uninjured leg, breathing heavily and sagging in Blake's grip as her broken ankle drags along. Blake's stoic and silent as always, her jaw clenching visibly, and Yang's steeling herself for arguing for a break when they step out of a copse of trees into a camp that's appeared almost out of nowhere. Camouflaged tents are settled in neat rows, set around sturdy metal frames and covered in enough overgrowth to mark months or years in the same spot.

The man who'd been leading them sheathes his machete and turns back to the others. He points at Blake, and abruptly one of the other yanks her away from Weiss.

"Hey," Blake snaps out, but she's drowned out by a sharp yelp from Weiss as weight shifts onto her broken ankle and she collapses, and Yang moves without thinking about the guns pointed at her, shoving past the guards and dropping down onto her knees at Weiss's side.

"Are you okay?" she asks stupidly, wrists flexing and shoulders straining against the cuffs. "Weiss, hey--"

"I'm fine," Weiss mutters through gritted teeth, quiet enough that even Yang can barely hear her. She pushes herself up to sitting, eyes glassy with pain and face covered in mud. Her foot is twisted and displaced too far to mean anything less than the entire ankle being ruined, worse than any of the injuries Yang's seen in her time training or cagefighting, and she bites down on her cheek to swallow the nausea twisting in her stomach. "But when we get out of this you owe me dinner for a *year*."

"Get up," one of the guards snarls, fingers wrapping like a clamp around Yang's arm and yanking her up to her feet.

"Get off me, you shit," Yang spits out, and smashes her forehead into his. It sends him reeling and there are more guns pointed at her again but it was worth it, and she doesn't try and dodge it when the butt of a gun slams into her jaw. It drives her down onto one knee, but she glances over at Weiss, who's in too much pain to even scold Yang for antagonizing them, and instead gathers a mouthful of blood from the hit and spits it out onto the man she'd headbutted.

"Get up," the leader says, bored. He gestures lazily towards two of the guards and then Blake. "Take her over to the others and get her started working. The rest of you take these two over to see her."

“Hey,” Yang starts to protest, driving up from her knees and glancing wildly over to where Blake’s being grabbed roughly.

“Don’t,” Blake says quickly. Her eyes lock onto Yang’s and she flicks them over towards Weiss and shakes her head. She jerks her arms free from the men holding onto them but holds her hands up placatingly. “It’s fine.” She doesn’t look away from Yang, eyes wide and sharp, until she’s steered around into the other direction and shoved through the camp, and Yang stares helplessly at her retreating form.

“Get the other one up,” the leader says.

“Don’t you touch her,” Yang spits out, and earns another hit from the butt of a gun.

“Yang, stop,” Weiss grinds out.

“Uncuff me and I can help her,” Yang says quickly, jerking her eyes away from where Blake’s just chanced a look over her shoulder at them and been shoved in the back with one of the guns for it. She wheels around to face the leader, planting herself between Weiss and the rest of them. “I’ll behave, promise. You can shoot me if I try anything.”

“Yang,” Weiss grinds out, but Yang ignores her.

“Just let me help her, okay?” Yang says, glaring at the leader until he waves one hand lazily.

“Fine. Shoot her in the leg if she gets smart.” He tosses the keys over to one of the others, and he fumbles with the cuffs until they drop away and Yang can move her arms again.

“You’re so reckless,” Weiss mutters when Yang kneels down at her side again. “Don’t offer to let people shoot you, you moron.”

“Love you too, babe,” Yang says flatly. She crouches on her heels at Weiss’s side, curling an arm around her waist. “Count of three, yeah?”

“Just get me up,” Weiss says impatiently, fingers digging into Yang’s shoulder for purchase, but there’s no venom in her voice, no irritation, no anger; it’s heavy with pain instead, and Yang’s stomach turns as she pulls Weiss up to standing.

“Okay,” Yang says, turning back to the leader. He jerks a thumb over his shoulder and one of the guards prods her in the back, and Yang sets off walking. Weiss is featherlight at her side, even with more than half her weight on Yang and her fingers digging claw-like into Yang’s arm. There are guards milling around throughout the camp who step out of their way as they carry on, some of them stopping mid-conversation, some of them pausing in their work of escorting groups of cuffed men and women, all of them with dark skin and dark hair and the same mistrustful, wary frown that Blake had worn when they first found her.

“This has to have something to do with it, right?” Yang mutters, not looking at Weiss.

“I mean,” Weiss says with a groan. “This has clearly been here for a while and the delta is supposed to be protected wildlife, so someone’s been spending a lot of money to keep this off the grid and the authorities looking the other way.”

“Those are military uniforms,” Yang says quietly. She tilts her head to the right, and Weiss’s eyes follow, tracking to a collection of men standing lazily with machine guns in camouflage, their posture relaxed but their shoulders emblazoned with the Romanian flag. “Whoever’s doing this has at least part of the Romanian military in their pocket.”

“We really just can’t catch a break,” Yang adds. Weiss is silent beside her, focus instead locked onto the lines and lines of cuffed people being guarded throughout the camp, a different sort of pain crossing over her face.

They’re led into a tent, one with a wooden floor and a metal desk and a camp bed, every corner taken up by wire shelving filled to bursting with supplies.

“Hands,” the man with silver hair says gruffly, holding the cuffs out and staring expectantly at Yang.

“Just do it,” Weiss says, dropping down with a groan onto the camp bed. Yang’s jaw clenches, but she holds her hands out in front of her, letting him lock the cuffs around her wrists again.

“Stay here,” he says, bored, and disappears out of the tent.

“We could--”

“Yang,” Weiss says sharply, shaking her head, eyes wide, and Yang bites down on her tongue and turns to see a woman standing in the entrance of the tent, staring at Yang appraisingly, a man standing behind her with his hand on the hilt of a sheathed machete like the one the guards who brought them in had carried, his red hair glinting in the sunlight.

“Have a seat,” she says, cool and level, and gestures to the camp bed. She doesn’t move, staring Yang down until she finally relents and settles at Weiss’s side, cuffed hands held awkwardly over her knees. One of Weiss’s hands curls round hers, tight and grounding.

“My name is Cinder. And you’re Taiyang’s daughter,” she says languidly, settling into the chair behind the desk and hooking one knee over the other, taking a moment to remove the satellite phone from her belt and set it on the desk in front of her. “The other one.”

“What do you know about my family,” Yang says, hand tightening around Weiss’s enough to bruise.

“I know they’re dead,” Cinder says, waving one hand dismissively. “We went through all that trouble to get him out here to finish his research, but he was--uncooperative.”

Behind her, the redheaded man scoffs, bored, one hand resting lazily on the machete at his hip. “He spent so long looking for the exact thing we wanted, and then refused to help us find it.”

“If this is how you treat people, can you blame him?” Weiss says with a sneer. Like a flash, he’s around the desk, machete drawn and inches from Weiss’s throat. She glares up at him,

unflinching, corporate and cold, but Yang can feel the tension that's snapped through her body.

"We don't need you," he says thinly. "Just her. Don't tempt me."

"Adam, please," the woman says with a sigh, and red flashes in Yang's vision. "Be polite to our guests."

"You're Adam Taurus," she says. "You took my dad-- my *sister* --"

"I did," Adam says, sheathing his machete with a smirk, sharp and wolfish. "I killed him, too."

Yang lunges for him without thinking, cuffed hands reaching for his throat, but he has the advantage of free hands and no injuries, and he sidesteps easily and snaps an arm around her neck. Somewhere in the background is Weiss, yelling for Yang to stay calm, but Yang slams a heel into the arch of his foot and an elbow back under his ribcage, hard enough that his hold breaks and he doubles over, gasping for breath, and she manages to get her forearm locked under his jaw, squeezing the breath out of him, and--

A gun cocks, snapping through her rage, and she blinks over to where Cinder's still leaning back in her chair, a gun trained lazily on Weiss and eyes appraising.

"I'd rather not kill anyone else," she says drolly. "But if you won't cooperate, I'm afraid I might have to."

Yang releases Adam, shoving him away as best she can with cuffed hands, and slides to her left, putting herself between Weiss and the gun pointed at her. Behind her, Weiss huffs in indignation, but Yang ignores her wounded pride, unwilling to lose anyone else to this godforsaken place.

"What do you want from me?"

Cinder produces a crushed tablet, the one Yang's spent days poring over and memorizing, the one that had been filled to bursting with her father's research, filled with maps and runes and riddles that are imprinted in Yang's mind.

"I want you to tell me what was on here." She drops the destroyed tablet onto the desktop. "So that we can find what we're looking for."

"If my dad refused to help you then I know it was for a good reason," Yang says, unwavering, confident in this at least. Behind her, Weiss is quiet and steady. "So no. I'm not going to help you."

"Yang," Cinder says with a sigh. "We can all walk out of here in two days if you help me. You and your little Roma friend and your Schnee brat, you can all be home and safe with your fortunes." She leans her elbows on the desk, head tilting to one side. "But if you don't, your Roma friend is going to be worked to death digging, just like the rest of them. And that--" she points to Weiss's ankle and the way the jagged edges of broken bones are pushing

against the skin, nearly breaking through, nauseating and dangerous. “--is going to wind up infected and you’ll watch her die, too. So you can cooperate and we all leave, safe and sound, or you and everyone else are going to die here.”

The man with silver hair pokes his head into the tent, muttering something in a language Yang doesn't understand and Cinder sighs. She pushes up from her chair and holsters her gun, shrugging languidly and hooking the satphone back onto her belt.

“Your choice, Yang.” She glances over towards Adam and jerks her head towards the entrance to the tent, holding his gaze until he leaves, and she saunters after him. “I’ll give you two time to think it over.”

She disappears, the tent flap fluttering shut behind her, and Yang watches, pauses, peers out of the tent entrance and then the rear entrance and, finding them unguarded, turns immediately to Weiss.

“Don’t even say it,” Weiss snaps out before Yang can open her mouth.

“You don’t know what I was going to say,” Yang says unconvincingly, even as she settles gingerly down onto the ground in front of Weiss’s broken ankle, bound hands reaching carefully for her.

“You’re about to be an idiot to try and save our lives,” Weiss says, voice shaking when Yang’s fingers work her boot off gently and roll up what’s left of her pants leg.

“This needs to be set,” Yang says. She climbs back up to her feet, turning in a slow circle until she spots a first aid kit. She digs through it, finding bandages and antiseptic and, finally, a suture kit.

“I’m not the one who needs stitches,” Weiss says, voice tight with pain, and Yang ignores her, finagling a needle out and pricking herself in the process of working the tip into the handcuffs.

“I can’t set your ankle in handcuffs,” she says, nose wrinkling as she concentrates.

“Where did you learn to pick a lock?”

“YouTube,” Yang says absently, and she bites down on her lip in concentration, growling with frustration, until the lock on one of the cuffs opens. It takes half as long to unlock the other one, and she lets them fall to the ground with a flourish.

“Did you learn to set broken bones on YouTube, too?” Weiss says, suddenly apprehensive, glancing down at her mangled ankle and then back up at Yang.

“Have a little faith,” Yang says with a grin, forced as it may be given their situation, as she digs through a pile of supplies left behind Cinder’s desk, coming up with two broken halves of a tentpole. “Pyrrha taught me.”

“Pyrrha taught you to set a broken bone?” Weiss says, doubt dripping from her voice.

“I can’t tell if you’re judging me saying she knows how to do it, or that she taught me how.”

“Obviously the latter,” Weiss says with a huff. “She’s a firefighter, of course she knows emergency medicine.”

“Couple years back one of the kids at the gym got cocky with the heavy bag and managed to snap his tibia clean in half during a training practice,” Yang says, glancing up from where she’s kneeling in front of Weiss with an empty canvas backpack and a knife, cutting the straps off the bag. “The marathon was happening so it was taking forever for the ambulance to get to us, and he wouldn’t sit still and was going to make it worse, so P set it. I got her to tell me what she was doing so I’d know, y’know? Never know when you might need to know something like that.”

“Right,” Weiss says. She watches apprehensively as Yang strips her belt off and offers it to her.

“You might want to bite down onto that,” she says gently. “I don’t know how much this is going to hurt, but I’m going to guess somewhere between a lot and a fuckload.”

“If you make this worse I’m going to murder you,” Weiss says with a glare, even as she folds the belt over and shoves it between her teeth.

“If I don’t, you’re going to finally ask Pyrrha out when we get home,” Yang says, matching Weiss’s glare with a smirk, hands gentle around her ankle. “Deal?”

Weiss glares down at her, teeth clenched around the belt, not blinking until Yang sighs and cracks her knuckles.

“On three.” Yang makes it to two and then straightens Weiss’s foot, aligning the broken bones as best she can, and grits her teeth against the muffled yell coming out from around the leather in Weiss’s teeth as she fumbles with setting the poles and wrapping them tightly.

“Done,” she says, yanking her hands back, and the belt falls out of Weiss’s mouth with a gasp.

“I hate you so much,” Weiss says raspily, slamming a fist into Yang’s shoulder weakly, chest heaving with every gasping breath.

“Love you too.” Yang props her elbows on her knees and scrubs at her face uselessly with her palms. “Now we have to figure out how to find Blake and get you out of here.”

“Yang,” Weiss says, suddenly calm again. “You have to go. I can’t walk on this.”

“Not a chance,” Yang says immediately. “I’m not leaving you--”

“You have to,” Weiss says over her, firm and unwavering even with eyes glassy from pain. “You can get out of here and find help and come back for us.”

“Help from who, exactly?” Yang says, gesturing wildly towards outside. “Don’t know if you noticed the Romanian military out there helping them.”

“Winter,” Weiss says firmly. “Get to a phone and call Winter. You know she has diplomatic contacts all over the world, and we’re American citizens, and high profile at that. She can get to us.”

“I’m not leaving you here,” Yang says, shaking her head. “I’m not going to lose you, too, Weiss, I swear to God--”

“Yang,” Weiss says, her voice finally cracking. “This is our best chance. Blake’s valuable because they want her to work, apparently, and I’m valuable because of my family, and she knows it. I can string her along long enough for you to get help out here. Everyone wants Schnee money, you know that, and she’s clearly not exactly the principled type that would turn away from the possibility of ransoming me back to my family.”

“I don’t like this,” Yang says, still shaking her head. “I already lost Dad and Ruby to these people, I’m not going to just give you and Blake to them, too.”

“You’re not.” Weiss grips at her hand, holding tight with fingers that still shake with the pain from setting her leg, and the floor spins under Yang. “You’re going to get us out of here. All of us. How many people do they have out here working? You know they aren’t here willingly. They aren’t going to kill you if you run because they need you alive to find whatever it is they think you know, so *use* that to get out of here and get us help.”

Yang shakes her head and swipes at her eyes even as she climbs to her feet, one hand pressing against the stubborn wound in her side and the other steadying her against Cinder’s desk when the room spins around her.

“For the record, I don’t like this,” she mutters.

“I know,” Weiss says with a shrug. “If it makes you feel any better, once we’re home you’re going to owe me for the rest of your life for getting us into this, so really you’re just starting with that now.”

“It doesn’t, actually.” Yang rolls her eyes and slides her belt back on. She glances around the tent, turning in a slow circle again. “You need a weapon, something for defense, just in case--”

“What, like a knife?” Weiss says, producing a butterfly knife out of the boot on her uninjured leg and flipping it open expertly. Yang gawks her as she flips it closed again, and Weiss rolls her eyes. “You’re not the only one with hidden talents, you know.”

“Honestly I don’t know why I’m still surprised when you keep turning out to basically be James Bond,” Yang mutters, then pauses, head tilting. “Don’t suppose you have a bazooka hidden somewhere that we can use, too, do you?”

“Sorry, I left my rocket launcher in my other pants,” Weiss says flatly. “Get going, okay? If you go now you’ve got some time before the sun sets, and I’m going to guess that if you push, you’re probably faster than most of these jackasses.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Schnee,” Yang says, rolling her eyes. “You’re sure you--”

“I’m sure,” Weiss says firmly, blue eyes sharp through the pain as she nods. “Get us help. We’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Yang says uncertainly, stomach aching as much with fatigue and exhaustion and dehydration as it is at the fact that she’s about to leave Weiss and Blake to the people who killed her father and sister.

“It’s going to be okay,” Weiss says, one hand gripping at Yang’s, fingers winding between hers and holding tight over her dirty and bloodied knuckles.

“Right,” Yang says, distracted, half her focus on trying to figure out the best way out and the other on Weiss, who’s never left her side, the only person who’s always been there, who Yang’s loved her whole life, and the fact that she’s about to leave her behind. She drops down on the cot next to Weiss and hugs her, tight enough that she can feel it when air bursts out of Weiss’s lungs, but she doesn’t let go, and Weiss’s arms are just as tight around her. “Okay.”

Weiss presses close and pushes her forehead into Yang’s neck, breath hot and unsteady on Yang’s collarbone. “Okay,” she mumbles.

Yang pulls back and extracts a knife from her own boot, folding it into Weiss’s hand and holding tight. “Just in case you need an extra.”

“Yang,” Weiss starts to say, and then pauses, relents, redirects. “I--”

“Please,” Yang says helplessly. “If I have to leave you here then at least let me--”

“Pyrrha and I went out six months ago,” Weiss says over her, and then her teeth clack together audibly, red smearing across her cheeks.

“You did?” Yang pulls back, hand still wrapped around Weiss’s, an unexpected ache building low in her stomach. “You haven’t dated anyone in--I thought you--”

“I know,” Weiss hurries out. “But it-- she’s great, but my heart wasn’t in it.” Weiss pulls in a deep breath, eyes shut, and then exhales, opens her eyes. They’re hard and bright, brighter than ever with her face dirty with dried flecks of mud, and her free hand presses against Yang’s cheek, holding her steady so Weiss can lean forward and brush a soft kiss against her mouth.

“You have to go,” she says softly, still close enough that Yang can feel her words more than hear them, drowned out by the way her pulse thunders and her chest aches because she’s held herself back for so long, too messy and too lost and too certain that she was alone in how she felt to ever do anything about how she’s loved Weiss for as long as she can remember, how it grew and evolved and changed over time, a quiet constant in the midst of the turbulence that’s made up the last fifteen years of her life.

“Tell me you’re not doing this because you think we’re going to die,” Yang says, eyes still closed, forehead tilting against Weiss’s.

“You’ll get us out of here,” Weiss says firmly. “I know you will. But you have to go now.” She pulls back with a pained inhale, hand falling away from Yang’s cheek, and the loss finally prompts Yang to open her eyes.

“You have to go,” Weiss says again. “Now.”

“Right,” Yang mutters. She checks the spare knife in Weiss’s hand, pauses to pull their joined hands up so she can press a kiss to Weiss’s knuckles, muddy and covered in thin lines of scar tissue that Yang’s had memorized since she was barely a teenager, from years of archery and fencing and too many other sports to count, and finally pushes herself up to standing. “Don’t go anywhere without me.”

“Har har,” Weiss says, rolling her eyes, and it’s so familiar that they could almost be at home, in New York, at Weiss’s apartment high above the park where it’s quiet and safe, and a surge of determination flickers in Yang’s chest.

She spares one look back to Weiss, who’s folding the switchblade into her boot and snapping softly for Yang to run, and ducks out the back. It dumps her into an empty alleyway of tents, and she breathes, closes her eyes, thinks. It’s late, late enough in the day that if she can get out of the camp the likelihood of them tracking her is low, especially if she can avoid bleeding too much. Her head reels, fatigue and dehydration and what has to be a concussion blurring her surroundings and her spatial awareness, but they’d been flying northeast when they were shot down and had walked into the afternoon sun for an hour, so--

She shakes her head and opens her eyes, glancing up skyward. South. She needs to head south. The sun is warm on her back and low in the sky, and she smiles grimly. She knows where south is.

There’s a rattle of guns and boots on the other side of the tents, and she ducks between two of them as a line of soldiers turns a nearby corner. She needs to get out of here and to head south, away from the people holding Weiss and Blake, to civilization and someone who can get her to an embassy. Even Cinder’s hold on the Romanian military won’t hold up to the American embassy and the power of the Schnee family fortune.

Yang slides between tents, ducking around corners and dodging soldiers, and draws up to a stop at a sleeping soldier, sprawled out in a camp chair outside a tent, gun slung over his chest and belt full of grenades, and smiles. She doesn’t need long to get out, she can run for miles with enough adrenaline, even with her side aching and bleeding.

She glances around from the shadowy corner she’s crouched in, waiting for clearance, minutes clicking along before she can slip out of the shadows and slap a forearm over his throat, yanking him back into the shadows and shushing him uselessly as he struggles against her hold. It’s not long before he goes limp in her arms and she drops him unceremoniously onto the ground, yanking his belt free with slippery fingers and hoisting the gun around her shoulder.

She’s never used a grenade before, but she yanks one free and pauses, breathes, waits for her hands to stop shaking, and then pulls the pin free and flings it over the tents, towards the treeline to the north, and sprints off in the other direction.

The ground shakes with the explosion and she nearly crashes to her knees, barely catching herself with a strangled yell that's swallowed up by the flurry of activity around the camp when her abdomen protests and starts bleeding more freely. She sidles along the backside of a row of tents, breaths coming heavy and one hand pressing over the gash in her side. Blood leaks between her fingers, sticky and warm, and she clenches her teeth together and skids around the corner of a tent, barely dodging a sprinting soldier. The camp is awash with activity and people shouting, and she ducks between another row of tents and skids to a stop in front of a chain link fence, shoddily constructed but effective enough at caging in a dozen people, crouched and dirty.

"Yang?"

Blake pushes up to her feet, eyes wide over a bruise blooming on one cheekbone, and Yang's stomach twists around itself because Weiss convinced Yang to leave her behind but there's nothing in the world that can make her leave the both of them if she doesn't have to. Yang pushes her hand harder over the wound in her side and glances at the corners of the chain link fence, the locked gate, and on the other side Blake's eyes go wider and she shakes her head.

"Don't--"

"Shut up," Yang breathes out, hands shaking as much from adrenaline as the fact that she's loved Weiss her whole life and has only known Blake for two days but the idea of leaving Blake behind hurts just as much as leaving Weiss behind.

"Look out--"

She ducks just in time with Blake's warning, barely dodging the butt of a gun flying towards her head, and manages to get one elbow up and into the jaw of the man behind the gun, snapping his head back and sending him flying. There's a hissed protest from behind her, Blake's voice a rasping snap, but Yang slams a kick into his chin and watches as he goes limp, the keys on his belt rattling as much as the dropped gun.

"Come on," Yang says, yanking the keys free. They slip in the blood on her hands, but she manages to fit a key into a lock and swing the gate open. "Come on, let's go."

Blake hesitates, looking around at the people crouched in the back of the pen, dirty and malnourished and not moving.

"Blake, come on," Yang says lowly, adrenaline burning in her throat, warring with desperation. "We have to move, get them up, if they can run we can make a break for it while they're dealing with the explosion."

Blake stares at her for a long span of seconds, jaw setting firm, and she turns around and rattles something out in Hungarian, pointing at Yang. The others shrink back from her even more, heads shaking and hands up carefully, and Yang freezes because never in her life have so many people looked at her like she would hurt them.

"They don't want to leave," Blake says softly. "They-- escapes don't go well."

“Then we’ll come back for them,” Yang says before she can stop herself. “Tell them we’ll come back for them when we come back for Weiss.”

“What?” The tension in Blake’s shoulders gives momentarily, eyes darting past Yang as if expecting to find Weiss there. “Where’s--”

“She said to get to a phone and call her sister,” Yang says shortly. “She can’t walk but she’s next in line to run the largest company in the world and is worth like a billion dollars. She’s too valuable for them to hurt her.”

“Yang,” Blake says softly, one hand reaching for her arm, and Yang freezes under the gentle pressure because it burns against her skin the same way Weiss’s touch had, the only soft touches anyone’s had for her since they found this godforsaken place and it hurts, it hurts so much, to remember that she’s the one who dragged them into this all. “She’ll be okay--”

“Let’s go,” Yang says, short and sharp, and she jerks her chin towards the others. “Tell them we’ll be back.”

Blake pauses, but then says something quietly in Hungarian, and follows Yang to the other side of the gate, staring through the chain link as the others continue to cower behind it as Yang locks it again.

“Come on,” Yang says, yanking on her arm. “We have to go south.”

Blake’s hand curls around hers, squeezing tight and holding on, and they set off at a run towards the southern treeline together.

Chapter 4

They don't talk as they run, an unspoken agreement at the need to find distance above all else settling between them. Blake's footfalls steady into a comforting cadence behind her, and Yang focuses on keeping her breathing steady and her head up as they keep moving, keep running, keep putting as much distance between themselves and the camp full of Cinder's army behind them.

It's dark, the sun setting and dragging their pace down from a run to a jog to a heated walk, when Yang hears a new set of footsteps behind them, heavier than Blake's, and she skids to a halt and turns just in time to get hit by a flying tackle. It's the man who'd lead them back to camp, silver hair matted with sweat and a gun slung around his back, and he lands heavy on top of her in the mud, the impact slamming the air out of her lungs.

"You're such a pain in my ass, blondie," he grunts out, forearm pushing over her throat and knees pinning her elbows into the ground. Black edges into her vision and her legs kick, trying for traction in the slippery mud to flip him off of her but finding none, and she's nearly unconscious when she manages to brace one heel against a root and buck her hips up, disrupting his balance just in time for a log to slam into the back of his head and send him careening into the mud. Blake appears in her vision instead, breathing heavily with, log tumbling from her grip.

"Nice hit," she croaks out. He's out cold on the ground next to her, face half-buried in the mud. She pushes up onto her elbows, groaning at the renewed ache in her abdomen and the way it's bleeding yet again. She doesn't protest when Blake reaches down to help her up with both hands, and lets herself lean for just a minute against Blake, warm and solid at her side, holding her upright easily. She drops her forehead onto Blake's shoulder and gives herself just a moment to breathe, sinking into the way her arms curl around her carefully, different than Weiss's but exactly the same.

"I met Adam," she says without meaning to, muffled into Blake's shoulder, and Blake stiffens under her. "I'm sorry," she adds uselessly.

"He's alive?"

"Yeah," Yang says raspily. She straightens up, pulling her forehead off of Blake's shoulder, and Blake's arms fall away, curling around her own stomach as she steps back, putting distance between them. "I-- figured you'd want to know, I guess."

Yang pauses, watching as Blake's eyes darken and her jaw sets even as her shoulders slump, and curses the fact that she'd brought them all into this. "He killed them," she whispers. "He told me."

"I'm sorry," Blake says, distant, and Yang shakes her head.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing," Yang says, smiling thin and humorless. "For dragging you out here and getting us all into this mess."

"I chose to be here," Blake says. "So did Weiss. It's not your fault there's someone out here with an entire army on the payroll. There's no way you could have known."

"You did," Yang says hollowly. "You said nothing good ever came out of looking for him, and I pushed anyways, and now we're out here in the middle of nowhere and--"

"Stop blaming yourself," Blake says, sharp and too loud for the dark they're in the middle of. "Weiss chose to follow you. I chose to go with you. We both made our choices, and you don't get to take that away from either of us by taking all the blame."

Yang's teeth grind together, and she shakes her head. "We need to keep moving," she says after a long moment.

"Yang," Blake says, finally moving, one hand digging into Yang's arm. "You need to rest."

"All of those people back at the camp," Yang says instead. "How did they get there?"

It pushes a sour look onto Blake's face, bitter and cold, and her posture goes sharp, angry, ready to fight.

"Roma," she says after a long moment of carefully measured breaths. "Mostly. People ignored by the government, or left behind. People someone like these bastards could disappear without attracting attention."

There's something hollow to her words, something cold and tired that overrides the way Yang's side is still bleeding, the way there's an unconscious man face-down in the mud ten feet away, the way they're both so far from home with no one else to hold onto but each other. Yang deflates for a moment, allows herself a minute to breathe, to listen, to rest her hands on her knees and try to parse through the way something like guilt is dragging Blake's words down.

"Roma," she echoes after a minute. "Like you said your mom--"

"Yeah," Blake says flatly, cutting off any more Yang might have found to say, and Yang pushes up off her knees and covers the distance between them, boots squelching in the mud. Her hands reach for Blake and it's only in the last second she remembers the mud-covered damage to her shoulder and a parking lot in Romania, the way Blake had looked at her like she was worth protecting, how she'd curled around Weiss hours or days or weeks ago after the plane crash, and exhaustion wins out over reason and her hands-- filthy, like the rest of the both of them, stained with the day's turmoil and damage, shaking and uncertain-- press against Blake's cheeks instead.

"We'll get them out," she says, low and firm, a promise she isn't sure she can keep but one she's unable to stop herself from making for Blake. "We *will*. Everyone back there, we'll get them all out."

Blake breathes in, loud and unsteady, and her hands curl around Yang's wrists, trembling and strong and grounding in their grip, and Yang lets her eyes shut and her forehead tilt down until it presses against Blake's and they're sharing air and wavering breaths. It should feel

like a betrayal, almost, with Weiss left behind and waiting, but instead it feels like a promise, an unspoken determination that they'll all get out and go home together, the pained protective way Blake had looked at Weiss and her broken ankle burning just as hot in Yang's chest as the way Weiss had kissed her.

"You're sure Weiss will be okay?"

It's not what she'd expected and Yang's pulse stutters, her breath catching in her throat.

"No," she says, thick and scared. "But Weiss is sure. And Weiss is always right."

"She is," Blake agrees, sniffing quietly. "It's really fucking annoying."

It settles Yang's pulse, the way there's no vitriol in Blake's voice, nothing but a weighty affection, and her hands press harder against Blake's cheeks.

"Okay," Blake breathes out eventually, fingertips digging into Yang's wrists, pressing heavy over her heartbeat and the way it's fluttering and unsteady but constant still. "Okay."

Yang opens her eyes and Blake's are still closed, and they're lost in the middle of the Danube river delta somewhere in Romania with an army chasing after them and hundreds of prisoners behind them waiting for their help but for just a moment Yang's chest burns and she wishes-- more than she wants to survive this, more than she wants to find her sister, more than she wants to get all of them home safely-- that they had Weiss and time to sit down and just be, just for a moment, quiet and calm and together.

"We have to keep moving," she says instead, clearing her throat and pulling her hands free. Blake's eyes snap open as Yang moves away, bright in the dark, and color that has nothing to do with mud or injuries smears across her cheeks.

"You need to rest," Blake says as Yang pulls further away. "Weiss will murder me if you die out here."

"I'm fine," Yang says with a grunt, ducking under a branch. "We need to keep moving."

"It's been hours," Blake throws back. "You're still bleeding, you almost definitely have a concussion, you haven't had anything to eat or drink since this morning, you need to--"

"Get down," Yang says suddenly, half-breathless and pivoting on one heel to tackle Blake down into the mud. A sharp line of new pain skids across her arm just over her elbow as they hit the ground, Yang's body blanketing Blake's and an arrow-- an *arrow* -- thudding into a tree trunk behind them. Yang shoves an arm over the back of Blake's head, ignoring her grunt of protest, and lifts her head enough to see a narrow shadow between tree trunks, a slim form nocking another arrow into a wooden bow and swinging it up with familiar ease, stance narrower than it should be but with a perfectly lifted elbow, and--

"Ruby?" Yang says stupidly, carelessly, the name breaking in the middle and burning in her throat. She clambors off of Blake, up to her feet, hands out carefully and chest in full view, a perfect target, and Blake's grabbing at her and snapping about being careless, but Yang's

world has narrowed to Ruby, scrawny and underfed and six inches taller than the last time Yang saw her, with their mother's dark hair and silver eyes, their father's cheekbones standing sharp under her skin.

"Ruby," she says again, practically choking on it. "Ruby, is that-- it's me, it's Yang--"

The bow lowers slowly, and Yang lurches forward, covering the distance between them in two strides and slamming to a stop abruptly, two feet away from her sister who's been missing for a decade, who's improbably alive and staring up at her with familiar silver eyes and unfamiliar distrust, arms still tense and ready to swing the bow up and fire.

"You're alive," Yang breathes out. Her hands flex at her side, fingers shaking with the need to reach out, to touch her, to assure herself that Ruby really is alive and right in front of her. There's a rustle of dirty clothes and mud behind her as Blake climbs to her feet but Yang doesn't move, doesn't look, doesn't breathe, unwilling to consider anything but Ruby, here, now. "It's been so long--"

"You're not real," Ruby says finally, shaking her head. "You're never real."

It hits harder than the gun that had slammed into her jaw hours earlier, more than the hole in her side that's still bleeding, and Yang stops breathing.

"What?" Her voice shakes, her throat closing up around itself because in ten years of wondering, of wishing, of dreaming of seeing her sister again not once did she consider that Ruby would reject her. "Ruby, it's me, I'm here, we-- me and Weiss, we found you--"

"You're never real," Ruby mutters out again, shaking her head, fingers flexing hard enough around the bow that the wood creaks. "You always leave."

"I'm real," Yang says stubbornly. "Or have you really spent ten years imagining I'd show up here looking like someone put me through the ringer and that you *shot* me?" She yanks her shirt up to show the wound in her side. "We flew out here and got shot down by whoever the hell took you and Dad out here, I got fucking stabbed by a tree branch from the crash and Weiss broke her ankle, they still have her, she made me leave to go find help but we found *you* instead and--" She cuts off abruptly, something burning warm and bright in her chest, giddy like Christmas morning, and she suddenly looks around with wide eyes. Because they were both supposed to be *dead* but Ruby is here right in front of her and-- "Dad, is he here? Where's Dad? He can help us--"

"Dad's dead," Ruby says flatly, her hands finally relaxing on the bow minutely when Yang freezes. "He died a long time ago, when we were trying to escape."

Yang's stomach twists around itself and her chest deflates, and her body gives in, suddenly, to the last day of brutality and violence, the final confirmation that her father had died so long ago sapping the strength out of her legs, and she falls, knees crashing back into the mud and chest heaving as she tries to find air in her lungs.

Cold hands, strong and steady, grip at her shoulders, Blake's voice tinny and distant in her ears, and Yang's nails dig into her own palms. Distantly, raised voices reach for her and

suddenly Blake's hands are gone and there's a crack of a fist against skin, and Yang comes back to herself to see Blake standing over Ruby, sprawled on the ground with a hand over her nose, blinking wide-eyed up at them.

"What--"

"We're real," Blake says, seething and low, glaring down at Ruby. "She sent herself on a suicide mission to find you, so wake the hell up and be *here*. You've survived this long on your own which means you have somewhere to stay, so we need to go there *now* before Cinder finds us."

Ruby blinks up at her, pulling her hand away and staring down at the blood in her palm, leaking out of her nose from Blake's punch. She glances from her hand to Blake to Yang and, abruptly, sucks in a great gasping breath.

"Yang?" she says, shaking and small, and Yang flings herself past Blake to grab ahold of her, touching her sister for the first time in ten years and holding her tight. Ruby's hands dig into her back, hard enough to bruise, to break skin even through her shirt, but Yang holds on tighter regardless, enough to squeeze the air out of Ruby's lungs.

"Everyone said you were dead," Yang mutters into her shoulder, one hand curling around the back of Ruby's head, fingers threading through unevenly cropped dark hair and holding tight. "I'm sorry it took me so long."

Ruby doesn't say anything, just pushes her head further into Yang's shoulder, taking in huge gasping breaths, her whole body-- she's so *small*, so thin, so undernourished, all skin and bones and scars, living and breathing and found-- shaking with every inhale.

Another hand settles on Yang's free shoulder, careful and gentle. "Yang," Blake says softly. "We need to get somewhere safe. Now."

It's enough to break the moment, reality crashing back into the reunion, and Ruby scrambles back from Yang abruptly, even as she keeps one hand wrapped around Yang's arm.

"Who--"

"This is Blake," Yang says hurriedly. Her free hand covers Blake's on her shoulder. "She helped us get here to find you. You can trust her."

"Helped us," Ruby mutters, and then shakes her head, eyes widening again. "Weiss, where's Weiss, you said--"

"Cinder's people have her," Blake says, grim and tired, worry written as plainly into her eyes as anything Yang's seen from her so far, and Yang grips tighter to her hand.

"She's okay," Yang adds hurriedly, before Ruby can say anything, skidding right past her own doubt because the fear flashing in Ruby's eyes ignites something primal and protective in her, something she's missed for ten years. "She broke her ankle and can't walk, but she's a Schnee. They won't hurt her if they think they can get money out of her family." She shakes

her head, chest aching at the thought of Weiss, left alone with Cinder and Adam, the sardonic dismissal of her own worth save for her money. “She told me to get out and find help and come back for her.”

“I can’t believe you’re both here,” Ruby breathes out. “I thought I’d be stuck here forever--”

“Guys, I’m sorry, but we have to move,” Blake says lowly. “We can’t stay here, they’re going to track us and then we’re all in a world of hurt.” She glances over to the unmoving form of the man who’d followed them, breathing shallowly into the mud.

“That’s Mercury,” Ruby says, voice low and venomous and unlike anything Yang’s ever heard from her. “He was-- when Adam shot Dad he was--”

Yang goes cold at the unspoken accusation and she turns back to Mercury’s form. “Let him die here, then,” she says savagely. She pushes up to her feet and lands a kick between his legs, hard enough to jar his whole body and leave him in a world of pain when he wakes up. If he wakes up. “Let’s go.”

Ruby glances half-suspiciously towards Blake, and Yang curls a hand possessively around Blake’s elbow. “You can trust her,” she says quietly. “I promise. I’d trust her with your life, or Weiss’s.”

Ruby stares at her for long moments, and then finally nods. “Okay,” she says. “Let’s go.”

Blake hesitates as Ruby slings the bow over her back and darts over to grab the arrow she’d shot at them out of the tree, free hand coming up to grip at Yang’s on her elbow and eyes wide in the dark, and Yang swallows and nods and clears her throat.

“Let’s go,” she says softly, pulling her hand free as Ruby sets off at a rapid clip, waving for them to follow. There’s an audible inhale behind her from Blake as Yang starts off, but Yang keeps her eyes trained on her sister’s form, unwilling to look away any longer than she already has, even for Blake.

“This is where you’ve been hiding?” Yang says dubiously, staring at the knotted mass of roots at the base of the tree. “That doesn’t look--”

“Trust me,” Ruby says, kneeling down and shoving a rock half her size out of the way to expose a hole under the roots. She drops the bow and quiver full of arrows down and sidles through after it, leaving Yang to try and find a way to fit her shoulders through.

“When did you get so big?” Ruby mutters, watching as Yang struggles blindly through the hole, finally managing to narrow her shoulders enough to fit and drop down, landing in an undignified crouch ten feet down in what could almost be called a room, built out of carefully structured and clearly ancient caulked stone blockwork.

“What the hell,” Yang breathes out, staring at the carefully constructed walls and the ceiling that’s high enough that she can’t reach it even on her toes. Behind her, Blake lands gracefully and gawks all the same, and Ruby brushes past the both of them to grip at a leather strap-- newer leather than anything around them, a clear replacement-- that’s looped around a metal bracket embedded in the rock she had moved, and she pulls with a grunt until the entrance is covered again.

“What is this place?” Blake says, turning in slow circles, eyes tracing over faded artwork painted onto the stone walls.

“It’s what Dad was looking for,” Yang says suddenly, pieces clicking into place. Ruby and Blake stare at her, but she ignores them, closing her eyes and counting how far they’d run, the sun’s location as it set, the maps her father had found that she’d memorized. “This is-- this is what they’re looking for. Jesus.”

“What is it?” Ruby says, nose wrinkling.

“There’s some old folk tale,” Yang says excitedly. “Or fairy tale, I don’t know. This woman in the woods who would drain the life out of men who tried to find her--”

“Vadleany,” Blake supplies. “The wild girl.”

Yang blinks over at her, nodding. “Yeah, her,” she says. “Dad found some old map, it was in old Hungarian I think and he managed to translate it.”

“I remember him talking about that,” Ruby says slowly, and Yang nods again and points sharply at her.

“He must have planned to come look for it after you came home,” she says, pacing across the oversized room and back, fingertips tapping rapidly against her legs as she turns around pieces of information in her mind. “He said in his notes that other maps he’d found were Byzantine and all pointed to the same place, but there was one other one he found that was pre-Byzantine, so it was--”

“Non-Christian,” Ruby interjects, and Blake glances back and forth between them in surprise.

“Dad was a total nerd,” Yany says with a shrug. “Until Mom died, she ran the whole company so he could spend all his time being a geek in his study. We learned a lot and, y’know. The things you pick up as a kid stay with you.”

“Uh huh,” Blake says slowly. “So this map was...what, a military map?”

“No, a religious one, but not Christian,” Yang says. She closes her eyes and tilts her head back, conjuring up the map she’d memorized as best she could. “It still pointed to the same area of the delta as the other maps, I think, but it had additional directions. Something about-- three hundred paces south from some tree stump and then turn left to honor the-- um-- wind mother? I think? And then another thousand paces from there.”

She opens her eyes to Ruby and Blake staring at her. “What?”

“I forgot you basically have a photographic memory,” Ruby says with a shrug, and warmth washes over Yang because it’s Ruby, here, right in front of her, Ruby who she grew up with, who she did her best to raise, who crept into Yang’s bed, into Weiss’s bed, almost every night for years after their mother died and held on tight through nightmares and loneliness, who even at six was the first person to understand Yang’s eidetic memory and penchant for word puzzles.

“I didn’t know you knew anything but punching,” Blake offers, smiling. “I guess I should’ve learned to stop underestimating you by now.”

“Rude,” Yang says playfully, hands settling on her hips with a glare that doesn’t have any weight behind it, and for just a moment things almost feel okay, as if they aren’t all running for their lives and Weiss isn’t alone with the people who killed Taiyang. A stab of pain flashes through her side and brings her back to reality, though, and she lets out a groan and pushes her hand over a fresh swell of blood.

“You need to clean that,” Blake says, immediately at her side with her hand pressing over Yang’s. “Ruby, do you have any--”

“More or less,” Ruby supplies. She hesitates, hand going back up to her nose and the dried blood under it.

“We’re real,” Yang says, as firmly as she can even as she wants to curl around the pain in her side. “I promise. We’re here.”

“She needs to clean this wound though,” Blake says, quiet and urgent. “So it doesn’t get infected.”

“Okay,” Ruby says, shaking her head. “Come on, this way.” She counts along the blocks in one of the walls and then pushes against one, hopping back as a quarter of the wall recesses and slides away.

“Jesus,” Yang mutters. “How long has this been here?”

“Dad said at least three thousand years,” Ruby says over her shoulder. She produces a flashlight and flips it on, lighting up a second room with a collection of electric lanterns, a box full of military rations, a pallet and ratty blankets. Haphazard stacks of crates, some full of blankets, some full of ammo, at least one stacked full of old newspapers and magazines, all stamped with the same Salem, Ltd. logo.

“Is this where you’ve been living?” Yang says slowly. It’s dark and damp and cold, and her chest aches at the sight.

“It’s not so bad,” Ruby says with a shrug. “I’ve gotten *really* good at stealing. Drives Cinder insane, as far as I can tell.”

“Small victories, right?” Blake says absently from where she’s inspecting the stacks of supplies in one of the crates, and she surfaces with a first aid kit. Yang sags in her grip as she’s maneuvered around to sit on the pallet, not resisting as she’s pushed back to lay down

and her shirt is worked up to show her bloody abdomen. Behind Blake, Ruby stares down at her with wide eyes, and Yang closes her eyes against the tears pricking in them.

“I should have found you sooner,” she says, her voice creaking and hands curling into fists as she opens her eyes. “I’m so sorry, this is-- I should have--”

“I’m okay,” Ruby says, dropping down to kneel at Yang’s side, one uncertain hand reaching out, hesitant, and then settling on Yang’s shoulder. “Yang, you found me. I didn’t think anyone ever would.”

“What have you been doing all these years, Ruby?” Blake asks conversationally as she dumps water onto a blanket and sets to dabbing at the mess around Yang’s stomach, cleaning away mud and blood.

“You’re trying to distract me,” Yang mutters out, not looking away from Ruby, who offers a watery smile her way.

“Is it working?” Blake says, pausing to glance sidelong at Yang, one eyebrow lifted.

“Maybe,” Yang says, disgruntled at being handled because only Weiss has ever been able to handle her and, improbably, it draws a laugh from Ruby. It wraps around Yang, the sound of her sister’s laugh, lost for so long, familiar and familial, and her breath catches in her throat and fingernails dig into her palms.

“Trying to find a way home,” Ruby says eventually, glancing over towards Blake. “Before Dad died we were trying to find a way out of here. The problem is that Cinder has a whole perimeter blocked off on land, so the only way out is to swim when the water’s high, but it’s too far to go without surfacing, and the perimeter is filled with underwater mines.”

“Cinder has a satphone,” Yang says absently. “If we had that we could just call Winter from there.”

“Winter?” Ruby says, blinking back over to Yang. “Why-- I thought--”

“A lot changed,” Yang says after a long moment. “She-- it took a long time, but she and Weiss are okay now. If she knew Weiss was in danger she’d rip up all of Europe to get to her.”

“Oh,” Ruby says faintly, and then shakes her head. “I-- wow.”

“Weiss is going to be so happy to see you,” Yang says, thick and heavy, and she uncurls her fist and grips at Ruby’s instead. “She missed you so much.”

“I missed you guys, too,” she whispers, and swipes at her eyes with her free hand. “I kept trying to find a way out, to see if I could get home, but--”

“Ruby,” Yang says sharply, shaking her head. “You survived. Which is more than anyone could have expected. That’s enough. You’re still here, and now we are too, and we’re going to find a way to get all of us-- *fuck* !” She’s cut off when Blake dumps hydrogen peroxide

onto her side, and one hand clamps around Ruby's and the other fist slams into the ground next to her.

"Sorry," Blake says unapologetically, even as her eyes soften and she gently presses a dry bandage over the wound. "I think this needs to be stitched up."

"I know it does," Yang grinds out. "But that doesn't mean I'm happy about it." She sucks in a deep breath and grips at Ruby's hand again, focusing on her sister instead of the fact that Blake's about to stitch her up without anesthetic. "Just get it over with."

"Ruby, talk to her," Blake says. "Please. It'll suck less if she can focus on something else."

"I'm right here, you know," Yang says sourly, even as she focuses on Ruby anyways.

"How long have I been gone?" Ruby says after a moment, and Yang's focus narrows immediately at the apprehension creeping over Ruby's face, older and harder and narrower than the seventh grader who'd left to go camping with her father so long ago, round and bright and full of light.

"Ten years last week," Yang says carefully.

"I stopped counting after a while," Ruby says, slow and unfocused. "I think it was driving me crazy, counting. Dad had kept a record, before he-- before--"

"What happened to him?" Yang asks before she can stop herself, voice tight with pain as the needle passes through her skin, Blake's hands steady. She pauses to tuck dark hair behind her ear and glance up at Yang, jaw set and eyes worried, and Yang does her best to smile even as her hands shake.

"We were trying to escape," Ruby says, pulling Yang's focus away from Blake and the sharp lines of her profile, burned into the back of Yang's eyelids when she shuts her eyes. "We'd already found this place and Dad had gone full nerd over it, found the hidden room, all that. We thought we could swim out one night when it was dark, between the perimeter guards. He went first and-- um--"

Yang grips at her hand tighter, forcing her attention just on Ruby, on listening to her father's story. "It's okay," she says softly, encouraging, not at all sounding like all she wants is to curl into a ball around her sister and never let go, never face the real world again.

"That's how we found out about the underwater mines," Ruby says eventually. Her eyes are dry and flat, even as her voice wavers and her hand curls tight around Yang's. "We weren't hit by any of them but then the guards started shooting and-- he was hurt, and couldn't swim out, and I couldn't carry him. He made me leave and then Adam found him--"

Yang lets out a grunt when the needle stabs harder into her skin, yanking her focus over to Blake and the way her knuckles have gone white around the needle. Ruby glances over at her, uncertainty written plainly into her features, and Yang reaches across with her free hand, fingers curling around the back of Blake's hand.

“They have history,” Yang says carefully, glancing between Blake and Ruby.

“I was hoping to find out he was already dead,” Blake says, flat and emotionless, as if her posture hadn’t stiffened visibly and hands weren’t shaking at his name. She pulls in a deep breath, and then another, and her hands steady under Yang’s, and she shakes her head and gently moves Yang’s hand away and sets back to work. “Adam is-- he’s terrible, and I’m sorry he’s hurt your family so much.”

“It’s not your fault--”

“I enabled him for a long time,” Blake says shortly. “If I hadn’t, he might have been in prison this whole time instead of what he did to your family.”

“That’s not your fault,” Ruby says, slow and uncertain, glancing at Yang with a frown. “Is it?”

“It’s definitely not,” Yang says firmly. Blake doesn’t answer, instead focusing on tying off the stitches and cutting the loose thread and fixing a bandage over it. Yang sits up as soon as she does, swinging around to face the both of them and holding onto Ruby with one hand and Blake with the other, holding as tight as she can to both of them. “It’s not your fault Adam did what he did, Blake, and Ruby, it’s not your fault for not finding a way out of here on your own. None of this is either of your faults, okay?”

“Weren’t you blaming yourself for all of this an hour ago?” Blake says, but there’s no fight in her voice, nothing but an echoing fatigue dragging her shoulders down.

“To be fair, I did drag you and Weiss out here and now--”

“Okay, new rule,” Ruby says over her, bright and loud and so much like she’d been before they left that Yang feels suddenly fourteen again. “No one is blaming themselves for any of this. Yeah? Deal?”

“Deal,” Yang says quickly, staring bright-eyed up at her sister, who’d survived against all the odds for so long on her own, still fighting and still burning bright with the kindness that she’d always held so fast to, and tears burn in her eyes.

“Okay,” Blake says, quiet and hesitant and unconvinced, and Yang pulls her eyes away from Ruby long enough to look after Blake, dark and fiery and kind in her own way, all sharp lines and bright eyes and burning determination underneath it all, and wants to cry. Instead she leans forward, ignoring the stab of pain in her stitches, and yanks them both into a hug. Ruby squeals but falls into it anyways, arms winding around the both of them and holding tight, burying her face in Yang’s neck, and Yang squeezes tighter until Blake finally wraps her arms around them as well.

“We’re going to figure this out,” Yang says wetly, muffled into their shoulders. “Together.” She lets out a groan and pulls back, pressing a hand over her side. “But like. Tomorrow. We seriously need to sleep.”

“She’s right,” Blake says, her voice thick, and she swipes at her eyes unsubtly. “Do we need to set up a watch?”

“I don’t think so,” Ruby says, sniffing and scrubbing at her face, still leaning against Yang. “They’ve never found me here before.”

“Okay,” Yang says, sagging into Ruby’s side, unwilling to break contact. “Sleep, and then food, and then we come up with a plan.”

She falls asleep with dry mud caked onto her clothes and skin, her hair a heavy weighted mass of tangles tinged brown under the weight of dirt in it, but curled around her sister’s side, clutching her tightly and with Ruby’s fingers digging into her forearm, with Blake warm and breathing soundly at her back, one arm resting carefully along Yang’s side, strong and unwavering. It’s freezing even on the pallet and wrapped in the blankets Ruby’s managed to steal over the years, the lack of proper ventilation in the hidden room stopping them from starting a fire for warmth, and her entire body throbs with pain and aches that dwarf any cagefight beating she’s taken over the years and the empty ache where Weiss should be at her side, but it’s the best night’s sleep she’s gotten since she was fourteen.

By the time Yang wakes up, Ruby and Blake are both already awake, Blake’s skin flushed from scrubbing the mud away, her clothes damp and frame shivering minutely under the wet of late winter water. She’s wrapped in a blanket in a somehow dignified manner, contrary to Yang, sprawled half-off the pallet they’d all crammed onto, blankets a mess and only half on top of her, her skin and clothes still caked in mud. She rolls over with a groan, her body aching with the combination of damage and exhaustion and sleeping on the floor, and it breaks through the quiet conversation Ruby and Blake had been having.

“She lives,” Blake drawls out, one eyebrow lifting, and Yang grunts in response.

“Were you always not a morning person or is that something I forgot about?” Ruby says, and it slices through Yang’s exhaustion like a bullet, a violent reminder of where they are, how far from home Ruby’s been for so long, how desperate they all are to be home and safe.

“Puberty,” Yang mutters, pushing up onto her elbows and groaning when her side aches.

“What a gift,” Ruby deadpans, so much like their father that Yang can’t help but smile in spite of their dire situation.

“Did you two geniuses come up with a plan while I was sleeping, maybe?” She sits up and crosses her legs, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders to ward off the chill.

“I’m sorry, who’s the one who memorized a pre-Byzantine map in old Hungarian?” Blake says lazily.

“Ruby took apart a lawnmower and built a go-kart when she was nine and drove it through the garage door,” Yang says with a yawn, pointing an accusatory finger at her sister.

“One time!” Ruby says indignantly, and it’s so familiar it warms Yang all over, spreading out from deep in her chest and reaching for her fingers and toes, and she smiles wider.

“We’re working on it,” Blake says with a shrug. She unwraps the blanket from around her shoulders, shaking her limbs experimentally, and then crosses the room to wrap her blanket around Yang. “I think our best bet is to get that satphone from Cinder. Ruby’s been stealing from them for years, so if we can make a diversion, she can get in, steal it, and get out.”

“You sure about that, Rubes?”

“I’ll make it work,” Ruby says stubbornly. She settles down next to Yang, leaning in when Yang automatically-- automatic, as if it hasn’t been a decade; automatic, as if she hasn’t been without a sister for so long; automatic, as if nothing ever changed-- opens up the blankets to wrap them around her and hold her tight against her side. It’s almost like home and the number of times the three of them had burrowed into one of the enormous couches to watch horror movies, Yang sandwiched between Weiss and Ruby because she hated horror movies but they loved them. There’s a pang of cold on her other side where Weiss should be, and she swallows and holds tighter to Ruby, redirecting her focus to Blake instead.

“So how do we make a diversion?”

“We still have a few grenades,” Blake says with a shrug. “It worked well enough to get us out.”

“Won’t they be expecting it then?” Yang’s head tilts to where Ruby’s is resting on her shoulder, eyes focused on Blake. “Since that’s what we did to escape.”

“I’m not sure we have a better option.” Blake sits in front of them, legs crossed to mirror Yang’s, arms wrapped around herself. Yang’s chest aches momentarily at how far away she seems, holding herself so separate from the two of them, but her arm stays locked around Ruby as she stares at Blake, fully aware of how openly her eyes are pleading for Blake to move closer.

Blake doesn’t move, wrapping her arms loosely around her knees instead and clearing her throat. “I can cause a diversion on the far side of the camp, and I’m fast enough to get back around to the south side--”

“Wait, hold on,” Yang says sharply. “No way are you doing that on your own. They’re going to send so many guns that way, and also A--”

“I’ll be fine,” Blake says over her.

“Blake,” Yang says, pleading, leaning forward and unwrapping her arm from Ruby in the process. “We have to do this as a team.”

“You watch Ruby’s back,” Blake says stubbornly. “Make sure nothing happens to her.”

“I’ll be fine,” Ruby says, just as Yang exhales indignantly.

“I can set the grenades off just as well as you can,” she says sharply. “You can protect Ruby-”

“Ruby doesn’t need a bodyguard!” Ruby half-shouts over the both of them, loud enough to echo off the stone walls and send the both of them flinching back. “I’ve been stealing from these people for years just fine and never been caught. I don’t need either of you to try and protect me like I’m a kid, because I’m not.”

“Ruby,” Yang says, wounded, aching, because she’s *right* but even now, still, Ruby is her baby sister, twelve and fragile and so so young, and Yang lost her once already. “I--”

“I’m right and you know it,” Ruby says, her hand firm on Yang’s shoulder. “You two set off the grenades to cause the distraction. I can get in and out in less than a minute. I don’t need a lot of time.”

“What if they’re keeping Weiss in there still?” Blake asks carefully. “That would mean more guards.”

“I can deal with their guards,” Ruby says, calm and savage in a way that has nausea gripping at Yang’s stomach, and she glances over to where Blake’s expression is carefully blank.

“Okay,” Blake says eventually. “Yang and I will be the diversion. Ruby gets the phone. We meet back-- where?”

“East of the camp,” Ruby says immediately. “This time of year there’s a tributary that runs south. It’s slow moving, but fast enough to cover tracks. We can drop the trail there and make it back here within two hours.”

Yang stares at her, reminding herself that this isn’t Ruby, twelve year old mechanical genius who grew up in a mansion with a service staff, but Ruby, in her twenties, who’s survived alone in the Danube river delta for the better part of a decade, surrounded by an army willing to kill her at the drop of a hat.

“Okay,” Yang says after a moment of Ruby staring back at her, unblinking, unwavering. “Diversion on the northwest side of camp, then. We head due east from the eastern border until we hit the river and rendezvous there.”

“When do we do this?” Yang says.

“When it’s dark,” Blake says without hesitation. “Ruby’s basically invisible then, based on yesterday. And explosions cause more panic in the dark.”

“Okay,” Yang says slowly, Blake’s certainty and flat affect leaving her unsettled and uncomfortable. “Makes sense.”

“I’m going to go get some water,” Ruby says suddenly, after a long silence. She pushes up to her feet and yanks a collection of Camelbak bladders from one of the closest crates. “We’re probably all dehydrated.”

“I’ll go with you,” Yang says without hesitation, flinging the blanket off. “I--um. I could use the walk.”

Blake waves them along, turning to the gun and belt of grenades Yang had stolen, and Yang hesitates, one hand reaching for her, before following Ruby back out into the daylight, hurrying against the way her body protests and the way Blake, so new but so familiar and currently so unusually grim, stays behind.

The sun burns bright against her eyes and it takes her long seconds to adjust to the light, blinking rapidly until the spots fade from her vision and blurred edges solidify into Ruby, rubbing at her eyes lazily and bow resting easy in her grip. It’s overwhelming, seeing Ruby in the daylight, the way her sharp cheekbones cut stark lines of shadow over her face and her eyes, silver and overbright as always, blink over towards Yang uncertainly. Bright winter sunlight highlights the way she’s grown into corded lines of muscle, a lanky build so similar to their father’s but stunted by years of malnutrition; her hair’s cut unevenly short, enough to keep it out of her eyes and nothing more, spikey lines of reddish brown just like their mother’s sticking in every direction. There’s tension written into her posture, solid and unwavering, shoulders sharp even when her fingers are loose around the bow, spine straight and chin lifted, head and eyes constantly moving around the horizon.

Yang’s stomach aches because this is Ruby, this is her sister, this is who she lost for so long, but it’s also someone entirely different. Ruby who’s lived almost half of her life alone, hunted, scraping a living together off the land and her sanity from stolen magazines and newspapers, her only tether to the rest of the world. It’s Ruby, but it’s not, and there’s no constant for Yang to plug into the equation to reconcile the two yet.

“So how’d you find Blake?” Ruby asks, after long seconds of silence, and Yang remembers, abruptly, that it’s been ten years since she was alone with Ruby.

“Oh,” she says faintly, setting off to follow Ruby’s sure footsteps through the woods. “I, um, found a workshop Dad had hidden. It had all of his research on this whole thing, and that he’d hired Adam as a guide.”

She ducks under a branch, taking the moment of hesitation it allows her, dragging her memory back to another life, another world, where she had a quiet empty life in Brooklyn and friends at work and the gym, Weiss forever holding her steady, her worst worries finding enough part-time jobs to pay her rent and gym membership, the dangers of her father’s disappearance a constant grief but a distant worry.

“I just kinda, y’know. Bought a plane ticket and went after Adam.”

“And found Blake?” Ruby turns back from where she’s leapt up onto the thick trunk of a felled tree, pivoting in her crouch to inspect Yang’s answer with narrowed eyes.

“They-- have a history,” Yang says carefully.

“That doesn’t sound like a reason to trust her,” Ruby says, unaccusing but wary, and Yang shakes her head without thinking about it.

“She wanted to find out that he was dead,” she says firmly. “For closure and stuff.”

“Are you sure?” Ruby says, resting her elbows on her knees, not moving from her spot on the oversized log, the only clean spot to climb over it for fifteen feet in either direction, pinning Yang into her spot.

“As sure as I am that Weiss would go to the end of the earth to confirm Jacques was dead,” Yang says sharply, defensiveness rising in her throat, an unfamiliar and uncomfortable challenge, because it’s been a decade without her sister and she never imagined she could push back against Ruby for anything, not after so long, but here she is doing it for Blake’s defense.

Ruby stares down at her, sharp and pointed, until she finally nods. “Okay,” she says eventually. “So we can trust her.”

“I trust her,” Yang says without hesitating. “I’d trust her with your life.”

“I believe that,” Ruby says slowly. “But that life ended a long time ago. You don’t really know me anymore, Yang.”

She pivots away before Yang can say anything, offering nothing but her back and silence as she leads them towards the river, and Yang, helplessly, follows.

Chapter 5

Yang's skin aches in the cold, her cheeks flushed and red from washing the mud off her, and the full Camelbaks are heavy in her hands as she follows Ruby back to the hideout. She's given up on conversation, her ten years of wondering what it would be like to reunite with her sister unprepared for the near silent woman she'd found, appraising and predatory. They're halfway back, by Yang's count, when they hit the same felled tree where they'd last spoken, and Ruby pauses again in a crouch atop it, turning back to face Yang with narrowed eyes.

"Cinder's people, they get newspaper and magazine deliveries every month," she says without preamble.

"I noticed," Yang says, cautious, uncertain. "I saw them."

"Every now and then, there was something about Weiss," Ruby carries on. "I know where she went to school, that she started working at her dad's company. She graduated early, I think."

"Top of her class," Yang says, faint and automatic, acknowledging Weiss's overachievement in life a default setting to accommodate for her own stagnation.

"It made sense," Ruby says. "Our parents, ours and Weiss's, they ran the world, basically. SDC and Rose Holdings own so much, there's no way that we weren't tabloid fodder. But not you. There was never anything about you."

Yang blinks, Camelbaks sagging in her hands. "I--"

"I thought you'd died," Ruby says, harsh but quiet, one hand rubbing over her face. "I thought that I'd see something about you, somewhere, in some paper or tabloid or something. You own one of the largest holdings' companies in the world, you became the richest fourteen year old on the planet when Dad disappeared--"

"I didn't," Yang says sharply. "I-- he was missing, not dead. By the time police and PIs gave up on looking for you both, I was eighteen. The company defaulted to me, but only if I acknowledged he was dead. But I never signed the paperwork. I was sure that you both were-- that you were going to come home. I was *sure*."

"Dad's dead," Ruby says, unwavering.

"I know that now," Yang says, pressing a hand over her side to hold in the way it aches and wishing, desperately, for Weiss to hold her upright and read her mind like she always does, to explain to Ruby what the last decade had been like for the both of them. "But I didn't then. Until I found his papers, I didn't-- I had no idea where to look. But then I did, and now I'm here. With you."

Ruby stares at her, mouth pressed into a thin line, bow hanging casually at her side, appraising. Yang stares right back, unwilling to look away after so long.

“I’m sorry,” Ruby says after a long series of moments, finally blinking and looking away. “I just-- so many times I thought you were here. And it was always a lie. I stopped trusting it a long time ago and It’s just...it’s hard, to believe you’re here now.”

“Blake basically broke your nose,” Yang says without meaning to, and she nearly apologizes, but Ruby smiles and presses a hand tenderly to her nose.

“She did,” Ruby says softly. “It’s comforting.”

“You’re weird,” Yang counters, a desperate reach for comfort, for familiarity, for something resembling the relationship she’d had with her sister once upon a time.

“And you’re a giant,” Ruby throws back, smiling crookedly. “Seriously, when did you get so big?”

“There’s a mixed martial arts gym near my apartment.” Yang flashes a grin and a showy flex of one bicep, undeterred when Ruby rolls her eyes. “I started working out with Pyrrha and she got me into fighting years ago.”

“Pyrrha?”

“One of the regulars,” Yang shoulders the Camelbaks and sets off when Ruby starts walking again, ducking under branches. “She’s a firefighter. You’d like her a lot.”

“What--”

She’s cut off by the sound of a pained yelp, Weiss’s voice familiar In the distance, and then there’s the sound of guns firing, a rapid fire rat-a-tat-tat snapping through the woods, followed by an explosion that nearly knocks Yang over and seizes the attention from both of them, and Ruby glances back at Yang and then sets off at a run back towards the hidden cave, Yang barely able to keep up with her burst of speed. She skids to a stop, nearly running into Ruby’s back, to the sight of Cinder and a dozen armed men by the tree disguising the entrance, Blake straining against the two men gripping her arms as she tries to get to Weiss, eyes wide and afraid and flashing between Adam and the gun he’s holding on Weiss, an unnerving smile spread across his face. Scattered pieces of rock and tree surround all of them, smoke rising up from the exposed cavern. There’s dried blood tracking down the side of Weiss’s neck and staining the already-ruined collar of her shirt, just enough to stand out from the dirt ground into her skin from the crash, a fresh split to her lip and a bruise over her eye, and nausea swoops through Yang’s stomach.

“There we go,” Cinder says conversationally. She’s peering down into the cavern, head tilted curiously to one side. “After all the blood we tracked here, I was wondering where you went.” Her gaze shifts from Yang to Ruby, one side of her mouth curling up unpleasantly. A sharp inhale sounds from somewhere in the collection of gunmen, and Yang’s eyes pull from Blake to Weiss, on crutches, wavering in place as she stares at them.

“Ruby?” she says dumbly, leaning awkwardly forward on crutches that are too tall for her, and there’s a moment, just a moment, where Ruby goes slack and looks at Weiss with recognition and the same flash of hero worship she’d always had burning in her silver eyes, where everything in Yang’s world feels righted.

“There you are, little red,” Cinder says, lazy and slow, shattering the moment. “I thought you’d died a long time ago, you know.”

Yang moves automatically, putting herself between Ruby and Cinder, fists curling and ready, but Ruby’s hand settles on her shoulder firmly, her attention redirected from Weiss to Cinder, cold and calm and appraising.

“Here I am,” Ruby says evenly. “What do you want?”

“I want what’s in your sister’s pretty blonde head,” Cinder says with a shrug. “And I’ll kill whoever I have to to get it.” She tilts her head towards Adam, who holsters his gun with one arm and unsheathes his machete with the other in one smooth motion, the blade swinging towards Blake’s side.

“Don’t!” Yang yells out at the same time Weiss does and the blade stops abruptly, inches from Blake’s arm, and Blake’s eyes snap open, furious and burning and glaring at both of them.

“Stop,” she says lowly, a warning, an acquiescence, a promise, but Yang shakes her head violently.

“Don’t hurt them,” Yang says, holding her hands out carefully. “What do you want from me?”

“I want,” Cinder says, low and warm and calm. “For you to get me through that door downstairs, and the rest of the doors your father studied.”

“I don’t know how--”

“Then you’ll watch Adam here dismantle all of them piece by piece,” Cinder says sharply.

“Okay, okay!” Yang yelps out, still staring wide-eyed at Blake, who’s still shaking her head.

“Yang, don’t,” she says sharply, and Ruby echoes her just as aggressively.

“Don’t help her,” Weiss says, her voice hard and eyes bright. “You know--”

“I didn’t come all this way to watch you die,” Yang says, her voice cracking and focus on Ruby before shifting to Blake, to Weiss.

“I have to,” Yang says helplessly. She glances back towards Ruby and the flat empty affect in her eyes and grief washes over her as she steps forward, hands out and placating. “The three of them walk out of here free and clear, and I’ll tell you everything I know.”

“Of course,” Cinder says, bored and lazy. “But only after you get me in and out. Let’s go, goldilocks.” She hops down through the exploded entrance and lands lightly in the cavern below, and one of the gunmen turns to face Yang, training his gun on her until she shuffles forward and leaps down as well, avoiding Blake and Ruby’s eyes as she does.

“How do I get through?” Cinder says.

“I-- there’s a trap door,” Yang says, uncertainty leaving her voice to tremble, and she tries to remember the stone Ruby had pressed to open it. She turns towards the westward wall, hands out uncertainly, feeling for some tell or another to indicate which one to press.

“Think faster,” Cinder says, and then calls out Adam’s name. There’s a swish of air and then a yell from Blake, pained and sharp, and Yang turns on Cinder with her fists raised and violence building in her chest, Blake’s yell petering off into a quiet groan and Weiss’s voice, quiet and calm and comforting, following it.

“Don’t touch them,” Yang breathes out. “Or I won’t help you at all.”

“You’re misunderstanding the situation,” Cinder says evenly, not flinching at all away from the way Yang’s burning with violence. “You’re going to get me through this door, and they’re going to stay there. You try anything clever, I call back and there’s a bullet in a joint. You get me in and out and maybe they’ll walk out of here in one piece. Maybe they won’t. But if you don’t, then I promise you there’s going to be nothing left. Do you understand me?”

“I’m going to kill you,” Yang says before she can stop herself, fists clenching tighter and tighter still, until her bones creak and protest the effort.

“You won’t be the first to try,” Cinder says, one hand curling along Yang’s jaw gently. “And you won’t be the last. Let’s go.”

“Ruby’s the only one who knows which one it is,” Yang says. “Let me talk to her.”

Cinder steps back, turning her face towards the light let in from the explosion. “Little red,” she calls up. “Which stone gets us through? You can tell me now or after we blow out one of the Schnee’s kneecaps.

“Not a word from you,” Cinder adds, redirecting her attention back to Yang, producing a pistol from her back and training it on Yang.

“Three up, six over,” Ruby says after a long moment. Cinder tilts her head towards the wall, a maddening smile on her face, and waits patiently until Yang moves to count and press, pushing until the door recesses once more, revealing the room Ruby’s been living in for so long.

“I’ve pressed every stone in there.” Ruby’s voice floats down into the cavern. “Floor and walls. Nothing happens.”

“Then let’s play a game,” Cinder says pleasantly. She produces a leatherbound book from the small of her back, flipping through pages until she finds a specific one and handing it to Yang. “Dear old dad loved puzzles. Figure this one out.”

Yang stares down at the pages in front of her, then back at the flagstones lining the walls, and back again. A cipher stares back up at her, equidistant lines and acute angles in different formations repeating across the page. Yang reads through the pages helplessly, her father’s hand familiar but his code brand new to her, and paces the length of the room and back again, over and over, one hand tapping restlessly against the side of her leg and the other gripping tight at the book.

“Any day now,” Cinder drawls out. She glances down at her watch. “I’d like to be back in civilization in time for dinner and a drink, if you don’t mind.”

Yang turns to glare at her, a retort burning in her throat, but it fades immediately and she strides over to Cinder. “You watch,” she says hurriedly. “Give me your watch.”

“What--”

“Let me see it,” Yang says impatiently, slapping Cinder’s gun out of the way and locking her into a standing arm bar, staring at her watch and then the cipher on the page. “Clock hands. It’s clock hands.”

She shoves Cinder away and turns back to the entrance to the room, glancing down at the pages and back up again. “Three over and two down?” She counts stones and then reaches with one hand and one foot, pressing at the same time, to no avail.

Cinder follows, eyes wide with excitement. “Maybe it’s military time. Fifteen and fourteen?”

“Or fifteen and two. Or three and fifteen,” Yang mutters.

“Room’s only twelve wide,” Cinder says conversationally. “So that has to be two. So it’s fifteen and two.” She hurriedly counts along to the fifteenth brick from the entrance, glancing back towards Yang and pressing with her hands and feet, and both bricks depress.

“Here we go,” Cinder says, manic joy marring her features as she leaps away from where the floor’s started to depress, an entire wall pulling away like elevator doors and revealing an open, empty chasm.

“Chasm of souls,” Yang mumbles out, leaning over the edge to stare down into a pit that disappears far past the reaches of light in the cavern. Cinder produces a flare from one of her men and cracks it open, tossing crackling light down into the chasm. Yang counts-- one, two, three, four, five, six-- before it finally finds the bottom, lighting up a pile of shattered skeletons and skulls.

“That’s unfortunate,” Cinder says, and then yells back for a ladder and lamps. Yang watches, anxiously glancing back to the other side of the open cavern to where Ruby and Blake are still held at gunpoint, joined by Weiss and a whole host of other gunmen. Weiss is leaning on

crutches and awkwardly pressing a wad of fabric over a bleeding wound just over Blake's hip but staring wide-eyed at Ruby still, who's sneaking glances back at her but mostly watching the men stomping through the place she's called home for the last ten years, tracking muddy bootprints through and kicking her sleeping pallet and blankets aside with no care.

Blake has one hand held uselessly over Weiss's at her hip, doing little to actually help stem the bleeding, shallow but continually leaking, a gash that will scar no matter what, assuming they live long enough. She's glaring at Adam, who's staring right back at her, smile cruel and mocking and machete held lazily in one hand.

"Let's go, blondie," Cinder says, gesturing at one of the gunmen until he grabs Yang's collar and yanks her around towards the ladder. "You first."

"I can't help you if you throw me down into a giant hole, you know," Yang says, jerking her collar free.

"She's right," Cinder says with a sigh. She pulls her pistol smoothly and shoots the gunman through the head, kicking his body down into the pit while Yang recoils, horror building in her stomach. By the time his body cracks against the mound of bones down below, Cinder's cocked her weapon again and has it pointing back towards Ruby and Blake and Weiss. "Let's go."

She gestures towards the ladder sprawling across the chasm, the lamps set up to shine light across to the other side, and jerks her chin towards it until Yang moves unsteadily towards it, setting first one foot and then the other onto the rungs. The ladder wobbles under her, unsteady under even her weight, and she fights the urge to drop to her knees and crawl.

It doesn't take long after that for half of Cinder's men to make it across, leaving Ruby and Weiss and Blake on the other side. Cinder crosses last and turns back with a sigh. "Adam, leave your pet project there. I need you here."

There's silence from the other side of the chasm for long seconds as Adam bristles visibly, hand tightening on his machete, and fear drops in Yang's stomach because there's nothing she can do from here if he swings, no way to save Blake or any of them, but instead he lets out a sigh. His other hand comes up to press against Blake's cheek, a soft murmur audible across the chasm even if his words aren't, but Yang can hear it when Blake rears back and spits into his face.

"Adam," Cinder says sharply. "Now."

He settles for a backhand across Blake's face instead of arguing, hard enough that Blake stumbles back against Ruby and Yang's yell echoes in the oversized cavern they're in. Ruby catches Blake, holding her upright and staring urgently across to Yang, shaking her head visibly, enough to keep Yang pinned in place instead of charging back across the ladder.

"Deal with that later," Cinder says softly once Adam's across, disappointment dripping from her voice, and Adam glares back while Yang considers how quickly she can throw him into the chasm he's standing dangerously close to. "Let's go."

Yang doesn't look away from the other side of the pit, where Blake's back is upright on her own, blood dripping from her nose and shoulders turned down even as she stands up and away from Ruby's support. Weiss has one hand pressed against Blake's cheek, holding eye contact and speaking urgently and inaudibly to her, and her head tilts towards Weiss even as she glances back across to where Yang is standing with clenched fists. Blake finally shakes her head, forehead tilting down against Weiss's briefly and one hand coming up to curl around Weiss's wrist, the other gripping at Ruby's shoulder, and jerks her chin towards Yang, grim and calm and certain.

"Let's go," Cinder says again, yanking at one of Yang's shoulders until she turns and starts walking. "What's next?"

"It's funny that you think I have any idea," Yang throws back, even as she steps carefully forward, eyes on a swivel and focus on where she's putting her feet.

"You had his research," Cinder counters.

"Yeah, well," Yang says. There's a pattern to the stones in the stones under her feet. She pauses and stares, thinking back to puzzle boxes and cipher keys, everything she learned snooping through her parents' studies when she was younger, and shifts her weight and leaps from one stone to a matching one six feet away. "I also technically never graduated high school."

She points towards the stone she's standing on. "This pattern, every third one, counting left to right."

"Or what?" Adam says, bored. One of the gunmen chuckles and steps forward, and is immediately impaled by a metal spike rocketing up through the floor.

"Or that," Yang says, solid and unwavering, as if she's not fighting the nausea in her stomach at the way he's pierced from mid-thigh up to his collarbone and the way it killed him immediately.

"Fair enough," Cinder says. She gestures forwards lazily, and Yang sets back to counting, leaping from one to the next, until she's onto undisturbed hard-packed soil once more. "Never graduated high school?"

"Formal education is overrated, and I needed to work," Yang says with a shrug. "Also, I mean, I did get a GED. For whatever that's worth."

"Probably a lot, if you ask him," Cinder says casually, jerking her thumb over her shoulder towards the impaled man.

"Did you even know his name?" Yang's hands curl into fists, anger and fear burning cold on her skin.

"Should I?" Cinder doesn't wait for an answer, shoving Yang forward instead. She glances over one shoulder and points towards one of the gunmen. "Stay here. We'll relay back anything we need done on the other side."

Yang turns back to where she can barely see the others, far enough back even at the edge of the chasm that she can't see their faces, just the blue of Weiss's jacket and the black of Blake's hair, the dull red of Ruby's shirt. She lifts a hand, about to wave, and then pulls it back down to her side. There's nothing good left to do now except try and survive long enough for them all to get out of here.

"What did your obnoxious father's books say came after that?" Cinder says.

"Real talk, dude, he said *nothing* about the stabbing floors of doom back there," Yang says irritably. "Just something about a chasm of souls and then a death queen dying to bring back life. That's all."

"Helpful," Cinder says sardonically. "Keep moving."

The hallway they're in winds to the right, meandering like a river, and Cinder leaves another gunman halfway along for relay and then, abruptly they curve to the left and dips down into a cavernous room twenty feet high, filled with a honeycombed wall of slots filled with decomposed coffins.

"What," Adam says slowly. "The hell."

"The priests," Yang mumbles. "There was something about priests-- or like shamans, I guess? An army of shamans to keep her in?"

"Charming," Cinder draws. "You can go first." She prods her gun between Yang's shoulderblades. "Or I can yell back to get someone shot in the foot."

"Fine, going, going," Yang hurries out, hands up and out and feet already moving into the room. She steps carefully, waiting for something terrifying and violent to burst out of the floor or walls or ceiling as she does, and then suddenly she's at the other side and nothing has happened, and she can breathe again. "All clear."

"We knew that," Adam says with a huff, following Cinder through, and Yang rolls her eyes. As if she wasn't already ready to rip his head off.

Cinder leaves another gunman behind, dropping her advantage to five to one, and Yang starts walking without prodding this time, splitting her attention between waiting for the next obstacle come up and calculating her speed and odds. The riddle she'd read in her father's notes-- *she must die to bring back life* -- tracks on repeat through her mind until, suddenly, the odds are down to four to one and she turns a corner to another floor of inscribed stones, the walls patterned with tiny doors and an enormous stone wheel of a door blocking the other side.

"Another pattern?" Cinder says, peering around her shoulder, tense and sharp, glancing down to see if there's a spike about to impale her.

"They're all the same," Yany says absently. "Same design on every one of them. So I don't think so."

“What’d the research say?”

“I told you, there’s just a riddle,” Yang says with a huff. She jerks away from Cinder and sets to stomping across the room, indignation and pettiness winning out for a brief moment, and she’s almost to the other side, the other halfway across, when pieces of the floor start to fall away into a seemingly bottomless cavern underneath them. Yang sprints for the other side, leaping and catching herself on the stone door and feeling her stitches rip free in the process.

She manages to get her feet onto a ledge, finding some measure of stability, and glances back to where Cinder and Adam and one of the other gunmen are clinging to the edges and narrow ledges, and hesitates. She could let all of them die here, let herself fall with them, and the others might have a chance.

Cinder yells, holding herself steady with one hand and pointing back towards the one guard left on solid ground. “If we die, kill the others,” she snaps out, settling Yang’s indecision for her. “Figure this out, kid!”

Yang groans and turns back to the door, doing her best to block out the sound of more pieces of floor falling away. There’s a tiny door inside the one she’s clinging too, and she does her best to pry it open, revealing a series of stacked slots.

“It’s a keyhole!” she yells over her shoulder. “Check the other doors, there must be a key.”

“Catch,” Adam bellows, and she turns just in time to catch the carved yellow stone he’s throwing at her. She shoves it into slots until it sits neatly into one of them and holds her breath, but nothing happens.

“Not that one!” she yells back.

“Here!” The other gunman says, and yanks a red stone free and hurls it to Yang.

“Nope,” she snaps out, yanking it free and shoving it into her other pocket to mirror the yellow one.

“Running out of floor here!” Adam yells over the sound of more stones falling.

“Fairy of death,” she mutters. “Must die to bring back life.” She repeats it, again and then once more, and then the pieces click and her head snaps up. “It’s a color puzzle. Bring back *life--*”

She swings around, holding herself with one arm. “I need blue!”

A blue rock hurtles towards her, the throw wild as the last of the stones under Cinder disappears and she barely catches herself as she throws, and Yang leans and leans and leans and gets her fingertips around it, shoving her hand into her pocket to smash the blue against the yellow and then shove them together into the keyhole.

The floor abruptly stops disappearing and the door she’s clinging to rolls to the side, taking her with it. Yang holds tight and breathes, letting it carry her until solid ground appears, and she hops down onto it. Her legs give out immediately and her palms scrape against the stone

floor, breath coming heavy and labored and back heaving under the effort. Her side is bleeding again, aching with every breath.

“Guess you’re smarter than you look,” Cinder says easily as she hops over onto the solid floor, slapping a hand against the back of Yang’s head and waiting for her to stand back up. “It must run in the family.”

“Get fucked,” Yang says savagely, but it’s all she can muster with her hand pressed over her side and blood leaking through her fingers, teeth ground together against the pain.

“That’s the spirit,” Cinder says, clapping her shoulder and then shoving her forward. She points a flashlight towards a door ahead of them. “Look on the bright side. Maybe that’s the last door.”

“Don’t touch me,” Yang mutters, yanking her shoulder free and marching ahead. She’s this close to finding what she needs and then finding a way out. The posted relay gunmen at far enough apart that she’s fairly certain she can handle any one of them at any given point if she has to. That has to be enough.

There’s no locking mechanism on the door, and they push at it together until it rolls away, spewing dust and dirt into the corridor, and suddenly they’re standing in a room with a stone sarcophagus, and Yang stumbles to a stop.

“Vadleany,” Yang mumbles, staring at the familiar runes and hieroglyphics hewn into the stone, filled with dust and appearing as Cinder blows the dirty and dust away reverently. Her father’s notes hadn’t been far off at all, a near perfect replication, and descriptions of men with their organs sucked dry and deflated flash through her mind as Adam and the other gunman pry the stone lid off to reveal a decomposed body.

“This seems wrong,” Yang says quietly, to no one in particular.

“Do yourself a favor in life and lose the conscience,” Cinder says conversationally. “You’ll be happier.”

“No, I mean-- well, yeah, everything to do with you is fucked up,” Yang mutters. “But everything we just did-- that last one in particular. That doesn’t feel like something designed to keep people *out*. If it was meant to be keeping people out then the key would’ve been on the other side of the room. It’s meant to keep something *in*.”

“Shut up,” Adam says, unsheathing his machete but still staring down at the body in the coffin.

“All of the stories said she killed everyone she touched,” Yang says, ignoring Adam and his machete, mythology convulsing and straightening in her mind, fragments and pieces clicking together. “It was a virus that killed everyone. She was a carrier. And the shamans, they brought her here and locked her in to keep everyone safe. It’s a *virus*.”

The gunman steps back from the corpse, hands pulling too late from her body, but it’s only seconds later that he starts to convulse, blood leaking out of his eyes and nose and mouth and

ears, wet screams ripping out of this throat until, suddenly, he collapses in a thick pool of blood and brain matter, his corpse deflating between the bones of his ribcage. Cinder stares down at him, unaffected even as the smell and sight of his corpse makes Yang want to gag.

“It’s a virus,” Yang says again, louder, even as her voice shakes. “Look at what it just did! You can’t-- this is murder if you take this out into the world. It’s *genocide* .”

“Do I look worried?” Cinder says blandly. She yanks a multitool off her belt and turns it into pliers, reaching carefully into the coffin and snipping a finger off. “I just need a tiny bit.” She dumps it into a ziplock bag and tucks it into one of the pockets on her belt.

“You can’t do this,” Yang says suddenly. “I can’t let you.”

“I’ll kill everyone you love if you try and stop me,” Cinder says, bored.

“You’ll kill them anyways if I let that thing out of here,” Yang says, and she sends up a prayer for Ruby and Weiss and Blake and then dives, rolling past the sarcophagus, rocketing up to her feet with the gunman’s rifle in hand and firing off a spray of bullets. A line of them hits Cinder’s leg, tracking along muscle and bone, and she collapses abruptly. Adam dives behind the other end of the coffin, and Yang flings herself back against the narrow end of the coffin.

“Adam, take care of her!” Cinder yells, hands busy with tying a tourniquet around her leg, and there’s the sound of a gun cocking and then the shuffle of feet standing, and Yang pauses, breathes, turns, just in time for a gunshot to ring out and then Adam’s the only one left standing, staring down at Cinder’s slumped dead body, his bullet in her head.

“I never liked her,” he says, bored. He shoves the ziploc bag into his shirt pocket. “I just promoted myself.”

Yang gapes for too long down at Cinder’s dead body, blinking up at Adam just in time to dive behind the coffin as he fires.

“Doubt you’re fast enough,” he shouts back, already half out of the room, and sends another spray of bullets to hold her back until he’s all the way out.

Yang curses and sprints after him, slinging the gun over her back as she goes and praying for adrenaline to keep her upright long enough to catch him. He’s disappearing across the chasm in the puzzle room as she rounds the corner, and she hauls the gun around and fires wildly, sending a wave of bullets across the room. The other gunman crumples, dead on sight, but Adam makes it around the corner before she can hit him.

She’s danced her way back through the hallway with the spikes, a line of dead bodies in her wake that she can’t think about yet, and can see Adam stepping onto the ladder and yelling for the other gunmen across the chasm to hold it steady. On the other side, Blake and Ruby and Weiss see her and move against the guards immediately, starting with Weiss swinging one of her crutches at one and then Blake dropping another in a jujitsu hold that would make Yang green with envy any other day.

She reaches the edge and launches herself forward before she can stop herself, one hand catching the edge of the ladder and the whole thing shuddering under her weight and Adam's, and he drops down to one knee to catch himself as she hauls herself up.

"I'm not letting you out of here with that thing," Yang says viciously, breathing heavily, body aching with exhaustion and effort. "No way in hell."

"Like I care," he says, pushing himself up to his feet, and Yang sets her balance and throws one leg out, shin catching his shoulder as he lifts his gun and watching with grim satisfaction as it flies out of his hand and down into the pit under them. She manages another strike, and then another, driving him to his knees on the ladder.

"Not such a big man now, are you?" she says with a sneer, throwing out another kick to take advantage of his imbalance and driving him back towards the edge. He stumbles back, barely making it to solid ground before falling, and she charges after him, red flashing in the edges of her vision, the loss of her father and her sister blurring into the way Blake had shrunk back at the first mention of his name, the way he'd threatened to cut Weiss's throat the moment they met him.

She lands another kick to his ribs, knocking air out of his lungs, and takes a moment to glance back to the other side where Ruby has one of the gunmen in a chokehold and the others are unconscious, sprawled out unnaturally in a way that indicates they aren't likely getting back up. She turns back to Adam and the way his hand's tightened around the handle of his machete, and sets her jaw, breathes, and thinks of everyone Adam's ever hurt, of her father, of Ruby, of Blake and Weiss and something that might have been a future for the three of them together, improbable but real. She settles and exhales and keeps her focus on Adam instead of the fact that every piece of family she has left is on the other side of the ladder, and then kicks it until it falls into the chasm.

Adam's yell is echoed by Ruby's and Weiss's and Blake's, cracking and broken, and she dodges the wild strike he throws out with his machete, then another, air whizzing by her with every dodged strike until he overextends and she can dance around him and slam an elbow into his kidney, one hand grabbing his hair and the other yanking the bag out of his pocket and flinging it into the pit.

He lets out a yell, half pain and half cracked with rage, and slams his elbow into her burst stitches, sending her stumbling back.

"I told you," she gasps out, resigned. "I'm not letting you out of here. You're never hurting anyone again."

"I'm going to kill you," he spits out, machete twirling in one hand and grip reversing until the flat of the blade rests flush against his forearm, fists lifted like a boxer. Yang swallows and sets herself, pushing up onto the balls of her feet and doing her best to ignore the yells from the other side, and dodges the first hits he throws at her. He's faster than she is, but sloppy with rage, and her feet move on instinct, hips pulling her to one side and then the other, sliding around his strikes and dancing out of his reach.

Her boot slides on the stone, slippery with the blood dripping out of her burst stitches, and he flies forward at her imbalance. The dull side of his blade slams into her arm with more power than she'd imagined possible, just under the elbow, hard enough to break through skin and muscle. Bone cracks loud enough that it echoes through the whole underground, second only to the yell that scrapes out of her lungs. Everything past her elbow flops uselessly down, tendons severed and bones in pieces, and she grits her teeth and switches her stance, instinct and years of fighting training taking over and dragging her out of range as he recovers his balance.

"If I die here," Adam snarls out, face twisting. "Then I'm going to make sure you go first. Slow and painful. And I'm going to make her watch."

"Shut up," Yang says, teeth grinding together. She dodges a wild swing and ducks under the follow through, driving her left fist up into the underside of his jaw and sending him flying back. He lands sprawled on his back on the patterned floor near the body of the impaled gunman, and leaps up to his feet and to one side just in time to avoid another spike screeching up through the floor. He flings his machete out, the sharp side of the blade slamming into the dead body on a spike and severing the strap holding the gun around his torso. He catches the gun as it falls, turning around and cocking it with a grin.

Yang stumbles back, one hand hanging at her side and the other up. She can fight a lot of things, even with one arm, but not a machine gun. Never a machine gun.

She glances back over to the other side of the chasm, where Blake and Ruby have managed to find a rope and fashion a hook out of one of Weiss's crutches and are hauling the ladder up, leaving her leaning on one of them and watching with wide eyes when Yang looks back.

"Yang," she snaps out, helpless and sharp, and batters at Blake's shoulder and grabs for the gun she has slung over it. Blake looks up and drops the rope immediately, leaving it in Ruby's hands and hauling the gun up. "Yang, get down!" Weiss bellows, and Yang drops, just in time for a spray of bullets to send Adam flying to the ground as well.

"Get the ladder up," Yang yells out, covering her head with her uninjured arm and looking across to where Weiss has taken Blake's spot, splinted leg sprawled out awkwardly to one side as she helps Ruby yank the ladder up until they can get a hand on it. Blake keeps firing across the rift, keeping Adam out of reach of Yang, mouth set in a grim line but eyes wide and afraid and continually locked onto Yang whenever she stops firing.

"Got it," Ruby yells out as the ladder clangs across the chasm, and before Yang can even get up on her feet Blake is charging across, firing to keep Adam pinned down, and skidding to her knees at Yang's side.

"What the hell," Yang groans out, clapping one hand over an ear when Blake fires again to keep Adam back. "I'm supposed to come to you."

"Yeah, well," Blake mutters. "I'm not bleeding profusely, unlike some people here." She fires again. "Can you walk?"

“More or less,” Yang says with a groan, sitting up. Her arm dangles uselessly at her side, blood dripping freely down past her fingertips and starting to pool on the ground under her.

“That’s bad,” Blake mumbles. She produces a hunting knife from her boot and offers it to Yang. “Lifted it off one of the Rambos over there. Just in case.”

“Girl after my own heart,” Yang says, grunting as Blake fires off another round of bullets and helps her to her feet.

“No you don’t,” Adam growls out, and before Blake can turn around to fire he flings a broken-off spike from the floor at them like a javelin, forcing them to dive apart. “You don’t get to leave me here.”

He kicks the gun away from Blake, looming over her, burning with rage, and Yang claws her way up to her feet. His machete is gone, left somewhere behind in his rage, and he towers over Blake. Yang’s breath catches in her throat because Blake followed her here to face down Adam’s ghost and now Adam’s ready to kill her, finally and for good, all because Yang brought her here. Her left hand tightens around the hilt of the knife, the weight unfamiliar in her hand, but she grips tight and stares at where Blake is scrambling backwards away from Adam, her hand curling around a broken piece of metal spike, and Yang launches herself forward knife-first, gritting her teeth against the way her whole body feels like one raw nerve when her ruined arm moves with the momentum.

It’s harder than she expected to drive the blade between his shoulderblades, but she doesn’t let up, leaning her weight into it until his body sags and a metal spike juts out from just under the hilt of her knife, driven up from under his ribs. Blood runs down the spike and over Blake’s hands, and Blake falls back, landing hard with her hands out in front of her, staring at the blood on them as Adam wavers and croaks out a single, undignified gurgle, and then falls, toppling down over the edge into the chasm.

Yang wavers on her feet for one long moment, and then drops down onto her knees, injured arm flopping uselessly at her side and eyes locked onto Blake, who’s staring back at her.

“Blake,” she croaks out. “I--”

“Your arm,” Blake says, shaking her head and shifting forward onto her knees, nearly colliding with Yang. Her hands shake uselessly at the way Yang’s arm hangs from the elbow, full of broken bones and ripped nerve endings. “I’m so sorry, I--”

“Blake,” Yang says, hooking her good hand, the one covered in dirt and blood, hers and Adam’s and so many other people’s, behind Blake’s neck with a groan and tipping her forehead forward until it presses against hers. “Are you okay?”

A choked sob, cracking and twisted, pulls from deep in Blake’s chest, and she collapses against Yang’s good shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she mutters, arms winding around Yang’s back. “I’m so sorry.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Yang murmurs, nose buried in Blake’s hair, matted with dirt and sweat and blood, comforting and familiar like Weiss, some version of home Yang thought

she'd thrown away with the ladder she sent falling into the chasm. "Come on."

"Can you get across the bridge?" Blake stands first, hands out and pulling Yang up to her feet carefully.

"Let's find out," Yang says with a grin, tired and wavering, and Blake rolls her eyes.

"Wait," Yang says suddenly. "The body-- vadleany-- we have to do something about the--"

"It's real?" Blake says, freezing in place with an arm locked around Yang's waist and holding her up.

"It's real," Yang says. "It's a virus. It killed one of Cinder's men in like four seconds flat."

"Shit," Blake breathes out. "How do we even--"

"Weiss," Yang yells out, leaning forward to look past Blake to where Weiss is still sitting, injured leg out to one side, seemingly torn between staring at Ruby and staring at Yang and Blake. She sits up straighter with a grimace, head tilting to one side. "How do you kill a virus?"

"What?"

"Like, a bad one. Big bad. Much bad. Transferred by touch."

"Burn it, I think?" Weiss says, head tilting in the other direction. "Why?"

"Good thing we have a shitload of grenades, then," Yang says, somehow managing something akin to cheer in spite of her ruined right arm and the pile of dead bodies behind them.

"You think that'll be enough?" Blake's arm tightens around her side, and Yang slings her good arm around Blake's waist. Her side is sticky with blood, and Yang glances down to where the stab wound is still bleeding.

"How bad is that?" Yang tilts her head towards it, and Blake ignores her, guiding her towards the ladder.

"I'll keep it steady from this side," she says. "You go first."

"I see you there, ignoring me," Yang says through gasps for breath, pain blurring her vision.

"Yang," Blake says softly. "Go now, before you pass out. Please."

Yang doesn't remember making it across the ladder, only landing with a groan on the ground between Ruby and Weiss, Ruby running for the first aid kit in the destroyed antechamber and the way she bit through her tongue when Weiss hastily wrapped bandages around her forearm and a tourniquet above her elbow. Her vision swims and she can hear, just barely, Weiss cursing at her and feel familiar hands in her hair, her head in Weiss's lap and Weiss curling around her protectively, lips pressed against her forehead. Blake appears in her vision, blurry

around the edges and one hand soft on her cheek, the other winding together with Weiss's and pressed heavy and grounding over Yang's sternum. She nearly vomits with the pain when Ruby and Blake haul her away from the chasm, her arm folded over her stomach and jarring with every step, nerve endings grinding together, and then she's laying with her head in Blake's lap this time, quiet redundant apologies overwhelming her until Weiss's hands cover her ears and the whole floor rocks with an explosion and then, finally, blissfully, she loses consciousness.

Chapter 6

She wakes up to a white ceiling. Her mouth is cottony, her throat aching, a tube in her nose, and she reaches for it blindly but her arm doesn't move.

"Hey, hold on, be careful." It's Ruby's voice, and Yang's eyes snap open the rest of the way, head jerking to one side to see Ruby-- taller and thinner and older than when she'd disappeared, with poorly-cut hair and a nose still healing from being broken by Blake's fist, real and whole and *there* -- in a chair next to her.

"Ruby?" she mumbles out. "You're here?"

"Yeah," Ruby says with a smile. Her hand falls onto Yang's leg, squeezing hard enough to ground her. "I'm here. You got me home."

"How did we-- where's--"

"Weiss had to have surgery for her ankle," Ruby says gently. "A few of them, actually. She's a few floors up in her own room. Winter hasn't left since we got here."

"Where's here?"

"Berlin," Ruby says, squeezing at Yang's leg again. "Cinder left her satphone at the camp. It was easy enough to get in and call Winter from there. She didn't believe I was me until Weiss talked to her, but after that she had helicopters in to get us within an hour. Interpol came with them and cleaned out the whole camp, arrested all of Cinder's people, took the prisoners in and started working on finding their families so they could go home." She pauses, head tilting. "It's a little terrifying. And extremely weird. She's--not what I remember."

"There was a lot of therapy involved," Yang mumbles out, absent and exhausted, staring up at the ceiling. "You're really here, right? This isn't a dream?"

"I really hope your dreams of finding me didn't involve you shattering your entire arm," Ruby says drily, and it sobers Yang up immediately, her eyes glancing down to where her arm is covered in bandages and held in traction, a series of rods and pins protruding from it.

"How bad is it?"

"It's still there," Ruby says, shrugging one shoulder. "So I guess it could be worse? But they're not sure about mobility in your hand. There are plates and pins and stuff to hold it all together. They said the muscle and stuff should heal, but the nerves they aren't sure about."

Yang blinks, tears stinging at her eyes and throat aching, and she closes her eyes tight.

"I'm sorry," Ruby says after a moment. "I-- they said I'm too blunt."

"What?" Yang's eyes fly open. "Who said that?"

“Some therapist,” Ruby says again with another shrug. “I don’t really remember. There’s a lot of lawyers and paperwork going on right now that I know nothing about. Weiss said she’d handle it since she’s your--um-- your--”

“Legal proxy,” Yang says automatically. “I--I didn’t want to deal with any of it, after you and Dad disappeared. I couldn’t. She’s been my proxy since we turned eighteen.”

“She said no one was allowed to do anything until you woke up, I guess. So it’s all on hold. But the police made me talk to a therapist. And she said I’m too blunt because I haven’t had enough human contact.”

“She can fuck off,” Yang mutters viciously. “I’d like to see how well she handles being stuck in the middle of nowhere for--”

“Yang,” Ruby says over her, slow and smiling. “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

Yang blinks at her, foggy but clearing, and swallows. “You are?”

“I’m okay,” Ruby says. “Or I will be. You got me home.”

“We did,” Yang corrects without meaning to. “It was all of-- where’s Blake?”

Ruby freezes, hand clenching at Yang’s leg.

“Ruby,” Yang says, sharp and unwavering.

“She’s-- she waited until we got here,” Ruby says carefully. “Until you and Weiss were in surgery, and Winter was here. And then she disappeared.”

“What?” Yang’s stomach clenches, maybe from not enough food and maybe from her arm and maybe from surgery, but probably from the fact that after all of that-- after leading them to Ruby and taking more hits than anyone should have had to for a job, after facing Adam down, after holding Yang and Weiss together and killing Adam and helping undo all the bad Cinder had done to so many people-- Blake had just left them behind.

“I don’t know where she went,” Ruby says, quiet and careful. “I’m sorry.”

“She left?” It comes out like a crack, and Yang’s throat aches and her chest crashes in on itself and then expands, a great gasping sob ripping out of her. Ruby’s out of her seat in an instant, even before her heart monitor picks up on the change, climbing into the bed and curling around her side like she had so many times when they were children, and Yang turns her head into Ruby’s hair and grips at her back with the hand she has left and cries.

There’s a parade of doctors and nurses after that, prying Ruby away from her for checks on her vitals, and Yang curses at every single one of them until they finally leave, emptying the room petulantly until it’s just her and Ruby again and Yang’s left with nothing but her sister, back from the dead to fill a void in her life that Yang had been circling around for a decade, and a new emptiness left behind from Blake’s disappearance.

There's a knock on the door and Ruby's on her feet in an instant, fists clenched, and Yang's cursing at the door before she looks over to see Weiss in a wheelchair, Winter standing stiffly behind her.

"Hey," Yang says belatedly. "Sorry, I thought you were--"

"It's okay," Weiss says, quiet and tired. She wheels herself awkwardly into the room, glaring back at Winter when she tries to help, and makes her way to Yang's side. Her hair's limp and tied up into a messy knot at the back of her head, her cheeks pale and drawn, enough that the scar over her eye stands out starkly; the hospital gown's too big and shows off a sloppy pattern of bruises and abrasions on her shoulders and arms, tracking messily up the side of her neck. A delicate line of stitches pulls on the underside of her jaw. She looks young and too small and too fragile, and it twists around Yang's sternum because she's loved Weiss for as long as she can remember and she's the one who dragged Weiss into all of this, who nearly got her killed, the reason she's wheelchair bound and battered. "How are you?"

"Is your leg going to be okay?" Yang says, pushing at the buttons on her bedside until she's sitting halfway up and can peer down at Weiss's ankle, propped up in the wheelchair and with rods just like Yang's protruding out of the bandages.

"I might have a limp, and I apparently won't be running any more marathons," Weiss says, waving one hand dismissively. "But that's not exactly my life's passion anyways, so I think I'll be just fine."

"Weiss," Yang says thickly, eyes burning.

"Yang Xiao Long, I swear to God, if you try to apologize to me I *will* tell Winter to punch you in the face," Weiss says threateningly. "And you know she'll do it."

"I will," Winter says, bland and threatening as always, and Yang rolls her eyes.

"Keep it in your pants, ice queen," Yang says with a sneer at Winter before directing her attention back to Weiss. "I-- did everyone get out? Everyone that they'd--"

"All of them that were still alive," Weiss says gently, glancing carefully over towards Ruby. "They-- we have no way of knowing yet how many people they took over the years, but I have to imagine it was a lot, over the span of a decade."

Yang's head drops back, eyes shut and nausea pushing at her stomach.

"This is good, Yang," Weiss says, hand curling around Yang's. "We found Ruby, and stopped them from finding whatever it was they wanted to find, and got all of those people out. This is good. *You* did good."

"I nearly got you all killed," Yang mutters out.

"You saved all of our lives," Weiss counters. There's a familiar strong set to her jaw, even with shadows under her eyes and a spine that's curving with exhaustion from fatigue and trauma, and she shakes her head when Yang's focus zeroes in on the shadows in her eyes, a

quiet sadness at abandonment that only Yang's ever been able to recognize. "And stopped those people from finding a virus that could have killed millions of people. *And* brought Ruby home. Because you never gave up on her. Don't lose sight of that."

"Yeah," Ruby pipes in. "But don't worry, I won't let you, I've got ten years of little sistering to catch up on."

"Oh, don't you dare," Yang says with a groan without meaning to, and then pauses, breathes, smiles, glancing over to where Ruby's sitting, and then over to Weiss, and back again. Ruby glances to the door and the lack of nurses to reprimand her, and climbs back into the bed by Yang's feet, settling cross-legged between her ankles and settling her hands on her shins. Weiss holds fast to her hand and presses a soft kiss to her knuckles, and Yang nods, looking between the two of them, the family they'd put back together, over and over again, and nods again.

She's quiet as Weiss sets to talking about business, about the paperwork to sign the fortune over to Yang and all of the work that will go into reintegrating Ruby into society, about the irritation it's sure to cause Raven now that the company won't default to her anymore. She listens and agrees, ignoring Winter's interjections, focusing on Ruby and on Weiss and on the way they're here with her now, living and breathing, and doing her best to ignore the gaping ache in her stomach that by now has nothing to do with her injuries or dehydration or surgery but is all Blake-- Blake, who had fit so cleanly between her and Weiss, how they'd stood on their own for so long until Blake had thrown them off balance and slotted neatly into an empty space they hadn't known was there, challenging Weiss and calming Yang-- and the gaping emptiness between them that she left behind.

Recovery is slow. It's close to a month before the doctors sign off on Yang being able to fly without chartering a private medical plane to mitigate the risk of infection-- which she can afford to do, now, with billions of dollars suddenly at her fingertips, none of which she knows what to do with-- and another month after that before she's ready to leave Weiss's apartment, to leave the safe enclave of privacy from the journalists and paparazzi hounding all three of them, everyone desperate for a line on the story of the billionaire's daughter returned from the dead after ten years, of the sister who tracked her down, of the SDC executive who disappeared on an unannounced leave of absence and returned on crutches with what will probably be a permanent limp and a sharper steel to her spine. It's yet another month and change before she can sleep through the night in her own room, instead spending most nights in Weiss's comically oversized bed, far enough apart that neither of them can roll over into the other's injured limbs but close enough to touch, to hear Weiss's breathing, to settle into a silent understanding of how they aren't ready, not yet, not now, to talk about what they are to each other now, even as Yang eventually starts to find the words to put to the confirmed loss of her father and Weiss matches them with recounting her time in Cinder's camp alone, habitually thumbing along the scar under her jaw left by a reckless threat to Adam's pride and an equally reckless response from his machete.

Yang hides, paying ostentatious amounts out of her new fortune for lawyers to come to her and to settle Ruby's return to society and for doctors and physical therapists to make house calls to the apartment. She hides, only speaking regularly with Ruby and Weiss and, eventually, Pyrrha, who storms into the apartment one day half a week after they make it back to New York, after Yang texts her to ask about setting up a new training program, and yells at her for ten minutes straight. After that, Pyrrha's a regular fixture in the apartment when she's not on call at the fire station, helping Yang with her physical therapy, getting Ruby to talk with her genuine kindness and openness more than anyone else can, clocking the changed dynamic between Weiss and Yang immediately and landing squarely into a supportive friendship, chiding Weiss into doing her own stretches and talking to her therapist where Yang doesn't have the heart to push.

She hides, and learns to have a sister again. Ruby is still Ruby, warm and kind and smarter than she's ever had any right to be-- she wouldn't have survived as long as she did if she wasn't-- but she closes off, too often, learning quickly to redirect attention away from herself and shutting down when anyone pushes her to talk about her time in the delta. She tells Yang once, haltingly, deep into the night when neither of them can sleep and she finds Yang doing PT exercises in the gym, about the day Taiyang died, how Adam's first shot had crippled him and then he'd been dragged to shore for Adam to gloat before the second shot killed him. She signs herself up for online courses, pursuing her GED and setting herself up for a college degree, busying herself with work, and Yang watches and begs, day after day, until Ruby speaks to the therapist that comes by daily to speak with her.

Weeks pass at home, and then months, and Yang finds an apartment for her and Ruby because she loves Weiss and wants to spend all her time with her but they need their own space, as much to sort through what a handful of chaste clandestine kisses in the dark since their first in Cinder's tent means as to give Ruby and Yang space to relearn how to be a family. It's smaller than Weiss' behemoth penthouse, but big enough for them to coexist without crowding; close enough that Yang can walk the two blocks to Weiss's whenever she needs to see her, to worry out loud about Ruby shutting herself off from the world, to see with her own eyes that Weiss is okay, to curl around her as best she can with a shattered right arm and hold tight with her around the empty space aching between them since Berlin; far enough away to feel separate and like *theirs*.

Months go by and the empty ache stays deep in her stomach, existing between every breath and winding its way around her ribcage, expansive and creeping and forever present. It leaves her wishing for dark hair and bright eyes and a mouth the curls readily up into a smirk every time she presses a kiss to Weiss's cheek or Weiss curls up against her and breathes into the crook of Yang's neck, anything of Blake to clear out the shadowy edges Weiss tries and fails to act like she don't still haunt her steps, to pull the last disparate pieces of them into place, but instead she redirects her focus towards poring over her father's research and the enormous files that constitute a summary of Rose Holdings and all of its subsidiaries and holdings around the world.

"Yang," Weiss says sternly one day, spinning around from the desk in her home office and pushing up to her feet. She's walking again, limp noticeable but less so than the doctors had expected, as much from the best treatment money can buy as from sheer willpower. "You miss Blake."

Yang pauses in her pacing, hand curled around her reconstructed forearm, and loses the thread of ranting she'd been carrying on for ten minutes straight about Ruby's refusal to talk to anyone aside from them.

"What?"

"Blake," Weiss says with a sigh, hands on her hips. "You miss Blake, and you're doing the exact same thing that you worry about Ruby doing because you're not dealing with the fact that you miss her."

"I don't--"

"You talk to me, and to Ruby, and Pyrrha, and your PT and doctors," Weiss says, ticking names off on her fingers. "No one else. You applied to college, but turned down every interview. You signed almost all of the company work over to a proxy. You don't go to the gym anymore now that you have one at home and Pyrrha comes to you there. You don't go out. You do your PT and obsess over Tai's research and worry about Ruby, and that's *it*."

"What does that have to do with Blake?" Yang says with a huff. "Who says I even want to see her? She blew us off. Left us in a hospital in a foreign country. Why would I want her here?"

"Yang," Weiss sighs out, slumping back down into the chair and rubbing at her leg, the motion familiar and automatic, and Yang moves without thinking, kneeling in front of her and helping stretch her leg out to soften the strain in her quadriceps. "I miss her, too."

Yang pauses, hands gentle on Weiss's calf, jaw clenching tight because they haven't put words to this before, have skirted around it for months since the delta, since Berlin, since coming home without Blake.

"Are we talking about this now?" Yang says carefully. She sits back on her heels, hands moving lazily along Weiss's calf, massaging the cramps out of the muscles without thinking about it, her focus instead on the meticulously guarded tension in Weiss's jaw.

"We probably should," Weiss says after a long moment. Her head tilts back against the back of her chair, staring up at the ceiling instead of Yang, granting her a moment to silently waver, private and unsteady, at the prospect of finally putting a name to whatever it is-- the tension, the comfort, the way Blake had somehow pulled them closer together and then shattered the both of them when she left-- that they've so deliberately avoided for so long. "If you even know where to start."

"What, your fancy therapist doesn't have a script for talking about how your best friend's been in love with you forever but also, hey, there's someone else that you both may or may not both be in love with, too?"

Weiss drags her chin back down to level a glare at Yang, and shoves her foot into Yang's ribs in response. "Do you have to make a joke out of everything?"

“Well, *my* fancy therapist tells me that’s a coping mechanism and that as long as I don’t use it to avoid uncomfortable discussions then it’s perfectly suitable, thank you *very* much,” Yang says smugly, pinching at Weiss’s calf. Weiss huffs out a sigh, irritated and familiar, and a burst of affection warms Yang’s skin, comfortable and comforting, because this is Weiss. Weiss who’s stood beside her since before either of them could form full sentences, who’s been steady and strong and constant, who kissed Yang in a tent in the middle of the Danube river delta when they were both prisoners, who put all of her faith in Yang’s ability to get them home safely.

“I’m in love with you,” Weiss says, hesitant, precise, and Yang’s hands, forever moving on autopilot to address the constant cramping in Weiss’s leg, freeze. It’s not technically new information now, since the moment everything shifted in a tent thousands of miles from home-- it’s been telegraphed into the bedroom she kept for Yang in every apartment she’s lived in since college, in how even when she was buried in work she never missed a text or call, in the clothes she kept tailored to Yang’s forever-broadening shoulders and the way she kissed her in the middle of a European river delta and trusted her to bring them all home, always there just out of Yang’s reach-- but it’s still the first time she’s heard it out loud and her pulse stutters against her sternum. Weiss sighs and props her chin in her hand, shaking her head. “I think I’ve always-- I don’t know. I always knew but there was never a right time to turn your life upside down *again* .”

“I wouldn’t be here without you,” Yang says honestly. Her fingers curl gently along Weiss’s calf, dragging down towards her ankle-- reconstructed and stiff with scar tissue, functional but forever changed-- and up towards her knee and back down again, massaging over familiar scar tissue with an arm and hand weighted down by matching damage. Weiss’s shoulders sag into relaxation as Yang works the knots out of her leg, fingers manipulating the joint expertly, but her eyes stay clear and bright, like they were in the delta, in the tent in Cinder’s camp, unwavering and deliberate.

“All those years, I just-- you kept me from falling apart, but even before then, before Dad and Ruby--” Yang shakes her head, hands stalling out. “It was always you.”

“You kept me from falling apart, too, you know,” Weiss says quietly, head tilting, and Yang’s fingers stumble over themselves. “You’ve always thought you’re some kind of disaster, but you’re *not* . Without you the best I could’ve turned out would’ve been Winter.” Her mouth turns down inelegantly. “Or, more likely, my dad.”

“Hey,” Yang says sharply. “You were never going to be like him, okay? That’s all you.” She grips harder at Weiss’s calf, harder still until Weiss stops avoiding her gaze, and smiles crookedly. “Besides, Winter’s not so bad. She did manage to get the UN *and* Interpol into the middle of nowhere within, like, two hours to pick us up. And, you know, I know you’re the one who dragged her into therapy with you. All the good in you is yours, Weiss, but everything good in her? You saved that.”

Weiss finally moves, pulling her leg back from Yang’s hold and leaning forward until she can curl one hand along Yang’s jaw to the back of her neck, pulling gently until Yang leans up on her knees and kisses her, soft and fleeting, not the first since the delta but the first in the

daylight, the first when they're both awake and alert and not reeling from nightmares or panic attacks.

Weiss's hands keep her in place, threading through the hair at the back of her head and holding her steady as Yang's lungs start to burn but she refuses to pull away, to step back, to let either of them brush this off yet again. Her fingers twist into Weiss's shirt, disrupting perfectly pressed creases and digging into her sides past the fabric, hard enough that a shudder drags through Weiss's body and burns its way into Yang's palms.

"Are you sure?" Weiss pulls back, cheeks burning bright and hands firm still at the back of Yang's head, breathing ragged and heavy.

"I'm sure," Yang says, resolute and unwavering, the only point of certainty she's ever had in her life, and the spots of color burning Weiss's cheek burn darker, even her ears tinting pink, and Yang's stomach twists around itself because she's loved Weiss for as long as she can remember and they're here, now, and she can taste Weiss's coffee on her tongue. "I've always loved you."

"But it's not just me," Weiss says carefully. "Is it?"

Yang sags in her grip, skin prickling uncomfortably suddenly, because it had been such a perfect moment, the whole world dropping away and nothing but Weiss in her arms left to matter, but Weiss has brought the whole world back in and the gaping ache left in Yang's ribs from Blake's absence had come crashing back in.

"I--" Yang starts and then cuts herself off. She shakes her head, pulling in a deep breath and holding it, because she barely knows how to put a name to how she's felt about Weiss for her entire life and the addition of Blake to the equation is so new and disquieting that it tilts her world off its axis. "I don't know. Maybe?"

"I--miss her, too," Weiss says, slow and deliberate, her hold on Yang loosening but not releasing, one hand dropping down to the side of her neck, thumb rubbing absently along her jawline, and it drags an unsteady breath out of Yang's chest. "I don't know how to talk about her to anyone else."

She pauses, head tilting to one side. "I've felt guilty every time I tried."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Yang mumbles, slumping back on her heels. It drags her out of Weiss's grip, and Weiss lets out an irritated grumble and follows, sliding out of her chair to sit down on the hardwood next to Yang, leaning back against the desk and letting Yang manipulate the both of them around until she's sitting crosslegged with Weiss at her side, legs slung across Yang's lap. "Are you sure it's okay--"

"Yes," Weiss says over her, firm and sharp. She pulls Yang's arm into her lap, absent and automatic, fingertips blindly mapping sharp lines of muscle under her skin. "We're in the same boat here, you know."

"It feels--greedy," Yang says haltingly. She leans back on her other arm, letting her head drop back and eyes fall shut, the sensation of Weiss's hands on her skin familiar, comforting,

grounding, even as they talk circles around what it is they want with Blake, with all of them.

“Maybe it is,” Weiss says after a long moment. “But who says that means we can’t want it anyways?”

“It’s always just been you and me,” Yang says, staring up at the ceiling because it’s easier, a blank stretch of white instead of Weiss and the fact that from the minute their plane crashed in Romania and Blake put herself between Weiss and the guns pointing at all of them there was no going back to just the two of them. “We could just be us. Finally, for real.”

Weiss hums noncommittally. Her fingers sweep over the inside of Yang’s wrist, drawing her pulse up to the surface and the air out of her lungs. “We could, yes.”

Yang pulls her head back down, staring down at where Weiss’s fingertips are dragging along her skin, framing the remnants of the too-many surgeries she’s had since the delta. “I miss her,” she says eventually, small and wounded, and she doesn’t look up when Weiss’s fingers stall momentarily.

“She’s just-- infuriating,” Weiss says with a huff, and Yang hums in agreement. “But I couldn’t ever tell if the reason she pissed me off so much was because she was just antagonistic, or if it was because I could have turned out just like her if I hadn’t had you. Angry and alone for all of those years.”

Her free hand lifts absently, brushing at the scar over her eye self-consciously, and Yang’s throat aches because they’ve never spoken directly about the cruelty of Weiss’s father, the neglect from her mother, and Yang’s always known but never known what to *say*.

Weiss’s hand drops back down and she sucks in a deep breath, shaking her head. “The thing is, though,” she carries on, as if she hadn’t just come as close as she ever had in speaking out loud about the *incident* -- as she always referred to it, oblique and aggressively nonchalant-- that nearly cost her an eye.

“The thing is,” she says again, after her voice shakes. “I wouldn’t have walked away from that crash without her. And I was *terrified* about what they would do to her in that camp, as terrified as I was about what would happen to you. When Cinder tracked you all down and Blake was there, I just-- I didn’t know she’d gotten out with you.”

Yang shifts closer, helpless and uncertain of what to say but needing to be closer, to swipe gently at the way Weiss is starting to tear up, to feel her pulse and be sure that they’re both *here*, together, even if Blake is still missing. Weiss leans into her hand, letting out a heavy breath, and smiles, crooked and sad and so very unlike herself.

“Things with you have always felt right,” Weiss says after a moment. “But when Blake was here it felt--”

“Whole,” Yang finishes for her, and Weiss nods and tilts further into her palm, hand coming up to cover Yang’s and hold it in place. “Is that weird?”

“Of course it’s weird.” Weiss rolls her eyes and scoffs and it’s so familiar that Yang’s pulse settles and levels, because if Weiss is on her side then it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. “But that doesn’t make it wrong.”

“Do you think-- does she--” Yang stalls out, unsure of how to phrase it, and Weiss rises to the occasion like she always does, reading Yang’s mind like she has since the first grade.

“I think she felt it, too,” Weiss says softly. “She-- when we were-- when Cinder made him leave Blake behind. Did she tell you what he said to her?”

“Of course she didn’t,” Yang grumbles. She sets to stretching Weiss’s ankle again, needing somewhere to put her hands, and Weiss doesn’t protest, letting Yang settle into manipulating her ankle carefully, expertly. “When would she have--”

“He said he was going to kill everything she cared about,” Weiss says sharply. “Starting with us.”

Yang freezes, Weiss’s ankle held into a flexed position until she settles a hand gently on Yang’s arm and clears her throat. Yang releases abruptly, nearly dropping her leg, her hands unsteady.

“What?”

Weiss’s head tilts back against the desk, and she rubs a hand over her eyes. “I don’t think I was supposed to hear. Or maybe I was. There was just so much going on, it’s hard to tell, but-- even then, even to him it was obvious.”

“And she still left,” Yang says with a snarl, anger she didn’t know she had unspooling from deep in her chest. She keeps her hands calm enough to gently move Weiss’s legs from her lap and then scrambles to her feet, setting to pacing the length of the office and back. “She-- she *left* us, Weiss. After all of that, she just abandoned us.”

Weiss pushes up to her feet slowly, leaning back against the desk and then levering herself up onto it so she can massage at her leg again on her own. She watches as Yang paces, letting her work through a burst of manic energy, giving her space.

“Yang,” she says softly, eventually, waiting until she finally stops pacing and turns to face her from halfway across the office. “You and I both know that she spent years running from him. He was a cruel, violent monster of a person. And she watched him nearly kill you. It’s probably the one thing that scared her more than anything, the idea that he would hurt more people because of her, and she had to watch it happen.”

“Oh,” Yang says faintly. Her shoulders drop, guilt creeping up along her spine, because Weiss is right, because Weiss is always right. Of course Blake had a reason to leave, a reason to run; of course there was a direct line between Adam threatening to kill the both of them and Blake leaving them behind. She shuffles, shamefaced, the rest of the distance back to Weiss’s desk and curls around her, dropping her forehead onto Weiss’s shoulder and breathing in shakily, nosing against a line of scar tissue on the underside of her jaw that she’d brought back from the delta. “I-- I didn’t think of it like that.”

“Yes, well, you've been dodging most of your therapy and I actually go to mine,” Weiss says wryly, hands falling to Yang’s waist. “You miss her. I miss her. She left because she felt guilty, and we both know it.”

“So what do we do?”

“What do you want to do?” Weiss’s fingers curl into her shirt, lazy and gentle, and Yang breathes out into the crook of her neck.

“What do *you* want to do?” she echoes.

Weiss doesn’t answer, breaths even and measured the way they are when she’s thinking, and Yang presses closer until she can drape herself more heavily onto Weiss and press her fingers over the narrow spaces in Weiss’s spine.

“I want to find her,” Weiss says eventually. “I want *us* to find her.”

Yang pulls back, searching for Weiss’s gaze, for her usual arrogant certainty, and instead faced with Weiss ducking her chin and a worried slump to her shoulders. She reaches without meaning to, one hand catching under Weiss’s chin and tilting until she looks up, worry written plain into her eyes, watery and bright.

“She'll want us, right?” Her voice wavers and it burns into Yang’s chest and she surges forward and kisses her, heavy and confident and certain, until Weiss is pulling in deep gasping breaths and her fingernails are digging into Yang’s hips.

“Who wouldn’t want us?” Yang says, cocky and certain in a way she can only find a way to be because for once Weiss *isn't*. She lifts an eyebrow and kisses Weiss again, hands soft at her cheeks.

“You’re sure?”

“Positive,” Yang says immediately, and is surprised to find that she means it, because Blake carried Weiss out of a plane crash, because Blake curled around Yang’s back and held her until she fell asleep after helping her find Ruby, because Blake left but waited until they were both being taken care of before she did, because Blake sat in an empty parking lot in Romania at two in the morning and looked at Yang like she was worth protecting and held Weiss up in the middle of a cadre of armed guards with careful hands and a fury that promised murder for anyone who tried to hurt her again.

Weiss nods, wavering but only moderately, and Yang grips at her shoulders and nods, sharp and sure.

“Now you gotta tell me how the hell we *do* find her, because I’ve got no fucking clue,” Yang says firmly. It draws a smile from Weiss, eyes rolling up familiarly, and a quiet warmth settles in Yang’s chest.

“You must have forgotten exactly what you can do with enough money to throw at the problem,” Weiss says with a sigh. Her hands curl absently at Yang’s waist, nose wrinkling as

she thinks.

“I’ll do that if you want to tell Ruby about, y’know.” Yang tilts her head towards Weiss and lets herself indulge, just for a moment, thumb ghosting over Weiss’s lips so she can revel in the shiver that drags through Weiss’s body.

“She kind of already guessed,” Weiss mumbles, eyes drifting half shut.

“I’m sorry, what?” Yang says flatly. “She what now?”

Weiss huffs out a sigh and shoves at Yang’s shoulder, glaring. “Of course she figured it out, she’s not an idiot.”

“I mean, I know *that* , but--”

“We talk, Yang,” Weiss says, clearing her throat. “I missed her and now she’s home and I just-- I worry about her too, and we talk a lot, and you, and Blake...you both come up.”

“Oh,” Yang says faintly, because she should have known. Weiss and Ruby were always close, especially after Summer died and they were all lost in their grief but Weiss was an outlet, a focus point, an unwavering anchor that both of them leaned too heavily on. “Right.”

Weiss’s hand curls around Yang’s, fingers sliding meticulously between hers. “She kept asking when we were going to figure it out, so I guess we did. Or started to. I don’t know.”

“Right,” Yang says again, stupidly, shaking her head and dragging their joined hands up absently so she can brush her lips over Weiss’s knuckles. “Well, that’s one problem out of the way. Now we just have to find Blake.”

“Now we just have to find Blake,” Weiss echoes, calm and sure and back to her usual confident self, and Yang breathes, nods, smiles. The cold ache left by Blake’s absence doesn’t fade, but she has Weiss at her side and Ruby’s support, and even if it’s a small one it’s still a step forward, towards something, the first she’s really managed since they came home.

She pivots to drop into Weiss’s chair, dragging Weiss’s feet into her lap and rubbing at her ankle absently as she dials her lawyer and sets up a meeting, ready to start, ready to find Blake and bring her home to the both of them.

Chapter 7

Weiss is right, like she so often is. As soon as they start throwing money at the problem, information about Blake floods in, enough to make Yang feel vaguely dirty and unsettled: traffic camera footage in Germany and hotel receipts in Austria, a train ticket to Budapest here, a flight to London there. Threads pick up and disappear and they follow them all, shelling out money for bribes and favors alike, and what Yang had expected to be a months-long effort terminates abruptly when one of the private investigators calls her on a Tuesday morning two weeks in to tell her that Blake Belladonna checked into a hotel in Hoboken the night before.

“Hoboken?” Yang says into the phone, incredulous. “Seriously?”

“Hoboken,” the PI confirms, her voice bored but pleasant. “I’ll email you the information. There’s no end date on the reservation so far.”

The call ends, the PI hanging up without waiting for Yang to speak again, and Yang drops her phone onto the desk. Hoboken. Just across the river. She can *see* Hoboken from the westward windows in their living room, and Blake is there, right now. She drops down into the desk chair, rubbing absently at her arm. The weather’s started to turn, the first cold snap of the year since she made it home, and she can feel it deep in her reconstructed bones.

She’s unlocked her phone and dialed Weiss’s office without even realizing it, and nearly drops the phone when Weiss’s secretary answers and immediately puts her on hold. Every single person who works for Weiss hates Yang and has no problem ignoring her, and it gives her too much time to think, to fidget, to tap her fingers against the desk and think about Blake and all the ways this could go sideways.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Xiao Long,” Weiss’s secretary says, sounding not even remotely sorry. “She’s in a meeting--”

“It’s important,” Yang blurts out. “She’ll understand, you can blame me, I promise.”

There’s a long moment of silence, and then “*One minute, please,*” and Yang’s left again with the familiar hold music.

“What’s wrong?” Weiss says immediately.

“I found Blake and she’s in Hoboken and I was going to say we should go there but you’re downtown and now I’m freaking out so please tell me to stop freaking out,” Yang blurts out, and she’s rewarded with a slow and measured exhale on the other side of the phone that immediately settles her pulse.

“Yang,” Weiss says pleasantly, the way she does when she’s about to yell at someone. “Did you pull me out of a meeting that’s been scheduled for two months so you could have a gay panic about Blake?”

“Excuse you, how are you *not* having a gay panic about Blake?” Yang says, immune to Weiss’s trademark fury and the way it’s sent businessmen twice her age running for cover.

“Because I’m at work and I can’t have any kind of panic over anyone while I’m here!” There’s a pause, and then: “Wait, did you say *Hoboken*?”

“I know!” Yang exclaims. “I *could* just be freaking out because it’s Jersey, you know--”

“Yang,” Weiss says, again, this time accompanied with a slow exhale, and Yang pauses and closes her eyes because she can practically see Weiss, pacing in her office, a hand pressing over her sternum and wrinkling her tie as she tries to keep her nerves in check. “It’s okay to be freaking out because it’s *Blake*. And also because it’s Jersey, but mostly the former.”

“Can you leave work?” Yang hates how small her voice sounds, but she squeezes her eyes shut and breathes in deep because they have to do this together and Weiss has never turned her down when it mattered, even when it set her professional life on end, and--

“Of course,” Weiss says, exasperated. “As if I’d make you go do-- I don’t even know what to *call* this-- by yourself.”

“Can’t believe you don’t have some efficient business jargon to sum up going to confront the person we both fell for during a life-threatening situation and asking her if she likes-likes us back.” It feels good to be sarcastic, and Yang drags her free hand through her hair and lets out a breath that had been burning in her chest.

“I cannot believe I’m attracted to you,” Weiss mutters distractedly. “I just-- I need to smooth some feathers about rescheduling, but I can pick you up in half an hour, probably.”

“You’re downtown,” Yang blurts out. Her body hums with nervous energy. “Can we just meet in Hoboken? I’ll text you the address. If I sit around waiting for you I’ll go crazy.”

There’s the familiar sound of a laptop snapping out of a docking station, a quiet hum of agreement, and then Weiss, distant, rattling off instructions to colleagues and spinning lies into gold about a family emergency she has to deal with. The ache that’s been weighing her stomach down since the investigator called unravels, because even if this goes terribly she’ll always have Weiss, familiar and constant, the only person who’s never left her behind.

“Klein can drive you.” Weiss materializes back on the phone. “I’ll text him.”

“Klein hates me.” Yang rolls her eyes and drags a hand through her hair. “I can drive myself. Just tell him I’m going to pick up one of yours and I promise not to scratch it.”

“Yang Xiao Long, if you lay a *finger* on my--”

“Going through a tunnel, sorry, love you, bye babe,” Yang rushes out, grinning in spite of herself and ending the call, a bounce in her step as much at the prospect of finding Blake as in an excuse to drive one of Weiss’s absurdly expensive cars.

“Hoboken,” Yang yells out, flopping back in her chair with a groan. An ache flashes down her arm from the impact, but she ignores it, irritation overriding the pain.

“What about Hoboken?” Ruby pokes her head into the room, one eyebrow lifted. Her hair’s sticking up in every direction, a deliberate and expensive choppiness displacing the messy crop she’d returned with, and she shakes it out of her eyes with practiced ease.

“Blake,” Yang says, disgruntled. “Is in *Hoboken*.”

“As in New Jersey?”

“Yes!” Yang yells out, flapping one arm out indignantly and pointing westward. “As in right fucking there!”

Ruby stands more fully in the doorway, leaning against the wall, arms folded over her chest lazily. It pulls Yang out of her frustration momentarily, like it still does so often, the way Ruby’s fit back into her life. She’s put on weight, filling out the hollows in her cheeks and her ribcage, and her eyes are brighter than they had been in the delta, less shadowed with distrust and survival instincts. She looks good, and healthy, and it still leaves Yang completely poleaxed sometimes that she’s home.

“Are you going to go talk to her?” Ruby tilts her head, one eyebrow lifting just like Weiss does, and Yang lets out an indignant huff. “Is Weiss?”

“Yes,” she mutters. Her left hand massages habitually at the muscles in her right arm, damaged fingers flexing and releasing. She might never have full mobility in her fingers again, but she’s trying. “I guess so. I don’t know what to even say to her. ‘Thanks for everything you did and then also totally bailing on us immediately?’”

“Maybe don’t lead with that.” Ruby shrugs and straightens up from the wall. “Play it cool. If you can. Or just let Weiss do all the talking.”

“I’m sorry, are you trying to give me social advice?” Yang throws back at her. “You lived in a cave for ten years.”

It pulls a laugh out of Ruby, and the sound warms in Yang’s chest and overwhelms the apprehension at the prospect of seeing Blake again. They found her sister and brought her home and they’re okay, now. They can do the same for Blake.

She pushes up to her feet and shuts her laptop, abruptly enough that Ruby blinks owlishly at her.

“What, you’re going now?”

“Yep,” Yang says hurriedly, slapping a hand onto Ruby’s shoulder as she slides past. “Meeting Weiss there. You’re not invited.”

“You think I want to go to Hoboken to watch you and Weiss be awkward around Blake?”

Yang pauses halfway down the hall and turns, hands on her hips, and Ruby sighs and shrugs.

“Obviously I want to watch you be awkward,” she amends. “But fine. Go do what you do. I’ll just sit here, sad and alone in this enormous apartment, all by my lonesome.”

“Great,” Yang says, flashing a grin at her. “Love you, don’t throw any parties while I’m gone, bye now.”

“Take a coat, moron!” Ruby yells after her as she disappears down the hall.

“Don’t baby me, cavewoman!” Yang bellows, even as she doubles back from the front door with a sigh and grabs her coat because Ruby’s right, like she so often is. It’s November, nearly a half a year into recovery and home and relearning how to live in the world instead of just watching it go by, and it’s freezing outside.

It’s a long drive to Hoboken, traffic out of Manhattan moving at a crawl and creating time and space for her anxiety to rebuild itself until it’s overwhelmed her confidence again, and her fingers are tapping nervously against the steering wheel by the time she makes it to the hotel parking lot. One of Weiss’s company cars is parked in a corner of the lot, driver lazing against the hood and preoccupied with a cigarette and his phone, and it tempers the sharper edges of her nerves because Weiss is here, and Blake is here, and they’re going to find a way to figure it all out together. She makes it out of the car and up the elevator until she turns the corner to find Weiss standing outside of the room Blake’s rented, shoulders sharp under her coat and arms crossed over her chest.

“Hey,” Yang says softly, pulling her arms free until she can hold onto Weiss and close her eyes and measure her breaths against Weiss’s careful exhales warming the shoulder of her coat. “This is a good idea, right?”

“Who knows at this point,” Weiss mutters into her shoulder. Her posture doesn’t break, her breathing staying steady, but her fingers dig into Yang’s back even through her coat and sweater and shirt. She pauses and then pulls back, hands going automatically to the collar of Yang’s coat and straightening it primly. “Though I doubt she’s in Hoboken just for fun.”

“Oh,” Yang says, faint and distracted. Behind her and around the corner the elevator dings again, distant and bothersome. “I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

Her hands curl around Weiss’s arms, wrapping gently around the soft scratch of her coat and tracking up to her shoulders and down again, closing her eyes and breathing into the way it settles her, the grounding sense of Weiss’s constancy, even when they’re both reeling with uncertainty. She can’t wear heels anymore-- or yet, depending on how indignant she’s feeling about it on a given day-- and her oversized presence, the one projected through the tailored lines of her suit and the overbright shine to her oxfords, shrinks as her nerves grow, and Yang considers, momentarily and not for the first time, if they should just forget the entire idea of Blake and move on.

“Yang?”

She nearly trips over her own feet with how quickly she turns at the sound of Blake's voice. She's standing by the corner to the elevator, four doors away, an empty chasm of carpet and space between them that feels broader than the pit under the delta that Adam's body had fallen into, and Yang's mouth drops open silently and she internally overcorrects because she could never forget about Blake, anymore than she could ever forget about Weiss.

Blake's eyes dart past Yang to where Weiss has shifted to stand at her side, chin lifted and her business face-- the cold and corporate one, unreadable save for an unwavering air of arrogance-- pasted on.

"Weiss," Blake says, softer, less of a question and more of a plea, and Weiss stiffens at Yang's side.

"What are you doing here?" Blake steps closer, cautiously, one hand weighted down with a bag from a grocery store, the other tight around a cup of tea, the label on the teabag still swinging from her abrupt stop and start.

"What are *you* doing here?" It's not what she means to say, and it comes out sharper than she intends, sharp enough that a new ache stabs through her chest at the way Blake flinches and stops covering the distance between them. Yang grips at her arm without meaning to, the tension pulling her body tight burning through her reconstructed bones, and Weiss's hand settles over hers automatically. Blake's eyes flicker down, jaw setting and grocery bag rustling with the clench of her fist.

"How are you?" Blake says after a moment. Her eyes slide deliberately along Yang's arm, up to the narrow scar hidden in the shadow of Weiss's jawline.

"It's fine," Yang says after a long hesitation. She shoves her hands into her coat pockets just to have somewhere to put them when they want to reach for Weiss, for Blake, for the both of them. It's too soon, too much, like she so often is, and she holds herself back carefully because Blake's run once already and Yang isn't sure she'll survive it if she runs again.

"Getting better every day." She lets her gaze fall down towards Blake's hip, hidden under a sweater and leather jacket that can't possibly be warm enough for the November chill. "How about your-- um--"

"Stab wound?" Blake says, dry and flat and so very like the first time she spoke to them, all those months ago in a ramshackle house in rural Hungary, distant and careful and twisting nausea into Yang's stomach. Weiss is still silent, save for a barely audible whistle of an inhale between her teeth at Blake's words.

"Where'd you go, Blake?" Yang says helplessly. Weiss shifts minutely closer, enough that her arm presses into Yang's, present and unyielding, and Yang curls her hands into fists in her pockets. "You *left*."

"I-- it seemed like the best choice," Blake says. The elevator dings behind her and her head snaps around, posture tensing and breath catching audibly.

“Blake,” Weiss finally speaks, quiet and firm. She tilts her head towards the door to Blake’s room. “Should we talk inside?”

“Yeah,” Blake says after a moment. “Right.” She slides by them in the hallway, careful and distant, and doesn’t say anything when Yang automatically reaches out to help with the groceries, instead hooking the bag over the wrist with her tea and digging the key out of her pocket one-handed.

Blake holds the door open for them and Yang files in behind Weiss to stand awkwardly by the window, hands in her pockets and skin prickling with the dry heat blasting out of the vents. Weiss fold her coat over the chair at the desk and settles down into it elegantly, one knee hooked over the other and chin propped delicately on her fist, a counterpoint of calm to the way Yang’s brimming with nervous energy, as Blake unloads food and a four pack of beer into the mini fridge.

“Planning on staying for a while?” Yang asks without meaning to, cursing her own lack of a filter when Blake hesitates and freezes, halfway to closing the fridge. She turns her focus to shrugging out of her own coat, dropping it onto the still-made bed, because it’s something to focus on that isn’t the way Blake’s shoulders shrink in on themselves, achingly similar to a doorway in a ramshackle house in rural Hungary, before she’d settled into a space that Yang hadn’t even known needed to be filled between her and Weiss.

“Not really sure what I’m doing at this point, to be honest,” Blake says. She reaches, haltingly, back into the fridge, and surfaces with three beers, holding two out like a peace offering.

Yang takes one automatically, glad to have something to do with her hands; Weiss is slower, frowning down at the drip of condensation that darkens the gray of her pants just above the knee and swiping a thumb over the label. The dry air from the heater prickles on Yang’s skin, too similar to another hotel room in another country, half a year and a whole lifetime ago, and she wonders if it would be unfair to Blake to curl around Weiss and sink into the comfort of her, unfair to Weiss to leave her to carry the conversation for the three of them.

“Where did you go?” Yang says instead, not looking away from the bottle in Weiss’s hands but not moving from her spot by the window, creating an awkward isosceles of distance between all of them and leaving Blake as much space as she can to navigate the moment. “After Berlin. Ruby said you went to the hospital with us and didn’t leave until we were both in surgery, but then you just walked out. Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere,” Blake says eventually, and Yang’s hands tighten around the beer bottle as her head snaps up. Blake holds out her hands placatingly, mouth turned down into an uncomfortable frown. Weiss doesn’t move, still staring thoughtfully down at the bottle in her hand. “I mean, I didn’t have a plan in mind. I just thought it was better for me to not be there.”

“How could you think that?” Yang’s shoulders tense, fingers tightening around the beer bottle until condensation-slick glass squeaks against her palms. She looks from Blake’s frown over to Weiss, impassive and unconcerned, and for the first time that she can remember feels a flash of frustration at Weiss’s ability to maintain her calm under stress because Yang’s three

breaths away from a panic attack and Weiss looks like she's waiting to order coffee. "After every-- you--"

"I burned my whole life to the ground for Adam," Blake says, thin and hollow, cracking. She plucks at the label on her beer, unopened like all of theirs, peeling at the paper corners, glancing obliquely at Yang, at Weiss, never direct enough to catch. Weiss doesn't move, chin still propped on her fist, thumb swiping methodically along the beer label, and Yang's free hand curls into a fist tight enough that her rebuilt muscles spasm. "Cut myself off from my family so that I could enable every terrible thing he did. He should have been in prison years ago and he wasn't because--"

"Seriously?" Yang sets the bottle down onto the dresser, heavy enough that drops of condensation fling off of it onto the cheap lacquer and Blake's eyes snap over towards it, Weiss's eyes shifting from Blake to Yang, the straight line of her mouth finally softening.

"I should have protected you from him," Blake says after a moment, dragging her eyes from Yang to Weiss. Her posture finally breaks and she takes a hesitant step closer to Weiss, and then another, and Yang's breath tangles behind her sternum when Blake reaches out, careful fingertips ghosting along the exposed side of Weiss's jaw and the notched line left under it from the edge of a machete, invisible to anyone who doesn't know it's there but burning bright to anyone who does.

Yang's fingers dig into her palms, tension heavy through her body, mirroring the silent snap of Weiss's posture even as her expression keeps cool and calm, head tilting minutely to maintain the barest of distance between her skin and Blake's fingertips, eyes level and appraising on Blake's.

Blake lets out an unsteady breath and pulls her hand back, shaking her head. "I should have-- I made so many wrong choices and--"

"Seriously?" Yang says again, strained and choking, and it snaps the focus of the room back over to her. "You left because you think we wanted you to *protect* us?"

"He hurt you because of me," Blake says. Her voice wavers and her eyes burn bright and it's the closest Yang's been to her in six months but she's still so far away, and Weiss is somehow so far away in a too-small hotel room but has never felt closer as she shifts, finally, hands folding in her lap and gaze settling firmly on Yang. "Both of you."

"Blake," Yang says, strangled, unsure, because she knew this would be hard but she hadn't know how much it would *hurt*, to have Blake within arm's reach but have to watch, pinned in place, as she stands there drowning in guilt, unable to look anywhere but at Yang, at Weiss, the scars from Adam they'd both brought back from the delta. "We-- I dragged us out there--"

"For God's sake," Weiss snaps out suddenly, on her feet before Yang can even register that she's spoken for the first time since they stepped inside, and she's meticulously buttoning her suit jacket and advancing on Blake until she stumbles against the dresser with wide eyes. Weiss yanks at the edge of Blake's jacket, leather creaking in one hand, and her other hand digs under the edge of Blake's sweater until scar tissue flashes in the artificial hotel lighting.

Yang's lungs burn and her palms itch, her body aching with a need to *move*, to touch, to be as close as possible to the both of them, but her boots stay rooted to the floor and she watches helplessly as Blake's eyes go wide and she sucks in a loud breath when Weiss shoves at her shirt until she can press a hand over the scar at her hip.

Weiss's free hand wraps around Blake's wrist and drags against resistance until she can press Blake's palm over the scar hidden under her jaw. Yang pushes a hand over her mouth, holding her breath in her lungs because surely if she breathes too loudly it'll all shatter, the way Blake's staring wide-eyed and frozen down at Weiss, the way Weiss is holding onto her like she could evaporate at any moment, the matching tension holding each of them sharp and unmoving so close to each other and far from Yang.

"This isn't your fault," Weiss says sharply, pushing Blake's hand harder against her jaw. "He hurt us because he *could*. He hurt Yang because she fought him, and he did *this*--" She presses Blake's hand harder still to her skin, firm and unyielding-- "Because I insulted him. That's not your fault."

Blake looks past Weiss's shoulder, to where Yang's still rooted to the floor, eyes wide and hand uncertain at Weiss's jaw, and Yang reaches for her own arm automatically.

"She's right," she says, shaking her head and rubbing at her arm. "He-- you're not responsible for what he did to us anymore than I'm responsible for not finding Ruby when I was fourteen, and we're not mad that you didn't protect us."

Weiss pushes harder against Blake's scar, enough that Blake's free hand grips tight around the edge of the dresser and her breathing shifts audibly, and Yang's stomach twists at the sound.

"We're mad that you *left*," Weiss says, deathly calm and dangerously smooth, and a shiver rips through Yang that has nothing to do with nerves because there's always been a power to Weiss, a weight to her attention that's always pinned Yang in place and held her steady, and Blake's finally found her feet under it, pitch black hair and gold-bright eyes and all her shattered pieces patched together and on display, burning at the seams and forever challenging Weiss, pushing back in a way Yang's never been able to. "Why are you here now, Blake?"

Weiss looks over her shoulder, not letting go of the grip she has holding Blake's hand to her jaw, leveling a meaningful glare at Yang until she manages to break her feet loose and *move*, finally, covering the distance between them in stuttering steps with hands clenching and releasing over and over at her sides, until she's a hairsbreadth away from Weiss's back, close enough that she can see her reflection in Blake's eyes and almost feel the wavering exhales of her every breath.

"Why are you *here*?" Yang echoes, ragged where Weiss is calm, pressing even closer to Blake, and Yang moves without meaning to, reaching with her damaged arm and dragging her fingertips along Weiss's forearm until she can cover Weiss's hand over the scar on Blake's hip, burning and shuddering with Blake's uncertain breaths.

"For you," Blake finally says, helpless and burning, looking from their joined hands on her skin to Weiss, to Yang, hand gripping tight enough to the edge of the dresser that it creaks

audibly. “Because I’m tired of running.”

“Then stay,” Weiss says savagely, and hooks a hand behind Blake’s neck and yanks, pulling her down until she can kiss her, all pent-up aggression and six months of grief, and Yang’s stomach drops out, free hand landing at Weiss’s side and skidding down the material of her jacket to land at her hip.

Blake jerks back, breathing heavily, looking between the two of them and dark spots burning hot on her cheeks. “I don’t unders--”

“Don’t overcomplicate it,” Weiss says, fingers twining with Yang’s and pulling away from Blake’s hip finally so she can press a kiss to Yang’s knuckles, and it’s not *new*, not by a long stretch, the way it feels to have Weiss’s lips on her skin after so many years, but it still sends a thrill down her spine, molten heat stretching down her limbs that’s part Weiss and part the smoldering gold in Blake’s gaze as pieces click together in her eyes and part the stark contrast between Weiss’s pale skin and Blake’s darker tone, a clean line blurring the longer Yang looks at it.

“Are you sure?” she says, still looking between the two of them, gaze wobbling between uncertainty and relief.

“God, yes, we’re sure,” Yang breathes out, pushing closer, and Blake reacts immediately, hands fumbling with the button on Weiss’s jacket and grabbing for her waist and mouth slanting against hers, kissing her hard and turning and lifting her easily up onto the dresser, one hand reaching back for Yang the second Weiss is settled. Yang doesn’t know where to put her hands but forgets to worry because Blake’s craning around to kiss her, one hand reaching back and grabbing for the back of her head. Yang’s lungs burn but she crowds closer, one hand landing on Weiss’s knee and the other skidding up along the side of Blake’s neck, mapping the line of her jaw, the curve of her cheekbone, and then suddenly Weiss is there, hands dragging Blake forward again until Yang pulls back enough to pull in deep gasping breaths.

Weiss’s hands press against Blake’s cheeks and hold her in place, eyes shut and forehead tipping against Blake’s, breath unsteady, and Yang curls a hand around her wrist, thumbing over her pulse and dropping her chin down onto Blake’s shoulder, free arm wrapping around Blake’s stomach easily.

“Come home with us,” she mumbles, tilting her head until she can press a kiss to the side of Blake’s neck and watch the way Weiss’s eyes are still shut. Her hand presses flat over Blake’s stomach, lips pressed over her thundering pulse and thumb resting easily over Weiss’s as it matches pace, and she closes her eyes and breathes in slowly because they’re all *here*, now, whole and breathing and together, and the aching emptiness in her ribcage, the unsteady uncertainty between her and Weiss that even a lifetime of history couldn’t quite compensate for, is righted with Blake standing between them.

“Stay,” Weiss says softly. She drags one hand from Blake’s cheek to Yang’s hair, and Yang’s pulse stumbles and she presses her face further into Blake’s neck, as much to mask the edge to her inhale as because she’s not ready to let go yet. Blake’s hand covers hers, her other roaming from Weiss’s cheek to her hair to the knot in her tie. “With us.”

A phone rings shrilly, cutting off Blake's inhale and shattering the air between the three of them, and Yang straightens up automatically. Instinct has her stepping back, creating space for Blake, for Weiss, but Weiss's eyes snap over to her and Blake's hand tightens, holding her in place, and she freezes, uncertain, as the phone keeps ringing.

"Ignore it," Weiss grumbles. "I'll deal with it later."

Blake hums noncommittally, tugging at Weiss's tie and tilting her head to one side, and Weiss's eyes go wide over Blake's shoulder when a hand reaches into her jacket, Blake fishing Weiss's phone out from the inside pocket and holding it up in front of her face.

"It's okay," she says, voice low and syrupy, and she turns halfway to curl an arm around Yang's waist, the movement dislodging her chin from where it had been resting on Blake's shoulder and the sudden pressure at her waist vacuuming air straight out of Yang's lungs. "We're not going anywhere."

Weiss raises an eyebrow, clearing her throat and glancing from her phone still dangling in Blake's hand to Yang's wide eyes, and then hops delicately off the dresser. She straightens her tie and buttons her jacket neatly, and snatches her phone out of Blake's fingers, pausing only to dig a hand into Blake's back pocket and resurface with the room key, one side of her mouth lifting elegantly when Blake's breathing shifts and her hips tilt into Yang's.

"You two behave," Weiss says coolly, and she pockets the key and strides out of the room, leaving the both of them to stare after her until Yang shakes her head and pulls back from Blake's hold on her waist.

"You're really staying?" She shoves her hands into her pockets, curling them into fists to keep them in place because her skin feels hot, hot in a way that has nothing to do with the sputtering heater by the window and everything to do with how her palms still burn from Blake's skin.

"If you'll have me," Blake says, confidence vanishing immediately and arms wrapping around herself. "Yang, I-- are you sure this is what you want?"

"Only if you're not going to leave again." It comes out harsher than she means for it to, and regret flares deep in her stomach when Blake flinches back miserably. Yang pulls in a deep breath and lets it out slowly, tilting her head back and closing her eyes so she can gather the threads of her disparate thoughts without getting distracted thinking about the curve of Blake's mouth.

She breathes out slowly and opens her eyes and immediately regrets it, because her shoulders tilt towards Blake anyways. Blake drops down to sit on the edge of the bed, propping her elbows on her knees and scrubbing at her face, and Yang steps towards her without meaning to, jerking to a halt halfway there.

"I-- we just want you to stay," Yang says softly. "We can figure everything else, all the details-- we can figure all of that out together when we get to it. But we just want you to *stay*."

Blake laughs into her hands, dry and humorless, palms dragging down her face until she can drop her chin into her hands and stare up at Yang. “You know, this really isn’t what I was expecting when I came here.”

“What’d you expect, then?” Yang makes it across the rest of the distance between them, pivoting on one heel until she can sit down on the edge of the bed as well. Her arm-- her whole arm, the undamaged one, the one that doesn’t ache in the winter chill-- presses against Blake’s side.

Blake doesn’t answer for long seconds, still staring straight ahead, and then she sighs, back lifting and lowering slowly with the breath. Yang winds her hands together and holds them tight in her lap. It feels pointless, after she’d had a taste of Blake’s pulse point and a hand dangerously low on her hip, half on scar tissue and half dragging at the waist of her jeans, barely thirty seconds earlier, but she digs her fingernails into her hands anyways.

“I don’t know,” Blake says eventually. “I hoped-- I thought you’d be together. After we talked at the hotel, after watching how you two looked at each other-- I just wanted to be sure you were both happy.”

She rolls her head over until she can look at Yang, and Yang drops her elbows onto her knees and mirrors her posture, head propped on her fist so she can stare right back. There’s a fullness to her cheeks that hadn’t been there six months ago, a warmer flush to her skin instead of the sallow overtones that had lingered after they dragged her out of her dark house in Hungary; she’s put on weight, her hips and cheekbones no longer jutting out, instead settling into a lean, healthy build.

“I missed you,” Yang says quietly. “I-- I’ve always loved Weiss and I always will, but I-- we-- we *missed* you, Blake. After everything we all went through, and then you were just gone.”

“I wanted to protect you,” Blake says, barely above a whisper.

Yang rolls her eyes, because she doesn’t have anything else to do except bump her shoulder against Blake’s, because Weiss has always been better with words, because she doesn’t know how to put words to how all she’s wanted since they set out from a hotel room in Romania is for them all to come home and be together, the three of them, and now she’d give anything to keep them all together.

“He’s gone,” Yang says softly. “Adam’s gone. Cinder’s gone. You’re safe, Weiss is safe, I’m safe, Ruby’s home. We can just live our lives.”

“And you’re sure this is what you want?” Blake asks again, uncertainty dragging the question down. “You and Weiss, you want-- this, with me-- all of us--”

“Yes,” Yang says, unwavering, solid, sure, because she’s terrified of Blake leaving again but she knows, here with Blake in her sights and Weiss just outside the door, lips still tingling and hands still burning from kissing and holding the both of them, that this is what they need. She sits up straighter and turns, hand curving along Blake’s jaw and pulling until she sits up as well and follows Yang’s touch, leaning closer until Yang can kiss her again. It’s softer than earlier, less desperate and more patient, because they have so much time to do

everything they need to, a whole empty horizon to fill together, all three of them, and there's no need to rush. Her mouth drags slowly over Blake's, spine arching forward when Blake's fingernails rake along the back of her skull--

"If you're both quite done being sappy," Weiss says archly, and Yang jerks back abruptly, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand without thinking about it and cheeks flushing dark as much from kissing Blake as from Weiss surprising them. She's standing over them, arms folded over her chest and one eyebrow lifted imperiously, corporate and disaffected, and a silence stretches over the three of them for a short burst of seconds before Yang scoffs and Weiss's posture breaks.

"Work crisis averted?" Yang slings an arm around Blake's shoulders, pulling her into her side, pulse tripping at the way Blake fits against her. It's different than Weiss, a variable shade of right, and she glances back to Weiss, who's looking down at them with her hands clasped in front of her, mouth soft and eyes softer, the way she's only ever looked at Yang, uncertainty crowding into the back of her gaze.

"Weiss," Yang says quietly, head tilting to one side, because this was always about *them*, all of them, together, and Weiss's insecurity has no place in that pattern. Blake hesitates, leaning back just enough to glance at Yang and then over at Weiss, and then holds out a hand, reaching until she can hook a finger around Weiss's palm, and then another, pulling and pulling until Weiss finally gives and steps closer and closer still, letting herself be pulled until she's crowded between their knees, held in place by Blake's hand in hers and Yang's hand at her back.

"You're enjoying being the tall one right now, aren't you," Yang mumbles, forehead tilted against Weiss's arm. It earns her a laugh from Blake, watery and warm, and a slap on the back of the head from Weiss, and she laughs into the material of Weiss's suit.

"Let's go home," Weiss says, hand dragging through Yang's hair gently. She steps back and holds a hand out to each of them, and Yang lets herself be pulled up to standing. Blake follows a beat later, and there's a moment of uncertainty where Weiss's fingers start to slacken before Yang holds tight and then reaches out and catches onto Blake's with her free hand, closing the circuit and nodding resolutely, firmly, like she knows what she's doing.

There's a small sound from Weiss, uncertain and quiet but warm, and Yang glances from Weiss to Blake and then to where Blake's shifted their hands until her fingers are winding between Weiss's. It's careful and deliberate and her eyes are locked onto Weiss's, wide open and scared but unwavering, and more than anything-- more than the way Weiss had kissed Blake, more than the way Blake had fit into her side and kissed her softer than anything Yang had ever felt not two minutes earlier-- it settles warm and sure in Yang's chest, spreads through her limbs.

"Let's go home," she echoes, and squeezes their hands and then pulls free so she can pick up Weiss's coat with one hand, Blake's suitcase with the other. She tilts her head towards the door and clears her throat and Weiss rolls her eyes but marches towards the door anyways, shoulders square and chin up and pulling Blake along, and Yang follows, stomach flipping because Blake's smile for Weiss, for her, for *them* is familiar but so new outside of the delta, in a safer place and a quieter world where they have so much time to learn to live together.

“How long are you in the US?” Weiss says, hand still locked with Blake’s as they make their way down the hall. Blake’s stride is shorter than usual so she can match Weiss’s pace easily, and Yang trails behind them, watching how Blake’s pulled Weiss’s hand in front of her so she can hold it with both of hers; they turn the corner to the elevator in front of her and there’s a wonder written into Blake’s profile as she stares down at Weiss’s hand in hers, fingers tracing over her knuckles and the inside of her wrist reverently.

“I, uh,” Blake says after a minute, shaking her head and glancing back at Yang, who raises an eyebrow and shrugging. She’s used to being dumbstruck by Weiss; it’s nice to not be the only one anymore. “I think my ticket’s for a couple of weeks. It was the cheapest.”

“I have a friend at the State Department,” Weiss says as they step into the elevator. It’s a tighter fit than it needs to be, with neither Weiss nor Blake willing to give up their hold and Yang squeezing in on Blake’s other side with both her broad shoulders and Blake’s suitcase, pressed into Blake’s hip and flushing more than she’d like to admit at the way she’s plastered against Blake. Weiss smirks at her, because Weiss is a brat who enjoys watching Yang squirm, and Yang sticks her tongue out because she doesn’t know what else to do. “If you’re interested in staying longer, that is.”

“I think I might be,” Blake murmurs, voice low and warm, and it rolls down Yang’s spine in a way that shrinks the elevator to half the size and, judging by the way Weiss’s eyes go twice as dark, has the same effect on her. “If that’s okay with the both of you, that is.”

“Uh,” Yang says, and then shakes her head and looks up at the ceiling, breathes in deep, focuses on something besides the way her mind and her chest and her hands keep tracking back to the way Blake had lifted Weiss up onto the dresser and then dragged her forward for her own kiss. “Yes.”

“Yeah,” Weiss adds, uncharacteristically ineloquent, and then shakes her head, cheeks smeared red. “I mean--yes. Of course. That’s why we came to see you.”

“You’re both sure?” Blake says quietly.

“Yes,” Yang says, and Weiss echoes it without hesitation. A flush crawls up Blake’s neck, appealing and calming at the same time, and Yang’s palms itch because all she wants to do is to touch and to hold, to grab onto the both of them and not let go, but they’re in a hotel elevator in New Jersey and all she can do is stand there and stare instead.

The wind in the parking lot’s picked up, and Yang can barely hear Weiss’s voice as she gives her driver the rest of the day off and they load Blake’s suitcase into the car Yang drove over. There’s a moment where Weiss and Blake look uncertainly towards the front seat, to Yang, to each other, and she rolls her eyes.

“I won’t hold it against either of you if you sit back there together,” she says with a deeply put-upon sigh. “But if you start making out without me I *will* be offended until the end of time.”

“You’re so kind,” Blake deadpans, but Weiss just rolls her eyes and pulls at her coat until Yang leans down so she can kiss her softly and with a hint of promise before she slips into

the backseat. Blake pauses, hesitant, and Yang stares because there are still lines to learn, boundaries to navigate, but then Blake leans up and brushes a kiss against her mouth as well, careful but warm, a hand pressing soft over her sternum for a moment before she follows Weiss into the backseat.

Yang stands stupidly for a moment, mouth burning and chest warm, before she drops down into the driver's seat. In the rear view, Blake's sitting uncertainty, ramrod stiff, and Weiss rolls her eyes and slaps at her arm until she relaxes and leans into Weiss's side, and Yang smiles.

"So." Yang starts that car and pulls out of the parking lot. "Where'd you go after Berlin?"

There's a moment of quiet in the backseat, and Yang chances a look back to where Blake's chin has dropped towards her chest and Weiss presses a kiss to her hair.

"Budapest," Blake says after a moment. "To see my parents."

"Oh yeah?" Yang smiles into the rearview, meets Blake's eyes and then Weiss's. "I bet that was good."

"Yeah," Blake says softly.

"It'd be nice to meet that at some point," Weiss says quietly. "If you're okay with that. Whenever you're ready."

"I'd like that," Blake says, soft and barely audible. "One day."

There's a long stretch of silence from the backseat, and Yang does her best to keep her focus on the road in front of her. She waits until a red light to look over, and Blake's practically curled into Weiss's lap, barely held in place by her seatbelt.

"That's terrible road safety, you know," Yang says conversationally.

"Don't hit anything then," Weiss retorts, and Yang smiles, deeply and stupidly enamored, and Weiss's hand curls into Blake's hair, and then suddenly she lets out a yelp. "Did you just *bite* me?"

A car horn blares behind them and Yang laughs, almost as loud as the way Blake laughs, because Weiss is slapping at her leg, as she turns around and sets off towards the tunnel. She pulls over into the left lane and accelerates, relishing as much in abusing the powerful motor of Weiss's favorite car as she is in the sound of Weiss and Blake laughing in the back and the fact that Blake is coming home with them, that the last missing piece of her life is slotting into place.

She skips past traffic and merges smoothly into the toll line, glancing back into the rear view to where Blake and Weiss are curled around each other but looking up to where she's sitting, and keeps moving forward, taking them into the tunnel and home together.

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