

Blood 24

"What? There has to be some way we can do this."

Ruby gritted her teeth, Scroll pressed tightly against her ear. Weiss leaned forward, attempting to pick up whatever fragments of the conversation she could.

"Well, yes, but—"

Ruby tried to raise her voice, uncaring about who overheard them. They stood in the middle of the fairgrounds, and Weiss felt every wandering pair of eyes. She could only assume Ruby decided to do this in public out of convenience.

"Look, I know the deadline has passed—"

Ruby sighed.

"Okay... okay, but... okay..."

She sighed again.

"And there's really no other way to get a substitution in? Okay... um... okay..."

Ruby nodded.

"I understand. Uh, thank you, Barbara. You've been a big help. Okay... okay... bye..."

Ruby hung up the Scroll, and smeared her palms down her face. Weiss had a pretty good indication of how the call went.

So, the worst fear had come true. Ruby had always known that there were problems with trying to substitute Yang so late in the Festival. She had hoped that her clout and the public nature of their debacle would gain her some leniency with the Vytal Committee. Unfortunately, the same bureaucratic procedures that allowed Team RWBY to sneak into the Vytal Festival were now being utilized against her. By law of the land, enforced by pen and ink, Ruby was not allowed to unilaterally replace one of her teammates for the Vytal Festival Tournament after the registration forms were finalized earlier that afternoon. Any such substitutions, even if voluntary, would be seen as a violation of the principles of fairness, and were thus forbidden.

There wasn't anything she could do. Yang was going to fight in the Vytal Festival.

Ruby felt the sun beat down on her head, and Weiss stepped closer to her, attempting to provide comfort.

"Well... that's no longer an option," she said glumly. "We're going to have to work with Yang on this."

Ruby shook her head, rattling through her thoughts to find a new solution. "She doesn't have to fight yet. We can make her forfeit."

“Are you allowed to do that?”

“The lady on the phone said that we can’t replace her with anyone else,” Ruby explained. “But that doesn’t mean she *has* to fight. If... if she says that she’s injured and can’t compete, then her opponent automatically goes to the next round. I mean, it’s not a *great* solution if she’s fighting against someone who’s a major threat, because we don’t need them to advance unharmed. But... but it’s *something*. We just have to be careful to avoid allegations of rigging, but everyone saw her get injured, so the refs shouldn’t complain—”

“Ruby, can I stop you there?” Weiss said gently. “Two things.”

“Huh? What?”

“First of all,” Weiss said calmly. “*They*.”

Ruby pouted. Stupid pronouns. She was never going to get used to that. She slowly crossed her arms over her chest as she tried to slow down her mind.

“S-Sorry. What’s the second thing?”

“I’ve just been thinking,” Weiss said awkwardly.

“Yeah?”

“I know you are really worried about Yang competing. We all are.”

Ruby eyed her girlfriend suspiciously. “Yeah...”

“And I know that it seems obvious to you that we should try to block her from the Festival...”

Ruby didn’t need to hear any more. She could feel the inflections in Weiss’s voice, that careful way of speaking where she knew she would have to be convincing. Ruby’s hesitation vanished.

“No.”

Her words were as blunt as a hammer. Weiss sighed.

“Just... hear me out.”

“Weiss, seriously?” Ruby asked, almost offended.

“Listen—”

“You saw her—*them*—out there. You cannot honestly think that it’s a good idea to let them fight anyone. They’re going to get hurt.”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” Weiss said quickly. Ruby calmed down slightly, though still eyed Weiss with suspicion as the heiress explained herself. “Obviously, Yang is not in fighting shape. It would be much safer if we could get them to step down. But are we sure that forcing Yang to quit is the best for them?”

“Yes,” Ruby said in a heartbeat. “How is letting them get killed good for them?”

“We don’t know that they’ll get killed.”

“They are literally going to fight in a no-holds-barred death tournament.”

“Against students who most of them don’t actually want to kill people,” Weiss reminded her. “And tournament deaths are actually rare.”

Ruby stared at Weiss in disbelief. Was she even hearing herself? What the hell was up with these godawful excuses? Oh, Yang only *mostly* didn’t have a chance of getting their brains blown out. Well, that changed everything! It took a significant amount of willpower not to lay into Weiss, and they all knew how hard Ruby had to be pushed to give *Weiss* a verbal smackdown. However, Weiss remained calm as she saw Ruby’s face twist itself into knots, all of her thoughts clear for the world to see.

“Ruby, seriously... listen to what I’m saying,” Weiss implored her. “I am *not* saying Yang should compete. I’m literally saying the opposite. Yang *should not* compete.”

“Okay...” Ruby took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“I’m just pointing out facts,” Weiss claimed. “And something I think we need to point out is how this is all going to affect Yang.”

Affect Yang? What the... wait, were they seriously going to talk about this?

“Is this about how I yelled at them?” Ruby asked, concerned.

Weiss shrugged. “A little.”

Ruby struggled to find the words. “Look, I know I was really hard, and I probably could have waited to do it privately—”

“That’s not really—”

“Hold on,” Ruby insisted. “You know how stubborn Yang can be. If I didn’t lay it in, they never would have listened to me. It would have been like pulling teeth.”

“Yeah, I know,” Weiss said carefully. “And I get *why* you acted like that. But... picture this from Yang’s perspective. They put in all this work to heal from the Maiden, and they badly messed up their first encounter. And instead of giving them any support, you immediately jumped in and yelled at them and told them they were worthless, and now you are forcing them out of the tournament they’ve dreamt of competing in since they were a kid. I can’t *exactly* tell what they are going through, but they probably feel like shit.”

Ruby groaned. She couldn’t believe they were actually doing this. Right now. In public. At some point over the past year, Weiss had become the mother bear of Team RWBY, always worrying about feelings and mental health and all that personal stuff. And a lot of times, it was incredibly welcome. *How* Weiss became so good at it was a mystery, given how she loved telling people to kill themselves just a

few months ago, but *wow*, was she good at it now. But this was maybe the most unnecessary time to focus on this, and Ruby needed her to think with her head instead of her heart.

"I... I know this sucks for them," Ruby admitted. "And okay, maybe I could have handled the locker room better. But Weiss, how do you want me to fix this? I can't let them back in the tournament."

"And I'm still not saying that," Weiss insisted. "But *forcing* them out is just going to destroy them."

"Competing is going to destroy them," Ruby countered.

"I'm talking mentally."

"And I'm talking physically, which is more important," Ruby said forcefully. "My two primary concerns are winning the Grail and making sure my sister doesn't die. *That's* what worries me right now. I genuinely don't care if Yang feels bad about it! As long as she's safe..."

Ruby had to stop herself. Weiss didn't have to say anything. She merely crossed her arms and gave Ruby the most disappointed glare the young Huntress had ever seen in her life. Ruby felt the guilt wash over her. God, what the hell was she even saying? *Of course*, she cared about Yang's feelings. They wanted to be in Vytal together ever since they were children. Fighting was everything Yang was good at. To have this stolen from them was *devastating*. Screw their chances with the Grail, this was her *sister*. And yet, she had so consumed by the thought of Yang getting hurt that she couldn't let herself think of how Yang would destroy themselves.

Because if she thought about Yang's feelings, she would start to doubt herself.

And if she doubted herself, she would give in and let Yang fight.

And if she let Yang fight, it would be one more in the ...

"Ruby."

Weiss's words snapped Ruby back to the fairgrounds. The sun had fallen behind fluffy, white clouds. The grassy field had become even more densely populated, with people having to twist and turn around the pair as they stood in the middle of the path. Weiss reached out her hand for support, and Ruby grabbed onto it so they wouldn't lose track of each other.

"Let's get out of the way," Ruby suggested. Weiss nodded, and the two pushed their way out of the crowd. They were able to locate a bench close by, wide enough to fit three people. Two of the spots were already taken, and after some mild back-and-forth over who got to act gentlemanly, Ruby eventually found herself sat down, Weiss leaning over the armrest to speak to her.

"Look, we still have time to think it over," Weiss reminded her. "We'll be having dinner with your dad and Winter. I'm sure we can all talk reasonably then. In the meantime, maybe we should try to distract ourselves."

"How?" Ruby asked.

“Well, we are at the fairgrounds,” Weiss suggested. “There are plenty of game booths around here. Wouldn’t you like to win me a stuffed... thing?”

“Stuffed thing?”

“Look, we didn’t have fairgrounds in Atlas. This is new to me.”

“Do we have to?” Ruby moaned. “I mean, I don’t know if this is the best time for games...”

Weiss pursed her lips. This wasn’t *actually* a suggestion. Ruby was stressed to hell, and Weiss knew she was going to continue to act up unless she was able to regain some sense of normalcy. She was going to need to try harder.

“I mean, we don’t *have* to play games. I just... really would have thought it sweet if you won me a stuffed thing,” Weiss said with a wink and nudge. Ruby just pouted.

“I always sucked at those games though. I probably wouldn’t win anything.”

Weiss smiled through her frustrations. Okay, *try even harder*. Activate the Ruby cheat code.

“If you want to go back to the cabins, we can,” Weiss said tenderly.

Ruby nodded. “Yeah. Resting until dinner might be for the best.”

“I’ll just have to go more of my life without knowing what funnel cake is.”

Ruby’s eyes widened. She felt a horrible pain in her chest. She faced Weiss with shock and terror.

“You’ve... never had funnel cake?”

Weiss frowned oh so sadly. “I always wanted to try it, but alas... Atlas doesn’t have funnel cake. I know they are common at fairgrounds, so I thought this would finally be my chance. But if you want to go back to the cabins—”

Ruby stood up suddenly, grabbing Weiss once more by the hand. “We must rectify this grave injustice! Quick, to the funnel cake!”

Ruby pulled Weiss away with great speed and efficiency. As she was dragged behind her girlfriend, Weiss couldn’t help but smile. Ruby was a complicated person, her struggles so immense they could shatter the entire world. But the girl liked her sweets, and sometimes, that was enough.