

Weiss was beginning to suspect that Ruby was a lot like her. Sure, she knew that her partner wanted to help Jaune in any way she could, and they were a team in this. Jaune's feelings and well-being were the important issue here, and Ruby had always been an affectionate girl whenever she could overcome her social awkwardness.

But there was something *more* there, a touch of something a little more powerful than friendship. At first, she may have been able to brush it aside, but the more she was exposed to it, Weiss began to realize that she was looking into a mirror.

Ruby liked Jaune. Liked-liked.

It was in the little things. How her eyes would follow him when he wasn't paying attention, the way her mouth would automatically pull into a smile so small that if you weren't looking for it, you may miss it. The easy way she'd take his hand, or rest her head against his shoulder, or snuggle into his warm body. Weiss understood because she felt it too. She tried not to let it control her, but sometimes, maybe, it wasn't just about his comfort but hers as well.

Jaune made her feel good. He was a rock, even when he wasn't trying to be. A steady presence. Worn down by the Ever After, damaged, even – but still standing, there with them, flaws and all, and she was willing to stand by him through anything.

And it seemed that maybe she wouldn't be standing by his side alone.

Weiss wasn't sure what she was expecting. Maybe to feel a little jealous or territorial? If another girl *liked* Jaune, did she have it in her to step aside and bottle up her own feelings? No, she didn't. Weiss just wasn't that type of girl. She could keep them to herself for Jaune's sake, but if another girl was making a move? She couldn't just stand idly by.

Strangely, she didn't feel threatened. In fact, Weiss thought it was... *cute*.

Ruby hadn't ever shown an interest in the opposite sex before – or the same sex, or anything ever that wasn't to do with being a Huntress. It wasn't that Weiss believed her partner to be asexual, but she'd just never indicated a desire for a boyfriend or girlfriend before. Almost like she just didn't see it.

Ruby was definitely seeing it now.

Weiss wondered what a courtship involving Ruby would entail. She thought it would be very sweet, and bumbling, and just thinking about it made Weiss a little giddy.

She didn't have much time to ponder it, though.

"Ms. Schnee," Headmaster Theodore greeted, waving her over. "Come. We've got some news you'd like to hear."

Jaune and Ruby were already present, as was Oscar, and Qrow. She nodded at her friends before taking a seat beside Jaune, curious about the summons she had received. The last to appear was Ren, and at once, she realized what this was about.

"You've found something," she said as soon as Ren sat. The Headmaster smiled and nodded.

"We have," he confirmed. "Last night, several members of a known criminal entity were taken into custody. They are part of a gang known as La Culebra Escondida – but what is interesting about the men we picked up is that two of them are former associates of confirmed Crown members. It appears that when the Crown dissolved, many of them spread out into other groups."

"They were found using that drain pipe you scouted as a passage," Qrow piped up.
"Transporting supplies that had been stolen from one of our warehouses. They had people working on the inside and in the office, manipulating the paperwork to hide their thievery. We're beginning to suspect that this has been going on for weeks, at this point."

"They are being interrogated as we speak," Ozpin spoke up, taking the forefront in Oscar's mind. He stood and began pacing, his cane tapping against the floor with every step. "But as of yet, most of them are unwilling to speak to us."

"Most?" Ruby asked.

"The people they had in the warehouse were more willing to talk," Qrow replied. "They weren't part of the gang. They're just people that had been threatened, and were doing what they had to do to keep themselves and their families safe."

"So how do we proceed from here?" Jaune asked. "What next?"

"We thought you may wish to speak with them," Ozpin offered. "Their fate is already sealed, they are wanted men already, but perhaps you'll be able to pry something out of them where we have failed."

Weiss wasn't sure how they'd have any better luck, but it was worth a shot.

But it was more of the same. No matter what they asked, these men remained stubbornly silent. Hard faces set with hard eyes, they watched her dispassionately, their hands cuffed to the table, and she knew if she weren't a Huntress and just a regular girl, she would be prey to them. Even

now, she could read it in their expressions. If they had the opportunity, they still might have tried their hand anyway.

It made her skin crawl but she refused to show it, meeting their eyes boldly. She was unafraid of these petty scum. She had faced some of the worst people the world had to offer, and some of the most powerful, deadly Grimm. In comparison, they were nothing.

Photos of the missing families had been printed, and were scattered across the table. They barely looked at them, and Weiss couldn't tell if they really knew something or nothing. Stone gave away few secrets.

After an hour of constant questioning, she left the interrogation room. She tried not to let her irritation show but it was difficult.

"Any luck?" she asked when Ruby approached with a fresh cup of coffee. Weiss took it gratefully.

Ruby shook her head. "They won't talk to me. All they do is stare."

Another door opened and Jaune stepped out, followed by Ren. She was about to call out to him when she spotted his face. He was deep in thought, so she didn't disturb him, instead watching as he leaned against the wall, eyes focused on something out of sight.

"I'll go get us some coffee," Ren said to him, but Jaune didn't react, as if he hadn't heard him. Ren left, leaving the three of them alone in the corridor.

"Jaune?" Ruby finally asked as the minutes ticked by. "What are you thinking?"

He snapped out of whatever daze he was in, looking their way.

"I might have an idea."

"Tell us," Weiss said.

"These men are loyal," he started, crossing his arms. "For whatever reason, it doesn't matter. Be it fear, or brotherhood, or just a general disdain for authority, they aren't going to talk to us – unless we target their weakness. Unless we can threaten something they wish to protect, they'll never break."

Ruby frowned. "But what is their weakness?"

"I'm not sure, but... if nothing else comes to mind, then family is a good place to start."

Weiss blinked, shocked. "You want to target their families?"

"In a manner of speaking," Jaune nodded. "I read some of their files before going in. A couple are orphans, and as far as we are aware, have no one. But a few have known relatives. Involved in the gang, as you would expect. One is married with a wife and kids. He'll be the easiest, I think."

Ruby hesitated. "Jaune..."

Weiss thought she was going to speak against it, but she watched as Ruby's face firmed.

"I trust you," her partner said. "What do we do?"

Apparently, what they do is go to Emerald.

Weiss realized what Jaune had planned. It was brilliant.

It was simple. Using Emerald's semblance, they could craft an elaborate ruse. Make it appear as if they'd captured the man's family and were hauling them in for questioning. They had pictures of them, so all it would take is a glance for Emerald to pick up their appearance and trick his mind into seeing what she wanted him to see.

From there, they could do anything.

Hadn't Emerald and Jaune used this tactic before? At the prison? Now it would be put to use again.

Grow was sent to find her, and when she arrived, she appeared irritated.

"I was in the middle of something," she grouched, glaring at Jaune. "What am I? The royal jester you can just summon whenever you want a good show?"

“Were you at the orphanage?” he asked quietly.

Emerald's lips pursed. “Do you even have to ask?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “If it wasn’t so important, it could have waited.”

She clucked her tongue before dropping the act, asking, “The old man mentioned some children are missing.”

Jaune nodded. “That’s right.”

“Then let's get this show on the road. What do you want me to do?”

Jaune let her know, and they went over a few things. Apparently her illusions were even more potent if she layered them over something. She could create whole people, but placing a false face over another made it even more difficult to see through, so Ruby, Weiss and Ren played the parts, standing in for the wife and children. While the prisoner was being moved to a different room, they enacted their little play. Once Emerald met his eyes, he was captured in her illusion, his wife and children being led by Jaune who shoved Ren in the back.

All the man saw was Jaune shoving his wife.

“Sable?” the man asked in disbelief before lunging in a fury, the two men escorting him struggling to hold him back. “Get your hands off her!”

They couldn't actually see what Emerald was doing with the illusion since she hadn't trapped them in it, but they'd gone over this part. Sable, the wife, made a plea but before she could finish, Jaune hauled her away as the man continued to struggle, spitting vile insults in a rabid rage. When he tugged on Weiss' arm – all he saw was Jaune roughly manhandling one of his daughters. That was when he truly flipped.

"I'll fucking kill you, you piece of shit," he snarled, eyes bulging as he was wrestled down the hallway. "I don't give a fuck who you are, you're dead! *You're dead!*"

"That worked better than expected," Jaune deadpanned as he was dragged out of sight, Emerald dropping the illusion. "Now we let him stew for an hour."

Weiss watched the prisoner through the one-way glass. They hadn't bothered to cuff him to the table this time, so he was pacing around the room like a caged lion, full of tension, working himself up into a frenzy. The longer he waited, the more agitated he became.

An hour passed, and then another ten minutes just to make the anticipation build before they moved. Emerald was the first one through the door to ensure the illusion took hold, but the man lunged as soon as the door opened. Jaune met him with a swift kick, booting him in the chest and sending him flying back across the room.

"Get up," Jaune commanded as the man wheezed, writhing in pain. Jaune had knocked the wind out of him. "You've got people here to see you."

"S-Sable?" he managed to get out, rolling over and spotting his wife. Ren attempted to move towards him but Jaune pulled him back.

"No closer," Jaune said, directing Ren into one corner, and Ruby and Weiss into another. They huddled together as if scared, and she saw the first cracks in the man's armor.

“What are you – *why are they here?*” he demanded, struggling to sit up. “They haven’t done anything!”

“Mr. Shaw,” Jaune approached him and seized him by the shirt, pulling him up effortlessly and throwing him into a chair. The legs scraped across the floor as he slid back a foot. “Or should I call you Rowan?”

“You – you fucking bastard, I’ll gut you,” Rowan seethed, pure murder in his eyes but Jaune was unimpressed. He pulled out a stack of photographs and slapped them down on the table.

“These people, we are looking for them,” Jaune said, voice devoid of anything. There was no cheer or anger, or frustration. Just calm. “We think you and your friends might know what happened to them.”

“Fuck you!”

“If you cooperate, perhaps something can be done about your family,” Jaune continued blandly, as if bored. “If you don’t...”

“You’ll what?” Rowan asked, voice dripping with derision. “You won’t do shit!”

As casual as pulling out a scroll, Jaune unsheathed his sword. Rowan flinched as the rasp of steel filled the room, and then in a move that shocked even the hardened criminal, he turned and pointed the blade at Ruby.

What he saw was Jaune pointing his sword at one of his daughters.

Rowan froze.

“Which one do you love the most?” he asked coldly. He moved his sword between Ruby and Weiss, as if debating. They continued to huddle together, unknowing what Emerald was weaving in the man’s mind, but they saw the panic bloom on his face. “Quickly – or I’ll just choose myself.”

“You won’t,” Rowan tried to call his bluff, but he didn’t sound as confident as he once did. “You can’t!”

“Why can’t I?”

“You people don’t do this!”

“You people?” Jaune asked. “What people is that? Huntsmen? Trust me, there are plenty of Huntsmen that do this. So tell me – have you seen these people?” Jaune gestured at the photos. “Or will I have to get creative?”

Rowan hesitated.

“Fine,” Jaune said, turning towards them, and Weiss saw the darkness in Jaune’s face. Even though she knew this was a ruse, even she felt a flicker of intimidation when faced with those eyes. They were blank, unfeeling. When he gazed upon them, he didn’t see people. “This one will do.”

He leveled the sword at Weiss.

Ren surged out of the corner, acting the desperate mother. Jaune swung around and slammed the pommel of his sword into the side of his head. To them, it was barely a strike, Jaune pulling it at the last moment, the side of his wrist buffering it, but Emerald's semblance did the rest. Ren fell to the ground, clutching his head while Emerald showed Rowan what was expected. Blood, screams, panic.

"It seems your wife would like to go first," Jaune said coolly.

He broke.

He spent the next ten minutes spilling everything. To their surprise and joy, the families still lived. They were being kept prisoner, but were fed and as healthy as you would expect. The reason why they'd been taken was much bigger than they realized. The children had seen something they weren't meant to, and when the families came looking, they were taken as well. What was it that they'd seen?

Mercury Black and Tyrian Callows.

Apparently La Culebra Escondida had much bigger ties to the Crown than even the Headmaster of Shade thought. They were directly involved in helping Mercury and Tyrian into the city, smuggling them in. The prison break had happened before they'd returned from the Ever After, though. The children and their families had been taken much later.

Which meant...

“They’re still in the city,” Weiss said, shocked.

Rowan didn’t know where they were staying, though. He wasn’t high enough up the food chain to have that sort of information, but he had enough.

Everything they gathered, they took to Theodore and Ozpin.

“This is concerning...” Ozpin said slowly. “If they are still here, that means their work is far from done.”

And whatever they had planned couldn’t be good for the citizens of Vacuo.

“We have the location of the families,” Jaune said. “Give us the green light and we’ll go in.”

“Granted,” Theodore said. “Bring them back.”

They moved under the cover of darkness, striking in the early hours of the morning. The streets were empty, a ghost town, and they stuck to the shadows as they moved. The safe house was set above an old record store, appearing innocuous to the eye at first glance. But Weiss saw the things that could easily be overlooked; the tinted windows, the re-enforced door, and the abundance of security cameras, as well as the rotating lookouts posted on the surrounding buildings.

In this part of Vacuo, gang law ruled.

Weiss easily took out her target, chopping him in the back of the head with Myrtenaster's pommel. He collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut, Ruby appearing in a cascade of petals on the other roof and incapacitating her man before he knew what was happening.

"Target down," Weiss spoke into her earpiece.

"Target down," Ruby echoed.

"Target down," Ren repeated, and across the street, Weiss saw him wave from the alleyway.

"I have eyes on the back door," Jaune announced. "Triple deadbolts, three cameras – two guards. On my count, we move."

When he counted down to zero, they all moved as one. Weiss leapt from the roof and fell in a flutter of white cloth, landing on a man standing between the two buildings. His shout of pain was cut off before it could truly leave his lips, and his friend only had time to turn before Ruby descended on him in a fury. His head slammed into the nearby wall, knocking him out instantly, and then they were moving around the back as Jaune charged.

They didn't see him until he was already upon them, his fist catching one in the face, while he kicked out at the other. The first man was out like a light, the second grunting as the air was driven from his lungs, unable to shout. Jaune gripped him by the hair and kned him in the jaw, the man joining his comrades in sleep.

"Here we go," he said before rearing back, his body flaring with semblance as he kicked the door as hard as he could. Even with it being re-enforced, the frame splintered as the door bent

inwards, blown off its hinges. Ren struck the front door at the same time, blowing it in, and then it was chaos.

There were shouts of alarm, gang members reaching for their weapons as they were rudely awoken, but they didn't have the time to do more than glimpse their coming demise. Ruby blurred, a red streak, men being tossed like ragdolls as she blew through the room, down the hallway and up the staircase in the blink of an eye. There was a gunshot upstairs before a scream of pain, a man, and then silence. Weiss followed her up while Jaune and Ren cleaned up anyone that remained downstairs, joining Ruby in front of the door at the end of the hall.

This one just had a simple lock and nothing else. Ruby kicked it in with a crunch, and inside...

"Please, don't hurt us," a woman pleaded, throwing herself over the children. Poppy and Ash, Weiss recalled. "Please!"

Two men – the fathers – shielded them by stepping forward, faces fearful but willing to fight. One already had a bruise on his cheek, the other a small cut on his lip. Another woman trembled in the corner, clutching at her hair.

"We aren't here to hurt you, ma'am," Ruby knelt, showing her hands. "We're here to get you out of here."

Weiss saw the hope bloom on their faces, but their eyes remained wary.

That was until Jaune walked through the door.

"...Mr. Jaune?" Poppy asked from behind her mother, eyes wide.

“Poppy,” he said, and everyone watched as Poppy slipped by her mother, around the two men and leapt at him, arms flung around his waist. Even Jaune appeared surprised, freezing, and then when the tears came, her sobbing cries muffled by his body, he embraced her in a hug.

It immediately set everyone at ease.

“You’re...” the woman who had thrown herself across the children hesitated. “Jaune Arc.”

“I am,” he said. “I used to escort your daughter to school.”

She nodded. “Yes, I – I remember. How... we were told you were dead.”

He smiled. “Word of my death was greatly exaggerated. As you can see.”

Ren called in their success, and what passed for law enforcement in Vacuo rolled in to clean up the mess. Over a dozen arrests were made, and weapons were seized. In a room under the store, they found a safe. It would take some time to crack and transport was arranged to bring it back to Shade.

It was a successful operation.

Weiss watched as Jaune entertained the children on the way back, riding in the back of one of the vehicles. Poppy was completely smitten with him, hanging on his every word. Ash was a little slower to warm up but Poppy’s enthusiasm won him over, his distrust for strangers warranted considering what he had just gone through.

“Jackalopes don’t exist!” Poppy was saying, her face twisted in doubt. “They’re just in fairytales!”

“They do exist, I had one as a pet for a long time,” Jaune disagreed, grinning. When he smiled, it made him appear younger.

“Really?” Ash asked.

“Yep. Her name was Juniper,” he said fondly. “She was big enough to ride on and had these massive horns like an antelope. Do you know what an antelope is?”

Poppy and Ash nodded.

“We learned about them in school!”

“She was really fast and could jump *really* high,” he told them. “Jackalopes can be very temperamental, and dangerous – but if you manage to gain their loyalty, you have a friend for life. They will stay by your side. Always.”

She could hear a note of longing in his voice. He missed her. Perhaps the one thing he missed from the Ever After, the one good thing that happened to him in that accursed place.

He kept the children entertained all the way back to the academy. From there, the families were given rooms and a hot, filling meal. Questions would need to be asked but that could wait until they were settled. In the meantime, they had many more gang members to question.

Their work for the night was done, though.

Emerald met them as they were leaving, her face taut with worry.

“Emerald?” Ruby asked, unsure. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you find any sign of Mercury?”

A loaded question if there ever was one. Weiss and Ruby shared a look, but it was Jaune who spoke.

“No, not yet. We made a lot of arrests, they might know something but... as of now, we have no new leads.”

That didn’t seem to make her feel any better, her expression still tight.

“You’re worried about him,” Jaune said. It wasn’t a question.

“Mercury is a dumbass,” Emerald replied shortly, annoyed. “He is an insufferable, morally corrupt jackass – but I don’t want him to die. The idiot is only sticking with them because he thinks they’re going to win. That’s all he knows; survival. He is only loyal so long as he thinks he is on the winning team.”

“What do you want us to do about it?”

She hesitated.

“I know I don’t have the right to ask you this,” she said slowly, looking down. Her hands bunched together, fingers twisting back and forth. It was unusual to see her so unsettled. “After everything he has done... what I’ve done... but you’ve shown me kindness, so I’m hoping that when the time comes, you don’t hurt him,” she then scoffed. “Too much. Just don’t kill him. Cripple the bastard if you must, but... just don’t kill him.”

“You know we don’t typically kill people,” Jaune said lightly. “But Mercury doesn’t strike me as the type of person to go down easily.”

“He won’t. I just... wanted you to know that he isn’t like Tyrian. He isn’t like... Cinder.”

Emerald grimaced saying that name.

“He’s just scared. He might put on a cocky front but... he’s just scared,” Emerald looked up, meeting Jaune’s eyes. “He’s always been scared. We’ve got that in common.”

Jaune nodded. “Okay. We’ll try our best.”

“Thank you.”

“As long as you help us when the time comes,” Jaune added. “Fighting a friend is never easy. You might be the difference maker.”

“We aren’t friends,” Emerald grunted before sighing, shaking her head. “And yeah, I’ll help you take him down if I can. It’ll be all the sweeter, just so I can rub it in his dumb face.”

“Do you think they...?” Weiss left the question hanging when Emerald left, the implication clear. Jaune shook his head.

“No. I think they’re like siblings,” he smiled ruefully. “Messed up siblings, but... I think they learned to rely on each other, when they had no one else. I doubt Cinder offered much in the form of stability.”

Jaune’s voice grew dark saying her name. Weiss placed a hand on his arm, an action mirrored by Ruby on his other side.

“One step at a time,” Ruby chirped. “We did good tonight.”

Weiss nodded, agreeing. “We saved two families from a horrible fate. And we might be able to learn more about what Salem is planning for Vacuo.”

“A little positive reinforcement, huh?” he asked.

“Someone has to be positive,” Ruby teased.

He chuckled softly. "You're right, though. We... we did good. I'm glad they're safe."

It was the middle of the night, but Weiss wasn't tired at all. The adrenaline of the operation had yet to fade, so she was wide awake, and from a glance at Ruby and Jaune, they appeared much the same.

"I'm not tired," Ruby said bluntly, saying what Weiss was thinking. "Are any of you?"

Weiss shook her head.

"No," Jaune said. "Though I am hungry."

The dining hall was empty, but the kitchens had plenty of leftovers from dinner. They warmed some food up before taking a seat, their plates piled with far too much food. Weiss picked at her dish, mindful of not overeating. Jaune appeared to have a ravenous appetite, though, shoveling it in. As usual, Ruby picked the most unhealthy options she could think of. More dessert than actual food.

"You definitely won't get to sleep if you eat all that sugar," Weiss deadpanned, watching Ruby consume some type of pudding. It looked like a sponge drizzled with chocolate, the inside oozing with thick sauce.

"It's so good, though," Ruby said through a mouthful, cupping her cheek as her eyes lit up.

Anything Weiss couldn't finish, Jaune ate up. She wondered where he put it all.

Into those wonderful muscles, no doubt.

She felt her cheeks grow warm at the thought, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. He'd been very capable tonight, and had shown great leadership. It was his idea that had led to them gaining the information they needed, and he had led from the front in securing the families. Jaune had grown so much from that awkward, lanky boy at Beacon.

He was very impressive.

"I wanted to apologize for earlier," he suddenly said.

Weiss frowned. "Whatever for?"

"The little ruse we put on," he said. "I know it must have seemed... callous. Using his family, even though it was just an illusion. To him, it was real."

He was worried about that?

Weiss couldn't say it hadn't bothered her, just a little bit. They all had their ideal version of what a Huntsman should be, and it didn't involve such subterfuge. Her old, naive self would have rebelled at the thought of doing something like that. But the Weiss of today understood that at times, you had to do what you had to do, to save lives, for the bigger picture. There was always a line you couldn't cross, but she didn't believe they'd crossed it.

They hadn't come anywhere near it.

“Jaune,” Ruby said softly. “It was a good plan.”

“You don’t think it was too much?”

Ruby shook her head. “Too much would have been tracking down his actual family, and treating them like that. Lives were at stake, and you came up with a way to find them. I’m proud of you.”

“And my... acting didn’t bother you?”

“A little bit,” Weiss chimed in. “But I’m your friend. You wouldn’t enjoy watching me act that way, right?”

He shook his head.

“But in the end, it *is* just an act,” she pressed. “You wouldn’t truly threaten young girls, right?”

He shook his head again.

“You may have changed, but so have we,” Ruby took over. “All of us have. That is what living is. But you’re still Jaune. And we’re still Ruby and Weiss, that hasn’t changed. You’re a good person, Jaune. You aren’t perfect, but none of us are. Sometimes we have to do things... things we don’t like, but they’re important. Poppy and Ash, they are here, safe with their families because of what you did. What we did. That’s what matters, right?”

He sighed, nodding. "Yeah. Sorry. I just... I was doubting myself a little. I just... sometimes I feel like I could go too far, you know?"

"If it looks that way, we'll be right there to stop you," Weiss said firmly. "Just like we know you'd stop us, guide us, if we needed it."

He shot them a grateful look.

"You two... are too good to me."

"We know," Ruby smirked, becoming the bratty little sister at the drop of a hat. "We're the best, aren't we?"

"Yeah," he said. "And it isn't even close."