

They took it right to the top, and Headmaster Theodore approved their mission. Supplies were constantly going out to all sections of the city, and a shipment was due for that area. Jaune, Weiss, Ruby and Ren were selected for the job as per their request.

The next day, the other two were filled in on their real purpose. They were more than willing to help out.

But first things first, Jaune took Ruby aside to apologize.

Weiss didn't mean to eavesdrop. That would be rude and unbecoming of an upstanding woman such as herself, it was purely an accident that she just so happened to have to tie her shoelaces.

Which she didn't have.

"I want to apologize for my behavior the other night," he began.

"You don't have to apologize!" Ruby instantly replied, shaking her head. "It's fine!"

"It isn't. You asked me out to the market and I shouldn't have left like I did. I ruined the night."

"You didn't," Ruby said vehemently. "Don't think that! Jaune, I know you wouldn't have left if it wasn't for a good reason. Really. I'm not upset."

“Even so,” he just wouldn’t take the easy way out. That was so him. “I am sorry – and I’m sorry for avoiding you.”

“Now *that* is something you should apologize for, mister,” she wagged her finger, a smile in her tone and on her face. “I was worried about you. Don’t do that again.”

“I won’t.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Ruby paused. “Are you feeling better? I mean, I don’t want to assume but... something upset you, right?”

Jaune nodded slowly. “I – Weiss spoke to me about some things. I’m doing better.”

Ruby grasped his hands, squeezing gently. “You know you can always talk to me, right? We’re besties. Even about sad things, like... like Penny. It was about Penny, right?”

“Yeah, it was about Penny,” he confirmed. “And I know. I will. Talk to you, I mean. I guess I just panicked, seeing Dr. Polendina. Weiss thinks I should speak to him.”

“I think that would be good,” Ruby encouraged. “If you need me to go with you, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he then smiled, one of those rare smiles. “Besties, huh? What would Weiss think if she heard that?”

“She’s my girl bestie and you’re my boy bestie, there are two slots and they’re filled!” Ruby shot back.

“What are you doing?”

Weiss flinched and quickly stood up, brushing off her dress.

“I was tying my shoelaces,” she answered automatically, turning to face Ren.

A single eyebrow rose, his eyes darting down to her feet.

“You don’t have laces,” he pointed out needlessly.

“Shut up.”

“There is nothing to tie,” he continued, infuriatingly deadpan.

“Nothing you can see.”

“Uh huh.”

Weiss scowled.

Ren's gaze shifted from Weiss over to Ruby and Jaune, his calm facade softening.

"He's been a little withdrawn the last few days," he said, watching them interact. Ruby was saying something in a low voice, Jaune leaning in closer – and if Weiss tried really hard, she could pretend they were back at Beacon, and she was telling him something immature and stupid, not a care in the world. "More withdrawn than usual, I mean. But today, he seems... a little more open. A little more like Jaune."

Weiss nodded. "Yes, he does."

Ren regarded her silently for a few moments.

"What?" she asked.

"You've seen spending some time with him," he said.

She shrugged. "Yeah, a little."

"So has Ruby," Ren smiled. It was a muted smile because everything Ren did was muted, so coming from him, Weiss knew that his next words were filled with gratitude. "Thank you. For looking out for him, I mean."

"Of course. Jaune... he deserves to have us look out for him. How many times has he looked out for us?"

Ren nodded. "Too many times to count. Sometimes when we didn't exactly deserve it."

Weiss agreed, though she wondered when Ren ever felt like he didn't deserve the care of his team leader and friend. There was a story there, no doubt, but it would remain a mystery to her.

"Exactly. The least I can do is be a good friend."

When Ruby and Jaune were finished, they made their way over to the stables to pick up their horse. It was the same one they'd used during their last supply run mission, and Jaune easily coaxed it out and led it over to the wagon. Jaune ran his hand through its mane and spoke to it in a low tone as he deftly connected the harness, the horse nickering.

Their next stop was the warehouse where the supplies were kept. Blankets, clothes, food and water, footwear and more. Anything and everything struggling families could ever need. While the city was still operating normally for now, it was possible that one day, the entire population might require such help. As of now, it was mostly just the refugees and the least fortunate, those that struggled to find work or had lost their jobs when many of the outer territories were abandoned due to the Grimm threat.

They filled the wagon until it strained under the weight of the crates, and then they were moving again.

Growing up, Weiss had been taught that Vacuo was a dangerous city filled with criminals and warlords, vying for control of the kingdom. That it wasn't unusual for kidnappings and murder to occur, and the people had to do whatever it took to survive. It wasn't quite like that, but there were many parts of the city where people were advised against going. This wasn't one of those areas, but it wasn't far from the slums where cut throats and thieves ruled with fear.

The shelter was dilapidated, rundown – at least, on the surface. At some point, the sandstone had been painted red but it had long since peeled off, only small patches remaining. Though worn from the harsh desert sun and sand-laden winds, it appeared sturdy, the windows barred but clean, the front gate rusted but the hinges well oiled, swinging open without a sound. Jaune led the horse inside and they were greeted by a dark skinned man with long jet black hair, his beard styled into numerous small braids.

“You must be the Huntsmen,” he bowed his head gratefully. Weiss observed him silently, taking in his muscled frame and rough palms, the skin calloused. His face and body were hard from ceaseless toil in the sun, but his voice was warm. “Are these the supplies?”

“They are,” Jaune said. “Where do you want them?”

“We’ve cleared a room inside. Let me show you.”

While Jaune was led inside, they started unloading the wagon. The crates were heavy and an ordinary person would have struggled, but even someone as small as Weiss could haul them with aura. Stacking them outside the door, they waited until Jaune returned, waving them in.

The entrance way was large with beige colored walls, bare of decoration. There was a single desk with a woman seated behind it, large round glasses perched on her nose. She was completely absorbed in her work, paging through a note book and writing things down.

Beyond that room was a short hallway before it opened up into a large room lined with beds, and it was here that the people resided. Whatever chatter had been going ceased when they entered, eyes watching them carefully as they passed through. Most of them were grateful, or even curious, but some stared at them with distrust, even open hostility in her case.

The storeroom was at the back, a small window letting light in and not much else. Jaune stacked his crate in the corner, and so began their task of moving everything inside.

Weiss took this time to observe the families.

There were a number of faunus present, and were the bulk of the hostile glares she was receiving, but there were many more humans. While they all appeared tired and worn down from their ordeal, none of them appeared underfed or harmed in any way. They were all dressed neatly, if not entirely coordinated, and their hygiene was without question. There were also a lot of children, from babies to early teenagers.

Their spirits were low, but physically, they appeared in good health.

Ruby received the bulk of the attention, eyes following her in a different way. Almost as if they didn't quite know what to make of her.

"I informed Sukham of the situation," Jaune said when they retrieved the final crate, placing it in the room. He closed the door so they were alone. "The man that greeted us. He runs this shelter. He confirmed your mother's story, and has been making his own inquiries with the residents but many of them won't speak to him."

"So it is up to us to try to pry it out of them," Weiss grimaced. "I don't think this will be easy."

"He also confirmed that their things were left here," Jaune said grimly. "He has them stored, should we want to look at them."

"How are we going to do this?" Ren asked. "The people here... they'll be on guard, and they aren't happy. Their home was destroyed and now they're living in a foreign place with foreign people, at the mercy of charity. Those in this type of position aren't so willing to open up."

Ren spoke from experience. He was an orphan, as was Nora. Driven out of their village by Grimm, they'd been forced to move from place to place, doing whatever it took to survive. He knew all about being in their position, and how they may feel.

That was probably another reason why Jaune had invited him along.

"We're a little early but they'll be serving lunch in an hour, and then Sukham will be handing out some of these supplies. He wants us to help and I've agreed," Jaune said. "It'll give us a chance to speak with them in a natural setting, rather than us going around hounding them. From there, we can press a little more and try to find out what happened."

He then turned to Ruby.

"Ruby, you'll be the one they'll most likely open up to."

She blinked. "What? Me?"

"You," he confirmed. "There isn't a person in that room that didn't see the broadcast when you told the world the truth. You've formed a bond with these people, in a way. They see you as trustworthy."

She frowned. "You want to exploit that."

"I wouldn't have put it that way, but... yes, you're right. I want to use that trust they might have for you, and get them to reveal what happened to those families," Jaune grasped her shoulder,

meeting her eyes. "Time is of the essence. If something bad has happened to those people, then we need to figure this out so we can protect the ones still here."

Ruby's expression cleared. "Right. Sorry. I didn't mean to make it sound like I disagreed or that what you were proposing was bad. It's just... I'm not used to being in a position like this."

Jaune nodded. "I know. Ren – I don't have to tell you. You have experienced similar hardship, I'll leave it to you to know what the best way forward is."

He then turned to Weiss.

"As for us, we'll just focus on listening to any conversations and watch for suspicious behavior. If anyone here was involved, they might appear nervous having so many Huntsmen here."

Because the chance of them opening up to Weiss was pretty much nil.

Weiss joined Jaune in searching through their belongings. There wasn't much. Just some spare clothing, a backpack, and some keepsakes. There was a photo in the left pocket of one of the jackets, and when Weiss showed it to Jaune, his eyes narrowed.

"What?" she asked. "What is it?"

"They look familiar..." he said slowly, peering at the photograph closely. "I know I've seen them before but I don't know..." he trailed off before his eyes widened. "Oh."

“You know them?”

He nodded quickly. “Those children I used to escort to school, that little girl,” he tapped the photo with his finger, pointing at the girl with short pigtails. “She was one of them. And that’s her mother – and that must be her father, I never met him. Not that I recall.”

He leaned away.

“When Whitley gave us those names, they didn’t ring a bell but now...” he pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. “I’d forgotten.”

Weiss gave his arm a comforting squeeze. “It’s okay. To us, it hasn’t been that long – but for you, it has been. I’d be surprised if he hadn’t forgotten a few things, Jaune.”

He sighed. “We need to find them. I don’t have a good feeling about this.”

“We will.”

The shelter had a fully stocked kitchen where people from the community helped out, making meals for those living there. The scent of food being cooked quickly filled the building, and it wasn’t long until lunch was ready to be served. A long table was set up in what once may have been a recreation room, but now it was converted into a dining area. Pots of stew and curry, large containers of rice and vegetables were set down, and stacks of flat bread. They all took a spot behind the table to begin filling bowls as the people shuffled in.

It warmed Weiss’ heart to see the children’s faces light up, taking their bowls gratefully. The parents were more subdued, most of them taking their meal silently but some uttered their thanks.

"You're Willow's daughter, aren't you?" one woman asked her.

Weiss nodded. "I am. My name is Weiss."

It was unusual to meet someone that knew who her mother was but not because of the name Schnee.

The woman hesitated before leaning closer, whispering, "Are you here because of...?"

She didn't need to finish.

"I am," she said. "If you know anything else, it would help."

But the woman shook her head, face filled with regret. "I'm sorry but we told Willow everything we know."

"That's okay. Thank you for bringing it to her attention."

As expected, there was a lot of interest directed Ruby's way. Though Weiss could tell that it made her partner uncomfortable, she did not falter under their stares. Once everyone had been given a meal, it was their chance to mingle, and Ruby took the initiative by sitting amongst them with a bowl of her own, filled with only a small helping of rice and stew, no more than a couple of mouthfuls.

She now weathered the crushing weight of responsibility. The Ever After had given her the opportunity to face her demons and come out the other side stronger, as it had for Weiss, and for Blake and Yang. Ruby was now unafraid of being the one people looked to, even if she still wasn't comfortable with that position.

While Ruby made small talk with those around her, Ren sat down with many of the children. Unlike their parents, they were more than willing to talk, and his unassuming demeanor meant that he wasn't immediately seen as a threat, the adults allowing the interactions to occur. He was his usual stoic self, but Weiss saw the softness in his eyes as he dealt with them.

Jaune had made the right call in forming this team.

It didn't surprise her. Not truly. Just that even after all the years he had spent apart from them, trapped in another world, he still knew them well enough to know who would work best. It was impressive.

"Forgive me for not meeting with you earlier," Sukham approached her, holding out a hand. Weiss took it. "Your mother and brother have been recurring visitors here. I must admit, I did not know what to make of them when they first came calling. There are many stories about the Schnee, and most of them are not flattering, I am sorry to say."

"Don't be. Those stories were earned by my father, I cannot deny it," she replied. "He did much damage to the Schnee name... and after what has happened to Vacuo over the years, exploited by the other kingdoms, I do not blame anyone for their hesitance towards strangers from foreign countries."

He smiled, the skin around his eyes crinkling. It was clear that this was a man that smiled often. "It means a lot to me that you've come out here to help. It may be horrible to say, but people go missing in Vacuo frequently and Huntsmen often don't have the time to follow up on every one."

And now, with everything that is happening in the world..." his gaze shifted off her and towards Ruby. "Sometimes it is difficult to believe what she told us."

"We've lived it, and even to us, it sounds ridiculous," Weiss agreed. "A couple of years ago, the world still made sense. Now we are dealing with things that we would never have thought possible."

"I do not mean to sound pessimistic," he hesitated. "But is this a fight we can win?"

"We don't have that answer," it was Jaune that answered, stepping over towards them. Weiss felt his steady presence settle beside her. "The truth is that Salem has been an enemy of mankind for countless generations, and likely will be for generations more. Our victory here will not be determined by her death. It will be determined by our ability to live."

"Live?" Sukham asked.

"Not just survival – but our ability to live our lives, and forge a path forward into the future," Jaune looked around the room, now bursting with people, chatting amongst themselves as they filled their bellies with food. "If we give up on that, then we lose. Humanity has always struggled for its place in this world, and so long as we continue to do so, I believe we will not falter. Only by giving up do we surrender ourselves to oblivion."

He said it with such calm surety that Weiss felt herself inspired, looking up at him in awe.

"All we need is the courage to carry on," he continued. "Salem can kill us and destroy our kingdoms, but she cannot crush our will to survive and prosper. It is what allowed our ancestors to claw their way up through the ages, and why we are here today. I can see you've not given up. The proof is all around us. If you had, you would not be feeding those less fortunate. You would not be running this shelter."

Sukham nodded slowly. "I – yes, I have not given up."

"So long as more people are like you, I think we'll be alright."

This was not the Rusted Knight speaking, or the Jaune who returned from the Ever After, unsure and unsettled. This was the Jaune Arc that had been the one constant when everything began crumbling in Atlas, while the rest of them floundered with their own issues. Stable, sure, inspirational.

Weiss felt her tummy roil with butterflies, her cheeks warming pleasantly.

This was the man who had made her fall in love with him.

As time went on, the people began to open up more. Ruby had drawn in a little bit of an audience, and she was answering their questions calmly. Jaune and Weiss helped with cleaning up, collecting bowls and utensils, carrying empty pots back into the kitchen. Jaune even removed his gloves and wrist guards, burying his arms in soapy water to help clean the dishes, so Weiss grabbed a dish towel and started drying.

It felt very domestic.

A few minutes later, Ren came to them bearing news.

"I might have something," he said in a low tone, drawing near.

Jaune tilted his head to signal that he was listening, scrubbing plate after plate.

“One of the children mentioned that there was an old drain pipe nearby where some of the older local kids liked to hang out. Part of an old waterway system that doesn’t get very much use any more,” he said. “He also mentioned that they were told some of the gangs use those abandoned pipes to move around the city undetected. The last time he saw Poppy and Ash, they said they were heading in that direction.”

A lead.

“Poppy,” Jaune murmured. “Yes, that was her name. I remember now.”

Weiss placed a hand on his back.

“That’s good, we have something we can follow up on. You’re good with children, Ren.”

Ren bowed his head. “They were scared to talk about it. They felt responsible since they were the ones that told them about it.”

The parents probably didn’t know, and they wouldn’t have told anyone else. Children could take a secret and never speak of it when in fear, so it was impressive that Ren managed to get them to open up so quickly.

“Right,” Jaune said, finishing off the last bowl. Weiss dried it and then handed him the towel so he could dry his hands. “Let’s get Ruby.”

“They were more interested in talking about Atlas and Mantle,” Ruby told them when they stepped out of the shelter, waving at the people that came to see them off. In a short time, they’d obviously made a bit of an impression, and those distrustful looks were absent. “Sukham has been treating them well. They’ve got no complaints there. Though they’re frightened about what happened to those other families.”

“Ren discovered a lead,” Jaune said, taking the reins of their horse. He patted him on the nose and let the animal nuzzle his palm. “We’ll head over now. We don’t have time to waste.”

They found a spot to leave their horse and wagon. Many of the businesses in Vacuo provided hitching posts for those that didn’t use vehicles, and Jaune paid the owners of a nearby store to allow them to use theirs, and for them to watch over it. It was property of Shade, and once they were told that, they were enthusiastic to help out.

“Lead the way, Ren.”

It was only a five minute walk from the shelter. The ground opened up between a series of buildings, almost like a large pit, and at the end was the beginning of a large drainage pipe that could fit five people abreast. The concrete was old and cracked, and covered in decades of graffiti, trash and other debris having built up around the entrance. Old shopping carts, rusted out. Ripped clothing, discarded. Cardboard boxes, flattened and pushed off to the sides.

Ruby looked around carefully. “I didn’t think it rained much here.”

“It used to,” Weiss said quietly. “While it was the corporations and the war that depleted their resources, the weather shifted drastically. They’re constantly in drought now, but once upon a time, they used to get their fair share of rain.”

"They still do, on occasion," Ren spoke up, scanning their surroundings. "Every few years, they suffer through extreme weather events. Years of rain falling in a matter of days, and the ground can't cope because of how dry it is. These drains ensure the city doesn't flood when it happens."

Vacuo really couldn't catch a break.

Jaune approached the entrance and pulled out his scroll, activating the flash light feature. The opening lit up, and he peered down into the darkness.

"There doesn't appear to be anyone here right now," he said.

"Let's look around," Ruby suggested.

They broke up onto teams of two. Jaune accompanied Ren while Weiss joined Ruby. They walked into the darkness, their scrolls illuminating the way. The air was dry down here, filled with dust and sand, and when they reached a fork in the road, they split up.

"This place is creepy," Ruby muttered as they went left.

"Not my choice of location for a stroll," Weiss agreed, eyes sharp, body tense in preparation of danger. "You did well back at the shelter."

"I just talked with them."

“It can be difficult when they look at you like that, though,” Weiss pressed. “Like you have all the answers. It’s stressful.”

Ruby nodded after a moment.

“Yes, it is.”

“You know we’re here for you, if you need it. Don’t take all the burdens on your shoulders alone. Share the load.”

Ruby turned to look at her, and in the glow of their scroll lights, Weiss saw her grateful smile.

“I know. Thank you.”

They continued on in silence for a bit.

“I heard you speaking with Jaune,” Weiss said.

“You did?”

Weiss nodded. “Yeah. He apologized to me, as well.”

"The dummy," Ruby said fondly. "I just wish..."

"You just wish?" Weiss prodded when she trailed off.

"I just wish I could do more for him," Ruby said softly.

"Offering to accompany him when he meets with Dr. Polendina was good," Weiss nudged her lightly. "Having someone by his side will be a big help, Ruby. And... I know how close you were with Penny. Coming from you, it probably means a lot to Jaune."

"You think so?"

"I do. I don't think we need any grand gestures, Ruby. We just need to stand with him, whenever he needs it, and not let him pull away from us when he tries. There isn't a rule book for this type of thing, unfortunately. It would make things so much easier."

"You're a good friend, Weiss," Ruby said warmly. Her tone made Weiss' belly flip, a little like earlier when Jaune had been so... well, Jaune. "I knew you'd warm up to Jaune one day."

Weiss pouted. "Hey, we've been friends for a long time now..."

"He used to annoy you so much, though, right?" Ruby teased. "Whenever he'd try to talk to you, you'd have this expression on your face like you really needed to go to the toilet."

"Crude," Weiss sniffed. "Very crude, Ruby."

“That’s what it looked like. You can ask Yang, she’ll tell you.”

“No, thank you,” Weiss said. “I don’t need to hear that from her,” she went silent, feeling a tinge of guilt for things she hadn’t thought about in years. “I was pretty horrible to him, wasn’t I?”

Ruby didn’t refute it, remaining quiet.

“I thought he was something that he wasn’t,” Weiss sighed. “I judged him without knowing him. Just as I judged you, and I judged Blake. But we figured things out. With Jaune... we never really did, and then our lives got upended and those things from before just seemed to not matter any more.”

“I know,” Ruby said. “You were never mean to him. You just weren’t very nice.”

Weiss laughed lightly. “That doesn’t make me feel better about it.”

“He doesn’t hold it against you, though.”

“No,” Weiss agreed. “And he *was* a little bit annoying, even if I could have been nicer.”

Ruby snickered.

“And then after that, well... he wasn’t annoying any more.”

They came to another fork, and that is when they decided to head back. When they arrived back at the beginning of the pipe, they were joined by Ren and Jaune shortly after.

“Anything?” Ruby asked.

Ren shook his head. “Nothing. Just darkness.”

“We’ll report this to the Headmaster,” Jaune said, leading them back out into the light. Weiss raised a hand, shielding her eyes until they readjusted. “We need to get some eyes on this spot, and any others that these gangs might be using. Hopefully they’ll manage to catch something and then we can make a move.”

It was all they could do. Weiss was worried for those missing, but this was as far as they could go until they had more.