

They gained some valuable intel from the men arrested in the raid, and the safe contained money – *a lot* of money. Several new locations were raided, assets seized and men arrested, but there was still no sign of Mercury or Tyrian.

Though they didn't find what they were looking for, clearing out elements that may have been willing to work with Salem was always advantageous. Jaune joined in on the raids whenever he could, and he bore witness to some truly horrible situations.

Gangs preyed on those most vulnerable, exploiting them in a myriad of ways. To use them as cover, to recruit and bolster their numbers with those most desperate. To turn a profit. There were plenty of sick and twisted ways to turn people into money.

Jaune was glad to do it.

This latest safe house was underground, connected to the old unused drainage system. There were large concrete caverns beneath the city that water would pass through, old pumping stations that were no longer in use. The ones that were truly out of commission had been sealed off, long ago – but someone had found a way in.

Jaune's flashlight illuminated the way, his steps silent. Ren and Nora followed closely behind, ready to act at a moment's notice. Team RWBY would be advancing from another tunnel, and the two teams would strike together in a pincer move, taking them by surprise.

That was the plan, anyway.

Jaune recalled Emerald's plea. For them to take Mercury alive. To not hurt him... *much*.

Mercury wasn't the one that Jaune was worried about, though. A tough fighter for sure, but if Emerald was to be believed, then not the sort of threat they needed to be overly concerned for.

Tyrian, on the other hand...

A complete psychopath, through and through – but a skilled one, with a troublesome semblance to match.

It was so long ago now, especially to him, but he could still vividly remember the first time he encountered that man. Right from the jump, Jaune had known there was something wrong with him, something... off. Dangerous, unpredictable. A fanatic.

People were afraid of things they couldn't understand, be it large or small, important or trivial. The unknown made people uncomfortable, and something as simple as a person acting differently was enough to trigger a soft response. Tyrian's very presence was enough to raise the hairs on your neck because be it through instinct or something else, you understood you walked with a predator.

Like a Grimm, that is what he was. A dangerous beast, and one that needed to be put down.

Tyrian had been captured already, once before. That had ended in tragedy. Clover was dead, and Qrow was left with a deep bitterness that he did his best to conceal. This time, Jaune wasn't about to give him the same chance to slip through their clutches.

When they found him, he would ensure that he never harmed anyone ever again.

But finding him was the tricky part.

Jaune checked his scroll and saw that Team RWBY were already in position. There was a bend up ahead, and then, if the intel was good, a small pathway through the rubble that had been piled to seal it off. There were no guards, because no one would ever dare venture this deep.

But inside, there would be dozens of gang members – and hopefully, the two people they were after.

“Get ready,” he said lowly before forging on ahead. The bend was in sight, and then the rubble.

Jaune expected some resistance, but when he stepped through the passageway that had been made, and into the cavernous room, no one rose in opposition.

Across the way, he saw Team RWBY’s flashlights. Nothing stirred.

The place was empty.

They searched it top to bottom but found nothing, just some equipment, food and bedding, enough for a couple dozen people. They’d cleared out in a hurry but had taken great pains to cover their tracks. Anything important had gone with them.

“Damn it,” Yang swore. They found some floodlights and a control box, and flicking the switch, the entire room lit up. Jaune blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. “They knew we were coming.”

“We knew that might be the case,” Weiss sighed. “With all the arrests being made, it was always a possibility that they knew their safe places had been compromised.”

Blake was squinting against the light, her faunus heritage making it even more uncomfortable to her. She hadn’t needed a flashlight, able to see in the dark perfectly fine. “We should double check to make sure we didn’t miss anything.”

Jaune felt the tension drain out of him as they searched one final time. It felt hopeless, just dust and shadows.

“Interesting,” he overheard Ren mutter.

“What is?” Jaune asked, suddenly alert.

“This spot here,” he gestured to an empty place on the floor. “All around it, you can see the dust, right? Something was here – something they took with them.”

Ren was right. The concrete in that spot was clear of dust. Not clean, exactly – this place was old, nothing was clean beyond what had been brought down here from the surface, but there was a visible difference. Whatever had been there, it had been stationary for a long enough period of time for dust to build up around it.

Whatever it was, it had been big. Really big. Either that, or multiple things stacked together. Several feet across, and several feet wide.

“What do you think they moved?” he asked.

Ren shook his head. "It's impossible to know. It could be anything. But whatever it was, it must have been valuable to them. Otherwise they would have left it here."

It didn't give them much to go on, but it was something, Jaune supposed.

But that wasn't the only thing they found.

"I've got something!" Weiss called out.

Everyone gathered around her as she knelt on the ground, near one of the entrances they came through. Placing her hand on the floor, she lifted it up and showed them. Her palm glittered red, and at once, Jaune knew what he was looking at.

Fire Dust.

Weiss channeled her aura, and her hand caught fire for an instant before it dissipated without a trace.

The trip back to Shade was tense, a cloud of disappointment hanging over them.

"Well, that was a waste of time," Nora complained.

“We needed to check it. At least we know it’s empty now,” Ruby tried to reason, but it was clear that she was pretty bummed out about it. “Winter can send soldiers in to clear it out, so if we missed anything, they might find it.”

Wishful thinking.

They ended up with more questions than answers.

They made their report to the Headmaster, and then their day was free.

“Does it always have to be so damn hot?” Yang complained, shielding her face with a hand as they stepped back outside. “I thought I’d get used to it, but it feels like it’s just getting worse!”

It did feel that way. Jaune could see the air warp, heat waves rising up off the sand and stone. It was oppressive.

“Hey, we’re going to get some lunch,” Nora said, drawing their attention. “Anyone wanna come?”

“Sure,” Ruby chirped.

“Actually, I have somewhere I need to be,” Jaune said. “I promised someone I’d help them with something.”

He'd given Cerise his number, and she'd messaged him earlier that day, asking if he could help gather some education materials for her daughters. While they had a home now, schooling was still up in the air.

"Oh?" Weiss asked curiously.

"It shouldn't take too long," he said. "I'll see you guys later?"

"I'll accompany you," Weiss said at once.

"Me too!" Ruby jumped in.

"I thought you wanted lunch?" Yang asked, perplexed.

"I can eat later!" Ruby said defensively.

Blake arched an eyebrow in amusement but remained silent.

"You don't have to, I just need to pick up some things. You can go eat if you want."

Ruby pouted. "But I want to come with you."

Jaune saw no reason to shoot her down, so he shrugged. "Sure, if you want. It might be a bit boring, though."

They said their farewells to their friends, and Weiss and Ruby joined him as he began making his way into the city.

"So what are we doing?" Ruby asked excitedly.

Weiss shot her partner an amused glance.

"Nothing that requires three Huntsmen," he deadpanned, chuckling as she poked her tongue at him. "Cerise asked me to pick up some education materials for her daughters. Textbooks, work sheets, things like that."

He wasn't sure, but Jaune felt like the air grew a little cooler. That was strange. They were still in the sun, it wasn't like they'd found some shade.

"Cerise," Weiss repeated.

"Yeah. She doesn't want her daughters to fall behind."

"She asked you for help?" Ruby pressed.

Jaune nodded. "Yes, that's right."

They shared a look, and Jaune wasn't sure what the big deal was.

"Guys?"

"I think it is a good idea that we came with you," Weiss declared.

Jaune blinked. "Uh... why do you say that?"

"They're girls, right? Well, so are we – so our perspective will be invaluable!" Ruby said loudly. "Yep. It's lucky you have us with you."

Well, she wasn't lying, but... it was just things for school. Did a woman's perspective matter for that? If it was clothes shopping or... more delicate matters, then Jaune fully understood. He might know more than the average guy due to growing up with seven sisters, but that sort of thing was best left to them.

Ruby appeared very sure of herself, though, and Weiss was in agreement, nodding along. If Weiss was also of that opinion, then maybe they were right.

"Well, I guess it's a good thing you came, then," Jaune said lamely.

Maybe this would be harder than he thought?

“So what exactly do they need?” Weiss asked.

Jaune pulled out his scroll.

“They’re in fifth grade... so they’ll need textbooks for that level in Math, Science, Language and History,” he ticked off, raising a finger for each one. “Some books for them to practice their reading skills, and if they have any, work sheets for them to complete.”

Ruby frowned. “Where do we get stuff like that?”

“I did a little research, apparently there are a few stores that supply all the schools here in Vacuo.”

It didn’t take them long to reach the nearest store. Nestled between a mechanics workshop and a hardware store, it was easy to miss. They almost walked right by it before Jaune spotted the sign hanging above the door.

It was blessedly cool inside, and he was instantly hit with the scent of crisp paper. Bookshelves lined the walls, the store much bigger than it appeared from the outside, stretching far into the back. Smaller, lower bookcases positioned in rows filled the middle, and near the counter were item bundles that included things like pens and pencils, pencil cases, notepads and binders.

“Hello,” an elderly woman greeted them, her face heavily wrinkled. She peered at them through a pair of thick glasses, her eyes a unique shade of blue that almost appeared silver. “Do you require any help?”

“We’re looking for textbooks,” Jaune stepped forward. “Could you help us find them?”

“Certainly,” she smiled, her mouth missing a few teeth. “What grade are you looking for?”

“Fifth, ma’am.”

“Follow me,” she said.

She hobbled along, rather spry for someone her age. That was something Jaune had noticed about many of the older Vacuoan’s. A harsh land had built a strong people, and even in their advanced age, aches and pains and all, they could still move well. A limp here and a bent back there, certainly. But they didn’t let it stop them.

She showed them to a shelf about halfway into the store.

“Textbooks for fifth, sixth and seventh grade,” she pointed, though she didn’t have to. Everything was neatly labeled with bright, colorful signs. “Do you need anything else?”

“Worksheets for equivalent ages,” he said. “Math, Language, Science and History.”

“Behind the counter,” she nodded. “I can put some things together. How many students?”

“Two – and some books for them to read.”

“Children’s books are near the front, on the left side. Teenage and Young Adult are further on.”

Jaune gave her a grateful smile. “Thank you very much, ma’am.”

She patted him on the arm, eyes warm. “I’ll go get those worksheets sorted. Come up whenever you’re ready, there is no hurry.”

“She was nice,” Ruby said when she returned to the counter, smiling. “A lot of the people here in Vacuo are.”

Weiss nodded. “They’ve got a bad reputation – and I understand why,” they all knew what she was talking about. The gangs that held much of the city under their thrall. “But many of the people here are just like anywhere else. They’re trying to live their lives, and raise families. I’m reminded of Mantle.”

There were similarities, but plenty of differences, as well. But Jaune understood what she meant.

Jaune tracked down the relevant textbooks, and then decided to collect the ones for the sixth grade, as well. While they were there, they browsed through some of the more advanced content. It went up all the way through high school, and then beyond. University text books on a wide variety of subjects.

Ruby peered at some of the engineering manuals. Specifically, mecha-shift technology.

“This stuff is pretty advanced,” she said, flicking through the pages of a book thicker than her arm.

Weiss smirked. "How much of it do you already know?"

It wasn't unusual for children at combat schools to build their own weapons. Most trainee Huntsmen did it, but it was alongside significant help from the teachers. There were classes at Beacon, Haven, Shade and Atlas to advance that knowledge, but it heavily focused on weaponry rather than things like aircraft, farming machinery and the like.

Ruby was built a little different, though. She'd built Crescent Rose entirely on her own, with only minimal guidance from her uncle, whose weapon she based her scythe off of. Ruby would be the first to tell people that she wasn't particularly intelligent but when it came to this?

She was certainly a prodigy.

"Are you teasing me?" Ruby pouted.

"I think she's praising you," he stepped in. "You do know you're incredible, right?"

Her pale cheeks flushed scarlet.

"S-Shut up," she snapped shyly.

Weiss giggled.

“Did you build your weapon, Weiss?” Jaune asked. “I can’t remember if you’ve ever said.”

“I had a hand in designing it, but engineers at the Schnee Dust Company were the ones that made it. Alas, I am not as talented as my partner.”

Ruby nudged her in the ribs. “Oh, yeah, suuuure. You’re just an incredible singer that could top the charts if she wanted to, or perform ballet in front of the world and not falter. Yeaah, you aren’t as talented as me *at all*.”

Ruby’s sarcasm was always a treat and he laughed as Weiss preened.

“Thank you for the compliments, Ruby. I deserve it, of course.”

Silver eyes rolled. “You’re dumb.”

After that, they made their way over to the children’s book section. There were plenty of classics that he remembered from his own childhood, and newer titles that he hadn’t seen before. This was a little harder to decide on.

Maybe having Ruby and Weiss along was a good thing after all.

“What do you think a pair of ten year old girls would like to read?” he asked them.

Weiss shot him an arrogant look, flicking her hair. “Leave it to me.”

He watched as she began pulling titles from the shelves and comparing them with others before placing them back. This went on for nearly ten minutes as Ruby browsed nearby until she had a handful of books she deemed worthy.

“Do you think this is how it feels to shop for your kids?” Ruby asked innocently.

Weiss flushed lightly while Jaune shrugged.

“I don’t know. I suppose it would be something like this. Why?”

“Do you want to have kids, Jaune?”

Weiss shot Ruby a surprised look, and even Jaune was taken aback.

“What?”

Ruby fiddled with her fingers. “Do you want to have kids?”

That wasn’t a question he ever expected to come from Ruby, of all people.

“Uh, well...”

Did he want to have kids? Yeah, he did. He always had. Maybe it was the result of growing up in a big family but he'd always wanted what his parents had. A loving marriage and a large family, big enough that the house was never quiet. His childhood had been frantic. There was always *something* going on. If it wasn't Sapphire and Saphron having some sort of argument over wearing each other's clothes, it was Ivy and Lavender causing some sort of mischief. Jaune got into his fair share of trouble, as well, but seeing as he was the only boy, most of the time, the trouble was being caused against him by his siblings.

So yeah, he wanted kids.

It just wasn't something he had thought about in a very long time because it was something he thought lost to him.

"I do," he said. "Though I don't know if I'd be a very good father."

"You would," Weiss said instantly.

"Yeah, you'd be the best father," Ruby added. "Don't doubt yourself!"

He couldn't help it. Not when it was so easy to do.

They brought everything to the counter where the worksheets were waiting for them. When it was time to pay, Weiss frowned.

"Jaune... who is paying for these?"

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I am.”

Jaune handed over the money before she could object, and the elderly woman bagged everything neatly.

“There you are,” she said. “Have a lovely day.”

“You too, ma’am.”

Bags in hand, they stepped back out into the harsh heat.

“Jaune,” Weiss said again. “Did Cerise give you money to buy these books for her?”

He shook his head. “No, of course not. They only had the clothes on their backs, any money she had was lost when Atlas fell.”

He didn’t like the troubled look on her face.

“You don’t think she might be taking advantage of you?” she asked tentatively.

Jaune felt a spark of outrage. “She isn’t like that.”

“How well do you know her, though?” she pointed out.

“Well enough,” he said gruffly.

Her face softened. “I’m only worried about you, that’s all. I’m not trying to be mean. I just don’t want some woman exploiting you.”

“That isn’t what’s happening here,” he said firmly. “She only asked for help, and I offered to get her some. She tried to talk me out of it when she realized I’d be paying for it, I have the messages if you want to read them.”

His voice was a little sharper than he intended.

“Guys...” Ruby said softly, getting between them. “Hey, don’t fight.”

Weiss huffed, crossing her arms. “I was just worried, that’s all... it sounded like she was making you buy all this for her, as if it were expected.”

Jaune calmed down quickly. “She just needs some help, that’s all. If a little bit of money can ease the burden, then I’m glad to help.”

“And you’d just do that for anyone?”

He shrugged. "Why not? These people need help, and I'm more than willing to give it."

"You can't save everyone, Jaune."

His words were bitter as he said, "Don't I know it? But this is something I can do."

Maybe he had a bit of a thing – a saving people thing. Some sort of complex. Who was he kidding? That is exactly what he had. Just because he had come to peace with the Paper Pleasers, just because he could look at himself and call it out, that didn't mean he still wasn't ruled by those feelings.

Failure scared him. To fail meant death. Not just for him, but for others. Sure, this wasn't quite like those times with Pyrrha and Penny. There was no sword aimed at their necks. But life could crush a family beneath its weight very easily.

"I want to do it," he continued, sighing. "I know you're worried about me, and you have every right to be. And I appreciate it, more than you'll ever know," he shot her a comforting glance, eyes warm. "You're a good friend to me. Both of you are. Without you, I'd be lost. But trust me on this. Cerise isn't taking advantage of me. She's just had her entire life uprooted, which I'm sure we can all understand. It's happened to us, more than once. But unlike us, she doesn't have the types of friends that we do. We hold each other up, don't we? When we need it most? Who holds her up?"

"Jaune..." Ruby's voice was a whisper, filled with emotion.

Weiss looked away, ashamed.

"I... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. I just..." she shook her head. "No, that's no excuse. I'm sorry. You're right. You're probably the only one she can turn to."

"I'm a familiar face, and she trusts me. That trust was built because I protected her daughters, walking them to school every day when others thought the job was beneath them. Things haven't been the greatest here for them."

They continued on in silence, but Jaune disliked the uneasy mood. Shuffling the bags around into one hand, he took Weiss' hand in his own. She looked at him in surprise.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

Her blue eyes sparkled. "Yes. It's more than okay, Jaune."

Ruby beamed.

When they arrived at the apartment complex, a bunch of the children were playing outside. Jaune spotted Ash and Poppy mingling with other kids, though the parents weren't far away. After their harrowing ordeal, he didn't think they'd let them out of their sight completely. The two fathers were sitting together, nursing what appeared to be bottles of beer.

Cerise must have spotted them approaching because she met them at the door to her room, leaning against the door frame. Dressed in a loose fitting summer gown, her long hair pulled back into a ponytail, she looked magnificent.

"Thank you *so much* for this," she said immediately, straightening up. She approached and hugged him, her arms stronger than expected. "You're a lifesaver, Jaune."

“Happy to help,” he said, waiting for her to step back. She lingered a little longer than appropriate. “Here, these are for you.”

He handed over the bags.

“I was worried they were going to fall behind with everything going on,” the relief in her voice was palpable. “You’re the best. Are you hungry? The locals brought all of us food, and there is way too much. They’ve been really generous here, even though I know things are pretty tight for everyone.”

“We’d love to,” Weiss answered before he could. “Right, Ruby?”

“Yeah, I’m starved.”

Their voices sounded a bit strange, and when he looked at the both of them, he saw that their faces were strangely stiff.

“Please, come in.”

They followed Cerise into her apartment. The kitchen counter was covered in containers, each filled with food. Local curries and rices, chickpea salad, and samosa were only some of the things he spotted.

“Jaune~!” two voices squealed, and then he was being assaulted by a pair of twin girls.

“Oof,” he grunted as they slammed into him.

“What are you doing here?” Amaranth asked.

“Do you want to see our room?” Magenta followed up.

“Girls, settle down,” Cerise chided as they started questioning him rapidly, their voices blending together. “Jaune is hard at work. He’s just here to drop something off and have something to eat, then he’ll be going.”

“Awwww,” they both whined.

“He brought you some books,” she showed the girls the books they’d picked out, and they snatched them with a cheer before rushing off to their room.

“Girls, what do you say?” Cerise shouted.

“Thank you~!” they called back.

She rolled her eyes. “Those two, I swear.”

Jaune chuckled. “I’m glad to see they’re just as lively as ever.”

“They’ve taken things a lot better than I thought they would,” Cerise said, beginning to plate them up some food. “Children can be surprisingly resilient.”

“Don’t hesitate to ask if you need anything,” Jaune told her. “I’ll do what I can.”

“I *will* be paying you back for this,” she said, fixing him with a stern look. “When I get back on my feet and find a job, expect it.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Yes I do,” she pressed. “Things are tough – for everyone. I won’t be a burden on you.”

“Well said,” Weiss appeared happy to hear it.

Ruby snickered.

They were all ganging up on him.

The food was delicious, as expected, and afterwards, they spent the rest of the afternoon helping her around the house with small things, spending way more time there than planned. Ruby and Weiss both warmed up to her considerably, for which Jaune was glad, and by the time they left, it was approaching evening.

He was happy they could make friends with her, though the way they kept shooting each other looks behind his back when they thought he wasn't paying attention was cause for concern.

They were up to something, he just didn't know what.