

Ruby's reunion with her father was a happy occasion despite the mixed news they brought with them. Vale being spared from destruction was a good thing, but the impending horde making their way towards Vacuo was cause for great concern. They already had their hands full with the Grimm already attacking the outer reaches of the kingdom, and things had been relatively quiet, all things considered.

Ruby wasn't sure how well Vacuo could withstand an assault the likes of which Vale had been beating back for months. They had the added firepower of what remained of the Atlesian fleet, but the city could be surrounded on all sides and held no geological advantage, unlike Vale. They were, as the saying goes, sitting ducks.

And then there was the whole issue of Mercury and Tyrian, and the Asturias siblings, slinking around in the shadows, waiting to strike.

It would take some time for those Grimm to arrive in these lands, though. Even walking day and night without rest. Valuable time for them to come up with a way to counter the coming incursion. Plans were already being drawn up, and the reality was they'd all been expecting this day to come.

It was just now they knew it was closing in quickly, and they had to get ready.

It was nice to have her dad around, though. It let Ruby be a little girl again, and take comfort in having him nearby. She hadn't seen him in so long, she'd even cried a little! Yang was also happy to see him, but it was countered by the presence of her mother. As expected, things were tense between them – doubly so because apparently, when Raven had opened the portal to Vacuo, she'd used Yang as the anchor, not Uncle Qrow.

It meant that their first sight of Vacuo had been the inside of Yang's room, while Yang and Blake had been in the midst of...

Well, yeah. Awwwwkward~!

According to her dad, Raven had been just as embarrassed with the situation but she was much better at hiding it. Truthfully, it had been mortifying for all involved. Not only had her mom and dad seen Yang in such a compromising position, but Professor Goodwitch, as well.

Ruby would want to die if she were in Yang's shoes right now.

Impending doom aside – something they were well accustomed to at this point – life went on. Ruby had plans! Big plans! And no stinking Grimm horde was going to change them.

The kitchen staff were more than happy to allow Ruby and Weiss access to the kitchen for their endeavor, and Headmaster Theodore refused payment for any ingredients.

“Think of it as payment,” he said jovially. “A bonus for all you’ve done here in Vacuo so far.”

He’d also given them permission to use Shade’s ballroom as the venue for the party. Ruby hadn’t even known that Shade had a ballroom, but she shouldn’t have been surprised. Beacon had one, as did Atlas Academy. Haven probably did as well, so why not Shade?

Her outing with Jaune had given her all the information they needed, so now it was all about execution. Ruby had never baked a cake before. As much as she loved cookies, she’d never baked them either. Her mother had made those for her, when she was younger, and then after, it had been Yang that picked up that particular ability. At first, she’d been horrible and she could still vaguely recall some of those early attempts.

Ruby was surprised she’d never gotten sick.

But practice makes perfect, and as the years went by, Yang only got better. Until eventually her cookies tasted almost exactly like mom's did.

Now it was Ruby's turn. Jaune's favorite was a chocolate mud cake, and thankfully, they had a recipe for it here at Shade. It might not have been the same as Jaune's mother's recipe, but it was as good as she could get.

Weiss looked nervous, glancing around the kitchen as if it were a battleground. It would have amused her any other time but she also found herself wracked with jitters.

Ruby didn't want to mess this up. If she failed the first time, then she'd try again. If she failed the second time, then there was always a third, or fourth, or fifth. She was going to keep trying until she got it right.

She didn't want to waste food, though. Not with how dire things were in Vacuo at the moment.

Ruby breathed in deeply to calm herself, and then slapped her cheeks – *hard*.

"Ruby?" Weiss asked, startled.

Ruby felt her eyes water. "...Ow."

"Are you well?" her partner asked, giving her a look that clearly said she didn't think she was.

“I was just trying to psyche myself up,” Ruby mumbled, wincing. Okay, she’d slapped her cheeks a little too hard. They were now stinging.

“Your cheeks are going all red.”

Ruby focused, her aura soothing the pain away.

“Right, well,” she cleared her throat awkwardly. “How about we get started?”

Weiss shook her head, her mouth curling into a bemused smile before she pulled the open recipe book towards them. There was a picture of a chocolate cake printed on the left page, and on the right was the list of ingredients they would need.

Weiss began listing them off. “We’ll need butter, dark chocolate, superfine sugar, brown sugar, instant coffee, milk, eggs, vanilla extract, plain flour, unsweetened cocoa powder, baking powder – and salt, if we’re using unsalted butter. Oh, and we’ll need cream for the ganache.”

“The what?”

“It’s like icing,” Weiss explained.

Why did that sound like a lot? That was a lot of things!

Ruby stopped herself from panicking by pinching her hand.

Weiss frowned. "Ruby, I'm getting a little worried now..."

"I'm fine, everything is fine," she said.

Everything was not fine.

Why was she already freaking out and they hadn't already begun?

Weiss arched an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. I'm very sure," Ruby nodded quickly. "Um, I'll go get the butter – and the chocolate."

"Fine. I'll get the eggs and the flour."

They started assembling all the ingredients. The kitchen was huge which was to be expected, needing to feed hundreds of mouths. They had a massive walk in fridge, so Ruby darted inside and found the butter quickly. It was unsalted, so they would need to use salt, after all. She also grabbed the milk since it was there, the cream and the eggs, and placed it on their work counter. Weiss returned with the flour, baking powder, superfine sugar and brown sugar.

"Oh, you got the eggs."

“They were in the fridge, so I grabbed them.”

There were coffee beans and instant coffee, Ruby grabbing the latter while Weiss collected the vanilla extract and chocolate. The last thing they fetched was the salt when Ruby pointed out the butter was unsalted.

“Right,” Weiss said, pleased. “Now we need bowls, knives and measuring cups.”

They quickly grabbed everything they needed, spreading it out in front of them. Weiss then placed a chopping board down.

“How do we start?” Ruby asked, peering at the open book.

“We need nine ounces of butter, roughly chopped,” Weiss read out. “And eight ounces of the dark chocolate, chopped the same way. Can you do that?”

Ruby scowled. “Of course I can!”

Weiss smirked. “Fine. I’ll measure out all the dry ingredients.”

She was looking down on her! The nerve. Ruby wasn’t the one that grew up with a cake butler!

The electronic scales helped her gauge the weight. Chopping the butter into cubes, she broke the chocolate up with the edge of her knife. It was a little messy, small fragments shooting off but she managed to keep all of it within her vicinity.

“Now what?”

“Put it in that bowl,” Weiss pointed at the small glass bowl. “And then we have to melt it. We’ll use the microwave.”

Ruby dumped it all in the bowl together and checked the recipe to make sure of the times. It suggested melting it slowly, putting it in for one minute, then stirring it, and then another thirty seconds, stirring, and then a further ten seconds to finish.

She did as instructed, feeling more and more confident when she saw the final product after stirring for the last time.

“That looks good,” Weiss eyed the mixture critically. “Okay, so now the sugar goes in...”

She dumped all the sugars in, as well as the coffee granules, and began stirring it all together. Ruby leaned in and watched closely as they all combined, turning into a grainy chocolatey batter. It didn’t look all that appealing, but she still had the desire to taste it. Dipping a finger in, she popped it into her mouth.

“Ruby!” Weiss scolded.

...That was *really* sweet.

Weiss sighed but refocused on the job at hand. “Okay, so now we stir the eggs in... oh.”

“What?”

“It recommends that the eggs should be room temperature,” Weiss said. “Otherwise the batter might split.”

What did that mean? Ruby didn’t have a clue but it sounded bad.

“Uh – what do we do?” Ruby picked up one of the eggs and felt that the shell was still very chilled. “These are still cold.”

“It says we should also use room temperature milk,” Weiss read ahead. “It looks like we’re going to have to wait.”

“Can we heat them up in the microwave?” Ruby suggested.

“...We can probably heat the milk,” Weiss said slowly. “But not the eggs.”

“I’ll look around and see if they have any lying about.”

Ruby searched the kitchen top to bottom, but she didn't have any luck. So they had to sit around and wait for the eggs to warm up, which thankfully didn't take too long. In the meantime, they engaged in a little girl talk.

"Did your sister introduce her girlfriend to your father properly?" Weiss asked, amused.

Ruby snickered. She'd already told Weiss about the mess of their arrival. "They're going to have dinner tonight. Just Yang, Blake and my dad. I wasn't invited because I laughed when I found out about what happened."

"What about Yang's mom?"

Ruby shrugged. "I dunno... things are weird between them, and... well, things are weird between Raven and my dad, as well."

"What do you mean?" Weiss asked, curious.

Ruby wasn't quite sure and it might just be all in her head, but, "It's almost like... they're together again."

Weiss blinked, startled. "Oh. You think so? Uh... how does that make you feel? I mean, you know... because of your mom and everything..."

For as long as Ruby could remember, she'd always known that Yang had another mom. That her father had once been with another woman that wasn't Summer Rose. It was just a normal fact of life. Technically, they were half-sisters – but that had never meant anything more than a technical term. Half, full – it didn't matter. Yang was her sister, and that was the end of it.

She'd never really put much thought into Raven as a potential mother figure since she'd never been around. Ruby came after, and only ever knew Summer. But Yang remembered Raven, and Summer, so it was much more complicated for her.

Ruby hadn't ever thought there would be a day where her father rekindled things with Raven, but thinking about it... there had always been the possibility. How did it make her feel?

She wasn't sure.

"I'm not mad," Ruby admitted. "Is that weird?"

"I couldn't tell you," Weiss said softly. "I've never had anything like that happen."

Should she be mad? Upset? Was he replacing her mom somehow, if they really were together again? Maybe she was just seeing things that weren't there, it wasn't like she had seen them interact much since arriving, but what she *had* seen had spoken of familiarity and affection... even if buried.

Though wouldn't that be expected? They'd had a daughter together, after all. Even if that had been a long time ago now.

Ruby was confusing herself.

"I just..." Ruby thought of the right words to say, and it was slow going. "I always knew dad had another wife. I mean, I don't know if they were actually married-married. It might not have been

official, but... well, you know what I mean. I'm rambling. Raven has always existed, even though I never knew her, so maybe that's why I'm not upset with it... the idea that dad loved two women isn't strange to me."

She then laughed a little. "It's like with us."

"You mean with us – and Jaune?" Weiss asked, flushing lightly. Ruby nodded.

"Yeah. I – when I saw Cerise, and how they were together, it bothered me. I got a little jealous," she rubbed her neck, her smile awkward. "But with you, it doesn't. It feels completely different, and I... don't hate it. I like it, in fact."

"Ruby," Weiss said warmly.

She thought of the other day when they shared a shower, and a bath, and felt her cheeks melt down. Ruby turned away so Weiss couldn't see her blush because there was no way she wouldn't notice, not with how hot her face felt.

Ruby didn't know what possessed her to get into the shower with her, but she didn't regret it. But ever since, it had been difficult to forget the sight of Weiss' flawless, porcelain skin, the lithe muscles of her back, and the swells of her hips – and her ridiculously sculpted ass. Weiss had a figure that was out of this world, and while her chest was modest, that was hardly a fault to some.

Just thinking about it now made her insides squirm, just like they squirmed whenever she recalled Jaune whenever he was shirtless, or when they'd fallen asleep against him, comforted by his firm chest and arms, and steady presence.

Did she also...?

Ruby cleared her throat, pushing the thought aside for now.

"If it was another woman, I think it would bother me," Ruby said. "But since it's Raven... I guess a part of me feels like it's normal, you know?"

"I can see that."

"That is if anything is even going on," she shrugged. "I might just be seeing things that aren't there."

Maybe she should ask Yang about it, then thought better of it. As she'd already thought, with Yang, it was a lot more complicated. While Ruby was indifferent at worst, and happy for her dad at best, Yang might be really upset about it if something truly was developing.

"Are they staying here, do you think?" Weiss asked.

"I think so," Ruby said. "Raven has no way back. Everyone she cares about is here, so they wouldn't be able to return with her semblance."

That more than anything said a lot. For someone like her to strand herself in the one place Salem was coming for more than anywhere else, who had done her best to steer clear of such a conflict to the point of abandoning her daughter... it could only be for her dad, and for Yang that she'd done this.

“Professor Port and Professor Oobleck are holding things down in Vale,” Ruby continued. “Dad was talking about it with us. Some of our classmates are there, as well. The ones that didn’t come to Shade.”

“Doctor Oobleck,” Weiss reminded her with a chuckle.

Ruby smiled, thinking back fondly. “Doctor,” she agreed.

Not long after that, the eggs were ready for use. Ruby cracked three eggs into a bowl, wincing when some of the shells got mixed in. Sheepishly, she carefully removed them and handed the bowl over to Weiss so she could add them to the mixture. Weiss then stirred until everything was well combined before adding the vanilla extract, and slowly adding the milk while stirring.

After that, Ruby sifted the dry ingredients into the mixture while Weiss continued to stir until there were no lumps, and the grainy texture had vanished.

“Okay, now we need baking paper and a big enough cake tin.”

The baking paper was easy to find – but the correct tin was a little more difficult. There were so many – and all different sizes! The recipe gave them the size they required, but it wasn’t like these tins had them written on them. They had to measure and find the right one.

It took a little time but they finally picked one out that they believed to be the correct one. They first had to grease it with a little bit of butter before lining it with the baking paper. Weiss carefully poured the mixture in while Ruby used the wooden spoon to scrape the bowl clean.

They were almost there!

“Can you turn the oven on?” Weiss asked. “It needs to be pre-heated to 300.”

“Got it,” Ruby said, and then stared blankly at the oven they were using. This wasn’t any normal kitchen oven – this thing was designed for large batches. “Uh... how do I use this thing?”

Weiss huffed. “Fine, I’ll do it.”

But she was just as stumped as Ruby was. There were so many different buttons, and while at some point, labels had been present to tell you what each button did, they’d been worn away by use and age.

“This is ridiculous,” Weiss muttered, growing increasingly peeved. “We’re Huntresses for crying out loud! We’ve been trained and have used mecha-shift weapons for years, and we took Security classes at Beacon dealing with all sorts of technology... how can this thing be harder than that?”

But each button she pushed seemed to do the opposite of what she wanted.

Ruby wasn’t much better. At one point, the screen lit up but then it asked if they wished for it to go into cleaning mode, which was not what they wanted! Not at all!

“Are we being defeated by an oven?” Ruby asked pathetically.

“We are *not* being defeated by an oven!” Weiss seethed. “I refuse!”

...They were defeated by an oven.

Eventually, they had to go ask for help. One of the chefs had a good laugh but he was very kind about it, explaining that it wasn't easy to use for those that hadn't been trained to. It helped a little to soothe their bruised egos, but not by much.

"There," he said. "When it beeps, that means it's reached the set temperature and you can put your cake in."

"Thank you," Ruby said, bowing her head. "Thank you so much!"

Weiss looked like she'd sucked on a sour lemon but she lowered her head all the same.

So they waited until it beeped, and then carefully slid the cake tin onto one of the racks. Closing the oven door, they glanced at one another.

"How long does it take?" she asked.

"An hour and a half," Weiss said. "We shouldn't make the ganache until it's out and cooled."

"I suppose we better clean up, then," Ruby said.

Weiss nodded. "Yes, we should."

She couldn't help herself. As they started collecting the bowls and other utensils, Ruby let the voices win. Taking a pinch of flour from the bag, she said, "Hey Weiss!"

"What is it?" Weiss asked, turning – and then got a face full of flour. Ruby laughed at the comical expression of shock on her partner's face.

"Ahahaha," she clutched at her stomach. "Y-You should see yourself right now!"

Weiss blinked, frozen – and then she reached for the dirty bowl that had contained the cake mixture and ran her finger through it, smearing what remained of the chocolate mix across Ruby's cheek and nose.

Ruby squawked.

"Two can play at this game," Weiss said smugly.

Silver eyes narrowed, her hands reached for the dirty wooden spoon. Weiss backed away instantly, hands raised.

"Wait, wait – Ruby, you don't want to do this!"

"I think I do!"

She charged, and Weiss bolted, screaming for her to stop as Ruby chased her around the kitchen, waving the spoon like a sword.

“Get back here and suffer!”

“Ruby, *stop!*”

“Not until I get you!”

That was how they were found, almost falling over themselves as Ruby attempted to smear cake mix all over Weiss’ dumb, beautiful face.

“...If this is what stands between Salem and victory, then we may have already lost.”

They both froze, turning to face the newcomer. Raven peered at them with an arched eyebrow, her hand resting on her cocked hip. Ruby blinked, surprised.

“What are you doing here?” Weiss asked shortly, instantly on edge.

Raven smirked. “You’ve still got your fire. Good. That was one of your good qualities.”

Weiss scowled.

Ruby only then remembered that Raven had once kidnapped Weiss, and if not for Yang, who knows what would have happened. Probably ransomed off to her father.

"Hi," Ruby said, setting the spoon aside.

Raven stared at her, as if drinking her in.

"You're like a ghost," she replied.

"What?"

"Nothing," Raven shook her head. "Memories, that's all."

An awkward silence descended on them.

Ruby didn't know what to say, and Weiss seemed equally as stumped. Raven just continued to stare, and before it started to get creepy, she broke the silence.

"How long have..." she trailed off, and Ruby couldn't believe it but she actually sounded shy.

"How long have what?" Ruby asked.

“Yang... and her partner,” Raven mumbled, finally looking away. “How long have they been... together?”

...Wait a minute, was this actually happening right now?

Ruby gaped.

Weiss looked lost, looking back and forth between them.

“Er, uh – not that long,” Ruby finally managed to answer. “A couple months... at most...”

“I see,” Raven nodded her head. “I see.”

She saw what!?

“And that girl... Blake,” she sounded the name out, as if testing it. “Does she treat Yang well?”

Ruby was dreaming. There was no other explanation. She was dreaming, or she was drunk! No, there was a gas leak in the kitchen and she was hallucinating! She was still in the Ever After! Oh my god, she’d drunk the tea and hadn’t woken up again!

That was the only explanation to what she was witnessing!

When it was clear Ruby wasn't going to answer, Weiss stepped up.

"She does," Weiss said softly. "It was... complicated for a bit, but they've worked it out."

"That... is good to hear."

It was?

Well, it was – for Ruby, at least. And those that cared about Yang. But why did Raven care?

"Why do you ask?" she found herself asking before she could stop herself. "I didn't think you'd care about something like that."

Their eyes met, and Ruby wasn't willing to back down.

...Hm, she'd never noticed before but Raven's eyes were a darker shade of red than Uncle Qrow's, yet they still reminded her of him. They were... sad eyes.

"...Is it so strange for a mother to enquire about her child?"

"When that mother is you? Yes."

The air grew tense – but only for a second. Raven then sighed, her stance loosening, no longer coiled like a snake ready to strike.

“You really are just like your mother,” she said softly. “Not just in looks. Summer could also be rather blunt when she wanted to be.”

Raven’s eyes scanned the kitchen, and fell on the mess they’d made. She frowned.

“Are you two... baking something?”

Why did she suddenly feel so embarrassed?

“S-So what?” Ruby stuttered. Why was she stuttering!?

“What if we are?” Weiss asked defensively.

“I thought you’d be more worried about what is coming for us,” Raven looked between them. “There is a good chance we will not make it out of this alive.”

“We’re already doing all we can,” Ruby said. “What else is there? Until a plan is made, all we can do is wait. We still have to live our lives,” she smiled. “Just like Yang and Blake. What’s the point if we have nothing else but Salem?”

Raven didn't have an answer.

"That boy," she said instead. "He has been touched by magic."

Ruby blinked. "Who? Oscar?"

"Not Ozpin's puppet," she said dismissively. "The other one. Tall and blond."

Jaune. She was talking about Jaune.

"I can sense it on him," she continued. "He reeks of it."

"You can feel that?" Weiss asked, surprised.

Raven nodded. "I've been experimenting with my powers as the Spring Maiden. It appears as I push the limits, it has increased my awareness of those like me. Winter Schnee also carries the stench of magic. She smells of ice, and snow, and cold. She is the Winter Maiden, I take it?"

There was no use in denying it. She would find out one way or another.

"She is," Ruby said.

“Ozpin stinks of decay,” Raven’s nose wrinkled. “Like a corpse felt out in the sun for too long.”

Ruby had to know. “What does Jaune smell like?”

Raven was slow in answering. “...Metallic. Almost like old blood,” she frowned. “Or maybe rust. Rusted steel.”

Like a Rusted Knight.

Ruby knew instantly what that scent smelt like. In the Ever After, it had clung to Jaune like a cloak. Not unpleasant, but undeniable. Like sucking on a coin.

“What is he?” Raven asked curiously.

“That is none of your business,” Weiss snapped.

Raven hummed. “Whatever he is, keep an eye on him. He has dangerous eyes.”

“Dangerous?” Ruby asked.

“I think you know what I mean,” Raven turned away and made for the exit. She paused by the door. “...If you care for him, hold on tight. Do not let him go, even for an instant, or he may vanish like smoke in the wind... Ruby.”

Then she was gone, and you wouldn't have even known she was there if not for the heavy mood she'd left behind.

Weiss sighed. "Who does she think she is? Coming in here and speaking in riddles. That woman... honestly..."

"She isn't wrong, though, is she?"

Weiss placed a hand on her shoulder. "We're already holding on tight, and he isn't getting away from us. She says he's dangerous, but that isn't the right word. Wounded. Jaune is wounded, and we're going to heal him."

Ruby turned to her. "You believe that, don't you?"

"So do you," Weiss smiled. "He smiles more now. You've noticed, haven't you?"

Ruby nodded.

"He laughs more," Weiss continued. "He looks at the world now, not through it. He sees us, as we are. Not as we were. He'll always carry scars," she touched her own face, fingers tracing the scar that marred her perfection. "But his are on his soul. They'll remain for the rest of his life, just as this will always be here, a reminder of what I've been through. Do you know what else will be with him for the rest of his life?"

The look of love in Weiss' eyes stole Ruby's breath.

“He’ll have us,” she said without a shred of doubt. “We will always be by his side if we can help it. We’ll imprint ourselves on his soul, if we must. On his heart,” her cheeks grew rosy. “Whatever it takes. He’ll not suffer again without us.”

Ruby leaned in and wrapped her arms around Weiss’ narrow waist, burying her face against her shoulder. Weiss tensed in surprise before returning the embrace, hugging her firmly.

“Together,” Ruby said. “We’ll love him together.”

Weiss nodded. “Together.”

They stayed like that for several minutes, just enjoying the warmth of each other. When they untangled themselves, Ruby felt lighter.

They removed the cake from the oven when it was time. It had risen a lot, and it was very uneven, but that was expected according to the book. Removing it from the tin, they set it on a rack to cool down before using a serrated knife to cut off the excess until the top was flat, setting those pieces aside. Then over the stove, they heated the cream and some milk, and used it to melt the remainder of the finely chopped chocolate to create the ganache. Weiss let Ruby stir it this time, and when it was smooth and all pieces of the chocolate were melted, it was nearly time.

Ruby felt like she was in arts and crafts class back in elementary school, using a flat knife to spread the ganache atop the cake and around the sides, making sure to keep everything as even as possible. Weiss was smiling, and it made Ruby smile, and when it was done, they transferred it to the fridge.

They had to wait two hours for the finished product. That was how long it would take the ganache to firm up.

In the meantime, however...

"We can try these bits, right?" Ruby asked, gesturing to the offcuts.

"We can," Weiss confirmed.

Ruby cut some small pieces off and collected what remained of the ganache in the bowl, smearing it on top. While the cake in the fridge would taste different after being chilled, this still felt like the moment of truth.

They shared a look, and as one, popped their pieces of cake into their mouths.

The differences from the cake Ruby had purchased at the store and this one were immediately apparent. This was one much more dense, and would only be more so after it was cooled in the fridge. And the chocolate flavor was more pronounced, and heavier on the stomach.

It was... *so damn good~!*

"Oh my god," Ruby quickly cut herself another piece. "We made this? We're so frickin' cool!"

Weiss licked her lips clean. "That came out a lot better than I thought it would."

Not bad for their first attempt!

The real test came later. When the two hours were up, they gathered some of the kitchen staff who were around to try their cake. They waited with baited breath as they tried it, and from every single one of them, they received two thumbs up.

“Yes!” Ruby pumped her fist. “Jaune’s going to totally love it!”

When they tried a slice themselves, Ruby felt like she had died and gone to chocolate heaven. It really was much more potent after having sat for longer and been chilled in the fridge. Even the ganache tasted stronger, and Ruby moaned in bliss as she chewed through the fudge-like texture and swallowed.

“...Cake is the best,” Weiss said, licking her fork clean. “Cake is life.”

Ruby giggled.

She couldn’t find fault with that.