

Weiss couldn't get Jaune's fearful expression out of her head.

She hadn't seen him since that night at the market, and it was going on three days now. According to Nora, he was taking missions, business as usual, but he might as well have been a ghost. Up at the crack of dawn, only returning late in the evening, he was clearly avoiding her.

Her and Ruby both.

What had brought on such an intense reaction? Well, it hadn't been difficult to figure out.

After Jaune had fled, Ruby had spotted Dr. Polendina and Maria. Weiss put the pieces together quickly after that, and it filled her with a deep sadness.

Penny.

They hadn't really spoken about that particular subject. She'd attempted to explain it in the Ever After but Ruby had fainted after hearing of her death, and then things had just gotten crazy. While she'd eventually been able to tell Ruby and the others what had really happened, none of them had seen fit to discuss it any further, and especially not with Jaune.

Weiss couldn't even begin to understand how he felt about what he'd done. It was easy to try envision those types of feelings, but without experiencing that sort of situation, it would always fall short.

Jaune had taken the life of a friend. He'd done it to keep the powers of a Maiden out of Cinder Fall and Salem's hands, and had done it on the instruction of Penny herself. Weiss had been

there. Though she'd been fighting for her life at the time, they'd been close enough for her to overhear their conversation.

Penny wished to guide her own future, as short as it was. It was her choice, but she'd needed help to carry it out. In many ways, it had been cruel of her to ask Jaune to do such a thing. It was her life, but the one that took it had to live with the consequences. But he'd had the strength to carry it out, no matter how it hurt his soul.

Weiss wasn't sure how much Penny's father knew.

She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

It was all a big mess, and she didn't know what to do about it.

"Weiss?"

She blinked before shaking her head, smiling at her sister.

"Winter, I apologize – I was just lost in thought."

Winter Schnee – the Winter Maiden, General of what remained of the Atlesian military, and her big sister. Ice blue eyes regarded her worryingly, more expressive than Weiss remembered her sister being. Since returning, Weiss had noticed that Winter had been much more open with her emotions, where once upon a time, she'd been reserved and disciplined.

Having believed Weiss dead, it seemed to have brought about a shift in her sister. She was no longer willing to hold back.

“What has you so distracted?” Winter asked, gesturing at her cooling cup of tea. Weiss hadn’t taken more than a few sips. “It isn’t like you to be so lost in thought.”

The little cafe they found themselves in was comfy and intimate, the table they were seated at made of old, worn hardwood, the chairs decorated and furnished with handmade cushions for comfort. Old photographs hung on the wall, a collage of memories spanning back decades, shifting from color to black and white the further back you went. There were recurring faces, those of the owners and their parents, and their parents' parents, as well as customers, family friends, and more. The room was small, only able to seat ten customers at best but despite its size, it was extremely popular, though they’d managed to come at a slow moment. The coffee and tea were highly regarded, and Weiss knew her sister probably thoroughly researched the best places to come. She was just that type of person.

Weiss was about to brush it off, her mouth opening before she paused, reconsidering it. If there was someone she could speak to freely, it was her sister. And at the end of the day, this situation had direct consequences on Winter herself. Jaune’s actions had made her the Winter Maiden.

Perhaps she should speak to her about it after all.

Weiss gathered her thoughts. “Winter... may I ask you something sensitive?”

Winter nodded, “Of course. You may ask me anything.”

“What do you know of how Penny died?”

Winter froze, having gone to take a sip of her own tea. The cup was poised halfway to her mouth, but after hearing Weiss' question, she slowly lowered it back down. It clinked against the saucer, and Weiss watched as a troubled expression crossed her face.

"It is difficult to explain," Winter started slowly. "When Penny died... I experienced a strange phenomena."

"What do you mean?"

"I spoke to her," Winter said simply. "Even though we were apart, in that moment when she died and I inherited the mantle of the Winter Maiden – we spoke."

Weiss felt a burst of surprise. "You did?"

Winter nodded, a sad smile stretching her lips. "I did. While it wasn't long, and we didn't speak about much, not all of what I experienced was through her words. It is difficult to explain sufficiently, but... in some way, she was able to convey to me what happened."

Winter knew.

"She never said so with words, but I understood what had happened," Winter said, voice pained. "I know what she asked Jaune Arc to do, and that he granted her dying wish."

They sat in silence for a moment, Weiss absorbing Winter's words.

“He has been through a terrible ordeal, hasn’t he?” Winter asked softly.

Weiss nodded. “Yes. I... I want to help him.”

“When the pathways began collapsing, and you had fallen into the void, I was lost,” Winter confessed, staring down at her hands. Her fingers curled into loose fists, limp against the table. “I was consumed by anger, hate, and pain. I had never felt so much pain. I wanted to make that woman pay – but it was Jaune that talked sense into me.”

“He did?”

Winter sighed, her eyes slipping shut. “I would have chased her to the ends of time if he hadn’t been there, but when we fled... by the time I realized he wouldn’t make it, it was too late. I looked back as I passed through the portal, and it was only then that I saw the pathway collapse beneath him. I – Weiss, I could have taken him with me, I *should* have been able to stop him from falling but...”

Winter carried guilt of her own. Weiss could see that it had been eating at her, and Winter felt as if she had failed.

“I believed my recklessness had killed him,” Winter said, stricken. “But perhaps what happened next was even worse.”

“Don’t think like that,” Weiss reached across the table and grabbed her hand, giving it a squeeze. “He has suffered, *so much* – but he is here with us, alive. And I’m willing to do whatever it takes to help him. Whatever it takes.”

The conviction in her voice made Winter raise her head.

“You care for him very much.”

“I do.”

Winter’s smile was fleeting, a small twitch of her lips. “If I can help you in any way, I will. He deserves it.”

“Thank you.”

Winter could help by giving her the information she sought.

“Does anyone else know what happened?” Weiss pressed, releasing Winter’s hand and returning to her tea. It was lukewarm now but still tasty, the floral notes helping to uplift her. This was a heavy topic. “Have you told anyone?”

Winter nodded. “Yes. I – when asked, I provided a full account of what happened when I inherited the Winter Maiden’s powers. Including my conversation with Penny, and what she conveyed to me in other ways.”

Weiss hesitated. “Does her father know?”

Winter bowed her head. "He does."

That must have been a difficult conversation to have. Informing a parent about the death of their child, and then revealing the circumstances behind it. Dr. Polendina may not have been Penny's father in the traditional sense. They had no blood ties, and Penny had been a being created by science. She began life as a machine – but she was a machine unlike any other. Perhaps she hadn't shared his blood, and she wasn't born in a typical way, but the power of his very soul had given her life.

"Was he...?" Weiss tried to ask but couldn't find a way to delicately phrase it. She didn't have to. Winter understood.

"He was understandably upset," Winter filled in. "As we all were. It was... a dark time. Many of us had lost family, and with the destruction of Atlas and Mantle... things weren't good," the echo of their pain was clear in Winter's voice. "But he does not blame Jaune for what occurred. In fact, he took great comfort in what happened – that it was Penny's choice, and that she had a friend by her side that was willing to carry out her wish, understanding how difficult it must have been for him to do so."

Weiss felt a spark of hope. "Truly, sister?"

Winter's eyes said it all. "Truly. Jaune Arc does not need fear any resentment or anger for his courage. Pietro understands completely."

That was good. If the man had carried a grudge, things would have been much harder to mend. Jaune would never be able to forgive himself if Penny's father lay the blame at his feet. Even with his understanding, it may still be impossible.

But Weiss was unwilling to back down. Even if it took years.

She was going to show Jaune that he had nothing to fear. That rightly or wrongly, what had happened wasn't his fault. He'd been placed in a difficult situation, and a friend had asked him for help.

Winter's head tilted slightly, her long bang shifting away from her face, letting her look at Weiss fully. Searching, almost – looking for something, before nodding, satisfied.

“What?” Weiss asked, slightly defensive.

Winter smiled, her features softening. “I approve.”

“Pardon?”

“Your choice in life partner. I approve.”

Weiss frowned, taking a moment to catch on. When she did, her cheeks burned hotly.

“Winter!”

“Am I wrong?”

Weiss struggled to formulate a response. When nothing came, she settled for pouting.

Winter laughed, a rare sound. Weiss wished she would laugh more often, for it was a beautiful sound, rich and full, though she would rather her older sister wouldn't laugh *at* her.

"It isn't funny," Weiss muttered.

Winter continued to chuckle, her eyes crinkling. "I apologize. That was very unseemly of me."

She didn't mean it. She didn't mean it at all!

Weiss huffed.

Was she really so obvious?

That was a little embarrassing, but so what? Her feelings for Jaune were unimportant. His feelings were what mattered here, and he was hurting. Weiss wanted to change that. If that meant as a friend, then so be it. If it meant as more, then... well, yes, of course she wanted that, but only if that is what he wanted too.

She wasn't going to force herself on him.

But this conversation had been truly enlightening. How did she move forward from here, though? Weiss knew that it was much easier said than done when dealing with these sorts of emotions. It would do him some good to speak with Dr. Polendina, she truly believed that. Convincing Jaune to meet the man would not be easy, though.

No one ever said this was going to be easy, though.

Their remaining time together took a much lighter turn after that. They spoke about Winter's day to day duties, and how she had reconnected with their mother and brother. Whitley was still a bit of a brat with an acidic tongue when pushed, but Weiss thought it fitting for their dysfunctional family that at the end of the world, they were finally finding common ground.

The death of Jacques Schnee and ruination of her grandfather's legacy had brought them all together again.

That is where Weiss stopped next. After parting ways with Winter, Weiss made her way over to the apartment complex that her mother and brother were staying in. It was a nice building, once a hotel – but it had been converted into emergency housing. Politics were in play, even here in Vacuo, and so the families of 'higher standing' had been sent here. While the Schnee Dust Company was little more than a name these days, they still had a fleet of airships at their disposal. They weren't attack craft but transport was just as important, so it meant that her family was afforded some privileges.

It may have rankled her – if not for the good her mother and brother had been doing. It wasn't a stretch to say that Weiss had been shocked to learn that they regularly went out into the city to help out, handing out supplies and food when they were able. Those transport craft had been used to evacuate many of the outer territories, those towns and villages that were nomadic in nature and stood no chance against a concentrated Grimm assault.

They were doing their part in the only way that they could. Weiss could respect that.

Imagine her surprise that when she arrived, the subject of her thoughts and feelings just so happened to be present.

“Jaune?” Weiss exclaimed, shocked.

Weiss had let herself in, and hadn’t even closed the door when she spotted her friend sitting on the couch. She saw the way his body tensed immediately, his eyes meeting hers before darting away, as if ashamed. By his side was her mother, Willow Schnee, holding a plate of cookies, as if she were in the process of attempting to feed him.

Weiss stared.

What was going on here?

“Weiss!” Willow greeted warmly. Strangely enough, the approaching end of the world had done wonders for her complexion. Gone were the tired lines that once graced her mature features, replaced by smooth, lush skin.

It was truly a sight. The death of her father was the best thing that ever happened to her mother.

Weiss still remembered the dark circles around her eyes, though. The signs of not sleeping, barely eating. That was what awaited Weiss upon her return from the dead, but ever since then, she had bounced back stronger than ever.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Willow continued, still holding that plate of cookies. “What a pleasant surprise!”

Weiss blinked.

“Oh, yes, well – I thought I would stop by after tea with Winter,” Weiss said slowly. “Mother – where did you get those cookies from?”

“I baked them myself,” she said proudly.

“...What?” Weiss asked, startled. “You can bake?”

Willow scowled. “Of course I can bake! Why ever would you think otherwise?”

“We had chefs on retainer,” Weiss reminded her. “I even had a cake butler, and we spent ridiculous amounts of money on artisan confectionery... Mother, I’ve never seen you in the kitchen in all my years I’ve been your daughter!”

Willow huffed. “That doesn’t mean I can’t bake!”

“Jaune, you haven’t eaten one of those, have you?” Weiss warned quickly.

“Now *that* is very rude of you to say,” Willow said sternly. “I did not know my daughter was so mean spirited.”

“If you poison him...!” Weiss started, marching over but was cut off when Jaune raised a hand.

“No, uh – it’s fine, Weiss. I’ve had them before. They’re actually pretty good.”

Weiss gaped.

Willow offered the plate and asked shrewdly, “Would you like to try your mother’s home baked cookies?”

She was dreaming. There was no other explanation.

“The look on your face right now is truly ridiculous, dear sister,” that familiar droll tone instantly snapped her back to reality. Whitley entered carrying a tray, balanced upon which were three mugs. “Please close your mouth. It is rather unbecoming.”

“Whitley,” Weiss said seriously. “Mother has been baking.”

“Yes. She has quite the knack for it, apparently,” he replied while Willow pouted. “Who would have thought?”

“My children are horrible,” Willow lamented loudly. “But at least I have you, Jaune. Please have another!”

“Uh – sure,” Jaune plucked a cookie off the plate and took a bite. It was a good sign that his teeth didn’t shatter but maybe that was because of his aura?

“And to what do we owe the pleasure of your company?” Whitley asked, placing the mugs on the coffee table. “We weren’t expecting you.”

“As I told mother, I simply decided to stop by after having tea with Winter,” Weiss then gestured at the unlikely trio. “I did not expect to find Jaune here, of all people. Am I missing something?”

“We requested his assistance,” Whitley answered, crossing his arms. “As a Huntsman, and as someone known to the people of Mantle, we believed he was the best choice.”

Weiss frowned. “Has something happened?”

The light atmosphere shifted and it made Weiss tense.

“A couple of the refugee families have gone missing,” Willow said softly, taking over. “We know because they’ve been some of the few that have been receptive to our hand outs. Every couple of days, Whitley and I hand out food parcels at one of the shelters. Sometimes things get a little heated but we never go alone, so nothing has happened. But this last time we went, they weren’t there.”

“Couldn’t they have just moved?” Weiss asked, confused.

“We asked around, mostly those people that accept our handouts and know we mean well,” Whitley continued. “Apparently some of the children went missing one night, and then when the families went to look for them, they never returned. It’s been reported but things here are... well, everyone is too busy. Vacuo doesn’t exactly have a police force,” he grimaced. “Not in the traditional sense – and this isn’t something you take to the military. We don’t have many options.”

“You could have come to me.”

“And we would have, should Jaune have turned us down,” Willow jumped back in. “But we thought that it might be better to have someone less... provocative handling it.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Weiss asked. “How am I provocative?”

“You’re a Schnee,” Willow said simply – and that was more than enough to explain it, as much as she hated it. “They see us as outsiders here, and us most of all,” Willow gestured at herself, Whitley and Weiss. “Some don’t care, some are willing to look past it – but some aren’t.”

Weiss sighed.

“I suppose that makes sense,” she eyed Jaune curiously. “How did you know Jaune knows the people of Mantle?”

“Winter mentioned it to us,” Whitley smirked. “How he used to babysit a bunch of brats and walk them to school.”

The mission that no one else wanted to take, and yet Jaune continued to take it, morning after morning, no matter how much people teased him over it. At first, even he hadn’t wanted that particular mission and thought it was a waste of time, but that had only lasted as far as the first time he completed it. After that, he never complained and never looked down on it. Weiss remembered Yang asking him once why he kept taking it when he didn’t have to, and his response had been simple.

"If I don't, no one else will," he'd replied. "And all it takes is one Grimm getting through the wall and these children won't make it to school. Why else did I choose to become a Huntsman if not for this?"

"I'm helping," Weiss volunteered. "I refuse to stand by and do nothing."

Jaune didn't object, but he didn't appear over the moon, either. He couldn't look at her for more than a few moments before his eyes darted away, and it bothered her more than she would like to admit.

He'd never had trouble looking at her. Not ever.

Did he really think she would judge him for what happened?

Weiss ended up trying one of her mother's cookies. Much to her surprise, they actually were really good. Jaune had been telling the truth, he wasn't just being polite. They were just chocolate chip cookies but they were perfectly sweet without being overpowering, while the outside was just the right amount of firm while the inside was soft and doughy.

Weiss liked them that way.

Seeing that she liked them, her mother ended up filling a container for her to take. She was north of twenty years old and yet it made her feel like a little girl, receiving cookies to take home with her.

...She didn't mind it. She slipped the container into her pouch, and would indulge in them later.

Whitley provided names for the families, and Jaune quickly wrote them down before they took their leave after a few more minutes of conversation. Once the door shut behind them, he began walking quickly but Weiss hastily grabbed his hand, halting him.

“Jaune...”

He didn’t speak for a long, drawn out moment, his body taut with tension – and then with a sigh, he sagged, turning to face her.

“Weiss, I...” he paused, struggling. “What happened the other night...”

She interrupted him. “I get it.”

He blinked.

“You get it?”

Weiss nodded, giving his hand a comforting squeeze. “Penny, right?”

He opened his mouth and then shut it again.

"You don't have to deal with this alone, Jaune," she informed him gently, expression open. She stepped closer. "You do not need to be ashamed."

He hesitated.

"I just... when I saw her father, I guess I panicked," he said haltingly, eyes swimming with emotion. At this moment, he reminded her more of the old Jaune, emotions bared. "I – I killed his daughter and – does he even *know*? What do I say to him? I – it would destroy him to know, and I would deserve his hate. What I did to her..."

"You did what you had to do," Weiss interjected, cupping his cheek and forcing him to look her in the eye. His jaw was a little rough, the stubble tickling her palm. "I was there, remember? I know what happened. I know it was Penny's choice."

"I – we could have saved her."

Weiss shook her sadly. "No. You know that isn't true – and Penny understood that. That is why she asked you to do what you did. She wanted to choose," Weiss felt her eyes prickle, but she refused to cry even though her heart ached to think of her friend, gone too soon. "It's unfair that it fell on you, but you granted her dying wish, Jaune. You were there for her when no one else could be. I know it hurts but you're a good friend. Penny herself would agree."

His jaw flexed, teeth clenched, his face becoming harsh. Weiss witnessed the pain flash across his expression, years of guilt weighing him down.

"I just... it shouldn't have happened."

“No,” Weiss agreed. “So many things that have happened to us shouldn’t have happened. Pyrrha should be with us, still your partner and teammate. We should all still be at Beacon, enjoying our final year, about to graduate. You shouldn’t have had to be alone all those years,” Weiss felt her throat seize up, and it took her a second to clear it. “But it did. So here we are.”

“Here we are,” he grunted.

“Dr. Polendina knows,” she revealed.

“What?”

“Winter... when she inherited the Winter Maiden’s powers, she spoke to Penny,” Weiss said as he stared at her incredulously. “Magic never ceases to amaze, does it? Well – she knew what happened, how she died, what you did for her... and she passed it along.”

“Oh.”

“He doesn’t blame you.”

His brow furrowed. “How can you be so sure?”

“Winter says so, and I trust my sister. He understands that it was her choice, and that you had the strength of will to carry it out, no matter how horrible the act.”

Weiss could tell he was struggling to believe that, or perhaps, he hoped that was the case but he wasn't sure. That was fine. It was a start.

"You should speak to him."

"I... don't know if I can," he admitted. Weiss opened her mouth to encourage him when she saw his face harden, and he continued before she could speak. "No, you're right – I... not for me. He deserves an explanation. He deserves to hear it from my mouth, not anyone else. Penny deserves it. I just... I need some time."

Her thumb stroked his cheek tenderly, her heart going out to him. "Take your time, Jaune. I know this isn't easy."

He raised a hand, pulling her palm away from his hand, cradling it gently before much to her shock, he placed a chaste kiss on her knuckles. Like a knight kissing the hand of his princess. Her skin burned from the unexpected contact, lips feather soft. A rush of heat ran down her arm, and it rocked her.

"Thank you, Weiss. I'm sorry that I ruined our night at the market," he apologized earnestly.

"W-What are you talking about you big idiot?" she stammered, feeling her cheeks blaze. "I-I don't care about that at all! I was w-worried about you!"

"Even so, I'm sorry," he sighed. "I need to apologize to Ruby, as well."

"A-As long as you aren't avoiding us any more!"

Jaune bowed his head, contrite. "I won't."

"G-Good!"

Weiss felt jittery, out of sorts. She cradled her hand against her chest, feeling her racing heart pounding away inside her chest. This was a serious moment, and he had only kissed her hand as a show of repentance. It didn't mean anything else, and yet...

She needed to get herself under control. She was being a lovesick fool, and this was neither the time nor the place for it.

She cleared her throat, patting down her dress, smoothing out imaginary wrinkles.

"So," she said loudly, attempting to put that little episode behind her. "These missing families..."

Jaune became all business.

"We know there is tension between the refugees and locals," Jaune said, beckoning Weiss to follow. "We have their names, and we know which shelter your mother and brother hand out food at. That is where we will start. If we can get a mission in the area to deliver supplies, it'll be cover for our presence and hopefully it won't spook the people too much."

"It sounds like you've already got it figured out," Weiss said, impressed.

“From there, we can ask around and see if we can find any clues. If they left their things behind, then that would point towards foul play. They have so little to begin with, can you see a refugee family abandoning their things willingly?”

No. She couldn't.

“I was thinking about asking Ren to help us. He is good at this type of thing, and his semblance would be helpful in keeping people calm should things to flare up.”

“Right.”

“And Ruby, I think. The people... well, they trust her. They might be willing to open up to her more readily.”

So a team was formed.