

Vacuo was hot, and filled with sand – Weiss was *not* a fan.

The sun glared down angrily from up above, an ever present, scorching reminder, harsh shafts of light working their way between the towering maze of misshapen stone and clay buildings. Sweat beaded on her brow but she couldn't wipe it away, her hands occupied, and every gust of wind felt like a blast furnace that kicked sand into her face. The box she carried was heavy and awkward, forcing her to brace it against her chest, and it was only the first in a half dozen she needed to deliver. Food for the displaced – for those that had nothing, forced to flee their dying kingdom.

Wary eyes watched her as she approached, no doubt instantly recognizing her. It was hard to hide your identity when every member of your family had white hair, and the Schnee family was one of the most well known across the world. Once upon a time, it was because of the Schnee Dust Company, providing the world with mankind's greatest boon. Now? Well – it was no secret what part her father played in the downfall of Atlas and Mantle.

“Delivery,” she announced, eyes meeting that of a large man with a scarred face. They were relatively fresh, only a few months old, still red raw around the edges. There was no doubt; they'd been gained while he fled through the portals, as he was deposited in a new land, halfway across Remnant. Weiss had heard the stories already, about how thousands of people suddenly appearing outside the city had incited days of Grimm attacks.

He didn't say a word, simply offering his arms. His expression was complicated, a mixture of resentment – and awe. He knew exactly who she was, and the fact that she should be dead.

That stupid mural. There were several of them, and Weiss was the star of a few.

Weiss handed over the box and returned the way she came, finally able to wipe at her forehead. She grimaced as the back of her hand came away wet.

She never thought she'd see the day, but... she missed the harsh cold of Atlas, those crisp mornings where the air was almost too painful to breathe, and it stung the skin of your face to behold it.

Emerald was waiting for her back at the cart, still unloading what they needed for this stop. In addition to food, there were boxes of clothing, things more suited to the hot climate, and water – cartons of bottled water, stacked five high, perhaps the most valuable commodity of all.

“You look like a tomato,” she said in amusement, smirking as Weiss shot her a glare. “Are you already sunburned – or are you just overheating?”

“Very funny, especially from someone that is sweating through her clothes,” Weiss pointed out, and Emerald quickly looked down, her face twisting in disgust. Her shirt was damp around her breasts, clinging to her skin suggestively.

“Urgh – it used to get hot in Mistral in the summer, but nothing like this,” Emerald shook her head, her green locks dancing around her shoulders. “At least it isn't humid.”

Was that meant to be the silver lining?

“Don't you think you should find something cooler to wear?” she continued. “That dress can't be comfortable in this heat.”

She was right. Weiss had been persisting with it, but even after discarding her gloves and the blue shrug around her shoulders, the insulated material was too much. This dress had been made with the harsh cold of Solitas in mind, and she was about as far removed from that as possible. If they'd been somewhere more temperate like Vale, she could have made due, but they weren't.

Thoughts of Vale made her heart hurt, and she quickly pushed it aside. There wasn't time for that.

Emerald wasn't the only one that had accompanied her on this trip.

He approached from the opposite direction, his steps measured, his gait smooth in a way that Weiss was still getting used to. The armor was no longer rusted, and the sword on his hip no longer broken, but when she looked at him, she could still see the worn lines and tired eyes in her mind, the messy ponytail, and the beard speckled with silver.

Jaune Arc looked young, yet carried himself like a much older man because in truth, he was one.

Her eyes settled on the streak of white that passed through his short blond hair, the sole physical remnant of his ordeal. Though he appeared hale and whole, physically – Weiss knew that to look at him was only scratching the surface.

Emerald watched him from her perch atop the cart, as if she *knew* something was off but couldn't place her finger on what. That is how a lot of people who once knew Jaune Arc, even in passing, looked at him now. Everything *appeared* how it should, yet there was an undeniable gravity to him now that made it difficult to look away from. He carried with him a weight, a gravitas that clashed with his appearance.

Very few people knew the truth.

Beyond Team RWBY, it was those who knew them best. Nora and Ren were told immediately by Jaune himself, and Ozpin – Oscar – had been informed. Ruby and Yang's uncle, Winter – they

had also been informed, and Emerald too. She was one of them now. Weiss could still remember the surprising pain on Winter's face when she'd learned the truth, as if they'd plunged a red hot blade under her ribs. Why her reaction had been so visceral, Weiss did not know; she refused to talk about it, and Weiss... well, she hadn't pressed.

But knowing about what Jaune had been through, and *understanding* it were two different things.

There was only one person who had any chance of understanding what he'd been through, and that was Ozpin. His unique condition best placed him to sympathize, for he had spent countless lives walking the face of Remnant. The rest of them... even Weiss, who had witnessed him as an older man first hand... it was impossible.

How many years had he been in that strange world, all alone with no one else beyond those strange creatures to keep him company? How many years had he waited for them, praying that they would one day find him?

How had he never given up?

Whenever she thought about it, it made her want to cry. Weiss had some understanding of loneliness – but not on that extreme. What she knew and experienced herself, it was enough. For a short time, he'd had Lewis and Alyx – but that relationship was complicated, filled with betrayal and years of pain, anger – only for him to discover the truth at the very end.

At the very least, that little brat had helped to restore him – if not in mind, then in body. Clarity could be a double-edged sword.

It was the mind that Weiss was most worried about. She couldn't forget the desperation he'd shown, his endless, fruitless goal of saving the Paper Pleasers. She remembered the names

he'd written down for those weird origami creatures, *their names* – and it made her want to cry all over again.

Jaune Arc was a damaged man – but none of them could see the full extent of it, because he was very good at hiding it.

Since they'd returned, he had thrown himself into his work. Other than a small period of rest at the very beginning, he had been tirelessly helping where he could. The Grimm were very present, drawn in by the negative emotions of the city, the tension that had formed between the Atlesian refugees and the native Vacuoan people, so Huntsmen were in high demand. While Salem had yet to make her move, and was in fact strangely silent, they had their hands full with the constant attacks.

Jaune hadn't wasted a single moment. He knew how to fight, and fight well – and so he put those skills to use. When he wasn't outside the city walls fighting Grimm, he was helping all those he could. Be it delivering food parcels like they were doing now, or simply helping to keep the peace, or joining the builders and engineers in shoring up the city defenses, Jaune was constantly in motion.

He had replaced the Paper Pleasers with the residence of the city.

It worried her.

It wasn't like she wasn't also doing the same, as were her friends – they were all pitching in, however they could. But they also took time to rest and recharge. As far as she was aware, Jaune did not stop beyond the necessary time to eat, and to sleep.

It was that obsessive behavior that placed her on edge, but she did not know how to break it. Whenever she tried to speak to him about slowing down, he simply brushed it off. It wasn't the same as before, he'd claim. This was important. Let him help, let him be useful.

It was difficult to argue against someone that was so earnest in his desire to help, even though Weiss knew it was born of something deeper. Something darker.

“You’re back quick,” Emerald commented as he approached. “No problems finding the place?”

“A little. They’ve found a small place, at the end of an alley, you wouldn’t know it was there until you’re right in front of it. They were forced out of their last place by their neighbours, but someone was willing to take them in.”

Vacuo and Atlas had a long history of hostilities stemming from the Great War. While the wounds between the other kingdoms had healed, those in Vacuo had festered – and for good reason. These lands had once been an oasis, but the greed of foreign men had stripped it of natural resources until there was very little left. The only reason the kingdom hadn’t completely collapsed into dust was because of the massive river that passed through the northern part of the city, allowing them to continue to grow their own food and giving them an ample water supply, otherwise it would have been complete annihilation.

Vacuo had been on the winning side of the war, but afterwards, Atlas had its revenge through business and exploitation.

To them, it must have seemed like a bad joke. In their eyes, they were now hosting the displaced people of the kingdom that had all but destroyed their own. Mantle, Atlas – it didn’t matter what name was used, they were one and the same.

Emerald scowled.

“I get that they’re pissed about it, but don’t they realize we have bigger things to worry about now?” she then sighed angrily. “Damn it. I can’t even say that if I was in their shoes, I’d feel any different.”

“They’re scared,” Jaune said, voice somber. “And the people of Atlas are an easy outlet to vent out their frustrations on. Even without the historical transgressions...”

It was a bit of a mess, but this was what they’d been given to work with.

Those clear blue eyes shifted over to her, and Weiss found herself straightening up as he asked, “Are you okay? You look a little red.”

Emerald snickered, prompting another glare from her.

“I’m fine, it’s just *hot*,” she gestured angrily at the sun. “I’m not used to it.”

Jaune raised a hand to shield his eyes as he gazed up at the cloudless sky. “Yeah, this weather is no joke.”

“How about we finish our work and then we can get something cold to drink,” Emerald suggested. “I don’t want to be in the sun longer than I have to be.”

Jaune nodded. “Right.”

Even though he was in plate armor and jeans, he seemed to be handling the heat better than Weiss was. Had the Ever After experienced such extreme temperatures? They'd only been there a matter of days, and that had been enough to show them how crazy and wild that world had been. Did it even have seasons? Did they happen all in one day, like some bizarre, sped up version of what happened on Remnant? Or was it slower. Did summer last years? Did it snow in winter, and if so, how long did it last? Days, months, years? Decades?

Weiss shook the thought away, not wishing to linger on it. Jaune was still watching her and she shot him a reassuring smile.

They carted the boxes of food and clothes to the people that needed them, handing out water wherever they went. The children were most appreciative, greeting them with grateful smiles and cheerful eyes, but their parents were more wary. While they looked at her with suspicion, they were more accepting of Jaune and Emerald, so she allowed them to do most of the talking when needed.

Slowly, their cart emptied of supplies until all they were left with were a few blankets. They handed those out to whoever wanted them before making their way back towards the towering ziggurat located in the center of the city.

Shade Academy was by far the largest building in Vacuo, the sand stone structure alight beneath the sun's rays. More than just a Huntsman Academy, it was also the seat of power that governed the people. As Jaune led their horse-drawn cart through the walled gates, their eyes met the familiar sight of all that remained of the Atlesian battleship fleet undergoing maintenance. Mechanics and engineers rushed around with tools, fuel cells being recharged with Dust, soldiers going through their drills with cold precision. Students of the school watched, some with disdain, others with open curiosity.

They found a place to leave their cart, Jaune deftly removing the harness to release the horse. It huffed in appreciation and nipped at him affectionately, and he smiled, one of the rare, genuine smiles he showed these days, unclouded by memories.

He was good with animals.

Weiss thought about Juniper, whom he had been forced to leave behind. How long had they been companions? It must have been difficult to part ways with such a stalwart friend, perhaps his only source of real companionship for years.

The school had a stable where they left the horse with a bag full of oats before reporting to the Headmaster. Headmaster Theodore was an odd man; young, a little eccentric, but well respected by the people in Vacuo. On top of preparing the city for Salem's eventual coming, he was still operating Shade as an institute of learning, and it was he whom they went to for their missions.

They found him in the dining hall – and he wasn't alone.

Team CFVY hadn't changed much since their days at Beacon. Coco still exuded cool confidence, a commanding presence with her fashionable flare. Yatsunami loomed ever silent, calm, composed, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Laid back, Fox appeared unconcerned in even the most dire situations, but was always ready with a sarcastic quip or joke to lighten the mood. As for Velvet... well, out of the four, she was perhaps the one that had changed the most.

She was still kind with warm eyes, and a listening ear should you need it. Weiss had seen her interact with the children of the city, and she played the role of older sister well. But unlike those years at Beacon, there was a hardened quality to her now. Just as they had been forged in fire through their experiences in Mistral, Argus, Atlas and the Ever After, Vacuo had honed her into the person she was today.

After the Fall of Beacon, Team CFVY had been relocated to Shade to continue their education. They'd been here ever since, and from the few conversations Weiss had with them, she knew the situation here had been delicate, even before the refugees and destruction of Atlas and Mantle.

Fox noticed them first, tilting his head as he heard them approach. Though blind, he had remarkable awareness.

“—cleared out the last of their smuggling dens,” Coco was reporting, standing at attention. “There wasn’t much there. Old weapons and supplies, it looked like they hadn’t used it in a long time.”

“Another dead end,” Theodore mused aloud. “It appears that Jax and Gillian continue to elude us.”

While Salem had been unusually quiet, she hadn’t been completely absent. Before they’d returned from the Ever After, there had been a jail break orchestrated by Tyrian and Mercury, their faces caught on surveillance from the prison. Jax and Gillian Asturias were dangerous criminals who once led a group called the Crown, a group Team CFVY had clashed with often during their time in Vacuo. They’d been defeated, but like a disease, their ideology lingered, poisoning the city.

They knew the city well, and would only be a great asset to Salem when she launched her attack.

“We’d like to continue our search,” Coco said, her team nodding. “We’ve managed to turn up some leads. We think we’ve managed to find how they got into the city, and we’re confident we can track them from there.”

“Granted,” Theodore said immediately. “Any resources you need are at your disposal. Just be careful – you know how dangerous they are, do not place yourself in any unnecessary danger. If you find anything, contact us immediately.”

“Will do.”

Velvet spotted them next, her eyes lighting up. “Jaune! Weiss!”

Her expression froze as she spotted Emerald. Yatsunashi shifted subtly, tense, while Fox remained loose but focused. Coco tilted her head, eyeing them up.

Either oblivious to the sudden tension or uncaring of it, Jaune raised a hand, “Hey.”

Emerald remained unbothered by his side, focused on Theodore. Time had passed, but many from Beacon hadn’t forgotten Emerald’s part in what transpired. Weiss had learned from Nora that things had been very close to becoming violent at the beginning, but with her and Ren vouching for her, it had kept things from spilling over.

It didn’t erase their feelings, though.

But seeing Jaune stand by her side, unconcerned, *working with her* – it did make many of them question their lingering resentment.

He had more reason than most to hate her. Before the Ever After, he had felt much the same as they did – but to Jaune, much more time had passed. Years, decades. Enough time for those resentments to fade and heal, scab over. Weiss wasn’t sure how he truly felt about their former enemy, but on the surface, he did not appear to hold a grudge.

In fact, he had sought her out more than once to join him in his work, and Emerald had joined him without complaint.

How did Weiss feel about her? She'd proven her worth, both here and back in Atlas. Whatever hold Cinder once had on her was broken, and Weiss knew a thing or two about complicated relationships with those who held power over you.

"Jaune Arc," the Headmaster greeted. "You've completed your task?"

"Yes sir," he replied. "All supplies were delivered. Do you have anything else for us?"

"I do. Some parts need to be delivered to the wall in the west, so would you be open to providing an escort?"

Escort duty inside the city meant that the cargo was extremely valuable, and Theodore was taking no chances. Jaune nodded at once with Emerald seconding it.

Weiss sighed. "Can we at least get that cold drink first?"

Theodore had something sent from the kitchens. A popular drink here in Vacuo was something called a slushy which basically amounted to flavored ice. She'd seen a few people with them but had never tried one herself. It wasn't the type of drink that would be popular in Atlas, more likely to freeze completely solid before you could drink it. No, they were more partial to hot drinks to help stave off the creeping chill.

The drink she received was bright red with swirls of orange within. She stared at it for a moment, unsure, before raising the straw to her lips and taking a sip. An explosion of raspberry flavor entered her mouth, cold and refreshing, and Weiss perked up.

"Pretty good, right?" Jaune asked, giving her a knowing look.

Weiss found herself flushing lightly.

“Yes,” she said, attempting to maintain some dignity. “It is good.”

Jaune’s slushy was bright blue with purple swirls, while Emerald’s was a vibrant, shocking pink. She didn’t look very impressed by the color but drank it with enthusiasm, sighing as the cold, icy liquid did its job.

“We used to have things like this in Mistral,” Emerald mused. “A bunch of us kids would distract the vendor and...” she trailed off, frowning, catching herself.

“And?” Jaune pressed casually, sipping at his drink. Emerald eyed him cautiously.

“We’d draw him away and the older kids would steal a bunch of cups and fill them up.”

“Were they good?”

She hesitated.

“Yeah. They were the best.”

They found a table to sit down at to enjoy their treat. Weiss felt her body cooling down, the more she consumed her slushy, and knew she had discovered her new favorite drink. Not only was it tasty, but it helped regulate her temperature.

“Feeling better?” Jaune asked her and she nodded.

“Yes. Though I believe it is time to retire this dress. It is much too heavy for this climate.”

“I’m sure you could find something here to replace it with,” Emerald said. “Though I haven’t seen many people wear white around these parts...”

No, the colors they favored here were darker; browns, greens, yellows, the material light, breathable.

“I’ll check with my sister first,” she grumbled. “Maybe the military have something.”

Jaune grinned, his eyes crinkling. “Anything for fashion.”

Weiss nudged him with her elbow without thinking, “Hush. White is my color, I look good in it.”

He nodded. “Yeah. You do.”

It was said so easily, calmly – yet it made her cheeks burn even hotter. She turned her head away with a huff and sucked at her straw aggressively to cover it up, though she spotted Emerald from the corner of her eye smirking.

What was wrong with her?

She knew what was wrong.

She wasn't sure exactly when it started. Haven? Argus? Earlier? Weiss couldn't pinpoint the exact time, but all she had to do was think of the memories they shared, and was it any wonder that she had fallen so hopelessly?

Weiss Schnee was in love with Jaune Arc.

If her old self could see her now, she'd be mortified.

Perhaps it really had started on the night of the dance. Neptune's rejection had been awful, and it had been a severe blow to her ego. She hadn't once entertained the thought that he may turn her down, so when he did, she'd felt wretched. Part of her had wanted to skip the dance entirely, hide away in her room and pretend none of it ever happened, but she'd put so much effort into making the night a success that in the end, that had never been an option. If she had to suffer, then she would do it with what was left of her dignity.

When Neptune approached her, she'd been elated but confused. Why come talk to her if he wasn't interested in her that way? Didn't he realize how hurt she was? But at the time, she'd just been glad that he was talking to her.

And the reason was because of Jaune.

She didn't know the whole story, but apparently Jaune had spoken to him – rather vehemently, at that. Instead of trying to cheer her up himself and potentially get on her good side, exploiting her vulnerable state, he had instead gone to the one that hurt her and set him straight. Not for himself, but for her.

It had completely shattered the image of Jaune she'd had in her mind, and from that moment on, he continued to surprise her.

When Ruby had no one else to turn to, her team fractured and scattered across the globe, Jaune had been the one to step up. Fresh off the loss of his friend and partner, he'd accompanied her across continents, watching her back, keeping her safe. He did what none of them could do at the time, and she was eternally grateful to it – to him, Nora and Ren.

When they'd all reunited, Team RWBY whole once more, it meant that Team RNJR was no more. Unlike RWBY, JNPR was forever broken – and yet Jaune took it in stride, returning their leader to them without complaint or distress, happy for them that they had what he never could.

It was his maturity that surprised her most, and when she'd fallen to that wicked woman, Cinder... it was Jaune that brought her back.

She remembered the heat of the spear piercing her body, and then the cold – a bone deep chill that had devoured her as her consciousness slipped, and she was plunged into darkness. In that moment, Weiss thought she was dead, for what else could she be? Even the coldest Atlesian nights did not compare.

It felt an age, utterly consumed by the dark – but then a spark of warmth filled her, and that was all it took. It was like slipping into a hot bath after a long, stressful day, the comfort it provided, the renewal of energy, soothing not just the physical body but the soul itself. As she was filled with that wonderful feeling and her eyes fluttered open, it was Jaune's face that greeted her, his expression filled with concern, his eyes pleading for her return.

After that, there was no ignoring him. He had become a fine Huntsman, and as he overcome his own trauma and grew into the man he was always born to be, Weiss watched.

Where once he annoyed her, he now inspired her. Where once she may have avoided his company, she now craved it. In Atlas, he had been the pillar of strength they all needed. Calm, in control – while Weiss battled with her own demons, with her family, her father, he was there for her, for all of them.

But the world was cruel. Once again, it had thrown pain his way, forcing him to bear the burden. Why was it always him? First Pyrrha, and then Penny – at his own hand. A real girl at last, only for her life to be snuffed out on her own request. A sacrifice, to keep the mantle of the Winter Maiden away from Salem... but it was not just Penny's sacrifice, it was also Jaune's.

He followed through.

Weiss wasn't sure she could have done the same. Logically, she understood that it was the only way to keep the power out of Salem's hands but that did not make the act any easier. No, Weiss knew she wouldn't have been able to do it – and she doubted Ruby, Yang or Blake could have, either.

They'd have tried to fight it, to gain the ultimate victory where there wasn't one. Jaune had allowed Penny to choose her own destiny, no matter the damage it may do to his soul.

Yeah – it really wasn't a surprise she'd fallen in love with him.

He was everything she'd ever dreamed of in a man, in a companion. Kind, caring, capable. Dependable. Stalwart. A good friend; the best. Jaune was someone that Weiss could trust when she was vulnerable, when she was strong, whenever she needed it.

She just hated that it took so much pain for him to become who he was.

Jaune didn't deserve it.

So she made a vow.

She would be whatever he needed, going forward. An ear to listen. A shoulder to cry on. A friend to laugh with. Jaune would never need to pretend with her. He would never need to stand alone.

Not ever again.

"Weiss?"

She'd been staring, her eyes drinking him in. Instead of looking away, she met his eyes and held them.

"Yeah?"

"Are you okay?"

She smiled softly.

“I’m okay.”

She was better than okay. She was with him.

And she wasn’t about to leave him alone. Not if she could help it.