

“You want me to... accompany you shopping?” Jaune asked doubtfully, as if he had misunderstood her.

Weiss nodded. “That’s right.”

“And what are we shopping for?”

Weiss gestured at her combat dress. “If you recall, this is too hot for this climate, and while I was able to find a few things by asking around, I don’t have a full outfit yet. After speaking to some of the students here at Shade, I’ve discovered that there are a few stores in the city that cater to Huntresses.”

“Oh,” he said. There was a long pause. “And why do you need me again?”

She rolled her eyes. “Because I don’t want to go alone, and since you are free, I thought you’d like to come with me. Unless you don’t wish to spend time with me, then I would totally understand.”

His eyes widened, spotting the danger. Jaune raised his hands. “No, that isn’t what I was saying at all!”

“Excellent. So you’ll come with me?”

He blinked, realizing that he’d been tricked when he spotted her amused grin. A wry smile tugged at his lips, his eyes crinkling as he said, “I suppose I could join you.”

“You make it sound like such a chore,” she faux-complained, still smiling. “Am I really so horrible to be around?”

“You know that isn’t true.”

She felt warm in the chest. “Then stop fighting the inevitable and come with me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

It was true that she needed a much cooler outfit but this little outing wasn’t about that. It was just a convenient excuse, a way to kill two birds with one stone. The vow she’d made still resonated in her heart, and she was going to put it into immediate action. Human interaction was just what the doctor ordered, as Jaune was lacking the better part of two decades of it, so Weiss was going to give him a healthy injection of it.

Everyone needed a booster shot of love, right?

Blake and Yang had offered to go shopping with her when she’d mentioned it off hand what her plans for the day were, but even if her real goal hadn’t been to have Jaune take a break and have some fun, she wouldn’t have accepted. Weiss found it difficult to be around them lately, they were so sickeningly sweet with one another. She was happy for them and their budding relationship, but it made her want to hurl.

Maybe that was mean, but if she saw them kiss one more time, she was going to throw something at them. Public displays of affection made people very uncomfortable! Didn’t they realize this? Knowing Yang, she probably did and was doing it anyway – though from what Weiss had seen, Blake was the one taking the lead.

As expected of a pervert, she supposed.

Ruby would have joined them but she was busy. Some meeting with Oscar, it was all very secret. Weiss was glad, though. She hadn't wanted anyone else to tag along. It was better if it was just her and Jaune. Alone.

It wasn't a date. It wasn't. Yes, they were going out some place together but it was just a friendly outing. That was all. All in an effort to get him to relax and loosen up, and not worry about the state of affairs in Vacuo, or the world in general, and just be... Jaune Arc.

When was the last time he'd just been Jaune?

Probably a very long time, she'd wager.

And *if* Jaune happened to see this as a date, then... that was fine! It was perfectly okay, and good, and – well, Weiss would like that very much! But it wasn't a requirement! Just being together, *as friends*, was more than enough – for now.

Always! It was fine always! But, you know... Weiss wouldn't mind at all if it was only *for now*.

"Weiss?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes. I am well," she'd obviously been spacing out a little bit. Embarrassing! "Well – let us be off. I've been given directions. Afterwards, I was told about a nice little cafe.

They serve something called boba, whatever that is – some kind of drink? Like those slushy drinks, they're really popular with the students."

"Sounds good," Jaune said, joining her as they exited the ziggurat and descended the long staircase. "It's lucky you caught me when you did, I was just about to search for Headmaster Theodore for a mission."

"Yes, I had a feeling that was where you were going," Weiss said dryly. "That's all you ever do these days."

Jaune shrugged. "I just want to help out. That isn't bad, is it?"

"No, not at all – but you shouldn't overdo it," she said gently. "We're only human. Rest is important, both for the body and the mind."

He sighed. "I suppose you're right. Ren mentioned that I've been going full steam ahead, but... I guess I'm just used to constantly having something to do, and since they're, you know... going through something themselves, Ren and Nora, that is... I thought it best to keep busy and not intrude."

Like they'd care! They were just happy to have him back!

Weiss felt a twinge of sadness, though. The Paper Pleasers. Every day without fail, he'd done his utmost to protect them. Unable to let go, striving for perfection – scared of failure. Weiss reached out and placed a hand on his arm, giving it an affectionate squeeze. He stared at her in surprise before smiling, grabbing her hand and squeezing it back.

The store wasn't very far from the academy, though the roads in Vacuo were... confusing to say the least. They twisted and turned, and some were very narrow, disappearing between buildings that overhung the street, homes and stores built upon one another over the generations. Vacuo had plenty of room, but they'd done their best to keep the city compact, close to the river.

As usual, Weiss garnered her fair share of looks. Those that recognized who she was, the looks were not always friendly. In fact, they often weren't. But she was used to it by now. Her father had done a lot to damage the Schnee name, and it would possibly take the rest of her life to help restore it. All she could do was take it one step at a time, one foot in front of the other. Eventually, she would reach her destination.

That is what she believed, anyway.

While they may have resented the presence of foreigners, it was counter-balanced by the fact that they were Huntsmen. Weiss may have received a frosty reception but the way they looked at Jaune was different. Cautiously hopeful that they were protected, and the Grimm would never breach the walls.

If only it was a guarantee. Atlas had been well protected but had fallen regardless.

The store was a lot larger than Weiss had been anticipating. Almost like a small warehouse, there were countless rows of clothing and racks of raw material on display, should you wish for a custom outfit. Everything from leather to kevlar, synthetic and natural fibers, woven into high grade Huntsmen attire. The sheer scale overwhelmed her at first, her head craning around to take everything in.

They had their work cut out for them.

"Where should we start?" Jaune asked.

“This way,” Weiss pointed, spotting a sign that said ‘skirts and dresses’.

They quickly found the right aisle, and it was filled with all manner of combat skirts and dresses. There were those that stayed well above the knee, like Nora and Ruby’s skirts, and Weiss’ old one, and then there were skirts that hung lower for more coverage. Both types were equipped with frilly underskirts to protect against accidental flashing or peeping toms.

Weiss spotted every single color but the one she was looking for.

“White doesn’t appear to be very popular,” Weiss complained.

Jaune peered around in wonder. “I’ve never seen so many combat skirts in my life.”

That was fine since Weiss was more partial to dresses these days anyway. She had more luck here, finding a dress in the right color after a few minutes of searching, the material transitioning from pure white to a muted, light blue around the top of the skirt before darkening towards the hem. It was of the halter neck variety, a series of criss-crossing white ribbons fastening behind the neck, leaving the wearer’s shoulders and upper back exposed. The skirt stopped just above the knee, shorter than her current dress but a little longer than the skirt she wore at Beacon. Weiss checked the size and frowned.

It was a little big for her.

Perhaps they could adjust it.

“That looks more like you,” Jaune commented.

Weiss ran her thumb across the fabric. It was lightweight but slightly firm, and when she read more of the information on the tag, she saw that it was a type of synthetic fiber that was resistant to heat, stabbing and slashing, and was easy to clean. Along with the knee high boots she’d managed to acquire through her sister, it would look rather fetching.

“Should I try it on?” she asked, turning to face him. “Will you give me an honest opinion?”

“I’m always honest,” he grinned. “Sure, go ahead.”

Weiss felt a little nervous as she found the nearest changing rooms and stepped inside, locking the door behind her. There was a full length mirror inside, and as she undressed, she took the time to admire herself in the reflection. Just in her blue panties and strapless bra, her eyes traced over the gentle swell on her hip, and down her slender thighs before rising again, pausing on her flat stomach. Her abs showed through as she tensed slightly, her ribs stretching beneath her bust as she gently arched her back. She was a creature of slim proportions and lithe muscle, and when she turned, she glanced over her shoulder, sighting her pert bubble butt.

It made her very aware that only a thin piece of wood was all that stood between her and Jaune. Flushing, she slipped into the new dress and adjusted it accordingly until it sat right. It was actually a better fit than she thought it would be, but it was a little loose around her waist, and to her surprise, the chest helped cup her breasts and lift them slightly. What didn’t surprise her was the waist. She had such a ridiculously small waist-line that it was sometimes difficult to find dresses that hugged her tightly there and didn’t strangle her hips or small breasts.

With a little adjustment, it would be perfect.

Nodding, she unlocked the door and stepped out. Jaune was sitting in one of the chairs set out for those waiting, and when his eyes fell on her, they widened slightly. Grinning, Weiss gave a little spin, the hem flaring up and showing off a glimpse of her creamy pale thighs.

“So?” she pressed. “How do I look?”

“Magnificent, as always,” he said, and it made her feel giddy. “But really – that suits you really well, Weiss.”

She beamed. “Then I’ll take it.”

After she changed back into her dress, she said, “Now – how about we find something for you?”

“For me?”

She nodded. “Of course. That under shirt is far too heavy for this climate, Jaune. You might do better than I in the heat, but surely that cannot be comfortable.”

He might have looked unfazed by the harshness of the sun, but there was no way he hadn’t been cooking under his armor.

He opened his mouth and closed it again, considering her words. “Well... you aren’t wrong, it does get pretty hot. Especially when I’m moving around a lot.”

“You see? Since we’re here, we should look for something to go under your armor,” Weiss eyed him up and down critically. “Black is good on you, so let’s stick with that – but something lightweight that lets your skin breathe, so you won’t get so sweaty.”

Jaune appeared bemused as she grabbed his hand and pulled him along, looking for the men’s section. Though he was wearing gloves, Weiss felt her hand tingle, a little shiver tickling her spine. Taking a steadying breath to focus, she hauled him halfway across the store.

There were plenty of shirts to choose from, in as many different colors imaginable. Some were so thin that they were practically see through, and while she was positive that Jaune would look incredibly good in those, she skipped past them entirely. His current under shirt was more of a short-sleeved hoodie, the material thick for the cold weather in Atlas. Weiss handed her new dress to him and got to work, sorting through the racks, in search of the right one.

She found a number of light weight options that were of similar make to his current one, and she went for one that had some built in padding to protect his chest against his breastplate. It was almost like a modern day version of a gambeson, those old padded jackets once worn by knights, only this was shorter, less a jacket and more a shirt with short sleeves, and the padding was only in the chest and back. The material wasn’t too different to the one used in her dress, resistant to stabbing, slashing and heat while maintaining flexibility, and most importantly, it would be much cooler to wear.

“It doesn’t have a hood, is that okay?” she asked, holding it up.

“That’s fine,” he eyed it. “Um – do you want me to try it on?”

She nodded. “Yes. Right now. And don’t worry about the price, consider it a gift.”

“Don’t complain,” she said sternly before he could open his mouth, fixing him with her best firm look. “Friends buy each other gifts, do they not?”

He sighed. "Okay, you win."

"As if there was any doubt."

His lips twitched as he took the shirt and found a changing room to try it on in. It took a little longer since he had to remove his armor first but when he stepped out, Weiss nodded in approval. It was tight and highlighted the shape of his torso, the width of his chest and broadness of his shoulders, as well as how his waist narrowed in that classic V-shape. Jaune tested the flexibility by bending at the waist and waving his arms around, as if he were swinging his sword.

"It isn't too tight? Too rigid?"

He shook his head. "No, it's good. It's actually really comfortable."

"Excellent. We'll buy this one, then. Let me see it with the armor on."

Jaune went back into the changing room and a few minutes later, emerged with his armor in place.

"It looks good," she confirmed, smiling.

"The padding takes the pressure off my armor resting against my chest and back," Jaune sounded happy about that. "It could get a little uncomfortable sometimes, especially after a long day."

“Keep it on, I’ll remove the tag for you,” Weiss said, approaching him. Being so close, she was reminded how tall he was as she stood on her toes, reaching for the price tag. Deft fingers plucked at the string, removing it. Unintentionally, her fingers brushed against the nape of his neck and she felt a shiver travel down her arm. “There. Now – how about we look around a bit before heading to the counter?”

“Sure,” he replied. “And Weiss?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

Weiss regarded him with fond eyes. “Of course.”

They spent some time browsing the store. They really did have everything you could ever need, and if Weiss hadn’t already found a suitable pair of boots, she may have ended up lost in the shoe section for hours. They had armored trench coats and high tensile strength scarves, fire proof tights and more. Jaune ended up grabbing an orange bandana, citing the sandy gusts that often blew through the city and the desert beyond, prompting Weiss to grab one as well. They didn’t have white but they had light blue.

As they took their purchases to the counter, the lovely lady manning the checkout convinced Weiss to grab a pair of detached sleeves that were on special. They were white and made from a sheer cloth that was both floaty and breathable, and were attached to the upper arm by a pair of dyed straps and small string-ties at the wrist. They went really well with the dress and Weiss couldn’t resist. It gave her overall outfit a bit of style and flare that she really enjoyed.

They measured her waist to get the correct size, and once the dress was altered, they would send it over to Shade Academy along with the detached sleeves, and the two bandanas they'd selected. Weiss paid for everything, pinning Jaune with a stern glance as he tried to pay for the bandana.

"What did I say?"

Jaune chuckled. "I just thought since it was something extra..." he quickly caved at her cross expression. "Okay, okay – you can pay."

Weiss forgot how hot it was outside, being in an air conditioned building for so long. It was like stepping into an oven, the dry heat almost like a physical wall. They shared a look.

"So where are we going next?" he asked as they began making their way down the sidewalk.

Weiss consulted her scroll.

"It isn't far from here. The cafe is called Tilly's," Weiss said, showing him a picture. It was of the store, and it looked very cute with bright, lush colors and strange art work hanging on the walls. "Are you hungry? They have good reviews."

"Starving," Jaune confirmed.

It was busy when they arrived, most of the tables taken. Luck was on their side, though. There was a small two seat table in the back unoccupied which they quickly claimed. Weiss grabbed a menu and set it out between them.

“What do you feel like?”

“And I suppose you’re paying for this, as well?”

Weiss smirked, enjoying his tone. “Yes. Do you have a problem?”

“I feel a little bad.”

“Does it offend your male ego?” she teased.

Jaune chuckled. It was a sound she enjoyed. “A little bit. I was always a bit of a traditionalist.”

Traditionalist. Did he view this as a date, then? She considered him for a long moment, feeling a little warm behind the ears. “Fine. You can pay for this one, if you want. If that will make you happy.”

He nodded. “It will.”

Why did it make her feel so happy?

Weiss did her best not to show it, but it was difficult. She wanted to smile like a lunatic and it took everything she had to clamp down on the impulse, busying herself with scanning the menu. The food was a mixture of local cuisine and things from abroad, though mostly Vale.

“Does anything stand out to you?” she asked.

“The omelet with goat cheese,” Jaune read out. “With fried tomato and spiced pieces of lamb. What about you?”

“The sundried tomato pasta with feta and olives,” Weiss picked. “And – oh, here are the drinks,” she frowned when she spotted the boba she was instructed to try. “What are those balls in it?”

Jaune leaned across the table to get a better look. “Oh – I remember those now. They had them in Vale, I think they’re originally from Mistral? Pyrrha...” he trailed off, going silent.

Weiss looked up, concerned. “Jaune?”

He shook his head slowly. “Sorry – I was just... lost in a memory. I haven’t...” he paused awkwardly. “I tried not to think about – you know, things like that too often... in the Ever After. That place had a way of messing with you.”

“Like the Punderstorms?”

“Yeah... something like that,” he sighed. “It wasn’t like I didn’t think of her, or you guys or anything, but it was wise to avoid memories that were more emotionally driven.”

Weiss chose her words carefully, “Did Pyrrha... like these?”

Jaune nodded. “Yeah. They were... her favorite. They called them something else in Vale, that’s why I didn’t recognize the name. Bubble tea, I think.”

Their battle against the Curious Cat, when it had been using Neopolitan’s body as a puppet – she had seen what that nasty creature had used against him, the visage of Pyrrha appearing and striking at his back with her unforgettable skill and flair. She felt a pang in her chest, not just for his pain – but for her own.

She hadn’t really thought about it, but... seeing her again, in that place, if only for an instant... it had hurt in a way she hadn’t believed possible. Time had dulled the agony of her loss, as time did all things, but all it took was a glimpse and it felt raw, the wound open all over again. Weiss hadn’t had time to process it, they’d been fighting for their lives, and everything that came after had taken all of her attention, but now...

She looked down at the table, feeling a pressure behind her eyes. She wasn’t. She would not! This was not the time for her to blubber like an overly emotional wreck. If only a glimpse of her lost friend was enough to rock her this much, then it must have been devastatingly worse for Jaune.

Weiss took a steadying breath. “I didn’t know.”

“She was always very particular about her diet,” Jaune said softly. “Always the correct portions, never overindulging. She had a chart in our room, detailing sizes and calorie count... it used to drive Nora insane, Pyrrha was constantly trying to get her to adopt the same eating habits, though in truth, she just enjoyed winding Nora up. Ren thought it was great and encouraged it,” his smile was sad. “But there were two things that Pyrrha could never turn down, despite all her discipline – ice cream, and bubble tea.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to drag all these memories up,” Weiss apologized. Jaune shook his head.

“No, don’t be – I... it’s been so long, since I just thought about these things without worrying that the environment might do something in reaction to it. It’s... it feels good. Freeing, I guess.”

He met her eyes and she felt as if she were falling in, his eyes expressive in a way she hadn’t seen since Atlas. The sheer emotion was overwhelming, drowning her – until he blinked, and his expression settled.

“Her favorite was the coconut flavored milk tea,” he said, calmer. “But she also liked the green tea flavor, as well.”

Weiss reached across the table and grabbed his hand. He looked at her in surprise.

“Then I’ll trust her judgment. I’m quite partial to coconut myself,” Weiss said, squeezing his hand. “Pyrrha Nikos has never steered me wrong yet.”

The surprise faded, replaced by warmth. “No. She never steered me wrong either.”

They ordered their food and drink, and everything arrived in short order. The pasta was delicious, the sun dried tomatoes pairing well with the feta and olive oil, and whatever herbs they used brought the entire thing to another level. Jaune quickly polished off his food, leaving his plate completely bare and then they moved onto their drinks.

They were in plastic cups with a thin film over the top. Weiss frowned and watched as Jaune picked up the provided straw and stabbed it through the top, jostling the ice and those strange

dark, round pearls in the bottom. He'd ordered the green tea flavor while Weiss had gone for the coconut.

Weiss stabbed her straw through the top like he had, and after a brief pause, she took a sip.

She perked up. It was good.

She took another, longer sip. The milky coconut flavor spread across her tongue, the chilled liquid refreshing. Curious, she sucked up a few of those round balls and gathered them in her mouth. They were silky smooth and when she chewed them, they had a slightly chewy, gum-like texture. It was an odd flavor, a hint of sweetness with something else she couldn't identify.

She was a fan.

Jaune paid for the meal and they left, stepping back out into the scorching heat. It wasn't so bad now that they had a refreshing beverage to take the edge off, but if they didn't finish them quickly, the ice would surely melt and water everything down.

After that, they wandered without any particular destination in mind. They headed north and ended up walking along the banks of the river, the vegetation here lush and green, given the conditions to flourish. On the other side, Weiss spotted orchards, exotic fruits dangling from branches as workers picked them and placed them in large plastic bins. Vacuo wasn't known for its farming industry, they weren't big exporters like Vale had been, but they grew what they could to survive.

The river glittered beneath the sun which was directly overhead now, like a winding blanket of jewels. The water was clear, and every so often, they passed by people fishing for a meal, mostly older men with dark, leathery skin.

Eventually, they made it back to Shade.

“Thanks for the shirt,” Jaune said. “And... well, for the outing.”

“We should do things like this more often. While we still can,” she amended. “There may come a time where we can’t any more.”

He nodded.

“I... would like that,” he said. “This was fun.”

Maybe it was just a small thing. They’d just gone out for a little shopping and a meal, but it was a start. Perhaps it was just her imagination, but his expression felt lighter, his eyes clearer. He stood a little taller, no longer carrying an invisible weight – at least, at the moment. She was sure it would return, but she would be there to help remove it again, and again, as many times as it would take.

“I’ll hold you to that,” she quipped.