

Ruby wasn't used to the way people looked at her now, and she didn't think she ever would be.

She kept her expression neutral as people watched her pass, some whispering behind raised hands, some pointing her way. There was a lot of unrest in Vacuo right now, and a lot of the unrest manifested in distrust and resentment, but there was none of that on display when they looked at her. At least right now. Her broadcast to the rest of the world had made an impact, as it was meant to do, but it had some unforeseen consequences.

They looked at her as if she had all the answers.

She didn't but they didn't know that. Ruby's face was now forever ingrained in their minds, forever a part of perhaps one of the most monumental broadcasts in history. She had revealed the true enemy, lifting the veil of the unknown and exposing the truth that had been hidden from them for generations. It made her instantly recognizable, no matter where she went, and she was now beginning to understand a little of what Pyrrha used to endure.

Ruby smiled sadly.

She missed her. She missed her *so much*.

But thoughts of Pyrrha inevitably led to thoughts of Jaune.

Ruby made her way down the street, following the now familiar path back to Shade Academy. For the last few days, she'd been helping to clear out an old building that hadn't been used in years, filled with old junk and dilapidated walls. Many would say it was work best left to those less important, she was a Huntress, and not only that, she was Ruby Rose. But Ruby found comfort in the work, knowing that once the building was renovated, it would go towards helping house many of the refugees that were struggling.

The monotonous work also helped take her mind off things. How the world seemed to be falling apart, and other things... more personal. Her thoughts went to Oscar for a moment, and she shook her head. She didn't want to think about that. Not right now.

Then it went to the way she had treated her friends.

One in particular.

She still hadn't said sorry.

Ruby felt regret burn deep in her heart, her fingers curling into fists before loosening.

The crushing weight of responsibility had almost destroyed her, and in her desperation and anger, she had lashed out. Her feelings weren't invalid. Even now, after coming to terms with everything, she had every right to feel the way she had felt. Suffocated. Ignored. Expected to lead the way and never falter, to always know the right thing to do. To never be *wrong*.

It was an ideal that no one could live up to, and yet she had tried. Oh, how she had tried. But perfection was impossible, and Ruby... she was just a young girl – a young woman, still finding her way. Was it any wonder that she had finally crumbled under the pressure?

No, her feelings had been entirely warranted.

But the way she had vented, the hurtful words she had spewed at her friends... and especially at Jaune, of all people... dismissing what he had gone through, the lengths he had gone to protect the Paper Pleasers, calling them his make-believe friends...

It hurt her heart to think about it.

It had been wrong of her.

She recalled the rage in his voice as he yelled at her, laying it all at her feet. Her fault. All about her.

Ruby sighed, feeling her mood plummet.

She'd managed to patch things with her sister and friends. They told her that she didn't need to apologize, that they understood that she'd been under a lot of stress and they hadn't been considerate, but Ruby remembered the shock and hurt in their eyes when she'd said those awful things. An apology was the least she could do.

But whenever she was around Jaune, she froze up.

He was different now. It was clear to everyone, even those that hadn't known him as well as they did. How couldn't he be? To everyone else, it felt like no time at all between the fall of Atlas and now. To Jaune?

It had been *years*. Decades, even.

Even in her own anger and despair, she clearly recalled the sorrow in his voice when he admitted he wasn't okay, that he'd been alone for so long, waiting for *them*...

Ruby couldn't imagine how that must have felt. It was possible he spent as much time down in the Ever After as he had spent in his entire life beforehand. Just the thought alone crippled her with a strange type of panic whenever she tried to place herself in his shoes.

She wouldn't have been able to survive that kind of isolation.

It would have killed her.

He no longer looked as he had. Those worn lines carved into his face by time and stress had smoothed out, his youthful complexion restored. His blonde hair was brighter, jaw smooth, returned to just how he'd been when he fell – except for that singular white streak through his hair, he was the Jaune Arc they all knew and loved.

At least, physically.

Mentally? Well, there was no telling what sort of damage may have been done. Ruby saw the list of chores, saw the names listed. He'd named the Paper Pleasers after them. Ruby. Weiss. Blake. Yang. Ren. Nora. Pyrrha.

He still smiled but they were rare, and not all of them reached his eyes. Sometimes he would stare off into the distance, as if entranced by something only he could see. He walked carefully, on the edge, expecting an attack at every turn. She was reminded of a caged animal, newly released. Bewildered with their surroundings, not quite sure where they fit in.

He was hurting.

Ruby hated it.

She hated her own weakness.

Something had to change.

Jaune had always stood by her side. Who had been the one to reach out his hand, that first day at Beacon? When Weiss had been mean and Blake dismissive, when her own sister had left her to the social wolf pack, Jaune had been the one to step forward and offer his hand. Since that day, they'd been through thick and thin together. When Beacon had fallen and Pyrrha lost her life, he had been the first one to step up when Ruby called for help. On her word alone, he had walked across two continents, convincing his teammates to follow along. When her Uncle Qrow had been poisoned and things were falling apart, it was Jaune who held her together when panic started to fill her heart.

Again and again, he was there for her. By her side, when her own team couldn't be. Even when he was hurting. She remembered his late nights training, listening to Pyrrha's message. The words he spoke to Cinder at Haven, recounted to her by Weiss.

Ruby owed him a lot.

Things couldn't continue like this.

She needed to speak to him – and she needed to be honest.

As the sun began setting, Vacuo went from scorching hot to chilled, the heat leeching out of the sand quickly as night fell. The dining hall at Shade was large, capable of sitting hundreds of students easily. Ruby heard the rumbling chatter long before she entered, and she spotted her team easily.

“Ruby,” Weiss greeted warmly, her smile making her face light up. She was so ridiculously beautiful when she smiled that it made Ruby self conscious sometimes, a hand raising unconsciously to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Weiss,” she returned, smiling.

It was then that she realized Weiss was wearing new clothes. A new dress that appeared much lighter than the one she’d been wearing in Atlas, leaving her shoulders exposed. A pair of blue translucent arm sleeves covered her arms from the top of her bicep to her wrists, taking the place of her long gloves.

It was a very attractive look for her.

“Hey Rubes,” Yang greeted, already having started her meal. It looked like chicken tenders with an assortment of vegetables, her stomach growling as she sat down. “Long day?”

Ruby nodded. “Long day.”

Blake had managed to find some fish, her plate filled with two large fillets alongside a salad. Her cat ears flicked happily as she carefully cut it up into bite sized pieces, her amber eyes glittering as she popped a piece into her mouth.

“Are you still helping out at that old building?” Weiss asked.

“Yeah – the foundation is solid, but some of the internal walls need to be torn down and replaced. What did you do today?”

“Inventory,” Weiss pulled a face. “I helped catalog their Dust reserves here at the school. The good news is that we are well stocked. The bad news is that we’ll burn through it quickly if we aren’t able to find a new source of Dust.”

“Sounds like the perfect job for you.”

“It was very boring,” Weiss deadpanned. “But Jaune helped, so it wasn’t a total loss.”

Ruby perked up.

“He did?” she hesitated. “How was he?”

Weiss shot her a look of understanding, and for some reason, it made her blush slightly.

“What?” she asked defensively.

“Nothing,” Weiss gave her a tender look. “He seemed... well, his usual self.”

That was neither good nor bad, these days.

“Is he here?” she looked around.

“He wanted to have a shower first,” Weiss said. “He should be here shortly.”

By the time Ruby gathered a plate and some food for herself, Jaune had arrived with Ren and Nora by his side.

“Hey Ruby,” Nora chirped.

“Hey Nora,” Ruby returned enthusiastically. “Ren.”

Ren nodded. “Ruby.”

When she turned to Jaune, she felt her throat close up.

Those bright blue eyes regarded her, Jaune inclining his head.

“Hey Ruby.”

“Jaune,” she managed to get out. “Um – how was you?”

It came out wrong. How are you combined with how was your day.

He tilted his head quizzically. "Ruby?"

She felt horrified at the slip, jaw clenching before she managed to pry open her mouth to continue.

"Sorry," she said awkwardly. "I – did you have a good day? Weiss said you were counting Dust."

"Not the most interesting thing in the world," his grin was short but genuine, and it made her feel warm. "But every little bit helps."

Nora started piling her plate high while Ren was more conservative, taking a smaller portion. Jaune was somewhere in the middle, and when they had their food, they accompanied her over to her team.

"Yo," Yang waved.

Dinner was a quiet affair for the most part, everyone was tired. Emerald joined them when she arrived, taking a seat between Nora and Jaune, and didn't say much as she ate her chicken. Ruby kept glancing Jaune's way, hoping to gauge his mood.

He looked fine. Outwardly, he appeared the same as ever, offering a word here and there when someone spoke to him, but otherwise, he was focused on his food. When he finished his dinner, we went back for seconds.

He had quite the appetite these days. That was something she'd noticed quickly.

Ruby spent this time trying to muster her courage, talking herself up. She could do this. It was Jaune. He deserved an apology and no matter how awkward it was, she was going to man up and give it to him! Just not in front of everyone else because that would be horrible.

She spent so much energy on firming her resolve that she almost missed it when he excused himself from the table. Ruby blinked when she noticed his chair was empty, head whipping around wildly to see where he went. He was just leaving the dining hall and clumsily, Ruby shot to her feet.

"Ruby?" Weiss asked, concerned. "Is everything okay?"

She nodded quickly. "Yeah, I just – I need to speak to Jaune."

She didn't wait for a response, quickly dashing after him. Pushing open the great big oak doors, she peered out into the hallway and spotted him beginning to ascend the stairs.

"Jaune!" she shouted before she could let her nerves talk her out of it. "Wait up!"

Jaune paused, waiting for her to catch up, a curious expression on his face.

"Ruby?"

Now that they were alone, Ruby felt a flare of panic rush through her but she clamped down on it viciously.

“Um, are you busy? I wanted to speak with you,” she asked, keeping her hands steady by her side.

He shook his head. “No, I was just going to head back to my room. Want to come?”

She nodded.

So far, so good. They walked together in silence, and while her heart was doing its best to escape her chest, her breathing was calm and controlled, giving away nothing. She took this time to admire the cut of his jaw, eyes scanning the side of his face, lingering on the white streak through his short blonde hair.

For some reason, Jaune appeared even taller than before and he'd already been a tall person.

Ruby wasn't sure if he really was or if it was just her imagination.

His room wasn't much different from Ruby's. Small but tidy with minimal decorations, a comfortable bed and a bathroom, and a beautiful view of the city. They were all staying at the academy, but weren't being housed with the students. They all had their own separate rooms which was a blessing. Ruby wasn't sure what she would do if she came upon Blake and her sister getting hot and heavy, and she had a feeling that Weiss would be far from impressed if they started getting intimate in a room she shared with them.

Ruby wandered over to the balcony, eyes drinking in the different colors on the horizon. Pinks and purples and oranges and reds, all blending together in a magnificent, fiery hue, as if the very sky were on fire.

“You wanted to speak?”

Ruby turned to face him, tucking her hands behind her back so he couldn't see her fingers fidgeting.

“Y-Yeah,” she cringed, annoyed at herself. “I did. I do!”

Jaune peered at her, concerned.

“Ruby? Are you okay?”

She just had to say it, right? So why was it so hard!

Ruby took a deep breath, holding it for a long moment before exhaling in a rush, the words blurted out rapidly.

“I wanted to apologize to you!”

Jaune blinked, taken aback.

“Apologize?”

She nodded, unable to meet his eyes. She looked at the floor instead, more specifically at his boots.

“What for?” he sounded confused.

“For what I said... in the Ever After...” her voice wavered, and for a moment, she thought she might chicken out, but she forged ahead before what was left of her confidence fled her. “I – It was wrong of me to say what I said. It was unfair, and mean, and after everything you’d been through, it made me the worst kind of friend... I shouldn’t have dismissed your feelings like that, just because I was angry... so I just wanted to apologize for being a horrible friend, and I – I’ll understand if it isn’t enough, but I just needed to say it.”

Silence.

Ruby was scared to look up.

It was funny, wasn’t it? Everyone looked at her now, as if she had all the answers, as if she could lead them through the coming storm, and yet she couldn’t even face her oldest friend properly. Drinking the tea and confronting herself had been more difficult than anything she had ever done, and yet the thought of having hurt Jaune, having disappointed him... it was enough to break her, if he rejected her apology.

That is how much he meant to her. How much his friendship meant to her. How much she had relied upon him, all these years. He could have helped her shoulder the burden, yet she’d been so caught up in her own insecurities...

Why wasn't he saying anything?

Ruby forced herself to look up, dread pooling in her stomach.

"Ruby..." he said, astonished. "Ruby... you don't need to apologize. If anything, I should be the one saying sorry."

He stepped forward and Ruby felt her throat constrict as he reached for her, a hand settling on her shoulder, squeezing down in comfort.

"What I said to you was unforgivable," he said, sorrow in his voice. "I blamed you for what happened... not just to me, but to everyone... I lay that all at your feet, and that was unfair. I was angry and I lashed out, and I know I'm not..." he struggled for the right word before giving up, shaking his head. "It wasn't your fault, Ruby."

"But it was my plan," she said weakly, feeling her eyes sting.

"It was your plan," he confirmed, nodding. "Because you were the only one that had a plan. We were all there, but you were the only one that offered a possible solution. A way out. And for many, Ruby – you are their savior. They wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. The refugees here in Vacuo, they owe you their lives."

She felt her heart quake at his words, her jaw wobbling. His hand tightened on her shoulder.

“None of this is your fault. Neo... she let her grief consume her, and she blamed you. There is no way you could have changed that,” he said soothingly. “She made her choice... as did Cinder Fall.”

His voice darkened on that name, and Ruby caught a glimpse of the pain hidden behind his eyes. The darkness that dwells in his heart. It scared her, that brief glimpse, but she didn't look away.

“If we should be blaming anyone, it is her – and Salem. They're the ones at fault, not you,” he said sternly. “Never you. What I said... I said because I was hurt, and wanted to make you hurt too – which makes me a much more horrible friend than you could ever be.”

Why was *he* comforting *her*? She'd come here to apologize to him, not the other way around! And yet Jaune had flipped it around, and Ruby felt like she was on the verge of crying. She was a grown woman now, yet Jaune still made her feel like a little girl.

God, she was pathetic. He was downplaying things, softening the blow.

Ruby wiped at her eyes, sniffing. “Jaune... you were alone for so long...”

His smile was brittle, vulnerable. “I was.”

“I'm sorry that happened to you,” she croaked.

“I'm sorry too,” he said, and then she was in his arms, hugging him furiously. Jaune hugged her back just as firmly, holding her tight enough that she struggled to breathe, but she didn't care. At this moment, she had never felt safer.

If she could stay in his arms like this forever, she would...

But this was dangerous.

As she basked in his embrace, old feelings long buried fluttered to life, a spark thrown on dry kindling. It had been a long time since she had thought of Jaune this way, but feeling his hard body against her, his comforting scent filling her lungs... it all came rushing back.

Once upon a time, Ruby Rose had a crush on Jaune Arc.

Back then, she'd barely understood what it meant. Naive, she'd believed it was just friendly affection but as the months passed by, and it only grew stronger... well, even Ruby couldn't deny that maybe it was something a little bit more than friendship.

The problem was that she *knew* Pyrrha also felt the same way. She hadn't always known. It had taken Ruby acknowledging her own feelings before she saw the signs in Pyrrha. The fleeting glances and touches, the desire to always be around him. Ruby always found excuses to hang out, be it leadership exercises or binge reading comic books, and Pyrrha was the same. Sometimes they'd train twice a day! Three times, even! And sometimes it wasn't training at all, and they'd just lounge around under a tree and enjoy the idyllic views that surrounded their school.

Ruby had buried those feelings deep, after that – and when Pyrrha died, and the world became a darker place... well, there was no time for any of that any more.

So she thought.

It would flare up from time to time, at the most unexpected moments. Whenever he'd do something sweet for her, she had a mad urge to hug him, and maybe even kiss him – something she *never* followed through on. It was better to ignore and forget, than wallow in unrequited love... but being in his arms like this was unearthing all those old feelings.

But once again, she would bury them deeply because this wasn't something he needed to deal with. Her pining... it was for her alone, and she would not trouble him with it. He'd gone through so much, and this wasn't about her. It was about *him*.

She wanted to make him feel better. She wanted to make him feel alive.

When was the last time he had fun? Real fun. So much fun that he broke down laughing, crying tears of joy? When was the last time he just sat down and did nothing at all, not having to worry about the state of the world? What was the point in saving the world from Salem if they didn't *live*?

Ruby couldn't even remember the last time she herself had fun, so for Jaune... it must have been a lifetime.

She was going to change that.

Ruby was going to be the best damn friend he'd ever had, and by the end of it all, Jaune Arc was going to be the happiest man in the world! She guaranteed it!

"Ruby?"

How was she going to accomplish this? She didn't know! But that was fine. She'd figure it out. They'd hang out like the good ol' days and enjoy each other's company, and maybe they could do silly things like read comics and watch movies. Missions came first, but beyond those, she could dedicate all her time to him.

"Ruby?"

"Hm?"

She blinked, her face still buried against his chest. She inhaled deeply, taking in that scent of deep musk mixed with cleanliness; soap and deodorant, and a soft spice that made her nose tingle. She felt really, really warm.

"Are you okay?" Jaune asked, concerned.

"Mhm," she nodded, nuzzling against him before freezing.

What was she doing?

She leapt away from him, eyes wide, face flushing scarlet.

"Jaune!"

He jumped, startled. "Yeah?"

“I’m sorry!”

“Oh, uh, okay,” he appeared confused. “Why are you yelling?”

“I don’t know!”

Once she’d started, she couldn’t stop.

“Um, yeah, so – I just wanted to apologize, and now that I have, I’ll not take up any more of your time,” she rushed out frantically, hurrying over the door. “Sorry for – uh, hugging you too long!”

“Ruby,” he tried, reaching out. “It’s fine – it was actually nice. I haven’t been hugged very often, in a very long time... so it was nice.”

Ruby froze.

Physical contact was important for people, right? Ruby had read that somewhere, a long time ago. He was probably touch starved.

Ruby turned around and leapt at him, and Jaune grunted as she slammed into his chest.

“Ruby, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Hugging you, dummy.”

“But *why* are you hugging me again?”

“Because you said it was nice.”

Ruby could tell he was searching for the words to say but when he remained silent, Ruby tightened her hold.

“This is fine, right?” she asked quietly.

“Yeah,” he said. “This is fine.”

After a minute, Ruby peeled herself away from him a second time, smiling bashfully.

“From now on, you’ll get a hug every day!”

“Every day?” he repeated.

She nodded, hands on hips. “Every day! Got a problem with that?”

Ruby could tell he was getting really confused by her actions but she didn't care. This was important.

Through a bewildered smile, he said, "I've got no problem with that."

"Good!"

A hug a day kept the doctor away, or something like that, right? Or was that an apple? Bleh – apples were okay, but she much preferred strawberries. A hug was even better than a strawberry, though.

It was probably time that she left!

"I'll see you in the morning," she backed away. "Be ready to get hugged!"

His lips twitched. "Will do."

Ruby knew she was being a bit weird and silly, but she didn't care. If making a fool of herself would help him, she'd gladly be the fool.