

The Bullhead set them down in a grassy field several hundred meters away from a handsome two story farmhouse. As they disembarked, Jaune observed their surroundings with a critical eye. Rolling hills spread out towards the horizon to the east before shifting into dense, thick forest. To the north and north-west were the mountains that protected Vale as a natural barrier, their tops laden with snow, and if he wasn't mistaken, the largest peak in the distance was Mountain Glenn. To the south were more grassy fields, herds of cattle grazing peacefully, ignorant of the danger they were in.

"Thanks for the lift," Jaune said, nodding to the crew. They waved as the Bullhead ascended into the air, the ramp rising until it closed, and watched as it swung around and made its way back towards Vale with a roar.

"Someone is coming from the house," Blake said quietly.

There was no way they would have missed the airship.

A long dirt path stretched from the house and past the field they were in, so Jaune started walking, shouldering his backpack. His team followed.

An older gentleman with graying black hair and beard approached on an ATV, the engine rumbling as it kicked up dirt behind him. He stopped about twenty meters short of them and reached back, brandishing a shotgun. Weiss and Blake tensed behind him but Jaune waved them down.

"Hello!" he called out, hand raised. On the way over, he'd read through the briefing several times. "Are you Mr. Forrester?"

The farmer carefully dismounted his four-wheeler, firearm pointed down towards the ground. In position to bring to use, if need be, but non-threatening. Or as non-threatening as brandishing a shotgun could be.

“Who’s asking?” the man asked, wary.

“My name is Jaune Arc,” he introduced himself. “Leader of Team JWBK. You put in a request for a Huntsman team to investigate the disappearance of your livestock.”

The man lowered his gun further.

“I did,” he observed them closely, eyes flicking from Jaune to his team and back again. “You’re them, then?”

Jaune nodded. “We are. I have proof, if you want to see it. May I approach?”

The man nodded, so Jaune dropped his bag and slowly made his way over, making sure to keep his movements simple and obvious.

“I’m going to pull out my scroll,” Jaune said. “It’s in my pocket.”

“Go on, then.”

Jaune reached into his pocket and pulled out his scroll, opening the screen and bringing up the mission brief. He then slowly handed it over. The farmer quickly read what was on the screen, and Jaune saw the tension bleed out of his body. His gruff expression smoothed out.

“Checks out,” the man handed Jaune’s scroll back. “Sorry about that. We’ve been a little on edge.”

“Understandable,” Jaune said. “As I said, I’m Jaune,” turning, he gestured at his team. “That girl on the left is Weiss. The one in the middle is Nora, and the one on the right is Blake. We’re here to find out where your animals have gone, and stop whoever is doing it.”

“Graham Forrester,” the farmer offered a hand, and Jaune took it. He had a firm, strong grip, palm heavily calloused. “I didn’t expect Beacon to answer so quickly.”

“We’d like to get started tonight, if possible,” Jaune said. “Before the sun sets.”

Graham nodded. “Sure. Bring your bags to the house, and then I’ll show you.”

They left their things on the porch, and then Graham led them over to the barn. Inside were two more ATV’s. Jaune mounted one, Nora slipping on behind him. Blake and Weiss took the other.

They followed Graham across the farm, staying on the dirt tracks carved into the land over generations. Cattle watched them curiously as they passed by, mindlessly chewing on grass. The sheep were a little more skittish, darting away from the fences.

They headed north-east, cresting hills and across small gullies, water trickling steadily beneath makeshift bridges. They arrived at one of the furthest fields that bordered the forest, Graham opening a gate for them to enter. Even from a distance, Jaune could see the damage to the

fence. A gap several meters wide had been created, the ground churned up by hooves, the soil dark and wet, reduced to mud.

“This was the first one we discovered,” Graham said grimly, and Jaune could hear the frustration in his voice. “A day later, another hole was discovered in a field two over from this one. We checked the perimeter after we found this, and it wasn’t there that day, so they must have come back that night. I’m not the only one, though. Mason – that is, Mason Snow – he owns the land closer to the mountains, a couple days after we found this, he reported something similar. A few other farms bordering the forest also have had livestock go missing.”

The mission briefing had said as much.

Jaune hopped off the ATV and approached the ruined fence. Mud squelched beneath his boots as he leaned in closer, checking the edges of the wire. Blake joined him silently, eyes scanning the damage.

“It’s been cut,” she said softly. “See how the end is shaped? It would look different if it had snapped under tension.”

Jaune nodded, eyes shifting to the ground. If there had been any tracks left by the rustlers, they had been disturbed by the hooves of the cattle as they’d passed through into the forest.

“Have you tracked them at all?” Jaune asked, straightening up.

Graham grimaced. “A little. We followed the tracks into the forest for about two hundred meters before pulling back... I ain’t no coward, sir, but we are not equipped to handle Grimm. These forests are filled with em, the deeper you go.”

“You’ve moved your livestock away from the boundary?”

Graham nodded. “First thing we did.”

“Have they stolen any from those fields?”

He shook his head. “No, just from this one and the other. As far as I know, the other farms experienced the same thing. They were only taken from their outer fields.”

“How many animals were taken?”

“Twenty-five from here. Ten from the second field.”

Jaune frowned.

That was a lot of livestock to take, paired with the animals stolen from other farms. There was no way they could be sold on the legal market, Jaune had seen the tags on all the cattle they’d passed by, so it would be instantly flagged by the stock agents. And without tags, they’d be turned away.

Not that he thought they’d go through legal channels. Black market? But transporting this many cattle would take more than a dozen wagons. They’d need trucks to move them in any sort of reliable fashion, and the roads this far out would be difficult to navigate. Airships were a possibility, but that would mean they were dealing with a very serious operation.

Speculation was all they had until they found some hard proof.

Jaune turned to Graham. "Call your neighbours and ask around. We're looking for any suspicious activity that they might have noticed. Strange lights in the sky. The sound of engines. Tracks where there shouldn't be any. Anything. Do you know anyone that lives by the roads?"

Graham nodded. "I do. Old Petunia's farmhouse is by the main road in and out of here. She has seven sons."

"Check with them. Ask if there has been more activity on the road lately. Trucks. Wagons. Riders. No matter how uninteresting. This many cattle won't be easy to move. If they're taking them out of the area, they'll need help."

"And if they aren't?"

"Then we'll track them down, and the Grimm won't stop us."

They left the ATV's by the fence and moved into the forest. Similar to the Emerald Forest, most of the trees were old pine and oak, the soil damp and soft, carpeted by pine needles. Thick, thorny bushes grew where sunlight penetrated the canopy, fallen logs long rotted crumbling and feeding the ground. The tracks were easy to follow. You couldn't move two dozen cattle without leaving signs.

They walked about half a mile east until the tracks turned north. Blake scouted ahead, leaping up into the trees and bounding from branch to branch, quickly vanishing from view. Jaune removed his ear piece from his satchel and put it in, and after a moment, Blake's voice reached him.

“Testing,” she said.

“All clear. Can you hear me?” he asked back.

“I can,” she confirmed. “Moving ahead.”

Weiss and Nora swung wide, searching the surrounding area as they continued to follow the tracks. Bark had been rubbed off some of the trunks by the cattle being funneled between trees, and several bushes had been overturned in the mini stampede.

From what Jaune could see, there was nothing out of the ordinary. Beyond the fence being cut by tools, there was no other evidence left behind pointing towards men. No foot prints, no man made waste. Nothing.

“Grimm ahead,” Blake’s voice came suddenly, Jaune tensing. “Small group. Four Beowolves. Do I engage?”

“Take them out.”

Jaune continued onward for several minutes until he came across signs of a struggle. The corpses were mostly broken down, Blake having made short work of them. A little further on, another set of tracks linked up the ones they were following. The cattle stolen from the other field, most likely.

“Weiss, follow those tracks back and see where they lead,” Jaune ordered, just to confirm. “Nora will wait here for you to return.”

“Copy,” Weiss answered, and he saw her white combat skirt flutter as she vanished behind an old oak.

The late afternoon sun was beginning to dip behind the mountains in the west as they moved further north, casting the forest in shadow. The temperature dropped sharply once the sun was hidden away, the sky blooming red and orange behind the mountainous peaks. They traversed another couple of miles before his ear piece crackled to life once again.

“I’ve found something,” Blake said.

“Where?”

“Keep following the tracks.”

He found her a few minutes later, casually leaning against a tree. She straightened up when she saw him and waved him over.

“Here,” she said, pointing at the tree she’d been leaning on.

Three notches had been carved into the bark forming an arrow. It was pointing in the direction the tracks ran, and a quick search showed a few more trees with similar markings, all pointing the same way.

It was here that they found more evidence of men.

Jaune lowered himself and began brushing loose pine needles away, revealing the subtle imprint of boot tread in the damp soil. Someone had been standing there long enough for it to form, and a little more searching discovered many more tracks, and even a few discarded cigarette butts.

“Some sort of gathering point?” Blake asked as he straightened up, showing her the butts.

“Most likely,” he said, looking around. His eyes scanned the tree tops but found nothing of interest. “We’ll wait for Weiss and Nora to catch up.”

Blake had a troubled expression on her face, eyes constantly darting back to the markings.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I... nothing. I’ll tell you later.”

They only had to wait five minutes before they sighted the white of Weiss’ hair.

“What did you find?” Nora asked, having heard Blake over her own ear piece earlier.

Jaune showed them the cigarette butts, the boot marks and the notched arrows in the bark.

“They were on foot, far as I can tell,” Jaune said. “No tire tracks, and no horse tracks. That means whoever was rustling these cattle must have been really fit to keep them moving where they wanted.”

Herding cattle without a bike or horse would be a nightmare unless you had trained dogs to do it for you. Otherwise, they’d either need a lot of people or a few with aura could manage it.

“The sun is getting low,” Weiss said quietly. “We left our supplies behind. How much further should we go?”

“We’ll continue for another mile, see where it takes us,” Jaune decided. “Then we’ll head back if we find nothing else. We’ll pick back up in the morning.”

There was nothing more to find across the next mile so after marking the location on their scrolls, they started making their way back. The sky was just beginning to get dark when they arrived back at the barn, parking their bikes inside before making for the farm house.

Graham met them on the porch and invited them in.

“Did you find anything?” he asked, showing them into the dining room.

Even before entering, the mouthwatering scent of roasted vegetables and garlic had met their noses, and when they stepped inside, Jaune saw the table laden with plates filled with roasted potatoes, pumpkin, parsnips and carrot. There was a large leg of lamb in the center, moist, fatty meat already carved up, boats of gravy and mint sauce positioned on each side. Green beans lathered with garlic and butter, minted peas, and steamed cabbage. It was a full spread, a heavy meal but one designed to replenish the body after a hard day of work on a farm.

“The tracks swung up north. We found a place where it appears all the cattle were herded up into one big group. Tomorrow, we’ll go further and find out where they’ve taken them.”

It wasn’t much but Graham just appeared pleased that someone was taking their situation seriously.

“Please sit, have something to eat,” he waved them over to the table as a woman entered, carrying a pitcher of water. “This is my wife, Mandy. Mandy, these are the Huntsmen that were sent from Beacon.”

She had long, wavy brown hair that was beginning to gray at the roots, kind hazel eyes that crinkled when she smiled.

“Thank you for helping us,” she said.

“Of course. It’s our job,” Jaune said warmly. “Thank you for the food.”

A couple of younger men joined them soon after, fresh from a shower.

“These are my son’s – Basil and Sterling,” Graham introduced. Basil was tall and broad, muscular, with his mother’s brown, wavy hair though cut short. Sterling was slim but toned from life on a farm, shorter than his brother and a few years younger by the look of it. “I sent them to speak with the neighbours like you asked. Did they have anything to share, boys?”

Over dinner, Basil shared what they’d learned. There had been no strange lights in the sky, no strange activity at all on the roads – at least, recently. Old Petunia and her sons did have something to say about earlier in the year, though. Before winter’s grasp had set in.

“She reckons she heard ‘bout a dozen trucks roll through one morning, some months back,” Basil said between mouthfuls. “In the early hours. It was pitch black and by the time she got out of bed, she only saw their tail lights. Thought an army was passing through. Few of her boys said they saw more – counted at least fifteen trucks, hauling ass. Nothing since.”

Nora tilted her head, frowning. “When did the thefts start happening?”

“Only recently,” Graham answered, contemplative. “None of the others mentioned losing livestock earlier than a few weeks ago.”

“How far does that road go?” Jaune asked.

Mandy’s expression was taut. “Mountain Glenn.”

“The road always existed, though it was more of a goat track than anything. Enough for a wagon or horse, a tractor – but not trucks or cars,” Graham continued in the silence. “When they started work on that doomed city, they cleared and widened it as a secondary approach. But the number of Grimm close to the mountains was too much, so it was abandoned. They already had their fancy tunnels, so it wasn’t needed. We’ve helped to maintain it ever since, keeping the forest from growing back over it. It was handy to have.”

It gave them all something to think about.

The food was delicious. The meat was tender and broke apart effortlessly in Jaune’s mouth, rich and fatty and infused with garlic and rosemary. The vegetables were soft inside and crisp on the outside, the potatoes golden and fluffy, the pumpkin sweet. Jaune cleared his plate and went for

seconds. As they ate their meal, Basil and Sterling kept stealing glances at Blake and Weiss, taken by their beauty.

Afterwards, they were shown to their accommodations. There was a small home about five minutes ride from the main house.

“Place hasn’t been used in awhile, but we’ve cleaned and aired it out,” Graham said as they pulled up. “The workers stay in the smaller units further down. This used to belong to the Herd Manager, but now my sons have taken over that work.”

“Thank you. We’ll get an early start in the morning,” Jaune said as they hauled their bags inside. “See you tomorrow.”

Graham tipped his hat, mounted his bike and then he was gone into the darkness, his light fading into the distance.

“You two have some admirers,” Nora burst out as soon as they were alone, clearly having held it in since dinner. “I was feeling a little left out.”

Weiss rolled her eyes.

“I’m sure,” she deadpanned.

“How about we go inside and get settled?” Jaune suggested.

The home had power and water, and they'd even stocked the fridge with the basics. Milk, water, eggs, butter. There was bread in the bread box, cereal in the pantry, and the kitchen was stocked with a microwave, toaster, stove and oven. There was an older television in the lounge – box shaped instead of the current holo-televisions that had come out in recent times. There were only two bedrooms, though, with two double beds.

“Partners bunk together,” Nora sang, shooting Weiss and Blake a grin.

Amber eyes narrowed. “I’m sure we can all fit in one bed.”

Nora wiggled her eyebrows. “Oh? Should have expected that from Kinky Blake. But I don’t think we should have fun times in a strange house and bed. We’re on a mission, remember?”

“Could you be any less convincing?” Weiss asked, eyebrow arched.

Nora ignored her, instead saying, “Dibs on first shower~!”

Nora gathered her sleeping clothes and dashed into the bathroom after securing a towel. Jaune wandered over to the couch and sat down. Placing his scroll down on the coffee table, he pulled it open into its tablet form and tapped away on it until it pulled up the map of the area.

Blake and Weiss joined him.

He then pulled a small note pad out of his bag and a pen, and started scribbling down notes. Just observations he had made during the day, and a checklist of everything they had encountered. They were expected to make a full report after the mission, so this would help ensure that he didn’t forget anything, no matter how small.

“Do you have any theories?” Weiss asked curiously, watching him work with tender eyes. Her head tilted to the side cutely, strangely focused on his hands.

“Whoever it is, they’re organized,” Blake said. “The markings prove they’d done this before – or, at the very least, things like this. They aren’t afraid of working in Grimm territory, but they are cautious enough to leave very little evidence of themselves. Only enough for other members of their group to find their way. It...” she trailed off, troubled.

Jaune looked up from his note pad. “What is it?”

She frowned, her fingers curling in her lap and releasing, Blake contemplating her words.

“It reminds me of the White Fang.”

Weiss straightened up.

Jaune blinked.

“You think they’re involved?”

“I don’t know,” Blake shook her head. “It’s just... it reminds me of how we’d move in the wilds, leaving behind breadcrumbs for other units to follow. Remember the markings we found in Vale?” Jaune nodded. “Just like that. There were no markings like that, but... the idea is similar. The authorities often scan communications, especially those that happen outside of the cities. We have code, of course. But code can be broken – or even if it isn’t understood, they can still

pinpoint your location. The governments have full access to the CCT, so scrolls are unreliable if you are trying to keep your actions hidden.”

“Bandits, or the White Fang,” Jaune wrote it down and circled it in his note pad. “What would the Fang want with cattle?”

“Food,” Blake said at once. “That’s the only thing that makes sense. If they wanted money, they could have robbed all those stores in Vale but they only ever stole the Dust. Even then, they could sell the Dust on the black market if that was their goal. No, the only thing that makes sense is food – if it is them, that is,” Blake sighed. “I might just be seeing ghosts where there aren’t any.”

“No, you’ve done well, Blake,” Weiss said encouragingly. “We know the White Fang are operating in Vale, and you spotted the similarities in how they communicate and move. That isn’t to be dismissed.”

“The question is why do they need so much food?” Jaune asked, looking between them. “They’ve taken a lot of cattle from these farms. That is a lot of meat. They’re either feeding a lot of people, or they’re bunkering down for the long haul. Thirty-five heads just from this farm alone, and more from elsewhere.

That was enough to feed a small army for a short while, or a smaller group for a lot longer.

Jaune didn’t like the sound of either.

“The Fang would have access to trucks,” Blake said quietly. “Like the ones that were seen. How many bandit groups have that sort of hardware on hand?”

“And we know they were already active in Vale at the time,” Weiss continued. “Which means that whatever it is they are doing out here, they’ve been doing it for a while.”

If this was all connected. Right now, it remained speculation. Guess work. But the more he thought about it, the more it worried him.

“Dust in Vale, cattle out here,” Jaune mused, tapping his pen on the page. “If it is the White Fang...”

“We’ve seen how bold they’ve become,” Weiss said. “It may have been stopped, but their attack on the docks would have netted them a large shipment of Dust. We knew they were preparing for something big.”

“I just can’t see what they’re aiming for,” Blake said, disgruntled. “While I can see the patterns of their involvement, what is their end goal? It feels like they’re gearing up for war.”

They each shared a look.

“Surely not,” Weiss said, though she didn’t sound convinced by her own words. “That would be suicide.”

“...Sienna Khan would never enact such a plan,” Blake agreed. “She is the reason the White Fang started walking this path, but she isn’t stupid. As much as you may disagree, she believes that these radical actions are necessary for the good of all faunus. Starting a war does not help faunus, it would only make things worse. But there are elements within the Fang that are... more extreme.”

“That man from the rally,” Jaune said. “Adam.”

She nodded shortly.

“Adam... holds a lot of resentment,” Blake looked down, brow furrowed. “A lot of anger. He... has not had an easy life. I’m not defending his actions,” she said quickly. “But I understand where that fury comes from.”

“Would he really start a war, though?” Weiss asked.

“It’s possible...”

“We need more proof,” Jaune drew their attention back to him. “At this point, we don’t even know if it is the White Fang, though they are our leading suspects. We need to find them and the missing cattle, and I have an idea of where they might be.”

“I was thinking the same, but...” Weiss shook her head in disbelief. “Mountain Glenn is a deathtrap. It is overrun with Grimm. You’d have to be desperate to set up there.”

“We’ll find out tomorrow. We’ll start at first light, and we’ll move fast. It’ll take us about half a day to reach the mountains if we push ourselves,” Jaune closed his note pad. “Whoever it is, the sooner we find them, the better.”

They nodded in agreement, and soon after, Nora left the bathroom looking refreshed.

“What’s happening?” she asked, noticing their serious expressions. “What did I miss?”

Jaune filled her in as Blake showered, then Weiss. Jaune went last, and they decided to turn in early because they had an early start. Jaune slipped under the covers, the mattress soft. Nora slipped in beside him, her hair smelling of fruit as she burrowed instantly into his side, snuggling against him.

“Give me a kiss,” she demanded, so he did. Turning, he wrapped an arm around her slender waist and kissed her, their lips moving slowly against one another. Her tongue curled in his mouth and he sucked on it tenderly, her whole body shivering.

“Mmm, just what I needed,” she said softly, one of her hands slipping under his sleeping shirt. Her nails lightly raked down his chest before settling on his abs. “Kiss me again.”

“Just kisses?” he asked, pecking her on the lips.

“Just kisses, we shouldn’t get too randy,” she smirked, eyes glittering in the light filtering in through the window. It wasn’t a full moon but it was close. “That would be a little rude, right?”

“It would be,” he pecked her again, but this time she chased his mouth, their lips smacking wetly. Despite her promise, he couldn’t control how his body reacted. Having her soft warmth pressed into him, her lovely mouth on his, tasting her on his tongue, his blood thrummed with energy. His cock swelled thick and fast, Nora giggling as she felt it grow against her belly.

“Jaune, it’s just kisses,” she said breathlessly, wiggling against him.

“I can’t help it,” he said, slipping a hand down and squeezing her plump butt. Nora moaned low in her throat. “This is what you do to me.”

They shared a few more passionate kisses, their lips beginning to sting from the intensity before they reluctantly pulled away.

Jaune rolled onto his back, Nora throwing a leg over his to curl it around while she placed an arm across his chest. She shifted, nuzzling his shoulder until she got comfortable.

“Sorry for leaving it hanging,” she whispered.

Jaune laughed lightly. “Goodnight, Nora.”

“Mm, goodnight.”