

The flight was uneventful. First class had an entire floor of the airship to themselves, the very lap of luxury. Jaune felt like he was in a floating palace, not an airship, though he wasn't complaining. While he felt a little out of place, especially as he was the only one carrying a weapon, unlike the airships that ferried students from Beacon to Vale and back again, the extremely comfortable seats and the nice food were worth it – or at least, he hoped so. He wasn't paying for it, Weiss was.

Jaune really hoped it hadn't cost too much. He'd have been fine with regular seats but she wouldn't hear of it.

The flight was several hours from Vale to Atlas, and he spent most of that time watching movies or walking around the observation deck, admiring the natural beauty of Remnant. Lush forests and snow capped mountains gave way to isolated beaches and rocky shoreline, and then the dark, cold, rough waters of the ocean beyond.

His first sight of Solitas were towering, icy cliffs, colossal waves crashing against the northern continent with nature's fury. An endless expanse of snow greeted him after, plains and plains of white with the odd rocky spire, stone and ice gutting from the earth, reaching for the sky.

This was an inhospitable land, and yet here lay a thriving kingdom of man.

He spotted Atlas first as the dark sky began darkening further, multi-hued lights signaling from a distance. A city in the clouds and much like Amity, a marvel of engineering, the creativity of mankind on display for all to see. A floating island with sleek skyscrapers made of concrete, glass and steel, a jewel in the heavens.

Military and civilian aircraft buzzed around the floating city like moths enchanted by flame, a constant hive of activity. As they moved closer, Jaune spotted the sprawling city down below, the old kingdom of Mantle. Unlike Atlas with its towering skyscrapers, modern architecture and bright lights, Mantle reminded Jaune more of Vale; squat brick buildings and wide streets, only unlike Vale who was surrounded by fertile farmland and teeming forests, Mantle was encased in

a permanent shroud of frost. The large wall that ringed the city was covered in ice and snow, several feet of steel and concrete keeping the harsh arctic winds and the Grimm at bay.

Two cities, one kingdom.

Atlas was connected to Mantle by what appeared to be massive, thick cables, though Jaune wasn't entirely sure. Was that how the massive landmass stayed afloat, powered by the lower city or did they serve some other purpose?

The speakers crackled to life.

"Attention passengers, this is your captain speaking," a young, chipper male voice sounded. "We are now approaching Atlas and will be landing in less than ten minutes. Please prepare for departure. From all the flight crew, I'd like to wish everyone onboard a good day and be the first to welcome you to Atlas."

Those in first class disembarked first, and Jaune was quickly directed to his luggage. He passed through customs quickly, and when he stepped out into the terminal proper, he was greeted by a sea of people waiting for friends and loved ones. He scanned the crowd, looking for that familiar shock of white hair but instead found a short, heavysset man with balding brown hair and a large mustache dressed neatly in a silver-gray vest with light blue trim, and a cyan tie, holding a sign that read, "Mr. Jaune Arc."

Jaune raised a hand as he approached, "I believe you're waiting for me."

The man looked him up and down, as if sizing him up.

“Greetings, Mr. Arc,” the man greeted, giving a short bow. “I’ve been instructed by Ms. Schnee to deliver you to your accommodations. If you would please follow me?”

“Sure,” he said, but first offering a hand. The man blinked before taking it. “Thanks for coming to get me. Do you have a name, sir?”

“I am Klein,” he introduced himself. “Senior butler of the Schnee family.”

Klein took his bag and Jaune was led outside to a sleek black sedan. Vale had been cold but the difference was stark, like a slap in the face, his skin stinging as the extreme cold washed over him as he left the heated building. It reminded him of the coldest winters from home, but even worse. It was the type of weather that could easily kill a man in minutes, if he wasn’t dressed appropriately.

He was driven across the city and the traffic was minimal, night having truly fallen. The car was warm, on the verge of toasty, and Jaune relaxed as store fronts flew by before they merged onto the highway which was a little busier but still relatively free of other vehicles. When they took the second off ramp, it was only a couple of minutes before they pulled up outside a towering hotel, the outside of the building illuminated in a golden hue. The name above the entrance read *Eira Grand*.

A man in a warm coat opened the door as their car pulled up, showing him into the hotel as Klein gathered his luggage. The lobby was as grand as he was expecting, dark carpet leading him towards the reception desk which was elevated on a dais, the carpet set over hard wood floor. Crystal chandeliers hung above, casting a warm glow over staff and guests alike, and Jaune spotted what appeared to be a restaurant just off to the side.

“Welcome, sir,” a young woman greeted. “How can I help you today?”

“Uh – checking in,” he said. “Jaune Arc.”

She tapped away on her keyboard as Jaune brought up his ID as proof, as well as the booking notice Weiss had sent him. After checking it, she checked him in and handed him a key card.

“Thank you for choosing the Eira Grand,” she said, bowing. “We hope you enjoy your stay, sir.”

A bellboy took his luggage without prompting, and Klein joined him as far as the elevator.

“I shall remain here,” he said as Jaune boarded. “Please inform Ms. Schnee not to forget her curfew.”

Wait, what? But before he could question what he meant, the doors closed and he was ascending to the upper floors. When they arrived, it was to a lavishly carpeted hallway, cream with gold trim, the walls wood paneled with golden wallpaper set above. His room was near the end, and when he swiped the card over the reader, the door unlocked with a loud snap.

His room was large with a full living area, fully furnished with a cream colored couch, two matching chairs and a handsome low table of dark hard wood, polished to a shine. There was a bar to the left with a marble counter top, and a door to the right that went through to the bedroom. The curtains had been opened and the vast city skyline was open to him, glittering with artificial light. Snow had begun falling since he'd landed, and he watched as gentle snowflakes twirled through the air before vanishing out of sight.

“Thank you,” he said to the bellboy, taking his luggage.

Weiss had really set him up in a really nice place. Too nice.

Jaune frowned, looking around carefully. Now that he was alone, he had time to process Klein's words. Slowly, he made his way over to the door and peered into the bedroom. Another large space with a massive bed, a long landscape portrait hung above the headboard. There was a television mounted opposite the bed, and two bedside tables on either side with matching lamps. Another door led into what he assumed to be the bathroom, but he barely noticed as his eyes settled on the familiar sight of his short, slender teammate, her white hair more pure than even the freshest fallen snow.

She turned as he entered, and they stared at one another for a long moment. She was dressed in a white coat with a light blue turtle neck underneath, dark tights highlighting her ridiculously toned, svelte legs, and her feet were clad in a pair of oversized boots rimmed in fur.

Jaune swallowed, the air feeling charged with *something*. Weiss' face was neutral but her eyes, those twin crystal gems – they were bursting with emotion, shifting too fast for him to name. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, but just as her name formed on the tip of his tongue, she strode towards him.

“Jaune,” she whispered, as if in prayer – and then she was in his arms, her own winding their way around his waist, her small body falling into him. “It is good to see you.”

He tightened his hold around her, and they stood there for an unknowable amount of time until he finally answered, saying, “It's good to see you too, Weiss.”

He'd been receiving a lot of hugs today.

He felt her fingers clutch at his back, bunching the material of his jacket before she stepped away.

“How was your flight?”

“Good. The views were amazing.”

She smiled softly. “I’m glad.”

Why did it feel like they hadn’t seen each other in years, rather than a matter of weeks? Perhaps it was because so much had happened since the end of their first semester. It had warped his sense of time.

“I apologize for not meeting you at the terminal,” she said, contrite. “But I thought it might cause more trouble than it was worth. Here in Atlas, many eyes follow me. I’m sure your presence will cause quite the stir, and will find its way into the Atlas Times either tomorrow or the day after.”

He knew that Weiss’ family was a big deal, but he didn’t think a teammate visiting another teammate would be so news worthy.

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “Though... if they knew you were here, wouldn’t that be even worse?”

“It would be,” she agreed. “This would be seen as highly inappropriate, and the rumors alone would be a complete scandal – but I had to see you. I could not wait another day.”

“Is everything okay?” he asked, hesitating before placing a hand on her arm.

She nodded. “They are now. You are here.”

She was staying positive but her wording told him more than enough.

"I've missed you," he said.

Her expression softened even more. "I've missed you too. All of you. I cannot wait until this week is over and we are back at Beacon."

Jaune's eyes settled on the bed, where clothing had been laid out atop the blanket. Men's clothing.

"What are those?" he asked, gesturing. Weiss turned her head, looking down.

"These are for you," she replied. "Suitable clothing for your time here."

"Weiss, you didn't have to do this..."

"Stop," she held up her hand. "These people are vultures. I will not let them look down on you, *for any reason*. You will dress only in the best, and they will have to swallow their words and compliment you on your choices, and I get to watch and enjoy their internal struggle."

Her lips twitched, despite her voice being so serious.

“So you aren’t ashamed of me, then?” he asked half jokingly.

“Never,” she answered instantly, with such conviction that he felt warmth bloom in his chest. “I could never be ashamed of you, Jaune Arc. You’ve shown me the type of man you are, time and again. But I will not let these people think you are lower than they are. Not because I think you care but because I care, and because I know I will do something rash if they do it in front of my face.”

“You’re right, I don’t care,” he admitted. “But I don’t want to embarrass you, or make things even more difficult with your father. I don’t want to let you down.”

“You’ve never let me down before, and I doubt you ever will.”

Jaune inspected the clothing she had set out for him. There were more casual clothes, polo shirts and trousers, jackets lined with fur and wool, and more formal attire; crisp white shirts, vests, suit jackets and pants, and black leather shoes.

“You’re invited to join us for dinner tomorrow night,” she said quietly. “A family occasion. My brother, mother and father will be attending.”

There was a notable absence.

“The first night of the charity auction will be the following day,” she continued. “Then there will be a day in between that and then the second night of the auction shall commence. Once that is over with, and should all go well, I’ve been given permission to return to Vale.”

“It’ll go well,” he told her.

"It will," she confirmed. "I have not come this far to fall at these ridiculous hurdles my father places in front of me," she then sighed. "If you wish, we can visit Winter tomorrow, during the day. She knows you are coming and is interested in meeting you."

"I'd love to meet your sister," he said truthfully.

"...and I'd like to spend time with you, whenever I am free. We can train, or do whatever you like – I don't mind. I have some rehearsals the day of the first auction, if you'd like to attend."

"I'd love to attend," he said softly. "If you want me there, I'll be there."

She nodded. "Yes. I – I very much want you there."

"Then it isn't even a question. I'm there already."

She smiled, her entire face lighting up. "Thank you, Jaune. I know this is a lot, I've dragged you halfway across the world for my own selfish desires, and making you dress up like – like some sort of performing *clown*. I know this is horrible—,"

"It isn't horrible," Jaune cut her off. "Really. Being with you could never be horrible, Weiss. If I needed your help and it was within your power, you'd be there for me, wouldn't you?"

"Of course."

“Then what are we talking about?” he chuckled. “This is what friends do. What teammates do.”

Those icy blue eyes stared up at him, expressive. “...and is that all we are?”

Jaune felt his mouth go dry.

“Weiss...”

She shook her head. “I apologize. I – how have things been? Between you and... Blake.”

A smidgen of trepidation rose up inside him. He knew exactly what she was asking.

“Good. Things are... good between us.”

“And you have... been intimate, yes?”

“Weiss...”

“May I see your back?”

There was a beat of silence.

“I know I’m being unreasonable,” she continued. “I have no right – but may I see?”

Without a word, Jaune began removing his jacket. Removing each button, one by one, he shrugged it off, revealing the long sleeved shirt he was wearing underneath. Placing the jacket on the bed with the other clothes, he tugged the collar up over his head, the material sliding up his torso, revealing his chest to her eyes. He saw the way her eyes darted down and up again, drinking him in, and he felt a spark of heat as a healthy flush spread across her pale cheeks.

Setting the shirt down beside his jacket, he turned to face the other way. At first, Weiss didn’t say anything. Jaune felt nervous, unsure how she was going to react – and then jumped when he felt her soft, slender fingers touch his skin.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “It has darkened.”

“Yeah,” Jaune said.

Her hand traced Blake’s symbol and the images inked around it, those of the White Fang, of Grimm and other things. Weiss’ hand was so small and soft, and warm, and he couldn’t help but shiver as it passed over his spine and towards Nora’s tattoo, tracing that as well.

“I am not one for tattoos,” she said, as if that were obvious. It was. “But these really are quite beautiful. It tells a story, a glimpse into their lives and your back is their canvas. This is a physical manifestation of their love for you, and your love for them.”

She didn't sound angry or sad, or happy – she was just stating what she believed to be fact. Her hand moved lower, then, and this was what he was worried about most. Jaune felt the moment she realized there was something else there, her hand pausing in surprise.

“Your skin...” she trailed off.

“Yeah.”

Her hand started moving again, stroking the upraised skin. It felt ticklish and he fought the desire to squirm, jaw clenched as her palm pressed against it completely.

“This is Yang's symbol.”

It wasn't a question.

“Yeah,” he said again.

“You've kissed.”

He nodded.

“What happened?”

He told her. About Yang sneaking into his room in the middle of the night and all but confessing, and the kiss they shared as a result. He didn't mention Blake under the blankets and *what she was doing under there*, that was a little too much to share. But he continued on to their conversation at the airship terminal, and the feelings they admitted to.

"I see," she finally said when he finished. "You really are a womanizer, aren't you?"

But before he could say something to refute that, he was surprised to hear her laugh. A sudden, sharp bark of laughter, and then her hand started moving once again.

"The man I've fallen in love with... is a man I cannot have all to myself."

Jaune froze.

It took his mind some time to process what he'd heard, the sudden shock rendering him speechless.

*The man I've fallen in love with...*

Weiss removed her hand, and he felt the loss keenly – but then she seized his arm and gently turned him around until he was facing her, her face filled with barely restrained emotion.

"Weiss, what did you just..."

She placed a finger over his lips, “Shh – let me speak, or I may not be able to say what I want to say to you, that I’ve wanted to say to you for a while now...”

Her hand opened and cupped his jawline, caressing his cheek.

“I did not go to Beacon, looking for romance,” she said, her voice strong, proud. “I went to prove my worth. My whole life, I’ve been trapped in a cage and though I struggled to free myself, what did I know of freedom? Truly? It sounds nice, doesn’t it? Being free... but for someone who has had everything planned out for them, given all the tools to succeed... what did I know of it? Of relying only on yourself, being self sufficient, forging your own path? Nothing. I knew nothing of this – and yet, I wanted it, more than anything,” she sighed softly, a whisper of air. “But even now, that truly isn’t the case for me, is it? I still rely on my family, their money and standing. I can only do what I do because of it... in reality, I have not found freedom, not yet... but I will. Do you know why?”

“Why?” he asked.

“Because of you,” she said earnestly. “Because of Nora. Because of Blake. Because of Ruby, and Yang, and Pyrrha, and Ren – but most of all, because of you,” her other hand rose, framing his face on both sides, holding him steady, her expression filled with gratitude, with love. “I was still stuck in my old ways when I arrived at Beacon. I wanted to be team leader because I thought it was my right. I lashed out at Blake, who questioned the ethics of my family. I let my past rule my present, and it was *you* who did not allow me to tip off the edge. You are what grounded me, and I was able to make friends. *Real friends* – for the first time in my life,” her eyes glittered with unshed tears, and Jaune felt his breath catch in his lungs, burning. “You led us, as our leader – but also, as a friend, you showed me what it meant to cherish another person, to stand by them, to *accept* them for who they are, flaws and all. And I fell so hopelessly in love, it’s pathetic.”

She shook her head, a sardonic smile tugging at her lips.

“Ridiculous. In such a short time, you had conquered my heart. I felt easy. How many men had petitioned me over the years, seeking my hand? Always after something – be it wealth, or the

power of my family name. Never for Weiss. But you always saw me as a girl, didn't you? Being a Schnee meant nothing to you, all you saw was a teammate, a friend, a girl from Atlas... you are everything I ever dreamed of, in a man. Strong. Kind. Responsible... Handsome," her cheeks darkened, but she did not look away. "And I thought... I could take my time. We have four years together, after all. In the same room. On the same team. But I should have known... I was stupid. If I found you so attractive, why wouldn't someone else? And I *knew* – Nora didn't exactly hide it. She was all over you, and I gave myself false assurances. You are partners, of course you are close. Nora is just an affectionate girl, it doesn't mean anything," she rolled her eyes. "Wilfully blind. And then what happened... happened. You nearly died, both of you – and you came back together, changed."

She laughed lightly.

"As for Blake... well, I saw the signs. I saw how comfortable she was around you, and then after everything went down with the White Fang, it was written all over her face. I didn't expect her to move so quickly, but as I've come to know Blake better, I've seen that she can be quite the impulsive girl. Sometimes she can be worse than Nora, in that regard."

Her hands slid down, resting on his shoulders, her thumbs stroking the side of his neck. It was an intimate gesture, and Jaune shivered, looming over her, yet feeling like he was looking up at her radiance, blinded.

"Our team is a family. It had nearly fractured once, and I never want to see that happen again," she said emphatically. "But the truth is this; we all have feelings for you, and you've made a choice, as have they. It is a choice that seems ridiculous, impossible... this is nothing at all like the romance I envisioned."

"I'm sorry," he said, genuinely.

"Can something like this *really* work?" she asked. "Is it even possible? I – I will not lie, Jaune. The thought of you being with Nora and Blake, it makes me feel jealous. It is not a feeling I am accustomed to feeling, not when it comes to a man. But at the same time, I do not hate it. It

does not make sense to me. I've thought about it constantly, but how can I accept it if I feel so envious at the thought of them touching you, kissing you... canoodling with you."

The sudden humor took him aback, and he blinked in shock as she smiled, a fleeting thing.

"And now Yang? I don't even know how to begin processing that. I feel lost."

"I don't think I have the answer to that," he said, delicately. This wonderful woman was pouring out her heart and soul, but this was not something he could decide for her. "I know how unconventional all this is, and that isn't even including my semblance... it isn't normal, at all. It's a bit of a mess, truth be told – but I am sure of one thing, Weiss."

"And what's that?"

"That it doesn't matter what I feel for Nora or Blake, or Yang, or anyone else. What I feel for you... it's real."

"And what do you feel for me?" she breathed.

He wanted to kiss her, here and now. He wanted to draw her in and kiss those pretty lips, to watch her beautiful eyes flutter shut, to feel that slender, amazing body against him. He wanted to feel Weiss unravel, for her persona to crumble, for her to lose control... and Jaune saw that Weiss realized what he was about to do, her eyes widening, but a hasty hand pressed against his chest stopped him.

"I-I think I know," she stuttered. "I – Jaune, I'm not... I don't think I'm ready for that. Not yet."

Jaune nodded. "Okay."

"I – it isn't that I don't want to kiss you," her breathing was uneven, a little stilted. "I just... I need time."

"You can have as much time as you need," he told her. "This isn't a race, Weiss. This isn't something we should force."

Her eyes calmed, gazing at him tenderly. "When you say things like that, you make me want to do something stupid. Stop it."

He smiled. "Okay. Stopping now."

Weiss giggled softly before stepping back, putting a little more space between them.

"I should be going," she said, after taking a long, calming breath. "Klein will be waiting for me."

Jaune nodded. "Yeah, he said something about a curfew."

She clucked her tongue, annoyed. "You'd think I was a child, wouldn't you? A curfew – honestly!"

Jaune chuckled, and then hesitated. “Uh – see you tomorrow?”

She nodded quickly. “Yes. I’ll call you in the morning. Then we’ll visit Winter.”

He showed her to the door. There was a moment where she paused, hand on the knob, as if she were contemplating something but then she opened the door, stepping out.

“Goodnight, Jaune.”

“Goodnight, Weiss.”