

Jaune couldn't remember the last time he felt this nervous.

Weiss remained with Ruby and Maria as he followed Dr. Polendina out of the hangar and towards his personal quarters. The thunk, thunk, thunk of his chair's legs sounded like the beat of his heart. It felt three sizes too big for his chest, thumping against his ribcage as if trying to escape, and Jaune had to focus on his breathing just so he wouldn't have a panic attack.

He went over everything he wanted to say in his mind, but he might as well have been trying to catch smoke with his hands. It slipped through his fingers, no matter how hard he tried to grasp it, and by the time they arrived at their destination, he was no closer to figuring out how he was going to say what he wished to.

He knew this would be hard, but he almost felt paralyzed by fear.

"Please, come in," Dr. Polendina said, the door springing open as he swiped his scroll over the panel.

The room was a mixture of an office, a bedroom and a lab all in one. Jaune wasn't surprised, his eyes scanning the various machines, ignorant as to their purpose. His desk was covered in stacks of paper, some of them scattered, others orderly piled atop one another, while his bed was neatly made, as if no one had laid in it in weeks.

That was quite possibly the case.

There wasn't much of the man here in terms of personal items except one thing. Jaune's eyes found it quickly, his throat constricting. A small picture frame sat beside the bed, and as Jaune approached, he saw those familiar freckles and wonderful smile, those lush ginger curls and bright green eyes.

It was a face he could never forget.

“Beautiful, isn’t she?” Dr. Polendina said from behind him.

Jaune nodded, mute.

“The world is lesser from her passing,” there was a beat of silence, and then, “I had been meaning to come see you, but... I suppose I just expected you to seek me out. Cowardice on my part, admittedly. Please forgive me.”

Jaune blinked, turning to face him. “What? Doctor, what – you have *nothing* to apologize for.”

“Please, call me Pietro,” he said. “And that isn’t true. My daughter would be ashamed of me. I know this because I am ashamed of myself. General Schnee informed me of what happened.”

Jaune mouthed wordlessly before sighing, looking away. “I didn’t think you’d *want* to see me.”

“Why wouldn’t I, Jaune?” he returned softly.

The kindness he heard in his voice almost broke him.

“Because... I was there. I was the one who...,” his voice faltered, almost choking on his words. “I helped her die.”

“You helped her *choose*,” Pietro countered calmly. “There is a difference.”

“She shouldn’t have had to choose. She was just a kid,” he said bitterly. “A good one. Better than any of us. And I—,” his hands balled into fists. “I raised my sword. I ended it. I can’t stop seeing her face. I can’t stop hearing her voice.”

When he was awake, when he slept – it didn’t make a difference. Two girls haunted him now, his every moment. Pyrrha and Penny, two girls who he couldn’t save. No matter how hard he tried, he always came up short.

Why was he never good enough? Was this punishment for seeking to be more than he was worth? His dream of being a Huntsman, gained through deceit. If someone more capable stood in his place, would things have changed?

“Jaune... when Penny was first created, I dreamed she would show the world that machines could have souls. That synthetic or not, she was capable of kindness, choice... *sacrifice*. She proved all of that. Every day,” Jaune looked up, and saw the expression on Pietro’s face. That of a father, honored by how their child turned out. “I could not have been prouder of her.”

And yet it *hurt*. It hurt to know that she was gone, and he had been the one to make it so.

“But she shouldn’t have had to prove it by dying. Not like that. Not through me.”

Pietro approached him, maneuvering his chair to stand by his side. An old weathered hand reached out and rested on Jaune's arm. Pietro had always been a frail man, but Jaune saw the signs of his weakening health. Penny's loss and the destruction of his home had hit him hard.

"She trusted you. That trust wasn't misplaced," his eyes were sad. "Her final choice wasn't about programming or duty. It was about protecting others. That was who she was. And when the moment came, she chose you – because she knew you would honor her wish. No one else could have done what you did, Jaune. She was lucky to have you."

Did he really believe that?

"I just... I didn't want to be her executioner."

"You weren't," Pietro said gently. "You were her friend. You gave her peace. You gave her a choice. That is not something I will ever blame you for. If you are here to ask me for forgiveness, then I am sorry to say, you don't need it. There is nothing to forgive."

"Pietro..." Jaune swallowed. "How can you possibly say that?"

"Because I loved her. And I know she loved you, too. Not in spite of what happened, but because of the strength it took – for both of you," throughout, his voice had remained steady, calm, but infused with deep emotion. Kindness. Appreciation.

It was overwhelming. He didn't deserve it.

"Grieve her, honor her... but don't punish yourself. She wouldn't want that."

His eyes burned, but no tears fell. A weight wasn't lifted, but it was eased, somewhat. Jaune breathed in, a shuddering breath, and it took him a moment to respond.

"Thank you."

"Anytime, my boy," Pietro graced him with a smile, a brittle thing but true, genuine. "If you should ever have need of me, or if you simply wish to talk, do not hesitate. I will always have time for you."

"Can I... can we just stay here for awhile?"

"Of course."

Jaune wasn't sure how long they spent in silence, simply existing. He imagined Penny but not how he usually did, at the end, the life leeching from her eyes. No. He thought of her blinding smile and endearing innocence, that cute expression she would make whenever something confused her, a slight wrinkling of the nose, head tilted in bafflement. He thought of her voice, always so cheerful, happy to see him, happy to see everybody. He thought of her fierce desire to protect Mantle and Atlas.

Pietro was right. The world was lesser from her passing.

She was a bright spark in the darkness that was Remnant, and the world would never see her like again. Penny may have begun her life as a machine, brought to life by the desire and semblance of one man, but she encapsulated what it meant to be human. Their best traits all in one, stuffed inside an adorable little cinnamon bun.

Jaune wiped at his eyes, sniffing.

After some time, Pietro asked, "Would you come with me? I would like to show you something."

Jaune nodded, gathering himself. "Sure."

Pietro led him to the main observation deck. Jaune remembered visiting this place back during the Vytal Festival, when Amity was a showing of the world's innovation, a symbol of unity. He'd stood here among all the visiting students, and the civilians excited for the coming bouts, shoulder to shoulder with Pyrrha, admiring the view of Vale; the city, and the surrounding forests and rolling hills, the snow capped mountains and the clear blue sky.

The view here was different. Golden sand as far as the eye could see, rising up and dipping down, as if the earth were the ocean and the hills were waves. The sky here in Vacuo was so clear, the purest of light blue, not a cloud in sight. Far down below, he saw Vacuo itself, isolated, one of only two remaining kingdoms of man.

It was a magnificent sight.

Where sky met sand, things blurred. It felt like they were standing at the very edge of the world.

"Puts things in perspective, doesn't it?" Pietro chuckled, shaking his head.

"How do you mean?"

“Just how small and insignificant we are. In the grand scheme of things,” he waved a hand, as if gesturing at the entire world. “There are tens of thousands of people down there, below us – and yet from here, they are no bigger than a colony of ants. Is this how the Gods viewed us?”

“Probably,” Jaune muttered.

They stood there for some time until Weiss, Ruby and Maria found them. They were heralded by the tapping of Maria’s cane, and suddenly, Ruby was skipping over, eyes wide as she stared out at the magnificent view.

“We’re so high!”

Weiss joined him, and he felt her worried eyes.

“How are you feeling?” she asked softly.

He almost replied with the typical answer but caught himself, instead saying, “Tired.”

That was the truth. All of a sudden, he felt exhausted. His body was young, but he felt every single one of the years he spent in the Ever After in that very moment. A deep exhaustion that went beyond the physical. A fatigue of the mind and soul.

“Things went well?”

He nodded.

“Better than I ever believed possible.”

Jaune felt her fingers twine with his, the warmth of her palm helping to soothe him.

“I’m glad,” she said.

What did he ever do to deserve such wonderful friends?

He watched Ruby fondly as she peered around in wonder, the light of the sun making her silver eyes shine. Seeing her joy made him feel lighter, uplifted. When she looked back at him with a toothy grin, he smiled.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” he asked.

She nodded quickly. “It’s like we’re in another world.”

They were certainly a long way away from Patch, or Vale, or Atlas. All of them were far from home, and there was no guarantee Jaune or Ruby would ever see their home again. For Weiss, that had already been taken from her.

He thought of his family then. He hadn't truly thought about them in a very, very long time. It had been too painful.

He missed them. His mother and father, his sisters. It was strange to think but in years lived, he was now the eldest of his siblings. In years lived, he wasn't much younger than his mom and dad in truth. That was a scary thought.

"Jaune Arc," Maria said, taking a place by his side.

"Ma'am."

She peered up at him with those strange eyes, and Jaune felt as if she could see more than simply his face. She'd always given him that feeling, right from the very first moment they'd met. Her eyes may have been damaged beyond repair, and she required the aid of prosthetics to see – but Jaune had seldom met anyone as sharp and observant as her.

"I'd like to speak with you," she said bluntly, not mincing words. "If your little girlfriend here will allow it."

Weiss began spluttering. "I – I'm not his...!"

"Oh, I apologize," Maria said, not sounding it. An amused smirk tugged at her lips as she very pointedly looked at their joined hands. "An honest mistake."

Weiss quickly let go, and Jaune felt the loss keenly.

“Sure,” he said. “We can talk.”

She led him a short distance away.

While Maria wasn't a stranger, Jaune would never claim that they were close. She'd been focused on helping Ruby control her powers, and in Atlas, Jaune had been so busy that he rarely saw her. But she'd always been a figure of inspiration. After Qrow had filled them in on the legend of the Grimm Reaper, he'd done a little digging.

If there was one thing Jaune enjoyed when he was younger, it was reading about the Huntsmen and Huntresses of old.

There was a reason Qrow had been a little starstruck by her, enough so that his gruff manner would occasionally take a backseat. Her reputation was well earned.

And now she wanted to talk to him.

About what? He didn't know, but he did have a clue. What else could it be?

Pietro and Maria were clearly close. Jaune had eyes, and while he hadn't seen Maria around much in Atlas, he recalled hearing more than enough.

“You've changed.”

Maria was not a person to mince words or beat around the bush. She was as straight a shooter as you could find, and while some might find that sort of attitude off-putting, Jaune liked dealing with people where there was no chance of misunderstanding them.

“You could say that.”

He wasn't sure how much of what happened to him had leaked beyond those that had been initially told, but he was fairly confident that she had no knowledge of his time as the Rusted Knight. But as she watched him, Jaune had the feeling that while she knew no specifics, she obviously knew *something* had occurred.

“Hmm,” she looked him dead in the eye. “You've got the eyes of a Huntsman.”

He frowned. “Pardon?”

“A veteran,” she elaborated. “You and your friends have gone through a lot, even while so young. Though to look at them, you wouldn't know it. Their eyes are clear.”

“And mine aren't?”

She nodded. “Something like that.”

Jaune wasn't sure what to make of that.

“I was always a little unsure how you fit into your little friend group,” she admitted. “You were different than they were.”

“How so?”

“The way you moved,” she said. “The way you carried yourself. When I found out that you started much, much later than everyone else, I understood a little better. There is a reason training starts young. It isn’t just about honing the body. It is about honing the mind. To be frank, I thought you might be the weak link.”

He wasn’t offended.

“Believe me, you aren’t the only one to have that thought,” he revealed. “That was constantly on my mind. No one doubted me more than myself.”

“I never accused you of being stupid,” she grinned before her face became serious. “But when the time came, and you were forced to make a Huntsman’s call, you made it.”

She was talking about Penny.

“Huntsmen are in constant danger,” she continued, her old, wrinkled hand caressing the head of her cane. “Our line of work puts us in peril, and the stakes are often not just our own lives, but the lives of others. Sometimes, we are forced to make a choice – an impossible choice, for some. But it is a choice nonetheless.”

There was a sadness in her voice he had never heard before, and she was no doubt reliving another time, a time where she had been forced to choose and make a difficult decision.

“To protect the whole, can you allow a single life to perish?” she posed the question. “How about two lives? If it means saving five hundred? You want to protect them all, to save everyone – but if you overextend, you die, and then everyone else does. You are all that stands in the way of a complete massacre, and to prevent more death, you must allow one or two to fall. Can you do it? Not many can.”

She didn't wait for his answer.

“A different position to the one you found yourself in, but the same sentiment applies. Perhaps worse because the life given up to protect the greater whole was a friend,” she sighed. “You had a choice in front of you, and you made your decision. A Huntsman's call – or maybe a friend's gift, the hardest gift you can give.”

Jaune swallowed thickly.

“I was wrong about you,” she admitted clearly. “And I can see it now, in the way you stand, and in your eyes. I'm sorry you were forced to make that choice, young man.”

She patted him on the arm like she was his grandmother, and that more than anything made him miss his family even more.

They spent a little more time on Amity after that. Pietro and Maria showed them around, pointing out some of the improvements that had been made. While Amity could operate independently, a full crew was stationed on board to ensure that communications remained stable. Both human crewmembers and robots, and it was these people that Pietro oversaw in his day to day.

“Things in Mistral are tough right now,” Pietro told them. “Their depleted Huntsman forces mean they’ve been forced to abandon many of their outlying villages. They simply cannot protect them anymore, and the Grimm have moved in. Thankfully, there have been minimal casualties reported during the evacuations, and they’ve taken up defensive positions around the city.”

Jaune was almost too scared to ask.

“How is Argus? Do you have word?”

Weiss and Ruby shot him looks of understanding.

“They’re doing well. Many of the ships that escaped the fall of Atlas couldn’t make the journey out here, so they were redirected to the military base in Argus for repairs. The city is well protected, and all reports indicate that Grimm activity in the area is manageable.”

Jaune felt relief hearing it. At the very least, Saphron, Terra and Adrian were safe.

The trip back down to Vacuo was done in silence, but Ruby and Weiss were a constant presence by his side. Weiss reclaimed his hand, while Ruby took the other, and Jaune felt grounded in a way that he hadn’t in a very long time.

They were too good to him. He really had the most amazing friends a guy could ask for.

Stepping out onto solid ground, the heat hit them in a crushing wave. Amity had been air conditioned, as had the transport ship. Down on the ground, outside, there was no such protection, so they retreated to Shade.

It was Weiss that broached the subject first.

“How did it go?”

They found a common room to rest in. Furnished with lush couches and chairs, Jaune felt as if he would sink into the cushions and never come out. His eyes fluttered shut, and he felt Ruby and Weiss sit down beside him.

“As well as I could have hoped,” he said, sighing. “He doesn’t blame me.”

“None of us blame you,” Ruby said quietly.

“There is nothing for us to blame,” Weiss agreed. “We’re just sorry that you had to do it. That it was left to you, and that we couldn’t save Penny as well. We were all there fighting, Jaune. If you believe you failed in some way, that is only because we all failed.”

“You didn’t fail,” he said weakly.

“And neither did you,” Ruby cuddled into his side, and Jaune felt her warmth leech into his body. “We’re proud of you.”

“And we aren’t ever going to leave you alone,” Weiss copied Ruby’s actions, and just like on the airship, they both nuzzled into him, cocooning him in love and acceptance.

The wound on his heart scabbed over. Just a little bit.

Jaune was no longer an easy sleeper, and yet he found himself dozing off. There was no need for vigilance here, surrounded by Ruby and Weiss, no chance of danger finding him. He was no longer alone, forced to fend for himself, survival as his highest priority. All he felt was warmth, his lungs filled with the soft scent of strawberries and vanilla, soothing his troubled mind.

He wasn't sure how long they were sitting there. Long enough for the sky to darken, for when they were found, the light coming through the window had faded.

"What's going on here?"

Jaune's eyes opened slowly, and he was met with a mane of golden blonde hair and a pair of lilac eyes. Yang peered down at him interestedly, Blake standing by her side. They both had curious expressions on their faces, though Yang's quickly shifted into mischief.

Pulling out her scroll, she snapped a picture.

That woke him up.

"Yang?" he asked, frowning. "What are you...?"

"You three are *so cute*," she cooed, grinning evilly. "Did something good happen?"

It took his foggy mind a moment to catch up.

Looking down, it was to see Weiss and Ruby's sleeping faces nestled against his chest. Weiss' long braid was coiled in his lap, a rope of snow white hair, while Ruby's mouth was slightly open, a patch of drool staining dampening his shirt. They were both at peace, their breathing soft and even.

"Oh," he said dumbly.

"Is there something we should know about?" Yang asked.

"I met with Dr. Polendina today."

Yang froze, her expression shifting from teasing to worried in an instant.

"Oh, Jaune," Blake said sadly. Her amber eyes softened with concern. "What happened?"

He filled them in on their day, and when it was clear that things weren't as bad as they were fearing, he saw the relief pass over their faces.

"And then we came back here," he finished. "I guess we were exhausted afterwards because we all fell asleep. What time is it?"

“Nearly six,” Yang answered. “I’ve been messaging Ruby since four, but she wasn’t answering, so we decided to look for her. This is what we found,” she waved her hand at them. “I almost didn’t want to wake you.”

“You looked so peaceful,” Blake added, smiling. Her kitty ears flicked. “But we didn’t think you’d want to miss dinner.”

Jaune’s stomach answered for him, gurgling loudly, and both girls smirked.

“That answers that question,” Yang said in amusement. “Though it feels wrong to wake those two. Don’t they look just the cutest?”

She was really enjoying this, and Jaune couldn’t say that he blamed her. Looking down at them again, she was right. They did look the cutest, and it would be a shame to ruin that. But now that he was fully awake, he realized that both of his arms were dead. They weren’t heavy by any means, but even so, having two girls sleeping atop your arms was more than enough to make your limbs go numb.

Jaune tried to flex his fingers and couldn’t feel a thing.

He shifted his shoulders, shrugging lightly, “Ruby, Weiss – wake up.”

Weiss’ nose wrinkled but that was it, her face quickly smoothing out as she nuzzled further into him. Ruby was unmoved, a stone.

“Hey,” he said a little louder. “It’s time to get up.”

Yang moved closer, and Jaune saw the evil look in her eyes.

“Here, let me,” she said, popping a finger into her mouth, and Jaune knew instantly what was about to happen. As a little brother, there was no way of mistaking it.

“Wait, Yang,” he said quickly but it was too late.

Finding Ruby’s unsuspecting ear, Yang plunged her finger in and announced loudly, “Wet willy, wet willy!”

Ruby jerked as Yang twisted her finger, silver eyes snapping open in panic. A flailing arm lashed out as she recoiled, slapping Weiss across the face and the former heiress flinched, giving a shout of surprise as she rudely woken.

“Arggh~!” Ruby screamed, shaking her head wildly to dislodge Yang’s finger. The blonde retreated, smirking, prank complete while Ruby cupped her ear.

“What are you doing?” Ruby roared, eyes narrowed in fury.

“What is going on?” Weiss demanded, cradling her cheek. She blinked blearily, brain trying to catch up.

Blake raised her hands in surrender. “It wasn’t me.”

“Urgh, gross, gross, gross, *gross*,” Ruby rubbed at her ear furiously. “Yang, what the *hell*?”

“You wouldn’t wake up,” Yang said innocently. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“What happened? What did she do?” Weiss asked, confused.

“She wet her finger and put it in Ruby’s ear,” Jaune explained.

Weiss blinked before looking at Yang. “What are you? Seven?”

Yang chortled.

“And who hit me?” Weiss accused.

“That was Ruby. It was an accident,” Jaune said.

“Ew, she got it right in there,” Ruby complained, scowling at her sister. “What the hell is wrong with you? Wake me up normally!”

Yang gave her fingers a wiggle. “It’s your fault for falling asleep in such an exploitable position. On top of a boy, at that! Dad would hit the roof if he saw. You even drooled on him.”

“What?”

Ruby spotted the wet patch on his shirt and flushed scarlet.

“I didn’t do that!”

“So who did?” Yang arched an eyebrow. “It was either you or Weiss. Are you accusing her of drooling on him?”

“I don’t drool,” Weiss said, voice frosty.

It was such a ridiculous moment that Jaune thought he’d been transported back to Beacon, watching the sisters bicker over the most mundane things, be it first thing in the morning or between classes, or even *during* classes sometimes – and he felt a feeling of fondness wash over him, a startled laugh escaping him.

They looked at him in surprise.

“Sorry,” he tried to muffle himself but he ended up snorting, and that only set him off even more. His shoulders shook, and the harder he tried to contain himself, the worse it got. “She really got you good, didn’t she?”

The surprise fled Ruby’s face, replaced by a pout. “Why are you laughing? It’s gross!”

“Sorry, I just – haha,” he clamped his mouth shut, but it did no good. “I just can’t stop!”

Yang snickered, and suddenly, one by one, as if their laughter was infectious, it spread. Blake started giggling next, and while still annoyed at being rudely woken up, Weiss’ laughter joined in. Ruby held out as long as she could, but eventually, even she cracked.

“What are we laughing at?” Blake asked between giggles.

“I have no idea,” Weiss answered, her eyes filled with affection as she looked at him. “Because this lunk head won’t stop!”

It felt good. His mother once said that laughter heals the soul, and maybe there was something to it. Once it died down, he felt lighter than he’d felt in a very long time.

“So,” he said, under control once more. “You mentioned dinner?”

Ruby got her revenge by flinging mashed potato into Yang’s hair later that night, which almost resulted in the second coming of their infamous food fight from Beacon. The only thing that stopped it from escalating was Blake’s quick thinking, placing a strong kiss on her lips to distract her.

That was one way to calm someone down.