

“Sounds like you’ve had a busy time since the last time I spoke to you,” Weiss deadpanned after Jaune finished explaining everything that had happened. The heiress shook her head in disbelief. “We’re going to get a bad reputation around Vale if this keeps happening.”

“You weren’t involved,” Blake pointed out, having accompanied him on this day. “Neither was I.”

“Their actions will reflect upon us as a whole,” Weiss lectured, raising a finger like some sort of teacher. “And as we’ve all already been questioned by the VPD once before, we are unfortunately connected to this, whether we want to be or not,” she then sighed, rolling her eyes. “But that isn’t important. How is Yang?”

“Rattled,” Jaune said honestly. “I haven’t really spoken to her since the hospital. Ruby says she’s been withdrawn.”

“Yang and withdrawn aren’t two words I thought I’d ever hear in a sentence,” Weiss replied, concern written across her face.

“I’ve actually been invited by Ruby to visit them this evening. A sleepover – her words, not mine,” he said as Weiss arched an eyebrow in question. “The invitation was also extended to Blake. We’re going to try to cheer Yang up, lift her spirits.”

“I’d be there in a heartbeat if I could,” Weiss grumbled. “But that is a good idea. I know from experience that stewing alone with your thoughts isn’t the greatest way forward after a traumatic event. Does she know you’re coming?”

Jaune shook his head. “No. Ruby wants it to be a surprise.”

"I just hope she doesn't take it the wrong way," Blake said quietly. "Yang strikes me as the type of person who detests being pitied, and she might see it as that, even if that isn't what this is."

"Too bad," Weiss said, a little sarcasm in her voice. "She's going to have her friends around to cheer her up and she's going to like it. How horrible."

Jaune grinned. "Feeling a little left out?"

"Yes. God, yes. Get me out of this place," she pleaded, leaning in towards the camera. "I cannot wait until the new semester starts. I'm losing my mind."

"I'll be there soon," Jaune soothed. "Then we can be miserable together."

"Shut up," Weiss sniffed, her lips pulling into a reluctant smile. "The whole idea is that we won't be miserable if we are together."

"Oh, is that right? Sorry, I thought you wanted me to suffer as well."

"You've become very cheeky since I've been away," Weiss narrowed her eyes before smiling brightly. "I look forward to correcting it."

That sounded slightly ominous.

Blake snickered. "Don't be too hard on him."

“Hmph~!”

They chatted about some lighter topics after that, though before Jaune hung up, he had something to ask her.

“Weiss – do you know a girl called Penny Polendina?”

She thought about it. “Is that the girl you met in Vale? The last name sounds somewhat familiar... but I do not recall where I’ve heard it. Why do you ask?”

He hadn’t told her about her involvement in the whole fiasco at the Violet Room, so did so now, and told her about the Atlesian officer that had come to retrieve her.

“She also knows your sister.”

Weiss blinked, startled. “She knows Winter?”

“She claims they are friends.”

That was news to her.

“I’m sorry, Jaune. I don’t know what to say.”

“I thought that she might be the daughter of some military official, or a politician, or even just a wealthy family like yours.”

“Like I said, the name is somewhat familiar but – no, she definitely doesn’t run in the circles my family does, I know all of their names. *Unfortunately*,” she wracked her brains. “No politicians that I know of have that name, either. Maybe military... I could always ask Winter. If she claims that they are friends, she might shed some light on it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was just curious, that’s all,” Jaune shrugged. “I just wasn’t expecting an officer to turn up and take her away, it was a little jarring.”

“Maybe she’s an undercover spy,” Blake supplied before frowning when Weiss scoffed. “What?”

“This isn’t one of your dirty little books.”

“Hey,” Blake said, outraged. “That isn’t what I was thinking, at all!”

“I’m sure a bunch of them have a premise like that,” Weiss said shrewdly. “Some secret agent getting captured by the big bad man, who likes to tie them up, and they don’t struggle very hard at all.”

Blake flushed. “I resent your implication.”

“Your brain is rotten,” Weiss countered. “Jaune, does she strike you as a spy?”

Penny? A spy? Some secret agent?

“No,” he said instantly, Weiss looking triumphant while Blake sulked. “She is a little weird but she’s very sweet. Penny doesn’t really give off that vibe at all.”

“If they’re undercover, they’d be *hiding it*,” Blake muttered mulishly.

“It’s likely as you’ve assumed, Jaune. She is probably the daughter of an official of some sort. It isn’t so unusual for family members of high value targets to have minders,” Weiss’ mood darkened somewhat. “Until I was trained, I was often accompanied by bodyguards. Her bodyguards just happen to be aligned with the military”

Blake grimaced.

Their conversation didn’t last much longer after that. After saying their goodbye’s, they made their way down to Vale. They still had some time to kill before their ferry, so they went in search for something to take over to the Xiao Long residence. They couldn’t turn up empty handed, that would be rude.

“What does Yang like?” Blake asked as they browsed the cabinet of a busy bakery, eyes scanning the pastries and cakes on display.

“I know Ruby loves anything strawberry,” Jaune said, spotting a small strawberry cheesecake. It was decorated with glistening, whole strawberries, with a tasteful application of frosting in the middle. “I think Yang likes chocolate.”

There was a little chocolate mud cake decorated with white chocolate dipped wafers, and hunks of milk chocolate spread on top. Just looking at it made Jaune's teeth tingle.

"We'll get that – and the strawberry one for Ruby," Jaune said, pointing them out. "We should probably get something for their dad, as well."

That was a more difficult choice. Jaune doubted that the man was as enthusiastic about sweet things as his youngest daughter was. His Pa would tell him to take him a six pack but he wasn't sure if Tai drank, and if he did, what his favorite was.

Maybe something for dinner would be more appropriate. Ruby had mentioned that they had a blackstone and would be having barbecue, apparently Tai was a whizz at grilling, so perhaps some meat would not go amiss.

They found a butcher and Jaune picked up some lamb loin chops, and some aged sirloin steaks. Placing everything away in their backpacks, they made their way over to the ferry terminal, catching a taxi across the city.

"How has your investigation been going?" he asked Blake as they waited for boarding.

She pulled a face. "You know that guy I said I've been talking to?"

Jaune nodded. "Yeah."

"Something has him spooked, he hasn't met with me for the past few days," she looked troubled. "His store has been closed, as well, whenever I stop by. I've been keeping my ear to the ground, visiting a few places where they might try and recruit more members from but... I've got nothing."

“Did they find out he was trying to back out?”

“I don’t know. I’d think he’d left town already if he still wasn’t answering my messages occasionally.”

That didn’t sound good at all.

“How about your clone? Is she still around?”

Her expression wavered between annoyance and worry.

“I haven’t seen her either,” she admitted. “She just took off one day, and never came back.”

“Do you think she finally – you know,” he waved a hand. “Vanished?”

It felt odd to say that about this particular clone, seeing as she was as real as could be. Her normal clones came and went within the blink of an eye, but the one enhanced by his empowered semblance was practically its own person. A second Blake. A second Blake he’d had sex with.

“It’s possible but... wouldn’t I know if that happened?” Blake looked out across the unsettled sea, troubled. “I usually know when my clones are destroyed. It doesn’t hurt or anything, it’s just a sensation I feel... you’d think with this one, that would be a lot more potent, wouldn’t it?”

“You would know better than I would,” he said. “So she’s just... around, then? Acting on her own.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about her being out there alone with my face, doing who knows what,” Blake pouted. “Anything she does could come back on me.”

“Just think of it this way, Blake. She wouldn’t do anything you wouldn’t do.”

“That isn’t helpful.”

Jaune grinned. “Why? Don’t trust yourself?”

“You’re meant to be cheering me up, not teasing me,” she nudged him before leaning into his side, grasping his hand. Their fingers tangled together.

“Sorry, you’re right,” he placed a kiss between her kitty ears and she shivered, her furry ears tickling the underside of his chin as they flicked. “Do you think she might be doing something dangerous?”

She hesitated. “The last time I saw her was when my contact first started avoiding me. It might just be a coincidence, but...”

“She might be looking into things on her own,” he finished for her. “Got it.”

“I hope she’s okay.”

The worry in her voice was palpable. Maybe it was strange, to care about this creation of their semblance’s but it was hard not to. This other Blake was just as real as any of them, with all of Blake’s memories and feelings, desires, and trauma. It was almost like one day, Blake had woken up with a twin sister, but yet somehow even closer, identical in all ways.

Perhaps even right down to a soul.

As evening approached, the sky started to darken but not just because of the setting sun. Black clouds were gathering, and when they boarded the ferry, the captain informed the passengers over the intercom system that they may experience some rough waters. Even though the sky was gloomy and the water looked stormy, it was a beautiful ride over. They sat by a window, peering out across the rolling ways as the city of Vale faded behind them.

It was Jaune’s first time at sea like this, so his stomach was a little unsettled by all the swaying, but it wasn’t anything he couldn’t handle. Blake was completely unfazed.

“Airships don’t really travel to Menagerie,” she said, snuggling into his side and curling up like a cat. Jaune slipped his arm around her, fingers resting on her hip. “So most people that leave do so by boat or ship.”

He enjoyed having her soft warmth against him, and began to lightly doze. People chattered around them but he zoned them out, relishing this small moment of intimacy. As much as he loved their more physical, sexual encounters, this right here was what he liked most. The emotional connection, the effortless affection. Blake nuzzled her face against his chest before leaning up and placing a chaste kiss on his jawline which he answered by dipping his face and claiming her lips.

“Mm,” she moaned, beaming at him with bright eyes. “I’ve missed you.”

He pecked her lips again. “I’ve missed you.”

It had only been less than five days since he’d seen her, but it was true. He missed Nora terribly, and Weiss, even though he spoke to her every few days. He missed Ruby, his one time seeing her because of an awful situation. He missed Pyrrha, for as much as he enjoyed sending her those letter-texts, talking and training with her was better. He missed Ren and his calming presence, their connection different as they were the only two guys in their friend group.

And he missed Yang, and wanted more than anything for her to bounce back. Hopefully their visit would bring that about.

Maps had a way of skewing your perception. When looking at an illustration of Remnant’s landmasses, Patch looked small, unremarkable but in truth, it was not so small. Sure, it was tiny compared to the continental landmasses, and it was smaller than almost all other islands that had been mapped. Menagerie was much larger, as were the islands scattered in the southern ocean or the island of Vytal, which held such an important place in their history, but in person, Patch was fairly large.

Jaune watched it appear like some looming creature of the depths, growing in size as they approached. The waters here appeared even more disturbed, the currents running fast, the waves carrying them higher and dropping them lower. The ferry made its way towards the cluster of lights, and the main town where the port was located; Viren.

It was the largest settlement on the island where most industry took place. He recalled Ruby mentioning that Viren held around seventy-five percent of the population of the island, while the rest was split between three other smaller towns; Dunhollow on the northern shoreline, Azurebay on the western shoreline where a second port was located that housed Vale’s

substantial deep sea fishing fleet when in operation, and the smallest called Thistlewren, located a small way inland from Viren.

The Xiao Long residence was located in none of these towns. Their home was built within the lush forests towards the interior, where only experienced hikers, hunters or Huntsmen dared tread. Grimm were present on the island, though their numbers were relatively small compared to places like Forever Fall or the Emerald Forest.

Ruby had explained that for the most part, the Grimm stayed in the interior, only occasionally attacking towns. The presence of Signal Academy on the island ensured there was always a healthy group of aspiring Huntsman on hand, as well as their teachers, keeping the Grimm population under control.

Tai was waiting for them just outside the terminal, standing next to what could only be described as a yellow monstrosity. It was clear to Jaune then that Yang's taste in color came from her father.

It was a vehicle, large enough to seat five people comfortably and seven if the seats in the luggage area were deployed. Built primarily for off-road driving, it had thick wheels with deep tread, shaped like a box with a heavy bull bar protecting the engine bay. As was established, it was bright yellow in color with small areas of black, reminding Jaune of Bumblebee. There was nothing sleek or nimble about this thing, though. It was all raw power and bullish grunt.

"Welcome to Patch," Tai greeted, offering a hand. Jaune shook it, followed by Blake. "And you must be Blake. Ruby has told me a lot about you."

His eyes passed over her cat ears, unconcerned. Blake stood a little straighter, and Jaune realized that she must have been a little anxious about it. Just because Ruby and Yang didn't care that she was a faunus didn't mean that their father automatically held the same beliefs.

“Come on, it’s only a short drive to our home.”

Though they lived in the interior, the road from Viren was fully maintained for a couple of miles before they hit dirt. Even then, it was clear that the local government here kept things well looked after, the ground firm as farm land quickly turned into lush forests. As night fell completely, things grew dark. It reminded Jaune of home, where the only light to be found was within people’s homes.

Twenty minutes later, they were pulling up in front of a large, two story log cabin. Ruby was waiting on the porch and came running over as they exited the vehicle, practically flying into Jaune’s arms.

“You’re here, you’re here~!” she cheered happily, beaming. “We’re going to have so much fun, this is awesome! Oh, hey Blake!”

Blake smiled. “Hey Ruby.”

“Ahem,” Tai cleared his throat, arching an eyebrow at Ruby. She flushed and leapt away from Jaune, her boot scuffing the ground awkwardly.

“Aheh?”

Her father shook his head, looking amused. “Should I be worried that you leapt into a boy’s arms as soon as he arrived?”

He didn’t appear angry, simply teasing his youngest daughter. Ruby glared at him angrily.

“Don’t make it sound weird!”

Tai raised his hands. “Hey, just an observation. You also fell asleep, leaning all over him the other day.”

Ruby looked horrified. “Dad, stop it right now! You’ll give Blake the wrong idea!”

Blake just looked amused. “He *is* pretty comfortable. I can’t say that I blame you.”

Tai looked between Jaune and Blake curiously but didn’t question it. “Well – this is our home. It isn’t much, but it gets the job done.”

“It’s perfect,” Jaune said.

A sudden bark drew their attention. A small little black blur rushed towards them, and he felt Blake recoil beside him.

“Zwei~!” Ruby brightened immediately. “Come here boy!”

One moment Blake was there, the next moment, she vanished. Jaune grunted as a sudden weight settled around his shoulders, two soft, slender thighs clamping around his head from behind as a teenage girl used him as an escape. He almost toppled over, hastily bracing himself while grabbing her legs.

“Blake, what are you doing?” he complained.

“Dog,” she said darkly, gripping his hair to stabilize.

“Look, look, my friends have come from Vale,” Ruby cooed, picking up the writhing bundle. “This is Jaune and Blake,” she thrust him out, and he barked again, this time in greeting.

Jaune flinched as Blake’s fingers tightened, leaning back and away from the small animal, trying to put as much distance between her and it as possible.

Jaune wasn’t an expert on dogs beyond the ones they kept on the farm, but he was pretty sure that this breed was a corgi. He was pretty cute with his large ears and panting smile, his tongue lolling out. A red collar with a golden pendant hung around his neck.

“Uh, hey Zwei,” Jaune greeted.

“Don’t encourage it!” Blake hissed.

“Ruby, maybe you should take Zwei away,” Tai said, voice even, though Jaune thought he could detect a hint of amusement. “I don’t think Blake is comfortable around dogs.”

Ruby gasped. “Blake, there is nothing to be scared of! Zwei is a little cutie and well trained and would never hurt a fly, only a Grimm since his aura is unlocked!”

Zwei barked in agreement.

Blake scrambled higher, which he didn't think was possible, her feet pressed atop his shoulders as she perched on him like a gargoyle.

"Ruby," Tai warned.

She pouted.

"Fiiine~! Zwei can go in his pen."

"What's going on out here?"

Jaune looked towards the house and saw Yang standing on the porch. She was dressed down in a pair of khaki sweat pants and an orange singlet, her hair falling about her shoulders in a messy wave. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of Jaune before her head tilted, spotting Blake.

"Blake, what are you *doing*?" she asked, voice tinged with laughter.

"She doesn't like Zwei," Ruby whined. "Which is impossible! Everyone loves Zwei!"

“Ruby,” Yang snorted. “Blake’s a cat faunus.”

“That isn’t why!” Blake immediately denied.

“Oh?” Yang placed a hand on her hip. “Why don’t you like dogs then?”

“They smell and have fleas,” Blake fired back, easing up slightly as Ruby moved away, sliding down until she was sitting on his shoulders once again, no longer perched like a bird. “They slobber over everything and their barking hurts my ears.”

“Zwei doesn’t have fleas!” Ruby sounded offended at the very thought. “And he doesn’t smell! We bathe him regularly.”

“Dogs are ugly!”

“He isn’t ugly!”

Tai started laughing as Ruby and Blake began bickering.

“As funny as this is, how about we move inside?” their father suggested.

Blake slowly climbed down as Ruby poked out her tongue, rushing towards the house without a word. Grabbing their bags, they followed Tai to the house, meeting Yang on the porch.

“What are you guys doing here?” she asked, frowning.

“Hey Blake, nice to see you,” the dark haired girl mocked, and Yang’s face smoothed out, softening.

“Hey Blake,” she said. “Nice to see you.”

Blake leaned in and hugged her, and the two shared a moment, Yang’s arms pulling her in tight before they separated.

“It was Ruby’s idea,” Jaune supplied.

“Of course it was,” Yang grumbled before she reeled him in, embracing him. Jaune hugged her back, squeezing her firmly, and she lingered in his arms for a little longer than what you’d expect from friends.

Blake watched them curiously, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

She appeared better than the last time he saw her but looks could be deceiving. When she pulled away, their eyes met briefly before she glanced away, hiding her face with a curtain of blonde.

“Come in, I was just watching tv.”

They removed their shoes at the door. The inside was warm, a healthy fire burning in the hearth. The lounge room was large with two couches and a lazyboy set around a low coffee table, a holo-screen sitting upon a wooden cabinet. The flooring was dark hard wood with a large square mat upon which the furniture sat on. On the far wall was a long bookcase with cupboards underneath, the walls decorated with pictures; some were landscape shots, while others were of people. Jaune saw a lot of Ruby and Yang when they were younger, and a woman that could only be Summer Rose.

Just as Raven looked like an older version of Yang, Summer Rose was a more mature version of Ruby. She even wore a cloak, though it was white instead of red, though her dark hair that transitioned into red by the ends was the exact match for her daughter.

Next to one of the couches was a dog bed, though Zwei had been banished to the small caged enclosure in the corner. He didn't appear to mind, though, panting up a storm as his stubby tail wagged furiously. Blake made sure to sit on the couch that was furthest away from him, steadfastly not looking in his direction, as if not to encourage him.

"We got you guys something," Jaune said, reaching into his backpack. He pulled out the slices of cake, and Ruby's eyes immediately lit up when she spotted the strawberries.

"Score~!"

"Not until after dinner," Tai called out as he entered the kitchen, making Ruby sag in disappointment.

"Aww."

Blake handed Yang the chocolate slice.

“Thanks.”

“I also have this,” Jaune showed them the meat. Ruby took it off his hands and made her way into the kitchen, leaving them alone with Yang – and Zwei, of course.

“Weiss says hi.”

“Does she?” Yang eyed him up and down. “I suppose she knows about what happened.”

Straight to the point.

Jaune nodded.

“And what did she say?”

“That we’re going to get a bad name around the city with all the trouble we’re causing.”

Yang snorted.

“And she asked how you were.”

“Well, you know – I screwed up big time and shit sucks, but I’m over it.”

“Are you?” Blake asked quietly.

“Yep! What happened, happened. Can’t do anything about that now. No point in moping, right?” she asked boisterously. “Just gotta get on with it.”

Jaune hummed.

“What? Don’t believe me?”

“It isn’t that we don’t believe you,” Blake said slowly. “But it would be perfectly normal if you hadn’t completely recovered from the ordeal.”

“Trust me, I’m good.”

He didn’t believe her but didn’t press. Jaune wasn’t here to upset her, he was here to cheer her up and spend time with her.

“Did your dad tell you about Raven?”

Her expression froze at his words but it was only for a moment.

“Yeah, he did,” she said, eyes moving off them and focusing on the television. “Said she did a number on those guys.”

Jaune nodded. “That’s putting it lightly.”

“The detectives said she killed some of them. I guess she is good for something after all.”

He remained silent. Yang feeling that way wasn’t unexpected, and he didn’t blame her for it. A part of him felt the exact same, that they deserved everything they got that night. But another part of them just felt sad that it came to that in the first place, that human lives were lost.

Jaune wondered if Tai had told her about Raven’s semblance and how it worked, but didn’t ask. Broaching that subject was like opening a can of worms. Ruby returned shortly after, skipping over and plopping down next to Yang.

“Dad’s gonna start cooking in a minute. He wanted to know if you guys are allergic to anything.”

Jaune shook his head. “Nope.”

“No allergies,” Blake confirmed.

“Do you guys want anything to drink? We have soda, flavored milk, water,” Ruby pulled a face at that one. “Tea, coffee?”

“I’ll take a coffee, please,” Blake said. “Milk, one sugar.”

“Jaune?”

“Nothing for me.”

Ruby hopped up and skipped back out of the room, Yang scowling after her.

“She didn’t even ask me if I wanted anything!”

Blake snickered.

“She appears to be enjoying herself,” Jaune noted.

Yang’s annoyance faded as she smiled. A genuine smile.

“She isn’t used to having friends come over, so I think she’s enjoying the opportunity to play host. She had friends at Signal but... I guess they were more acquaintances than true friends, I don’t know if they’ve even kept in contact after she went to Beacon. Ruby’s always been a bit socially awkward.”

He knew what that was like.

Ruby returned shortly after with Blake's coffee and a strawberry milk for herself, and a glass of soda for Yang.

"I already knew what you'd want," Ruby said brattily while Yang rolled her eyes, giving her little sister a rude gesture.

Yang sipped at her cola. "How's Penny? With everything that happened, I don't know what happened to her. She wasn't hurt, was she?"

Jaune defused her worry. "Penny was great. She wasn't hurt, but afterwards..."

He told her what he'd told Weiss. Yang looked perplexed.

"I didn't know she was such a big shot."

Jaune shrugged. "I thought she might have a wealthy family, sometimes she'd remind me of Weiss – but this is something else."

Yang nursed her drink, rolling her chilled glass back and forth between her palms. "I'm glad she's alright, though."

When they finished their drinks, Ruby gave them a tour of the house. Their kitchen carried over the same warm colored hues from the lounge, lots of dark and light browns. One wall was made from light brick, several cabinets mounted above the window. They had the latest appliances; a state of the art stove and oven, a smart fridge, a coffee maker, anything you could ever need.

Tai was already on the back porch, starting up the blackstone, small lights dangling from the rafters outside.

Ruby then showed them upstairs where the bedrooms were. There was the master bedroom where Tai slept, a spare bedroom, Yang's room and Ruby's room. Since there was only one spare bedroom, that was Jaune's. Blake was bunking with Ruby, and it was her room they ended up in.

It wasn't messy, per se – it was more like controlled chaos. Everything had its place, but there was a lot of everything. A large stereo sat atop a set of drawers, a stack of CD's in danger of toppling over. Three different consoles were positioned in front of a tv, games scattered around them. A large shelving unit dominated one of the walls, filled with various objects; pictures in frames, weapon components, old magazines, and figurines.

Some of them were girls in cute clothes, manga and anime heroines. Some were guys and girls with awesome weapons that Ruby was likely to have fallen in love with. And then there were Grimm figurines.

Jaune didn't even know they made those.

"Stop staring at everything, it's embarrassing," Ruby muttered shyly.

Blake was inspecting the Grimm, her eyebrows lifted.

"You collect Grimm."

Ruby pouted. "So?"

Blake blinked. "I've just never seen someone collect Grimm figurines before."

"I didn't even know they made things like that," Jaune chimed in, though he did recall seeing Grimm plushies at the arcade when he went with Penny. Maybe he shouldn't be surprised.

"Ruby's a bit of a weirdo, if you haven't noticed," Yang circled a finger by her head moments before a red pillow hit her in the face.

Ruby brandished another one threateningly. "At least I don't have half naked boys on my wall."

Yang flushed. "That's normal!"

"Normal is weird!"

Yang did indeed have half naked boys on her wall. Posters of various boy bands were plastered everywhere like a collage, a sea of handsome faces surrounding them. Blake snickered as she made her way around the room, inspecting all the posters while Jaune was more interested in her interior design choices.

In the corner was a fluffy yellow chair, while a matching rug was thrown across the floor. She didn't have any consoles like Ruby but had her own sound system, a tv, and a vanity loaded with different types of makeup.

And on her bed was a stuffed bumblebee with large, comical eyes.

Jaune met her eyes and grinned.

“What?” she asked sourly.

He leaned in so the others couldn’t hear. “I guess Weiss isn’t the only one that likes stuffed animals.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I don’t like stuffed animals, it just has sentimental value, that’s all.”

“Oh,” he paused. “Was it a gift?”

“Not a gift. It’s just... my mom, Summer – she liked bumblebees. It was kinda her thing.”

“Ah.”

It was something that made her feel closer to her mom. It also explained why her bike had the name it did, beyond just the color scheme.

When they made their way back down stairs, Tai was waiting.

“I’m going to borrow Jaune for a while.”

Yang crossed her arms. “And *why* is that, exactly?”

“Because it’s a man’s job to grill, isn’t that right, Jaune?”

It was?

“It is,” he confirmed, catching on.

“You better not be doing dumb overprotective dad stuff,” Yang said. “Because Jaune is the perfect gentleman, and doesn’t need that crap.”

“We’re just grilling meat and having a few beers,” Tai replied, unconcerned with her hostile tone.

So that’s how he found himself outside, a cold one in hand as Tai started placing the meat on the hotplate. The lamb chops had been seasoned with garlic powder and an assortment of herbs, while the steaks were dusted with salt, pepper, garlic and onion powder. After those were slapped down on the blackstone and sizzling, Tai opened a pack of fat pork sausages, throwing them on.

“Where’d you get these steaks? They look good.”

“Just some butcher in Vale. I guess you could say I’ve got an eye for that sort of thing.”

“You grew up on a farm, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Eight of you,” Tai shook his head. “I’m still trying to wrap my head around that.”

Jaune chuckled. “They really wanted a son.”

Tai took a sip of his beer, Jaune mirroring him. It was ice cold, and the bitterness was short lasting. It had a dry aftertaste that was to his liking, not lingering in the back of his throat like some other beer he’d tried before tended to do.

“I won’t lie, I was always hoping to have a son myself, but... well,” Tai smiled sadly. “Things didn’t work out the way I wanted.”

This was a man that had lost two wives – one had abandoned him, while the other had died. He’d gone through a lot, and had raised two daughters on his own. Ruby had mentioned that for a little while, he’d been emotionally absent, but they’d grown up, safe and whole.

Jaune tried to imagine going through what Tai had. Just the thought of losing Blake or Nora made his heart ache, and they’d only been an item for a short while. After being together for years and having children with them?

It would devastate him utterly.

“I know I already said so, but thank you,” he continued, fixing Jaune with a grateful look. “But not just for having Yang’s back. For being their friend – both Yang and Ruby, and treating them right. Those girls mean the world to me, so it puts me at ease, knowing they have someone that will be on their side when they need it.”

“Of course.”

“And now here comes the overprotective dad part,” Tai said casually, Jaune’s eyes widening as the older man clapped him on the shoulder.

“What?”

“If you hurt them, I’ll kill you,” Tai said cheerfully.

Jaune knew he meant it. His happy tone only made it sound more terrifying.

“Uh – I won’t, I promise?”

Tai released him, taking another sip. “I know. You seem like a good kid, Jaune. You’ve been nothing but respectful, and I can see that you care for both of them – a lot. But I also see the way my daughters look at you, and as a father, it has me concerned.”

“The way they...?”

Wait, he couldn’t possibly be suggesting...?

“Ruby is usually very reserved around people that aren’t family,” Tai said, turning to keep an eye on the meat. “Seeing how at ease she is around you – and even Blake – warms my heart. Yang is outgoing and sometimes, she feels like a force of nature, like a hurricane – but deep inside, she has a fragile heart. I don’t want to see them clash over a boy.”

He actually was suggesting that!

“In so many ways, they are like their mothers – and that’s what worries me,” Tai finished with.

They were silent for some time, Tai flipping the chops and steaks, rolling the sausages around to get even heat on every side. Jaune sipped at his beer, taken aback by the implication he’d laid at his feet.

Ruby and Yang? Really?

Jaune couldn’t deny that he thought that both sisters were incredible in their own ways, and if pressed, he could admit that he was attracted to them. Of course he was. Ruby didn’t flaunt it but she was actually very beautiful, her soft, pale skin and alluring silver eyes were immediately captivating, as was her personality. Yang was the classic blonde bombshell that starred in every teen movie *ever*, with a body to die for and a face that was made for magazine covers, and her fun loving, boisterous, outgoing nature was very appealing.

But with Nora, Blake and Weiss...

Thinking about it hurt his head.

It felt wrong.

But at the same time, it felt right.

To take his mind off it, he asked something he'd been thinking about since earlier.

"How much did you tell Yang about Raven?" he asked.

Tai paused.

"How do you mean?"

"About how her semblance works, for starters."

Tai remained silent.

"I know it isn't my place and saying this might be out of line," Jaune steeled his nerves. "But I think she deserves to know about it. To know more about her... about Raven. I know you've probably kept these things hidden for a reason, to protect her – but Yang is old enough now to handle it, I think. She's been looking for answers, but the answers were here all along, aren't they?"

The silence stretched, and Jaune finished his beer. He'd definitely said too much – but he felt it needed to be said, even if he had to be the one to say it.

Tai turned to look at him, face hewn from stone but Jaune held his ground.

“You’re right, it isn’t your place,” Tai said before smiling, expression softening. “But I respect you all the more for saying it.”

Jaune swallowed, feeling a rush of relief.

“I didn’t tell her – but you’re right, she does deserve to know,” Tai grimaced. “As much as my desire to protect her from everything is protesting the thought, I can’t baby her forever. She’s training to be a Huntress, and she’s already gotten herself in trouble more than once, trying to chase things down... I’ll talk to her in the morning.”

They finished grilling in silence, but it was a comfortable one.