

The opera house was lit up in a dazzling display as their limousine approached, scores of reporters and photographers lining the street, snapping pictures of those attending. The rich and famous were out in force tonight, and not just those native to Atlas. Celebrities the world over were in attendance, everyone from movie stars to musicians, athletes to politicians and businessmen, and old nobles, those whose families had once ruled the world when Kings and Queens decided the fate of men.

As Jaune stepped out and offered a hand to Willow, cameras were instantly pointed their way, questions shouted furiously as they snapped their pictures. Willow smiled at him gratefully, looking years younger as she walked the red carpet as if she were born to it, Whitley following obediently. Many people were looking his way, wondering what his relation to the Schnee family was, but Jaune ignored them as he followed behind at a respectable distance.

This was certainly a new experience.

His breath misted in the cold night air, and he rubbed his hands together to keep his fingers warm. Nearby, a tall man with dreadlocks was being interviewed by a reporter and Jaune listened in with half an ear as he took in the sights.

A sudden roar of the crowd made him turn in question, and Jaune blinked in shock as a familiar face stepped out of a car.

A gorgeous scarlet red gown hugged her body sensually, a long slit up the right side showing off a toned, muscled leg, an endless expanse of creamy white skin that instantly drew the eye. The cut of her dress showed off her narrow waist and impressive bust, the low neckline falling well below her chest, revealing even more porcelain skin, and the hard line of her abdomen. Crimson locks tumbled down across her shoulders, emerald green eyes shining like polished jewels, and Jaune was left momentarily gobsmacked.

Pyrrha was here.

She raised a hand and waved to the crowd, cameramen falling over themselves to capture the moment. Her eyes scanned those gathered before instantly snapping to him, as if she could feel his eyes on her, and he watched as her face transformed from polite tolerance to radiant joy.

“Jaune!”

She hurried towards him, gathering her skirts in hand. Golden bands hugged her upper arms, inset with emeralds, and he was completely wrong footed as she reeled him into an embrace, right there in front of the entire world.

“Pyrrha?” he questioned, arms wrapping around her to return the hug.

Jaune saw the gathered reporters pointing and clamoring together, asking questions, but his attention quickly fell completely on her.

“It’s so good to see you!” she exclaimed happily, releasing him.

“Pyrrha, what are you doing here? I thought you were meant to be in Mistral?”

“I completed my business far sooner than expected, and when I heard Weiss was performing – I couldn’t miss it!” she said, as if it were obvious. A little more seriously, she then added, “I thought maybe she could use another friendly face.”

Pyrrha was looking out for her.

He wasn't sure how much Pyrrha knew about Weiss' family situation, but if there was anyone in their friendship circle who understood the pressures of public life, it was Pyrrha Nikos.

Jaune smiled. "You thought right."

She beamed at him.

"Pyrrha! Pyrrha! Is this a new boyfriend?" a reporter shouted, the one that had been interviewing the tall man.

"Where did you two meet?"

"How long have you been in a relationship?"

Pyrrha sighed, her expression smoothing out. "Sorry, I – it looks like I've created a misunderstanding. I'm going to have to handle this."

This is what Weiss had been talking about.

"Take your time. We should go in together."

Her smile was all teeth. “Great! Just let me correct these reporters and – oh, I’d like you to meet someone!”

It was at that moment that a short red haired woman joined them.

Dressed in a pretty but simple red dress that flared at the waist in a tumble of silken frills, Jaune immediately noted the similarities. The shape of her face, and the line of her nose and brow – and her eyes. He would recognize those eyes anywhere, even set behind a pair of handsome red-rimmed glasses. Pyrrha’s emerald green were very striking, and not a common color at all. Only Ruby had a more unique hue, maybe Yang, Blake – okay, maybe a lot of his friends had very striking eyes – but these eyes were unmistakable.

“This is my mother,” Pyrrha introduced, suddenly appearing a little nervous. “Mother, this is Jaune. Jaune Arc – the boy I told you about, from Beacon. Jaune, this is Pandora Nikos – my mother.”

She smiled at him softly, her face warm. “Jaune. I’m pleased to meet you at last. Pyrrha has spoken of you often.”

“Not that often,” Pyrrha quickly corrected, flushing.

“Hush, Pyrrha,” Pandora waved her off, offering a hand. “She says you’ve challenged her as a fighter, which is not something I’ve heard her say about anyone. That is very high praise.”

Jaune took her hand, and much as he had done with Willow when he’d first met her, he lowered his face and kissed her knuckles. Pandora blinked, startled, a healthy blush dusting her cheeks as Pyrrha stared at them, shocked.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Nikos,” he said.

While Pyrrha handled the reporters, Jaune escorted Pandora into the opera house. Willow was waiting with Whitley, and shot him a curious look as he approached.

“Willow Schnee, this is Pandora Nikos,” he introduced them.

Recognition instantly flooded Willow’s eyes and she offered a hand.

“A pleasure. I believe our daughters are friends.”

As they spoke, Jaune saw that Whitley was distracted. It didn’t take Jaune long to find out what was taking up his attention, his eyes glued to Pyrrha as she approached.

“Everything is sorted,” she said breathlessly, joining them. “At least, I hope. I’m sorry, Jaune. There will be some who will write false stories.”

“It’s fine, it isn’t your fault,” he said. “Pyrrha, this is Weiss’ younger brother, Whitley Schnee.”

Pyrrha’s eyes turned on Whitley, and the younger boy straightened up, his cheeks darkening.

“Oh! Hello there,” Pyrrha said happily, offering her hand. “I’m friends with your sister. We attend Beacon together.”

“Oh – uh, yes, I know,” Whitley stumbled briefly over his words, taking her hand. “She has spoken well of you.”

Jaune smirked, and Whitley shot him a warning glare before turning to putty in Pyrrha’s hand as she engaged him in conversation. As they waited, Jaune spotted a few familiar faces in the crowd of attendees, faces he had been plastered on billboards in Vale, or in movies.

He was certainly out of place here.

A member of staff opened the large inner doors, inviting everyone inside. They handed out pamphlets and paddles for those betting in the auction, and it was at this moment that Jaune realized he didn’t know where he was meant to be sitting. Weiss had never said, and he had never thought to ask.

Willow came to the rescue.

“Please join us, we would very much enjoy the company,” she offered not only to him, but to Pandora and Pyrrha. “It will only be Whitley and myself, as my husband will be involved in the auction, and Weiss is performing.”

They were shown to a balcony high above the main stage, overlooking the entire floor. Extra chairs were brought in for them and arranged by the staff, and Willow thanked them. The view was magnificent, and Jaune watched as a sea of people entered and began finding their seats, those of the highest standing towards the front.

Pyrrha opened the pamphlet she’d been given and began scanning the contents, Jaune leaning closer to get a better look. Within it held a catalogue of the items they would be auctioning off;

paintings and sculptures by famous artists, both deceased and current powerhouses in their fields, old pieces of jewelry once worn by royalty, historical items from the Great War and even long before, around the founding of the Kingdom of Mantle.

Some of these things probably should have been in a museum.

“Not betting on anything?” he asked her, grinning.

Pyrrha rolled her eyes playfully. “What am I going to do with any of this?”

Jaune chuckled. “The proceeds are for a good cause.”

“The one saving grace of all of this,” Pyrrha shook her head. “I’ve already donated money to the fund directly. From my understanding, the damage to the wall down in Mantle is quite significant. Any further attempts by the Grimm may cause a complete breach.”

Trust Pyrrha to cut out the middle man and start helping at the source.

Once everyone was seated, Jacques Schnee made his appearance, walking out across the stage. Dressed in a handsome white tuxedo with blue bow tie, he had a commanding presence.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, an immediate hush overtaking the room. “On behalf of the Schnee Dust Company, it is my absolute pleasure to welcome you to tonight’s charity auction. Thank you for joining us for what promises to be a truly unforgettable evening full of generosity, glamour, and goodwill.”

Jacques paused, letting his words linger. It almost felt like Jaune was seeing an entirely different person. This was not Jacques Schnee, negligent father – this was Jacques Schnee, the business man. A man who ran a multi-billion lien company, who knew how to work a crowd, and present an image of a caring, giving man – not a tyrant.

“We are gathered here tonight not only to enjoy the incredible items up for bid – but to make a real impact. Every paddle raised tonight helps fund the restoration of the damaged wall in Mantle, and the upkeep of their aging heating system. And in this room, we have the power to make a profound difference.”

He was good. Jaune would give him that. But there was no erasing the snide remarks Jaune had witnessed the night before, the scorn, the lack of empathy in those cold blue eyes. There was no erasing the expression on Weiss’ face, whenever she spoke of her father.

“Now, before we begin, a small reminder: tonight isn’t about getting a deal – it’s about giving with heart. So bid generously, bid boldly, and know that every dollar raised tonight is a step toward real and lasting change.”

Applause followed, but Jaune kept his hands in his lap. He wasn’t the only one. Willow remained as still as a statue, her face carved from stone. Whitley clapped politely – for all of three seconds, before lowering his hands. Perhaps Pandora and Pyrrha both recognized the tension, and only gave paltry applause themselves.

Items were then wheeled out onto the stage, and a man with a neatly trimmed beard took to the podium to begin the auction. Every item was given a lengthy description of what it was, including its history, and the starting price, before bidding commenced.

They started off with the cheaper items, or items of lower historical impact. Things like old bottles of wine, rare vintages, and even barrels of things like rum and whiskey. They then moved onto jewelry, rings and necklaces and bracelets, inset with every and any gemstone you could think of. The type of money being thrown around made Jaune’s head spin.

A couple of these items could fund the farm back home for years at a time.

After an hour, there was a quick break where members of the ruling council spoke on behalf of Mantle. It sounded like a pre-written, well rehearsed statement more than anything from the heart, but it got the point across. Then the auction began anew, this time on the rarer pieces of jewelry once worn by prominent figures of the past. Paintings and sculptures were wheeled out and purchased, and the figures just kept rising.

The last item they auctioned off was a large portrait of the last King of Mantle, drawing in a considerable sum. The woman that won looked very pleased with herself. There were still many items yet to be sold, being saved for the second evening. After the portrait was wheeled off the stage, Jacques returned.

“Thank you for your generosity this evening,” he began. “The people of Mantle are most appreciative, of that I have little doubt. Now that the auction is complete, let me introduce to you tonight’s entertainment – my youngest daughter, and heir – Weiss Schnee.”

This time, Jaune did applaud along with everyone else.

An angel stepped out onto the stage. Literally.

Her silver slip dress glittered as Weiss gracefully walked across the stage, passing by her father without a glance. The material clung to her svelte physique, highlighting how trim and fit her body was, cupping the gentle swell of her hip and bust. Her long white hair was arranged in a series of braids, criss-crossing down her back, a translucent netting casting a sea of small diamonds throughout, making her hair twinkle like a thousand small stars. Lush white feathered wings protruded from her back, making her look like a creature straight from a fairytale.

“She’s beautiful,” Pyrrha breathed by his side, captivated.

He could only nod in response.

Her eyes were shadowed in glittered gold, black eyeliner making her eyes pop. She scanned the crowd without emotion, her head held up regally, a Queen surveying her subjects. And then she craned her neck, looking up at them, and Jaune felt her eyes latch onto him.

Jaune stared back, sending her his well wishes for a grand performance – and he liked to think she heard them, for her brilliant smile lit up her entire face.

Facing the crowd, she opened her mouth – and pure bliss followed. Her voice was powerful, strong, but feminine. It projected throughout the opera hall effortlessly, casting a spell over all who heard it. Without fear, without doubt – Weiss Schnee brought the house down with her performance, her high notes reverberating in his heart as he watched her skill and mastery on full display.

It was out of this world.

Even Whitley, whom Jaune knew had a complicated relationship with his older sister could not keep the awe he felt off his face. Willow had tears in her eyes, tears she refused to let fall. Pandora was overwhelmed, her vibrant eyes wide as she listened to Weiss belt out song after song, the atmosphere electric.

“I knew she could sing,” Pyrrha whispered, on the edge of her seat. “I’ve heard some of her songs... but I never knew she was this good.”

Perhaps Weiss had talent – and yes, she had access to all the resources anyone could ever need. She would be the first to admit that she enjoys the fruits of such privilege. But this went beyond mere talent or privilege.

This was the result of hard work. Grueling practice. A search for perfection.

While the rest of them enjoyed their time off from Beacon, or honed their craft as Huntsmen, Weiss had been perfecting this performance because if she failed here, there would be no more Beacon for her. This was the perfection her father demanded, the result of the crushing pressure that bore down on her.

She met the challenge, and exceeded all expectations.

Jaune could see the shock on the faces of those in attendance, peering up at her as if they'd seen a Goddess given flesh. Actors, athletes, businessmen – even other musicians. They were in total awe, and Jaune watched as Weiss continued to lead them all on a journey until the final notes echoed through the massive hall.

Her cheeks were flushed as the last vestiges of her voice faded into silence, and for a long moment, time lay suspended.

As one, people rose to their feet and cheered, thunderous applause roaring throughout the opera house. Jaune stood and clapped, Pyrrha by his side, quickly followed by Willow and Pandora. Whitley hesitated before joining them, and Weiss bowed low as she received a standing ovation that lasted minutes.

Her eyes found him again, and Jaune mouthed to her, "*You were amazing.*"

He wasn't sure if she could read his lips, and maybe he was mistaken in thinking she held her head a little higher afterwards, but he didn't care. He'd tell her as many times as needed.

Afterwards, the dancers came out and entertained them all with their graceful, poised movements. Weiss left the stage and Jaune didn't see her again until after the dance routine was finished, and they were shown through to the ballroom where Weiss had held her rehearsals earlier in the day.

A small band had been set up in the corner, the silky notes of a violin coaxing them all in. People crowded around Weiss to give her praise, and Jaune waited with Pyrrha for several minutes until she was able to extract herself from the crowd.

"Pyrrha," Weiss said happily, and Jaune smiled as the pair embraced. "You did not tell me that you would be attending!"

"I thought it would be better if I kept it a secret," Pyrrha said cheekily as they parted, her eyes soft. "Weiss, that was incredible. You almost made me cry."

"Then you would deserve it for keeping your visit a secret," Weiss said haughtily before grinning like a child. "I'm so happy you're here, Pyrrha. Thank you."

Her eyes then slid to him, and he said, "You were amazing."

"Yes, I think I saw you say that already," she needled, smirking.

"And I'll say it again – you were amazing. I've never heard someone sing so beautifully."

Weiss flushed lightly. "Thank you, Jaune."

Jaune couldn't imagine how happy she must have been. She'd gotten through her performance without a hitch, and in fact had outdone all expectations. There was still the second evening to consider, but Jaune knew that Weiss would kill it again. He spotted Jacques Schnee across the room, his eyes focused on his daughter, and there was an air of satisfaction radiating from him. He was pleased, no doubt, and probably even felt like he had won.

In many ways, he had. But Weiss would not be under his thumb forever, not if Jaune could help it.

"Weiss, this is my mother," Pyrrha dragged her over to meet Pandora, leaving Jaune with Willow and Whitley.

"She did well," he said, looking to Weiss' brother.

He huffed, crossing his arms. "I suppose it was satisfactory."

"You looked like you were really into it."

Whitley scowled. "I do not know what you are talking about."

There was something about him that just made Jaune want to tease him. He wondered if this was what having a younger sibling was like. Was that why his sister's couldn't help but torment him whenever possible?

“What are you smiling about?” Whitley asked petulantly.

“Nothing. I’m here for a few more days and I’d really like to ride a horse, if you want to join me.”

Whitley blinked at him, taken aback.

“Pardon?”

“Weiss mentioned to me that your family has a stable, and offered to let me ride one of them when I showed interest. I thought you could join us, if you wanted,” Jaune extended the offer again. “I remember what you said about distractions, but... it’s something you really enjoy, right?”

“I think that is a great idea,” Willow smiled, her eyes fond as they settled on Jaune. “Do take him up on the offer, Whitley.”

“Mother...”

“You will help Weiss run our company one day,” she continued. “But that day is not now, and you have been attentive in your studies. I know your father will have his own opinion, but this is mine; live your life.”

Whitley hesitated, as if he wanted to say something back to his mother but was mindful of the location. In the end, he nodded shortly.

“Yes. I will join you.”

He didn't know Whitley well, but he didn't seem like a bad person at heart. A little confused and lost, and lashed out at those most convenient, maybe. The youngest in a family that was broken, whose parents weren't suitable role models. Though Willow had been very pleasant so far, Jaune could feel that thin thread that threatened to snap at any moment. She was worn down, and Weiss had told him how she loved to drink...

The way her eyes lit up when a waitress approached with a tray of champagne flutes was not a good look, her fingers deftly plucking one off as she passed, sipping at it with relish. Whitley frowned but didn't say a word, simply looking the other way.

Champagne wasn't all they were offering, though. Hors d'oeuvres balanced on silver trays cut through the room, waiters offering a wide variety of different foods. Jaune felt his tummy rumble and didn't resist, trying the ones within reach. The first was fresh salmon spread across a small piece of toasted bread rubbed with garlic oil, topped off with a dollop of melted blue cheese. The tartness of the cheese went well with the fatty salmon, the texture of the toasted bread bringing some crunch to the mouthfeel. Jaune snagged a few more before trying something else, honey glazed shrimp nestled in crisp pastry shaped like frilly cups, decorated with slices of green onion. After that were pancetta encased scallops, and then after that were mushrooms stuffed with spinach and cheese.

“Someone is enjoying themselves,” Weiss deadpanned as he popped another mushroom into his mouth, chewing. Pyrrha laughed behind a raised hand, eyes crinkled in amusement as he turned towards them.

“I'm hungry,” he defended.

“You're always hungry,” Weiss needed.

“I am a growing boy,” he countered. “And training to be a Huntsman inspires a big appetite.”

“I think you’re just a glutton,” Weiss pressed. “Ren doesn’t eat near as much as you do.”

Jaune shrugged.

“I guess I like good food.”

Pyrrha tried one of the pancetta wrapped scallops, making a sound of delight as she swallowed. “Those are really good!”

“Right?”

“Don’t encourage him,” Weiss sighed, though she was smiling. She tried the salmon and blue cheese, reluctantly conceding. “Okay, this tastes good. I can see why you are gorging yourself.”

People mingled, the chattering din increasing as champagne flowed freely. People began to dance as the band hit its stride, and to Jaune’s surprise, Pyrrha offered a hand.

“Would you like to dance?”

Jaune blinked, unsure if he'd heard her correctly. Weiss eyed Pyrrha curiously, head tilted slightly.

"Jaune?"

"Oh, uh – sure, I'd love to," he said, taking her hand. Pyrrha beamed.

"Great! We'll be right back, I'm going to steal him for a few minutes."

"Take your time," Weiss said. "But leave some in the tank for me."

Pyrrha led him over to the small area that had opened up for people to dance. Eyes followed them, some surprised, some questioning, Pyrrha ignoring them as they found a spot. She placed his hand on her hip and he drew her in, a hand on his shoulder while their opposites clasped.

They followed along with everyone else, effortlessly falling into the rhythm, and Jaune wasn't surprised at all that Pyrrha was very good at dancing. There wasn't much she wasn't good at.

"I've missed training with you," she admitted, meeting his eyes. Pyrrha was tall for a girl, only an inch shorter than he was. "I can't wait until we're back at Beacon."

"I've missed training with you too," he said. They hadn't been training together long but it had quickly become something he looked forward to. "I haven't been slacking off, though."

Pyrrha smirked. “Me either. I hope you haven’t fallen too far behind.”

Jaune met her smirk with one of his own. “I think I’ll surprise you. I’m definitely going to hit you this semester, I guarantee it.”

She laughed, the sound pretty, genuine. “You know, telling a girl you’re going to hit her is a little messed up, don’t you think?”

“I suppose it is. But it’s exactly what you wanted to hear, isn’t it?”

She hummed as he spun them around. “Well – I look forward to seeing you try.”

It was hard to believe that not so long ago, there had been such a misunderstanding hanging between them. All it had taken was a conversation and a little time, and now they could joke about it freely. He was glad.

The first song flowed into a second, and then a third. Pyrrha easily spun and twirled, allowing Jaune to take the lead. She was graceful on her feet, though it was different to Blake or Weiss, who moved with such silky smooth movements that it almost appeared unnatural. No, Pyrrha moved as if the world owed her something, and she was here to claim it. Nothing would get in her way.

The hand on her hip dipped a little lower, and Pyrrha’s hand on his shoulder tightened, drawing him closer. For their final song, they were nearly chest to chest, and their eyes remained locked the entire time, their movements smooth, as if they’d been dancing for years together.

“I believe Weiss wants her turn,” Pyrrha finally said, the pair of them coming to a stop. Weiss was waiting with an arched eyebrow, eyeing them both shrewdly.

“I believe you’re right,” Jaune chuckled, stepping away.

“Thank you, Jaune. That was very fun,” Pyrrha said happily, eyes tender. “Though the next time we dance, I’ll be taking the lead with Miló and Akoúo.”

A different type of dance, but a dance all the same. She was chomping at the bit to get at him, and Jaune felt the same way. The sparring match he and Weiss had with Harriet, an elite Huntress at the top of her game, showed just how far he’d come. He wanted to test himself once again, against the impossible.

“I can’t wait.”

Weiss took Pyrrha’s place, those beautiful angel wings forcing the other dancers to give them a little more room. She looked up at him through her eyelashes, much shorter than his previous partner but she carried herself as if she were the tallest person in the room. He took her hand, her soft, smooth palm slotting into his neatly as his other hand settled on her waist.

“You two looked like you were having fun.”

He detected a hint of envy.

“Now it’s our turn to have fun,” he said. “Ready?”

Without further word, they moved.

Weiss glided across the dance floor as if she were floating, and Jaune took the lead, effortlessly directing her with subtle shifts. She was perfect, never missing a beat, and as a quicker song began playing, the band having fun, they adapted flawlessly.

“I’m glad to see that things between you and Pyrrha have been mended,” Weiss commented, allowing him to twirl her away, their arms outstretched before he reeled her back in. Her dress flared around her legs, a halo of silver. “You two were being very silly.”

She was right. They had been ridiculous. He’d never really talked to anyone else about this but Weiss had clearly seen it unfolding.

“Though now I’m concerned that *another* girl is on your radar,” she said sourly, though she was smiling. “Must I have more competition?”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that when it comes to Pyrrha,” Jaune said lightly. Weiss shot him a look as if he were very stupid indeed, rolling her eyes.

“You really are annoying sometimes,” she muttered. “Annoying and endearing. Annoyingly endearing. Unbelievable.”

She was clearly not convinced.

“It’s like you said, we only just mended our friendship. I doubt Pyrrha is looking for anything else.”

“And you?” she asked. “What are you looking for?”

Pyrrha was a beautiful woman, no doubt about it. Like Weiss, she held the type of beauty that in days past may have started wars, all for the chance to claim her hand. Jaune couldn't deny that he was attracted to her because he'd have to be blind not to be, and the more he got to know her without the taint of frustration hanging over him, without his bruised ego spoiling things, he was discovering that there was a lot more to Pyrrha Nikos than anyone knew.

She had a lust for competition that bordered on obsessive. That even though her fame was something she detested, she never once thought about quitting, or being less than she was. She strived to be the best, and she wasn't afraid to show it. She could be shy and awkward away from the ring, but once she stepped onto that stage with weapon in hand, she became someone else.

Pyrrha inspired him to become better. Even when he was being a sore loser, her strength pushed him. Jaune wanted to be strong so he could protect others but most of all, protect his family. So if anything should happen again, be it Grimm or bandit, he could place himself in front of them and defend them with everything he had. With Pyrrha's type of strength, he could do that, and never doubt he would come out on top.

So maybe... he was into her.

Something must have shown on his face. Weiss sighed, shaking her head. “Ridiculous,” she muttered again.

Jaune grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Don't be. I suppose this is who you are,” Weiss smirked, a hint of teeth flashing. “Too caring. Too empathetic. It isn't surprising that you'd be drawn to so many different people, and they to you.”

The music continued at a high tempo for quite awhile before finally slowing back down. A second, third and fourth song passed by before Jaune caught sight of something concerning.

“Your father is watching us.”

Weiss didn't react, keeping calm. “I know. He's been watching since we began.”

“I know you didn't want to create waves...”

“It's fine. I'm expected to dance and partake, and since you are a friend, it isn't out of the ordinary to share more than one dance together,” Weiss then scoffed. “But you are right. We are pushing it, and I'm sure our picture will be in some tabloid by morning. Though perhaps your dance with Pyrrha will inspire tongues to wag more than the two of us.”

They reluctantly parted, and she bowed gently.

“Thank you for the dance,” she said, her eyes going soft. “And thank you for coming. I know I've already said so, but it means a lot that you came all this way for me.”

“Anytime, Weiss.”

“I should thank Pyrrha as well,” she wavered before her eyes spotting something, a grimace overtaking her. “Oh dear. Mother has been left alone for too long.”

Jaune turned to see what she meant and saw Willow Schnee looking a little unsteady, standing by one of the tables on the outskirts of the room. Whitley was nowhere to be seen, and while she wasn't causing a scene, it was clear to anyone that looked at her that she was three sheets to the wind.

"I'll go to her."

"You don't have to do that. I'll call a car."

"I insist," Jaune said. "Call the car. I'll keep her company."

Weiss stared at him, and her expression was difficult to read.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Thankfully, Willow appeared to be a happy drunk – or at the very least, she was happy tonight. Her eyes lit up as he approached, downing the last of her drink.

"Jaune," she said, only a slight slur to her words. Her pale cheeks were flushed, eyes a little unfocused, and she swayed as if to some unheard tune.

"Mrs. Schnee."

“Please, call me Willow.”

“Willow,” he corrected. He offered a hand. “Would you like to dance?”

She smiled widely.

“Young man, I would be delighted.”

Her breath stank of champagne, and yet she did not stumble as Jaune led her through some steps. A high functioning drunk, perhaps – which made sense, considering what Weiss had told him. For her, maybe this wasn't drunk at all.

Weiss acted quickly and it wasn't long until Klein appeared, ready to take her off his hands. Problem was, Willow did not want to leave without him – and so in the interests of keeping things civil, Jaune decided to go with her.

“You're leaving already?”

It was Pyrrha and she sounded disappointed, but one look at Willow and she understood, the woman practically clinging to his arm.

“Can you let Weiss know what is going on?”

Pyrrha nodded. “Yes, of course. I'll see you tomorrow?”

Jaune nodded. "Yeah. We can hang out. Weiss can show us around Atlas."

Pyrrha smiled. "Good. Have a good night."

"You too."

"You're such a sweet girl," Willow leaned over and patted Pyrrha on the cheek, grinning crookedly. "I'm glad my daughter has made such good friends."

Jaune escorted Willow outside where the car was waiting, the cold air like a slap to the face. Klein opened the door for them, and Jaune helped her in before slipping in after her.

"Have you seen Master Whitley?" Klein asked, and Jaune shook his head.

"Not in a while."

The ride back to Schnee Manor was done in silence, Willow content to doze off. Jaune helped Klein escort her inside before getting back in the car. The driver returned him to the hotel where he quickly jumped into the shower, letting the warmth seep deeply into his body.

It had been a good night, despite the awkward ending. Weiss had been magnificent and Pyrrha's surprise appearance had brightened the mood further. Willow getting drunk was regrettable but out of their control, but as far as he knew, she hadn't said or done anything to cause upset.

After drying off and dressing in a pair of sweat pants and a tank top, he ordered dinner. The little appetizers had been nice but not what he would call a proper meal, and all that dancing had worked up a bit of an appetite.

He found a menu in the bar and ended up ordering something called a Steak Oscar. Beef tenderloin topped with buttery crab meat in a Bearnaise sauce, served with asparagus and red bell pepper. For dessert he got a bowl of strawberry ice cream, and when the food arrived, he dug in.

The steak was tender and juicy, and the crab was flavorful. He was hungrier than he thought, mopping up all the sauce and leaving the plate spotless before devouring the ice cream. It was made from real strawberries and was incredibly creamy, and after he finished, the taste lingered, as if to urge him to order more.

He wasn't going to do that.

With a full stomach, he flicked on the television and reclined on the couch, surfing through a bunch of channels until he started to doze. Jaune wasn't sure how long he was there, drifting in and out of sleep but he jerked awake at a sudden knock on the door.

Jaune froze for a moment, straining his ears but there was no sound. There was a clock on the wall with the time, and he saw that it was quite late, approaching midnight.

He'd been on the couch awhile, then.

Getting up, he padded towards the door and opened it. As soon as he did, a small figure darted inside and Jaune flinched, bracing himself, thinking he was under attack. The door slammed shut, and all he saw was the fabric of a blue cloak before a pair of familiar, soft lips met his own.