

Patch was quite beautiful, especially when the weather decided to play ball.

It was cold, the ocean air carrying a chill that went straight to your bones, but the sky was clear this day, the grass wet from overnight rain. Under the light of the sun, the colorful expression of nature was on full display for him, and his eyes drank it all in as he walked around the Xiao Long property. Zwei followed at his heels, panting up a storm, eyes darting around at every little sound.

Even though they were so close to civilization, it felt as if the forest could swallow him whole and keep him forever, if he were to simply walk in and allow it.

“There you are,” Ruby called out. “Coffee?”

Her cheeks were flushed from the cold, her nose tinged red. She cradled two steaming cups and Jaune took one gratefully.

“Thanks.”

Ruby beamed. “No problem.”

Jaune sipped at the beverage, letting its warmth spread through him. It was a little sweet for his tastes but didn't say a word, more than happy to have something warm to drink. Ruby joined him in his trek, Zwei sprinting across the lawn after something only he could see.

“Did you sleep well?”

Jaune nodded. "Like the dead."

She giggled. "So – what do you think of Patch?"

"I've only seen a little bit of it, but it's great," he said honestly. "You have a lovely home, Ruby."

Her eyes crinkled as she smiled even wider. "Thanks!"

"Maybe one day, you could come visit where I grew up," he offered.

"Could I?"

"Of course. Though it's really far away, they don't have ferries or airships that go there. We'd have to go on foot, or hitchhike with a traveling trader. That's how I got to Vale."

She looked excited at the thought. "That's fine! It'll be fun! I've never gone any further than Vale... well, except for our survival test. It'd be like an adventure."

Jaune remembered thinking something similar, when he'd left to travel to Vale. He'd never gone so far before, and it had felt like he was undertaking a grand new adventure to see lands unknown.

“We could ride horses and I could show you all the hidden spots.”

“I’ve never ridden a horse before!” she exclaimed with wide eyes. “I don’t know how!”

“It’s easy,” he said. “You just need to stay calm. A horse will know if you’re scared. It’s in the way you sit. If you’re too tense, they’ll feel it in their body. You need to be loose – but not so loose that you’ll slide straight out of the saddle.”

“When I was little, I wanted a pony but dad said no,” Ruby pouted. “He said looking after one is a lot of effort, and since I was too busy learning to be a Huntress...”

They walked around in comfortable silence until they finished their drinks.

“Hey Jaune...”

“Yeah, what is it?”

She bit her lip, hesitating. “Would you like to come see my mom?”

Jaune paused, turning to face her.

“Your mom?”

She nodded quickly. "Yeah, she isn't that far from here. I usually go once a week, but I thought that maybe you'd like to visit with me... that is, if you want, I don't want to force you or anything."

Jaune felt incredibly touched. Visiting a deceased loved one was a deeply personal thing, something you shared with family. The fact that Ruby was asking him to come with her showed just how deeply she cared for him, as a friend.

He felt a welling of affection bubble up for her, his eyes soft as he said, "I'd love to visit her."

"Be right back!" she said, taking his cup and vanishing in a cascade of rose petals. Zwei barked as she zoomed by, chasing after her eagerly, almost tripping over his short little legs as he bounded up onto the porch.

He only had to wait a moment before she returned, Jaune chuckling as petals washed over his face, the scent of roses filling his nostrils as she vibrated in front of him.

"Let's go!"

Jaune followed her lead, the pair hiking through the forest. When she said she wasn't far, Jaune expected that she might just be beyond the treeline but the truth was that she was further than that. They walked for ten minutes, the land beginning to slope upwards. They were heading further into the interior, the soft soil becoming harder, more compact.

It wasn't long until they were standing in a field.

The forest cut off abruptly, leading them to a grassy field that extended towards the edge of a cliff. A few winter flowers grew here, swaying in the breeze as they passed by. Jaune saw it

then, perched near the cliff drop; a small rectangular gravestone crafted from white marble, gleaming in the morning sun.

Jaune slowed down to let Ruby approach first but she seized his hand and dragged him over, “Come on, she’ll want to meet you.”

Ruby’s hand was small in his own, her fingers slender, palm warm. Jaune tightened his grip and let her pull him along until they were standing in front of the gravestone.

His eyes traced over it, taking in the etched rose that reminded Jaune of Ruby’s symbol, the metal brooch she carried around on her belt, and then further down, onto the name.

*Summer Rose*

*Thus Kindly I Scatter*

She was a woman he’d never known, would never know – and yet he felt the weight of the moment, her daughter’s hand in his. This was the woman that had given birth to Ruby, who had raised both Ruby and Yang, despite the latter not being her own child. This was the woman that both spoke of so fondly, who had inspired Ruby to become the young woman she was becoming.

She’d been taken away too soon. Just as Jaune’s family had nearly been taken. It could have just as easily have been Jaune standing in this place, not on Patch but in another forest, in front of a different gravestone, reading the names of his mother, his father, his sisters, existing only in his memories.

Jaune had been there to stop it. By the miracle of aura and semblance, it had been enough.

Summer Rose wasn't afforded that same miracle.

When he looked up, he saw it. The view was dazzling, a sea of trees stretching towards the horizon – and then just beyond, where the sky met the ocean, blue on blue.

They'd picked a beautiful spot for her.

"Hey mom," Ruby said cheerfully. "I know I'm early, but when I'm away, I don't get to come see you as often, so I thought I'd better make up for it! This is Jaune – the boy I've told you about."

Not only did she speak to Tai about him, but also her mother. He squeezed her hand, and she squeezed back.

"Hello ma'am," he said. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Ruby spoke to her for some time, and Jaune listened. There was no sadness in her voice, only joy, as if her mother was right there in front of her, and they weren't separated by time and death. He remained by her side until she ran out of things to say, and then they sat together in front of Summer's grave, still hand in hand.

Eventually, Ruby said, "They never recovered a body."

Jaune turned his head to face her. "I'm sorry, Ruby."

She shook her head. "I just mean, even though we put this here, I sometimes wonder if she can even hear me..."

Jaune wasn't particularly religious. Religion on Remnant wasn't widely practised at all, but the majority still believed in the afterlife, as most believed in the existence of the soul. Aura was soul, was it not? Or at least, that is what everyone thought. Ozpin once mentioned that scientifically, there was no actual proof – but even so, the Headmaster still believed that their less technologically advanced ancestors had the right of it.

Where did the soul go after death?

There were many different opinions. Paradise. Heaven. Damnation. Hell. Reincarnation. Nature. What was right or wrong, Jaune didn't have a clue. Much smarter people than him debated it, and didn't know themselves.

But what did he believe?

"She can hear you."

Ruby faced him, her silver eyes searching. "You think so?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. But not just here," he gestured at the gravestone. "No matter where you are, she can hear you. At least... that's what I think."

Ruby smiled. It wasn't one of her usual beaming grins, full of teeth. No, this was softer, and yet carried much more emotion, the silver of her eyes seemingly lightening, becoming brighter.

She then turned to face her mother.

"See? I told you that Jaune is awesome."

They sat there for some time as the early morning chill faded, replaced by a milder coolness as the sun rose higher. Eventually they stood up and made their way back to the house in silence, and when they stepped out of the forest, it was to find Blake and Yang sitting on the porch.

"Where have you two been?" Yang asked, eyes falling to their hands. Ruby quickly let go.

"We went to see mom."

Yang's attitude immediately shifted, though it was subtle. Her eyes darted to Jaune and then away, focused on her sister.

"Oh? How was the view?"

"You know it's better in summer," Ruby said as if it were obvious. To them, it was. "Though my favorite is in fall."

"It looks nice when it snows," Yang said, and it felt like she was addressing him directly, though she wasn't looking at him. "It would have been nice if it turned it on like that, huh?"

Tai chose that moment to come outside, a cup of steaming coffee in hand.

“So what are the plans for today?” he asked.

“We’re gonna borrow the car,” Yang answered immediately, getting up. There was a tension in the air, all of a sudden, and Jaune realized that maybe they’d spoken about Raven already. “We’ll show em around town. It isn’t as impressive as Vale, but we have some nice places.”

“Fine with me,” her father answered as she walked by him without a glance, heading inside.

Ruby frowned. “What’s with her?”

“She’s a little upset with me,” Tai responded, mussing her hair. Ruby slapped his hands away in annoyance. “We just spoke about her mother, that’s all.”

“Oh,” Ruby looked down before her shoulders squared, and she chased her sister inside.

“Sorry about making things awkward,” Tai apologized, giving him and Blake a smile. “She might be a bit moody today. Don’t let it get to you.”

“We won’t, sir,” Blake answered.

“Please, call me Tai.”

They all got ready for their journey into town, and then they were off, loading themselves into the yellow monstrosity. Yang drove while Ruby sat in the passenger seat, Jaune and Blake sitting in the back. Yang was silent for most of the ride into town but began to lighten up the closer they got, and was more like her usual self by the time they found somewhere to park.

“You guys want to get a bite to eat or wait until later? They have a nice fish and chip place down by the water but they don’t open until ten.”

They had a couple of hours until then. Jaune wasn’t particularly hungry yet, they’d had a pretty big dinner, and the mention of fish had Blake’s immediate vote.

“We wait,” she said firmly, Ruby giggling at how serious she sounded.

“Alright, sweet – well, I guess we can show you some of the old haunts.”

Unlike Beacon, Signal Academy looked like an ordinary school with modern buildings. Jaune used the term modern loosely because they were technically decades old, built in old red brick like many of the older buildings in the faunus district were built from, but were doubtlessly much more modern than Beacon was with its towering stone cathedrals. The campus was only a fraction of the size of Beacon, as well, but it was well maintained and large enough to cater to a couple hundred students easily enough.

There was a large oval with a running track, bleachers set upon a sloping rise beyond which the main school buildings were located. There was a gymnasium, several blocks of classrooms, an open cafeteria, and a block of offices, as well as some outdoor training areas. They couldn’t enter any of the buildings, they were locked for the holidays, but the gates were open for anyone that wished to use the outdoor facilities. A bunch of young children were kicking a ball

around on the oval, and some Signal students were sparring over in the training area. They found a spot in the bleachers to sit down and relax.

“There are prep schools in Vale but a lot of students make the journey over to come here,” Yang said, leaning back, her legs crossed, one foot bouncing up and down lazily. “Signal has a pretty good reputation, so it does pretty well. Dad is a teacher here, and so is our Uncle Qrow – but he comes and goes, seeing as he is still an active Huntsman.”

“Is he out on a mission now?” Blake asked, curious.

“Yup,” Ruby replied, nodding. “He’s been gone for a while now. He isn’t usually out this long.”

At Jaune’s worried look, Ruby waved it away.

“Don’t worry, he calls dad every week to let him know he’s fine. Whatever he is doing must be really important, Uncle Qrow gets grumpy if a mission takes him away from Vale for too long.”

Ruby and Yang shared a few stories from their time at Signal. As you would expect, Yang was really popular, but Jaune couldn’t stop thinking about the story Ruby had told him at the hospital, about how she’d thrown up on a boy she kissed. It had happened somewhere around here, as well. Hadn’t Ruby said it was by the bleachers?

“A few of my friends tried for Beacon but they failed initiation,” Yang said. “Didn’t get to the relics in time. Last I heard, they’ve been doing some odd jobs around Vale. Even with a prep school graduation, it opens a lot of doors.”

The kids over at the training area were getting a little bit rowdy, a Dust explosion going off that sent a couple of them flying. They were okay on account of aura, but they cleared house after that, Yang snickering.

“The groundskeeper is a real hard ass, he’ll be pissed if they made a hole,” she informed them. “He’ll know who did it, as well. He always does. Nothing escaped his notice.”

If his family had lived closer to Vale, Jaune would have tried for a school like this one. He didn’t regret his apprenticeship but his mentor had often been away, leaving Jaune to his own devices. If he’d had a more structured learning environment, maybe he’d have fewer holes in his education. He was mostly thinking about Dust Usage.

At the same time, he couldn’t imagine learning any other way.

Their next stop was the fish and chip store, one of their first customers for the day.

“Well, well, well – Yang Xiao Long, I haven’t seen you around for awhile,” the elderly man behind the counter exclaimed before spotting Ruby. “And Ruby Rose! What can I get’cha?”

They shared a parcel of chips between them, and a piece of fish each – two for Blake. Jaune also ordered some oysters and scallops, and a container of homemade tartare sauce. There were benches and tables overlooking the beach, so they commandeered one of those and pigged out.

No one was swimming, the weather was much too cold for that. Other than a few people walking their dogs, it was deserted. Jaune knew that it would be a nice place in summer, no doubt packed with locals and tourists alike.

The batter on the fish was fried to perfection, light but crispy, the flavor of the fish strong, the flesh flaky; as fresh as could be. The chips were crisp with just the right amount of crunch, soft and fluffy inside, and the oysters and scallops were cooked just enough, juicy, with the same batter as the fish.

It was good. Really good.

Blake looked like she was having the time of her life, eyes bright as consumed her fish. Ruby tried one of the oysters but pulled a face, not a fan, but she liked the scallops. Yang didn't care what she shoveled into her mouth, taking a bit of everything.

"Told ya this place was good," she said, popping a chip into her mouth.

After that, they wandered. There was an arcade that Ruby wanted to show them, so they spent some time here. All of the shooting games had high scores that read RYR for Ruby Rose. They challenged each other to a match on the fighting machine, with Yang coming out victorious, much to Ruby's annoyance.

"You got lucky."

"Damn, sis – sore loser much?" Yang teased.

Ruby sulked.

They also tried their hand at the crane game. They weren't very successful.

Apparently Patch had a little bit of an abandoned cat problem. Not far out of town, there was a small overlook that had a great view of the sea, a small picnic area that was swarming with felines. They were very tame, and as soon as they sat down, they were set upon by dozens of cats vying for attention as only a cat could; by pretending not to want it.

A particularly grumpy looking tabby plonked down beside Jaune, resting its weight against his thigh, looking up at him as if to ask why he wasn't patting him. Jaune gently scratched it behind the ears and it immediately began purring.

Blake was the center of attention here, the majority of the cats flocking to her. She looked equal parts annoyed and endeared, pouting as they meowed at her with their cute little voices, breaking down her reluctance.

"Don't take this the wrong way or anything," Yang began.

"Stop," Blake commanded. "Don't!"

"But I think they believe you might be one of them."

Blake glared at her.

"Don't you think, Jaune?"

Way to throw him in it. Blake's glare shifted to him.

“Well...” he hesitated. “They do seem to like you more than they like us.”

A few cats were circling Ruby, but other than the tabby by Jaune’s side and those, the rest were circling Blake, watching her with wide, curious eyes.

“This doesn’t mean anything,” Blake muttered, scowling.

Ruby grinned. “You have the same expression as the cat next to Jaune.”

“I hate you all.”

They all laughed, and even Blake couldn’t stay sour, her lips twitching into a smile.

While Ruby wandered over to Blake to play with the cats, who was trying to lead them away, it left Jaune and Yang alone. Jaune continued patting the grumpy looking tabby, watching as Ruby got down on her knees, herding the kitties towards her.

“Jaune...?”

He paused, hearing something brittle in her voice.

“Yeah?”

He turned to face her, and saw a troubled look on Yang's face. Her hands fidgeted in her lap.

"I – I wanted to apologize," she said softly, haltingly. "To you."

"Apologize?"

"About what happened at the club," she elaborated, brow furrowing. "I – you warned me, time and time again about how dangerous they were, but I didn't listen, and then they – they almost – I can't *remember* any of it, but they almost..."

Much to his surprise, her eyes swam with tears but they didn't fall, her hands bunching into fists.

"I thought I was beyond this type of shit," she said bitterly. "I almost got my little sister killed over this crap, and now I just run it back and put you in danger, put Penny in danger, and they had me... if you hadn't been there, who knows what they would have done to me," it went unsaid, but they both had a pretty good idea what they'd been planning. Just the reminder made a hot flush of rage pass through him. "And then of all things, my *fucking* mother shows up..."

Slowly, he placed a hand atop hers. Her hands were tight, balled into fists, so he stroked the top of her hand with his thumb, attempting to soothe away the tension.

"Dad said... her semblance only works with those she has bonded with," Yang said in disbelief. "Can you believe that shit? What kind of sick fucking joke is that? How could she have bonded with me if she *left*?"

Her voice was raw.

“How does that even *work*? What does it even *mean*?”

He didn't have the answers she craved.

Yang took a deep breath to calm herself, her exhale unsteady.

“He's known where she was, all this time,” she revealed quietly. “Mistral. Well – nearby, anyway. She moves around a lot. Apparently she leads a bunch of bandits, he called them the Branwen Tribe. Can you believe it?”

So they'd been on the right track. The information they'd gotten from the Vassari had pointed at Mistral, at least back then, when she'd been looking for weapons. It appeared that she was still there.

“He said she grew up with them, back when it was called something else. Her and Uncle Grow... what the *fuck*, man. A bandit tribe? Didn't they think that maybe this was important information to know?” she asked angrily.

She then sagged, like a puppet with its strings cut.

“Jaune, I... why am I doing this? Whenever I do, it just puts people in danger, puts myself in danger, and *for what*? A mother that left to be a bandit? She cared so little for me that she'd rather go *rob* people than raise me.”

She looked utterly defeated, and it wasn't a look he was accustomed to seeing with Yang Xiao Long. Much like Nora, she had an infectious love for *life*, and faced it head on. But now it looked like the weight of the world was crushing her, the truth of her mother trapping her under foot.

She'd been hurt. Of course she'd been hurt. She had a loving father and an amazing little sister, but she'd been abandoned by her mom for what appeared to be a very frivolous reason. Summer had stepped into the void and had filled it with love, but life could be cruel, and it stole her from Yang, Ruby and Tai before that love could heal the wounds that Raven had inflicted on her blood daughter.

She'd wanted to know *why* for so long, and while she still didn't have that answer, some of the picture had been revealed to her – and it only hurt her more.

Carefully, he coaxed open one of her balled hands and thread their fingers together, holding tight.

"I don't know why she did what she did," Jaune started slowly, choosing his words. "No one but Raven knows why. Wanting to know is natural, Yang. She is your mother, the woman who gave birth to you. She should have been there for you and wasn't, and none of that is your fault."

She sniffled, and it only steeled his resolve. He moved, kneeling in front of her, taking her other hand and threading their fingers.

"Maybe you'll never know why," he said, confronting the elephant in the room head on. "Maybe you'll go your entire life and be no closer to figuring it out. And though I've never experienced anything like it, I know it sucks. How couldn't it? But Yang... Raven is your mother, but her leaving doesn't have to define your life. You have other people."

He turned to look at Ruby who was rolling around with some of the cats, letting them crawl all over her. Blake was sulking, sitting next to her as dozens of kitties rubbed their heads against her, purring up a storm.

“You have the best little sister in the world,” he pointed out, and Yang turned to look at her. “You have your father, who is here with you, who raised you, who has gone through the same pain you have, losing two wives – and you have your friends, who care about you so much.”

He drew her attention back to him, their eyes locked.

“This might sound harsh, but maybe you should be focusing on what you *do* have, rather than what you don’t,” he said quietly but with conviction. “On the people that are here for you, instead of a woman who decided to be a bandit instead of raising you.”

“...So you’re saying I should give up on her?”

That was the truth of it, wasn’t it? As much as Yang hated her mother for hurting her, for abandoning her – she couldn’t let go, she couldn’t give up on her. That’s why she’d been searching for signs of her for so long.

She was unwilling to cut Raven out completely, deep down.

So he said, “You don’t have to give up on her. Just don’t let it consume you, don’t let the past control you.”

“You don’t think it’s a hopeless cause?”

Her voice wavered.

Jaune held her gaze.

“In the end, she came for you, didn’t she?” he asked. “When you were in danger, she came. I don’t know what that means, exactly – but it means *something*.”

She squeezed his hands tightly, hard enough to hurt, but Jaune didn’t back away. He squeezed her hands back, holding firm.

“That *something* is what you can hold onto. Until you are ready to go looking for answers.”

“Guys?” Ruby called out in concern. “What’s wrong? Yang?”

Yang’s lilac eyes shimmered, and she released his hands to wipe at her eyes, giving a pathetic, choked up laugh.

“I’m fine, Ruby,” she answered, clearing her throat. “Everything is good. We were just... talking about something, that’s all.”

Blake was peering at him sadly, and Jaune realized that she’d probably heard the whole thing, even though she was far enough away that a typical person wouldn’t have been able to.

The perks of having a set of cat ears.

After playing with the cats, they went for a walk along the beach. There were some old men fishing further up and knew Ruby on sight. Apparently she liked to hang out in weird places and more than once, they'd caught her training when they came to fish. They had a pretty good haul and ended up giving them three large pink snapper.

Blake was practically salivating as they found a store selling newspaper and wrapped them up, returning to the car. They knew what they were having for dinner.

Yang was quiet all the way back home, just as she had been for most of the trip into town. Only this time, Jaune felt that her expression was lighter.