

The laughter of children was a sure fire way to lift the mood of even the most sullen individual. At least, that's what Jaune believed. If pure joy had a sound, this was it.

Vacuo had many orphanages, and they were unfortunately very full. A hard environment bred hard circumstances, and it wasn't unusual for children to find themselves short of a parent or both. When that happened, and there were no other family that could take them, those most vulnerable ended up at these establishments, raised by the matrons and volunteers who ran them.

Not too dissimilar to the shelters that helped care for those families that had nothing, and the refugees that had flooded into the kingdom in the wake of the Atlas disaster. Most of the children here were local kids; Vacuo born and bred. But there were a few that had come through the portals, former residents of Atlas and Mantle, whose parents had not survived the journey.

In a new kingdom, without friends or family, this was their only option.

A depressing situation all around but at the very least, this orphanage was clean and well maintained. Short staffed, certainly – but the matron was a kindly middle-aged woman, and her husband was clearly very handy with a hammer. They had clothes on their backs, enough food to go around, and even had books and toys to keep them occupied.

It could have been worse.

It was clear they were well looked after, and when he'd arrived with his partner for the day, their eyes had lit up in joy.

This wasn't a mission. Not officially – but out of the blue, Emerald had come to him and asked for him to accompany her, and he hadn't any reason to refuse her, even if he had wanted to. Which he didn't.

But Emerald asking him for anything was always a shock, and alongside the strangeness of Ruby and Weiss' behavior lately, he couldn't help but wonder if he was being led astray.

"Why do you have that stupid expression on your face?" Emerald asked shortly, her arms filled with a box of old broken toys. Toys that even the most handy handyman could no longer repair. They were bound for the trash.

Jaune shrugged. "Just thinking."

"About what?"

"Just things."

Her eyes narrowed. "What the hell does that mean?"

She was being awfully pushy lately. It felt like not so long ago, she was much more reserved around him. Now it felt like he'd found himself another sister. "Don't worry about it."

Emerald clucked her tongue but dropped it, placing the box near the door so they could take it away when they were finished.

"If you think too hard, you might hurt that brain of yours."

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

The news that Yang and Ruby’s dad, Raven Branwen and Professor Goodwitch had brought with them had definitely alarmed those that heard it, but it really hadn’t changed the situation they were in. They always knew that Salem would be coming for them, and it had honestly been quite strange that it had taken her this long to take more direct action, but now that there was a timeline on things... strangely, it put Jaune at ease.

The certainty was more palatable than the unknown, and while he was not looking forward to the confrontation, it was better than waiting for the shoe to drop. There was still an element of unknown in the form of Mercury and Tyrian, of course, but...

It really felt like things would soon come to a head.

Soon was relative. The Grimm were still a long way from getting to Vacuo, but someone like him who had waited endlessly in another world... it wouldn’t be long at all.

“Em, Em,” one of the young girls shouted, getting Emerald’s attention. “Come play!”

“Fine, I suppose I can spare a little time,” Emerald said, as if this isn’t exactly what she’d been planning all along. Jaune saw the gentle look in her eyes, a look she reserved solely for children. “Come on, then.”

A small hand tugged on his arm.

Jaune looked down.

A little boy blinked at him with wide, green eyes.

“Are you a Hunsman?” he asked in awe.

Jaune smiled. “I am.”

If possible, his eyes got even wider. “You fight Grimm?”

Jaune crouched, nodding his head. “That’s right. I fight the Grimm.”

Another child rushed over, overhearing the conversation. She was a little older with short red pigtails done into braids, her pale cheeks covered in freckles. If he had to guess, she was one of the children from Mantle or Atlas.

“That’s so cool!” she gushed, and when she smiled, she was missing several teeth. “Is that a sword?”

She pointed at Crocea Mors.

“It is,” Jaune looked around quickly, as if he had a secret to share. “Do you want to see it?”

They both looked like they might die from excitement at the very thought.

He should probably ask if that was okay first, though, so he asked the matron for permission. She had no problems with it, and it quickly got around to the other children that he was going to show them his super cool awesome sword.

Jaune made sure to find a spot with plenty of room for the demonstration. In front of a sea of wide, curious eyes, he pulled his sword free with a rasp and held it up. There were plenty of ooh's and aah's as he waved it around.

"Oh my god that's so cool," one of the older kids exclaimed, hopping up and down. "How many Grimm have you killed with it?"

"Hundreds!" one girl shouted.

"Thousands!" the freckled girl from before yelled. "Thousands, right?"

Jaune chuckled. "I'm not sure. I haven't been counting. But definitely a lot."

A few of the more reserved children were watching from afar, intrigued by what was going on but unwilling to participate. Either being too shy, or something else.

"Can I hold it?" one asked eagerly.

Jaune looked to the matron.

“If you’re going to hold Mr. Jaune’s sword, you have to be very careful,” she said aloud so everyone could hear. They all snapped to attention. Their love and respect for her was absolute. “It isn’t a toy. It’s sharp and can hurt you, if you aren’t careful. Listen to his instructions.”

Jaune crouched and lay Crocea Mors on the floor. He then beckoned for the boy who asked, and he approached quickly. As eager as he was, Jaune could see the nerves he held in the way his hands shook slightly.

“Just do what I say, okay?”

The boy nodded. “I will, sir.”

“This is the hilt,” Jaune gestured to the blue leather grip. “So long as you keep your hands here, you cannot cut yourself. Would you like to grab it?”

“Yes, please,” he said, and crouched beside Jaune, the child wrapped his small hands around the hilt. “This is so cool!”

It was nice to meet people who appreciated the classics, even if it was only a bunch of kids. Jaune recalled an old memory, a first meeting with a certain silver eyed girl who was found in a crater, and felt a rush of warmth.

“You can try pick it up if you want, just be careful.”

The boy tried, and struggled, his thin arms shaking as he stood with the point still angled against the ground.

“Woah, it’s so heavy,” he said in surprise, holding on tight. He tried to pick up fully and couldn’t. “How do you use this thing?”

“A lot of practice,” Jaune patted him on the back as the boy set it back down. “Would anyone else wish to try?”

Dozens of them came forward, girl and boy alike, each of them fascinated. Jaune watched and helped guide all of them. Some were too young to even lift it at all, so he helped them, while a couple of the oldest ones managed to lift it entirely off the ground, though only for a few seconds.

One girl in particular was not just interested in Crocea Mors, but in his armor.

“C-Can I...?” she mumbled, and catching on, Jaune nodded.

“You can.”

She reached out hesitantly and touched his chest plate, her eyes widening as she lay her palm flat against it.

“It’s cold,” she said quietly, fingers tracing the curve of the steel towards the edges.

Afterwards, he showed them his shield. Holding it up in its sheath form, it snapped open to the surprise of all of them, causing them to shout in delight. This was much safer for them to touch and play with, and they all came forward to run their hands over it, or knock on it with their knuckles.

“Look at you,” Emerald said, smirking. The little girl who had asked to play was holding Emerald’s hand, staring at his shield in wonder. “You’re stealing my thunder.”

“If you showed them your weapons, they’d instantly forget about mine,” he said dryly. “Yours are way cooler.”

Her smirk widened. “I’m glad you think so. Unfortunately, there isn’t enough room in here to swing them around. It’d be quite the show.”

They spent the next couple of hours entertaining the children. After they had their fill of looking at his sword and shield, he played hide and seek with them, and then afterwards, it was story time. There were a bunch of children’s books, and fairy tales – and as expected, there was one story they all wanted to hear.

“Can you read this one?” one of the girls asked, pointing.

He sighed. “Yes, I can read this one.”

Emerald froze, staring at the book in his hands.

“Are you...” she trailed off.

“It’s fine,” he said.

The Girl Who Fell Through the World.

No matter the generation, it was a fan favorite.

Jaune must have read the story over a thousand times as a child himself, and had it read to him even more. But since his return, he had not read it. Beyond seeing it in that book store when they’d gone to collect textbooks for Cerise’s daughters, this was only the second time he’d encountered it since leaving the Ever After.

He cracked open the pages and was greeted by an illustration. A large tree, and a Curious Cat perched on one of the branches. Detailed, and true. He wasn’t sure if Lewis had drawn this himself, or had worked with an artist to create it, but it was as accurate as possible.

Flipping to the next page, the words sprawled out. Jaune ran his fingers across them, feeling odd. He’d already come to terms with being the Rusted Knight, long ago. But now having come back, and holding Lewis’ work – a work that had inspired so many – it made him feel... strange.

This was their story.

Things had been embellished. Things had been left out. It wasn’t the whole truth, but it wasn’t a lie, either. This was how Lewis had viewed things. Perhaps not fully, but there was enough of his thoughts printed on the page, in his words...

Was he always meant to fall?

Whenever he thought about it, it hurt his head. What if he'd made it to Vacuo before the portal closed? What if they hadn't even tried evacuating through the Central Location and tried a different plan? What would have happened if Cinder had really died at Haven? Hell – what if he hadn't come to Beacon at all?

So many things had happened in his life, leading him to that moment. Any one difference could have changed everything, couldn't it? Would he really still be the Rusted Knight if he hadn't picked up his great-grandfather's sword and decided his path?

Pyrrha had once spoken to him about destiny.

If it was his destiny to become the Rusted Knight, did that mean that Pyrrha's destiny had always been to die on that tower? That no matter what, none of these things could have been changed, and they were locked on a predetermined path?

“Jaune?” Emerald asked, her hand settling on his shoulder.

The children were staring at him expectantly.

He pushed his thoughts aside.

It didn't matter.

He was who he was. What had happened had happened. There was no point dwelling on it.

*I'm reading your book, Lewis, he thought to himself, as if it were the first time. I hope you're happy.*

He cleared his throat, "Okay, is everyone ready?"

Once he started, it came easy to him. He read, and they listened, to the story of a young girl who fell through the world, and wished to get home.

He read several more stories afterwards, and by the time they left, most of the children had fallen into a slumber. Jaune waved to those that were still awake, and they waved back enthusiastically, shouting for him to come back again.

He would.

Emerald carried the box of old toys, and they stopped by one of the drop off points for garbage. Vacuo had dozens of locations around the city for people to haul their trash, as opposed to the typical garbage collection he'd seen in Vale, Mistral, Mantle and Atlas. It seemed to work for them.

"It must have been weird reading that story," Emerald glanced at him from the corner of her eye. "Considering you star in it."

"A little bit."

She looked awkward as she asked, “Wanna talk about it?”

Jaune arched an eyebrow at her, causing her to scowl.

“What?” she snapped.

“Just didn’t expect you to ask, that’s all,” he said, amused. “But no, I’m fine.”

“If you say so.”

They stopped at a store on the way back to purchase a drink. Even as evening approached, it was still sweltering. When Emerald paid for him, he definitely knew something was up.

He couldn’t contain his curiosity any longer.

“Okay, what’s going on?” he asked as she tossed him a bottle of water.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb, I know something is going on but I just don’t know what,” he held the cold plastic against his neck. “So – are you going to spill?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

It would have been more convincing if she didn’t have such a smug shit eating expression on her face.

“You aren’t even trying to hide it now,” he shook his head. “Do you really think I haven’t noticed Weiss and Ruby acting strangely?”

Emerald just shrugged.

“And you randomly inviting me out to the orphanage, and buying me a drink? Which I appreciate, by the way.”

“It doesn’t sound like you appreciate it,” she quipped.

Jaune thought about it a bit. “Were you just trying to keep me occupied?”

“Sure, let’s go with that.”

She wasn’t talking.

That was it, though, right? Emerald was keeping him busy. What for? Well, he didn’t know. It could be anything.

He opened his bottle of water and chugged it, thirsty from the heat and from reading aloud for the children for over an hour. The sky shifted from dark blue to purples, reds and oranges as the sun started setting far off to the west, and it was almost evening when they arrived back at Shade.

“Follow me,” she said, and started walking down a hallway in the opposite direction to the dining hall.

Jaune stopped.

“What if I don’t?”

She shrugged and continued walking. “Your loss.”

Jaune almost walked the other way out of spite, he was hungry and food was just a few steps away – but then with a sigh, he followed behind her. He saw Emerald glance back over her shoulder, red eyes dancing mirthfully.

“Good boy.”

“Real funny.”

She muffled her laughter.

Shade was a pretty big place. Though not as sprawling as Beacon, nor as towering as Atlas, the ziggurat was quite large and contained a lot of rooms and hallways, many of which he'd never ventured down. It wasn't long until they were in front of a pair of large ornate wooden doors, the wood covered in various carvings. A story of some sort, a local tale – but Jaune couldn't make heads or tails of it.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Ballroom," Emerald said, and then she pushed open the doors.

*"SURPRISE~!"*

Several voices washed over him in a deafening shout, and confetti was launched across his face and hair. Jaune tensed, his first instinct telling him that he was being ambushed before his brain caught up.

"What?" he asked dumbly.

Familiar faces greeted him, smiles aplenty, streamers and balloons hanging from the high ceiling as they crowded together.

What was going on?

Team CFVY. Winter, Willow, Whitley. Oscar. Qrow. Sun, Neptune, Sage and Scarlet. Cerise and her daughters, and the other families. Yang and Blake. Ren and Nora. Ruby and Weiss, and more.

Nora moved first, dashing forward and seizing one of his hands. Emerald grabbed the other one, and they hauled him inside.

“What is this?” he asked, perplexed.

“Happy birthday!” they all cheered.

Jaune blinked.

“Uh...” he thought quickly, confused. For a moment, he doubted himself – but no, he was pretty sure once he had a moment to think. “...It’s not my birthday though?”

No one seemed to care.

“One, two, three – and, go,” Nora said, waving one of her hands like a conductor.

*“Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, dear Jaaaune~! Happy birthday to you!”* they all sang together, and it only left him even more off balance.

A few more party poppers went off to conclude the song, and Ruby and Weiss approached with giddy smiles.

“So – what do you think?” Ruby asked, waving her arms. “Surprised?”

His mouth opened and closed several times before he finally managed to string together a sentence.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “It’s not my birthday.”

“Does that matter?” Weiss asked, before leaning in and whispering, “You’ve missed so many, so we thought we’d do something nice for you.”

He didn’t know what to say. He just stared at her, and then at Ruby.

They’d done this. For him.

To cheer him up? To make him happy?

Suddenly, he found his throat was a little too tight. A deep feeling of affection rushed through him, his heart swelling.

“I...” he swallowed thickly. “I don’t know what to say, I... wasn’t expecting this.”

This was why they'd been acting so strange, and asking him questions. So they could throw him a surprise birthday party, even though it wasn't his birthday. It sounded so ridiculous, and suddenly, he was laughing.

A chuckle turned into a laugh, and then he was gasping for breath as he started guffawing, clutching his stomach. Tears came to his eyes, and everyone watched him in shock as he doubled over.

"J-Jaune?" Ruby asked, panicked. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," he wheezed, waving her off as she moved forward to help him. "I'm – hahaha – I'm fine, really, it's just – ahahah, haaaahaha – I just wasn't expecting this."

A simple gesture, and yet...

Jaune felt touched.

"Thank you," he finally said, straightening. He wiped at his eyes, and found them embarrassingly wet. "I – thank you."

Ruby and Weiss beamed.

He was ushered inside fully.

Someone pressed play on the stereo, and music began playing. Jaune recognized it at once, even though he hadn't heard the song in years.

"You said you liked this band," Ruby said sheepishly.

They were his favorite. Hearing it again after so long felt a little surreal.

There was a table laden with all sorts of food; local dishes and some of Jaune's favorites. And then a little further on, there were desserts. Most importantly, there were a couple of cakes, and Jaune instantly knew what they were when he spotted them.

His mom's specialty.

"We baked those, just so you know," Weiss said smugly.

He looked at her in surprise. "You what?"

"You don't have to look so shocked, you know," she pouted, eyes narrowing.

"Sorry, it's just..." he tried to imagine Weiss and Ruby in a kitchen, mixing together ingredients to bake a cake and came up blank. "I didn't know you knew how to bake."

"We didn't," Ruby admitted, laughing. "But we still tried. For you."

For him.

They were too good to him.

Nora pounced on his back, her arms wrapping around him firmly.

“So – what do you think?” she asked as Ren approached.

“This is great,” he said. “It’s... really amazing.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Starving,” he confirmed.

As the man of honor, he was required to cut the first slice of cake to kick things off. Once that was over with, everyone began mingling. Jaune piled his plate high with all sorts of food, quickly followed by Nora and Yang, the rest lining up behind.

He found himself seated between Ruby and Weiss, everyone else spread out. Jaune dug in and the food was as good as he expected it to be.

“Mmmm~!” Ruby hummed happily as she swallowed. “It’s good!”

Weiss only had a small plate. He had a feeling he knew why, and it was confirmed when she finished quickly and went back for dessert. When she returned, she had a larger plate with more than one slice of cake, and even a couple scoops of ice cream.

“What?” she asked defensively.

Jaune shook his head, trying not to smile. “Nothing.”

“I like cake,” she declared. “I am not ashamed of it.”

Willow was seated across from them, and she laughed lightly.

“Weiss would often have the cake butler bring her slices in the middle of the night when she thought no one would notice,” she revealed. “We all knew, of course.”

“W-What?” Weiss spluttered. “How did – I did no such thing!”

“You weren’t exactly subtle, sister,” Whitley rolled his eyes.

A soft pink hue spread across her pale cheeks.

Ruby giggled. “That sounds so cute!”

When Jaune tried a slice of his cake, he felt a wave of emotion crash down on him. His memories said that it didn't taste the exact same, but it was so close that it may as well have been. Dense, and rich, the chocolate melted in his mouth as he chewed slowly before swallowing.

"Good?" Ruby asked hopefully.

He nodded wordlessly, and had another bite.

Jaune felt eyes on him and looked up, and saw Dr. Polendina across the room. Penny's father inclined his head, and Jaune nodded back.

From there, he felt as if he were caught in a whirlwind. Once he finished eating, he went around to each and every person, speaking with them, and thanking them. Sun and Neptune pulled him into a huddle with their team, and offered him a shot of hard liquor. Ordinarily, he might have refused it – but this time, just this once, he downed it and relished the burn.

"Cheers," Sun said, downing his own. Neptune followed suit.

"Cheers," Scarlet downed his alongside Sage.

They had another, and another. Jaune cut himself off after that and moved on.

"Weiss was very excited about this," Winter told him. "I've seldom seen her so animated."

“She’s a great friend,” Jaune said, his tongue feeling a little numb after those shots. “I don’t deserve her.”

“You do,” Winter said earnestly, and after a brief moment of hesitation, she placed a hand on his shoulder. “She cares for you deeply, Jaune Arc. But you know that, do you not?”

...He did. She’d shown him time and time again, these past few weeks. Her and Ruby both.

“I do.”

“...My sister can be awkward,” Winter smiled softly, her eyes filled with love as she sought out Weiss amongst the crowd of people. “But she is very pure. She has trouble opening up to people, a trait we both share. Look after her, please.”

“Always,” he said.

Qrow got his hands on him next.

“You’ve got my niece running around after ya, freaking out,” he was nursing a glass of water. A far cry from the man he used to be. “I gotta say, it was pretty funny watching her try to set this all up without you knowing.”

Taiyang watched him with a complicated expression, and it made Jaune stand a little straighter.

“Well, she did a good job,” Jaune shook his head ruefully. “I knew she was up to something, but I had no idea it was something like this.”

“What is your relationship with my daughter?” Ruby’s father asked bluntly.

Qrow started laughing hysterically.

“Uh – we’re friends,” Jaune replied, feeling like an awkward teenager for the first time in forever. “Best friends.”

Taiyang’s face may as well have been carved out of stone, which only made Qrow laugh harder.

“Hahaha, don’t worry about this idiot,” Taiyang jolted forward as Qrow slapped him on the back several times. His voice was even more raspy than usual as he continued to chortle. “Haha – he’s just getting a little worried, that’s all.”

“Worried?”

Qrow smirked. “He’s looking in a mirror and doesn’t like what he sees.”

“Qrow, would you shut up?” Taiyang growled, shoving him off when the other man kept slapping on the back without pause. “That isn’t it at all.”

“Yeah, *suuuuure* – I believe ya,” Qrow returned sarcastically. “History repeats.”

Taiyang scowled.

Jaune retreated as they started bickering in earnest. He’d have to do something nice for Qrow sometime, since he was pretty sure the man had saved him from a very embarrassing conversation.

“Jaune~!” Magenta and Amaranth latched onto him, their beautiful eyes twinkling as they crawled up his sides.

He chuckled as he seized them around the waist and lifted them effortlessly, the twins shrieking as he swung them around. Cerise watched on fondly.

“You’ve got a lot of people that care for you,” she said when he set them down.

Jaune looked around at all those gathered.

“Looks like it,” he said. “Thanks for coming.”

She smiled, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“I wouldn’t miss this for the word, birthday boy.”

“You know it isn’t really my birthday, right?”

She nodded. “I know. Weiss told me it was because you hadn’t celebrated it in a long time.”

He smiled ruefully. “You could say that.”

“So there was no way I was going to miss this,” she nudged him teasingly, voice playful. “Not for anything.”

When he met with Professor Goodwitch, she was nursing a glass of wine. She peered at him closely, her spectacles glinting.

“You’ve changed,” she said simply.

Jaune inclined his head. “You could say that.”

Her smile was small, but genuine. “When I oversaw your Initiation, do you know what I thought?”

He grimaced. “I can only imagine.”

“I believed you wouldn’t last a week,” she admitted, shaking her head. “I couldn’t believe you were the same student whose grades said you were ready for Beacon. What I read and what I saw with my own eyes did not match.”

“Funny, huh?” he laughed awkwardly, thinking of his fake transcripts. He couldn’t even remember what they’d claimed he was capable of, but whatever it was had been well outside the scope of his abilities at the time.

“I couldn’t have been more wrong,” she dipped her head, as if in apology. “Ozpin has... informed me of what has occurred, and what you’ve been through, Mr. Arc.”

Jaune became somber.

“Oh.”

“I am sorry you had to go through that,” her voice was tinged with sadness.

And then she surprised him by wrapping him in a hug. Jaune blinked, startled, and then returned it.

“Me too, Professor,” he said. “Me too.”

After he made the rounds, he got pulled onto the dance floor. After devouring way too much food, Nora wanted to burn it off, so he was forced into a dance contest where they battled each other for supremacy.

Once upon a time, it would have been child's play. But after years in the Ever After, Jaune's dancing abilities were beyond rusty. It didn't take him long to get back into the swing of things, and the more that Ruby and Weiss cheered and clapped, the more he got into it.

It wasn't a stretch to say he felt like a new person.

Ever since he'd spoken to Penny's father, it had felt like something had shaken loose. A weight that had been pulling him down, keeping him grounded. At the time, he'd felt lighter, but as the days passed and he spent more and more time with his friends...

Jaune felt as if he was reclaiming some piece of himself. A piece that had been left behind, discarded willingly, perhaps – to protect himself, his heart and mind and soul. But experiencing human contact again, growing invested in other people, and feeling love and kindness in return...

He seized Nora by the waist and spun her, making his friend yelp in surprise. Her wide eyes only spurred him on, taking her by the hand and twirling her around like they'd been doing this all their life. A memory surfaced of them at a dance, the four of them – Team JNPR healthy and *whole*. A promise made and a promise kept, Jaune rocking a white dress as the four of them tore up the dance floor in a synchronized routine that had stolen the show.

"Ren," he called, swinging Nora in his direction and letting go. Ren dropped his drink and hastily caught Nora as she barreled into him. "Come on, get out here."

His brother in all but blood stared at him, shocked – before his face softened, and a gleam of determination filled his eyes.

"H-Hey, what do you think—," Nora stammered as Ren lifted her by the waist, carrying her back onto the dance floor and tossed her to Jaune who caught her effortlessly. "Hey! Stop just throwing me around!"

Jaune laughed freely, setting her down before dipping her aggressively.

“This is fun,” he said.

“Let go of me!” she demanded, but Ren swooped in and took her away, leading the dance. “Oi! Renny – stop!”

He faced the crowd. “Come on. There is enough room for everyone.”

Jaune danced with whoever was in front of him, it didn’t matter who. Winter, Sun, Maria – he cycled through partners, one after the other. Cerise giggled as he spun her around, her cheeks flushed and eyes bright, and then Ruby was in his arms, holding on tight. Weiss commanded his attention with her graceful movements, her eyes aflame, and then he was sitting by the dessert table, pigging out on another slice of cake.

They joined him – Ruby and Weiss – their faces red, their breathing a little fast. Weiss fanned at her face while Ruby sliced herself another piece of cake. On a nearby table was a stack of presents. Ruby had gifted him a stuffed toy; not exactly what a guy in his twenties would typically like, but the shape of it had given him pause.

It was Juniper. Right down to the last detail, antlers and all. Just the sight of it made his throat close up.

Weiss had opted for something just as personal. An album of photographs, filled to the brim with pictures from their time at Beacon. When they’d all been together, happy – the eight of them.

“Thank you,” he said, the pair of them pausing. “For this... for everything.”

“Anytime,” they chorused, eyes soft.

“I might ask for another cake,” he warned.

“We’ll bake you a hundred of them,” Weiss promised.

Ruby beamed. “We’ve got the rest of our lives, after all.”

It almost sounded like a challenge. A challenge to Salem, and to fate.

But also something else.

He felt his heart skip a beat.