

Penny really had a knack for just turning up at unexpected moments.

“Penny,” Jaune exclaimed.

“Salutations,” she bowed low before springing up, her smile wide.

Jaune was momentarily speechless before asking, “What are you going here?”

“I was simply on an evening stroll,” she claimed before hiccuping, a hand covering her mouth shyly.

Yang and Jaune shared a look.

“Oh – well, we’re actually pretty busy, Penny. We’re meeting someone.”

She perked up, eyes wide. “Oh? May I accompany you?”

That wasn’t what he’d been hoping for.

He thought of something to say to dissuade her without revealing the fact that they were meeting with someone involved in organized crime, but came up blank. The Black Lotus weren’t exactly the types of people aspiring Huntsman should be meeting with, and he didn’t want Penny to think they were up to no good. He didn’t want to be rude, either. Penny was a sweet

girl who didn't deserve it, but he had no idea how to make her leave without sounding like a jackass.

It was Yang that had the answer, but it wasn't the one he was looking for.

"She could come with us, if she wants."

Jaune stared at her.

Penny gasped. "Can I?"

Yang shrugged. "Sure, I don't mind. Stop looking at me like that," she said as Jaune continued to stare at her. "She's a Huntress-in-training, right? Penny can handle herself."

"I'm combat ready!"

Yang nodded. "See? She's combat ready."

His mouth opened and closed in disbelief before he sighed. "Yang..."

"What?"

“I don’t think we should be involving people in this. I know you don’t think so, but these people are dangerous.”

“So having an extra pair of hands makes sense, right?”

He was used to Nora’s impulsiveness but this was more on the side of reckless. Penny looked eager, however, and Jaune found it difficult to turn her away. But he wasn’t going to let her walk into this situation without knowing exactly what she was getting herself into.

He’d rather damage his own standing with her than see her get hurt because she wasn’t ready for it.

“Penny,” he said seriously.

“Yes, Jaune?” she asked, attentive.

...She really was a good girl.

“The person we’re meeting... they’re part of a criminal organization called the Black Lotus.”

Her eyes widened, her mouth forming a perfect O.

“Are we going to be committing *crime*?” she asked in an exaggerated whisper, leaning in. For some reason, Jaune couldn’t help but hear it as enthusiasm. That couldn’t be right, could it? “I don’t think I should become a criminal, Friend Jaune! Even though it may be lots of fun!”

Yang snorted as he shook his head, explaining, “No, Penny. We aren’t going to be committing crime. They might have some information we need, so we’re going to speak with them.”

“Oh,” she deflated. Yeah, he wasn’t crazy. Even though she said she shouldn’t be doing crime, she was definitely disappointed that they weren’t!

“If everything goes well, then we should be in and out in half an hour.”

“And if it doesn’t, we’ll throw some hands to show em not to mess with us,” Yang chimed in.

“I can throw hands,” Penny said happily, holding up said hands, fingers curling and uncurling. “I can throw many hands!”

“That’s the spirit!”

Jaune wasn’t sure how he felt about Yang encouraging Penny like this. Were they corrupting her? He didn’t want to corrupt her. Penny’s innocence needed to be protected, not tarnished. But she was clearly down to help them, and Penny was not unintelligent. Just the opposite. And so the three of them together approached the Violet Room, the ginger haired girl from Atlas skipping as if on the way to the park.

A small line had already formed outside even though it was early evening, but Yang made a beeline straight for the bouncers, skipping the club goers attempting to get in. Much like the goons that worked for Junior, they were dressed in suits; charcoal gray with gold trim, with black and gold ties, their dark hair slicked back. They tensed when they caught sight of Jaune’s sword but Yang waved to draw their attention onto her.

“Sup?” she asked. “We’re here to see Hongwei. Name’s Yang, he’s expecting us.”

They eyed her doubtfully, one of them pulling out a small radio and calling it through. After a moment, they were given the all clear to enter but, “He has to leave the sword with us.”

Jaune frowned. “I don’t think so.”

“Then no meeting.”

Yang’s eyes narrowed but hesitated. The club was already busy, and maybe she was thinking about the last time she stormed a club and threw down. There was always a chance of collateral damage, and none of them wanted civilians to get hurt.

Jaune made a decision.

Jaune unclipped his sword and handed it over. “I’ll be wanting that back.”

Yang’s bracelets passed the eye test, so they weren’t completely unarmed. They eyed Penny curiously and she just smiled back, appearing out of place. She didn’t have any weapons on her, at least that Jaune knew of.

“Come,” one of the men said, and showed them inside.

They passed down a narrow hallway and into the main floor of the nightclub. The dance floor was already heaving with people, writhing to the beat of a fast paced song. Purple lighting illuminated the walls and floor, a long bar dominating the west wall. Lush couches and booths could be found leading towards it, young women delivering drinks, dressed in skimpy outfits.

They were shown to a table, "Hongwei is in a meeting. Wait here. Free drinks."

A woman approached with a tray, carrying a drink for each of them. Yang smiled and sat down, leaning back as if she owned the place, crossing one leg over the other.

"Now this is what I like to hear," she grinned. "Just tell him not to take too long. He wouldn't want me to drink his bar dry, would he?"

Something fruity was placed in front of her, while Jaune received something in a short glass, amber in color; whiskey? Penny's was in a tall, thin glass, colored a bright, radioactive blue. She peered at it interestedly, inspecting it on all sides.

Had Penny tried alcohol before?

Jaune watched as the suited men retreated through a door beside the bar, taking Crocea Mors with them.

"Don't worry, we'll get your sword back. If they fuck around, they'll find out," Yang promised, picking up her drink.

"Yes. They will find out," Penny nodded.

Jaune looked around as Yang sipped at her drink. It was a nice place, he would give them that. The table they were sitting at was made from hardwood, and the illuminated walls were wood paneled. The couch he was seated on was incredibly comfortable, and it wouldn't be so unusual to fall asleep on it after a few too many drinks. At the next table over, a couple of guys were entertaining some girls, telling stories to impress them. Due to the loud music, he couldn't hear all of what they were saying, but it appeared to be working as some of the girls placed hands on their arms and shoulders, or *lower*.

The waitresses were all very attractive, young women in their prime. The outfits they were wearing consisted of a short frilly skirt that didn't do much to cover them at all, a tight halter neck crop top, their hair arranged into a variety of different styles; some had ponytails, while others had twintails. When they leaned over to serve drinks, Jaune caught vast plains of smooth skin and panty-clad crotches.

While this wasn't a strip club or brothel, Jaune had a feeling that such activities might occur here occasionally, in a more private setting.

"Ooh, I like this song," Yang said, bobbing her head along with the beat.

It was Jaune's first time in a nightclub other than their visit to Junior's. The music was a little too loud for his tastes, making it difficult to think, let alone hear. Penny seemed to be enjoying herself, though, swaying back and forth, getting into the rhythm.

"We're being watched," she said casually, not pausing in her swaying.

She was right.

It took Jaune a few moments to notice it, they were concealing it quite well, but there were at least five different groups positioned around the club, keeping tabs on them. Jaune watched them back and saw their subtle glances. Four of the groups were men from the Black Lotus, dressed in those distinctive suits – the last group wasn't though.

“Yang,” he said quietly. “Recognize those guys? On my three.”

Yang took the chance to look as she had another drink of her beverage, her brow furrowing.

“Aren't those the guys from the docks?” she asked.

They were Vassari men – two of which were the guys Yang had laid out when meeting with Argento. That set Jaune on edge.

What were they doing here?

“They're armed,” Penny supplied, unworried.

That wasn't very surprising. How Penny could see that was another matter. She must have great eyes because Jaune couldn't see any evidence, though he knew it to be true.

The moment Yang finished her drink, the door beside the bar opened and a woman stepped out. She was dressed in a form fitting suit with a pencil skirt, hurrying over towards them.

“He will see you now,” she told Yang, tucking a long strand of her straight, black hair behind her ear. “But you are to come alone.”

“That’s fine,” Yang replied before he could protest, shooting her a look. “It’ll be fine, Jaune.”

He really wished she wouldn’t just agree to go alone, just like that. The whole point of being here together was to have each other’s backs. At the docks, at least she was just on the other side of the door, in a small office area. That was an acceptable risk. This was something else.

“Yang,” he said quietly, so the woman couldn’t hear them over the music. “Activate the emergency app on your scroll. If something goes down, push the button and I’ll be there.”

It was something all Huntsmen scrolls had, and was meant to be used out in the wilds. It wasn’t particularly helpful in situations like the one Jaune and Nora had found themselves in, being so far away from *anything*, but here in the city?

It was an easy and undetectable way to let him know if she was in danger and needed help.

“Jaune—,” he cut her off.

“Yang, just do it.”

She looked like she wanted to argue but sighed when she saw how serious he was, nodding. Standing, Yang followed the woman through the door, vanishing from sight.

Jaune remained tense, unable to shake his worry. A new song came on, but he didn't hear it, staring at the closed door as if it would give up its secrets.

"I don't like this," he finally said. "Something isn't right."

Members of the Black Lotus watching them wasn't unusual. Those Vassari men being here, though? That was. And the fact that it was those guys Yang put down only made his sense of danger nag at him.

Either it was just a massive coincidence, or they were here for them. Jaune didn't like the odds of the former.

"They're moving," Penny pointed out.

The Vassari men began making their way over towards the bar, and then vanished through the same door.

Yeah, no – this was a trap. They'd been set up.

"Penny, we need to move," he told her. "We need to get to Yang."

"Friend Jaune," she said worriedly, and he noticed that she'd finally taken a sip of her drink, and was looking at it with a strange expression.

"What is it?"

“This drink has been drugged.”

“*What?*”

Her eyes zeroed in on his untouched glass and before he could react, she snatched it up off the table and sampled it.

“Penny!” he plucked it away from her, spilling it everywhere. “What are you doing?”

“Your drink was also drugged.”

“Then why are you drinking it?” he demanded.

“It’s fine, Friend Jaune. It will not harm me,” she said, confident in the face of his worry.

How did that work, exactly? But then his mind shifted, his eyes landing on Yang’s empty glass.

“Penny, Yang’s drink...”

She reached over and grabbed the empty glass, running a finger through the residue and popping it in her mouth.

She nodded. "Yang's drink was also drugged. Flunitrazepam – popularly known as a date rape drug. Depending on the dose, it can cause rapid weakness and loss of muscle control, drowsiness and unconsciousness within ten minutes."

They knew they couldn't come at them physically, and so they'd found another way. Jaune felt dread pool in his stomach.

Jaune stood. "Penny, let's go."

He saw the Black Lotus men close in on them as they moved, trying to cut them off. A hand reached out of the crowd but it was too slow, Jaune gripping the wrist and with an effortless heave, spun and threw the man like he weighed no more than a pillow. He flew through the air and over the bar, slamming into the shelves of liquor. People started screaming as glass bottles tumbled to the floor, shattering, the bar staff ducking for cover as several more men advanced on them.

They brandished bladed weapons; short, curved blades of Mistralian make. One lunged at him and Jaune stepped aside, his fist finding his ribs. The man screamed as he was blasted off his feet and over the back of one of the couches, another man taking his place.

They were trained but too slow for a Huntsman, the blades whipping by his face as he moved. Another fist found purchase, this time across a jaw, the crack of knuckle on bone jarring. Two came at him at once but it did them no good, Jaune seizing one by the tie and tossing him into the other, the pair crashing to the floor. He felt someone come at him from behind but before he could meet them, Penny kicked them in the side and launched them halfway across the room, the dancers parting in fright as his body landed among them.

"Please halt, I do not wish to harm any of you," Penny said, avoiding a slash at her neck and countering with a short, swift punch to the sternum. The man collapsed with a wheeze, unable to breathe. "But I will not tolerate violence towards my friends!"

It was a hopeless battle on their part but they kept coming, slowing Jaune and Penny down. Growing annoyed, Jaune lashed out, dropping two of them with strikes to the face, before grabbing a third by the neck and hurling him at the door with all his strength.

The man shouted in pain as he crashed through it, the frame and door splintering.

“I’m going for Yang, can you handle these guys?”

Penny nodded, catching one of the blades between her fingers without looking. “I shall dispose of them shortly and join you, Friend Jaune! Go to Yang!”

That was all the encouragement he needed.

A large man tried to bar his way but Jaune charged through him, deflecting his strike with a palm to the wrist and shoulder checking him hard enough to send him flying into the wall. The hallway behind the door was padded and well lit, and two men came storming towards him, brandishing much longer blades.

Jaune avoided the first downward slash and caught the next one coming at his side. His aura flared as the sharp edge bit into his palms, his fingers closing around the steel as he twisted sharply, pulling the man forward. His elbow slammed into his jaw, teeth scattering as blood spewed from between his lips, the gangster crumpling.

“Die!” the other man lunged with a swift stab but he was too slow, Jaune kicking out, driving his foot into his gut. He hit him with such force that he immediately keeled over and vomited all over the floor.

The hallway had a series of doors, and a staircase at the end. Jaune hesitated, unsure, before letting his instincts guide him.

He took the stairs, two at a time, and met more men at the top.

These guys had guns, and as soon as they saw him, opened fire. Jaune grit his teeth as he charged through the hail of bullets, aura flashing as he covered his face. His arms ached as he reached them, lashing out with fists, dropping two before reaching for a third. Jaune reeled him in by his jacket and headbutt him, nose shattering beneath the force, his cry cut short as he threw him into the wall. The two last guys realized the futility of it and tried to run, but Jaune chased them down, kicking one in the back and sending him flying down the hall, and grabbing the other.

Seizing him by the shoulder, he disarmed him of his handgun and then pinned him to the wall, digging his thumb in. The man screamed as Jaune lifted him up with one hand, thrashing in agony.

“Where is she?” Jaune demanded.

He tried to keep a lid on his fear and anger, but it was difficult. Even without his semblance amplifying his emotions, he felt one step away from panic. He tightened his grip, making the man howl.

“Speak,” Jaune snapped. “Where is she?”

The man pointed wildly towards a door at the end of the hall. Jaune tossed him away before running at the door, entering a full sprint. He didn't have time to mess around.

He kicked the door as hard as he could, the frame cracking, the wall shuddering as it blew off its hinges. It struck someone inside, their scream filled with shock and pain, and when Jaune entered, he felt his heart stop.

Yang was sprawled on the desk, her jacket and top removed, her bra-clad chest on display. Her head moved side to side weakly, eyes glassy, and when she tried to speak, her speech was slurred. There was a man standing by her, hands on her shorts, as if getting ready to remove them, while several other men stood around the room, including a man in a much nicer suit than the others and a guy with spiked knuckledusters.

He carried the air of a Huntsman, and on his hip was Crocea Mors.

They all pulled weapons, and the Huntsman stepped towards him, fists raised.

“Get him!” the man in the nice suit commanded.

Jaune saw red.

Literally.

A great, red rend tore through the air, as if a wound had been cut into the world itself. It rippled ominously, and the gathered men tensed, unsure, sharing looks. Then from within, a long crimson blade lashed, a blur, and blood sprayed as one of the gangsters lost a hand.

His scream heralded the carnage to come.

A demon stepped out of the red wound, tall and imposing, lush raven hair tumbling down their back, their head encased in a white and red mask fashioned to that of a Grimm. They were dressed in a black and red v-neck kimono top, hinting at a Mistralian origin, a red obi cinched tight around their waist, along with a matching tasset below which a gathering of midnight black feathers protruded. A long sheath hung from their waist, resting against a black pleated skirt, their forearms protected by ridged red armor plating, hands covered in black fingerless gloves. Black thigh-high boots hugged slender, long legs, and they walked with the purpose of a predator.

The room had already been choked with tension, but now – Jaune felt it was a physical force, the air he breathed heavy. The man without a hand whimpered on the floor, blood pooling, and he could taste the oncoming violence.

*Who was this woman?*

Not one of theirs, but not a friend, either. Jaune's sense of danger screamed at him, and when she moved, he moved too.

She went straight for the Huntsman first, and he met her with his spiked knuckles, but it was hopeless. The demon moved like flowing water, avoiding his punch effortlessly, shifting into a powerful slash that struck him from groin to neck. Aura shattered in a single blow, his shout of pain was cut short as she spun, elbowing him in the face hard enough to shatter bone. He hit the wall with a thud, and Jaune scrambled for Crocea Mors, flinching as she kicked out at him.

He managed to tank the blow on his arm, aura shuddering as he rolled. Hand reaching out, he seized his sword and retook his feet. The other men began firing, and Jaune moved, ducking low as the woman carved through them like butter, screams filling the air as blood sprayed across the walls and ceiling.

The man who had been undressing Yang tried to use her as a shield but Jaune's fist slammed into his face, dropping him in an instance. Seizing Yang under her arms, he pulled her off the desk, trying to get to the door. But the men had put up zero resistance, cut to ribbons in an instant, and now the demon's attention was focused solely on him.

Jaune tensed, jaw locked as he felt their killing intent bore down on him, his adrenaline spiking in response. Calling upon his semblance, he shoved Yang out of the room moments before she blurred. He blocked her strike with his sheath, grunting at the force of her blow. The masked face tilted, as if surprised he'd managed to block her, straining against him, but Jaune was a wall, unmovable.

Gripping the hilt, he unsheathed his blade and struck back, forcing the demon away. Deploying his shield, the steel screeched as she darted back in, her crimson edge raking over the face. She hit like a truck, his arm screaming as he blocked her blow and retaliated, his movements amplified. Sword met sword, an echoing, deafening clang that rattled through their bodies.

A furious flurry of sword strokes occurred, Jaune clamping down on his surging emotions, thinking of Yang, of protecting her from this beast. Despite his semblance, she was meeting him blow for blow, her skill undeniable.

She fainted and drew him in, and Jaune hissed as her blade struck his legs, carving through his aura. Jaune lashed out with his shield but she avoided it, darting in, lunging at his face. He side-stepped and lashed out with a kick, but she ducked, spinning, slashing at his back. Jaune grit his teeth and followed through with his turn, Crocea Mors nicking her mask, carving a thin line across it.

She was good. The best. The only person he'd fought who was as good was Pyrrha, and as they met again, Jaune knew that he needed to step it up. He could not lose here. This was not a spar. This was Yang's life.

Yellow light blazed from his body and he *moved*. The ground cracked, Crocea Mors howling. She blocked his slash but the strength behind it unsettled her, the demon flinching as she was tossed aside. She slammed into a wall with a crack, and he followed, lunging. She deflected his

stab and struck at his neck, trying to decapitate him in one blow, but his semblance surged, the blade rattling as it hit him.

It was agony, his neck protesting, but it was stopped dead, and Jaune launched a punch with his shield, the edge taking her in the chest, hard enough to shatter concrete. Red aura flashed, and then a foot took him by surprise, kicking at his knee. Agony raced through his leg as he stumbled, and then her sword ignited, blazing with fire.

He met it with *Crocea Mors*, muscles screaming, and it *shattered*. Crimson fragments sparked in all directions, a wreath of flame washing over him. Jaune swallowed his scream of pain and pushed through it, slashing at her neck. They jerked their head back but his aura extended, an aura slash carving out a healthy chunk of their aura, forcing them back into the wall.

Jaune gasped as his skin tingled from the heat, the agony of being burned without the physical damage. Her sword was in pieces, but then she placed the hilt upon her sheath and another blade emerged, this one crystal, a shard of ice. It radiated cold as she readied a renewed assault.

“You won’t have her,” he said, voice rough. “I won’t let you.”

The demon paused, head cocking to the side – and then from behind him, several slender, black blades shot at her like bullets. She parried them in a flurry of strikes, *ting, ting, ting*, the blades sinking into the wall, and from the doorway emerged Penny, her expression cold.

“I am here, Friend Jaune.”

“Penny,” he said in relief. “Take Yang and go. She can’t protect herself. I’ll hold them off.”

There was a long beat of silence – and then, to Jaune’s shock, they sheathed their sword and reached up, removing their mask.

A familiar face was revealed to him, unmistakable. It was older, more mature, and the coloring was wrong – but it was Yang’s face, or what it would look like in the future. Even the red eyes reminded him of her, when her semblance was active, the furious crimson of her rage.

“I see. So she has made friends,” the woman said, her voice low, almost mocking. “*Strong friends*. Perhaps she isn’t such a lost cause, after all.”

There was no mistaking her.

“You’re her mother,” Jaune whispered, semblance fading, the strength leeching from his limbs. He was still wary, but with Penny at his back, he felt a little more confident. “How are you here?”

Her lips quirked, an eyebrow arched. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

This was the woman that abandoned her daughter, abandoned his friend. She had caused Yang untold pain, and yet *she was here*. She’d stepped out of that red rend in the air and had carved through the gangsters like a skilled butcher, and only now did their moans of agony meet his ears, his adrenaline beginning to fade.

The room was a bloodbath. Hands, fingers, arms, legs – she’d dismantled them with brutal, cold precision. Many of them were going into shock from the blood loss, their faces ashen, while the ones still holding onto their minds clutched at their stumps, attempting to stem the flow.

They didn’t deserve his help, but he couldn’t just watch them die.

“Penny, call emergency services,” he said carefully, eyes never leaving Raven. “We need an ambulance, and the police. Yang needs to get to a hospital.”

“It will be done,” Penny replied, and yet she didn’t move or pull out a scroll. He had no time to question her.

Raven’s eyes narrowed, setting him on edge. “How is it that my daughter was endangered by these... insignificant ants,” she asked dangerously, voice cold. “What happened here?”

“She was drugged,” Jaune answered. “Otherwise, they wouldn’t have been able to touch her.”

“I see,” she said, voice filled with *something*. “Her friends are strong, but she is weak. That is disappointing.”

“She isn’t weak,” Jaune returned instantly, a spark of annoyance flowing through him. “If you actually *knew* her, you would know that.”

“If she wasn’t weak, they would never have been able to compromise her in such a way,” Raven countered emphatically. “There is more than one type of weakness. They exploited that weakness, and here we are. How was it done? Was she reckless? Did she trust them? Foolish girl. These men are scum. You can never take your eyes off such creatures, just like the Grimm.”

Jaune scowled.

“That’s an interesting expression. My words anger you,” Raven smirked. “But am I wrong?”

Hadn’t he thought Yang’s recklessness would get her into trouble?

“She was here, looking for you,” he said, and the words hung between them.

It was subtle but he saw her mouth tighten.

“For me?”

“Looking for you. Trying to find out where you are,” he accused. “She might be reckless, *desperate* – but that’s because you left her behind, and she has been looking for you. It isn’t because she is weak.”

“I’ve no use for such a pathetic daughter.”

His knuckles popped as his hand tightened around the hilt of his sword.

“You’re the only pathetic one here.”

It was rare that Jaune felt *hate*, but he hated this woman. The way she spoke about her daughter, it grated on him, quickly inflaming his rage. What right did she have to claim Yang as pathetic, when she was the one that had walked out on her family?

Those haunting red eyes glared at him but Jaune refused to back down.

“You know nothing.”

“I know enough.”

She laughed sharply, a bitter sound.

“Not *nearly* enough,” she returned, face hewn from stone. “But perhaps one day, you will.”

“I know you abandoned your daughter like a coward,” once the words passed his lips, he felt the violence in the air and readied himself. For a brief moment, that demon who had cut through these men returned, and Jaune felt that his life was in danger. He heard Penny shift behind him, readying herself.

And then the feeling vanished, as if he had imagined it.

“We’re done here,” she said, slashing her sword through the air – and it *parted*, that red tear returning. It could be nothing else; semblance.

“Wait,” he said as she turned away, dismissive. “If you think her so pathetic, why are you here?”

She paused, body tense.

Jaune waited with baited breath, hoping for *something*, but then without a word, she stepped into the portal – for that is all it could be – vanishing from view, leaving Jaune and Penny with one hell of a mess.