

*Everything was going wrong, and Jaune had no idea on how to fix it.*

*Ever since they'd visited the Herbalist, Alyx wasn't the same. Sure, right from the beginning, she hadn't been anything like the storybook said. She wasn't just a little petulant or inconsiderate. Selfish and cruel were more apt terms, and it was a shock to see. To her, the Ever After was just a make believe world where the rules didn't exist. She could do whatever she wanted, and there were no consequences.*

*But even then, she had moments where Jaune saw the girl that the book described. Curious, full of wonder – even kind, when the mood struck her. After the Herbalist, though – she no longer trusted them. Even her brother, Lewis. Whatever was said to her, it had warped her personality even more. Paranoid, but most importantly – scared.*

*She was terrified. Of what? Jaune didn't know. She wouldn't tell them, and no amount of asking could pry that secret from her.*

*He was failing.*

*What else was new? Jaune was well acquainted with failure at this point. His entire life was one big failed experience. Too weak, not smart enough, too slow. Pyrrha. Penny. Atlas. Mantle. He was the Rusted Knight, and yet he couldn't even live up to the ideal written in those pages every child the world over had read. He couldn't even pretend to be the hero.*

*He was pathetic.*

*The fire crackled in the silence of the night. Lewis was subdued, having fought with his sister earlier in the day. He was a kind boy, smart – but constantly in the shadow of his sister. Sibling conflict – another thing Jaune was well acquainted with.*

*Would he ever see his sisters again?*

*Jaune cradled his head, fingers threading through his long blond hair. He knew he shouldn't think like that, but sometimes he couldn't help it. How long had he been waiting? Five years? Ten? Time in the Ever After was hard to keep track of. The days weren't the same as on Remnant. Sometimes they were short. Sometimes they were long. There was no consistent frame of reference.*

*All he could go on were the lines on his face, and the gray beginning to speckle his hair.*

*What if... his friends never came?*

*Rather... what if they did come, but it was far too late? What if Jaune was nothing more than a senile old man, barely able to lift his broken sword? What then?*

*His fingers tightened, and he closed his eyes as if to block the memories out, squeezing them until it hurt.*

*"Jaune?"*

*He jolted, surprised. Looking up, he saw Alyx, her face filled with concern. An unusual expression for her, especially these days. In her hands she held a bowl filled with soup, and a quick glance showed that Lewis had one too. He'd already begun eating, and with a start, Jaune realized that he'd lost track of time.*

*“Yeah?”*

*“Here’s your dinner,” she said, holding out the bowl expectantly.*

*He straightened up, blinking at her in surprise.*

*“Oh, uh – thanks,” he said gratefully, though still unsure. Slowly, he took the bowl and cradled it gently. “You didn’t have to.”*

*She smiled, her pretty face lighting up. He was so used to seeing scowls and distrust that it momentarily stunned him.*

*“Eat up. Our Rusted Knight needs to be strong.”*

*He chuckled, feeling his stomach rumble in agreement. “Thanks.”*

*How foolish he had been.*

*The broth was warm and filled with flavor, though the food in the Ever After always had a strange quality to it. He missed Remnant food, but this would do. He sipped at it slowly at first, but his hunger got the better of him. Soon half of the bowl was empty, and a soothing warmth filled him up inside.*

*That soothing warmth fast became a crippling heat.*

*“Argh,” he grunted, hunching over as his stomach cramped up. His tongue felt numb, and his throat convulsed, as if he wanted to throw up but couldn’t. The pain grew, until his vision was hazy, tears filling his eyes. “W-What is...?”*

*He tried to stand but it was as if the strength had been sapped from his limbs. He fell, gasping desperately for air. His bowl went flying, tumbling over, and he heard Lewis shout in panic. The pain rushed from his stomach to his chest, and then down all of his limbs. Just breathing hurt, and wildly, he wondered if this was the end.*

*And during it all, Alyx watched him dispassionately.*

*There was no anger in her expression, nor was there any glee. She wasn’t happy or sad, she felt nothing.*

*“Al—yx,” he breathed out. “What have you...?”*

*For a moment, it looked as if she wavered, her eyes glittering with some unnamed emotion. But then she turned away without a word, and seized her brother's hand as he attempted to rush to his side, dragging him away.*

*The last thing he saw before darkness claimed him were the wide, bright blue eyes of the Curious Cat.*

Jaune jerked as his eyes snapped open, his heart pounding in his chest. Something was wrapped around him and so he fought, shouting, his arms and legs straining. Unable to escape, he rolled, and with a swoop, he fell, grunting as he hit the floor. It was only then that he realized that the thing he was fighting was his blanket, and with sudden clarity, he remembered.

He wasn't in the Ever After any more.

He was home.

In a manner of speaking, at least.

His eyes darted around, taking in the familiar interior of his room. The curtains fluttered in a mild breeze, and the sounds of the city filtered in. Untangling himself from the blanket, he stood and approached the balcony, peering out.

It had to be late morning at the earliest, the sun already high in the sky, and the unforgiving Vacuoan heat warping the very air. He didn't usually sleep this long before recalling the night before.

His still racing heart began to slow. They'd saved those families in the cover of darkness, and so he hadn't gotten to bed until the early hours of the morning. That was why he'd slept in so late.

Jaune grimaced, reminded of his dream. Not so much a dream. Another memory, though this one was not a happy one. Alyx's betrayal still haunted him, and though she had seen the error of her ways at the end, it didn't erase the hurt she had caused. Even so, she hadn't deserved her fate. Murdered by the Curious Cat, a being she had trusted.

Perhaps there was some irony there.

He took a nice, long shower to drive away the cobwebs and clear his mind. Brushing his teeth, he was just finishing drying off when he heard someone knocking on the door. Padding over to the door after rinsing out his mouth, he opened it without thinking, dressed in nothing but a towel.

Ruby opened her mouth to speak before freezing, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Ruby," he said. "Morning."

She stared at him in silence, and it took Jaune longer than it should have to realize what had her so speechless.

"Oh," he said as his mind caught up. "Sorry, I'll go put on some clothes. Come in. I won't be long."

He left her standing there, hurrying over to his drawers to pull out some clothes. He took the first thing he found before slipping into the bathroom to change. Pulling on a pair of beige pants and a black singlet, he brushed his hair quickly before rejoining her in the other room.

"Sorry about that."

"I-It's fine," she muttered, doing her best to look anywhere but at him.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing! I was just... a little surprised,” her lips pursed, face crunching cutely. “Did you just wake up?”

“Yeah. I... slept in a bit.”

“We did have a late night,” Ruby said knowingly. “I’ve only been awake for an hour. Do you have any plans for today?”

Jaune shrugged. “Just the usual. Why?”

“Want to come with me?” she asked eagerly. “Team CFVY said they appreciate the new lead we uncovered, and want to treat us. You, me and Weiss – sounds fun, right?”

Jaune rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh – sure, I guess I could,” he hesitated. “The Headmaster doesn’t need us for anything?”

“Nope,” Ruby crossed her arms in an X. “He said we’ve earned a little downtime. They’re going to relocate those families to a more permanent home this evening, and he asked us to accompany them, but other than that, we’re free!”

It was hard not to get caught up in her infectious attitude. Ruby had always had a knack for setting the mood. It was something Jaune had always liked about her.

“Where are we meeting them?” he asked, searching for a cool shirt to throw over his singlet. He found a plain white one and he shrugged it on, leaving it unbuttoned. Crocea Mors was strapped to his belt.

“Some place Coco likes. It’s a bar,” Ruby rolled her eyes. “But it also does food.”

“Is it even open for breakfast...” he trailed off. “I guess it’s closer to lunch, isn’t it?”

Ruby nodded.

“Okay, well – I’m ready. Let’s go.”

They met up with Weiss, who was waiting for them outside of the dining hall. Unlike Ruby, who was as chipper as ever, Weiss appeared a little more worn down. Not that she didn’t look anything but her best because Weiss Schnee always looked absolutely resplendent at all times, but her posture was a little off. Almost like she was drooping.

“Morning,” she greeted, meeting his eyes and giving him a small smile.

“Morning,” he returned, matching her smile. That seemed to perk her up, standing a little straighter. “Rough sleep?”

“That obvious?” she sighed. “I found it difficult to nod off. Honestly, I could go for a few more hours – but no, a certain someone decided to wake me up.”

Ruby had the good grace to appear apologetic.



“You could have stayed in bed,” Ruby said.

“I could have,” Weiss agreed. “But here I am. Apparently Team CFVY wants to treat us, something I am all for.”

“Where are Yang and Blake?” Jaune asked. “Do you think we should invite them? Ren and Nora, too.”

Ruby grimaced, her cheeks pinkening.

“Uh – my sister is a little busy right now. So is Blake.”

Her eyes shifted side to side, and Jaune knew she was leaving something out. Weiss frowned at her partner.

“Did they take a mission?” the white haired girl asked.

Ruby shook her head.

“Aha – no, not exactly.”

“Then what?”

Ruby opened and closed her mouth a few times, before leaning in and saying quietly, “They’re... *you know.*”

Jaune blinked. “Uh – no, I don’t. Do you, Weiss?”

Weiss shook her head. “No, I haven’t the faintest. Ruby, speak plainly.”

“They’re...” she wiggled her fingers, but that only confused them more. “Doing... *stuff.* Like... *together stuff.*”

It finally clicked, and Jaune felt a little awkward.

“Oh, uh – couple stuff,” he cleared up.

Ruby nodded quickly, her cheeks burning.

“Urgh, I really didn’t need to know that,” Weiss complained.

“You asked!” Ruby hissed.

Weiss then tilted her head. “Wait, how do you know they’re...” she pulled a face. “Doing *that.*”

“How else do you think?” Ruby gritted out. “I could hear them... through the door.”

Weiss covered her face, assaulted by second hand embarrassment. Jaune felt a similar sensation, closing his eyes, as if doing so would make it any better. It didn't.

“Right,” he said.

As a guy, he couldn't say that the thought wasn't... enticing, in a certain way. They were both beautiful young women. But he knew Yang and Blake would both be mortified if they knew Ruby had overheard them doing... *that*. Being intimate. Flirting was one thing. A kiss here or there, another. Having sex?

Well... he wasn't about to say anything.

“Unbelievable,” Weiss muttered, voice strained. “Thank you for sharing, Ruby. Don't ever tell me anything like that again.”

“*You asked*,” Ruby said again, stomping her foot. “How do you think I feel? Yang's my sister...”

Things had gotten a little awkward.

“How about we go?” Jaune suggested. “Do you know the way?”

It wasn't far from the academy, less than a five minute walk. Jaune shot Nora a text, asking if she and Ren were busy, and got an instant response. Apparently they were helping out at that

shelter they had visited, the one where the families had been staying before they went missing. Nora offered to meet him but he let her know it was fine, it wasn't important. It seemed that Ren may have connected with the people there.

When they arrived, the bar appeared closed at first. There wasn't much activity outside, and it wasn't until they were right by the door that the sounds from within carried out.

"Er – I think this is the place," Ruby checked her scroll and then glanced at the sign hanging outside. "This is the name Coco gave me. The Last Oasis."

The entry way was a small room that immediately led into a staircase. Ascending the stairs, it brought them to the main floor of the bar, the room large with tables and chairs situated along the walls, several pool tables lined up in the middle, with the long bar on the left. The lighting in here was dim but not dark, televisions hung from the ceiling at regular intervals. Even at this time of day, there were people seated on stools at the bar, sipping at their drinks, while several tables were taken by those eating meals.

The crack of a pool cue striking a ball sounded nearby, drawing his attention. Coco straightened up as the white ball hit the arranged colored pool balls with a sharp sound, scattering them. One of them was sunk, another positioned right on the edge of the hole, and Velvet clapped.

"Oh, hey," Coco greeted, tilting her glasses down to observe them as they approached. "Glad you could all make it."

"Ruby, Weiss," Velvet said warmly. "Jaune."

"Hey," Ruby waved. "Where are Fox and Yatsushashi?"

Coco jerked her thumb further down the bar. “They’re getting some drinks. Do you want anything? My treat.”

“Uh,” Ruby floundered. “I don’t know... maybe a cola?”

“Come on, live a little,” Coco said, smirking, before facing Jaune. “What about you, big guy? What’ll you have?”

Jaune wasn’t really sure. He couldn’t remember the last time he had an alcoholic beverage. Maybe with his dad? They’d shared a beer together before he’d gone to Beacon. The Ever After didn’t have things like beer, whiskey or rum – though there had been one drink he’d had at the marketplace. He wouldn’t call it alcohol, but it had made him hallucinate something fierce.

He’d only tried it the one time. He’d woken up with a horrible headache and butt naked, sleeping in a tree. Never again.

A beer would be fine, though.

“Sure. A beer. Whatever is fine.”

“What about you, sweetie?” Coco turned to Weiss. Weiss hesitated.

“I must confess, I don’t know much about this sort of thing unless it is wine.”

“Something fruity, then,” Coco nodded. “For the both of you,” she added, looking at Ruby. “They make some nice cocktails here. Bunbun, be a darling and let the boys know.”

“So,” she said when Velvet hurried away. “You guys cracked the case, didn’t you? Those bastards had us running around in circles. Now we know they’re still here.”

“We were investigating an unrelated matter,” Weiss said. “It just happened to be bigger than we realized.”

“Funny how that is sometimes the case,” Coco gave them all a genuine smile. “Good job. Things here in Vacuo can be... well, even before the shit show with Atlas and Mantle, things weren’t good here. The gangs constantly bleed this place dry, so it isn’t a surprise that one of them would work with... Salem, was it?”

Ruby nodded. “Yeah. Salem.”

“And she was the one that caused that shit in Vale?” Coco’s expression grew dark. “That bitch Cinder was working for her?”

Jaune nodded. “That’s right.”

Coco huffed. “Great. Some people just want to watch the world burn, huh? We know all about that.”

Velvet returned with Fox and Yatsurhashi shortly after, carrying their drinks. Jaune watched as something colorful and bright was set in front of Ruby and Weiss on the edge of the pool table. Ruby’s was a glaring crimson, the rim dusted with sugar. Weiss’ was a mixture of varying

shades of blue, starting dark at the bottom before lightening towards the top, the uppermost gradient appearing almost clear.

The white haired girl hesitated before lifting it to her lips, taking a sip. She blinked.

“This doesn’t taste alcoholic at all,” she said in surprise.

Coco grinned. “Those are the most dangerous drinks.”

Yatsunashi handed him a pint.

“Thanks,” he said.

There was a healthy froth on top but not excessive. Lifting it to his mouth, he took a sip of his own. There was a slight bitterness but not overpowering, and it didn’t have much of an aftertaste. If he had to describe it, it would be a lingering dryness that wasn’t unpleasant.

Ruby’s lips puckered as she tried her own drink.

“Sour,” she said, though she took another sip quickly. “It’s yummy.”

“Any of you know how to play?” Coco gestured at the table.

"I do – though it's been a long time," Jaune said. "We had a table at home."

"Sweet. Then you'll be my opponent after I trounce Bunbun."

Coco talked a big game, but it was actually Velvet who won. After missing her fourth shot, Velvet proceeded to sink all of her balls without missing once. Coco's expression was stone cold as the final ball was deftly sunk in the far left pocket, Fox and Yatsurhashi clapping for her victory.

Coco scoffed, handing the cue over to him.

He didn't fare much better. He knew how to play, but it had been so long ago that calling him rusty was an understatement. He only managed to sink one ball the entire game, Velvet cleaning house. She did the same to the rest of them, destroying Fox and Yatsurhashi, and then Ruby and Weiss, who were both complete novices.

"Victory," Velvet cheered at the end before flushing. "Sorry..."

"Heh, don't be sorry – you kicked our asses," Coco said as another set of drinks arrived. "Come on, we'll find us a table and have something to eat. The grub here is pretty good."

They found one big enough to seat them all, and started going over the menu. They didn't have a massive selection but what they did have looked good. Jaune just went for a burger with fries, mirrored by Ruby. Weiss got the pan fried freshwater fish with salad.

As they waited for their food, they talked. It had been a long time since they'd hung out in any fashion, not since Beacon, and a lot of things had happened since then. Coco spoke about how they'd moved to Shade after Beacon shut down after the attack on Vale, and the massive wyvern that was apparently still perched on the school like a gargoyle after Ruby was through



with it. She talked about the issues they had when they first arrived, the rejection from the people here in Vacuo, and the trouble caused by the Crown.

“They were trying to form an army by kidnapping people with powerful semblances. They ran a fight club out of an old Dust refinery on the edge of the city, some place that used to be owned by the Mistral Trading Company. They called it the Mirage. When they identified fighters that they thought were useful, they’d make a move to secure them.”

Weiss frowned. “Secure them how?”

“Jax Asturias’ semblance was Mind Control,” Fox said. “As the name implies, he could control anyone he used it on – more than one person at a time, even.”

Jaune felt his eyebrows raise, and Weiss and Ruby appeared equally shocked.

“That sounds...” Weiss trailed off for a moment. “Horrible.”

“A troublesome ability,” Coco agreed. “But Yats was able to counter it with his own semblance.”

At their curious looks, Yatsushashi said, “I can wipe memories. An unintended but welcome side effect is that it works on semblances like Jax’s and removes them.”

The power to wipe memories...

“So they were trying to form some sort of army with these powerful semblance users?” Ruby asked. “What were they trying to do?”

“Restore the monarchy. At least, that’s what they’d tell people,” Coco scoffed. “Funny how when they say things like that, who are the ones who end up King and Queen? If you ask me, it was just a power grab. The whole restoration angle was just a way to justify what they were doing to those that joined them. They claimed it was to make Vacuo strong, like it once was – but who knows how true that is.”

“Their plan was to topple Shade as the ruling authority and take over the kingdom,” Fox shook his head. “Anyone that disagreed would have been forced to comply, or...”

There wasn’t much room for those that stood against them.

They’d certainly had their own adventures away from Beacon, that was for sure. After they were finished sharing their story, Ruby took over. Their food arrived, and his burger was really good. The meat patty was thick but juicy, the buns soft but lightly toasted. Aside from the patty, there was lettuce, tomato, onion and an egg, with some sort of mildly spicy burger sauce to cap it all off. The fries were seasoned with some sort of lemon salt and pepper, and came with a dipping sauce that was thick and tasted like bell pepper.

A type of salsa.

Jaune bit into it and hummed his approval, everyone else digging in as Ruby spoke. She told them of their journey across Sanus and Anima, the confrontation with Tyrian, and the Nuckelavee. The attack on Haven by the White Fang, and their fight against Cinder, Raven and the others. Their travels to Argus, the Leviathan, stealing an airship and flying to Atlas. The Ace-Ops, Penny, and everything that came after.

Ironwood's fall from grace, Salem's attack, and their desperate gambit to get the people away through magical means.

"No one really told us *how* you managed to get the people here," Coco interrupted. "Everyone just kept saying they came through portals, and there were bridges of light... it sounded ridiculous, but that's what everyone said."

Ruby and Weiss shared a look.

Some things had been left out. The Staff of Creation, the Lamp of Knowledge. Things that weren't widely known.

But they could trust Team CFVY.

"We used something called the Staff of Creation," she said quietly, so no one else could overhear. "It let us do the impossible."

If that blew their minds, learning about the existence of the Ever After was on another level.

"You mean like the fairy tale?" Velvet asked, unsure.

Weiss nodded. "The very same."

“You aren’t just pulling our legs, right?” Coco asked, sceptical. “This sounds insane. Those... *relics* are bad enough, but they explain how you managed to teleport thousands of people across the world. But... the Ever After? The fucking Red King and the Curious Cat?”

“The Red King wasn’t there any more,” Ruby chuckled nervously. “But yeah, that Ever After.”

“It’s true,” Jaune said in the face of their shock. “As crazy as it sounds.”

They spoke of Neo, and how the Cat took over her, and everything else that occurred. Including how much time he really spent there.

“Wait, what do you *mean* he’s the Rusted Knight?” Coco asked, staring at him. “This story is older than all of us. How is that possible?”

“Time doesn’t work the same over there,” he said. “When I arrived, I... found a tree. The fruit weren’t what you would expect.”

The more he spoke, the more outrageous it sounded. He could tell they didn’t want to believe it at first, but the way he said it, his face carved from stone, voice even – there was no hint of falsehood.

“How long were you there?” Velvet asked quietly.

He shrugged. “Twenty years – give or take a few. I’m not sure.”

“But you don’t look...” Coco shook her head. “You’re still our age.”

The end of their tale cleared that up.

“This is all that remains,” he reached up and tugged on some of the white strands.

They were speechless.

Maybe it had been a little too much to dump on them. Jaune couldn’t blame them. It was such a fantastical story, and if the shoe was on the other foot, he’d have been equally as thrown as they were. Jaune had lived it, though. And Team RWBY – they’d experienced it, *seen it*. They’d been confronted with the reality of it. Just hearing a story couldn’t substitute that.

Finally, Coco slapped the table, leaning back.

“Okay, you guys win.”

“What?” Weiss asked, confused.

“We thought we’d been through a lot – but shit, your story takes the cake,” she lowered her glasses, meeting Jaune’s eyes. They were warm. “Jaune... if you need anything, we’ve got your back. I’m serious. I’m sorry that happened to you.”

Jaune blinked, surprised. “Oh, uh – thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

"I'm serious. I know we aren't best buds or anything, but we're all from Beacon," she said emphatically. "We're all in this together. We lost one of our own when Pyrrha passed. She was a great girl, and I know that must have been harder on you than anyone. And now all this... fuck, man. I'm really sorry."

Velvet reached out across the table and took his hands, squeezing them.

"Just like Coco said. If you ever need our help, don't hesitate to ask."

"I..." he cleared his throat, touched by their words. "Thank you."

Unexpected but not unwelcome.

They ordered another round of drinks, and tried their hand at pool once again. Weiss wasn't half bad, though Ruby was terrible. That didn't stop her from having fun, though, and it was with wide smiles that they left the bar. As expected, it was stinking hot outside, so they made their way back to Shade quickly.

He wasn't drunk – but his body wasn't used to alcohol consumption. Even with the food, he felt a little buzzed. Jaune was definitely a lightweight. Not that he expected anything different.

Ruby and Weiss were similarly affected.

Ruby was much more clingy, latching onto Jaune and Weiss, being overly affectionate. Jaune didn't mind, and neither did Weiss, indulging her partner when she got a little too close. Weiss

held up better but her cheeks were a little flushed, her eyes a little too bright. When she spoke, it was just a touch too loud.

They still had plenty of time until those families were relocated, giving them a chance for a nap. Jaune helped Ruby to her room first, but the girl wasn't willing to let them depart.

"Stay with me," she pleaded, tugging on their arms. "There is plenty of room."

Jaune didn't need much convincing.

Her room wasn't much different from his. It was just the small things like the toolbox sitting on the kitchen counter, and the bag of half consumed cookies on the bed. Weiss tsked at the sight and Ruby blushed.

"What?" she asked defensively. "I get hungry in bed sometimes."

Ruby flopped down on the bed, while Jaune took the couch. Weiss sat down next to him, and lay her head against his shoulder naturally, as if it were the normal thing to do.

Ruby kicked her feet back and forth, staring at the ceiling. "They've had a crazy time too, huh?"

"Yeah," Jaune agreed. "We weren't the only ones going through it."

He hadn't had much time to think about it before but now that some silence settled between them, Jaune couldn't help it. Yatsunashi and his semblance...

The ability to erase memories. It sounded too good to be true, but was it so surprising that his first thought was to ask Yatsunashi to use his semblance on him? He had an entire life's worth of memories he wished he didn't, another life in another world. Traumatic memories. Memories of crippling loneliness.

Yatsunashi could remove them all in an instant.

But if he did that... then how would that change him? Your experiences are what defined you, made you who you are. If you removed those experiences, those memories and everything that went with it, wouldn't that change who you are?

The thought that he could just forget the last twenty-something years... as if he had never fallen in the first place...

His hands curled into fists.

"What are you thinking about?" Weiss asked softly, feeling that something was wrong. She moved away, turning to look at him. "Jaune?"

The worry in her voice alerted Ruby who sat up.

"It's..." he began, only to halt. He was about to brush it off as if it were nothing, but it wasn't nothing. What he was considering was huge, and Jaune knew that this decision wasn't one to be made lightly. "I was just thinking about what they said about Yatsunashi's semblance."



Weiss frowned – but she was a sharp girl. It didn't take long for her to figure it out, her eyes widening in shock. "Wait, you aren't thinking of—,"

"I don't know," he cut her off. "It was just a thought."

"What's going on?" Ruby asked, worried.

"He's thinking about erasing his memories," Weiss sounded outraged. "Jaune, you can't!"

Ruby's mouth fell open.

"I can't?" he snapped, annoyed. "Says who? Are you saying I don't have the right to choose?"

Her mouth opened, furious – but she caught herself, jaw locking before she looked away angrily.

"That isn't what I meant," she said through gritted teeth. "I – that came out wrong. I'm sorry."

Jaune felt his own temper cool immediately at her apology. "Right. I – sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you."

"I just – you don't *really* want to do that, do you?" she asked, turning back to him and meeting his eyes. "Jaune, that is a *really big* step. Do you have any idea how that could affect you?"

"I realize that," he sighed. "It was just a thought I had, that's all. It's not like I'm going to storm over there and ask him. Even if I did, he might refuse anyway. But... can you blame me for considering it?"

He saw the struggle in her eyes, and knew he'd upset her. Jaune didn't want that. He didn't want that at all.

"If that's what you really wanted to do," Ruby spoke up. "Then I'll support your decision."

"Ruby?" Weiss asked, shocked.

"We don't have the right to tell him what he can and can't do, not after... not after everything he has been through," Ruby said sadly, getting up from the bed and approaching them. Jaune watched her carefully, and without hesitation, she climbed into his lap, her knees on either side of him as she embraced him, arms wound around his back. "We can't tell you what to do, Jaune... but the thought of you forgetting and it changing you, it scares me."

"It might make me better. More like... how I was before."

Ruby nodded, burying her face in his neck. "Maybe," she said. "But you are who you are now because of what you went through. Do you really want to pretend that didn't happen to you? That all the suffering... and all the *good*, that none of it existed?"

Did he?

It was true that his time in the Ever After was filled with pain. Jaune had been alone in a strange world, and when he finally had people with him who he could speak to and guide, he was

betrayed. He lived a wretched existence for many years, consumed by his own failures – but there had been good, too.

Juniper.

Did he want to forget his most faithful companion?

The folks at the market place, the Garden. Every week, the strange antlered woman would bring him a new pair of socks. All because of an off hand comment he made about his one pair being worn and filled with holes. By the end, he had far too many socks and ended up giving them away to anyone he could find. The Paper Pleasers didn't have feet, but many of the Afteran's did.

Hawker would try to sell him mud cookies and mud cakes, and anything mud he could think of. Strange, even by Afteran standards – but a kind soul, who had helped him on more than one occasion to find the things he sought.

The Teapot Lady, the farmers from the Farming Flats... their produce was strange, but they always grew more than Jaune asked for when he purchased them... a way of showing their appreciation for protecting them from the Jabberwalker...

Did he really wish to invalidate his current self?

"No," he said, sagging into her embrace. "No, I don't. I – sorry. For worrying you. Both of you."

Weiss sniffled, and he realized she'd been on the verge of crying. That made him feel rotten, but then she was hugging his side, and he allowed their warmth to seep in deep.

“Don’t speak like that again,” she said.

“I won’t,” he promised.