

That strange feeling of being stretched too thin lasted only a couple of days. All he required was rest and relaxation, made easier by Headmaster Ozpin giving his team time off from classes. That first day, he spent most of it in bed, as did Nora and Blake. Weiss was too restless to stay abed, but she didn't wander very far from their room. A few trips to the dining hall to bring food was the extent of her excursions.

They had plenty of visitors, though.

"Have you tried not fighting powerful, eldritch Grimm?" Yang asked dryly during one of these visits. They'd been busy with their own mission, and it was their first chance to catch up with them. "Seems like whenever you leave Vale, you fight some horrible monster."

"Trust me, it's not like I'm looking for these things," he said. "Nora did jinx us, though, now that I think about it."

Nora poked out her tongue, making Pyrrha and Ruby laugh.

"I'm glad you're all unharmed," Pyrrha said after her laughter died down.

Ren nodded, staying close to his oldest friend. Nora was lapping up the attention, grinning like an idiot.

"At least the White Fang has been taken care of," Ruby chimed in. "Everyone is talking about it."

Adam Taurus had escaped, but the White Fang in Vale were crippled. A good piece of news right before the Vytal Festival, and it had everyone in good spirits. It was all over the internet, and the media were covering it extensively.

"It's big news," Blake said. "I've heard that they are putting together a specialized task force to track down Roman Torchwick since he was also involved in the Dust heists. He's now being labeled a co-conspirator to terrorism."

"Quite a leap from thief," Ren said.

Team RPRY weren't the only ones that stopped by.

"Friend Jaune!" Penny exclaimed when Weiss opened the door after a sharp knock, rather late into the evening. "You've gone on a grand quest without me!"

"Hey Penny," Jaune waved as she marched into the room, Weiss stumbling out of the way.

"Hey!" Weiss said. "Watch where you're walking!"

Penny hurried over to Jaune's bed, eyes wide as she surveyed him.

"You appear to be in good health," she said happily.

"Just a little tired," he said in amusement as Weiss grumbled in the background at being ignored.

“Sen—sational,” she clapped her hands together. “You cannot perish before the campaign is complete, it would ruin the game.”

So she was still on her RPG kick.

“I don’t want to perish after the campaign either.”

She nodded quickly. “Yes. I, too, do not wish for you to perish at any moment. We have yet to party together.”

“...Am I the only one that’s lost?” Weiss asked aloud.

“I... sort of understand,” Blake said.

Nora grinned.

“She wants to partner up with Jaune-Jaune,” Nora said plainly. “And go on a quest together, am I right?”

Penny pointed at Nora dramatically. “Yes!”

“How was your mission, Penny? Er, quest,” Jaune corrected himself, smiling. “Did it go well?”

She nodded enthusiastically. "It went very well! It was a simple Escort quest, but those are important to have in all games even if players complain about them."

A few others stopped by. Team CFVY, for one, Coco giving him an update on her arm. It appeared to be in good health, only a little stiffness that was being worked on with physiotherapy. Team NDGO also swung by, much to Blake and Weiss' chagrin, though they didn't stay very long. Just enough to rile his girlfriends up.

Sun also came by with his partner, Neptune.

"You guys don't do things by halves, do you?" Sun asked, chuckling. "They were already talking about you because of those tabloids, but now it's all White Fang this, White Fang that."

"It's pretty damn cool," Neptune said. "They're a big problem back home, so it was good to see."

"See? I told you these guys are awesome," Sun grinned. "Beacon rocks."

"We should go out some time," Neptune said. Weiss' eyes narrowed, thinking he was trying his luck with her but he was addressing all of them.

"We should," Nora agreed, grinning evilly. "Weiss would love to show you around."

That caused a fight after Sun and Neptune left, Weiss laying into Nora while his partner tried and failed to contain her amusement.

“You shouldn’t give people the wrong idea!” Weiss scolded.

“What idea? I was just telling them how helpful you are,” Nora said slyly. “What are you thinking about?”

“I know what you were implying, I’m not stupid!” Weiss snapped.

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about. Is it something naughty?”

Weiss tried to smother Nora with a pillow after that which garnered some cheering on Blake’s behalf.

“Help! Help! Jaune, I’m being attacked by a feral heiress!” Nora shouted dramatically, easily holding Weiss off with her superior strength. Weiss hissed through her teeth as she tried to force the pillow down over Nora’s face but no matter how hard she pushed, she couldn’t overpower her. “She’s lost her mind!”

“I’ll show you feral,” Weiss growled, pinching Nora’s side and causing her to thrash.

“You’re playing dirt—.” Nora managed to get out before Weiss successfully smothered her, her ploy working. “Mmmnnggghl~!”

“Don’t hold it over her face too long,” Jaune said as Nora bucked wildly, attempting to throw Weiss off. “She might suffocate.”

“That’s the plan,” Weiss said darkly before Nora returned fire with a pinch of her own, clamping down on Weiss’ left buttocks. She yelped loudly and was thrown off the bed, and onto the floor with a thump.

“That’s what you get,” Nora gasped, tossing the pillow aside.

“You pinched my butt!” Weiss said, offended.

“I hope it bruises,” Nora said nastily, grinning. “It’s the only part where you have any meat.”

Weiss scowled furiously, taking it the wrong way. “My chest has plenty!”

Nora blinked. “What?”

Weiss chose that moment to lunge, and they spent the next twenty minutes wrestling. It was a bad move on her part, Nora effortlessly manhandling her, but Jaune would give it to Weiss; she never gave up, and struggled with everything she had.

“Enjoying yourself?” Blake teased.

Jaune grinned. “A little bit.”

Watching two of his girlfriends wrestle on the bed was very entertaining, for more reasons than one.

Their final visitor was Emerald.

“You guys are okay, right? All the stories that have been going around are pretty crazy,” she said, looking them over. It was the final day of their rest, and Jaune was feeling more like himself. “The White Fang are bad news back home, and... was there really a Grimm as big as Beacon tower?”

“It wasn’t that big,” Jaune corrected. “Though it was bigger than some of the smaller buildings in Vale.”

“It was also wriggling and weird,” Nora pulled a face. “And it made awful sounds. I don’t recommend.”

“You guys must be pretty strong, huh?” she asked in awe. “Looks like we’re going to have it pretty rough in the tournament.”

“We didn’t do it alone,” Blake said. “Team CFVY were with us, as well as Professor Peach.”

“Even so – damn, we just did some simple shit,” Emerald looked at them in admiration. “How’d you even end up in that situation in the first place? Was it some top secret mission or something?”

“Nothing like that,” Weiss dismissed. “Our original mission was to discover and retrieve stolen goods. The White Fang just happened to be the perpetrators, and everything snowballed from there. You could say we happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

“Or the wrong place at the right time,” Nora twisted it around.

“So it was just luck?” Emerald asked, understanding.

Jaune nodded. “In a manner of speaking. We had an idea that they must be up to no good. No one is operating in such a dangerous area, stealing cattle, for no reason. We just weren’t expecting the scope of what they were doing to be so... well, what it was.”

“It was a good thing you were there, then,” Emerald smiled. “Some of the students were talking about a heist you guys stopped earlier in the year. Sounds like you’ve got a knack of stopping the White Fang.”

“Hopefully they’ll think twice before coming back to Vale,” Weiss sniffed. “I think we’ve had enough of their antics.”

Their first class back was Survival and Navigation, giving them a chance to catch up with Professor Peach. She looked like her usual cheery self, smiling at them warmly as they arrived for class.

“Team JBWN,” she said, nodding to each of them. “How are we feeling?”

“Great,” Nora chirped, flexing her bicep. “Ready for action.”

Peach chuckled lightly, a pretty sound. “Excellent.”



“And how are you feeling, Professor?” Jaune asked. “We were told that you are the one that got us out of there.”

“With your help, Mr. Arc,” she said seriously. “Your semblance allowed me to teleport us to a better location after the initial stages of the collapse, but it was a little too much strain. I required rest, but as you can see, I am in good health.”

“We’re pleased to see it,” Weiss dipped into a curtsy. “Thank you for your hard work.”

“Yeah, Professor – you were so cool, you’re the best,” Nora beamed. “Thanks for getting us outta there.”

Peach gave them a fond look. “You’re welcome.”

They were given permission to take things easy in class, so they mostly just wandered around the forest while everyone else was set to the task of finding specific flora that only appeared in the latter stages of Winter and early Spring. Some were edible, while others were used in treatment.

Most of their classes were like that, even Professor Goodwitch allowing them a pass, given leave to just sit and observe.

Something interesting happened during Combat Class, though.

Pyrrha was pitted against not just a single opponent, but several. Team CRDL had the unlucky distinction of being dismantled in front of the students of all four schools, though Jaune noticed that Cardin had gone back to withholding his semblance. Now that the competitors from the

other schools had arrived, he probably sought to keep his trump card a secret and hoped that no one from Beacon would spill the beans.

Even with it, though, she'd have picked them apart. It just meant it happened that much quicker, Pyrrha dominating from start to finish, flowing between their attacks and countering with brutal precision.

As interesting as that was, what happened next was what caught everyone's attention.

"Can I fight her?"

The voice came in the silence of Pyrrha's victory, Professor Goodwitch having just declared her the winner. Whispers broke out as everyone craned their necks to see who had spoken up, and Jaune quickly found them. It was a familiar face, his hand risen in the air.

Mercury – Emerald's partner.

Professor Goodwitch gave him a severe look. "Ms. Nikos has just completed a bout. Next time, you may challenge her at the beginning of class."

"Professor," Pyrrha spoke up, and Jaune knew immediately from her tone what she was going to do. "It's okay. I'd like to accept the challenge."

For a second, he thought she might deny her request, but in the end, Pyrrha Nikos was her prized pupil. She had leeway that others did not.

"If you are sure?" Goodwitch pressed.

She nodded. "I am."

Goodwitch turned back to Mercury. "Mr. Black, yes? Come down."

He rose with an undeniable swagger, making his way down into the arena. Jaune sat forward, suddenly eager for what was about to unfold. He hadn't seen much of the foreign students fight, and Mercury had volunteered himself after watching Pyrrha take out a whole team on her own. Cardin and his team carried themselves away, watching Mercury warily as he passed by them.

"Does he really think he can win?" Yang asked, watching closely. She appeared just as eager as Jaune was to see what happened next, shifting in her seat.

"He is confident," Ren observed, eyes narrowed.

"Or pretending to be," Weiss added.

He continued his calm stride until he stood across from Pyrrha, separated by no more than ten feet. Hands in his pockets, he smiled. It was not a warm smile, but a smile of challenge. Pyrrha's lips twitched, her blade idly twirling as her wrist rolled over effortlessly.

"The rules are simple. The fight ends when I say so, or when a participant's aura drops below thirty percent," Goodwitch said, loud and clear. "Do you understand?"

Mercury nodded. "Sure."

"Yes," Pyrrha answered.

"Very well," Goodwitch raised her arm before bringing it down sharply. "Begin!"

Pyrrha exploded forward, instantly on the offensive, Miló cutting through the air in a crimson blur. Mercury responded instantly, kicking high, knocking her slash off course before chambering a kick with the same leg, lashing out at her face. Pyrrha ducked, shield up as he spun, his weight bearing leg lifting and kicking out.

His boot slammed into the face of Akoúg with a loud clang, followed by the sound of a firearm discharging. Jaune saw that the tops of his boots around the ankle bulged out slightly, and realized that they contained some sort of gun, a little like Yang's gauntlets. The recoil blasted him back and created space, the force halting Pyrrha's charge for a moment before she reengaged.

It was immediately clear that Mercury was immensely skilled.

Pyrrha slashed again before she lunged, a thrust missing his neck by inches. His feet blurred, two, three, four, five kicks in rapid succession, Pyrrha weaving in and out, tanking the last one on her shield but shoving forward. Mercury hopped back effortlessly, maintaining balance before leaping forward with a powerful knee strike, Pyrrha twirling as it missed her and attacking his exposed back.

Mercury ducked, planting his hands and kicking back like a mule with both legs extended. A punishing attack, if it could land. Pyrrha dropped instantly and swept out with a leg, cutting his foundation out from under him. Mercury spun out of control, a grunt escaping him as he hit the floor before Pyrrha lashed out with another kick, taking him in the stomach. He rolled across the stage before flipping up, dodging frantically as Pyrrha was upon him in a hail of steel.

Jaune watched his movements closely, and in particular, his footwork. He looked like he was dancing, stepping back, to the side, feet never crossing over without purpose, Mercury spinning to avoid a thrust and countered with a brutal sidekick. Pyrrha shifted her shield between them and tanked the blow, a wall of muscle and metal, Mercury forced to back off.

He moved gracefully, even when Pyrrha applied pressure. Akoúo hummed as she slashed at him with the edge of her shield, leaping over his own attempt at sweeping her legs and coming down with an overhead strike. He rolled back and then pulled his knees to his chest before extending his legs sharply, his weapons firing at her head. Pyrrha bent back to avoid it and had to hastily back off as he went on the offensive.

A flurry of precise, powerful kicks rained down on her, not allowing Pyrrha to regain her balance. Mercury pressed on, flowing into each new attack, giving her zero openings to counter, until—there!

Jaune saw it, at the same time Pyrrha did.

Mercury took his eyes off her for only half a second, executing a spinning back kick, but it was enough. Pyrrha dropped to a knee and then spun, another sweep, taking out his leg. The force instantly robbed him of stability, his leg whipped out from under him. He flipped over, suspended, Pyrrha rising with a powerful uppercut that slammed into his chest.

He flew.

Miraculously, he landed on his feet, though Jaune saw the pained grimace he sported as he gasped for breath. Pyrrha reset her stance, this time more wary, the flat of her blade resting atop her shield.

“Target her left side,” someone shouted, a male’s voice, the crowd having been holding their breath since the beginning. It cut through the tension and the brief silence, Pyrrha’s head whipping around in shock, eyes wide.

It was so unlike her to lose focus in a fight that Jaune almost missed the chance to warn her.

“Move!” he shouted, as Mercury vaulted towards her.

Her eyes sharpened as she spun, her shield braced as Mercury launched himself at her, a flying kick transitioning into a spinning back kick, the force of the two kicks driving her back. He followed it up with a front kick, and then a sweep at her legs, Pyrrha managing to avoid it at the last moment. He wasn’t done, though, attempting that mule kick a second time, but when she tried to counter it like last time, he lifted his hands off the floor.

Her sweep missed, Mercury suspended upside down. His knee pistoned down from above, striking at her crown, and for the briefest of moments, Jaune was sure she was going to be hit.

His pants grazed her forehead, kissing her skin, and then her shield slammed into his face, the edge taking him across the bridge of his nose. Mercury shouted in pain as he was blasted across the stage, tumbling wildly before only just managing to stay within the ring, a hand clutching his face.

Pyrrha hastily stood and reset her stance, blade once more resting atop her shield.

“That’s enough. I surrender.”

There was a beat of silence, as if everyone was unsure of what they’d just heard. Professor Goodwitch blinked.

“Pardon?”

“I surrender,” Mercury repeated, rubbing his nose. “She’s too good.”

The students remained suspended in shock, Professor Goodwitch staring at him in disbelief. Gathering herself, she raised her hand towards Pyrrha.

“Winner – Pyrrha Nikos.”

The applause was muted, everyone disappointed that such an exciting match was abruptly cut off. Pyrrha remained tense, watching, waiting, and it was clear that she wasn’t pleased by the result.

“Next time, Mr. Black – if you are going to challenge someone, make sure you are willing to follow through to the end,” Goodwitch said, annoyed.

He nodded, contrite. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Very well – that will be all for today,” Goodwitch announced, checking the time. “Class dismissed.”

Pyrrha watched Mercury as he left the stage before swinging around to scan the audience. Her eyes moved frantically before pausing, and he saw that same expression he saw only once before. Dread, and fear.

Jaune instantly stood, and it alerted all his friends.

“Jaune?” Blake asked, worried. “What’s wrong?”

He scanned the crowd of students, searching.

“What is it?” Ruby asked, standing. “Jaune?”

He couldn’t see anything but a sea of heads as everyone started standing up, leaving their seats. Growing impatient, he rushed down towards the arena and vaulted over the railing, landing on the stage.

“Pyrrha,” he said, quickly approaching her. She didn’t hear him. “Pyrrha!”

Her eyes met his.

“J-Jaune?”

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I...”



“That was him, wasn’t it?”

She knew what he was talking about. Her jaw tensed, the hand wrapped around the hilt of her sword tightening.

“It was,” she sighed, voice troubled.

“Point him out to me.”

“Jaune...”

“Is he still here?”

Her eyes left him and darted to the crowd, Jaune turning to follow her gaze. It didn’t take Jaune long to spot him.

How did he know it was him?

Because he was staring right at them.

It was as Pyrrha described him. He was tall with short, tussled blond hair, dressed in the uniform of Haven Academy. Handsome with a strong jaw, clean shaven, he didn’t look away when he

noticed Jaune looking back. Quite the opposite. He raised a hand, waving, and Jaune felt his jaw tighten at the clear provocation.

Jaune took a step forward, only to be instantly halted as Pyrrha grabbed his arm.

“Don’t,” she said sharply.

He froze, eyes never leaving him. At this distance, he couldn’t be sure, but Jaune had a feeling that he was smiling. Lowering his hand, he turned and left with the rest of the students, filing out.

“Jaune, don’t,” she said again as his arm tensed. “It isn’t worth it.”

Jaune tracked him until he vanished out the door, letting out a harsh breath.

“What’s his name?”

“It doesn’t matter,” she dismissed.

Jaune turned to face her. “Please. I’d like to know.”

Emerald met blue, her brow furrowing.

“Jaune, really—,” she cut herself off, seeing something in his expression. “Zarin. His name is Zarin.”

Jaune nodded, facing her fully and placing a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he repeated his earlier question.

“I’m okay,” she said softly. “I was just surprised, that’s all... I wasn’t expecting it.”

“It isn’t like you to lose focus during a fight.”

Her smile was weak. “Yes. It could mean the difference between victory or defeat... life or death. It was just...” she paused, thinking for a moment. “When I was younger, I had trouble lifting my shield. It took me some time to grow accustomed to the weight, and for my muscles to develop enough to comfortably wield it. My shoulder would grow tired during prolonged engagements, and my arm would dip. This was before I’d discovered my semblance, before people believed I was unbeatable. He’d jokingly say if I didn’t get stronger, people would just target my left side.”

She sighed.

“It isn’t something I’ve heard in a very long time. Only someone that went to Sanctum with me would know it.”

“He was trying to rattle you.”

“Well – it worked,” she sounded annoyed. “How pathetic.”

“Don’t.”

She blinked.

“Don’t put this on yourself. He’s the pathetic one.”

“Jaune...”

“You know I’m right. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of,” he said firmly, squeezing her shoulder. “Nothing.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

“It should. You were amazing. You are amazing.”

Her mouth curled into a more genuine smile. “Careful. You shouldn’t say things like that to a girl. She might take it the wrong way.”

“I’m only telling the truth.”

Any of the stress she'd carried from the unexpected call out was gone, her features smoothing out.

"Mercury was a strong opponent," she said, changing the topic of conversation. Jaune let her. "I'm disappointed that he gave up so easily. He still had more to offer."

"He might have just been testing you," Jaune reasoned. "Scout you out a little before the tournament begins."

"He's fast, and very skilled," Pyrrha always got excited when she found someone interesting to fight. That was something he'd learned from training with her. Much like Ruby was obsessed with weapons, Pyrrha was constantly searching for worthy opponents to cross swords with. Nothing excited her more. "I had to use my semblance at the end. He took advantage of the distraction well."

Jaune nodded. "He had a unique fighting style. He only used kicks."

"I've fought specialized fighters before. They tend to over rely on their strengths, and their weaknesses are easy to exploit. He felt very aware of his weaknesses, though. He'll be a difficult opponent to defeat."

"That makes you happy, doesn't it?"

She laughed softly. "It does. Does that make me weird?"

"Maybe. But being weird is fine."

“You’re meant to say it doesn’t,” she nudged him playfully. “Don’t just agree with me.”

He shrugged. “Hey, if the shoe fits...”

She pouted and nudged him again.

“If you two are done flirting...” Nora said from behind them, causing them both to jump. She had an amused smirk on her face. “We’re going to be late for our next class.”

“W-We weren’t flirting,” Pyrrha denied instantly, flushing.

Nora arched an eyebrow. “Oh? My mistake, then.”

She was teasing her, but Pyrrha was too mortified to see it.

“Ah, well, I need to... get changed,” she said lamely, waving her weapons around before quickly stalking off.

Nora giggled.

“She’s so cute.”

Pyrrha didn't want him to worry but he couldn't help it. This guy – Zarin. Jaune had a feeling that he wasn't just going to sit back and compete in the tournament, and not cause any problems. The fact that he felt the need to yell out like he did, and knowing their past...

He didn't know everything, but he knew enough. This guy was bad news, and if he tried messing with her, tried getting into her head... it didn't matter what the reason was. It didn't matter if it was simply some tactic to throw her off her game for the Vytal Festival, or something more personal, vindictive and bitter, Jaune wasn't going to just allow it to happen.

Pyrrha was his friend.

If he could shield her in any way, he would do it. Just like he knew that if any of them ever needed such help, Pyrrha would be there in a heartbeat.

He hoped he was just overreacting.