

If there was any belief that their first day of classes may be a little relaxed, slowly easing them back into the swing of things, it was quickly corrected during their first class. After breakfast, they gathered outside by the Emerald Forest where Professor Peach was waiting for them.

No longer in her usual sundress, she was clad in a pair of black thermal tights that clung to her shapely legs and wide hips like a second skin, her upper body shielded by a woollen poncho. In fact, it appeared that beneath the poncho was a body suit, and Cardin didn't even try to hide his whistle of appreciation.

Lucky for him, Professor Peach didn't seem to hear it – or, at the very least, did not understand the significance of it. Resting beside her was her massive polearm, buried in the ground blade first like the first time they'd met her.

"Gather around," she called, her beautiful face somehow even greater in the cold of winter.

The snowing had stopped, but the ground was still covered in a thick carpet of white. The Emerald Forest was not so emerald right now, the branches laden with snow so thick it appeared that the trees might topple at any moment. Jaune peered out and saw mist clinging to the forest, a thick fog, and it made it appear eerie, as if the Grimm weren't enough.

"Today, you will be hunting Grimm," he said with a smile, eyes crinkling. "With you students away, their numbers have swelled. All it takes is a month. You will move in pairs, and just to make this interesting, you won't be with a member of your own team."

Thankfully, Jaune ended up being paired with Pyrrha.

Unfortunately, Weiss and Blake were paired with Russel Thrush and Dove Bronzewing respectively. The look on Weiss' face could curdle milk, while Blake's eyes burned hot enough

to melt the snow they stood on. Russel and Dove didn't look very happy about the situation, either, faces fixed with scowls.

He wasn't sure who he pitied more.

The rest of the pairings weren't anything of note, other than Ruby being teamed with Gray Wood. Gray watched Ruby warily as she bounced around in excitement, no doubt happy for a chance to unleash Crescent Rose.

"Well, partner," Pyrrha grinned, her green eyes sparkling with amusement as she saw Weiss and Blake march off with their temporary partners as if they were walking to the gallows. "How about it?"

Jaune grinned back. "Lead the way."

The snow wasn't as deep inside the forest, the trees having caught the bulk of it. Whatever made it through was no more than a few inches, and in some areas, had melted and made the ground muddy, or turned to ice. Pyrrha was dressed in her usual outfit, the faint glow of her aura telling him that she was using it to keep herself warm. Jaune did the same, though he had taken to wearing an under shirt while the cold weather persisted.

"I'm happy to be back," Pyrrha said after a few minutes of silence, her ponytail swaying as she vaulted over a frosted log. Jaune followed her, his boots crunching atop the frozen bark before he leapt down. "I've missed this."

"Don't I know it," he said, breathing in the cold forest air. It made his lungs tingle, the crisp freshness reminded him of home. "Training is well and good, and I enjoyed our break, but my sword screams for action."

Pyrrha shot him a playful glance. "How about we make a game of this?"

"Oh?" he asked, intrigued.

"A little bit of friendly competition," she continued, and he couldn't help the flare of competitive fire that grew inside him, spotting her smirk. "If you are up for it, of course."

Jaune took the small jab in stride. "Always," he said. "Tell me more."

"Whoever slays the most Grimm wins," she set forth the terms. "If we kill one together, that counts for both of us. Simple, right?"

Jaune nodded. "Okay. I accept."

Her smile was filled with teeth.

Now all they had to do was find some Grimm.

Professor Peach had said that the Grimm's numbers had swelled in their absence, yet as they walked, ten minutes passed, then twenty, and yet they encountered no Grimm. The other pairs weren't so unlucky, the distant sound of fighting reaching them.

“That sounds like Crescent Rose,” Jaune said after a familiar echoing crack reached them. “Sounds like Ruby is having fun.”

“Though not us,” Pyrrha pouted, peering around. “Where are they?”

Their coming was heralded by the sound of snapping branches.

Jaune moved before he even saw them, sword singing from its sheath as he darted to the left. A large black form appeared between two trees, a familiar roar filling the air.

An Ursa.

Crocea Mors flashed, carving through thick black hide. Crimson blood sprayed across the trunks of the nearby trees, the Grimm reeling as it gurgled, throat torn open in a wide, gaping smile. Another Ursa appeared, coming from the right, and with a pivot, he buried his blade in its side, wrenching it free with a twist. A third, a fourth, a fifth, three at once converging on him. Claws sought his face, but they were too slow, Jaune darting low, rolling, taking their legs out with deft cuts.

Two of them stumbled, collapsing as their tendons were cut. The last attempted to crush him, rushing forward with a bellow, only for Jaune to take its head. He finished off the other two, sword punching through the back of their necks, and he turned to face his partner who watched him with glittering eyes.

He blinked.

As the Ursa around him smoked and began to disintegrate, the snow around Pyrrha was pristine. Untouched. She hadn’t moved a muscle.

He frowned. "I thought we were competing?"

Her smile was taunting. "I thought I'd give you a handicap."

At first, he wasn't sure he heard her right but there was no mistaking her expression. Jaune gave a sharp bark of laughter.

She was trying to rile him up.

"Is that right?" he said. "Awfully cocky of you."

"Confidence does come across as cockiness to many, I suppose," she teased.

Oh, she knew how to push his buttons.

"You'll regret that," he promised. "Five for me."

It didn't take them long to find more Grimm. They'd been drawn in by the scuffle, and this time, Pyrrha blurred as her sword sang. Jaune joined her, the pair cutting through a pack of Beowolves, the creatures of darkness snarling with malicious crimson eyes, drooling at the prospect of their flesh.

“Four,” Pyrrha said cheerfully, skewering one in the eye before ripping her blade free, spinning, and taking another in the throat as it lunged. “Five~! I’m catching up~!”

“Eight,” Jaune counted back, Crocea Mors opening the belly of one, and then finding the chest of another. “Nine,” he said as it convulsed on the end of his sword, his boot rising to kick it off. Gunfire echoed in his ear as a bullet took out one that attempted to sneak up behind him without success, Jaune having already turned to meet it.

“Six~!”

“That was mine,” Jaune complained, ducking. A shadow passed over him, the Beowolf landing and spinning – only to die, his sword buried in its neck. “Ten.”

“Nine~!”

“What?” Jaune glanced her way and saw three Grimm bleeding out, their hot blood gushing into the snow before flaking away in black smoke.

Pyrrha winked at him, and he felt his blood roar at the challenge.

She *definitely* knew how to press his buttons.

They continued onward, and encountered more Ursa. Jaune exploded into action first, blade taking their heads. A crimson blur whizzed by his head and punched into the open maw of one, a whirling shield disorientating another as Pyrrha darted in, tearing her javelin from the first and slashing the second in one smooth movement. She then cartwheeled, avoiding a lunging bite and kicking the Ursa in the jaw, forcing its mouth shut with enough force to crack its teeth.

Jaune flew in and impaled it through the chest before she could claim the kill, and he saw her green eyes burning with equal parts amusement and annoyance.

“You owed me one,” he said cheekily.

Her smile promised vengeance.

They cut a path through the forest, leaving black bodies in their wake. Nevermore swooped down at them, their fighting having disturbed their rest, a flock that numbered in the dozens. Jaune slashed through them as they attempted to peck out his eyes, a dance of blood and steel. Pyrrha moved opposite him, weapon mecha-shifting back into its sword form, her blade slicing them to ribbons.

Some of the larger Nevermore fired feathers at them, hard as steel and razor sharp. Jaune deflected them with deft parries and launched himself at them, kicking off a tree and vaulting into the air. One, two, three, his sword carved through them effortlessly, another five heading his way when they were taken down by five precise shots.

Jaune wasn't sure how long they fought. It seemed the further into the forest they went, the more Grimm surged forward to meet them. A Boarbatusk attempted to gore Pyrrha with its wicked tusks but she effortlessly flipped over it, using her hand to balance on its back before kicking off. It wheeled around to try again, only for her sword to whistle through the air and slam into its eye socket.

Watching her fight was always a treat, but seeing her sublime skill used to destroy Grimm was somehow even better. No matter how they came at her, she always seemed to know exactly where to move, how to move, and killed them with such little effort.

He was entranced.

The ground shifted, and Pyrrha paused for a moment before dashing up a tree. Not a moment too soon as a large serpentine head erupted from the ground, white scales gleaming as it surged forward with an open mouth.

Pyrrha kicked off the tree and spun, lashing out with her blade. It skimmed off its scales, the King Taijitu's fangs sinking deep into the trunk of the tree. Jaune watched as wood melted away from the potent, acidic venom, its long, powerful body curling up out of the ground and revealing its second head, this one with scales as black as the night.

Jaune moved, leaping off the ground and gathering his aura. His blade erupted in golden light, and with a swift slash, he unleashed it. A flash of gold preceded a horrible screech as the scales parted, his attack passing through the entire width of its body. Blood gushed as he sliced the Grimm in half, both ends flailing in rage and pain.

But it wasn't dead.

Both ends turned as one, eyes burning with a deep loathing. They lunged, and Jaune met the first one with a thrust, taking it in the eye. The second was set upon by Pyrrha, a crimson comet, her weapon sinking into its skull and slamming it into the ground.

They jerked in their death throes before becoming still.

"That counts as one each," Pyrrha said, ripping her sword free.

"I've got fifty-four," Jaune said. "What about you?"



"Fifty-seven."

Jaune's eyes narrowed.

He wanted to call her a liar, but he knew that Pyrrha was not that type of person. She would rather lose a hundred times over than cheat to win, just as he would. His pride would never allow it.

"We aren't finished yet," he said.

They searched the forest and slayed any and all Grimm they came across until their scrolls began ringing, signaling the end of their lesson.

"Hah! Seventy-two," he counted his last kill, pulling Crocea Mors from its skull. The Ursa slumped, already smoking.

Not a bad number to kill in an hour and a half. Sure, the number was boosted by the smaller, numerous Nevermore but still respectable. When he turned to face Pyrrha, she had an annoyed look on her face.

Jaune grinned.

"What's wrong?" he asked teasingly. When she remained silent, he added, "Cat got your tongue?"

“Seventy,” she muttered, and it was such a sweet sound.

Jaune stood taller.

“Well, well, well,” he channeled every ounce of annoying little brother he could muster, which wasn’t very difficult at all. He had loads of practice. “Looks like I pipped you at the finish line.”

Green eyes glared at him, her angular cheeks flushed from the cold and exertion, and she had never looked prettier.

“I still win,” she said.

Jaune laughed. “What? I don’t think so. I got two more kills.”

“I gave you a handicap, remember?” Pyrrha pressed. “Five kills. So I win by three.”

“That’s not how this works.”

“I let you win.”

“Hah! I should have known you’d be a sore loser.”

Pyrrha scowled. "I am not."

"Sounds like it to me."

Though it did ruffle his feathers a bit that she'd almost closed that gap.

Pyrrha pouted, her cheeks inflated. "Fine. You win. But know that this will be the last time."

Jaune snickered. "Next time, I'll give you the handicap."

Oh yeah, he was definitely going to regret that one if the look on her face was anything to go by. Still, she had been the one to start it.

In their venture to one up one another, they'd traveled quite the distance. It took them some time to find their bearings and return to Beacon, almost making them late for their next class. Professor Peach simply waved them off with an amused smirk when they returned, her next class already gathering. They had to run through the halls to make it, and were the only two that remained in their combat attire for Grimm Studies. Everyone else had changed into their uniforms.

"Where have you two been?" Weiss whispered as they found their seats, Professor Port entering a moment later.

"We went a little too far," Jaune said, only then realizing that he'd forgotten to pick up his things for class. "Uh... can I look at your notes later?"

She rolled her eyes. "I doubt there will be much note taking," she said, as Professor Port immediately launched into one of his wordy, ridiculous stories.

Some of his classmates were looking his way, whispering. More were looking at Pyrrha.

It wasn't difficult to figure out why. Grimm Studies was a double, taking them all the way to lunch. Jaune went back to his room to change into his uniform, Pyrrha doing the same, and met his friends in the dining hall. It was here that he spotted more than one tabloid open on each table he passed, people reading the silly articles that had been written about their time in Atlas.

Cardin waved one in his direction as he got close, his expression vindictive.

"Never pegged you for a two timer, Arc," he said, voice filled with relish. "Can't fault your tastes, though. They are fine pieces of ass."

It seemed that after his first semester humiliation, Cardin had finally rediscovered his voice. The break had given him time to recover his spine.

A pity. Things had been so quiet.

"Ignore him," Pyrrha said, not even giving Cardin the satisfaction of glancing his way.

Jaune didn't need to be told. He wouldn't give him the joy of a response, and from the corner of his eye, he saw Cardin scowl when his words were ignored completely.

"He really is unpleasant," Pyrrha sighed.

They filled their plates with food and joined the rest of their teams.

"Yang, would you put that thing away," Weiss snapped, glaring across the table where the blonde had one of those damnable magazines.

*"—were seen together experiencing the delights that Atlas had to offer. Pyrrha Nikos and Weiss Schnee seem content as of now to share their new boy toy, but how long will such an arrangement last?"* Yang read aloud with laughter in her voice. "Hey, here comes your boy toy now."

Ruby giggled, though she shot him an apologetic look. Jaune smiled back.

"Boy toy is here," he deadpanned, causing Yang to cackle.

"Jaune, don't encourage her," Weiss huffed. "These stories are absolute garbage. One moment they pit us against each other, and then the next, they have the gall to insinuate that we are both *sharing* him. Honestly."

Though they weren't completely off the mark, though, were they? Only it wasn't Pyrrha who Weiss was sharing him with. That wasn't something he could say out loud, though.

"Cardin is enjoying it a little too much," Blake muttered, amber eyes peering across the room sullenly. "I much preferred when he kept his mouth shut."

"It could never last forever," Pyrrha sighed.

"It could," Nora said cheerfully. "If I break his jaw into thousands of pieces."

"You'll be expelled," Ren deadpanned, taking her seriously.

"Not if I do it in Combat Class."

"Professor Goodwitch will put you into detention for life," Ren countered.

Nora pouted. "Renny, let a girl dream!"

"I apologize for this," Pyrrha said, bowing her head. "This is the unfortunate price of fame."

"Pyrrha, this isn't your fault, so pick your head up," Weiss ordered.

"I still feel responsible for it."

"If you are, then so am I," Weiss sniffed. "But we aren't. These ridiculous outlets are at fault. They peddle a low form of entertainment," Weiss directed this part at Yang.

“Oh, come on, you have to admit that this shit is cinema,” Yang waved the magazine back and forth. “Apparently Weiss has been inviting them both back to her scalding love den to seduce them both into being her paramours.”

Jaune blinked.

“Wait, they actually wrote that?” he asked.

Yang nodded, mirth in her eyes. “See what I mean? Hilarious! How can anyone take this shit seriously?”

“Unfortunately, many do,” Weiss said solemnly. “And while the opinions of strangers matter little to me, they can still have an impact in ways many do not see. I am lucky that my father does not put much stock in these rags of low repute, but Pyrrha may experience pushback from fans or even sponsors should they believe a scandal is afoot.”

At the worried looks from her friends, Pyrrha waved it away.

“Do not worry. I’ve built good relationships with the companies I work with. This isn’t the first time that publications have written stories about me, and it won’t be the last. It comes with the territory.”

“Sorry, Pyrrha. I didn’t mean to make light of it,” Yang apologized, contrite. “I mean, I did – but not in that way, you know? It’s just so ridiculous the sort of shit they write.”

“I know,” Pyrrha said warmly. “It deserves to be mocked.”

People always saw the glitz and glamour of being a public figure, but few thought about the downsides. Having newspapers and magazines write stories about your love life was not the sort of thing most would be comfortable with, and while Jaune was unconcerned for himself, he hated that Weiss and Pyrrha had been caught in this storm. For no reason other than being seen with him.

What would happen if people found out about his relationship with Nora, Blake and Weiss? Jaune knew if Jacques Schnee discovered it, there would be consequences, but even if their classmates discovered the truth, it would no doubt reach the ears of columnists. It could cause Weiss trouble, trouble he did not wish for her.

"It'll blow over quickly," Pyrrha said, perhaps in response to his darkening expression. "Stories like these die without fuel, and with us being here at Beacon, they have no way of fanning the flames. Reporters and photographers are not welcome, so I give it a week or two before it fades into the background."

"Then you just have to contend with shippers," Blake said.

Jaune looked her way. "Shippers?"

She spun her scroll around to show him her screen, and he stared, confused. Set within a love heart were Jaune's face, Pyrrha's and Weiss' with the caption 'Armored Angel'.

Weiss palmed her face in embarrassment.

"What is *that*?" Jaune asked, mortified.



“Apparently you’ve got fans,” Blake’s jaw wobbled. “Isn’t it cute?”

Nora laughed loudly, slapping the table hard enough for their plates to rattle.

Pyrrha’s smile was strained. “Online communities will create their own fuel, there is nothing to be done about them.”

Apparently people were discussing them on forums.

Jaune... wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

After lunch, they had History. Doctor Oobleck was in mid-semester form from the onset, buzzing around the room and reading passages from their textbook. Having covered the majority of the Great War and the Faunus Rights Revolution, they were now discussing the storied history of each kingdom’s failed expansion expeditions.

The most famous was Mountain Glenn, and the closest to home.

“Beyond a few minor land acquisitions to the south, the Kingdom of Vale’s first major expansion attempt was Mountain Glenn. A city nestled in the shadow of Sanus’ second highest peak, it was to further Vale’s influence into the wilds beyond and establish a safe haven outside of the Cradle of Life, the valley in which Vale finds itself situated,” Oobleck lectured, tugging at his tie to loosen it. Unlike earlier, his words had slowed, and were delivered in a measured fashion. “Using a series of underground tunnels, a vast subterranean railway network was established. It allowed for the builders to avoid Grimm infested territory entirely, and erect vast defensive structures before work on the city commenced. Lacking the natural barriers that Vale owes its protection, billions in lien was funneled into one of the largest engineering projects attempted by

man. A vast wall stretching miles, fortified by bunkers and the latest in weapons technology. Once complete, Vale boasted that the new city would be impenetrable.”

But that was not the case, as they all well knew. Even Jaune knew of the ill fated city. He doubted that many on Remnant did not.

“The city was completed in record time, and the fertile soil was quickly put to use. Citizens used the same underground railway network to travel to the newly founded city, and for a time, Mountain Glenn thrived. Immigration from Vacuo, Mantle, Atlas and Mistral commenced, which quickly saw the population swell. It was a reminder of mankind’s determination and ingenuity, a declaration to all that Remnant belongs to her people, not the Grimm.”

Oobleck paused.

His voice grew sombre, unlike his usual self. “As the population increased, Grimm attacks followed. An expected outcome. At first, these attacks were easily manageable. For over a year, the city held comfortably. For all, Mountain Glenn was a success.”

He stopped pacing, turning towards them, facing them head on. Jaune noticed the tightness around his mouth, and around his eyes.

“But the attacks did not stop. They continued, and grew, a never ending tide. What was once manageable started to become a concern, and Huntsmen from Vale were deployed. Despite their best efforts, however – the attacks increased. Exponentially. When picking the location of this new settlement, Vale’s council was very selective. Extensive tests and reports were conducted. First was fertility of soil and abundance of minerals. Second was ease of access from the City of Vale. Third was the Grimm population. By all accounts, while it was an active area, it was nothing unusual. Dangerous, but again – manageable.”

Jaune felt the weight of the words to come.

“But the Grimm kept coming, in numbers never seen before. Not even during the Great War did Grimm muster in these types of numbers in any one single location. We lost much land in the War, forever claimed by the Grimm, but that was all across the globe. In this one location, a tide of darkness fell upon Mountain Glenn. A never ending wave that crashed upon the shores of the newly found city, and for a time, the defences held. Hundreds of thousands of Grimm,” he emphasised. “It was a testament to the vast defences that had been erected to protect the city that it lasted as long as it did. But we could not halt them forever. Slowly but surely, our perimeter was breached, and the city was besieged.”

You could hear a pin drop in their classroom.

“Tens of thousands lost their lives, but many managed to retreat beneath the surface. Sealing the way, they fortified the massive cavern underneath the lost city and attempted to rebuild,” Oobleck shook his head sadly. “Vale sent reinforcements, and again, for a time, the people were safe. There were talks of attempting to reclaim the lost city, and plans were drawn up. Extensive plans, and with the aid of the other kingdoms. But once again, disaster struck. In their quest to expand the cavern, they breached a den of subterranean Grimm. It spelled disaster for the survivors, and in the end, the council had no choice but to seal the tunnels so Vale remained safe. All those trapped... perished.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, as if in remembrance. With a start, Jaune realized that is exactly what was happening. Oobleck had been there – or, at the very least, had been involved in some aspect of what transpired.

“It is now the largest tomb in the world,” he said quietly, yet everyone hung on his words. “Hundreds of thousands of people forever call Mountain Glenn their home in death, and Vale has attempted no further expansions.”

For a long moment, there was silence.

Jaune felt a long way away from the jubilation of their first class of the day, competing against Pyrrha to see how many Grimm they could slay. He almost felt ashamed of it now, even though he knew he shouldn't.

Oobleck walked over to his desk, gathering some papers.

"Mountain Glenn is the single largest loss of life that humanity has ever experienced in one attack," he said. "And even then, only the Great War surpasses it in terms of total losses. But it is not the only time that a kingdom vying to expand their borders and influence has resulted in disaster. Indeed, there have been times when people have sought to found new states away from the control of the kingdoms, but all have met with the same result."

He went on to speak of several times Mistral had tried to widen their city limits without success, various villages and towns swallowed shortly after construction, and even times when wealthy groups had tried to create independent states. Nora and Ren seemed particularly tense at the mention of these villages, and Jaune wondered if the village Nora told him about was one such expansion attempt.

The mood was subdued at the end of class.