

The upcoming dance was the hottest topic at Beacon but it wasn't for a couple of weeks yet. That didn't stop the sudden rush to snag a date, and Jaune saw more than a few confessions – and rejections – in the coming days. Even on the weekends, it wasn't unusual to see a gaggle of girls giggling away as one of their friends was approached by a hopeful suitor, the guy looking like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders as he popped that all important question.

Will you go to the dance with me?

Jaune didn't have to worry about that. No. He had different problems.

"You'll be taking all three of us," Nora declared that very day, when the dance had been first announced.

"Won't that be a little..." he struggled to find the correct words. "People will talk, and with how things have been with the Weiss and Pyrrha stuff in the tabloids..."

Blake smiled. "It'll be okay, Jaune. We won't be going together officially, it'll be more like a group of friends going together. Since we're all on the same team, we can just tell people we decided to attend as one."

He supposed that made sense. It wasn't that he was ashamed of this weird relationship he found himself in, he would just rather not have everyone gossiping about them. Especially Weiss, whose position at Beacon was reliant on her father. At the very least, the stories published in those magazines hadn't caused him to pull her out. So a few students gossiping wouldn't do it if that didn't.

"That means you can dance with all of us and no one will blink twice," Weiss looked very pleased with herself. "I can attest that Jaune is a very good dancer."

“Oh, can you?” Blake grumbled, ears twitching.

“I call shotgun,” Nora instantly shouted, hand raised. “I get first dance!”

Weiss looked outraged. “What? No!”

Nora adopted a very smug expression. “What do you mean no? I’m his first girlfriend, and I’m his partner. Fate has decided that I am his first in everything. First to flash him my panties, first to have sex with him—,”

“I kissed him first,” Blake reminded her.

“Thieving cat,” Nora instantly changed tracks, going on the offensive. “Black cats are bad luck, I should have known you’d steal my man.”

“W-What? That isn’t what happened!”

“She jumped the line. Penalty! Blake deserves the death penalty! She knew I had already staked my claim. Treason!”

“That – no, Nora,” Blake looked panicked. “That isn’t it at all!”

Weiss shook her head, unable to keep the amused grin off her face. "I agree. No one likes a person who cuts in line."

"What line?" Blake exploded. "There wasn't any line! Nora was just too slow!"

Nora gaped. "How dare you? I was just waiting until the right moment presented itself. Jaune had already ruined me for all other men by seeing my underwear. I didn't want to come across as some needy girl who just required comfort."

"Isn't that what happened anyway!" Blake said angrily. "You two had comfort sex in a cave!"

"Are you belittling our harrowing experience?" Nora placed a hand over her heart, expression wounded. "Are these your true thoughts? I'm hurt, Blake."

"Blake, how could you?" Weiss struggled to maintain a straight face. "You should apologize immediately."

Jaune tried not to laugh. Nora and Weiss were just winding Blake up, and she fell for it, hook, line and sinker. Whenever those two aligned on something, they could be very effective.

"Okay, okay, that's enough," he said when it looked like Blake was about to blow a gasket. "Blake, they're just teasing."

She scowled at them as they laughed.

"I hate you both."

That only made them laugh harder.

"Yang will want a dance, as well," Nora said casually, and that stopped Weiss' laughter in its tracks.

The three girls shared a look.

"I *suppose* this was going to be inevitable," Weiss sniffed, shooting Jaune an arrogant look. "You! Stop seducing girls."

Jaune held up his hands. "I don't!"

Blake arched an eyebrow. "Jaune, you most certainly do."

"I didn't mean to," he amended.

Nora giggled. "That's even worse. We can't even be mad at you. Not that I would be mad. I don't mind if you want to get frisky with Yang."

Trust Nora to just say it outright. Not that her feelings on the subject had been hidden. Her and Blake had been very supportive of the idea. Weiss was a little resistant, but not completely opposed. She had come to terms with sharing him.

"We've been talking a lot," Blake said, grinning. "She is down bad, Jaune. Yang is completely smitten with you."

"Ruby and Pyrrha will also want a dance, so you might as well dance with all of us," Nora added slyly. "We'll just tell everyone that our teams are going together. You don't mind if we dance with Renny, right?"

"No, of course not," he said at once. "Nora, he's your best friend."

She smiled shyly. "Thank you."

So that ended up being the plan. He would take Nora, Blake and Weiss, attending as a team, and he would dance with them and Yang, Ruby and Pyrrha if they wanted to. When Team RPRY was told their plans, they'd been all for it.

"I like it," Pyrrha said, smiling. "We can all go together."

"Unless you have a hot date planned, Ren," Yang said quickly.

He shook his head. "No, I have no such plans."

Ruby bounced up and down. "Sweet! Now I just need to learn to walk in lady stilts, urgh~!"

But before the dance, their first mission was to be held.

The morning of, all the students gathered once again in the amphitheater. All of the first year squads were in attendance from all four Huntsman academies, the chatter deafening as they congregated around the holo-screens that had been erected. On the screens were lists of requests, numbering in the dozens, and they could pick their own mission at their leisure.

Some of the missions required a chaperone, and were listed as such. Those were mainly the Search and Destroy missions held in high density Grimm population areas. Either a Professor from Beacon would accompany them, or a licenced Huntsman from Vale. Those ones were the most popular, and Nora appeared excited at the thought of slaying Grimm, but Jaune had a different idea in mind.

“Aww, why that one?” she complained when he selected one tagged under ‘Investigation’. It did not require a chaperone. “That sounds boring!”

“I want to see how far we’ve come as a team,” Jaune explained, facing them. “It might not be dangerous, but this will give us a chance to complete a mission without help. Just us. As team leader... I want to see if I’ve been doing a good job.”

“You’ve been an amazing leader, Jaune,” Blake said. “You don’t have anything to prove.”

“Maybe – but even so. I think it’ll be good for us to do one without outside help. I know we’ve done some unofficial things,” he grinned ruefully, thinking about their infiltration of the White Fang rally. “But I’d like to see how we handle ourselves doing something like this.”

“I have no complaints,” Weiss said.

The mission was simple. Livestock had been going missing from a number of farms in the furthest reaches of the valley, and the evidence suggested that they were being stolen. Grimm did not tend to attack animals very often, and they certainly didn't cut wire fences. Bandits, most likely. So the farmers had banded together to put in a request.

It would take them out of the city for a number of days, it would challenge their investigating abilities, their tracking, and if they found those responsible, their ability to make an arrest. When he told Nora there would likely be *some* combat involved, she brightened up.

Jaune finished downloading the relevant data to his scroll and was about to leave when someone appeared by his side.

It was the silver haired boy from Haven that he'd spotted after the assembly.

"Yo," he greeted, nodding his head.

He was tall, only an inch shorter than Jaune at most. Handsome and lean, he stood with a casual air, hands tucked into his pockets as his eyes idly scanned over the mission board with disinterest.

"Hi," Jaune responded automatically.

"Mercury, where did you – oh," a voice called, and turning, Jaune saw a dark skinned girl with green hair approach. She was very beautiful, her nose slender, cheeks high and full – but it was her eyes that immediately captured his attention. They were red. "Don't just walk off without saying anything, jackass."

She also had a full figure, a healthy bust stretching the material of her olive green tube top. A strange white open chested vest helped to enhance her chest, giving her breasts lift while looping around her neck in a halter style. She wore white cropped pants with brown chaps, a three ring armband secured around her upper left arm, and a string of jade beads around her left wrist.

The way she moved was all hip, her narrow waist rolling as her wide hips sashayed side to side.

It was hard not to stare.

“You were taking too long,” the guy – Mercury – said without care, tilting his head back to look at her. “I thought I’d come see what they have on offer.”

The girl scoffed before meeting Jaune’s eyes.

“Hmm? And who might you be?”

“Jaune. Jaune Arc,” he said. “And you are?”

“Emerald. Emerald Sustrai,” she introduced herself, offering a hand. Jaune shook it. “This idiot is my partner. Mercury.”

Mercury rolled his eyes. “She’s a pain in the ass, but she ain’t lying.”

Weiss watched Emerald warily, expression pinched.

"I'm Nora," his partner leapt forward, taking Emerald's hand and pumping it up and down furiously. "This is Weiss and Blake," she jerked her head in their direction. "We're all on the same team."

"Hey," Emerald said, nodding at them in greeting.

Jaune glanced around but didn't see anyone else with them.

"Are you two here alone?" he asked.

"Our leader is busy right now, so she sent us ahead to pick out a mission," Emerald smiled. "And our other member... well, she isn't feeling too well. I think she ate something bad."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Blake said. "Food poisoning is never pretty."

"You can say that twice," Mercury pulled a face. "She's been glued to the toilet since we arrived, I didn't know a person could shit that much and still live."

"Would you shut the fuck up?" Emerald snapped, disgusted. "Have you not heard of too much information? Sorry about him," she bowed her head. "He was raised by animals in the wilderness. His brain hasn't fully developed yet."

"I know what that is like," Weiss said in sympathy.

"Why do I feel like I'm being roasted?" Nora asked, pouting.

"You guys are from Haven, right?" Jaune asked.

"Yep, that's right," Mercury replied, tapping away on the screen and selecting a mission. Jaune saw that it was an Observation mission within the city of Vale. Something about tailing a police officer. "It's my first time in Vale. I haven't seen much but I kinda like it here."

They made some more small talk before the pair received a call.

"It's our leader," Emerald said, giving them an apologetic look. "We should hang out some time."

"Sure," Jaune said. "Just let us know."

"She was nice," Blake deadpanned as the two departed.

"What's with all these girls approaching you?" Weiss asked, annoyed. "Is it your semblance? It's your semblance, isn't it?"

"Mercury was here first, she just sort of followed," Jaune defended himself. "And I don't think my semblance does that."

“Womanizer,” Weiss muttered under her breath. “Your semblance is a womanizer.”

Nora snickered.

Jaune ignored it.

“I wonder what Team RPRY picked,” Blake mused. Looking around, Jaune spotted them at one of the holo-screens nearby.

“Hey,” he greeted as he approached. “Pick anything good?”

Ruby beamed. “Search and Destroy!”

“Aww, see? They picked the fun one!” Nora groaned.

“You can join their team if you’d like,” Weiss needled.

Nora poked her tongue out.

“I don’t think so. You aren’t usurping me, we’ve already got one traitor.”

Blake scoffed.

“What did you select?” Ren asked, curious.

“An investigation mission,” Jaune replied. “Livestock are going missing, so we’ve been tasked to find them and stop whoever is doing it.”

Team RPRY’s mission was in the opposite direction, down along the coast. According to their brief, Grimm were on the move, a slow march bringing them much too close to several of the villages in the area. Extermination was the only solution.

“We’ll probably only be gone two days, tops,” Yang said. “Then we can relax while everyone else is still busting their asses. Win-win.”

As everyone chattered away, Jaune noticed that Pyrrha wasn’t taking part. In fact, she wasn’t even paying attention. Looking her way, he froze.

She looked like she’d seen a ghost. Her face was pale, bone white, eyes wide – and dare he say it, he saw fear in those eyes. Jaune followed where she was looking but didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.

Jaune had never seen her so rattled before.

“Pyrrha?” he asked quietly, moving towards her. He placed a hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

“W-What?” she jumped, startled at the unexpected contact, her head whipping around to face him. “Jaune?”

“Are you okay?” he asked in concern.

She swallowed, attempting to regain her composure.

“I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

Blake was glancing their way, no doubt hearing their conversation even though they were speaking softly. None of the others had picked up on anything wrong yet.

“You look upset,” he said bluntly, feeling a little bad when she flinched. “Sorry, I didn’t mean – I’m just worried, that’s all.”

Her expression wavered between forced calm and panic, so he squeezed her arm comfortingly.

“I’m here for you, whatever it is,” he said, their eyes meeting. “If you want to share. If not, that’s fine too. Just know that I have your back.”

He watched the panic leech out of her eyes, her features softening bit by bit. The tense line of her shoulders relaxed, a shaky breath escaping her.

“I – Jaune, I just...” she sighed, closing her eyes for a moment before opening them again. Transformed, she looked like her usual self, color returning to her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

She hesitated.

“I just... saw someone I know. I think,” she frowned. “I can’t be sure. It was only for a moment, but I’m pretty sure it was them.”

“Who?”

Jaune saw shame flash across her face. It was brief, only for an instant, quickly covered up.

“...The guy I told you about,” she whispered, eyes lowering. “My ex.”

“Oh,” he said. He tried to say something, anything – but for some reason, his tongue felt glued to the roof of his mouth. Or rather, he felt overwhelmed.

By anger.

It was sudden, his hands curling into fists. The disgust he’d felt for Jacques Schnee and the way he treated his daughter was mirrored by what he felt now for this person he’d never even seen with his own two eyes.

Jaune remembered what Pyrrha had told him. About why she’d been so wary of him when they’d first met. It had nothing to do with Jaune, and everything to do with this guy from her past

that had pressured her and used her. A guy who had only been interested in her growing fame and skill, viewing her as a conquest, a notch on his belt.

His eyes scanned the crowd of students again, searching. He had blond hair, Jaune knew. Tall, but not as built – those had been Pyrrha's words. Similar enough, but not the same. Though time had passed since then. Maybe he looked different now. But not so different that Pyrrha couldn't recognize him.

Pyrrha must have looked up at some point and had seen something in his expression because now it was her turn to place a hand on his arm, squeezing gently.

"Jaune, it's okay," she said, soothingly. "It's fine. I just... I wasn't expecting to see him here. Maybe I should have, he did graduate from Sanctum. I guess he joined Haven after..."

His jaw tightened. "I guess so."

He reluctantly abandoned his search, facing her. Her eyes bled gratitude, her smile soft. Her beauty disarmed him, and helped cool down much of the heat that simmered in his stomach. Not all of it, but most.

"You're angry," she said.

He didn't try to deny it. "I am."

"You're angry for me," she pressed.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Her emerald green eyes glittered.

“Thank you,” she said, heartfelt. “For being angry on my behalf.”

Jaune didn’t like being angry. It was not a feeling he enjoyed, even when it was justified. Angry at the Grimm, angry at Cardin, angry at Weiss’ father – and now this mystery guy that had treated this amazing girl with such disregard and contempt.

But witnessing the gratitude in Pyrrha’s eyes, the gentle twist of her lips, that half-smile she sometimes gave that was more true than any of the beaming looks she gave strangers who recognized her, or the dazzling smiles she deployed for the cameras...

It made him feel a lot better.

“Like I said – anytime, Pyrrha,” he returned her smile. “Anytime.”

Blake gave him a questioning look as they turned towards their friends, but he just shook his head subtly.

“We better get going,” he said, drawing their attention. “We’ll need to pack, the Bullhead leaves in a couple of hours.”

Ruby nodded. “Sure, we’ll see you guys off. Our Bullhead doesn’t leave until the morning.”

"Is everything okay?" Blake asked when they returned to their dorm.

"What do you mean?" Weiss asked, confused.

"It is," Jaune said. "Pyrrha just saw someone from her past that... well, she doesn't have fond memories of. I can't say more than that. It isn't my story to tell."

"Do I need to break some legs?" Nora asked eagerly. "Because I'll break some legs."

"You'll get expelled," Weiss deadpanned.

"...Not if I don't get caught."

The heiress shook her head. "Nora, I'm sorry to say but everyone will know it was you because you'd shout it from the rooftops."

Nora pouted. "I can be sneaky when I want to be. I can!" she doubled down at Weiss' doubtful look. "I can so! Anyway, I'll just make it look like an accident. During a match, for instance. If Pyrrha saw them here, that means they're from one of the other schools. Tell me who they are, Jaune-Jaune, I'll crush them."

"As satisfying as that would be," he said, and he was telling the truth. It would be extremely satisfying, even though such a thought was very unlike him. "I don't even know who it is. Like I said, it's Pyrrha's story to tell. Don't ask her about it."

"We won't," Blake said, nudging Nora in the ribs. "Right?"

"Fiine, I won't."

"Right, well – now that we've sorted that, how about we get our things in order?" Weiss straightened up, hands on hips. "As co-leader of this team—,"

"Here we go," Nora muttered.

Weiss ignored her. "—it is my duty to ensure that we pack appropriately, and carry only what is necessary for a mission of this type. How long did the mission brief state we had to complete it?"

"A week," Jaune said.

"Clothes for a week," she said. "Where will we be staying?"

"One of the farmers has offered us the use of a spare unit on their property," he quickly read off, checking on his scroll. "They probably have separate housing for their farm hands."

"Food?"

“School is providing rations, should we require it. They’ll probably provide us with food at the farm, as well,” he said, knowing from experience. There was no way they’d let them stay and not try to feed them, not if they were anything like his parents.

“Excellent. We’ll need water purification tablets, and our camping kits,” Weiss ticked off on her hands. “While this won’t be the same as our survival test, our investigation may take us away from the farm overnight. I will cover our Dust needs, so do not worry about that.”

When Weiss got on a roll, there was no stopping her.

“I think that is everything,” Weiss tapped her chin, thinking. “Jaune, can you think of anything else?”

“No, I think you’ve covered it all,” he said, amused. “Let’s get started.”

It didn’t take long to pack his backpack. A few spare pairs of pants, shirts, but most of all, underwear. His knife, water bottle, toiletries, and purification tablets. The rations they would pick up from the kitchens, and lastly, his camping kit.

The tents were big enough for two people, so Jaune and Blake chose to shoulder the burden, taking one each for the four of them. Sleeping bags were rolled up tight, and both the tent and sleeping bag was tied to the outside of the backpack. Two Dust stoves, a couple of pots, and some utensils.

“It looks like we’re all set,” Weiss said as she inspected all their bags. She then paused. “Nora, what is that?”

“Snacks,” Nora said proudly, showing off the small plastic bag filled with various types of candy. “I have enough room.”

Weiss’ lips pursed before she nodded.

Jaune and Blake shared a look and snickered.

“What are you two laughing at?” Weiss demanded haughtily. “I don’t like the sound of it, so stop.”

“Sure,” Blake giggled. “Stopping right now.”

“Hmph~!”

They stopped by the kitchen to pick up their rations, and then Jaune made a call to his work to let them know he wouldn’t be available that weekend. By the time they arrived at the landing pads, they only had half an hour to wait.

There were a couple of other teams from various academies loitering around, waiting for their own Bullheads. He’d done his best to put it out of his mind but he couldn’t help but look at them and wonder if the guy Pyrrha spoke of was among them.

Probably not. He couldn’t see anyone that fit the bill, though he did notice another blonde.

Arslan waited with a bored expression on her face, casually checking her taped fist. Reese stood beside her, chewing on gum and blowing large, pink bubbles until they popped. They saw him looking and waved, so he waved back.

"More girls," Weiss muttered.

"They're the team I met with Ruby," he defended. "I'm just being polite."

"Weiss is cute when she's jelly," Nora cooed.

"I am not *jelly*," the heiress huffed. "Just making a truthful observation."

The roar of engines signaled the approach of several Bullheads that pulled around before descending onto the landing pads. Crew members disembarked and began waving students on board. Jaune gestured for his team to go first, and then followed closely behind, showing his scroll and the mission briefing to the pilot.

"Welcome aboard," the pilot said. "Buckle up and I'll get you to your destination shortly."

"Thanks," Jaune said, securing his bag before buckling in.

After some pre-flight checks, they were airborne. The airship shook as they quickly gained altitude before they were zipping across the Vale skyline. In a matter of minutes, they cleared the great wall that protected the city and began crossing the fertile farmland surrounding Vale.

The further they got from the city, the more his mind focused. He felt a tinge of excitement for the coming mission, a chance for them to show what they were really made of. Nora might think it was a little boring but this was the sort of thing Jaune thought of when he dreamed of becoming a Huntsman. Maybe some would call it small, call it insignificant, but the little things mattered to him.

A small village under attack, be they by bandits or Grimm. Livestock being stolen, their livelihoods threatened. Farmers just trying to produce a product that ensured the Kingdoms could sustain themselves.

This was where he could help and make a difference. Jaune didn't want to save the world. At least, not in the way most people thought when thinking about that sort of thing. He just wanted to help people. Protect them.

That is what this mission was all about. Putting a stop to the thefts, and bringing those responsible to justice – before things could escalate, and get people killed. Because those farmers wouldn't just sit down and let it keep happening, but they were only simple folk. They didn't need to get tangled up with murders and rustlers.

That was their job as Huntsmen.