

History had never been Jaune's favorite subject. Compared to the more thrilling classes like Combat Class, Survival and Navigation, and even Grimm Studies, it struggled to excite the mind. But that wasn't the only reason it wasn't a favorite of his.

Much of modern history was very uncomfortable, and mostly dealt with one subject in particular.

The Faunus War.

They'd already gone over the broad strokes of the war. That it was the faunus who started it, attacking Mistral unprovoked. Their early triumphs against the easternmost kingdom, focusing on cutting off its supply lines, and occupying its outlying villages. The famine that resulted, many people losing their lives to hunger and sickness. Their advancement across the sea, and settling on Sanus land, taking many of Vale's outermost towns along the coast. The uprising in Vacuo and Mantle. The devastating defeat at Fort Castle, where General Lagune almost lost the war for humanity. And the turning of the tides, the coming of Atlas and the battle that ensured the destruction of the faunus army when two great kingdoms – once bitter enemies in The Great War – executed one of the greatest military campaigns in history, drawing the faunus in and fighting them on two fronts, crushing them in the process.

Some of these things, Jaune had already read extensively about. But Professor Brown, their History Professor, went much more in-depth than any of those books had. Disturbingly so, at times.

But now they were focusing on something else.

What came after the war.

Voluntary Servitude.

“—away their personal freedoms for a chance at a better life. No one would employ those that they could not trust. Faunus had shown, time and time again, that they were treacherous beasts, liable to stab humans in the back rather than coexist,” Professor Brown droned on in his dry, expressionless voice. He looked just as he sounded, dressed in an unremarkable brown suit that matched his equally unremarkable brown hair and eyes, his average face blank as he spoke to the class. “It ensured our protection, and ensured that faunus could contribute to the society they so nearly destroyed. Many industries function off the back of a powerful faunus labor force, such as Dust Mining, our large agriculture sector here in Vale, and manufacturing of heavy vehicles like cars, trains and airships.”

Jaune wrote everything down, feeling a little off put. He spoke of these things so dispassionately, without feelings – but Jaune found it difficult to not feel anything when discussing this topic.

Because this was the fate of Kali and Blake.

“They’ve been completely subjugated and integrated into modern society. Faunus are property – much like a pet dog or cat. An owner is responsible for their upkeep, and for any action they take. If their property attacks a human, the owner can be charged and heavily fined, their animal put down. If their pet attacks another pet, thus damaging another owner’s property, they can also be fined and depending on the severity, their pet may also be subject to death.”

Some of the other students showed their amusement as they took notes. Cardin Winchester in particular seemed gleeful, smirking as he whispered something to Russel Thrush, a friend of his. While most were not showing such open happiness at the subject matter, no one appeared upset.

This continued on for nearly an hour, Professor Brown going over the finer points of the legislation involved, and how the human kingdoms were now undergoing an era of peace that had rarely been seen in the history of the world. Lunch was next, and when the bell chimed, Jaune was glad to be rid of it.

But he wasn't rid of it.

Pyrrha joined him in the dining hall, and wherever Pyrrha went, Weiss was not far behind. Jaune smiled at her but all he received was a curt nod in return.

"A fascinating class," Weiss said as she set down her tray of food. Jaune had noticed that she ate very conservatively, a bowl of fruit and a small tub of yoghurt the extent of her meal. "All well known by me, of course. As heiress to the Schnee Dust Company, I was tutored extensively on all the legal issues involved in the ownership of thousands of faunus workers under our employ. Father often speaks about how good they are as workers. Suited for simple tasks that don't require much thinking."

Finding out Weiss was the heiress to the company had been a bit of a shock, especially when she'd mentioned she had an older sister and a younger brother. Usually the first born male inherited in cases like this but in the event that this wasn't the case, then the first born child would be first in line.

For some reason, it had skipped her older sister and landed on her shoulders. In Jaune's family, as the oldest male heir, it was he who would inherit the farm, so long as he was never disowned.

He didn't want to think about that possibility.

"Most of it was new to me," Pyrrha admitted. "Mainly the specifics around owning a faunus. We don't have one, you see. My mother wasn't comfortable with it."

Weiss frowned. "She isn't a sympathizer, is she? That would be awful."

Pyrrha shook her head. “No, nothing like that. My father – he died fighting in the war. She can’t stand the thought of one living in our home.”

Their friendship had been a little rocky in the beginning but a couple of weeks in, and Pyrrha and Weiss were fast becoming good friends. Jaune was glad because he really liked both of them. Weiss was... well, she was *Weiss*. She was so beautiful and talented, and good at everything she did. Jaune found it difficult to *not* admire her. She was as close to perfection as possible.

In fact, Pyrrha was all of those things as well – just, a little more low key despite her status as a famous athlete. Not as radiant in comparison to the Schnee heiress.

Their views about faunus, however – well, they were quite a bit different than his own.

“Jaune, does your family own faunus workers?” Pyrrha asked, interested.

He was afraid this would come up, sooner or later.

The way he treated Kali and Blake was very different than how many others treated their faunus, and Jaune knew he would be viewed as strange if they were to find out. Jaune didn’t want to be viewed as strange. He wanted to fit in and be accepted.

So he lied – or was about to, but Weiss beat him to the punch.

“The Arc family are a large supplier of food products for the Kingdom of Vale,” Weiss said primly. “They control large swaths of land to the north, and were once a prominent family in the court of the last King of Vale. Noble lineage, in fact.”

Jaune stared at her in surprise, and even Pyrrha appeared taken aback.

“When you introduced yourself, your name sounded familiar to me,” Weiss said smugly. “So I did a little investigating. I must say, I was impressed. Why you never told us sooner, I have no idea.”

Jaune shrugged awkwardly. “No one asked.”

Weiss made a little ‘hmph’ sound. “No one need ask, Jaune. You should always be upfront about your standing. You wouldn’t want the riff-raff to believe you are one of them.”

Jaune didn’t really care about that, but knowing that Weiss found something impressive about him made him feel... well, pretty good, actually. Even if he wished it was for something he could control and not just being an Arc. You couldn’t pick which family you were born into.

Despite his on-going issues with his mother, he was proud of his family and their lineage. So he wasn’t *too* disappointed.

“You grew up on a farm?” Pyrrha asked.

Jaune nodded. “Yeah. We mostly raise cattle and sheep, but we do some other stuff as well.”

“It is a large operation from my understanding,” Weiss continued. “So Jaune’s family likely has many faunus working the land.”

“Actually, all our workers are human.”

Weiss blinked, startled.

“What?”

“Yeah – our land is near a town called Hamersley, and all of our workers come from there.”

She looked entirely perplexed by what he’d just said, and it was the first time Jaune had seen Weiss taken so aback by something. He wasn’t used to seeing her anything but in complete control so it was nice to see her show genuine shock for once.

“Why in the world would you ever do that?” she finally asked. “The costs alone...”

“I mean, sure – if we used faunus labor, it would be free. Well, beyond the cost of purchasing them,” Jaune didn’t show how he felt about that last part. “But that would put dozens of families out of work, Weiss. We’re the biggest employer in the region, we’re as far out on the frontier as you can get. They’d have to move away to the city to find anything and the economy of the town would suffer.”

Pyrrha smiled. “That’s a mature way of looking at it.”

Jaune shrugged. “I mean, it’s just the truth. Our own wealth would increase but the wealth of our region would stagnate and rot. In a generation, other businesses would have to close due to a lack of customers, and then what would happen to the town?”

“I... see,” Weiss said slowly. “Yes, you *are* right, of course. It would have a devastating effect on the local economy, especially one so small as that. I never thought...” she trailed off, thinking. “I suppose it makes perfect sense. Enriching those around you, when you live so far from the kingdoms...”

Pyrrha giggled. “Well, I think it is a very good thing your family is doing. Humans should be put first, I agree. There are other ways the faunus can be put to use without taking jobs from hard working families.”

Jaune grinned awkwardly.

It was a successful deflection, and they continued to talk about small things over lunch until it was time for their next class.

His good mood faltered when he found out what they were going to be doing.

“As Huntsmen, your primary mission is to defend the kingdoms from all threats – within, and without,” Professor Peach was a young woman, in her mid-twenties at most. Not that much older than the students she was teaching. She was also incredibly attractive with soft, honey brown hair that tumbled across her shoulders and down her back in gentle curls, and a pair of bright hazel eyes with specks of green and gold. She was slender and short, though with a full figure enhanced by the sundress she wore, her skin pale as milk. At first glance, you would think of her as a doll – but then you’d see the massive polearm she wielded effortlessly, and be reminded that she was a licenced Huntress. “Slaying Grimm is, of course, the main function of Huntsmen. The creatures of darkness are our greatest foe, after all. But apprehending criminals is also a very important part of our jobs, no matter what career we fall into.”

They were outside, on the edges of the Emerald Forest. Professor Peach was their Survival and Navigation teacher, so this wasn't unusual. What *was* unusual were the dozen or so cages, filled with people – no, with *faunus*.

Jaune tried to ignore it but it was impossible. While they didn't appear to be in bad shape, their expressions were enough. Defeated. Downtrodden. Without hope. Men and women both, their necks collared with the familiar shock collars, the symbol of Beacon Academy stamped on each one.

"Today, we will be putting your tracking skills to the test," Professor Peach announced. "Faunus are wily creatures in tune with nature. Though they have simple minds, they are more intelligent than the Grimm you will regularly face, and so pose a different type of threat."

"Are you sure, Professor?" Cardin spoke up brashly. "I think Grimm might be smarter."

A few people snickered. Professor Peach ignored him.

"Attempted escapes, while uncommon, do happen. When they do, and they manage to flee beyond the boundaries of a city or town or village, Huntsmen are called to track and apprehend the property in question. Each of you will be assigned a faunus and they are your responsibility. They will be given a head start and then you are to track and capture them within the time limit of this class. If you do not, and the faunus escape, you will be penalized. If you kill your faunus, you will be penalized – and *fin*ed. These faunus are property of Beacon Academy. Minor damage is *expected* but major injuries will also result in a fine. Do I make myself clear?"

Cardin grumbled, annoyed – but everyone nodded.

Jaune felt sick. This is *not* what he thought of when he dreamed of becoming a Huntsman. It felt perverse.

“I will call you forward in alphabetical order and you will claim your faunus.”

Jaune was called up quickly. Arc started with A, after all.

He thought things couldn't get any worse.

They did.

The faunus assigned to him was a young woman, twenty at most with long, black hair and yellow eyes. A pair of black ears sat atop her head, large and triangular in shape. Her nose was different, as were her lips – but if he saw her from afar, Jaune could easily mistake her for Blake.

Dread pooled in his stomach, and his breath caught in his throat.

Her collar was attached to a leash which Professor Peach offered him. Jaune took it numbly as well as a rope, and followed her instructions, guiding the faunus – wolf or fox, he wasn't sure – over towards the treeline. Her eyes were filled with fear as she gazed at him, her body trembling.

He found it difficult to breathe.

“Damn, Arc,” Cardin whistled as he pulled up beside him, shaking his head. Jaune looked at him blankly. “I know she's just a mutt but you've got yourself a looker. I'm a little jealous,” the leash in Cardin's hand was connected to a skinny male faunus with a long tail. It reminded Jaune of a rat or mouse. “Want to swap? I wouldn't mind getting rough with her.”

The girl recoiled away from Cardin, pulling away until the leash became taut.

Jaune's mouth was dry as he said, "I don't think we can swap."

"Tsk, you're probably right. Fuck, some people get all the luck," then he smirked. "Just let me know how she sounds after you slap her around a bit, alright?"

Jaune just nodded, feeling like he was in someone else's body. He didn't even feel disgusted, just disconnected.

Once everyone had their faunus, they lined up at different parts of the forest.

"On my mark, you will release your faunus and give them five minutes head start," Professor Peach said loudly, her voice carrying. "Ready? Set! Go!"

Jaune unhooked the leash, removed the collar and the Blake-lookalike was gone, sprinting into the forest without a backwards glance.

A five minute head start would normally be a considerable margin but these faunus didn't have aura. The amount of distance they could travel in that time, someone like Jaune could cover in a fifth of it. Speed, strength, reflexes – aura enhanced all of these. Stats wise, there was no comparison.

What the time did give them was the ability to hide.

When the five minutes were up, Jaune set out. The forest this close to the school wasn't very dense, the trees set several feet apart, the underbrush fairly sparse. He could see a fair distance in all directions. It didn't take long for things to become more difficult, however, the trees moving closer together, untamed bushes and shrubs breaking his line of sight. Jaune had never tracked another person before but he'd been hunting with his father, more than once.

One of the first things he learned was to study the environment. Were there any tracks in the soil? Animals tended to follow paths through a forest, much like people did. But where the repeated tracks of people were incredibly obvious, animals were much more subtle. Were there any droppings? That didn't really apply here, but that was another good indicator of the presence of the animal you were trying to hunt. Broken branches, dislodged foliage, all good signs.

For someone charging through the forest, these were all guarantees. They weren't thinking about stuff like that. She was trying to get away from him, her one chance at freedom. Jaune had half a mind to let her go, but if he was the only one to return without a faunus, what would happen then?

Beyond just the failure of the class, what would his classmates think? What would *Weiss* think?

But he didn't want to hurt this woman. He needed to convince her to come back peacefully.

That was wishful thinking but he clung to it. The rope in his hand felt heavy.

Jaune quickly picked up her trail. Bent branches led the way for him, and kicked up soil. He started running, closing the distance and listened carefully. Some distance away, he heard a shout – a male voice, and wondered if that was Cardin capturing his faunus already.

He followed the trail all the way to a small rocky outcrop, the soil turning to stone. Jaune paused, frowning, eyes scanning the area.

This wasn't good. Such terrain was much harder to track across. There were no shrubs or bushes to disturb, and the ground was so hard, there were no tracks.

He needed to pick a direction – or not. Between the boulders, there were small gaps, capable of easily fitting a person. For someone desperate and fearful, and completely, hopelessly outmatched, it would be smarter to find somewhere to hide rather than continue to run. Owned by Beacon, this was probably not her first time used in this class.

She would know.

Jaune carefully moved across the smooth rock, climbing up and around, staying as silent as he could. Peering down, the first crevice was empty. The second was filled with loose rock. The third had scared yellow eyes.

"Please don't run," he said, but it fell on deaf ears. She scrambled madly, almost falling over as she sprinted towards the trees. Jaune followed easily but hesitated. "Please, stop – I don't want to hurt you."

She didn't listen.

She kept running, her black tresses streaming out behind her. He was close enough that he could grab them, if he wanted, yank her back – but he didn't. Jaune just followed her, basically jogging while she was in a full sprint, glancing back with panic filled eyes.

“Just stop, make it easy on yourself,” he pleaded but he may as well have been speaking a different language.

For the next minute, this kept going until she started gasping for breath, unable to keep up the pace. Jaune thought she was going to finally stop but instead, she only paused for an instance to scoop up a handful of dirt and fling it at his face. Jaune flinched, raising an arm.

“Stop,” he tried again but another handful of dirt hit his arm, and then she was running again.

Why wouldn't she listen? Didn't she understand that she couldn't escape? That this was futile? If he was someone else – someone like Cardin – he'd have simply tackled her and forced her to comply. Couldn't she see that he was trying to help her out, in the only way he could?

“Stop running,” but she wouldn't, and so with a frustrated sigh, he chased her, reaching down and slapping her ankle mid-stride. She yelped in surprise, her legs tangled together as she tripped and hit the ground hard.

Jaune grimaced as she groaned in pain, rolling over and clutching her chest. She was winded, attempting to gulp in air frantically. He stood above her awkwardly, waiting for her to settle.

It took a few minutes for her to stop gasping, her breathing evening out. She stared up at him fearfully but then her eyes narrowed, a spark of anger filling her gaze until it turned into rage.

“Fuck you, you bastard,” she spat at him, literally. Jaune didn't feel it but it landed on his pants. “You fucking humans! Can't you just leave us alone!”

“Look, you need to come back with me,” he said. “If you stay out here, a Grimm will find you.”

“Don’t act like you care, you son of a bitch,” she sneered. “You aren’t any different than the rest of them! *Stop, I don’t want to hurt you,*” she mimicked. “You’re just the fucking same, don’t make me laugh! Do you honestly think you’re a good person? Well you aren’t! You fucking aren’t!”

Jaune stared at her dumbly as she continued to rant and rave, her voice raw, filled with hate.

...Why did things always turn out like this?

Whenever he tried to do something good, to be *better* – why was it always thrown back in his face? For a moment, he wasn’t seeing this woman – instead, he saw Blake, and heard the venom in her voice as she screamed at him for not sticking up for her.

He saw Blake and her angry eyes, watching him for years but never speaking to him, their friendship in tatters because he tried to do something nice for her. The cat ears. Those *damned* cat ears.

He was the one that suggested he buy her some new clothes, as well. So she didn’t have to always wear the maid uniform his mother set for them, a constant reminder that she was his property. That had turned sour, as well.

And somehow, it was *his* fault.

Always his fault.

Why? Why was it always his fault?

Couldn't she see that he was doing his best?

That festering resentment flared, and he felt sick. He hated feeling this way. Angry.

This wasn't him.

But why did everyone keep yelling at him?

Jaune grit his teeth as she kept spewing hate at him, her pretty face warped by rage. Kneeling down, he reached for her leg, having had enough. She flinched and lashed out at him, kicking at his face but he easily avoided it, his fingers digging in against her calf, hard enough to bruise.

She cried out in pain and he pulled her towards him, dragging her across the ground before flipping her over. She tried to struggle, squirming, but he seized her arm and wrenched it back, bending it awkwardly and she whimpered, going still.

"You *fucking* disgusting—," she began only to go silent as he jerked her arm a little, enough to cause a spasm of pain through her shoulder.

"Shut up," he snapped. "Be quiet or – I'll gag you."

She *finally* listened. Jaune quickly tied her arms together, bound behind her back, and then staggered to his feet. He made it only a couple of meters before leaning against a tree, he threw up, bile erupting from his mouth, his lunch, breakfast, everything.

He vomited violently until he was dry retching, nothing more to give.

His mouth and throat burned, the smell causing his nose to wrinkle. When he turned around, the Blake-lookalike was staring at him, shocked.

Why couldn't she have listened from the start?

His mouth tasted horribly but he didn't have any water with him. Spitting and clearing his mouth the best he could, he hauled the girl to her feet before marching her back towards the school. Thankfully, she remained silent the whole way back and when he returned, he saw that only a few of his classmates had made it back.

Ruby was one of them – but that wasn't a surprise. While he had never spoken to the younger girl, he'd seen her in action during Combat Class. Her semblance was amazing, pure speed – anyone trying to run from her had zero chance.

The faunus she'd been sent to retrieve was a young boy, younger than her – maybe thirteen or so – with a long, bushy tail. A canine of some sort? Jaune didn't know, but he was bound in rope at her feet as she squatted next to him, and he watched as she patted his head like he was an unruly pet.

Silver eyes blinked up at him as she saw him watching.

"Oh," she smiled. "Jaune, right?"

He nodded dumbly.

“I’m Ruby,” she beamed before sagging awkwardly, rubbing the back of her neck. “Ahah – you probably already know that.”

She was still patting the boy with her other hand, and he was squirming, glaring at her angrily, but his mouth was filled with some material, gagging him.

Ruby noticed where he was looking and took it for interest. “Do you want to pat him? Though his hair is just like ours,” she pouted before moving her hand lower, stroking the tail. The boy attempted to roll away but she grabbed it, *hard* – and he went stiff as a board, expression filled with pain. “His tail is really fluffy, though. Here, touch it.”

“Ah – no, that’s... okay,” he said.

Ruby was – well, she was *really* cute. She had a small, round face and beautiful silver eyes, a very unique color he had never seen before in anyone else. Her hair was mostly dark but turned red near the tips, and her pale skin really made her dark clothing stand out attractively. She was a small thing, and to look at her, she appeared incredibly innocent.

So watching her manhandle that young faunus boy was a little bit shocking.

“I’m from Patch,” she explained as he continued to stare. “We don’t really have faunus over there. A few of the government officials that run the island do but we rarely see them, so I’ve never been up close to one before. I thought they’d smell like Zwei but they don’t.”

“Zwei?”

“Oh – um, my dog,” she giggled. “He’s a little sweetie. He has aura.”

Jaune blinked. What?

Other than the fact that Ruby was squeezing his tail too hard, the boy appeared unharmed. The same wouldn’t be said for the faunus Cardin had been sent to retrieve. The large boy made a show of it, strutting out of the forest with a pleased expression on his face, dragging the man through the dirt by his tail.

His arms and face were covered in bruises, and Jaune spotted a split lip, his chin covered in blood. His stomach would have rebelled at the sight but there was nothing in it.

“Oooh,” Ruby blinked curiously, tilting her head. “Cardin was rough with his faunus.”

Rough didn’t quite do it justice.

Weiss and Pyrrha returned next, their faunus bound neatly. Pyrrha’s was sporting a small graze on her cheek but was otherwise spotless. Weiss’ was... wet? Jaune blinked, noticing the way the woman shivered, long, droopy ears appearing very sad.

“Oho, Ruby, you beat me back,” a boisterous voice called.

Ruby rolled her eyes cutely. “Of course I did. It only took me about a minute. No one can outrun me.”

Yang appeared, carrying her faunus over her shoulder like a sack of flour. The man was unconscious and didn't react at all when she dumped him on the ground unceremoniously. Jaune grimaced at the horrible thud his body made.

Maybe he wasn't just unconscious. Surely she hadn't...?

"Oh, hey," Yang leaned across his vision, startling him. "Jaune, right? I'm Yang, nice to meet'cha~!"

She offered a hand and Jaune blinked at it for a few seconds before grabbing it. They shook hands, and Jaune felt the power in her grip. That wasn't surprising. He hadn't had the misfortune of fighting her yet but he'd seen her smack people around like they weighed no more than a body sized pillow. She had some serious strength in those arms.

"Uh, nice to meet you," he returned. "Are they...?"

He nodded towards the faunus she'd dropped on the ground.

Yang blinked before laughing, hands on hips.

"Nah, they're just out. He tried to fight me. Can you believe it?" she shook her head, and her luscious blonde hair waved back and forth. "They really are insane."

Using her foot, she turned him over and Jaune saw a really aggressive black eye forming. She'd laid him out.

“I might have hit him a little too hard,” she confessed sheepishly when she spotted his expression, arms behind her back as she leaned forward.

Yang was... very distracting; beautiful with a killer body, she was the classic blonde bombshell from the old war pin-up girl collections. Her lilac eyes were just as striking as Ruby’s silver ones, just in a softer way. To look at them, you wouldn’t know it but Ruby and Yang were sisters. At first glance, they looked nothing alike but the more he focused on them, he saw some similarities. Mostly in the brow and nose, and the roundness of their faces.

She inspected the Blake-lookalike. “Looks like you didn’t have much trouble.”

Her hands were dirty from throwing dirt and the front of her shirt was stained a mixture of brown and green from when he tripped her, but that was it.

“No, not really,” he lied.

“Hmm,” Yang poked the girl on the cheek and she flinched, leaning away fearfully. “You know, she’s kinda pretty for an animal. I guess this is what those people that breed dogs and stuff see when they look at them. She has potential.”

Jaune... didn’t know how to respond to that.

One by one, everyone returned until the last two people – Ren and Nora – appeared with their faunus tied up. Nora was known as a little bit of a wild child, though Jaune thought she was sweet. Right now, though, she looked upset with Ren trying to comfort her, a hand on her shoulder in support.

Jaune wondered what that was about?

“Now that everyone is back, I’ll grade your performance,” Professor Peach announced.

Jaune ended up with almost perfect marks, second only to Ruby. He didn’t feel much like celebrating it.