

Sometimes it felt like his time in the Ever After had been one long nightmare, and that now that he was awake, he was expected to go on, business as usual. Easier said than done.

Jaune looked at himself in the mirror, eyes tracing over his smooth cheekbones and jawline, still thrown off by his young reflection. For so long, he'd seen an old, worn down knight looking back at him that seeing his youthful complexion was jarring. Hearing his voice more so.

His eyes were the same, though. No matter how young and healthy he appeared to be, his eyes told a different story. They spoke of countless days and nights alone, of betrayal, and of suffering. They were the eyes of an older man, set in the face of someone not yet in their prime.

Raising a hand, he ran his fingers through the white streak in his hair, the sole physical reminder of his ordeal. He'd thought about dying it, as if smothering it in chemicals could help him forget – but in the end, had decided against it. There was no point in running from it.

What had happened had happened, and now he had to live with the consequences.

He adjusted the shirt he was wearing, a simple blue button down piece he'd found in one of the drawers. When they'd returned, the school had provided them with some clothing until they could afford to buy things for themselves. All of his old stuff had been destroyed back in Atlas, so he'd been grateful.

It fit well. Whoever had sized him up had done a good job.

Jaune checked the time. It was five to six, giving him more than enough time to make it on time. Gathering his things, he belted Crocea Mors to his hip and with one last glance at his room, he shut the door.

Ruby's invitation had been a surprise, but it wasn't unwelcome.

His days had been spent working in any way that he could. You could say he was a creature of habit, and Jaune felt lost without something to keep him focused, a task that needed completing, and so he had thrown himself back into the role of being a Huntsman. For years, day after day, he had busied himself with protecting the Paper Pleasers. An ultimately fruitless endeavor, but it had bred in him a compulsion to always be doing *something*.

At some point, he'd left something behind – the ability to live a life that wasn't committed to some overarching goal. To relax was to stand still, and to stand still was to fail. If he didn't keep moving, then maybe he wouldn't make it on time.

Like with Pyrrha.

At least the mirrors here on Remnant only showed his reflection. In the Ever After, they tended to show a whole lot more.

He could do without that.

A little harmless fun might just be what he needed.

To stop being the Rusted Knight, and to return to being Jaune Arc.

The heat in Vacuo was oppressive, and Jaune was not a fan. But as night fell, everything rapidly cooled, and as evening approached, the sky was filled with brilliant color as the sun dipped down beyond the horizon. Even here, at the end of the world, in a land ravaged by war and greed, there was beauty to be found.

In more ways than one.

Ruby was waiting for him at the bottom of the steps and she wasn't alone. Weiss stood by her side, and Jaune paused, drinking in their figures before they noticed him, a deep welling of joy and sadness filling him up inside.

He had waited so long for them, and when they had finally appeared in the Ever After, it had almost crippled him. If not for the danger they had been in, Jaune may have just watched them secretly for as long as he could, but the Jabberwalker had other ideas. Seeing their faces, unaged, untouched by time, it was as if one of his memories had stepped out into the world, fully formed.

But it had really been them.

Ruby. Weiss. Blake. Yang.

Team RWBY.

He'd been so happy in that moment, but also stricken. How would they react to what he'd become? An old man, a rusted knight with a broken sword. A man who had taken the life of a friend.

Even now, Jaune felt a heavy weight in his chest, the memory of the light bleeding out of Penny's eyes haunting him still.

As joyous as he had been, things had not been easy. Jaune grimaced, remembering how he'd been with the Paper Pleasers, and their doubts about his mental stability. Ruby's breakdown, and the awful things he'd said to her, the frustration and rage and pain that had built up over years and decades bursting free.

Even now, he knew... he wasn't well.

How could he be?

Would he ever be?

"Jaune?"

Weiss had noticed him, her eyes lighting up. Ruby turned, a smile stretching her lips. His sour thoughts were banished, and he nodded, approaching them.

"Ruby, Weiss," he greeted.

They were both dressed differently. They looked nice.

That wasn't a surprise. They always looked nice.

"You made it!" Ruby exclaimed happily. "Ready to have some fun?"

If he still knew how.

He nodded again. "Ready as I'll ever be."

Having his friends by his side helped to ground him, and chased away the depressing thoughts. He felt like he was here, in the moment, rather than somewhere else, in the past. On Remnant, not in the Ever After. Surrounded by people that cared for him, and whom he cared for in return.

He was no longer alone.

The bazaar in the middle of the city was already packed, the sounds of thousands of people reaching them several streets over. Lanterns had been hung from doorways and along every street leading towards the market, and the three of them joined the flow of the crowd. Alongside the chatter, Jaune heard music being played and sung, local folk songs that were foreign to Jaune's ears. As the street opened up and they arrived at their destination, they were greeted by hundreds of different stalls, a cacophony of sound hitting them all at once.

And the smell – Jaune felt his mouth instantly water as the aroma of grilled, fatty meat hit his nose, as well as the scent of freshly baked bread, herbs and spices, and more.

His eyes scanned the crowd, as was his instinct these days. Looking for danger, unused to being surrounded by so many people. He expected to see talking squirrels or mice, raccoons walking on two legs and dressed in clothes, but the closest thing here were faunus with their animal traits.

No, the animals here didn't speak. A nearby stall had exotic pets on display, a monkey dangling from a post while colorful birds squawked, presenting their beaks for food. Their plumage was

beautiful, a splash of bright colors, and the man running the stall fed them small morsels, the birds trilling in delight.

“What should we do first?” Ruby asked excitedly, bouncing up and down. At that moment, she reminded him of the girl he met at Beacon, all those years ago. Young and untouched by what would follow, not required to shoulder the burdens of a crumbling world.

“What do you think, Jaune?” Weiss asked, peering up at him through her long lashes. She placed a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. “Where would you like to go first?”

Jaune looked around at the sea of people, and hadn’t a clue.

“I suppose we could just walk around a little bit first, see what catches our attention,” he proposed. They were both on board, nodding, and so Jaune took the lead, Ruby on his left, Weiss on his right.

They moved through the crowd at their own pace, drinking in the sights and sounds around them, in no hurry to be anywhere in particular. They passed by stalls selling fresh produce, crates laden with fruit and vegetables, those easily grown in the harsh climate, but some not; mangoes, bananas, yams, garlic, dates, olives, onions.

There were blacksmiths selling home crafted tools, axes and pickaxes, shovels, the wood handles polished and gleaming. Next to them was a stall selling spices and dried goods; cumin, coriander, turmeric, cinnamon, lentils, chickpeas, bulgur, couscous. And then further on, someone trading in nuts and seeds; pistachios, almonds, sunflower seeds, sesame, and more.

There was a woman selling tea and coffee, both to drink and the beans and leaves, so you could go home and make it yourself. The stall selling bread was quite popular. Jaune breathed in deeply, eyes scanning the rows of loaves and buns, and the local favorites; pita, naan, laffa.

“Eeek~!” Ruby jumped, startled.

“Ruby?” Weiss turned quickly, concerned. “What’s wrong?”

“Something touched my leg!”

That something turned out to be a goat. It peered up at them, its lips peeling back as if it were smiling at them, its wool a dark charcoal color. Long, slender horns protruded from its head, large eyes inspecting them before it lost interest. It had a collar around its neck, leashed to a nearby post where a young girl was selling chilled goat's milk.

Ruby flushed as Weiss giggled, and Jaune cracked a smile.

There were more blacksmiths, but these ones were selling weapons. Swords and shields, spears, pikes, daggers and knives. Then there were clothes and rolls of cloth, women enticing people to come have a closer look. Sheer silks and velvet, soft cotton and wool, they had it all. The girls modeling the garments were pretty with dusky skin and charcoal eye shadow, presenting themselves with careful movements tailored to draw the eye.

A couple of them eyed him as he passed, waving and putting on a little bit of a show, bending at the waist, flashing a little more of their golden skin, their jewelry flashing in the low light. Weiss grumbled by his side, and suddenly she was holding his arm, cradling it against her side.

“Keep moving,” she muttered.

“Weiss?”

But she refused to look at him, and Jaune wasn’t opposed. She was warm and soft, and he felt her small body lean into him, a comforting presence.

The next stall had small trinkets and accessories; bangles, necklaces, rings, broaches, and more. Gold and silver, platinum, many inset with precious gems but some without, twisted into elaborate shapes, etched with beautiful imagery. This one caught Weiss’ eye and she paused, scanning the wares with a critical eye.

Even Ruby appeared interested, finding a small broach in the shape of a blooming rose. Her fingers danced over the detailed face, silver eyes glittering.

“You like that one?” the elderly woman before the counter asked, giving them a toothless smile. Her brown skin was heavily wrinkled and pockmarked, weathered by the harsh years living in a desert. “It suits you, I think.”

“It’s very pretty,” Ruby said. “May I?”

The woman nodded and Ruby picked it up, admiring it from different angles before holding it against her breast. She turned to him and asked, “How does it look?”

“Perfect,” Jaune said. Weiss nodded in agreement.

“You should buy it,” Weiss pressed.

“I don’t know,” Ruby hesitated. “I just spent a whole lot of money today.”

“Then let me buy it,” Weiss proposed. “As a gift.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

Weiss rolled her eyes. “I know that, dummy. I want to buy it, so let me.”

Jaune saw that Ruby wanted to turn her down to be polite but she glanced at the broach again, torn.

“I’ll pay half,” he spoke up. “A gift from both of us.”

Ruby looked at him in surprise.

“That settles it,” Weiss grinned, happy with their victory. “We’ll take it, ma’am. How much do we owe you?”

It wasn’t as expensive as Jaune thought it would be, considering the amazing craftsmanship. Pulling out his wallet, he counted out half and handed it over, as did Weiss, making Ruby the brand new owner of that silver broach. She hugged it to her chest, her eyes soft as she gazed at the pair of them.

“Thank you.”

After that, they followed their nose.

The food stalls were all packed tightly together in the middle of the market, so they made their way inwards. Most of them had a few stools set out in front but some of the larger establishments had tables and chairs set out, and most of them were already full to capacity. Once Ruby had the broach clipped to her cardigan, she took the lead, dragging them through the crowd to find something to their tastes.

“That smells really good,” Weiss said, eyes settling on a curry stand. They had four different curries for sale, ranging from one that was a dark, deep brown through to a reddish dish and finally, something bright and yellow. Though there were only four different types, each type came with whatever meat you wished. Chicken, beef, lamb, goat – you could pick whatever you wanted, they had it, and was accompanied by a healthy serving of white rice and a piece of bread.

Jaune sniffed the air and he was assaulted by a wall of herb and spice, his tongue tingling even though he had yet to taste anything.

“Oh, oh,” Ruby pointed to the stall next to it. They were grilling meat skewers over rows of glowing hot charcoal, the fatty flesh sizzling and popping as it was charred to perfection. They had an even wider selection of meat, ranging from the typical chicken, beef and lamb to things more exotic like camel and snake. Rubbed with a mixture of spices, people were dipping the skewers in some sort of garlic yoghurt sauce. “That looks so good!” Ruby exclaimed, almost drooling.

A particular favorite with the locals was the shawarma stand, the slow roasted, marinated meat glistening as a man carved pieces off it to stuff into rolled flat bread with fresh vegetables, lathering it with sauce. Their stall was over flowing with people, the queue disrupting the flow of foot traffic.

“What do we get?” Ruby looked around, torn with each new sighting. A little to their left was a place serving deep fried balls. They didn’t look like meat. Instead, it was some sort of vegetable – chickpea? And next to them was a woman selling different types of hummus with crispy cracker-like bread to dip into it. And then next to her was a young man molding seasoned ground meat into balls and patties, frying them atop a heated piece of black steel.

Cheesy breads dusted with herbs, pockets of pastry packed with stewed meat and vegetables, rice dishes infused with spiced oil and diced meat, there was an endless selection on display. Jaune felt his stomach rumble, and just like Ruby, he had no idea what he wanted. He was paralyzed by choice.

“Why don’t we each select something and we can share,” Weiss suggested, ever the level headed one. “I’ll find us a table we can use.”

Ruby nodded, excited. “Right! Um – I’m going that way!”

She pointed at the skewered meat stand.

Weiss ended up getting shawarma while Jaune decided to get a couple of bowls of curry, though he stopped by the stand selling the fried chickpea balls and snagged a bag of six so they could all try them as well. In the end, it was Ruby who found them a table since Weiss was stuck in line for longer than they were, and she looked well and truly frazzled as she returned with two wraps bursting with meat and salad.

“That took longer than I would have liked,” she complained as she sat down, eyeing the selection they’d chosen. Ruby had gotten a little of everything, even the snake and camel, while Jaune had picked the chicken korma – the bright yellowish one – and lamb vindaloo – the reddish hued curry, as well as some garlic naan to go with it.

They had a little feast on their hands.

Ruby clapped her hands, bowing her head as if in prayer.

“What are you doing?” Weiss asked, confused.

“I’m offering my thanks to the food gods,” Ruby said proudly.

Jaune smirked. “The food gods?”

“Yup! Look at what they’ve given us!”

“You should be offering thanks to the people of Vacuo,” Weiss said sternly. “Not imaginary deities!”

“How do you know they aren’t real?” Ruby ribbed. “With everything we’ve seen?”

Weiss opened her mouth and then shut it again without a word, frowning.

Ruby nodded. “See? And I am thanking the people as well. They made it, after all.”

“Hmph – well, if these food gods do exist, they better be nicer than those Brothers.”

Emotion welled up inside him as he watched Ruby and Weiss go back and forth, joking around. It was such a small thing, and yet sitting with them, just enjoying each other's company... this was what he had missed, more than anything. These moments that had been few and far between, once they'd left Vale – and for him, a lifetime ago, before he'd fallen and become an old soul.

This is what their life should have been.

Not what Cinder Fall had turned it into.

Jaune reached across the table and grabbed one of the meat skewers, cutting Ruby off mid-sentence. Bringing it to his lips, he bit down. Flavor exploded across his tongue, the richness of the fatty lamb, and the hint of smokey char perfectly paired with the spice rub, a hint of chili shining through as he chewed and swallowed.

"It's good," he confirmed, taking another healthy bite. Ruby quickly scrambled for her own while Weiss giggled.

It tasted even better with the garlic yoghurt dipping sauce, Jaune groaning in appreciation as he devoured the rest of the skewer. The three of them moved between dishes, sampling them all. Both curries were filled with so much flavor, the numerous spices combined to create a delicious whole. Smearing some onto one of the naan with a bunch of rice, Jaune tore into it with gusto.

They both had a little bit of a kick in terms of heat, but nothing outrageous. It was more than enough for Weiss, though, whose cheeks turned red, a dainty hand waving in front of her mouth. She wasn't used to this kind of food.

“Do you need a drink?” Jaune offered.

She nodded gratefully. “Yes, please.”

There was a stand nearby selling juices, and so Jaune purchased them all a mango and orange fruit juice, chilled with a healthy helping of ice. It helped to soothe Weiss’ burning tongue.

“Mmm~!” Ruby wiggled in her seat as she tried the shawarma. “Everything is so tasty!”

The little deep fried chickpea balls had a smooth nutty taste that blended well with whatever seasoning they’d put in them, and dunking them in the yoghurt sauce only took it to another level.

Jaune ended up eating the bulk of the food but both Weiss and Ruby did their part. Patting his stomach, he covered his mouth as he burped.

Ruby smirked while Weiss arched an eyebrow.

“Sounds like you enjoyed it,” Ruby teased.

He nodded. “Best meal I’ve ever had.”

Weiss lowered her eyebrow. “Hopefully not just because of the food.”

Jaune gave a small smile. "The company did play a part."

After clearing up their trash and finding a bin, they continued to wander. Drawn to the music, they found the main source of it. A group of teenagers were playing instruments, some of which Jaune did not know the names of. Some of them, he knew; there was a boy playing the bongo drums, and a girl playing some type of wood flute. People were dancing and singing together, a space having cleared out naturally for those who wished to partake, and money was being tossed into a container as tribute.

"Care to dance?" Weiss asked, offering a hand.

Jaune blinked.

"Uh..."

He couldn't remember the last time he'd danced. It had been years. Even longer since he'd danced with a partner. At one point, dancing had been something that he was actually very good at, but he was so out of practice that he wasn't sure how good he would be.

Jaune hesitated. "I don't know..."

Weiss hummed before holding her hand out to Ruby.

"What about you?"

Ruby recoiled. “W-What? No, I don’t – I’m not good at that!”

“And?” Weiss didn’t give her a chance to get away, reaching out and seizing her hand. “As long as you can move your legs, that is good enough for me. Feel free to join us any time.”

That last part was directed at him, and then Weiss was dragging Ruby over to the group of dancers, the younger girl panicking.

“Wha—no, Weiss, stop!”

“Ruby, stop struggling – just follow my lead.”

Jaune watched with growing amusement as Weiss coached her through a few basic movements. This wasn’t ballroom dancing or anything of the sort, people moving to their own beat. Ruby resisted at first until Weiss whispered something in her ear, and then all of a sudden, she was on board. Jaune wondered what she’d said to her, but that quickly fled his mind as the partners started dancing together.

People were staring. Not just because they were out of place with Weiss’ graceful movements and Ruby’s jerky, awkward ones, but because of who they were. Eyes watched Weiss warily, and it wasn’t the first time Jaune had caught people looking her way in that manner. It wasn’t quite hostile, but it wasn’t friendly, either. Caught between unfriendly and confused, as if they didn’t know what to do with her, while a few considered her with grateful eyes.

The way they looked at Ruby was different.

Some of them looked at her in awe. Others in trepidation. What they both had in common was that spark of hope. To many of them, Ruby was the face of their potential salvation. The one that had lifted the veil from their eyes and told them the truth, revealing what those in control either were ignorant of or what they'd kept hidden.

And now these two people were dancing amongst them, making fools of themselves. Ruby started laughing, swinging her arms back and forth in an exaggerated manner. Her cheeks were flushed in embarrassment but she didn't stop. Weiss shook her head, unable to fight the smile that threatened her lips. She would look more at home in a ballet studio, her body shifting effortlessly as she danced.

Maybe he should follow their example.

But before he could join them, something in the corner of his eye caught his interest. Turning his head, Jaune froze when he spotted them.

Maria Calavera was the same as in his memories, the elderly retired Huntress hobbling with her walking stick, shrouded in a gray-blue cloak. Her mechanical eyes cast a soft blue glow about her face as they scanned the crowds curiously, but it wasn't her who dominated his attention.

It was the man by her side.

Carried along by his robotic chair was Pietro Polendina.

Penny's father.

Jaune felt his throat seize up, suddenly unable to breathe. Within a blink of an eye, he was transported back onto that bridge of light, Penny's freckled face peered up at him, her eyes imploring him.

*"Let me choose... this one thing..."*

The ease in which his sword had slipped through her skin and into her body had surprised him. Even though at that point, he'd been used to fighting and killing Grimm, the human body was much different. Those he fought against all had aura, and he'd never taken a life before that moment.

It wasn't something he would ever forget.

Faced with her father, Jaune felt his insecurities and failures rear their ugly head. Choking on the guilt, filled with dread, he flinched when Pietro noticed him.

Did Penny's father know?

Voices called out to him but they were nothing more than jumbled sound to him, mixing with everything else. Jaune felt as if something had him by the throat, squeezing down, choking him, his breathing becoming erratic.

Any semblance of calm he had was shattered.

The onset of a panic attack. At Beacon, they'd been taught about recognizing the symptoms. As a Huntsman, you could encounter stressful situations. A lifetime of fighting against the creatures of Grimm, witnessing death and destruction had a way of taking a toll on a person.

Jaune was well acquainted with such feelings.

The nausea and shortness of breath. The cold sweats, the trembling that manifested primarily in his hands. The racing heart, and the overwhelming fear that flooded his system. It had been a common companion in the Ever After.

He hadn't had one since coming back, though.

A hand settled on his arm and he jerked away, whipping around. Weiss' concerned face greeted him, the look mirrored by Ruby. They were saying something but he couldn't hear it over the way his heart pounded in his ears, drowning everything out.

He needed to leave.

"Jaune!" Weiss called but without a backwards glance, he pushed through the crowd. Away from his friends, away from Dr. Polendina.

Away to be alone.

Alone with nothing but his guilt and memories.