

They spent most of their day at Atlas Academy with Winter showing them the rest of the grounds. Just like Beacon, the CCT was located at the school, and Jaune was given a tour. Other than some small differences, the interior was familiar, right down to the floor plan which wasn't just similar, it was exactly the same.

The views from the upper floors of the tower were magnificent. They were high enough up in the sky that Jaune could make out the ocean in the very far distance, even though they were quite far inland. The mountains to the north looked like yawning rows of gigantic teeth, and Winter mentioned that many of those mountains were laden with Dust, mined by the Schnee Dust Company.

In fact, their grandfather's very first mine was in that mountain range. The mine that kickstarted his company, and earned him his millions. Both sisters became somber at the mention of their grandfather, Nicholas Schnee.

After his tour was complete, duty called.

"I must be going," Winter offered her hand. "I thank you for the visit. It has been a pleasure to meet with you, Jaune Arc."

Jaune shook her hand. "Thanks. I had a good time."

And it was here that Winter revealed something to Weiss.

"I will be seeing you in a couple of months," she told her younger sister. Weiss appeared confused for a moment before her eyes widened.

“You will be attending the Vytal Festival?”

Winter nodded.

“I will indeed. I will be there on official business – but I will make time to come and see you, and... I will be cheering for you.”

Weiss beamed.

“That’s great! You’ll be able to meet my other teammates.”

In the end, Jaune thought Winter Schnee was exactly as he envisioned her. On the surface, she was an intimidating woman, much like Weiss could be. Her beauty and serious nature could make it difficult to approach a woman like her, but underneath that stern visage was a kind woman, a loving sister.

Jaune liked her.

But maybe he was conditioned to like older sisters. Trauma from his childhood.

Before they parted ways for good, though, he had to ask her something.

“Winter, I ran into a friend of yours in Vale.”

She appeared confused, head tilted slightly as she asked, "A friend of mine?"

"Penny," he clarified. "Penny Polendina."

She stilled, her eyes suddenly sharp.

"You've met Penny?"

Jaune nodded. "Yeah. We've become friends. She mentioned you."

"Oh," she said. "I – that is good. Penny... does not have many friends."

"She said you were her first friend."

Jaune wasn't sure but he thought Winter seemed touched, her face softening briefly.

"She said that?"

"Yeah."

Maybe it was his imagination but he believed she stood a little taller.

“And how is Penny?” she asked.

“She is good,” he didn’t think it wise to tell her about the incident at the nightclub. She’d probably find out about it at some point, anyway. “She’s a very nice girl.”

Winter nodded. “You will not find a nicer girl than her.”

“She told us a few stories,” he said slowly, mindful of who was standing by his side. “Stories that you passed on to her.”

Winter’s brow furrowed briefly before her eyebrows shot up, catching the meaning. That was a new expression; one of horror. Her eyes quickly darted to Weiss before focusing on him.

“I... see.”

“She didn’t mean to. Another friend of ours was talking with her and she got a little enthusiastic.”

“Yes, Penny... can get a little caught up in the moment,” Winter tried to keep a straight face. “I am glad that she is making friends. Especially friends such as you. It will do her some good.”

It was somehow *colder* when they left. The temperature had dropped further, making his hands tingle. Activating his aura, a feeling of warmth enveloped him.

“Give me some of that,” Weiss reached over and grabbed his hand, curling her palm against his. Without thought, he used his semblance on her. Weiss sighed as their aura mingled, her reddened cheeks flushing further. “It feels even better in the cold.”

“Aren’t you worried someone might see this?” he asked, swinging their hands.

“There aren’t any prying eyes here at the school,” she answered. “Well, not over the holidays. It’ll be fine.”

She held his hand all the way down in the elevator and only released it when the doors opened, and they stepped out, heading back to the car.

“What do you think of my sister?” she asked quietly when they were seated and belted in.

“I think she’s amazing,” he said honestly. “She reminds me of you.”

“Y-You think so?”

Jaune shot her a fond look. It was clear that Weiss admired Winter a great deal, so being compared to her was quite the compliment for her.

“Yes. And not just because you both look alike. I can see many of your mannerisms in her, and the way she conducts herself. I do wonder if she has a goofy side like you do.”

Weiss scowled. "I do *not* have a goofy side!"

"Come on, you definitely do."

"That is slander! Take that back!"

"Not as goofy as Nora," Jaune grinned. "But you're definitely a very unserious on occasion."

"H-Haaah? I don't think so," she jabbed him in the side, and Jaune squirmed. "I don't appreciate such attacks against my character."

"I think it's charming."

"I don't care *what you think*," she glared at him. "I am a vision of – of grace and poise, and my conduct is without question. I have never once been goofy."

"I've seen you miming important historical moments with Ruby when you thought no one else was around."

"W-What? You've been spying on me!" she accused, outraged. "And I've been doing nothing of the sort!"

"I thought your rendition of the King of Vale joining the battlefield during the Vacuo campaign was quite good."

She flushed scarlet.

"You insufferable *man*," she jabbed him repeatedly in the ribs, and Jaune started laughing as each poke got harder and harder. "Forget you ever saw that! It didn't happen!"

"Nora also saw it."

"No!"

It had taken Jaune a lot to ensure Nora never said anything about it. In all honesty, it had been really cute, and it was nice to see Weiss be a little silly and not so uptight. The fact that she was willing to be that way with Ruby just showed how close they'd become since their rocky start.

Weiss pouted furiously when she realized her jab attack was only amusing him.

"She learns better that way, okay? It's not like I'm doing that because I enjoy it or anything..."

Jaune sort of figured as much. Ruby found History boring, a lot of the time.

"You're a great friend," he said warmly.

Weiss crossed her arms. "Hmph! Just because you compliment me and look at me like that doesn't mean I'm going to forgive you."

"Look at you like what?"

"Like that!" she accused, pointing at his face. "With those dumb eyes!"

Jaune laughed.

"I didn't know my eyes were dumb."

"Well they are! They're stupid and I don't like them."

Jaune caught the driver's eyes in the mirror, and saw his amusement plain as day on his face. That made him crack, and Jaune started laughing harder. Weiss puffed out her cheeks and started pinching him this time, but that only made it worse.

It was a moment of levity that she desperately needed. When they arrived back at the hotel, Weiss grew serious.

"Dinner is at seven, but a car will come fetch you at six," she said. "I can introduce you to... my mother and brother beforehand," her voice grew a little strained, particularly on the word *brother*. "You won't meet my father until dinner. Wear... wear the black suit with the light blue shirt, it'll look good with your eyes. There should be a dark blue tie, as well."

“My stupid eyes,” Jaune reminded her.

She smiled weakly.

“Okay, will do.”

She squeezed his arm briefly. “I’ll see you later, then.”

“Yeah. See you later, Weiss.”

Jaune hated how just the thought of this dinner had sucked the life out of her, but there was nothing to be done. She was worried and maybe she had every reason to be, but Jaune refused to let her down. He’d managed to endear himself to Winter, now he just had to charm the other members of her family.

Even if it was an impossible task.

Jaune spent the rest of the afternoon checking out the hotel. In addition to the restaurant, they had a bar and cigar lounge, a fully stocked gym and swimming area, and even a small casino. Gambling never interested Jaune, he never saw the point beyond maybe having a little bit of fun by tempting fate with a tiny wager. But throwing down the occasional twenty was not what was going on here.

When it got closer to time, Jaune showered and prepared his clothes, laying everything out. He found the light blue shirt and the dark blue tie, and he saw how well they paired with the black of

the suit. Once he was dry, he applied some deodorant and began dressing. He was just in the process of brushing his hair when there was a knock on the door.

“Delivery,” a man’s voice called out.

When he answered, the young man bowed and held out a small package.

“This just arrived for you, Mr. Arc.”

“Oh – uh, thank you.”

When he opened it, he saw that a pair of cufflinks were inside. Small and golden, they were shaped into double crescent moons. There was a note with them.

*Saw these and thought of you – W*

Jaune smiled, shaking his head.

He took extra care with his hair, making sure that it was perfect. Combed over and parted on the side, he didn’t stop until not a single strand of hair was out of place, held together with liberal amounts of product. He then attached the cufflinks, slipped on his shoes and presented himself in front of the mirror after a few tactical sprays of cologne.

He wasn’t one to toot his own horn, but... he looked good. As if he belonged in this environment when it was anything but. Jaune wasn’t the type of person that believed in spending exorbitant

amounts of money on clothing but there was no denying that the quality of what he was wearing was only enhancing how he looked.

The car arrived a little before six, and Jaune was already waiting. He received a few looks from those around him as he stepped outside, particularly from younger patrons of the hotel. A young woman in a purple gown stared, while a couple just arriving watched him as he strode towards the car.

“Sir,” the driver greeted. It was the same one from earlier.

“Thank you,” Jaune said as he opened the door for him. Jaune slid into the back, and within moments, they were pulling out onto the street.

Jaune felt his first bout of nerves assault him as they hit the highway, but he clamped down on them and focused on his breathing, eyes passing over the scenery. It wasn't long until the towering buildings were replaced by fields of snow and trees, and not long after taking the off ramp, they were turning up a long driveway.

A looming stone gatehouse awaited further in, a pair of massive wrought iron gates barring the path. The car pulled up and a member of security stepped out, the driver flashing him a card. It was scanned and with a beep, they were shown through, the gates swinging open to let them advance. Frost covered hedges followed the driveway up towards the house where a massive fountain made of white marble stood, sculpted into the visage of a robed woman with a harp, the water frozen in a dazzling display. Atop her head was a luminous snowflake, the stylized Schnee symbol casting a soft blue light across the driveway.

Further beyond lay the house. A manor in truth, crafted from smooth white and gray stone, it was an imposing building. It was a multi-story structure, the central building taller with two long wings that stretched on either side. Tall, elegant windows lined the facade, the upper floors containing balconies with stone railings. The entryway was grand and was held aloft by thick, white pillars, and this is where the car pulled into.

Waiting at the base of the stairs to accept him was Klein.

“Welcome to Schnee Manor,” Klein said with a bow. “Please follow me, sir.”

He was led up the stairs. The doors were large, thick oak inscribed with beautiful carvings and would have taken some effort to open if not for the well oiled hinges, Klein pushing them open effortlessly.

The entrance hall was a grand room with high ceilings, marble flooring, ornate pillars and rich woodwork. A massive staircase lined with white marble bannisters and shrouded in blue carpet dominated as the central fixture, leading up towards a stained glass window where blue light from the moon filtered in, casting a ghostly hue. The stairs then split off to either side, leading to the second floor. Flanking the staircase on either side were enormous suits of armor, coldly greeting any visitors. Hanging high above was an elaborate chandelier, and the floor was marked with a large, intricate snowflake.

Jaune looked around, and though it was warmer inside than outside, he somehow felt colder. This was not a welcoming room. This was a room that made a statement, a show of power and wealth. It did not feel like a home.

Movement drew his attention, and he looked up towards the top of the stairs. A lithe figure moved with grace, a simple yet elegant white dress shifting as a goddess descended, following the gentle curves of her body. Jaune felt his breath catch as Weiss carefully took step after step, the material of her dress clinging to her slender waist and rounded hips, the silver necklace around her neck glittering like a string of stars. Long, velvet gloves enclosed her arms up to above her elbows. Her hair flowed down her back in a river of moonlight, the ends long enough to tickle the backs of her knees.

She was a vision.

“Jaune,” she greeted. “Welcome.”

There was a controlled quality to her greeting, and Jaune understood. He nodded.

“Weiss,” he returned. “Thank you for the invitation.”

“Let me show you around,” she offered quickly, gesturing for him to follow. “Thank you, Klein.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Klein bowed low and retreated, until only they two remained.

They climbed the stairs, and Weiss directed him to the left. They entered a long hallway lined with doors on the right, and those tall windows on the left, small sconce holding candles spaced between each window. Between each door was a portrait set in beautiful wood frames; lavish landscapes, and people. Some were dressed in military uniform, some in suits, and some were family with that distinct white hair and pale, icy blue eyes.

They moved in silence for some time, until they came to a furnished room with a fireplace and a white, grand piano. This space looked a little more lived in with warmer colors, the fire in the hearth casting a warm, orange glow. Weiss moved towards the fire and Jaune joined her, the pair of them standing together, side by side. Above the mantle piece was a portrait of a man in a suit of armor, a red, fur lined cape draped across his shoulders. Long, white hair fell about his face in a tumble, his strong jaw lined in a thick, white beard. His face was hard but open, eyes kind.

“That is my grandfather,” Weiss said softly. “Nicholas Schnee.”

The founder of the Schnee Dust Company.

“Thank you for coming,” she said.

“Of course,” Jaune replied.

Her jaw was tense as she mulled something over. Jaune didn’t push her, instead inspecting the room with curious eyes.

“I’m meant to be taking you to my brother and mother,” she finally admitted.

Jaune nodded. “Right.”

“But can we just stay here for a moment?”

“Whatever you want, Weiss.”

She hesitated. “You look handsome. In that suit, I mean.”

Jaune grinned. “And you look beautiful – as you always do.”

Ten minutes passed, just the pair of them enjoying the warmth of the fire. Weiss had moved closer, and her gloved hand fell into his. Jaune squeezed her hand softly, offering her his strength, until finally she sighed and set her shoulders.

“Right,” she said sharply. Holding her head high, she turned. “Come on, then. Let us get this over with.”

Weiss led him to a room that wasn’t too dissimilar to the one they’d just left, only much larger. Jaune’s eyes traced over the walls and the flood of portraits before immediately finding the woman sitting amongst it all, reclined against the lush cushions of an old camelback couch.

That could only be one person.

While age lined her face, and she carried with her a barely concealed sorrow, Willow Schnee was a beautiful woman. This was the woman that Winter and Weiss had inherited their otherworldly beauty from, and it was still on stark display, her snow white hair pulled into a loose, low ponytail.

In contrast to her daughter who was dressed in a lovely gown, her attire consisted of a white cravat secured by a silver brooch set with a red stone, as well as a light purple jacket with short sleeves, a long sleeved white shirt, a wide belt around her waist, a matching purple pencil skirt with black tights and slippers. In hand, she cradled a crystal wine glass half full with a deep red liquid that she casually swirled.

“Weiss,” she said warmly. “Where have you been? We’ve been waiting.”

“You know how she can be, mother,” a voice said from behind them, and Jaune turned. “Do not hold it against her.”

He was young. Younger than Ruby but tall for his age with a slim build, his white hair cut short. He wore a white, short sleeved shirt, the sleeves fastened just above the elbows with navy blue cuffs. Over his shirt he wore a light blue vest that almost appeared gray, a black handkerchief in his right breast pocket that matched his neck tie. Navy blue trousers and black, polished leather shoes completed the outfit; simple but formal.

This was her younger brother.

“Whitley,” Weiss said without looking at him, her voice bored.

Jaune saw his eyes narrow briefly, his sharp features becoming even sharper. Even though he was a boy, he had taken Willow’s beauty as well. While Jaune couldn’t quite call him handsome, not yet – he was *pretty* in a way that hinted at his future appearance. Whitley Schnee was going to be an incredibly attractive man one day.

“Sister,” he finally said, almost mockingly. “So this is your teammate, is it?”

Pale blue eyes looked him up and down, and Jaune caught a hint of frustration.

“Hm – it appears he wears a suit well. Color me surprised.”

“Yes, he does, doesn’t he?” Willow peered at him interestedly. “Tell me your name, young man.”

“Jaune Arc, ma’am,” he introduced himself, striding forward and lowering himself to one knee. Willow blinked in surprise as he took her free hand and brought it to his lips, giving her knuckles a soft kiss. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Her mouth fell open in a surprised titter. “Oh my, Weiss – you never said he was so charming.”

Jaune stood, and turned to Whitley, offering his hand. Whitley frowned, unsure, taken aback by Jaune’s sudden confidence. He hadn’t been expecting it. Perhaps he’d thought Jaune would be intimidated, and in truth, Jaune did feel the pressure of the moment – but he refused to let himself fail her.

Whitley hesitated but finally grasped his hand, and Jaune gave it a firm shake.

“Pleased to meet you, Whitley,” he said, holding his eyes.

Whitley shook his hand back, appearing a little flustered.

Weiss hovered by Jaune’s shoulder, concerned but the handshake went without incident.

“You’ve a lovely home, ma’am,” Jaune turned back to Willow. “It must be even more beautiful during the day.”

She sipped at her wine. “Thank you, young man. Weiss has spoken of you, though not as much as I’d like,” she eyed her daughter. “Would you be willing to share a story or two of my daughter away at Huntsman school? She doesn’t like to share.”

“What would you like to know?” Jaune asked.

Weiss was tense, her hands clasped in front of her belly but remained silent, allowing the interrogation to commence.

“Has she made many friends? I know that my daughter can be somewhat prickly, so I did worry about her going so far from home.”

Jaune thought it interesting that Winter and Willow both shared such worries.

Whitley scoffed as if the concept of Weiss and friends was completely foreign. “Mother, don’t be silly. I doubt that this ‘Beacon Academy’ is a suitable place for someone as *esteemed* as my sister to find companionship. Current company excluded, of course.”

Weiss’ hands tightened but Jaune answered easily.

“She has made many friends. Would you like to see them?”

Willow perked up. “See them?”

Jaune pulled out his scroll, and he saw the flash of panic that passed over Weiss’ face but he gave her a reassuring smile and moved closer to Willow, bringing up some photos.

He hadn't really *planned* anything, not truly – but Jaune had been prepared to pull back the curtain a little bit, and show her family that her life away from home was doing well. Nothing embarrassing, just wholesome pictures of which Jaune had plenty.

"This is our team," he said. It was a group shot of Jaune, Blake, Weiss and Nora in one of Beacon's many courtyards – Team JBWN. They were all smiling widely at the camera with Nora's arms thrown around the back of Blake and Weiss' necks, pulling them down slightly. "And this is another team we are friends with – Team RPRY. That short girl is Ruby, and the blonde is her older sister, Yang. The black haired guy with the pink streak is Ren, and the red head is Pyrrha."

"Goodness, Pyrrha Nikos," Willow said, taken aback. "I *had* heard that she had chosen to study abroad but I did not realize she had gone to Beacon."

"You know of her?"

"Of course. An athlete she may be, but she has also made waves in the business world. Many of her endorsed products go on to be *very* successful."

Whitley wavered, as if he wanted to look but didn't want to appear like he was interested. Jaune had no qualms and turned the screen so he could see.

"So it is," he said, looking a little impressed. "Sister, it appears you've befriended someone interesting. I am shocked."

Jaune cycled through several photos, showing the two teams interacting. Then he moved onto pictures highlighting Beacon's beauty, focused on the old architecture and breathtaking views of the city, as well as the sweeping forests.

“This is Forever Fall,” he said, showing off the red and orange foliage. “It is like this all year, no matter the season.”

“I visited, once,” Willow admitted quietly, finishing her drink. “A very long time ago.”

“I – I didn’t know that,” Weiss said, surprised.

“It was before you were born. Before Winter was born,” Willow gazed down into her empty glass, thinking. Recalling memories, no doubt. “I visited Vale with my father. We toured the city and visited Forever Fall forest, and even walked the halls of the last King of Vale’s estate. We did not visit Beacon, however. These views are stunning. I can see why one might choose to study there.”

“Have you ever thought of becoming a Huntsman, Whitley?” Jaune asked suddenly.

“W-No, I – I have no desire to swing around a blade like some brute,” he sniffed. “Don’t get me wrong, we all deeply value the Huntsmen who sacrifice their time and lives to defend humanity from the Grimm – but I see no point in joining in myself.”

“That’s a shame. I know you’d be very skilled, just as Winter and Weiss are.”

Maybe he was laying it on a little thick but Jaune was a young boy once, and a little bit of motivation went a long way.

“W-Well of course I would be,” he stood a little taller. “Schnee’s have been known to make remarkable warriors.”

“Weiss is carrying on their legacy. She is one of Beacon’s best students.”

“Yes, well – that’s... good,” Whitley said lamely, shooting a look at Weiss before looking away. “I suppose we shouldn’t forget our roots.”

“No, we shouldn’t,” Willow agreed, her smile brittle. “Thank you for sharing, young man – but it appears that it is time for dinner,” she stood, setting her glass down on a small table next to the couch. “Come, your father awaits.”

Or so they believed. When they arrived in the dining room, the food had already been set out on the long table but there was no sign of the Schnee family patriarch.

“Klein, where is my husband?” Willow asked.

“He told me to inform you that he will be late, and that you should eat without him.”

Weiss frowned. “This was his idea.”

She didn’t sound terribly upset about it, though. Neither did Willow, who almost seemed to sigh in relief, the subtle tension in her shoulders lessening.

“He is a busy man. I apologize, Jaune. You’ve come all this way, and work keeps my husband away.”

“It is no problem, ma’am,” he said. “Truly.”

“Please, sit,” she gestured to a chair. “It looks like the chefs have outdone themselves once again.”

Had they ever. The dining table was capable of sitting over twenty people easily, and their section of the table was covered in food. Jaune felt his mouth water as his eyes settled on the arranged dishes. There was succulent roast lamb, infused with rosemary and drizzled in some sort of mint glaze, baked fish in a citrus sauce and garnished with parsley, freshly shucked oysters still in the half-shell, golden roast potatoes and pumpkin, lush salads with cherry tomatoes and cucumber, warm bread rolls just out of the oven, and even more. There was way too much food, and it must have shown on his face because Weiss said, “Don’t worry. The leftovers are eaten by the staff.”

That was good. He supposed they did have a lot of staff, waiters lining the walls, waiting to be called forth. Klein stood behind Willow, producing a fresh bottle of wine but she waved it away.

“I’m good tonight, thank you, Klein,” she said, and Weiss and Whitley both looked shocked to hear it.

“Please, Jaune – eat whatever you like,” Willow said and he nodded.

“Thank you, ma’am. It looks delicious.”

“Would you like anything to drink, sir?” one of the waiters asked.

“Just water, please.”

Jaune filled his plate as the waiter fetched him a glass of water, and then dug in. The lamb was so tender it parted effortlessly beneath his knife, and the flavor of lamb and mint exploded across his tongue. The roasted potato was expertly done, crunchy on the outside but soft and fluffy on the inside, the pumpkin soft and infused with garlic. The fish was the perfect balance of tangy and salty, the white flesh flaking away with little pressure.

This was on the level of a high end restaurant. Jaune could see himself becoming a glutton if he had access to this level of food every day.

“So – Jaune, tell me about your home, are you from Vale?”

Jaune was happy to share, he always liked talking about where he was from. Whitley scoffed when he heard he was from a small little farming village in the middle of nowhere, yet he was listening just as intently as his mother was as Jaune regaled them with stories of his childhood. His parent’s farmhouse was about as far removed as you could get from Schnee Manor, and the contrast was what made the stories interesting to them.

“You’ve got seven sisters...?” Whitley asked doubtfully. “That is impossible.”

“You should have told my parents that.”

Weiss appeared enthralled by the fact that her mother and brother were actually listening, and seemed genuinely interested in what he was saying. There was this look of disbelief on her face as she looked back and forth between them whenever one would ask a question, and when they finished their food, dessert was rolled out.

Orange cheese cake with vanilla ice cream and whipped cream. The flavors paired very well together, the crust buttery as it crumbled in his mouth. The zestiness of the orange glaze and the creamy vanilla ice cream was magnificent, and Jaune found himself having another slice.

“What do you like to do in your spare time, Whitley? You must still be in high school, right?”

“I attend the finest private institute in Atlas,” he answered, chest puffed. “Whitestone Hall. Only the very best are accepted.”

“It’s an all boy’s school,” Weiss chimed in.

“Yes, thank you, sister – as I was saying, only the best are even considered. A school for the elites.”

“You must have good grades,” Jaune praised. “Do you play any sport?”

“I do not, though they have come to me several times attempting to recruit me to the polo team.”

It took Jaune a few moments to figure out what that meant.

“Oh, like on horseback – do you ride?” he asked. “That’s one thing I miss about being at Beacon. I used to ride almost every day but now that I’m in Vale, I’ve probably gotten a little rusty.”

“Whitley is quite good on a horse,” Willow spoke up, taking a delicate bite of her dessert. “For all that he despises physical exertion, that is one pursuit that he takes seriously when he applies himself.”

Whitley flushed lightly, scowling. “Mother, please – while I am quite adept on horseback, I have no time for such frivolous activities.”

“Everyone needs a hobby,” Jaune pointed out.

Whitley hesitated.

“Father says that it is only a distraction.”

“Well said, Whitley,” a new voice spoke, carrying with it a snide undercurrent, and Jaune saw all three Schnee’s tense as one. “Distractions can be costly, and a Schnee does not accept that which can be costly.”

Jacques Schnee was of average height with a slim build, his white hair slicked back and his bushy mustache trimmed neatly. He carried himself with an air of supreme confidence, striding into the room without a care, dressed in a very handsome white double-breasted suit. Narrow eyes observed them as if they were all beneath him, and Jaune *felt* the air shift, the room suddenly filled with tension. Any of the good cheer that previously existed was sucked out of the room in an instant.

“Ah, and this must be my wayward daughter’s friend,” Jacques opened his arms as if in welcome, and yet it did not feel welcoming at all. “John, was it?”

Jaune quickly stood and turned to face him. "Jaune, sir. Jaune Arc. Thank you for the gracious invitation."

He offered a hand and Jacques stared at it, as if he was offering him something particularly disgusting. There was a long beat of silence before finally, he reached out and grasped his hand for a brief instant before letting go.

"Jaune Arc," he tested the name, inspecting him critically. "A friend from Beacon."

"Yes, sir."

"And how *is* my daughter performing at Beacon? Please, do tell."

"She is one of Beacon's top students, sir."

"One of? So not *the* top student?" Jacques questioned, glancing at Weiss who shrunk back. "A pity."

Jaune felt a flare of anger ignite in his heart, a sudden resentment flashing brightly. Whitley had also been openly snide but it had carried with it the bratty petulance of a younger sibling, and it had washed off Weiss' back easily. But the words of her father were like a slap to the face, and he hated seeing Weiss shy away as if *ashamed*.

She had *nothing* to be ashamed of.

"Weiss scored top marks in many of our classes. It is not a stretch to say that she is Beacon's best."

The defence leapt from his mouth before he could even process it, and Jacques returned his attention back to him.

"Is that so?"

"Very much so, sir."

"Hm – you are her team leader, I am told."

Jaune nodded. "That's right."

"They trusted you to lead my daughter, but not the other way around," Jacques probed. "Why do you think that is?"

"I'm sorry, sir – but I believe you are looking at this the wrong way."

It felt as if the air grew colder.

Jacques arched an eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh? Do explain this to me."

“It isn’t that they believed I was the most suited to the task, and not your daughter,” Jaune explained. “It is that they believed I would benefit the most from the position. It’s possible that they believed I lacked something, and being team leader would help me find it.”

Jacques contemplated his words, their eyes meeting. Jaune refused to look away, and after a moment, Jacques nodded, as if satisfied.

“Then that is how I will see it, going forward,” he said dismissively, turning to observe his family. “Willow – please, keep entertaining our guest. I have been called away on urgent business, so I will be absent tonight.”

Willow nodded, eyes lowering. “Yes, husband.”

“I expect nothing but perfection when it comes to your performance,” he directed at Weiss, voice stern. “No distractions. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” Weiss said sourly.

Jacques shot Jaune one last calculating glance before sweeping from the room, leaving behind the sort of turmoil that couldn’t be seen, only felt.