

Mistral was pretty different from Vale. Where Vale was built in the shadow of a great mountain range, nestled against the ocean within a fertile valley with great, flat plains and forests all around, Mistral was built amongst the towering mountainous peaks, their roads and pathways winding ever higher into the clouds. Their buildings were typically built out of wood with tiled, sloping roofs, though the larger ones were built upon stone foundations. There was something... *old* about the vibe, and thinking back on his History lessons, Jaune did recall it being mentioned that out of the four current, established kingdoms, Mistral was the oldest.

Jaune couldn't deny the beauty on display. The views were breathtakingly beautiful, the upper canopy of the surrounding forest land stretching out like a sea of green down below. The cherry blossoms were in full bloom, as well. Everywhere he walked, a carpet of pink petals covered the pathways, and the lakes were often shrouded in the early morning by mist.

At any other time, he would have taken a moment to drink it all in, and let it into his heart. But for some time now, his heart had been cold and closed off. There was only one thing on his mind, and he did not have room for anything else.

No, that wasn't quite true, was it?

Jaune leaned against the railing of his balcony, the early morning sun only beginning to crest the horizon. Shafts of light passed through the gaps in the mountain peaks, casting luminescence across everything they touched. Everyone else was still asleep, but Jaune found little rest in sleep these days and often woke early. Long before everyone else.

His scroll felt like a weighted stone in his pocket, calling to him – but he ignored it, a rare moment of control. It didn't matter. He didn't need to see her face and hear her words, for they were etched within his mind.

Pyrrha's death had almost broken him.

Pyrrha... he never deserved such an amazing, brilliant partner such as her. Jaune had been truly blessed, partnered with the best. But not only that, she was kind, and funny, and... she loved him.

That... had been a shock.

The feeling of her lips on his lingered, even now. But it wasn't an enjoyable memory. It was one filled with pain, and betrayal, and regrets.

A kiss... moments before she sent him away, because he wasn't *good enough*. Too weak to stand by her side, where he should have been. Too weak to have her back, like a partner should. Maybe if he'd been there, then she wouldn't have fallen.

It was wishful thinking, but the killer here was... he would never *know*. What was done was done, and there was no going back. There was no way of knowing if his presence could have changed things, and it was something he had to live with for the rest of his life.

Maybe... just maybe, he could have saved her. If she had trusted him to stand side-by-side with her, and face their enemy together.

Pain quickly turned to anger, and he thought of *her*. Cinder Fall.

Vengeance burned in his heart, justice for his partner. When Ruby had revealed her plan, that she had a lead she wished to follow, he had jumped at the chance. An opportunity to put things right. As right as they would ever be.

It was something to focus on. Something to channel his rage and pain into.

But could he actually do it, when the time came? Could he take a life?

Revenge wasn't all he thought about these days, though. As much as he tried to bury himself in it.

Blake...

At first, he'd been hurt. Why wouldn't he be? Her place was with them, with *him*. Pyrrha was dead, their school was in ruins and Vale was besieged by Grimm. With all that going on, *why would she leave?*

It stung like betrayal – but then days turned to weeks, and as his temper cooled, he began to see reason.

He was still angry with her. Her decision to leave wasn't something he agreed with, but with a cooler head, Jaune began to think it over. Blake wouldn't have left for no good cause. Yang's disfigurement played a part, no doubt. Jaune heard that it was Adam Taurus who caused Yang's injury, and he understood the significance of that. The guilt must have been eating Blake alive.

But it can't have only been that.

Jaune liked to think he knew her pretty well. Even if it didn't make sense to anyone else, Blake believed that she needed to leave. And Jaune had a pretty good idea on where she had fled to.

He just wished she was by his side.

The pain of Pyrrha's death would still remain. Thoughts of revenge would continue. But with Blake with him, then maybe it wouldn't hurt quite so much. With Blake by his side, perhaps he could live for something more than just ending the life of that vile woman who had ruined everything.

If he could just see her face. Hear her voice. Touch her skin. Inhale that scent that was unique to her, and her alone.

He missed her.

Jaune sighed, straightening up. He needed to do something. Take his mind off things.

Leaving his room, he padded down the hallway quietly, careful not to disturb his friends. As he descended the stairs, he spotted Qrow sprawled out on one of the couches, an empty bottle discarded beside him. Hesitating, Jaune walked over and grabbed a comforter off the other couch, throwing it over his body.

Satisfied, he left the house and began walking down the street, letting his feet take him wherever they willed.

Things had taken a strange turn in the last couple of days.

They'd visited Haven and met with Headmaster Lionheart, and learned that the situation in Mistral was dire. Qrow's sister, Yang's mother, was in possession of the Spring Maiden, but they had no Huntsmen to spare. The Mistralian council was focused on the prospect of war after what happened in Vale, and had no men to spare. Not only that, but Raven was some sort of bandit leader with a considerable force of her own.

But this wasn't even the craziest part. Jaune knew about the Maiden's already. That magic was real. Pyrrha had been their choice to become the Fall Maiden after the previous one had been brutalized by that horrid woman, Cinder Fall. The Maiden's were only the tip of the ice burg, though.

A young boy had turned up by the name of Oscar Pine, claiming to be Professor Ozpin. It sounded ridiculous, unbelievable – and yet Qrow believed him. At first, Jaune thought that perhaps Ruby's uncle had finally drunk enough to pickle his brain – but then Ozpin showed them proof, by telling them things only he could have known.

Day by day, Jaune was learning that he knew nothing of the world.

Jaune walked with no particular destination in mind, boots scuffing against the cobblestoned streets. A few businesses were already opening for the day, and it wasn't long until the scent of freshly baked bread and pastries filled the air. An oxen drawn cart rumbled by, laden with fruit and vegetables bound for a local grocer. Children bound for school left their homes, racing by with hurried steps so they didn't miss the bus.

It was all very normal. But below the surface, there was a tension that was easy to miss if you weren't looking for it.

The world had witnessed what happened to Vale. It had been broadcast far and wide, the Vytal Festival – an event about unity – turned into one of fear. They had seen the Grimm. They had seen the Atlesian droid soldiers turn on those they were meant to protect. They had seen the android Penny, whom everyone believed to be a real girl but instead was... *what?*

Why were Atlas trying to hide their machines under the facade of a young woman? Why the deception?

Those were the questions people were asking themselves. With Vale brought low, and Atlas' intentions questioned on the world stage – Mistral was awaiting the next hammer blow.

Jaune stopped by one of the bakeries and purchased some small pastries. Small flaky crusts decorated with chocolate, or glaze, and when he bit into them, they filled his mouth with buttery sweetness. He continued to walk as he consumed his meal until he came upon a park, and within, a large lake. Ringed by cherry blossom trees, it appears as though the water was tinted pink, though it was just the reflection of the blossoms. He found a bench and sat, stretching his legs out.

This would have been a nice spot to bring Blake.

What was she doing right now? Was she with her parents? Because that is where he figured she would go. Back to Menagerie. Did they make up? She'd been so scared of their reaction, worried that she no longer had a place with them. Had they worked things out? Jaune hoped so. It had been clear to him that she loved her parents, despite their differences.

If only he could have been there with her.

That had been the plan. She would come meet his family, and then he would go meet hers. Blake would suffer the natural disaster that were his sister's, and then he would endure the disapproval of a teenage girl's father.

When things had been simpler.

He pulled out his scroll and browsed through his gallery of pictures. Every time Pyrrha's face appeared, it felt like a sword pierced his heart, and so he skipped over those quickly and found

amber eyes and raven black tresses. He admired her slim nose and high cheeks, and those lush pink lips.

They'd taken quite a few photos together, but Jaune had snapped even more when she was unaware. A smile touched his lips as he saw some of the earlier ones, back before he realized what he felt for her, before Blake had approached him that night in the library and stolen his breath. Blake at the amusement park, eyes gazing around in wonder. Blake dressed in her maid uniform, disgruntled at his appearance at her work place. Between classes, hurrying through the hallways with her team. Lazing about under a tree, a book resting against her chest, vulnerable, carefree.

She was beautiful in every single one. Even the ones where she was frowning, like when he jokingly snapped a picture after saying something particularly dumb to rile her up. She was fun to tease, and Jaune discovered why Yang liked to do it so often.

But seeing her in these pictures only reminded him of the last time they spoke.

It was after Yang's match with Mercury, and the fiasco that resulted. Now they knew it was planned by Cinder Fall to cause division, and to whip up negative sentiment within the population. But back then?

They hadn't known any of that.

Blake was understandably upset – but what Jaune hadn't realized was just *how* upset she'd been.

"Jaune," Ruby had said in surprise when she answered the door, finding him gracing their doorstep. The atmosphere within the room had been intense, and Jaune had felt it immediately. "What are you...?"

He looked over her shoulder and spotted Weiss standing by the window, her arms crossed tightly, as if she were shielding herself from something. Yang was seated on one of the beds, her long blonde hair hanging around her face like a curtain, obscuring her expression. A further glance showed that Blake was nowhere to be seen.

“How is Yang?” he asked softly.

Despite what had happened, despite what he had witnessed with his own eyes, he was concerned for his friend. The world saw Yang lash out at a defeated opponent, breaking his leg. Jaune saw the same thing.

But that didn’t alter the fact that Yang was a friend. A friend he cared for very much.

Ruby sighed, casting a worried look over her shoulder. “...Not good.”

“Can I do anything to help?”

“No... I don’t think so...” Ruby began, eyes full of gratitude before she paused. “Actually... maybe you could speak to Blake?”

Jaune blinked. “Blake?”

Ruby nodded, stepping out and closing the door. “She and Yang had a fight.”



“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Ruby laughed hollowly. “It wasn’t good. She thinks...”

Ruby struggled to verbalize it, but Jaune caught the gist.

“Right.”

“Do you...?” Ruby hesitated. “Do you believe Yang... she says that she saw him attacking her, that’s why she lashed out but...”

“I know what I saw,” Jaune said. “But I also know Yang. And I don’t believe Yang is the sort of person to act so maliciously.”

Ruby nodded. “Right? Something must have happened!”

But what? Because all the evidence pointed at Yang intentionally attempting to cripple another student after the fight was won.

“I’ll go find her,” Jaune promised. “Though when Blake doesn’t want to be found, you know how that goes...”

Ruby placed a hand on his arm, squeezing gently. "Thank you, Jaune."

"No problem. Give Yang my support, okay?"

She beamed. "She'll appreciate that. A lot."

When Blake had her argument with Weiss about the White Fang, she'd fled down to Vale. There was a possibility she'd done the same here, but Jaune decided to check the most likely spots at Beacon first. Having spent so much time with her lately, he knew where she liked to go when she wanted to be alone.

It hadn't taken Jaune long at all to find her.

There was a tree she liked to use whenever she was feeling particularly stressed out, and wanted some time away from her team. Usually, Jaune would find her here reading a book, or just staring off into space, and that is exactly what she was doing this time.

She was so out of it that she hadn't heard him approach, and her reaction when he tugged on her dangling foot was violent.

"Woah~!" Jaune shouted as she flipped down off the branch and landed on him in a fury, pinning him to the ground, straddling his hips. He didn't struggle, simply smiling as she glared down at him for a moment before recognition filtered through her eyes.

"Jaune?"

“Hi,” he said softly, and when she realized she was practically choking him with one hand, she released him quickly, trying to back away.

Jaune didn’t let her, seizing her waist with both hands and holding her still, Blake freezing.

“Jaune,” she said timidly. “Jaune, I’m sorry – I didn’t mean to... you just startled me, that’s all!”

“It’s okay,” he said soothingly, expression open. “I get it. Are you okay?”

Her mouth pulled into a thin line. “What do you think?”

“Yeah. Stupid question. Sorry.”

She sighed, and slowly, she leaned down until her front was pressed against his chest. He released her waist and embraced her in a hug, and he felt her melt against him.

“Did someone send you out here?” she asked softly.

He nodded. “Ruby. I went to your room and... well, it was pretty tense.”

“That was my fault...” she muttered.

“Want to talk about it?”

A bout of silence stretched between them, and he thought that was answer enough. But then she sighed again, burying her face against his neck, and said. “My head says one thing, but my heart says another. I don’t know what to listen to.”

“What does your head say?”

“That I’ve seen someone I care about fall before,” her voice was brittle. “Someone who I believed beyond reproach, someone that I admired and looked up to. I turned a blind eye to his faults, until they were impossible to ignore. The action that broke the camels back... it wasn’t the first. It was just the first time I accepted it with my eyes wide open.”

One of her hands fisted his shirt, tightening her grip.

“And your heart?” he asked gently.

“...That Yang would never harm a person in that way, not ever. That as hotheaded as she can get, she isn’t cruel. She isn’t malicious. But I saw it happen. We all saw it happen, didn’t we?” she implored, and he nodded.

“Yeah. I saw.”

“So how could it be anything else?”

“She says she saw him attacking her,” he said. “That’s why she struck.”

“But that isn’t what happened, is it?”

“No,” he sighed. “That isn’t what happened. At least, that isn’t what we saw.”

She nuzzled her cheek against him, and Jaune tightened his hold on her body.

“I don’t know what to do,” she admitted, voice wavering. “I’ve been wrong before, Jaune. People aren’t always what they seem...”

Jaune understood. Their past shaped who they were, and while it should never control you in all aspects, there was no escaping that fact. Blake had trusted before, even when perhaps her instincts warned her otherwise, and she was burned for it. Someone close to her had turned out to be a bad egg, and now it felt like history was repeating itself.

It wasn’t so unusual to try protect yourself.

“I’m not going to tell you what to think,” he said, voice no more than a whisper. “I don’t have that right. All I can do is share my own opinion. Do you want to listen?”

She nodded, curling against him. “I do. I always want to hear your opinion.”

So he told her.

He shared his confusion and shock at what transpired, and spoke of his doubts. His eyes didn't lie. Yang attacked a downed opponent. He saw it. Everyone saw it. It was on camera. It happened. But then he revealed his desire to believe in her, because Yang had always believed in him. When he had been trying to talk to Weiss, earlier in the year, Yang had been supportive. She never looked down on him, even when Weiss shot him down bluntly. She even told him that she was rooting for him.

He talked about how Ruby believed in her sister. Ruby, who knew Yang better than any of them. She could be optimistic, even a little naive – but Jaune knew that Ruby wasn't stupid. She wasn't blinded to the faults of others, even if she was willing to ignore them. More than Yang's own words, it was Ruby's belief that reinforced his own.

Blake listened quietly as he spoke and even when he finished, remained silent. They lay together for a long time, simply basking in each other's presence. Taking strength from one another, and comfort.

"I..." she finally said, voice a little clogged. "Thank you, for being honest."

"I'll always be honest with you," he told her. One of his hands found her silky hair and began stroking it, fingers carding through it effortlessly. She sighed. "Even if it isn't something you want to hear. Even if it is difficult. I'll be honest."

After that, she claimed his lips in a searing kiss. One filled with passion and love, and they made out until their jaws cramped and their lips felt as if they would crack from the friction. It left them both feeling hot and giddy, but they didn't press it. Looking back, Jaune regretted not laying with her one final time – but how was he to know that the world would flip upside down, their lives never the same again?

"Kid?"

Jaune blinked before turning his head.

“Qrow?” he asked, surprised. “You’re alive.”

Qrow Branwen scowled. “Very funny. You know, maybe you should have become a comedian instead of a Huntsman.”

Ruby’s uncle approached and sat beside him on the bench, slouching as was his fashion. Jaune peered at him curiously.

“You’re up early,” Qrow pointed out.

Jaune shrugged. “I’m always up early.”

Qrow grunted. “True.”

“I’m surprised you’re awake, when I left the house, you looked out for the count.”

“I have a few final leads to chase up...” Qrow then grimaced. “But it isn’t looking good.”

Jaune knew that Qrow was attempting to find Huntsmen to join them in their endeavor to secure the Spring Maiden, but he had been tight-lipped about his progress. From his tone, it didn't sound like things were going well.

"That bad?"

Qrow nodded, face grim. "That bad. Worse than I thought. Everyone on my contact list that I've attempted to meet with is MIA. Every. Single. One."

Jaune frowned. "That... how is that possible?"

"Beats me, kid. Dozens of Huntsmen and Huntresses, gone. Vanished like smoke on the wind, and no one knows anything. Either they all decided to skip town at the same time, or..."

"They're dead," Jaune said blankly.

"Bingo," Qrow scoffed. "But if that is the case, then this kingdom is all but undefended. And the Mistralian council, and Lionheart know it."

"He never mentioned anything about this."

"No," Qrow said darkly. "He didn't."



Why would he leave such an important piece of information out? That Mistral's Huntsmen force had been depleted so thoroughly. So they wouldn't panic? If the populace was to learn this, it would be a devastating blow to morale. Especially on the back of what had happened in Vale.

"I've got a few more names to chase down, but... I'm not feeling optimistic about it," Qrow clucked his tongue. "It's looking like we are all alone in this."

"...Do you want some company?"

Qrow glanced at him, eyebrow arched.

"What?" Jaune asked defensively.

There was a beat of silence, and then, "Sure. Why not? Maybe you'll learn a thing or two about how shitty this world really is," Qrow then sighed. "Not that you don't already know that."

Jaune accompanied him down into the lowest levels of the city. He hadn't been here long but Jaune had quickly picked up that the poorest and those disadvantaged lived on the lower levels, and the area was rife with criminal activity. Mistral was a beautiful jewel stacked upon poverty, and as they approached a run down house – no more than a shack, really – Jaune was reminded that sometimes, beauty really was only skin deep.

He kept his eyes trained on their surroundings as Qrow knocked. There was no answer, so he knocked again, and then again, until finally the door creaked open. It was a man of similar age to Qrow, his face heavily lined, jawline covered in five o'clock shadow. His eyes were the first thing Jaune noticed though.

He was tired. A deep exhaustion that went beyond the physical.

Qrow noticed too, faltering briefly before saying. “Hi – I’m looking for Heather. Is she here?”

The man said nothing, staring at them sadly, and Jaune knew without him saying anything.

Heather wasn’t there.

She wouldn’t be there again.

A young girl appeared at the man’s side, no older than five. She peered up at them hopefully, voice begging, “Do they know where mommy is?”

Jaune swallowed.

Qrow closed his eyes briefly, his shoulders sagging. “I’m sorry.”

The man nodded, ushering the girl back, her hope crushed. Jaune saw it bleed out of her, replaced by despair. When the door shut, he found himself rooted to the spot as Qrow began moving away.

“Kid?”

Jaune turned and followed.

They tried a few more places, but it was more of the same. They hadn't been seen in months. Qrow struck them off his list until there was no one left. Dozens of names.

"This isn't normal," Jaune muttered.

"No," Qrow said tiredly. "No, it isn't."

The last place they visited was a bar. Jaune waited outside as Qrow went in. For a moment, he thought he just wanted another drink but when he came out, there was a sadness shrouding him that was haunting. Jaune didn't ask what this visit was about, and they slowly made their way back to their temporary accommodations.

"Oh, um," they were greeted by their newest companion. Oscar Pine was young – younger than Ruby, and from what he'd shared, was a farm hand on his aunt's farm. He wasn't a Huntsman – hadn't even met many before. But now he had the soul of a wizard inside him. "Welcome back?"

Jaune smiled to set him at ease. "Thanks. Where is everyone?"

"In the lounge," Oscar pointed, and he followed the boy in. Qrow slunk into the kitchen, and Jaune overheard the clink of bottles from the refrigerator.

"Jaune," Ruby said happily, perking up. "Where have you been? When we woke up, you were gone."

"I went for a walk," he admitted. "And then I ran into your uncle. He had some errands to run, so I tagged along."

Nora looked worried but he shot her a smile, one that she returned after a moment.

"Sorry, I should have said something," he continued. "I didn't think I'd be out so long."

It was already well after noon, and his stomach grumbled in protest. He hadn't eaten at all today, skipping breakfast and lunch, so was it any wonder that he was suddenly ravenous?

"Here," Ren passed him a packet of chips, one he tore open gladly.

"Maybe we should have an early dinner?" Nora suggested.

But at that moment, something truly unbelievable happened. Out of nowhere, a great big rend opened up in the middle of the room, startling everyone. Jaune choked on his chips as he hastily reached for Crocea Mors, readying himself for some type of attack.

And then Yang walked out as if it were the most normal thing in the world, carefully leading her motorbike in beside her. Everyone stared at her, shocked – and then were further bamboozled when Weiss Schnee appeared behind her.

"Uh... what?" Nora said dumbly.

"Hey guys," Yang smirked, though her eyes appeared a little tight. "What's up?"

