

Jaune, in his time at Beacon, had repeatedly found himself surprised by the smallest things. Most of the time, it was over how much things hadn't actually changed. Oh, there *was* change, of course...but barely anywhere it mattered that he could think of, besides the venue and some, quite frankly, *odd* differences between Hunters and Civilians that still left him feeling kind of uncomfortable.

Without Blake (even if she'd caused it in the first place), he'd have exploded on the first day of school. That wasn't an exaggeration either. He'd have gone up in a ball of smoke and charred Arc bits...or so had been his thinking at the time. He hadn't quite internalized that he had Aura yet so, while everyone else had been...not happy, but fine, he'd been hyperventilating from behind a nearby tree. Freaking out about how he'd almost died while everyone else had brushed themselves off and Blake had given him a blank stare, as was her wont. Not exactly comforting.

Weiss still hadn't forgiven him for the loss of a good third of her dust stock and an entire bag of clothing. He hadn't expected her to, knowing her as much as he did, but it had been a month already...and it wasn't like she couldn't have afforded a million more of whatever she'd lost. At this point, Jaune suspected that her enmity was running purely on habit and sheer bloody-minded spite.

He'd given up on changing that, deciding it was a lost cause a while ago. Sometime around his eighth birthday actually, when she'd called him a weedy something or other... Ruby made up for it though. After he'd come out, helped her out of the crater, and explained himself, she'd been very understanding about everything. She actually kinda reminded Jaune of himself, but cuter. The older, overbearing, more socially aware and developed sister that overshadowed her in nearly everything hadn't hurt that comparison in the slightest.

They'd bonded quickly over shared experiences...and he was more than a little glad he hadn't brought Crocea Mors. When everyone else had a weapon that was also a gun and you were the only one left out...that sounded like a situation that would get awkward quickly. Like a fart in a business meeting, where the currency you were going to lose that day was the respect of your peers and that new kid mystique.

*A sniper-scythe?* Who had thought that one up and what had they been on to make turning such a thing into reality sound like a good idea? He couldn't even begin to imagine how to use it himself...but, from seeing her in action, it was apparently workable and not at all deadly to the user even if it really should have been. It didn't matter how much you weighed or how strong you were. A single shot being all you needed to get on top of a building was an impressive amount of firepower, and more than enough to cave his chest in like a steel toe boot on a sand castle.

There was something to be said about having a friend that was stronger than you, thought you were funny and *really* liked your cooking...even if they were a foot shorter than you and two

years younger. School, he'd come to realize, was more than a little similar to what he'd heard prison was like on late night TV...besides the fact that he'd never been forced to throw Blake at someone and hope for the best, obviously. Similar didn't mean the same after all.

He was pretty sure that Miss Goodwitch would have had something to say about that if he had... Oh well. Winchester didn't seem the type that was going to last all that long in school or in the real world from what Jaune had seen (felt). From what Ruby had told him, Cardin and his team weren't exactly at the top of the board in anything...which wasn't surprising. Anyone willing to pull on a Caerbannog breed's ears as a joke, repurposed as a fashion model or not, was too stupid to live.

Coco was an odd one but, seeing as she'd inherited Velvet from her mother and wasn't dead yet, she'd clearly read the manual and hadn't been repeatedly dropped on her head as a child. Or ate enough paint chips to fill a can with. Good for her.

Flicking his pencil away to ping against the decorative vase in the middle of Glynda's table, Jaune let his face hit his homework so that he could wrap his arms around his head with a groan.

Right now, he felt like *he'd* been eating paint chips. He was no slouch when it came to school work or anything, but he was starting to get the idea he wasn't supposed to be doing it all by himself. It was possible, yes, but not exactly what he was supposed to be doing. That was just an idea though. He had no real proof that this was the case...all he had to back him up was that, unlike everyone else his age, he wasn't in the Dorms right now. Instead, he lived with one of the teachers. A hot older woman that wasn't around for most of the day anyway, and didn't have the time to really help him when she was around.

If he'd been a Hunter, his life would have been so much easier. He'd have been cool. He'd have had all kinds of friends and been invited to all the best parties. His confidence, stunning good looks and impeccable martial skills would have seen him through everything that might have come his way... Yeah. That was how it would have been. How it *should* have been.

Jaune, his now aching skull still buried in the hollow of his arms, groaned once more.

His golden years. Gone before they had ever really existed. Here lay Jaune of Arc, Hero. Savior...and totally not a virgin anymore, shut up, Amber.

... But no. Those days were, once again, gone. Here he was, stuck calculating optimal Dust-to-air ratio for various ammunition types for a specific caliber, one which was currently falling out of favor in the face of customized calibers... A series of events which had only resulted in him getting assigned homework on how to calculate the ratio for said custom calibers. Which was, thanks to there being no such thing as standardization when it came to

custom work, at least 10 times more complex thanks to the normal formulas not being nearly so robust as they had used to be in the face of this multi-headed monster.

This wasn't even *Hunting* homework. Purely civilian, administrative stuff. This was the sort of logistics that came with the management of a village or a compound. The sort of work Sapphire had been raised on. *This was not his speciality.*

His fingers were grey from the sheer amount of graphite on them. His hands were cramping. He was almost out of pencil lead. The scrap paper bin was clean and - wait. No. That wasn't right. It should have been overflowing... Right?

Jaune could only stare at it. His brain so fried from the sheer amount of math he had to do, and him forcing back a bout of frustrated tears over the past three hours, that it wasn't working anymore. Not correctly anyway. No thinky good, much dumb. No know make fire. Booga.

... Was he losing his mind? Because it was starting to feel like he was losing his mind.

"I emptied it a few times while you were busy," Kali's voice pleasantly chimed in, reminding him that he wasn't alone and assuaging some of his doubts as to his sanity. That made a lot more sense. "I was thinking that you might have needed a little pick-me-up."

A cup of tea was placed in front of him, still steaming and minty. With a dash of honey too, just like Jaune liked it. The blonde drank from it without even thinking about it, his expectations fulfilled as always and he'd never thought it would have been otherwise.

He had no idea what he would have done without Kali. Or what his parents or sisters would have done for that matter. She'd been a part of the Arc Household for longer than any of them, besides his Grandfather, had been alive. If anyone would know anything and everything about them, their every taste and preference, it would be her... Living without her chocolate chip cookies, or her subtly murderous yet watchful presence, was a life he didn't want to even seriously contemplate.

Those two things weren't at all unconnected. He'd had his fair share of cookies after a couple minutes of frolicking through a supposedly safe forest clearing had turned into a game of hunter and prey, with a random Grimm as the hunter. He'd never made that happen on purpose or anything. He just had one of those faces, he guessed...that he'd never even got himself a scratch during one of those times could have been considered a miracle by some people.

In his family's opinion though, it wasn't a miracle. It was that Kali was just that good...also, what the fresh *hell* had he been doing out there in the first place? Supposedly, going out into the woods without telling anyone was a bad thing.

... He knew that was a bad thing *now*, yes. But still. It wasn't like Kali, or any of the other Faunus in his family, would have ever let him get hurt. Not without a fight. They were better than that and, even as a child, he'd known that; to a dangerous degree, perhaps, but he'd known it, and still did, all the way to today.

If there was something that Kali couldn't handle by herself, Jaune never wanted to meet it. The difference between a hero and a martyr wasn't the type of difference that he enjoyed contemplating all that much. Making a difference or not, he kind of wanted to see it after...and he didn't think he'd be the only one to go out in a blaze of glory if that ever happened. That was just a hunch. An inkling, really...it made sense.

Kali raised a brow at him questioningly, most likely due to his sudden case of silence, and he gave her a weak shrug and a smile in return as he listlessly tapped the end of his pencil on paper.

He might have had some problems when it came to his own safety (he'd been told his views were a little skewed when it came to danger...), but other people were an entirely different matter. Being a hero meant helping people and, if people didn't need help, there would have been no need for heroes. It had been the perfect job for him, he'd thought.

It would have been different, at least. His sisters had their own things going on, the ones that were old enough for it. His younger sisters weren't exactly talentless either, each of them excelling in school or sports or art. All the things that he'd...never been all that good at when he'd got around to them...that line of thought led to nothing but depression. Depression, and an empty bag of cheese puffs.

He needed to do something else. Anything else. There was still light outside, and it wasn't like classes lasted all day, right? Maybe Ruby had some free time...?

"Yeah. I need a break." Jaune dropped his pencil and pushed back his chair. The screech of the legs on the floor, and the disapproving look he got from Kali, made him wince. "Sorry about that. But it's true. I've been staring at the paper for the last thirty minutes and I'm not going anywhere fast.."

"Is it really that hard?" Kali asked politely as she plucked Jaune's cup off the table, nothing inside of it besides the dregs, and gave it a slight spin between her fingers. "What is the problem?"

Jaune gestured at it. Also politely. If he could have gotten away with it though, you'd better believe that he'd have been a lot more expressive about it. "See for yourself."

Kali, with that invitation, did. She looked hard and long, her face unmoving as she took it all in. It was a long wait.

“... Well?” Jaune prodded hopefully.

“Well.” Kali lifted her head. “It looks like you humans can’t even leave math alone for more than twenty years at a time. The last time I saw something like this, humans were still poking things to death with swords and spears. *Normal* swords and spears.” She clicked her tongue with distaste. “This Mechashift nonsense makes everything so complicated. What’s wrong with specialization, I ask you? One tool, one use? I’m going to have to relearn my numbers because of this. Again.”

“... So...?”

“I’m utterly lost,” Kali admitted shamelessly as she flapped her hand dismissively at him. “Get out of here. You’re clearly not getting anywhere by yourself. Take your work and show it to that friend of yours.” Her nose scrunched lightly as her lips pursed. “The one with the eyes. She’s good at that sort of thing.”

Jaune sighed a very tired sigh. “Her name is Ruby, Kali. Not ‘the one with the eyes’. I know you don’t like her but, come on. She’s my friend. Saying her name won’t hurt you.”

“You don’t know that.” Kali sniffed as she bustled past him and into the kitchen, most likely to go wash the cup she’d brought him. The only one she’d be bringing him today, if he was honest. Even if she’d suggested him meeting up with Ruby, she was going to be in a bad mood for the rest of the day. “Now, go. Do whatever it is that boys your age do these days. I have dinner to make and math books to read.”

“Yes mom,” Jaune let slip out of his mouth as a joke. Just a little snark to round out the day...and his hair instantly stood on end as the room’s temperature, metaphorically, dropped like a rock.

“I know your mother’s number by heart. Want to say that again?”

“Going!”

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“Huh....” Ruby scratched her chin with the sort of intensity one normally saw in Mistralian martial arts flicks. Like a wise elder that had found themselves faced with a new but interesting problem that their skills had been made for. “I can see why you came to me now. This is some, uh...” She squinted at the paper some more. “Stuff. Oh, jeez... Why are they even asking you this? Where would anyone even get this kind of money anyway?” She pointed at a line somewhere near the bottom. Somewhere... Jaune didn’t care about the specifics. It was all the same in the end. “Do you *know* how much a full cargo container for Grade-5 Milspec Dust costs?”

"It depends on the market and what kind of Dust you're asking for. The location, how badly you need it, and the danger involved in the delivery matters as well," Jaune remarked sullenly as Ruby's dog, Zwei, chewed his shoelaces to tatters. Damn thing had never liked him and Jaune had to admit that the feeling, past their first meeting, was mutual... If Ruby and him hadn't been such good friends, he'd have told a teacher about him by now, damn the consequences. That he could afford more shoelaces, thousands of them, wasn't the point. It was the principle of the matter. "It can go from five hundred-thousand at best to two-million at worst...from what I've heard. And, if you're unlucky, you're just throwing money and supplies down a well."

He'd never been told the reasoning for that, but he could guess. He wasn't *stupid*. He'd wanted to be a Huntsman for a reason.

Ruby, at the very thought of the numbers involved, and no doubt catching the implications, cringed. "*Oh, jeez*. I was just going to spitball a really high number or something. That's even worse than I thought."

"Yeah. That's what I said when I heard it. Saw it. Whatever." That there had been lots of screaming into a pillow involved after the first hour of mulling the work over had passed didn't need saying. "There's a lot of work that goes into making a compound work. More than most people think... God forbid the generators run dry for some reason or that the bullets run out. Might as well bend over and kiss your butt goodbye if you're out on the frontier when that happens."

Ruby's jaw hung loose for a second before coming back up so that she could form her lips into a pout. "Well aren't you just a big ball of sunshine? Why they haven't put you up on one of those happy outgoing colonist posters, I have no idea." Ruby poked her tongue out at Jaune to show there were no hard feelings. "Seriously though, this is just homework. We can think about all that other - stuff later. It's kind of a bummer, you know?"

... Oh. It kinda was, wasn't it? He had a right to be bummed out though, with homework like this.

"Ah... Whoops." Jaune ruffled the hair at the back of his head sheepishly. "Sorry, sorry. Homework blues, you know?"

"Pfft," Ruby rolled her eyes at him in commiseration, "tell me about it."

"Well, okay. I've been trying to work on this for the last two hours and-" A grinning Jaune was interrupted with a snort from Ruby and a slap to the shoulder. "Couldn't resist."

"I can see that." Ruby hummed as she pulled a pencil to herself. "Alright. First off, first question. You are under siege." Ruby's brow furrowed as her cadence started to slow. "You were recently resupplied with enough food for six months. Four months have already passed. You have a hundred-sixty occupants that each take up three units of food per day. There is no resupply or

reinforcements expected till another week has passed, due to the nature of the threat. Accounting for expected casualties, set at ten percent per day, how much food will be left...over?" Ruby raised her head, visibly horrified. "What the...the..." Ruby buried a hand in her hair. "What the snickerdoodling heck, Jaune!?"

Exactly. *Exactly*. He'd used stronger language, of course, but *exactly*.

"... Yeah. Professor Peach is kind of..." Jaune coughed and looked away from Ruby's accusing glare. For someone with such a cute name...they were kind of... Yeah. This wasn't his fault! Blame the system, not him! "That isn't making this any easier."

"Maybe we can work on some problems that aren't so...horrible!" Ruby said with forced cheer, trying to bring the mood back up in that way she did.

"Not really. They're all like this. She's a morbid kind of person," Jaune said with a sigh as he got up to reach for his backpack... Only to find himself flat on his face.

He'd forgotten about his laces.

"Damnit, Zwei!" Jaune cursed his canine nemesis. First Blake, and now this? Was it all connected?

"BARK!" Zwei barked triumphantly as he took a victorious stand on Jaune's rear and looked to Ruby for praise.

Ruby, in turn, slapped a hand against her face and proceeded to pretend that nothing had happened.