

Stress Relief

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In a world where your allies can be just as dangerous as your enemies, sometimes it can be difficult for a criminal mastermind to find a little stress relief. That blonde idiot, Jaune, was just unimportant enough, just malleable enough, to be a viable option. It was meant to be a one time thing, an easy lay. Emotions were never supposed to get involved.

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Chapter 1

Stress Relief here we go, I'd like to thank all my s for making this possible - as without you, this honestly might not have come out until June or July 2016 - so I hope everyone else will throw out a quick "thanks" to them. Do it right now, say it out loud.

I'll wait...

...

So the typical first chapter warnings, this story is rated M for mature, and that comes with a few extra warnings. While there will be no detailed lemons in this story (I'll make some separate ones if people honestly want them) - there will be references to sexual intercourse and some foreplay elements. So if you're against that kind of thing you might want to try looking elsewhere.

Also I'm trying a bit of an experiment in writing entirely from one person's PoV - namely Cinder's. So you'll never get to see Jaune's internal thoughts, meaning I'll be trying to show them in his actions, words and how he reacts to things. So you'll need to read a little deeper to catch everything.

I'm also trying a few other experiments, but I don't want to list them all as it will spoiler things - you'll see in time perhaps. Another warning will be that if canon suddenly changes things with Cinder massively, I might be forced to ignore it. Consider this AU obviously anyway, in that Jaune and Cinder don't really talk in the show. But if Cinder suddenly somehow becomes a "goodie" then I am ignoring it.

**Other than that I hope you like it, review if you enjoy xD -
Though honestly, it'll take a chapter or two to get into it**

anyway...

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter One

Sometimes, if you wanted a job doing properly - you just had to do it yourself.

Those were the words she used to comfort herself. A reminder as to why she'd chosen to submit to such mindless tedium. Not to mention the vast inconvenience. There were alliances to be forged, plans and schemes to be drafted, mulled over... and ultimately discarded.

There was work to be done, individuals to be monitored - others to be removed. The world shifted, as it was wont to do, and yet she was trapped at the one location where she couldn't affect it.

Beacon.

One of the premier schools for Hunters and Huntresses within the Kingdoms, and certainly the best in Vale. Future *protectors* were trained within these walls, and yet it was not them she had any real interest in. For Beacon held a treasure infinitely more valuable than the potential of a congregation of entitled youths.

Beacon held the CCT - the Cross-Continental Transmit Tower. The very device that enabled long-distance communication between Vale and the other Kingdoms. In a very real sense, Beacon was the gateway to the rest of the world.

It was also the one part of her plan that she could not afford to leave to anyone else. Even a single mistake at this stage would ruin what was almost a decade's worth of shady deals, underground movements and careful planning.

Assigning such a task to Roman - with his own peculiar way of messing things up? Not a chance. If she wanted the job done, then there was only one person on the face of Remnant she trusted enough to get it done.

Herself, Cinder Fall.

Securing her entry into the illustrious Beacon Academy have been the work of but a few days. One thing Roman was adept at, if nothing else, was forged documents - and a few generous donations to some of the admin at Haven Academy was enough to not only have her records added to the system, but even a few uniforms sent over for them to use. From there it had simply been a matter of waiting for the coming Vytal Festival, and the transferral of students to Beacon. With so many new faces in attendance, no one seemed to notice a few extra bodies.

How deliciously ironic that the very event that was supposed to promote international cooperation between the Kingdoms, would be what caused the fall of Vale.

She loved it.

It was just a little regrettable however, that she needed to remain in Beacon until an opportunity to sabotage the tower presented itself. For a woman as intelligent and experienced as her, the constant tedious lessons left her frustrated, while the incessant prattle of teenagers and children denied her any chance for peace and quiet.

Speaking of...

"Can the two of you keep quiet for a *single* moment?" She snapped, cutting through whatever asinine argument her two subordinates were having at that moment. Talented though Emerald and Mercury might both be, she wished their relationship relied a little less on banter and squabbling.

"Sorry," the grey-haired boy said as he stepped back from his partner. Her golden eyes watched him as he shifted nervously in place, pleased to see he dared not defy her.

"See," Emerald crossed her arms and smirked at the boy, "even the boss wants you to shut up."

"I believe I said the both of you." She said with a silent snarl as the smaller girl flinched. Their dorm room, cramped though it was, should have been a sanctuary for her. Somewhere she could get back to the work necessary to run their little operation - and yet every day she was forced to sit through their pointless chatter.

It was enough to drive her mad.

"I have neither the time, nor the inclination for your witless banter," she let her eyes drift from one to the other, "did you find out anything interesting - or not?"

"We did." Mercury said quickly, his loyalty as much as Emerald's was a constant question for her. They were both dedicated to her cause - she'd made sure of that. But there was no telling how far either of them could be pushed. There never could be with criminals and murderers - but you worked with what you tools were available. "General Ironwood is going to be here on the day of the school dance, about a week from now. Probably intends to use it as cover for spreading his forces out over the school."

Ah, the good General, always so very eager - so very predictable. It would be just like him to stick his nose where it didn't belong.

"And the other matter," she said as she turned to Emerald, "the team that interfered with Roman?"

"Team RWBY." The dark skinned girl reported quickly. Cinder listened intently as Emerald rattled off what little information she'd gleaned on that group. Of course, with how high-profile some of those girls were, the information was easy to obtain.

An entitled rich brat, an idealistic idiot, a book-worm with a suspicious interest in the White Fang - and a boastful party animal. The team sounded like a mess. Conflicting personalities and agendas. Just the sort of people Ozpin would consider putting together.

So they were the man's new pawns were they?

She wondered if they even realised it. It hadn't been difficult to find out what the initiation ceremony had been, and the use of chess pieces to represent their teams ought to have made it obvious. But if they were foolish enough not to notice? Well then, they deserved to be manipulated - and then thrown away like worn tools once their purpose was fulfilled.

Still... they'd interfered with Roman a number of times now, first at the dust stores - and more recently at the docks.

"Mercury and I could look to cause an accident, maybe remove on-"

"No." She cut into the smaller girl's suggestion, turning a fierce glare on the both of them. "You do *nothing*. I do not want another repeat of the book store - am I understood?" They nodded quickly, neither quite meeting her angry gaze.

She didn't care if they'd sought to *help out* when they decided to do that. They were to follow her orders to the letter, not gallivant off on their own little adventures. There was a reason she'd wanted Roman to handle that trifling little matter. His men had that special way of failing that would have served her purposes.

Now all she was left with was a dead faunus, and an alert police force.

"You will not do *anything* that might draw attention to us while we're here, do you understand?"

"We understand." They said in unison. She watched them for another second or two, looking for any signs of guilt or rebellion, before she turned back to her scroll - and the reports hidden there. Roman was still tasked with acquiring more dust, and thankfully seemed to be sticking to that task for now. Leaving him unattended while she dealt with the CCT had been a calculated risk - and one she didn't relish having made.

No one's loyalty was as weak as his. She would have to remove him in time, before he could become an even greater threat to her plans.

That little helper of his would need to be carefully watched as well. By far, she was the more dangerous of that duo. Cinder massaged her forehead, already she could feel a headache beginning to grow - as pain blossomed behind her eyes.

There was just too much to handle, too much that required her attention. And no one she could trust to look after it for her. Though even if there was, they would likely be just another threat she would need to guard her back from.

Being a criminal mastermind had never been easy, she knew that. She'd known it wouldn't be easy from the start, yet that hadn't stopped her. She just... just wished she could have a little peace and quiet.

"You look stressed," Emerald said quietly, almost uncertainly - as though she expected she might be incinerated for her temerity. When fiery death did not come however, the girl seemed to gather her confidence. "Maybe you should do something to relax - I'm not saying now," she rushed to add, as Cinder turned her gaze on the girl. "I just mean..."

"If you're stressed you won't be operating at full strength," Mercury chipped in, for once coming to the defence of his partner. "I think what Emerald is saying, is that you might want to take at least an hour or two off - just to rest."

Their words were true, she knew that. There was no use denying the stress she felt, it was a perfectly normal reaction to the workload she had - nor was she the kind of fool to punish her subordinates for speaking the truth just because she didn't want to hear it.

"Pray tell, what would you advise?" She questioned with a sigh. Her scroll dropped down onto the bed she was sat on as she regarded them both, one elegant brow raised. "The school week has just begun, and there's not much chance of me taking a Bullhead to Vale without raising suspicion."

Fine wine was hardly in abundance at the school either, and the ways the students might seek to relieve stress were not things she had an interest in. She couldn't even spar to burn off any energy, since she couldn't fight at full strength without revealing her semblance. Holding back in a fight for the sake of her charade would just frustrate her further.

"I don't know," the male member of their group said as he scratched his ear, "I just meant you might want to take some relaxation if you can - any stress relief is better than none, right?"

"And how would you relieve your stress?" She asked. The boy shifted nervously, he looked like he didn't want to provide an answer. Emerald laughed.

"Mercury would probably find some girl to try and make out with, or if no one would take him - just jerk off in a dark corner." Cinder rolled her eyes at their immaturity, even as the boy in question blushed tellingly. That wasn't something she'd really needed to know.

"It's a proven form of relieving stress!" He defended, even as Emerald fell onto her bed in laughter. "Shut up! At least I don't read shitty romance books like you."

"Of course, I forgot you prefer the artful masterpiece of X-ray and Vav!"

"Children," she chided with another sigh, before they could descend into yet another petty squabble.

Crude as their words might be, she couldn't deny the truth behind them. Migraines were becoming a common occurrence for her, and her temper was the worse for it. How long would it be before she snapped and did something she might regret? Or worse, failed to notice something and make a mistake?

Her mind had not betrayed her since she stepped foot on her path, and now - so close to the end - her body would not be allowed to falter either.

"Maybe we should get out of your hair for the evening," Emerald offered. And after a few seconds where Cinder pointedly did not dispute the suggestion, she rose to her feet and headed for the door. Mercury followed after her, though he turned before he left.

"You know boss, it might sound stupid - but maybe getting laid *would* help." She held up one hand, and he fled with a gulp - slamming the door behind him. With a tired sigh she let her arm fall back to the mattress, never once actually having summoned any fire. Not in Beacon, where the Deputy might recognise her.

No comforting heat or roaring flame to calm her frayed nerves. Without the heat coursing through her veins she felt cold - and so very tired.

So Mercury would get away with his foolish comment. No doubt he knew it too.

What a suggestion. She had not the time, nor the desire for a personal relationship - not to mention it would be yet another complication in her already busy life. She worked alone, the Queen of their organisation with no King to answer to.

Yet...

He hadn't necessarily said a partner... had he?

Her head tilted to one side, as she glanced at her reflection in the mirror that adorned the nearby wall. Dark locks fell across her pale face, casting dark shadows over one eye. The other half of her face shone in the dim light, alabaster skin gleaming softly while two orbs of brightest gold shone with intelligence, and concealed cruelty. She was beautiful, she knew that. She was a woman in her prime, dripping with sensuality.

A predator. Filled with danger, yet *oh* so tempting nonetheless.

It was a weapon she'd used many times before, back when her power was not so assured - her resources not quite so vast. Seducing, subverting, killing... how many times had she played the black widow on her desperate climb to the top?

How long had it been since she'd felt the need to employ such measures?

How long... since she'd experienced that pleasure?

At least a month... two or three at the most.

Six?

Surely it hadn't been over a year...?

She found she couldn't answer, and that didn't bode well. Was there perhaps merit in what her underling had uttered?

One long finger traced patterns in the soft sheets by her thigh, before her fingers spread out into the fabric, clenching it. Perhaps it would be beneficial for her to indulge in a little of that carnal pleasure. Just for the stress-relief of course. To calm herself down and unload some of the frustration that bubbled within her.

It would be... pleasant, to relax like that once more.

And certainly it could not hurt...

Of course, the question was of whom she might take to her bed in that way. Mercury was the closest male to her physically, yet on that route lay hidden danger. His questionable loyalty aside, she didn't particularly like the idea of mixing business and pleasure in that way. Especially not when he might come to desire more... Those who worked for her needed to know their place, and her bed would only muddle the value he felt she had for him.

Roman was much the same, only many times worse. Unreliable as he might seem, she feared him more than any other within their group. He was resourceful, a mind born from experience with a callous disregard for anything that got in his way. While she was certain a night with Roman would be... interesting to say the least - there was no telling what might do with such leverage.

That already cut away many of the potential men in her life. Adam was a face she knew, and a figure she still needed to win over to their cause. Her men, those peons who worked beneath her - it would have been but the work of a moment to choose one visually appealing and then dispose of him. But those resources were not available to her all the way up in Beacon.

Nor was a professional escort.

She needed someone closer to home as it were, which meant a student within Beacon Academy itself - as the teachers were too much a risk. Younger than she liked, but beggars could not be choosers. She just needed them for a one-night stand, little more than a night of debauchery so she might satisfy her cravings and return to what truly mattered.

She needed someone weak. Someone who could be easily ensnared, and then tossed aside once she had finished with them. Who would not waste her time in dogged pursuit once she told them they were finished.

She needed someone... unimportant.

The first time Cinder Fall met Jaune Arc was not by design, nor was it for any nefarious purpose.

Wandering through the halls of Beacon Academy, the three of them had just made it through their latest set of classes. The lesson with that fat oaf had provided an easy opportunity to liaise with some of her contacts, and also peruse reports from Roman. She doubted anyone even noticed her activity, and even if they had it wouldn't have seemed out of place in a class where over half the students were either asleep or busy playing games on their scrolls.

The day, like the others, had been an effort in frustration. The act of waiting for the right moment was far more painful than people realised, and in the meantime she had to attend lessons for subjects she knew more than enough on. Every day that went by felt like further time wasted. It was enough to drive one mad.

So perhaps she might have been forgiven for the lapse of attention as she wandered the hallways. Maybe it was the stress, the frustration - or just the mind-numbing boredom. But as a blonde figure leapt around the corner in front of her, she only had the time to flinch as a body collided with hers, dragging them both to the ground.

It was probably for the best however, she couldn't help but think as she was knocked from her feet. Her typical reaction to someone catching her by surprise like that would probably have been violent, even worse if they were rushing towards her in a threatening manner. The last thing she needed was to have to explain why one of the Academy's students had been reduced to charcoal.

That tended to draw attention...

A small gasp was torn from her lungs as she hit the ground, the body of her assailant falling atop her with a loud thump. Her aura, and probably his, prevented any real damage from the impact - but still

left her feeling more than a little sore. Bright blue eyes blinked slowly down at her, as blond locks tickled her chin, right before the young man was hauled off her.

Mercury offered a hand as she climbed to her feet, just in time to hear Emerald tear into the unfortunate teen with barbed words and insults. Cinder laughed softly as she dusted herself down, sparing the briefest glance to categorise him.

Blond, scrawny and *clearly* not a threat. All gangly limbs and hormones no doubt, he looked like any other bumbling teenager as he tried to stutter out some kind of apology to Emerald, who was having none of it. Mercury watched in amusement, no doubt taking more pleasure than was strictly necessary in his diminutive partner aiming her insults at someone else for a change.

It was times like those which reminded her of just how young and immature her subordinates really were.

She did not take pity on the young man. He was inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, and of no value to her or her organisation. He wasn't worth recruiting, and as far as she cared he could die with the rest when the time came. She was a callous and cruel woman, she knew that - but her cover as a student was *not*, and wouldn't share those same virtues.

So instead she smiled at him, the beautiful expression sliding onto her face like oil over water. A mask and nothing more, a game she had played many times before, and one she would continue to play - until searing heat and cleansing flame could be her true answers.

"There's no need to worry," she said as she stepped towards the young man. Her sharp eyes noted his armour, the plate across his chest and the smaller ones on his hands. Sifting them away in her memory for that moment he might prove himself an enemy to be disposed of. He wasn't in uniform, which doubtless meant he was en route to the training halls, or some combat related lesson. "We were not paying attention; we're just as much at fault."

"N-no, it's my fault," he sighed as he rubbed the back of his head and looked away, "I was rushing from the changing rooms. I shouldn't be running in the halls, less so when I'm carrying my weapon around." He shrugged as he hefted a long sword, still trapped within its sheathe. She thought she might have recognised the symbol on it, but family crests were a lien a dozen. Little more than doodles the arrogant used to suggest power or authority. "I'm sorry for bumping into you... uh?"

"Cinder," she gestured to her companions with one hand, "this is Mercury, and Emerald - who I believe you've had the pleasure of meeting."

The green-haired girl sniffed loudly, already forced into her role by the way she'd reacted to him initially. Ever the manipulative one, Mercury offered a lazy grin and a wave.

"I'm Jaune, Jaune Arc - and I don't think I've seen you around here. I mean I would definitely remem- well, I mean you er... new?" His blue eyes didn't quite meet hers, as he fidgeted with the fingers of one hand. She swallowed her laughter, instead letting her smile grow wider as she nodded.

"We're transfers," she nodded down to their uniforms, which while similar in design, were a different colour to Beacon's. "Our team is going to compete in the Vytal Festival, but our last member has yet to arrive. So for now we're studying here, to get used to the area."

Her contacts in Mistral were far stronger than the ones she held in Vale or Atlas, it had been the work of but a moment to have their details added to the student records for Haven. That school taught so many that an extra team would likely go unnoticed, and by the point they might start to notice - it would be much too late.

"Ah right," the young man cheered, "the Festival - yeah there's a few others from Vacuo around here too. Well uh - it's nice to meet you Cinder, I'm a first year at Beacon so if you need showing around, or any directions you can rely on me."

He held his hand out to her, and from the corner of her eye she caught the amused expression on Mercury's face. Really, she never cared for overly friendly types like this one apparently was. They were too trusting, foolish and idealistic - but yet again... her cover wouldn't be the kind of woman to ignore such a gesture. She wasn't a criminal, she was a student of Haven... and had to act as such.

"Thank you... Jaune," she managed to force out as she took his hand with an internal sigh, idly noting the rough calluses on his fingers. Now she *knew* Mercury was attempting to hide his laughter at her expense, but if putting up with the attentions of an amorous teenage boy was what she needed to do, then so be it. Thankfully she had already memorised the layout of the Academy, so actually being forced to rely on his aid was a non-issue. "Not to interrupt however, but weren't you rushing somewhere?"

"Oh crap, Goodwitch's lesson!" He gasped as he released her hand, "uhh, I need to go! Nice to meet you Cinder and uh..." he paused as he looked to the other two, and even he was unable to ignore the completely unimpressed expression on Emerald's face. "Er, yeah - sorry and bye." Cinder rolled her eyes as she watched him rush away, loud footfalls echoing in the hallway.

"What a moron..." Emerald sighed.

"Awww," Mercury cooed, "looks like someone's got a crush on you Cinder. And is widdle Emmy jealous?"

"Yeah, right."

"Come now," she warned, the two going silent, "let's not cause any problems while we're here." It was hardly the first time some young man had been blinded by her beauty, and it was hardly his fault. It was a perfectly natural response to one such as her.

"Ugh, he's a complete idiot," Emerald kicked at the ground, an impressive frown adorning her features, "and to think he's the partner of someone famous like Pyrrha Nikos."

"Are they a threat?" She asked quickly. Childish tournaments and competitions were hardly dangerous to her, but there was no denying that skill mixed with experience made for a deadly combination.

"She's tough," Mercury sighed as he leaned back on a nearby locker, "was able to push me back, even if I wasn't giving it my all - didn't feel like she was either. But the team doesn't really do anything outside of Beacon. I'd just call them over-achievers."

"Apart from him," Emerald snorted, "the other three on his team are pretty good. He just rides their coattails as far as I can see. But Merc's right, they could be dangerous - but they just don't care for anything happening outside Beacon. Not like that RWBY team which keeps getting involved."

"That's fine then," Cinder said as they made their way to the next set of lessons. While she would never be so foolish as to dismiss anyone she met as harmless, neither would she let paranoia label everyone a threat to be removed. If this Jaune, and his team, were simple students as they said? Well then, there needn't be any problems between them. And if they turned out to be more?

Then they would be removed, just like the rest.

After all, they were nothing more than children - playing at a game for adults.

So... what did you all think? Cinder is an interesting character and I've tried to capture how I imagine her character being. Cruel, calculating, *arrogant* but also mortal. A woman who doesn't suffer fools gladly, but knows how to play the game and when she needs to pretend to be something she's not.

I'm sure no one was honestly expecting me to go all "lovey-dovey Cinder" but if they did... well yeah, I'm not. When I say "Romance" I still mean on-character.

I will be making what is perhaps an unpopular decision here however... **drum roll** - no omakes for this fic.

Gasp, why!?! Well, this story is a serious one and I don't want to break the mood and tension with funny snippets at the end. Besides, this comes out alongside Staffroom Chronicles, which is pretty much two omakes anyway, a long one and a short one.

You can go there if you need your fill.

Otherwise, thanks for reading - I hope you enjoyed, and please leave a review if you're looking forward for more!

Want to see more fics, updated more frequently - or just support me for the pleasure and enjoyable reading I bring you? Please consider supporting me on - enabling me to bring you even more fics, updated as regularly as possible! There's even a goal where I would update a chapter for a different fic EVERY WEEKDAY. That's right - 5 days, 5 fics. Daily chapters.

. com (slash) Coeur

Next Update: 28th December 2015.

Chapter 2

Back, and here we go! Some initial notes before we go. In response to many reviews I guess, thank you - in response to others. I'll be trying to keep Cinder in-character as much as possible, but with her changing so wildly in the show, as it's focused on her now, that will be difficult. That said, the story for this has already been "planned" in advance. So like I said at the end of last chapter. If she goes through one of those annoying RT twists, where they seem to get utterly bored of their character and re-write them... then I'll be ignoring it sadly.

This is all written from the PoV of Cinder as a criminal mastermind. Now some I may still use from the show, and I hope to. But like I said, if they suddenly add in a "she actually loves children and won't hurt them" thing or a "Cinder is actually a hero in disguise" - then I'll be ignoring that. If they give her a past, then sure I'll use it. What I'm saying is, the whole premise here works on the assumption that she is a driven, sometimes cruel criminal - who isn't afraid to do what needs to be done to reach her goals. If they vastly change that, in a way that she could *never* be cruel or hurt someone... then I will ignore it.

On another note, someone said she's utterly OoC because she isn't snappy or angry like in last chapter... sigh. You haven't seen her snappy in the show because she's usually shown in a good mood. That would be like saying I cannot ever write angry Ruby, because she's never "truly" angry. In this fic (early on anyway) she is frustrated and annoyed. So of course she is going to "act" frustrated and annoyed. We've never seen the shopkeeper aroused in the show, that doesn't mean he's a eunuch.

Also as for never snapping at Mercury and Emerald, some of Cinder's first lines were to tell them off, tell them to be silent,

and then say; "Don't think - obey."

Her snappy nature will only last so long as her frustration does. When she's back in a good mood, then she will be much more similar to how she acts in the show.

Anyway, I'll be trying to keep in-character, but obviously the whole premise is a little AU, as RT will never include sex or any desires for, in an anime aimed at younger audiences.

Chapter Two

"We can't *afford* to have you slowing down," Cinder sighed as she lay back on the hard bed, her scroll pressed to one ear, "we need more dust if we're to make this work Roman. You *are* a master thief are you not?"

" *I am,*" the voice on the other end of the scroll shot back, "*but that doesn't make me invincible. With the Vytal Festival coming up, security is through the roof - this just isn't a good time to be out on the streets. Not to mention after the last fiasco, Schnee Freight Shipments have started arriving with robotic guards.*"

"And whose fault is that? It might have been worthwhile had you even managed to bring back a single container, but instead you were scared off by some children."

" *Those children, as you call 'em, are better trained than any of my men - or the White Fang you've saddled me with.*"

"And *you* should be more experienced than any bunch of brats. I'm not in the mood to put up with yet another failure from you." One hand clenched the bed sheets she lay upon, twisting them as she imaged it as the thief's neck. "Just... get it done, Roman. Or the heat from the police will be the least of your concerns."

" Tch," she heard him spit loudly, "I see someone's in a foul mood. Alright then, Cindy, I'll get you your dust - here's hoping your impatience doesn't get me - and you - killed." The scroll went dead as he hung up, right before she threw it against a nearby wall. It didn't shatter as she hoped it would, instead it made a dull thump and fell to the carpet.

That... that... she had no words. He never dared be that mouthy when she was face to face with him, clearly distance had allowed him to grow something of a spine. She would make sure to *tear it out* when they next saw one another.

A great sigh escaped her lips as she fell back into the soft sheets. Golden eyes tracing patterns the rough paint made on the ceiling, swirling white circles that interlocked and danced with one another, becoming ever more complex. Her body felt heavy, and even stretching out her limbs didn't quite do enough to remove the tension in her muscles.

It was as though Mercury and Emerald's words had sparked an ember within her, a slow flame building in intensity with each passing hour. Ever since they pointed it out she'd been unable to focus on anything else, as though by drawing her frustration to her attention, they had made it worse. Her body ached for something, *anything* . A deadly fight, pulse-pounding adrenaline, a massage... she would take *anything* other than this endless waiting. Where her muscles were tight and coiled, her nerves ever on edge.

Waiting for an attack that never happened.

Little wonder she was stressed, and unlike in Vale - she couldn't bury it in work. There was simply nothing to do at Beacon. Other than that utterly pointless six-page essay on history that hyperactive excuse for a professor had given them. Such a suggestion was an insult, she made Emerald do it - complete with a warning of just what would happen should a teacher figure out and call her in for copying.

There were far more important things for her to focus on than schoolwork... like scratching that damnable itch.

Except that it wasn't an important matter at all, was it? Simply one she had come to realise would impede her every decision, even the way she reacted to people. Her eyes drifted closed as she cursed at how she had lambasted Roman. He was a threat yes, but honeyed words achieved more than empty threats... she *knew* that. He'd just caught her in a bad mood.

How could she be expected to balance so much when her body was distracted so? No one did good work on an empty stomach, and when the body was hungry - you fed it.

This would be no different.

She had sought to take matters into her own hands, as it were, the previous evening - but a night alone in her room with her fingers had done little to alleviate the flame that grew within her. If the other two had noticed her mounting sexual frustration, then they chose not to comment.

A wise choice.

As far she was concerned, that last little experiment made it official. She needed a man, in fact - not even that; she needed the *services* of man, for a single night. After which he would be expected to fade away into obscurity and never approach her again.

There was no use arguing with the body, it would only waste time - and that was something she couldn't afford to squander. She could seduce a man easily enough, in a school like this most of the male population were probably walking bundles of hormones. She would enchant one, take him - and that would be the end of it. No complications, and certainly no more frustrated evenings alone.

A knock on the door interrupted her musing, with Mercury's voice sounding out a moment later. A brief glance at the dust-powered

clock by her bed told her it was time for lessons. With a frustrated sigh she swung her bare legs over the side of the mattress and climbed to her feet.

"I'll be there soon, go on without me," she called through the door. If they replied then she didn't bother listening to it, instead pushing open the wardrobe door as she pulled out a fresh uniform. So dull, a mixture of blacks and greys, Haven was clearly a boring place to study - likely why not a single person from there had actually bothered to chat with them. Only Atlas seemed more zombie-like, with whites and light greys, all their students arranged and poised like soldiers. She could just imagine Ironwood being the type to enforce something like that.

Always results with that man.

She sat on the edge of the bed as she pulled the stockings up her long legs, rolling the soft fabric out against her skin. She briefly imagined someone's hands running up and down them, fingers ghosting over her flesh as they drew them down. *No, focus.* She shook her head, the pleasurable sensation fleeing as she growled. Damn Mercury and his poisoned words, she would need to think up a suitable punishment for what he was putting her through.

Perhaps she should make *him* deal with Roman's excuses next time.

She was never one for make-up, just the briefest touch of shadow around her eyes as she blinked into the mirror, her thick lashes lowered, flecks of gold shining through. It would do. She didn't need to impress, and even if she did - she was so far ahead of the others in the school it wasn't even fair. A wolf among sheep, a Goddess amongst mortals.

The alarm sounded, her sigh echoing it. She slammed the door behind her as she made her way through the halls. Yet another lesson with Professor Port, another chance to peruse the reports being sent through - perhaps even make contact with Adam once more. The White Fang certainly were digging their heels in.

Or should it be hooves, she thought to herself with a soft laugh.

"Oh, hey Cinder," a voice called out to her before she could reach the classroom, and once more she sighed. A false smile bloomed as she turned to the man who dared speak her name. Blonde, taller than her - a uniform this time, but unmistakably the one she had bumped into the other day. But what was his *name* ?

"Ah, Jo-Jaune?" She hazarded, breathing a sigh of relief when his smile didn't falter. "I didn't see you there."

"Ha ha, yeah - I just finished a lesson with Port. Well... not sure I'd call it a lesson."

"Rest assured I know what you mean," she sighed honestly, "I'm about to go through the same myself." The teen winced, and for a moment she felt amused at how such a man's lessons could inspire similar emotions between a criminal and a Hunter, even if it was one in training. She blinked slightly when she realised there was someone else behind the boy, another of similar age - though this one seemed infinitely quieter, with hair the colour of her own, but for a single streak of pink.

"Anyway, this is Ren - he's one of my teammates, though I'm the leader," she didn't fail to notice him add proudly, even as she internally rolled her eyes. Goodness gracious, was the child honestly trying to impress her like that? She wasn't sure whether to feel amused or exasperated. Of course, the emotion her face gave off was that of a woman impressed with such news.

"I didn't realise," she said, "I'm the leader of my team too - a pleasure to meet you Ren, I'm Cinder."

"Charmed," the boy's voice was deep and lilting, "I'm guessing from your uniform that you're from Haven?"

One of those silent analytical types, he certainly fit the bill. In a way he might have reminded her of what she was once like, and that wasn't something she liked to see in a potential enemy. She would need to keep an eye on him, maybe even remove him if he made himself dangerous.

"Yes, Jaune was kind enough to offer to show us around."

"That was good of him, I hope you enjoy your stay."

"Thank you, but I must get to my lesson now," she shrugged elegantly, one shoulder rising and falling as her smile took a lopsided edge. "The last thing I want is Professor Port to lecture me for being late, especially if it's anything like his lessons."

"Yeah, I guess so. I'll see you around though, right?" The blonde asked eagerly, the words prompted another internal eye-roll from her.

"Of course Jaune, have a good day if I don't see you again." The two boys nodded and walked away, some small chatter between them. Cinder's happy-go-lucky smile slipped from her face easily, an annoyed sneer taking its place. Heaven help her if she needed to put up with any more people like them...

"Was worried you might not make it," Mercury moved to allow her past, and she took the seat the two had saved between them. The last thing she needed was someone trying to chat with her, or worse - catching a sight of what was on her scroll. "Something hold you up?"

"Someone," she sniffed as she smoothed out her skirt and sat down, crossing her legs beneath the desk, "that blonde buffoon from the other day, Jaune." Emerald tutted loudly, pretty much echoing her thoughts on him.

"Really?" The grey-haired teen chuckled quietly. "Aw man, I said he had a crush but this is a bit rich. Do you... maybe want me to warn

him off. You know, say you have someone back home in Haven or something? I can do it subtle, like I'm saving him the heartbreak."

She did consider his offer, genuinely did, before shaking her head no. There was really no need to bother them with something so small, and her being a social pariah might just draw more attention. It was standard fare for students to form crushes, and for boys to moon over young women out of their league. It would only help her cover further if she appeared to blend in with the crowd like that, even if she did have to resist the urge to light the poor sap on fire.

"Allow me to tell you all about the time I came across a village in peril," the obese fool Port started, the sheer force of his voice causing his moustache to twitch like a dying animal. Cinder simply allowed her head to fall onto one hand, as various other students around them let out their own sighs and began to get comfortable.

She swore he would be the first to die.

A few peas rolled around her plate as she poked at them, her head once more resting in one hand as an elbow balanced on the cafeteria table. As always the feeding hole of the Academy was a hive of activity, as students bustled and chatted away. Emerald's tray settled beside her own with a clank, as Mercury sat across from them - the two falling into their usual banter. In front of so many others she dared not draw attention by silencing them.

No matter how much she wished to.

Still, it did provide her an opportunity to scout for a solution to her little problem. If she was to look for a man to settle that itch, then there would be no better place to see them all. Her eyes roved over the student body, picking out potential candidates - before dismissing them for various reasons. Too plain looking, too clingy, already in a relationship - she cared not for their childish attachments, but she did *not* need some jealous harpy dogging her every step.

She didn't need to leave a corpse.

Her eyes fell upon a burly figure, who she recalled as being the scion of House Winchester, little more than a bully and a braggart from what she had heard and confirmed for herself. He was tall and broad enough, but there was a point at which confidence became arrogance - nothing was more dissatisfying than that. His mistreatment of the faunus bothered her little, but the attention he generated while doing so was an issue. The Winchester name might also cause complications with her alliance with the White Fang, since their position on faunus was clear. While she was only looking for a single night, there was always the chance of a White Fang member misinterpreting her actions as affection.

This wasn't to interfere with her plans, so he was definitely out.

His teammates were not options for various reasons. Too ugly, ridiculous hair, but more than all of that - Winchester seemed like the type that had to see himself as the alpha male. If she was to take any of his members, even for a night, then he might seek to redeem his lost pride by `bagging` her as well.

Cinder Fall was no prize. Whatever man she chose would count himself *blessed* to stand in her presence, if only for a short time. He *would* count himself fortunate, she would make certain of it.

A few others caught her eye - a tanned figure with reddish hair, although badly scarred he looked exotic and exciting. She didn't recognise him from any notes from her peons, which meant he wouldn't be a threat - but she was forced to dismiss him when the brunette with the beret slapped his ass. The... literal giant next to him, she dismissed for logistical reasons.

She wasn't one to make assumptions, but if his size was relative to the rest of his body...

A few others caught her fancy for brief moments, but the problems were common among them. Like many women when she was

looking for someone, she found the same features attractive. Confidence, good posture, a handsome face, personality. But the men who had each of those tended to already be in relationships. Good catches snagged by others, and often jealously guarded.

She didn't want to settle for someone unattractive, certainly not when she was looking for a single night of pleasure - but would clearly have to expand her horizons a little bit. Her gaze was drawn to the one she had met earlier, Ren if she recalled correctly. An eastern name; suitable for a man clearly not from Vale. He certainly had the elegant look down, with his dark hair with a single streak of pink - and though he was slim and fragile looking, he was interesting enough. She dismissed him however, partly for the girl constantly hanging from his shoulder, but also because of how intelligent he had seemed.

She needed someone relatively easy to approach and seduce. While she was confident in her ability to win over a person in the long-run, she didn't want to waste time on it, this was to be an *immediate* solution. So the less effort she needed to put into ensnaring, and getting rid of her catch - the better.

It was while her eyes were trailing back over the Ren boy, that she heard laughter come from *their* table. It was the team that had gotten in their way, this time laughing over the antics of a particular blond boy who was attempting to talk to the white-haired girl.

"Not. Interested." The Schnee deadpanned, causing the boy who had crashed into her earlier to slump. Jaune looked defeated for a moment before plastering a smile on his face and walking back to his own group, getting a consoling pat on the shoulder from the redheaded Pyrrha Nikos.

Looked like it wasn't only herself trawling for company, she considered with a dark chuckle, subtly enjoying the drama unfolding. Apparently his approach needed some work if he'd been rejected so easily. The laughter from some of the tables around them suggested it was a fairly regular routine. He certainly looked like one of those

naïve types who wore their hearts on their sleeves, he'd been much the same with her.

She hated that kind of person.

So predictable, so easy to manipulate, so completely unimportant...

...

Wait... No, surely not?

She hated that kind of person... and yet... wasn't that exactly what she was looking for?

Unimportant enough to not raise much fuss, simple enough for her to enchant with relatively little effort. He had already met her, and even shown interest in getting to know her a little better. Sure it had been bumbling flirtation on his part, but she wasn't exactly looking for scintillating conversation or a romantic date. As long as he had the required body parts and a pulse, that would be enough for her.

" Looks like someone has a crush."

She watched him a little more, noticing how he poked at his food, a look of dejection sneaking back onto his features, even as the other members of his team clearly did their best to cheer him up. Typical teenage angst, as though the girl was the most important thing in his life.

He wasn't exactly handsome, not by her usual standards. He wasn't rugged enough, lacked that dangerous edge that set her off. When the lifestyle you lived was already full of danger, it took a certain type of man to really hold your interest. Jaune Arc was still a boy transforming into a man, but he wasn't quite there yet.

He wasn't ugly though. A little gangly true, but he was hardly obese or strangely proportioned. He had the physique of a hunter-in-training, which already placed him far above the common man in the

streets of Vale. And while blond was not normally her colour, she could put up with it.

Normally his expressiveness would have turned her off, especially if she was looking for a meaningful relationship... but the fact that he showed his every thought on his face, no matter how hard he tried...?

That sounded exciting.

There was no doubt in her mind that she would be his first. There was no confidence in the way he moved, she doubted he had so much as kissed a girl before. He was completely innocent.

Would it be exhilarating to taint that innocence? Tarnish it. Coax lustful and *dirty* expressions onto that face... he would be completely unable to hide them from her, showing and sounding his *every* emotion. Each and every bit of pleasure would be reflected on his face, in his voice...

In every desperate gasp...

Already she could feel her body beginning to warm up.

Yes...

Yes! He would do nicely. In fact, the more she thought about it - the more she realised she wanted that more than any other thing. Experienced hands were nice, but she would become an *unforgettable* experience for him, a spectre that would haunt his dreams and thoughts for years to come. No one remembered their tenth roll in the hay, but the first time lasted forever. *She* would last forever.

He turned his head, the instincts drilled into him by his training no doubt allowing him to finally pin-point the feeling of being watched. His blue eyes scanned the room nervously, before finally noticing her smouldering gaze.

Their eyes met, his blue locked onto her golden orbs. He was everything she hated in a person, loyal to her enemies, idealistic, young and foolish. And o *h* so innocent.

She smiled at him, lowering her head slightly so that he could see one eye through her thick black lashes, even as she raised her delicate fingers in a gentle wave. He looked behind him, scanning the cafeteria to see if anyone else was waving back to her, before turning back, a surprised expression on his face.

She giggled. Like the little girl she had never in her life been, allowing her expression to turn a little more flirtatious, before nodding.

He waved back, nervously, an almost excited smile coming to his lips.

He was already hers.

He just hadn't realised it.

There we go. Jaune, you are the chosen one. Also, I still haven't seen the last three episodes or so of RWBY, but I'll be watching them all before next weekend. At this stage there shouldn't be too many clashes though, unless it's been revealed that Cinder is a man. Or my own little joke (but also hoping it ISN'T as it's cliché as hell, but kinda scared it is.. please RT, do not...) conspiracy - Cinder is Summer Rose, or Cinder's boss is Summer.

Next Chapter: 18th Jan.

Chapter 3

Chapter three of Stress Relief is a go, I hope you all enjoy.

I'm sure Jaune does ~

This chapter is rated M for "Oh my..."

A reviewer raised a good point in asking if Cinder is an "unreliable narrator" since it is from her PoV. I would like to point out that yes, she is an unreliable narrator. For instance, she considers Jaune to be a complete idiot - but that doesn't mean he is, or that I am belittling him. It's what Cinder initially thinks.

Keep that in mind for things perhaps, as it *is* intentional.

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 3

Cinder had been many things in her life. Daughter, woman, friend... now she was a criminal, blackmailer and occasional murderer. But before all of that, she had been a Huntress. And if there was one thing a Huntress was a master of, it was hunting their prey.

Hunting a man was not so different. You had to understand your prey, figure out its behaviour - where it ate, what it liked to do during the day. The more you knew about a creature's habits, the more opportunities you would have to capture it. And so, like with any hunt - any mission or criminal action.

Jaune Arc was a young man, and, in some ways, that was information enough. Almost eighteen years old, no doubt a bundle of

hormones and insecurity. He already wanted her, as he no doubt wanted every attractive female within his sight. She just needed to make sure it was her that his eyes, and ardour, were focused on.

Camouflage served a different purpose for this kind of hunt. Hers was not to disguise, but to draw subtle attention. The lightest shadow around her eyes, some light pink gloss to make sure her lips shone - the barest hint of perfume, just enough that he would be able to smell it if he came close to her.

When he came close to her.

She blinked as she inspected herself in the mirror, tilting her head first to the left, then the right, as she checked every nuance of her figure. The Haven uniform was uninspiring, but the short skirt did show off her long legs. The reflection took on a cruel edge as she smirked, amber eyes narrowing.

She was perfect.

"Cinder?" A male voice called through the door, no doubt her two *colleagues* .

"Coming," she said as she picked up her small bag of school supplies and allowed it to hang loosely from one shoulder. If Mercury or Emerald thought anything of her appearance when she opened the door, then they wisely remained silent. The young man's eyes blinked once or twice as he looked her up and down, in a rare moment he no doubt thought she wasn't watching. She chuckled softly but ignored the attention.

He could hardly be blamed for admiring her now, could he?

"Any news from the city?" The green-haired girl asked as they continued through the corridors. Cinder shook her head.

"No, but no news is good news at the moment. I'm in contact with our new friends, but they've yet to make a decision on what our

relationship is to be."

The White Fang... she needed them, or rather - she needed their numbers. The sheer manpower they could bring to the fore at her command. So many dispirited and frustrated faunus, willing to do anything for a brighter future.

Fanatics, essentially. Happy to change the world under a veil of violence if they needed to, so long as she could direct the where she chose they would be allowed to live in the world she would create.

Those that survived anyway.

"So we're just waiting then?"

"Have a little patience, Mercury," she teased, placing a single finger on his chest and enjoying the way his breathing quickened. "In fact, why don't you go interact with your peers. Who knows, you might make some friends."

"They'd need to be pretty desperate to accept him."

"No need to be jealous Em, I won't leave you behind."

"I can only dream..."

Cinder rolled her eyes but ignored them, content to leave them bickering as they so often did. Thankfully it served a purpose, drawing attention to the two of them and away from her. It also worked to turn people away from approaching them, as no one wanted to get stuck between the two.

A flash of gold caught her attention from the other end of the cafeteria, eyes narrowing as she sought out her prey. The young man was making his way towards the serving area, leaving his friends behind as he went to secure some food for himself.

Cinder's seat dragged against the tiled floor as she rose, the two she left behind barely noticing her absence as she quickly pushed her

way through the gaggle of students.

"Sorry!" He said automatically as both their hands reached for the same tray, her fingers bumping into his. "Ah, sorry - you first." He made to step back, azure eyes trailing up from the floor to meet hers.

She wanted to laugh when she saw those orbs widen.

"Cinder." His entire visage seemed to brighten, before he caught himself and tried to look more natural. A lost effort of course, but she pretended not to notice, even as she smiled brightly at him.

"Jaune, I didn't see you there. Good morning." She accepted his invitation to go ahead of him, making sure to brush against him as she crossed his vision. As her rear ghosted against his hips she could feel his body stiffen, even as he laughed happily at her having remembered his name. She picked up a tray from the stack, before taking another and handing it to him.

"Thanks, so... yeah morning. Looking forward to classes?" The two moved into the buffet queue, the press of students meaning they were practically joined at the hip. She let hers rest against his, comfortably so as she felt the heat from his body seep into her. He was warm. She liked that.

"I hear we're to receive an assignment in Oobleck's class today. So no, I'm not exactly looking forward to it." She sighed dramatically as she flicked her raven locks back over her shoulder, making sure to bare her creamy throat towards him. "I much prefer physical lessons to theoretical. I like to *do* things. Not merely learn of them."

"Y-yeah, me too."

"Perhaps we could spar together then? I'm sure it would be an interesting experience." There was nothing like a fight to get adrenaline flowing, and though she doubted it would be much of a challenge for her, she wasn't above throwing a fight to get what she wanted.

"Ah well, sure but I'm... well, I'm not exactly the strongest on my team."

An understatement if the information from Emerald and Mercury was correct. And judging from the way he carried himself, it was.

"It's not always about winning or losing," she nudged her hips against his as she shot him a small grin, "sometimes the fun is just in taking part."

"Then sure," he said, smiling as he loaded up the last of his tray, "I'm game, just tell me when."

Seven, my bedroom. She wanted to say those words badly - if just to see his reaction. But he had the demeanour of a skittish horse, and she feared scaring him off. Good things came to those who waited, after all.

Her body wasn't feeling particularly patient however, and neither was she.

"Well, I'll see you later then," she said once they both left the queue. She could see his indecision as to what he was supposed to do, but she simply grinned and turned away, making sure her hair wafted the scent of perfume his way. "Don't be a stranger."

She could feel his eyes on her as she left, and she rewarded his attention with a subtle sway of her hips. If he wanted her, he would need to make the moves to follow, but even if he didn't, she knew there would be little else on his mind for the rest of the day.

Either way, she won. Which was just the kind of gambles she liked to take.

"Dare I ask?" Mercury's brow was raised; even Emerald looked a little shocked as she took a seat once more before them, tray rattling lightly on the wooden surface.

"Why Mercury, I'm just taking your advice."

"My advi-? Wait- with him!?" She didn't know who looked more appalled between the two of them, a mixture of shock and horror that tore a dark chuckle from her lips.

"You don't approve?" The two shook their heads, waving their hands as if to decry the very notion, despite that she could see the distaste as clear as day on their faces. "Worry not children. I'm hardly looking for a life partner, just a single night."

"Yeah but... well," Mercury looked away, uncertain, "you could do better."

"Hmm," she savoured the warm oatmeal as it melted on her tongue. She *could* do better, that much was true. But there was still no denying the excitement in such a conquest - even if the challenge itself was relatively small.

She wanted to see Jaune Arc squirm. Wanted him to gasp and writhe as he panted *her* name. Just the thought of it set off a warm tingling down her body, pooling in her stomach as her toes curled beneath the table.

"I've made my choice. Your place is not to argue."

"Of course," he shot back - even as Emerald nodded. "Should we... make ourselves absent tonight?"

Cinder chuckled at the question. Such confidence in her, that they felt she could ensnare him in a single afternoon.

Well. They were hardly wrong, were they?

"That might be for the best."

Never let up on your foe. To give them even a moment's chance to recover was folly. It was one of the few lessons that applied equally to her life as a Huntress, and also as a criminal. And funnily enough, it also applied to her hunt of a certain young man.

So when the woman walked into the classroom of the most obnoxious teacher in Beacon, for yet another history lesson. It was with a predatory smile that she approached a desk near the back.

"Hello again, Jaune." She sat down next to him, offering a quick nod before placing some of her notebooks and pens on the desk. She didn't look at him, despite wanting to catalogue his response.

She did what every man expected a beautiful woman to do.

Ignore them.

Mercury and Emerald settled down on her other side, understanding that their role was to keep others from disturbing, even if they didn't fully agree with her decision.

A moment later Professor Oobleck whirled his way into the class, interrupting any response he might have given to her. But that hardly mattered. She had his attention.

The teacher continued to drone on, prattling about history that was of no use to her. In the future they might have to cover *her* in a class like this, and that might be a lesson worth listening to. She kept her mind focused on the prize at hand however, waiting patiently while watching him from the corner of one eye, gaze shrouded beneath her cascading raven locks.

He tried his best for the first ten minutes or so. Better than many others around him, who had begun to get distracted. But after ten minutes of trying to follow the man's rapid speech, he too gave in, fidgeting and looking around for anything to distract himself.

She obliged.

One hand moved forward, drawing a lazy circle on the desk. Long and pale fingers traced a pattern - inconsequential shapes and words. The crimson polish artfully displayed on her nails no doubt catching his eye. In the animal world, colour was often used to attract the attention of a mate. Bright and distinctive, it stood out against the otherwise dull natural world.

Much like she did.

The hand paused, allowing him to watch it for a few moments - just enough to ensure he was paying attention - before slowly rising towards her face. Her tongue darted out for but a second, glistening as she touched her forefinger to it, she let it hold a few milliseconds longer than necessary, before turning the page in her text book.

She could *hear* him breathe a little louder.

Gently she tossed her head back, a practiced move that removed the hair from before her face, giving him an unobstructed view of her features, while also once more sending her scent his way. For the rest of the lesson she maintained discipline, doing nothing but reading from the textbook. She allowed his hungry eyes to devour her. Luxuriated in it, no less.

As the lesson drew to a close he refused to meet her eyes, stuttering some paltry excuse with a guilty expression, before fleeing to his next lesson.

" *This* is the man you're thinking of?" Mercury asked once more, yet again questioning her. She ought to rebuke him for that, but felt too satisfied for such an action. The hunt was on, and she would not sully it with such negativity.

"All prey runs at first, my dear."

It was simply a case of running it down.

He's at the library.

-Emerald

The words flickered across the surface of her scroll as she stalked through the corridors of Beacon. A right turn ahead and through an ornate pair of wooden doors brought her to the home of the biggest collection of literature within the Kingdom. In another world, and another time - she might have sought to learn the secrets contained here.

For now though she orchestrated a different plan, picking a book from a shelf as she ensured her path would cross that of a certain person.

Perhaps it should have sent warning signals to the young man. That she would secure his attention in the same way they had first met. Books rained down around them as he cursed. It was an easy task to feign discomfort, even as she sat with her hands behind her and his body atop her legs.

"We really must stop meeting like this, Jaune..."

"Oh Gods..." he groaned as his eyes roved up her legs and body to meet her eyes. "Why can't fate take a break and just kill me already?"

"Does this happen often?" She asked as he climbed to his feet. He offered her a hand which she took with a smile. Though she made sure to drag her fingertips across his palm once she was on her feet and let go. He shivered slightly, though she made no mention of it.

"Bumping into people? No," he sighed as he picked up a book and handed it back to her, "but the making a fool of myself - yes."

"Well, this was my fault - this time," she laughed - taking subtle pleasure in the honesty of that statement, "so you shouldn't worry

about it. I was... lost in thought, and lost in the homework Professor Oobleck set us too."

"Yeah I can understand that... I mean making us write a topic on the fallout of the last Vale - Mistral war is pretty rough, I haven't been able to find anything."

He wouldn't either, not if he was looking for newspaper clippings or reports. Vale, for all its pointless rhetoric of freedom and liberty, loved to suppress the news they didn't want shown. It was one of the reasons she was able to get away with so much, for the Council didn't want anyone to know how poor a job they were doing.

But Vale had *not* come out fully on top of the last war, even if there hadn't technically been a winner. So newspapers at the time had focused heavily on the message of peace, and glossed over - if not fully failed to report - on any negative results. Either way she wouldn't be doing any of that homework. Emerald had handled her last assignment, so she would have Mercury write this one.

It was only fair.

"History isn't my strong point," she laughed huskily, using a finger to flick a lock of hair away from her face, smouldering gaze meeting his. "I prefer action to words."

"Same." He agreed readily, though she couldn't help but think he would have agreed with her no matter what she had suggested.

"Perhaps we could work on this homework together then?" She suggested, eyes drifting towards the ceiling as though she had just conceived of such a notion. "The politics of Vale are different to Mistral, so if we both work together we can get the differences written up quickly."

"Hey, that sounds like a good idea. We can do it in my ro- ah... uh well." He paused, likely from suggesting they work in his room. How very *naughty* of him.

"Oh you have shared team dorms don't you?" She said instead, pretending that was the conclusion she had come to. "I suppose it would be loud trying to do work in there. Well I was given a room to myself, we can work in there. We're hardly going to get anything done here." She turned to regard the crowded library, which despite the rules was bustling with noise.

"In your room?" He stammered, before swallowing visibly and smiling. "Yeah, sure." She could see it in his eyes, the thoughts swirling in his mind as he imagined the things they might get up to alone in her room, before dismissing each one as impossible.

She could practically *feel* his thoughts, the way he dismissed those possibilities as something that could occur only in his wildest dreams.

She nearly laughed.

"Perfect. Room two-twelve, we can meet after dinner there. Say... seven?"

"I'll be there." He promised, doing his utmost to keep his face cool and composed, despite his shining eyes and painfully wide smile. Really, she considered as he rushed from the library, her eyes boring into his back. He was like an over-eager puppy.

She didn't really do anything in preparation for the night, other than take a refreshing shower and wash her hair. She chose to climb back into her school clothes, wondering if her regular garments might be too much for him. As a last moment decision she went without the tights, and left her top few buttons unbuttoned.

Inviting enough even for him, yet casual enough not to look desperate.

Cinder Fall didn't *need* to stoop to desperation. She took what she wanted, when she wanted it.

She heard footsteps outside her door fifteen minutes before their little rendezvous, yet waited with a coy smile in her room, reading through her scroll. She imagined how he might feel, nervous, elated, *aroused* .

It excited her.

When the clock struck seven, so too did his hand the wooden door. She answered it after a few seconds, feigning surprise before inviting him in with a smile. She didn't step aside Instead forcing him to brush past her as he entered, his body sliding across her own as she closed the door behind him.

Shutting them both in. Alone.

She could smell the aftershave on him, some kind of fragrant spice. His efforts almost made her laugh.

The teen know where to look when she turned to face him, blue eyes doing their best to stick to her face, but she could see them dipping every now and then as they spoke about the homework. She sat on her bed, inviting him to sit beside her, hips touching.

Her assault was a slow one. Subtle, teasing and torturous. She would lean forward, pointing out paragraphs in the text book, balancing in ways that gave him a tantalising view down into her cleavage. At one point she feigned stiffness, lifting the text book up and crossing one leg over the other, before propping it back on top. She pretended she didn't notice her bare knee resting on his upper thigh.

Pretended she didn't notice the way he shivered. The way his body pushed gently back against her, as though to be closer to her warmth.

The raging inferno within her continued to grow too, like a fire feeding off of all the little signs he gave of his desire for her. The way his eyes strayed, roving across her skin. The colour that came to his

cheeks, the not-so-subtle manner in which his body would bump against hers while they worked.

He was hers. She knew that.

She had won. As she had always known she would.

With an audible sigh Cinder leaned backwards, propping her arms on the pillows behind her as she turned to look at him. She knew what he saw, her against the backdrop of her bed, chest pushed forward and legs beside him, she couldn't help the lascivious smile that took over her lips.

"All this homework is a little frustrating," she whispered, watching him watching her. "Would you like to do something else?"

"S-sure. Yeah. But what should we do?"

"What do *you* want to do, Jaune?" She asked, reaching up and idly popping another button on her shirt, the tight fabric opened a little further, showing the tiniest hint of black lace beneath as more of her skin was bared to the cool air.

He tried to speak, she could see that. His mouth opened and closed, nothing coming forth, before he would swallow and try again. He looked out of sorts, shocked. Excited, and yet nervous.

She could see the doubt in his eyes and wondered at his thoughts. Was he thinking something along the lines of *'this can't be true'* perhaps he was wondering if this was all a cruel dream that he might soon awake from?

Silly boy...

There was nothing but reality here. Still cruel perhaps, but soft, warm - and *inviting* .

"- I don't know." He finally choked out, little more than a whisper. He didn't mean it as he spoke it, she knew that. It wasn't that he didn't

know what he wanted, but a plea that he didn't know what he was supposed to do.

A kinder woman might have taken pity on him, eased him into it. She was not that woman and never would be. Instead she leaned forwards, touching two fingers to his cheek before slowly dragging them down his neck, taking a gentle hold of his collar. He shivered at her touch, and she could feel his heart hammering against the knuckles resting on his throat.

She leaned back once more; drawing him along with her as he desperately followed her lead. His body turned, crawling over hers as she led him by the collar like a dog. So that he lay above her, balanced now with his hands either side of her shoulders.

With his face mere inches from hers, his warm breath tickling her lips, she wrapped her arms around his neck, keeping him locked in place.

"I think you do know Jaune," she teased, pulling his face to hers.

There was no resistance.

Their first time was rushed. He was eager, fumbling - desperate to do whatever he could to please her, yet unsure on what to do. Instead, he worshipped every inch of her body. Drinking in the sight of her and luxuriating in every touch.

Warm lips cut burning patterns across her body, feather-light touches as he explored every hill and valley of her luscious form. She, for her part, indulged in the sounds and expressions she could coax from him. Gentle touches, scraping nails, soft bites - whatever she could to leave him writing in pleasure, to have him surrender everything to her. His body was an instrument, and she the musician. Yet, despite his lack of experience, she somehow found herself enjoying it all the more. Feeding off his ardour, his excitement - the sounds, the

feelings. The way his bright eyes darkened as lust slowly overtook his mind.

Muscles relaxed, even as others tensed, the aches and pains of the days washed away by his questing hands and warm caresses. It was a night of heavy breathing, clenched fists and choked moans, as they both lost themselves to something older than Vale itself.

His body gave in first. A sudden groan as he arched his back, his heart pounding against the hand she placed on his chest - pushing him down as she ground her hips into his, drawing him deep inside. He grew within her, and she watched his face as he experienced true bliss for the first time. Gasping and bucking he came, eyes drifting shut as he whispered her name in awe. She watched it all, a cruel grin adorning her lips as she felt his seed within her.

He had expired long before she reached her own pleasure, yet somehow it didn't leave her feeling disappointed in the slightest. Instead she leaned down and sealed her lips to his, tongue diving into his mouth as warm, calloused hands stroked her sides.

As she pulled away, both their bodies covered in sweat. He stared up at her. Azure eyes filled with awe and wonderment. He looked upon her as though she were a Goddess.

As he should.

Oh wow, so the scene already. In a traditional romance story this would be an absolute failure - it should be saved for so much later at least, maybe near the middle - beat 4 or so. Or even at the end if you're going for a lighter one.

Not here though, as the whole story revolves around casual relationships, which means it needs to happen early. Like Beat 2 early - the meeting.

And this is how the sex scenes will likely be, for reference. Not explicit, as I hope you can see - there's no mention of thrusting, mechanics - all that stuff. But it's still M-rated nonetheless.

Leave a review if you liked it. I'd be interested to hear if you think the detail was too much, since this is meant to not be as explicit as a lemon. The sex is ironically less important than the way in which they have sex.

. com (slash) Coeur

Next Milestone - Two updates per week!

Next Chapter: 8th February

Chapter 4

Hey guys - great feedback from the last chapter, I really do appreciate hearing people's thoughts on things. Anyway, this chapter might raise a lot of concerns people have raised - mostly about the moral aspects of Cinder's plan. All I can say is... keep reading. Also, yes - Jaune isn't going to be a "Y-yes" stuttering mess for the entire story. Cut a man some slack, we were all tongue-tied and a bit useless around women at first! Practice makes perfect, after all.

Also, he's gone from "constantly getting rejected by Weiss" to "bagged super-hot new girl in a single day" that's a *little* bit out of his comfort zone perhaps. Forgive a man for being caught off-guard xD

But at the same time, it's a valid concern. I personally hate reading those stories where one person has a "..." between words all the time.

"Naruto... kun... eto... eh... ano... I-I-I..."

Kill me...

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 4

Billowing heat wafted about her form as she let out a long sigh of pleasure, slowly drifting back into the steaming water. Aches and pains, as well as that delicious soreness, slowly drifting away as the heat worked its magic on her body.

A slow smile spread across her face, even as raven locks dipped into the water.

Loathe as she was to admit it, Mercury's advice had been sound. With her body finally sated after the previous night's activities, her mind felt clearer than it had for some time. It was impossible to hold back the wicked smirk that danced its way across her lips. Even as she stretched her damp arms above her head, marvelling in the way the droplets ran down her slender arms.

Waking up beside a warm body had been a pleasant affair too, warm and soft - yet with an unrelenting firmness beneath the skin. Young, as he might be, there was no denying the physique of a Hunter.

Dismissing her little toy had been an easy enough task. A quick, but passionate, kiss before promising they would meet up again later. Luckily she was as beholden to her promises to Jaune Arc as she was to any of those she worked with. No doubt he would realise in time just what her angle had been. Perhaps he would be hurt by it. Maybe he would come off stronger for it.

It was none of her concern.

It hadn't even crossed her mind to tell him the truth. Why bother, when all it would cause was needless drama, tears and shouting? All of it from his side, obviously. Much easier to just give him what he wanted; say what he wanted to hear.

Let him realise the truth in his own time.

If he wanted to weep or rant at the unfairness of life, he could do it on his own time, not to mention outside of her hearing. It was a Saturday regardless, and she could easily keep to her rooms to avoid him. There was enough work to be done as it was without catering to the delusions of a love-struck teenager.

For now however, she would continue to appreciate the boons of his service. The satisfying soreness in her muscles, through to those

delicious memories. Those little sounds he made, even now they had her biting her lower lip.

Such pleasant thoughts were short lived however, as a low knocking on the door drew forth a put-upon sigh.

"Enter." The wood creaked as it opened, small frame of Emerald Sustrai slipping in as she closed the door behind her. Cinder watched the girl from the corner of one eye, propping herself a little higher in the bath so she wouldn't appear vulnerable.

"Ma'am, Mercury and I visited the CCT yesterday and were able to map it out as you requested." The girl kept her eyes lowered, even as Cinder raised a long, creamy leg into the air, running her hands down the smooth skin. Fingers splayed across her ankles as she rubbed moisturiser into the skin, a lazy smile adorning her lips.

"Go on."

"The General is expected to arrive tomorrow afternoon," the smaller girl coughed lightly, likely from the steam billowing through the small room. "His forces on the other hand will spread across the school in the two hours prior to the dance happening. If the CCT were to be breached say, half-an-hour before the dance began? It would probably be a full two hours before any downed guards were found. I, or rather we, feel that would be the best time for us to strike."

"Hmmm," Cinder hummed as she considered the suggestion. Astute as always, she'd trained them both well. The exact moment at which the guards spread out over Beacon would be a dangerous moment, those on guard tended to be most alert at the beginning and end of their shifts. Cutting them down somewhere in the middle certainly would be easiest. "Thirty minutes before the dance?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. Take Mercury and ensure he has a good suit for the ball. The two of you are to arrive early and stall for me, when I have finished

up at the CCT we'll need a public alibi, so I want Mercury ready to dance with me. We need to be seen present and accounted for after all."

Emerald seemed to hesitate for a moment, nothing changing in her demeanour, but the long pause before she spoke was sign enough.

"You'll be handling the CCT yourself, then?"

Cinder could understand the girl's hidden concern, even if she didn't voice it. Despite what brave and heroic fools might claim, a true leader led from the rear. Where they could see the entire battlefield, react accordingly to any changes. She supposed in that sense, she wasn't a true leader.

But some tasks were too important to trust to others. Their plan relied heavily on the Cross Continental Transmit tower being inoperable. This could *not* be allowed to fail.

When you wanted something doing properly...

"I will handle it. Make sure the two of you are prepared." The last thing they needed was attention aimed at them. A woman arriving late to a formal ball was hardly suspicious. Why... it was practically tradition.

"I'll tell him now," the girl said, though she didn't move from her spot until Cinder nodded. The door closed behind her with a soft click, even as the woman leaned back once more. Lukewarm water tickled the nape of her neck for a moment. Before, with a quick frown and a raised hand, the water bubbled and re-heated, steam coming forth once more.

That was more like it.

Two days until that beautiful moment. It wouldn't be the end of their time at Beacon sadly, but it would mark the beginning of it. The time

for waiting would come to an end, and she could finally see the future come into fruition.

A high-pitched ringing cut into her thoughts, drawing a sigh from her as she once more disturbed her relaxing soak. Leaning out over the rim of the bath, little droplets of water falling from her naked body, she reached down and picked up the violently shaking scroll.

Oh, she thought, as she saw the name represented on that screen. Leaning back into the water she flicked it to one side, accepting the call - though denying video.

"Adam." She cooed into the scroll, flicking wet hair to one side so she could hold the device to her ear. "I'm glad you were able to reach me."

"Cinder..." The cold and lifeless tone came through the receiver, but little else. She rolled her eyes at the typical nature of this so-called *leader*. Little wonder the White Fang had been able to achieve so little through peace. As always, it seemed she would need to do their thinking for them.

"I take it that your comrades are prepared for Mt Glenn?"

"They are ready," he said, though she could hear some hesitation in his voice, "though I wouldn't say they're pleased. Your... *representative* didn't leave the best impression on our recent outing. After he fled the scene at the docks, many White Fang were captured. They fear we will be betrayed once more."

Roman...

She should have known.

"I appreciate that Adam, truly I do." Perhaps it was the heat, the steam, or just the lingering effects of her late-night relief. But she was able to reign in her normally furious temper even before it could

show itself. "Humans have been less than kind to you all, they're not wrong to have that fear."

"I'm glad to hear you understand."

"Oh, but I do Adam. It's not only faunus that humans can be cruel towards. Their own people suffer under cruel oppression. One needs only look at Mountain Glenn to see how much the Councils value our people."

"Mountain Glenn was a disaster. It affected human and faunus alike."

"And yet we live under that very same Council," she pointed out, weaving some damp coils of black hair around one finger, "how can the world hope to move on from such hatred, if things refuse to change?"

"And you believe you can bring about such change?" He demanded contemptuously, though she could hear the faint interest in his tone.

Men... always so easy to read.

"Alone? Perhaps not - but together we might, Adam. We're all stronger when we are united. And should we seek to betray you, like so many have before? Then keep us close, that you might cut us down if we prove ourselves unworthy." A flash of white teeth, as one arm lazily dangled over the edge of the tub, hair falling back in waves as she looked up towards the ceiling.

"I'll consider your words Cinder. Should you betray us however..."

"You can trust me, Adam," she cooed, amber eyes drifting shut as the call came to a close. The scroll dropped lazily from her fingers, padding lightly onto the towel that lay beside her bath.

Silly little animals.

The chance to stretch her muscles after the previous day's torpor was a welcome one. While it had been undeniably satisfying to lounge the day away where no one could reach her, it was much more exciting to revel in her own power.

It was truly incredible, having so much power within her.

Slipping past the guards had been a simple task. Senses dulled by boredom and complacency, they paid little attention to their surroundings - their senses no doubt muddled by all the students who had been running about earlier. There was the briefest struggle as she got hold of them, but with the element of surprise on her side they quickly fell. Just normal humans, not Hunters like the others at the Academy. And *nothing* compared to her.

Hiding the bodies would have been nice, but there was little time for that if she wanted to avoid being too late to the dance. Ducking into the main corridor, she approached the elevator to the central terminus, slipping out her scroll and checking the map she'd been provided.

The elevator would take her to the top, from there accessing the mainframe for the CCT would be a rather trivial matter. Everything was going to plan, as she knew it would - but that didn't stop her heart beating furiously in her chest, or the adrenaline raging through her body. The blinking lights above the door flickered slowly down. They paused, somewhere a few floors above her.

Cinder frowned, turning away from the doors and looking around at the walls. A metal grate stood about seven feet off the ground, on the left wall near the ceiling. A quick jump, a surge of heat - and the grill fell loose, allowing her to shimmy her lithe body inside. Touching the tips of her fingers to the edge she welded the grate shut once more.

The runny and disfigured metal would be painfully obvious to anyone who looked at it. But so late at night, with the corridors shrouded in darkness? By the time anyone noticed it would be too late. Crawling

through the space, she made her way through the vent towards where she knew the elevator shaft would be. True to form another grate melted and removed allowed her to watch the metal carriage riding slowly down the shaft towards her. As it came to a rest on the floor she'd just been on, she stepped out atop the metal cage, kneeling down to grip one of the emergency handles on the hatch for support. A quick glance up showed the two main cables connecting the elevator to the roof of the building. She could climb them if she had to, but such effort seemed unnecessary.

A minute passed. And then another, as she patiently waited. Before the carriage shook violently beneath her, and began its arduous climb towards the main terminal. She watched ceiling approach, threatening to crush her at any moment. There was space between the carriage and the ceiling, perhaps enough for her if she lay flat. But that would provide no access to her objective.

Instead she kicked the escape hatch beneath her feet violently, heeled boot smashing it open, even as she dropped gracefully into the cabin.

Right between two armed guards.

"Wh-!? Freeze!" One of the men demanded, even as they each snapped their weapons into place, barrels pointed towards her as she lifted her hands into the air. The light on the control panel flickered white, signalling their arrival.

Cinder spared the guard on the left a coy smile, even as the elevator doors opened with a loud ding.

The noise and movement caused him to glance aside, only for an instant, but enough that he failed to react when her hand snapped up and moved the barrel of the other man's gun aside - even as his finger twitched instinctively on the trigger.

A loud shot sounded, the barrel in her hand heating to levels that might have been unbearable to anyone else, even as it bucked

violently. The guard to her left slumped with an agonised cry, blood pooling from the wound beneath his rib-cage.

The soldier whose gun she held gasped, before going silent as she pressed him against the elevator wall, one hand over his mouth, while the other gently caressed his neck.

It was surprisingly easy.

Killing, that was.

The helmeted man struggled briefly, before her abilities flared to life, super-heating the soldier's neck in a sudden flash of light and a brief sizzle. She had never bothered to understand the mechanics of what extreme temperature did to a man's throat.

Was it painless? Agonising?

The dead never answered, and she had never thought to ask. Stepping over the corpse, she idly pushed one of the buttons on the wall, ignoring the body as it fell forward - sliding down the wall before slamming face-first into the floor of the elevator. The doors slid shut behind her, the steel coffin descending once more. No doubt it would become a nightmarish surprise for some late-night janitor.

Not her concern. For before her, stood the true prize. Row upon row of computer screens and control panels, the Cross Continental Transmit control terminus. Technology that facilitated long-distance communication between the four kingdoms...

It was a gift from Atlas to Vale. To them it was a sign of strengthened ties and peace.

To her, it was a weakness.

Technology was so very easy to manipulate, so much so in fact that finding a talented hacker capable of writing a virus to shut down the facility had taken Roman not even a weekend. If their source was to

be believed, and Roman assured her he was qualified, then it would take at least two weeks for this to be repaired.

More than enough time, she considered, as she slipped the disc into place, smiling as screen after screen flickered to an image of a solitary chess piece. Ozpin did love his chess after all. Doubtless this would leave him agonising over the meaning, the mystery. If she were the Queen, then who was the King behind it all?

Did the silly man not realise? That in the real world an all-powerful Queen would not suffer a King so useless to live, let alone rule beside her. She had no need for a King, less so one that was only as strong as a pawn.

"And speaking of pawns," she muttered as the elevator returned with a sharp ding, the metallic doors sliding open as a short girl dressed in red entered. In a blood-red prom dress and high heels, she looked almost as out-of-place in the terminus as that scythe did.

She took the chance to duck behind a nearby pillar, amber eyes narrowing as she considered the intrusion. This was the girl that had delayed dear Roman? Her fingers twitched as she let out a near-silent hum. She could kill the girl... it wouldn't be difficult for her. Remove one of Ozpin's vaunted pawns before it could reach the end of the board and become something more troublesome.

It was tempting... and would be a fine ending to such a productive night.

It would take time however. Not to mention that it would drive the Headmaster to more aggressive action. Not the best option considering that she was effectively within his grasp. She also needed to make an appearance at the dance before her presence would be missed.

A fortunate turn of events for you, little Rose, s he thought to herself, stepping out from behind the cover as she summoned a black bow in a flash of fire. Not her usual choice of weapon, but if she was going

to leave the girl alive then it was going to be with a nice little goose chase for Ozpin and Ironwood.

"Who are you? Did you hurt those guards!?" The small girl slammed her scythe to the side, the blade extending as it dug through the metal floor.

She was on the clock however, and has little time for the girl's delusions. Leaping back she flexed one hand, arrows of pure fire materialising between her fingers - three resting on the string at once. The girl's silver eyes widened as she dived to the side, right as she released them. Explosions rocked the rooms, great blasts of scorching heat and roaring flame as rose petals were incinerated. A flash of red fabric around a pillar had Cinder running in the opposite direction - circling the room as she fired another two shots in quick succession.

She was fast, almost unbelievably so, and in its own way that made her dangerous. For anyone else, that was.

Silver eyes widened as the bow vanished, two curved blades taking their place as she casually checked the girl's semblance-enhanced strike. The silvery scythe blade sparked between her two ones, before she drove a solid heel-strike into the girl's stomach, sending her hurtling back into a few computer terminals.

The girl groaned as she pushed herself out of the wreckage, small hands gripping the upturned table as she staggered to her feet, before her eyes widened.

"W-wait!"

Cinder chuckled as she slipped into the empty elevator, pushing a single button. The doors slid shut with a silent hiss, even as she held out one hand and gave a casual wave to the girl. There was a sudden loud bang, the door denting inwards once - twice. Before, with a sudden shake, the carriage began to descend.

"Ooh, scary," she cooed, reaching out to touch one of the indentations with a single finger. The metal was twisted, poking a full inch inwards as though someone had tried to ram a spike through it. Or a high-calibre dust round. Poor girl... had she truly expected such a building would not have doors reinforced against that?

Still, she considered as she divested herself of her combat suit in a hidden corner of Beacon, the distraction had delayed her more than originally anticipated. Perhaps she should have expected them to get involved, but she'd dismissed Roman's tales as nothing but poor excuses. What reason did that little girl even *have* to be near the CCT tower?

Was this Ozpin's gambit?

It hardly mattered. The objective had been achieved, and the interfering child would get what was her due in time. They all would.

It was a matter of a brief moment's concentration, and a flare of dust, to have her outfit shift into the long black ball gown. And as she pushed her way through the doors and into the hall, she ran her gloved hands down her sides, rubbing out any creases. It was time to be noticed, to be *seen* .

The music was blaring, as might be expected of their age, with numerous couples dancing in the middle. She turned heads as she walked through the crowds, male and female alike. And so they should look upon her, she was far beyond anything these children had ever seen before.

That didn't change her current problem however; she needed to find the two of them. Her eyes roved across the dance floor, the buffet, even the balconies. They wouldn't have left the dance, not without her orders... but she needed to be *seen* by people. Her presence at the dance made an absolute *certainty* in the eyes of the General, lest he review any cameras watching the event.

Where was Mercury?

"Cinder? Cinder!" Amber eyes narrowed as she cocked her head lightly, turning to look behind her. That didn't sound like Mercury, too high-pitched, too young. Instead she saw a young blond jogging towards her, dressed in a simple suit.

It looked like nothing more than his usual uniform with a bow tie, but beggars couldn't be choosers.

"There you are, I haven't seen you since... well, the other day." He slowed his pace as he approached, still a little nervous - but with a faint tone of optimism beneath. He looked more confident than he had before, walking with the subtle sway of a man. Perhaps he'd gained more from their time together than she'd initially thought.

With a sudden flourish and a smile, she slipped into his personal space, causing him to back up as she laid one gloved hand directly over his heart. She smiled up at him devilishly, thick black lashes cutting patterns across her golden eyes.

"I wanted to surprise you for the dance, Jaune." She whispered as she laid a quick kiss on his lips, the briefest touch, but enough to taste the wine there. "What do you think?" She stepped back, holding her arms out to the side. His eyes roved up and down her body, devouring her hungrily. And despite herself she felt a small thrill of excitement. It brought back memories. Dark and luscious memories that made her want to lick her lips.

"You're beautiful." He said, and she couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped her. Yes, she knew that, and could tell as much from the way he looked at her. "Dance with me?"

Who said good things didn't happen to bad people? Mercury might be distracted with whatever he was doing, but Jaune could serve much the same purpose. In fact, her cover would be all the stronger for involving a Beacon student.

"I thought you'd never ask."

She allowed him to lead her out onto the dance floor, his eyes never leaving hers as he drew her further among the press of adolescent teens. She noticed a few look their way. Perhaps they knew him, wondered how he could be dancing with one such as her.

Perhaps they simply stared at her beauty.

It didn't matter.

He drew her close, almost possessively. His body pressed into hers, even as his arms slowly wrapped around her waist, coming to rest on the back of her hips. His palms were large and warm on her exposed skin, a stark contrast from the cold night air within the CCT.

She preferred his heat.

The music was still on-going, and while there was no convenient new song played he was able to lead them into the dance easily enough. Dancing was just conflict of a different form, but in this one she allowed him control, swaying with him as the beat echoed through the floor.

Perhaps it was the adrenaline still rushing through her body making her feel hypersensitive, or the heady feeling of their plan slowly coming to fruition. Or perhaps it was the way his hands drifted lower down her back, tracing a fiery pattern across her skin. The subtle scent of sandalwood and pine he gave off, the firmness between her fingers as they came to rest on his chest. She could feel the warm beating of his heart against her palm, strong and fast.

Whatever the cause, as one dance became three and she remained joined to him, her own body began to feel sluggish. A night of dancing, of mingling and parading in front of others... that felt like such an anti-climactic ending to what was one of the most important nights of her life. It was happening. It was finally taking place, all her plans - and yet she was to waste her good mood on this?

She wanted something else.

She knew *exactly* what she wanted.

And as the music came to a slow end, onlookers clapping politely as the final notes drifted away, she reached up on tip-toes - as though to whisper something in his ear. She paused there, hot breath washing over his neck, she smiled and closed her eyes - letting her lips brush across his skin, even as she bit lightly at his lobe. His frame shuddered, arms locking tighter around her as he drew her closer. In return, his warm breath washed across the side of her neck, causing goose bumps to prickle across her sensitive skin.

"I want to do a different dance," she whispered, blowing lightly into his ear canal.

"N-now?" His voice reached her as a faint whisper, and she could feel his body stir against hers. Feeling undeniably powerful, she answered not through words, but instead ground her lower body against his.

She could *feel* his response, the hard length clear as day against her thigh. It brought a cruel smile to her lips, even as her hands came up to rest about his neck, drawing his cheek against hers.

" *Now* ."

She knew eyes were upon them as they hurried from the hall. Had she been in the right frame of mind, she might have noted with subtle pleasure that her plan of achieving an alibi had gone off perfectly. Better than it ever would have had Mercury been there to dance with her. But her thoughts were distracted, one hand latched in his as she drew him down the corridors of Beacon, the other occasionally tangled in his shirt, hair - whatever she could grip onto during those moments they paused to give in to hungry kisses.

They did not make it back to her room.

Her patience snapped half-way, in a moment where his lips fastened on her neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin. Pushing him against a wall she locked her lips to his, forcing herself into his mouth as she dominated him. He fought back however, with more confidence than he'd ever shown the first time, driving her back so that it was *she* who was pinned. Even as one of his warm hands reached down, slipped under the slit of her dress, dragged up the inside of her thigh.

He was desperate as he shifted her lingerie aside and took her, the two of them standing pinned in an abandoned corridor, her with one leg wrapped around his waist. Like a starving man he lavished kisses upon her, first her lips, then her face before settling on her creamy neck.

She stoked his ardour, coaxing that small ember into an inferno as they rutted like common animals. She remembered little else of that night, other than biting down on his shoulder, and him gasping as he reached his climax.

Wow, good job Jaune! Again, the sex is short - it's there to... show things. You'll see in time, but the sex itself is meant to represent show, don't tell - so there are details to be had if one digs. On that note as well, the quotes about "She had won, he belonged to her." Were not "tells" they were "shows" you simply didn't notice what they were showing. It was to represent Cinder's mindset, that she genuinely believes people can be "won" and that they "belong" to her. It's not meant as a tell of the fact her seduction was successful... that was kinda obvious anyway.

Now we see the effects of Cinder not instantly breaking Jaune's heart, he's just naïve enough, just hopeful enough... just inexperienced enough - to think that this might be relatively normal in a relationship. After all, what's a day or two of no contact? Maybe she's just busy... maybe we didn't have many classes together.

Also, while Cinder might have achieved her *objective* by dancing with Jaune in public, there's also a certain... well, let's just say *fallout* of such an action.

I changed the fight scene with Ruby. Sue me, I didn't want to have to repeat exactly what happened again and describe it in full. Realistically speaking it changes little. Sure, Ironwood didn't see her per se, but all the cameras would have proven it was a masked figure. Not to mention matters of timing. *Yes, I know* that when Cinder arrives, Jaune is already in the dress, etc... but consider this, Jaune noticed Pyrrha's distress at the dance, but would he... if he was currently going through his own little mini-crisis, looking for the girl he might be, might not be, going out with - who he hasn't seen since they last had sex?

That's a pretty distracted Jaune... which means, yes... poor Pyrrha. She went alone, all miserable, and Jaune did nothing about it.

. com (slash) Coeur

Next Chapter: 29 th Feb

Note: Starting from March (assuming no cancellations) the update speed will be increasing to a chapter every 14 days - there will be more notes as to the exact schedule closer to the time. But faster chapters is always a good thing, so I hope you enjoy.

Chapter 5

Hoo boy! This pairing suddenly got scary to write or support in any way, didn't it? I've actually received a few PM's about it. I wouldn't call them complaints or criticisms, since none of them relate to anything actually *in* the story.

Let's just call them flames - although maybe that's an ironic word choice xD

Basically equating to - "How *dare* I write a Cinder x Jaune after what happened! How very dare!?"

Well I dare, ladies and gentlemen. And if we can hold back from burning me too much, and cut out the flames (unless they're actually relevant to the writing - in which case turn up the heat!) - and if I can cut out all the fire puns at Pyrrha's expense?

I will try... even if doing so leaves a taste like ash in my mouth.

...

Okay, I'll try from now - honest.

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 5

Cinder awoke the next morning in a fine mood. The dress was a lost cause; crumpled and ruined, it lay on the floor by the bed. But she could hardly complain. Instead she lay naked atop the sheets, stretching out her lupine frame as muscles and joints popped.

What a delightful surprise that had been, she considered with a brief smile - only for it to wither away, as she let out a short sigh.

Taking the boy for another night had been a spontaneous decision, born of convenience, adrenaline and excitement. She'd meant for it to be only one time, a quick bout of relief for her stress, and while it had certainly achieved that...

There wasn't supposed to be a second time.

Perhaps she could blame her body for that, for like a thirsty Huntress lost in the wilds, it hadn't been content with just a single drink from that delicious oasis. No, it had demanded more - and taken it.

The problem however, was that she still hadn't dismissed him as she perhaps should have the first time. He hadn't been in the room when she awoke, so it was likely they had split up after their illicit activities. There certainly was something to be said for a man who didn't take up space the next morning...

The question was though, what was she to do with him now?

One time might be an accident, the second; a clumsy mistake on her part - there could not be a third, for that represented a pattern she had no desire for. Ironically, had he stayed with her, she might have had a chance to let him down gently this morning. To finish things in such a way that he was under no illusions as to their relationship.

And that was the true crux of the issue, wasn't it? She'd taken him from the dance, in a move that few would be able to misconstrue - even assuming no one had seen them in one of their moments, pressing each other against walls as they ravaged their way down the corridors. They hadn't exactly been paying attention to their surroundings...

The illusion was complete, her alibi solid.

Too solid.

With Mercury she could have claimed they were merely dancing as teammates, he would have stuck to that story happily enough. Jaune, though? He was on a different team, known to his peers within Beacon... he was a security breach she couldn't predict or prepare for. And not exactly someone she could remove either, not when she was the last person to be seen with him.

And now presumably, at least in the eyes of those at the dance - which was probably every single one of the first years - they were... *involved* .

For a woman her apparent age, that probably wasn't anything unusual. Students dated left, right and centre - ruled by their hormones as only teenagers could be. And while she might admit her own small guilt in that regard, it only served to make the disguise all the more complete. No infiltrator would dare forge a relationship with someone so open, so loyal to Beacon. It would be foolish.

Or genius, depending on how you looked at it.

The available options were simple. She could reject this sham relationship; however she chose to go about that. Or she could embrace it, make it her own and play along.

The former would be the easier, naturally - and the safer. Getting rid of him now would be the obvious choice.

But it would also draw attention to her. Drama on that level, perhaps even a scandal by the standards of a school like Beacon, would put her at the centre of every student's conversation. Mercury and Emerald would be confronted for gossip; she would face whispers and staring each day, making any clandestine movements... difficult. And if it somehow was enough to draw the attention of the faculty... if Jaune Arc acted out so much at her rejection that they felt the need to get involved?

That, as Roman might say, would be bad.

On the other hand... keeping him around might present its own dangers. The longer he spent near her, the more chance he had of discovering something about her - or seeing something he shouldn't. It would also be an annoyance, to put it simply. An unnecessary effort she didn't want to put forward, into keeping a young man entertained enough not to ask questions.

But that was it, really... and both of those aspects could be managed. *She* could control how much he saw, *she* could control how much of her time he could demand. While on the other hand, short of killing him - which would open its own can of worms - she would have no control over his actions if she rejected him.

Control was everything.

So she supposed he would stay, for now. There was nothing forcing her to be loyal to him, she hardly entertained those kinds of feelings for the blond. Their relationship had been purely physical. But he didn't need to know that, did he?

And really, what if their business here took even more time and her urges played up once more? Would she need to ensnare another man, go through all this hassle again?

That seemed woefully inefficient.

"Unexpected," she whispered, holding one hand before her face, "but not unwelcome." It was something she could deal with anyway, even if it wasn't ideal.

Her scroll buzzed once, and she fumbled blindly with her hand atop the nearby nightstand, pulling the device before her eyes. The number she didn't recognise, but the name...

Jaune?

Had she truly given him her number? That seemed an awfully poor decision for her, though without any real risk. Her scroll had been

heavily modified, enough to make sure it couldn't be traced if anyone became suspicious. With a brief sigh she opened the message, scanning the blocky letters with lidded eyes.

You were wonderful last night. Would you like to come out into Vale today?

Oh?

Was she, Cinder Fall - terrorist mastermind - being invited out on a *date* by a young student? A chuckle slipped past her lips as she leaned back into the cushions, reaching out to type a message in return.

Sorry Jaune, I'd love to - but I have to meet my team in Vale. We need to prepare for the Festival after all.

Oh look, she considered as she read through the message, she was even adhering to one of the main rules of being a good girlfriend. Perfect honesty... of course, he likely didn't expect her to be meeting someone like Roman, but still.

It was the thought that counted, right?

She did waste a second to wonder if she should add something else to it, perhaps a heart - but the mere thought of it brought an ugly twist to her lips. Instead she ended with a single X, sending it to him a second later. It wouldn't do for him to feel she wasn't interested after all, there had to be a balance. That he would believe them together, yet not come to expect too much from her.

Simple enough a task, if everything went to plan she would be gone soon enough, anyway.

Twice now she had allowed Jaune Arc bask in her presence, let him closer than any other had come in a long time. Certainly her body seemed the better for it, this lazy morning lay-in being the first she had allowed herself in years.

It felt good, undeniably so, to be so desired.

The hunger in his eyes, the sheer lust on his face - the way he would descend upon her. Clumsy and rushed, devouring every part of her body as though he had never experienced anything so fine in his short life.

She smiled luxuriously to herself, her knees coming together as she arched her back against the soft fabrics, reminiscing on his touch.

She was a work of art. It was only right that she be appreciated so.

Mercury and Emerald remained at least two paces behind her at all times, a little to the left and right in such a way that made it clear she was the one in command. The bored-looking man manning the entrance to Roman's compound actually had the gall to try and stop her, not once looking up to see who it was before he moved into her path.

She considered killing him then and there, just for that insult.

"You fool!" His fellow hissed, rushing over to drag the other man away before he could say anything. Apparently he had no problem recognising her, even as he gestured for her to enter, face slick with sweat.

She didn't have the time for this.

"*Cinder*!" The tall man called across the busy warehouse floor, making his way towards her with his arrogant swagger, cane twirling in one hand. All around them men and women made room for her party, parting around them like waves against a ship. Some even went so far as to turn around completely, finding somewhere else to be.

"My dear Roman," she cooed back, lifting one hand as though to caress his cheek. She noted with pleasure the way he flinched, eyes

becoming cautious - at the last moment she pulled back, using the hand to push back a lock of her own hair. She doubted anyone could miss the way his breath escaped him, the relief evident to all.

He feared for his life every time she touched him.

But that didn't make him harmless.

The problem with Roman, and one of the main reasons she'd never considered him for some carnal pleasure, was the intelligence and cunning he held behind those emerald orbs. They sparked with experience. Telling the story of a man who'd been through much, and not just survived, but *thrived* .

Roman was a dangerous man indeed.

And that little bodyguard of his even more so.

The man pulled out a cigar, masking his nerves in the action of lighting it and taking a long drag. "I heard there was a problem at the CCT," he said between puffs of smoke.

"I do wonder where you hear such rumours Roman." Not from Mercury and Emerald, that was for sure. She hadn't even told them about her little interference yet, which meant his source must have come from within the school itself. That or the Atlas military.

"Regardless, the CCT is down, as per our plans."

"Perhaps now you'll believe me when I say how annoying that little girl is," the man scoffed, "as for the *plan* of yours. Have we got the White Fang on board yet, or are those animals still in hibernation?"

"Those *animals*, as you put it, might be more inclined to move for us if you could hold back your attitude. Not to mention the racism of the men you work with."

"Never took you for an animal-right's activist Cindy."

Her temper frayed in an instant, from the words, as well as that asinine nickname of his. She caught his face in the palm of one hand, watching his eyes as she allowed her powers to flare. Small rivulets of sweat dribbled down his skin, even as the cigar between his lips went up in flames.

"I care little for your *snark*, Roman. But if your behaviour continues to be a problem then it will be *I* who finds the solution." The girl beside the crook shifted, but didn't intervene - behind her, Cinder felt Mercury and Emerald do the same. "Animals, revolutionaries, terrorists... I don't care what they call themselves, or what you consider them, but we need their numbers."

She would have them by their hearts, by their bodies or by their minds. But by the Gods, she would have them...

"Understood..."

She watched him for another second, before releasing his chin with a sharp shove. Roman stepped back, one hand coming up to massage his raw skin. Once more he drew a cigar, and she delighted in the way it took him three nervous attempts to light it.

"I'll leave the acquisition of dust to you then, Roman. Do make sure not to disappoint me any further." Mercury and Emerald stepped aside as she turned, making way for her so that she could pass between them. The small girl with multi-coloured hair watched warily.

"There was *one* little thing," the man called before she could leave. Catching her by honest surprise... she hadn't thought he'd have the balls to delay her any further. "I caught wind of some interesting news if you want to hear it?"

"Go on."

"Mostly about how a certain someone was dancing with a blond kid, right before they went off for a little alone time. In a real rush I hear, too. It's almost enough to make people assume things."

She *really* needed to find his source within Beacon. And then kill it.

"Your point, Roman?"

"Just that one shouldn't mix business and pleasure, since we don't need that kind of distraction. I simply thought this person might have known better."

Her hand clenched, once, before releasing. He wished to speak about distraction, when he was the one causing most of their failures at this time? Everything she had worked towards so far had gone perfectly because of her. Not him. Her!

"My business," she said, still facing away from him, " *is* my pleasure. And my pleasure, dear Roman, is none of your business."

"Do you... mind if I ask what Torchwick meant?" Mercury's words were halting, clearly able to see her foul mood - yet despite that, curious for answers. She hadn't exactly had the time to fill them in on what had happened. Not with it having taken place just the previous night.

"The situation has become somewhat complicated," a frown came across her features, "speaking of, where were you at the dance last night? I recall expressly telling you to be prepared for me."

"I-I was, Em back me up here," the green haired girl nodded quickly, "we were waiting on the balcony, figured it would be the best way to spot you when we came in. But by the time I got down to the dance floor you were already with someone else."

"We were unsure if you wanted us to interrupt," Emerald cut in, "you seemed content to use him, and we figured it served the same purpose. We danced together nearby, just in case you needed us - but we didn't see you for the rest of the night."

"Hmm..." She looked away from them both as she continued down the streets of Vale, towards the more populated areas. Theirs was a good enough excuse, she supposed. And they were right not to interfere, in the end the goal of creating an alibi was achieved, even if things going on might be a little more complex.

Truly she supposed it was Jaune's fault, seeking her out mere moments after she'd arrived. Much like Mercury and Emerald, he had been waiting for her, but his position on the floor had been closer than theirs.

"I appear to now be in possession of a boyfriend." She laid it out casually, as though discussing the weather - and was rewarded for her efforts by how her two companions spluttered in shock.

"Wh-what!?" Mercury was the first to recover, even if he still had one hand hitting his chest as he struggled for air. "How, when!?"

"Who?" Emerald went straight for the important question. A second later, before Cinder could even think to answer, her face scrunched up. "Ugh, that blond guy, the scrawny one?"

"Yes." She thought to say that he wasn't scrawny beneath his clothes, but the poor girl looked sickened enough as it was. Clearly she didn't want to hear the sordid details, even if Cinder had been schoolgirl enough to share them. Besides, even she could admit that he hadn't given off the best first impression.

"Will this... be an issue?" Her male subordinate was able to keep a neutral face, at least when it came to judging her choice, but she could see the masked concern behind it. Will this be an issue for their plans, he was asking. Would she be compromised by him?

"It won't be an issue." She would make sure of it. "Accept it for now. The last thing we need is the attention focused on us if the *relationship* goes south."

"Yes ma'am," they each said in unison, before Emerald continued, "what should we say if people ask us about it?"

"Use your imagination," the older woman sighed, "don't act like there's anything to hide, this is a perfectly natural relationship after all. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that what happens behind closed doors is to remain private?"

"Yes ma'am."

She could still hear the uncertainty in their voices, but time would prove her right. Roman was a fool to think she would become distracted by him, at least in the sense the man had insinuated. The boy would demand some of her time, yes - that was unavoidable. But he would open up other opportunities too. What information one who'd spent so long at Beacon might have, what locations he might know of. The best places to remain unseen in the school, what corridors went less traversed, what classrooms were truly abandoned.

Like every other person she dealt with, he would be of use to her. He would have value, clear *quantifiable* value. And if that should happen to include *other* services which he could provide for her? Then so be it.

She'd been waiting so long for this moment... she was hardly going to be swayed by a bumbling teen's amorous attentions. She should punish them for even thinking it! But she wouldn't... that was the difference between Roman and her. Mercury and Emerald were all the more valuable for their ability to *think*, even if they did make mistakes - like with that bookshop owner. She had no need for yes-men cowed into obedience... not like the ones Roman surrounded himself with just to satisfy his petty ego.

That his most valuable companion couldn't even speak might as well be further proof of that.

"Cinder!" A voice called, loud and light across the hordes of pedestrians. The woman paused, a sigh escaping her even as she forced a smile onto her lips. A warning passed between the three of them, amber eyes imparting a message of silence onto them as she turned around.

"Jaune," she greeted, feigning surprise at the young man rushing up to them. Another followed closely behind, the same boy he'd been with the other time, Lee or something. "What a surprise, I didn't expect to see you here."

"Yeah, Ren and I were collecting some supplies for the team. We alternate it between us and well - our responsibility this weekend." He hoisted up a bag before him, from which she could just about make out the signs of dust cartridges. The other boy was loaded down with a bag as well, though neither was struggling. Likely they travelled in pairs simply for the company. "Were you guys doing similar?"

"Pretty much," she shrugged, not willing to answer either way lest he ask where their bags were. "We had some things to order in town for the tournament, turns out some of the equipment we use isn't quite so common in Vale, so we had to commission it directly."

A fair excuse, if she did say so herself. It seemed enough for the two anyway, and she doubted the looks the blond was shooting her had anything to do with suspicion.

"You've got everything sorted now though, right?"

"For the most part, yes."

"Great, well how about the two of us hang out a bit - if you're not busy, I mean?"

Damn it...

She'd walked into that one, hadn't she? And now she was in the strange situation of not really being able to talk her way out without some kind of consequences. Did she say that she *was* too busy, that they could do their date another night? That would prompt the rather obvious question of when she *was* free. A question she didn't have the answer to... Adam could call at any moment, and there was no telling when something might come up.

She could keep fobbing him off too, giving little excuses here and there as to why she didn't have time for him, but that would just lead to him becoming more aggressive in asking her out - or breaking down. Neither of which was a particularly appealing prospect.

Was she, Cinder Fall, honestly going to agree to a date with this young idiot?

"I'd love to." She tried her best to sound excited at the prospect. From behind her, she could actually *hear* the confused noise Mercury made, as breath escaped between his teeth. But her attention was soon focused on the boy before... her boyfriend... as a wide smile spread across his face.

He looked so utterly elated... like she'd just told him every single holiday in Remnant was today, and about him. She didn't know if she should feel flattered or sickened.

Instead she went for bemused.

"I'll take your bags back for you," Jaune's teammate offered, "I didn't realise the two of you were... well..."

"Together?" Emerald offered, sounding just as lost as him, despite knowing about it. "Yeah, we only found out today too."

"We've not been..." she hesitated to say the word, heaving an internal sigh, "official for very long." The boy stepped up beside her, and she had to resist the urge to cringe when his hand met hers -

their fingers intertwining. She allowed it; though she didn't return the gentle squeeze he gave her hand.

"This will be our first date actually," Jaune said with a light laugh. He seemed inordinately pleased with himself, which she supposed made sense. Guys like him rarely had the opportunity to bask in the presence of women like her. This would be his third time now, already more than any other man had achieved. "I wanted it to be something really special."

"Well, uh..." Mercury rubbed the back of his head, "I suppose we should all leave you two lovebirds to it, you wanna show us the way back, Rin?"

"Ren," the boy sighed, "but sure, you can follow me." Cinder watched the three of them leave, recognising the way Mercury and Emerald kept talking in an effort to confuse him, keeping the boy on the back foot so he wouldn't ask any questions of them. While Mercury might act the fool, one didn't become such a successful assassin as he without having a memory for names *and* faces.

"I can't believe you agreed," Jaune gushed once they were alone, stepping in front of her as he took her other hand in his. With their fingers joined, she was forced to stand face-to-face with him, chuckling slightly at his excitement.

"Was there any reason I would not?" She asked, marvelling at the million and one reasons that came to her mind. None of which she could pose, of course. She needed to play the part.

"No, no! Of course not, I mean..." he shook his head, calming himself down as he smiled at her. "I'm just glad to be able to spend some time with you. You're beautiful, you know?"

She didn't respond. Looking away as she ignored his words, and the pure emotion on his face. Being complimented was a common occurrence for one such as her, but rarely did they say it with such complete honesty.

"What did you have in mind for our... date?" How she hated that word already. It wasn't a reminder, for she'd never been a child, but it smacked of teenage years and foolish naivety that rubbed her the wrong way. Cinder Fall did not *date*. Cinder Fall identified what she wanted, and then took it. Still... that didn't mean she was completely unfamiliar with the act, nor the execution. And if needs be she would lead this date so that he didn't have to.

"Well there's a fair that's come to Vale, they set up before the Vytal Festival to catch all the tourists who come ahead of time. I thought we could check that out?"

"Sounds delightful," she lied. A fairground... it would have been better had he stammered, let her decide what they could do. At least then she could have picked something simple and short, like a cinema or walk in the park. Something that wouldn't take too much time, so she could get back to things that were actually important.

Instead she smiled at the... her boyfriend... settling her hips against his as he wound one arm around her waist. Locked against his side she did her best to ignore the stupid grin on his face, or the how tense his arm was... even as his feet bumped against hers, his gait that of a man who hadn't yet mastered the art of walking so close to another person.

She could only sigh...

"I've got this," the blond said as he aimed down the scopes of a miniature rifle. Behind and slightly to the side, Cinder sighed and checked her scroll. Only about fifty minutes... somehow it felt like longer.

It hadn't taken long for her to come to the conclusion that she despised fairgrounds. The bright lights, loud noises - the way little children were free to run around *screaming* at the top of their voices. It was as though the whole concept was designed to annoy. Add in to that costumed mascots bumbling about like fools, and stall-owners

shouting across at them, inviting Jaune to *`win a prize`* for his *`little lady.`*

She honestly wished she could set the whole thing alight... they'd deserve it too, for what they were putting her through.

And Jaune, the poor, bumbling fool. She had no idea how much lien he'd already wasted, flitting from one stall to another as he chatted into her ear. At those rare moments she could even hear him over the raucous crowds around them. The stall owners had long ago pegged him as an easy mark. Someone with more lien than sense, desperate to impress no matter how much it cost.

Their greedy smiles sickened her. Rolls of fat and sweat on pinched faces, their hands wringing together in glee even as they shouted out for others to "test their luck."

"Damn it, so close," he cursed, lowering the rifle as he glared at the targets. As though by sheer sense of will he could set them aflame.

"Nearly had it that time," the large man agreed as he took the rifle back, "fifty lien for another try - maybe you'll get it this time."

She doubted it. And judging by the grin on the man's face - so did he. Surely Jaune wouldn't be so foolish as to not see it. He'd already spent so much there was no way he wou-

"Okay! Here we go," his hand slammed down onto the counter, pushing another fifty towards oblivion.

For the love of...

"How about *I* have a try," she tried to keep her voice saccharine, but wasn't sure if even she could conceal the frustrated edge to her tone as she took the small gun from his hands. Thankfully he either didn't notice, or knew better than to comment on it. Stepping out of her way so that she could take his position at the counter.

"Good luck, Cinder!" He cheered.

Luck, she scoffed to herself. How utterly foolish. The stock came up to her shoulder with easy grace, one amber eye aligning with the barrel as she slowed her breathing. Three shots, three metallic cans to be knocked from a wooden plank. The trick was simple, the rounds weren't exactly live fire - not in a crowded public area. The small metal pellets it fired would never be enough to knock them off.

Like any game, it was rigged from the start.

"Ooh, a little off," the man taunted as the first shot went wide, "nice try though missy." She momentarily considered changing targets, but decided that shooting the man in the face might send the wrong message. Instead her second shot followed after the first, hitting not a single can.

Behind her she could hear Jaune's breath catch.

How foolish, she pulled the trigger a final time, lowering the rifle before the pellet had even finished its flight. The round man opened his mouth, eyes glinting - before a loud crash echoed behind him. The crowd about them opened up in cheers, as the thin rope holding the plank up finally snapped - weakened from the shots eating at the knot.

Three metal cans clattered across the floor.

"Go Cinder!" Jaune cheered, the crowd clapping along.

"That-" the man looked like he was ready to protest, lips peeling back in a snarl. It stopped the very second he met her eyes. There was something instinctual in every man, be they Hunter or mere civilian... perhaps it was inherent in all creatures. That instinct that warned you not to cross the line, that the person before you was not willing to put up with it any longer. As her eyes smouldered, the man swallowed and looked away - picking a random stuffed toy from the rafters and throwing it at her.

"Thank you." She caught the stuffed animal with as benign an expression as she could manage. It... well, it had perhaps been intended to look like a puppy. Whoever had worked on it either hadn't done a very good job, or hadn't been paid enough to care. The eyes were off-centre and the face was out of proportion.

Jaune had probably spent more lien trying to win it than the damn thing had cost.

Were they done here, yet?

"Cinder, that was *amazing* !" Jaune gushed as he rushed up to hug her, arms tightening around her back as he lifted her up. No. It wasn't. It was something a child could have achieved, so long as they had the slightest training. It was something a Hunter-in-training, like he, should have had no difficulty doing.

"Here," she pushed the stupid thing into his hands, feeling glad to be rid of it as the crowds parted. If he wanted it so badly he could have it, he'd wasted all his lien to get it after all.

"T-Thanks," the boy blushed, holding it against his chest as a wide smile came over his lips. He seemed inordinately pleased, enough so that she couldn't help the sigh that slipped from her.

Jaune took her hand in his once more, dragging her through the crowds in some new direction. She still wore her red dress from the meeting with Roman, and while the high heels and scant clothing had been a fine choice for the warmer day, it didn't offer much against the cool evening breeze. Eventually they parted from the crowds however, coming to a stop on the nearby pier. Away from the rides, stalls and bright lights, it was almost abandoned. But for lovers and the elderly, enjoying the peace together as they watched waves crash against stone barriers.

"You know, I always dreamed of doing things like this," the blond said, leaning on his arms against the wooden railing before them. She stood beside him, looking out over the ocean. It was a quiet

night on the waves. No shipments from the SDC, she'd have known about those beforehand. The next large one bound for Vale would be for the Festival itself, and Roman had been warned off that one. Too public, and too much of an escort. "Being able to take someone to a fair, win them something - then watch the stars together at the end of it all."

A simple dream for a simple boy. It suited him.

"Well... I didn't actually manage to win anything," he rubbed the back of his head, "what about you?"

"Hm, what?" She blinked lightly, looking back towards him. Her dreams? Vengeance, fire, ash, "I want to graduate I guess... become a Huntress..."

"Are you okay, you seem distracted?" He pushed away from the railing, face suddenly ashen. "I-I mean, if you don't enjoy stuff like this we can do something else, just let me know-"

Curse her lack of attention. The last thing she needed was him deciding to try something else, or she'd be stuck out here all night!

"Don't be silly," she whispered, leaning forward and pressing her lips firmly to his. His blue eyes drifted shut as she moved against him, one hand coming to rest on his heart. "I was simply enjoying the sights, it's a beautiful night."

"Sorry," his breaths came out in short gulps, "I'm... I guess I'm new to this, got worked up over nothing. I'm such an idiot sometimes."

But that's what makes you so convenient, my dear.

That red tint to his cheeks. The way he couldn't meet her gaze for more than a moment, before looking away shyly. How he responded to her each and every touch.

He was such a fool. So easy to control.

"If you're so new to this," she whispered, "why don't I show you a little something special, hmm?"

"S-sure!"

"Cinder, wha-"

"Shh..." she cooed, pressing her forehead against his as her hand slipped lower. His eyes rolled back into his head, a breath of air escaping his lips in a rattling gasp.

She pushed him back against the thin wall, crouching down as she worked on the buttons of his trousers, picking them apart with an easy grace. "W-wait," he gasped, but she ignored it - choosing instead to pull him free and stroke his length with one hand.

Jaune gasped above her, and looking up she could see him bite down on his bottom lip, desperately trying to keep silent, lest someone heard them. One of the sinks turned on nearby, blue eyes widening as the sounds of a young woman humming as she washed her hands reached their ears. Cinder saw him shake his head, a desperate panic settling in.

She gripped him tightly in one hand. And *squeezed* .

"Ghh!" His face scrunched up, face pointing down as he struggled to keep it in. Her own eyes sparkled like gold, lips stretching wide as she watched him writhe against the stall's thin wall. Even in her hand she could feel him bulge, straining against her palm.

So very innocent, she mused as her hand moved, stroking up and down as his legs shivered and twitched. His head fell back against the wall, eyes still shut as his hips pushed out towards her. She offered no mercy, pumping back and forth while listening in to the other woman now drying her hands.

"W-we shouldn't," he managed to whisper, though there was no strength in it. He looked like he was stuck to the wall, the only part of him capable of moving being that within her hand. With a silent chuckle she held one finger up to her lips, and made a quiet shushing noise.

And then closed her mouth around him.

"Ughh..."

He wasn't as quiet as he thought he was, even as she ran her tongue along him - bobbing her head back and forth. Small grunts, hisses and groans slipped from between his lips as his entire body shook. One amber eye opened, peeking to the left as she watched the door.

"Hmm?" The girl outside seemed to pause, the tap turning off. Hands settled in raven locks, trying to hold her still as he looked down on her, panicked. "What's that?" Heels clicked against the floor, Jaune shook his head.

Cinder bit down lightly. Scraping her teeth against him.

"Ah!" His hand slapped against his lips, the rest lost in a muffled groan as he bit down on his knuckles. But it was enough to be heard by anyone nearby.

"Is someon-?"

"Aren't you done yet!?" Another woman yelled, voice barely audible but the distraction enough for Jaune to let out a low pant. "What's taking so long?"

"Ah s-sorry, I'm coming Yang!" The young voice cried, footfalls echoing as she left the room.

"Someone certainly is," Cinder laughed, pointing him towards the opposite wall of their stall, where his seed was slowly trickling down.

Jaune didn't reply, eyes shut as he gasped desperately for breath.

Neither spoke as they left the fair, headed back towards Beacon. A wide grin adorned her face, filled with vindictive glee and just a hint of dark satisfaction. It fell a moment later when she felt his hand touch hers, fingers brushing against her own as though to ask permission.

She allowed it with a sigh, feeling his hand close around hers as he walked beside her. She would allow the child his comforts, if that was what it took.

Speaking of... he still had that stupid toy clutched to his chest, trapped between his chest and one arm. She was sure she'd thrown it to the ground while she teased him, but apparently he'd gone back to collect it...

Such a child.

So many metaphors, much symbolism. And, of course, motivations and relationship statuses to be pulled from the actual act of sexual gratification. None of it is purely for smut, as honestly it's quite tame for that. If I wanted to write a lemon, it would be much more detailed. Anyway, I've gone a little insane with the symbolism and little hints here, maybe too much. But ah well. Life!

Technically speaking this fic is my first proper romance. In that my others are more along the lines of romance as a sub-genre. They are action or adventure, with romance. Whereas this is romance, and just romance. The entirety of the plot is focused around the central question "will they get together at the end?" "Will it be real love?"

And technically no sex this chapter, though that defence is a little thin - ah well - let's hope it doesn't lead to any *burning*

sensations , am I right!? On a serious note, you have no idea how hard it is to resist the urge to have some of them eat breakfast in any of my fics, and mention the new "Pumpkin Pete's new BBQ Flavour." The temptation is so real!

New Schedule:

You might have heard it in Professor Arc, but just in case - we have a new schedule for fics, and the details are below. This will mean faster updates, and this story will be updated every 14 days. I've also included the exact dates for the first rotation, but after that you'll need to figure it out yourself in a sense. It just rotates, basically...

Monday 1 - Stress Relief (29th feb)

Friday 1 - Not this time, Fate (New Story) (4th March)

Monday 2 - One Good Turn Deserves Another (7th March)

Friday 2 - Professor Arc (11th March)

(Repeat) - From Beyond will be updated every Sunday.

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Chapter 6

Here we go, another week another chapter. Man, I didn't get as much done on my week off as I had hoped... mostly due to the whole drama between my work not understanding what a holiday is. Ugh... I realise that I've brought them pretty much from collapse to maybe survival... but all I needed them to do was the same as they have been the last three weeks or so.

I'd even written all my articles for the week in advance, as well as arranged and done some interviews for the magazines. Le sigh!

Ah well... life. Enjoy the chapter.

Or don't... xD - Don't let me tell you what to do. But then, don't let me tell you what "not" to do, either. Ooh, the double negatives.

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 6

"I'll be glad to see the end of this," Mercury sighed as the three of them finally relaxed in their dorm. Another day's classes... not completed per se, that would suggest some level of *learning* had been achieved. No, they had been endured, survived... tolerated.

"Not much longer now, dear Mercury," Cinder flicked through a few messages on her scroll, thumb sliding across the thin screen. A few messages from Roman, mostly status reports, for which she was thankful. The man had the ability to be irritate even in text, perhaps that threat a few days ago had been enough to put him back on track.

It wouldn't last, of course. It never did with him.

There was no moment she looked forward to more, than when Roman Torchwick's value to their cause came to an end. That would be an event to truly savour.

"An end to classes," the young man continued, waving one arm as he lay back on his bed, "to dinky dorm rooms, stupid homework and whiny teens."

She held back from pointing out he was being just as whiny himself right now. That would only prompt more chatter, and likely further teasing from Emerald. She'd rather enjoy the peace while she could - as impossible as that sometimes felt.

Yes... she too would look forward to having her own quarters once more.

More than that though, it would be the hard-won victory she would appreciate the most. Watching as every aspect of her plans came together in glorious synchrony. And then? Then she would finally have the power that was hers by right.

She had defeated the Fall Maiden, had laid and sprung the trap that would have taken her powers. But for Ozpin and his foolish lapdog interfering. That the brat hadn't died after what she'd done spoke of some kind of life support... she was here somewhere.

She would find Amber... and finish what she'd started.

"Are you sure we can trust Roman with this?" Emerald piped up from her own bed, the girl flicking through the pages of some kind of novel. Even though her red eyes were fixed on the book, Cinder could tell her attention was elsewhere. "If he's going to be out of Vale, won't he take this chance to make a break for it?"

"We cannot trust him to do anything we want," she replied, a cruel smirk at the corner of her lips. "That said, we can always trust dear

Roman to do what he must in order to survive. He wishes only to be on the winning side."

She would give him that at least. Besides, his task was hardly an arduous one. All he need do was gather the dust they had stolen onto the train. The White Fang had already been busy clearing the tunnels between Mountain Glenn and Vale for months now, a combined effort between her own people and Adam's.

One week... seven days. That was how long it would be before Beacon fell. The timing was perfect. The first missions given to students would provide the opportunity, expelling the largest concentration of combatants from the city. To make matters worse - for Vale anyway - each team had to be escorted by a seasoned Hunter, who was to guide and protect them.

Which meant many professional Hunters in the city would also be absent, playing babysitter as the Grimm ran rampant among the civilian populace. The fury of Mountain Glenn would descend upon them all... forcing all those who remained to defend the innocents below - including the faculty of Beacon...

Giving the three of them all the time they needed to scour the school, and see to its fall. Wherever he was hiding Amber, the information would be found within Ozpin's tower. It needed to fall anyway, the Beacon snuffed out once and for all. She wished she could see it, the look on those student's faces when they returned from their menial tasks - so full of cheer - but to see their precious Beacon a smoking wreck... the city overwhelmed with grief and horror.

With the CCT compromised as it was... there would be no aid for Vale. They wouldn't even be capable of contacting the Hunters and students out on their missions. With the virus they'd uploaded, she could turn it off remotely. It would be noticed of course... the act would draw attention enough to have it removed within a day or two. But by that point it would be too little too late for Vale.

It would be the perfect execution.

But what else could one expect from a woman like her?

"So once this breach happens you just want me to video things, right? Do I need to do anything special with the CCT?"

"It should handle itself," she said, "the moment you start recording, the virus will broadcast it across Vale, while also cutting off any external communication. You'll likely only have an hour or so, before someone manages to force a shut down. So do make sure you get some good shots."

"Won't be too hard," Mercury scoffed, "if it happens midday the streets should be filled with people. It's gonna get real messy down there."

"Be careful not to muddy your shoes," she chuckled, getting a snort from both of them. It would be an unrestrained massacre alright... one that had been allowed to occur under the watch of Ozpin, the Council and even General Ironwood himself.

She would alter the course of history in one small move. Such a heady feeling, to have so much power. Her will, to shape the future as she wished it.

It was enough to make the blood race through her.

"What about that kid?" Emerald asked, cutting into her pleasure. Cinder raised one brow towards the girl, indicating that she'd need to expand on that. There were a lot of kids around here, it was a school after all. "Your boyfriend, Jaune."

"What about him?" The two shared a look between them, filled with trepidation. Cinder let out a long sigh. "Speak your mind, I'm hardly going to snap."

"Well, when the breach comes... what do we do about him?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" The young man seemed surprised, sharing another glance with his partner. Already she could feel a headache coming on.

"If you could stop repeating my words," she sighed, "and perhaps elucidate on your points a little further. Is there a reason we should do something about young Mr Arc? Has he been asking troubling questions, shown any indication of being suspicious?"

She hadn't noticed it herself, and she'd been paying attention. As far as keeping him oblivious, he was a fairly easy boy to please. A little touching, some kind comments... he was eating out of the palm of her hand.

And she was a most kind mistress.

"No, not at all..." Mercury waved his hands, "we'd have warned you if he did. He just talks to us occasionally, but I think it's more to be polite. Em seems to frighten him."

"Hmph," the girl in question rolled her eyes.

"Then I fail to see the problem," if he wasn't interfering, and was still no closer to learning the truth... then why did they have to do anything about him at all? "He won't be something worth worrying about in a week anyway."

"What Mercury means," the other girl spoke, "was what are we to do if we see him caught up in it all?"

If he was caught in the battle? "Nothing," she repeated. "If you see him, leave him. If he survives, he survives."

That wouldn't be a problem however. Like many of the other students, he would be outside of Vale on his mission. He would be one of the lucky ones, away from harm... safe.

"Just like that?" Mercury, this time.

"Just like that," she glanced up from her scroll at him, eyes narrowed, "why do you sound so surprised?" The silver-haired teen froze, eyes not meeting hers as he sought for some excuse. Cinder's own turned into blazing embers as she realised the cause. Damn him... "You'd be wise to ignore those concerns Roman raised, both of you. Trust in me to know what I'm doing."

"We do, Cinder - we do," Emerald cut in, granting her companion a reprieve, "it's just that we're unused to this, you've never been interested in someone before."

"You are fully aware this is a charade, I don't see where this confusion is coming from." Except she did, damn that fool for raising them in the first place. "There are to be no changes to the plan as there is no need to make any. Nor are there to be any accommodations made for my *boyfriend*, because that is not what he is. Am I understood?"

"Yes, ma'am."

They still doubted... neither of them would ever dare say it, but she could see the apprehension in the way they sat. Both were on edge, when they should have been looking forward to the coming festivities.

"I'm going for a walk," Cinder stood, letting her feet fall to the floor as she walked to the door. Emerald made to rise, but a quick look had her sitting down once more. "The two of you should prepare yourself for what is to come ahead. At least that way you might be able to focus on what is actually important."

As opposed to wasting time overthinking *her* actions.

That fool, Roman. Emerald and Mercury too... one would think after following her for so long that they might have learned a little about her commitment to their goals. She'd been the one to recruit them, to first approach the White Fang. It was her who had done the legwork,

the planning. To think that she'd just throw that all away now, for something as stupid as emotional attachment?

If she really did feel for him that way she'd simply force him to follow her, bring him to their side. It wouldn't even be hard, would it? He was also so eager to please her, carrying her bags when they travelled between lessons, holding doors open for her. She wasn't sure where he got his relationship advice from, but it was woefully outdated.

But also a little mature too. She appreciated that, at least. If he'd been as melodramatic as most other teenage boys she might have had to kill him already.

Even then... even now.

She wouldn't have hesitated to kill him, if she needed to.

I suppose that makes me a bad person. A small smile slipped across her lips, *as though that was ever in doubt.*

"Hey, Cinder!" Oh Gods, not now... she recognised the voice instantly. How could she not, he'd spent almost every moment of class with her. This wasn't what she needed however. Not now.

"Good evening, Jaune. I didn't expect to see you out here so late." Only eight or so, but still, with the sun beginning to set behind the mountains, Beacon was covered in an orange glow. Most of the other students were inside, missing the sunset for the benefit of chatting with friends and peers.

To be frank... she didn't care for it either. It was simply the progression of time. A cycle that would continue long after she was gone. But people like to place meaning in such things, didn't they?

"Well I didn't intend to," the blond chuckled, rubbing the back of his head with one hand. A nervous tick, she'd noticed and categorised it the moment she saw it. Such were a weakness in the circles she

frequented... though some would simulate them, hoping to make you believe you held the advantage.

Jaune was not one of those people.

"But then I saw you out here alone and thought you looked like you could use some cheering up."

And he thought he'd be capable of that? How droll. "I'm not lonely, I was just enjoying the sunset. It's a nice view." A part of her warned against such cold words. How was she supposed to keep the charade going if she allowed her bad mood to affect him? Better to put on her usual fake happiness, seduce and take him in some dark corner.

Maybe she'd find some relief in that act anyway, to burn through the frustration she was feeling.

" One shouldn't mix business and pleasure. I thought this person might have known better."

...

No. There would be no taking him tonight, even if both her body and mind wanted it. It was as though Roman's words were a challenge, taunting her to give in and bury her frustrations in Jaune once more. She didn't *need* Jaune Arc, nor did she want him. He was a tool to be used.

And it was the user, who decided when and where - not the tool.

"Ah, I didn't say you looked lonely," he grinned at her, "actually, I thought you looked like you were in a bit of a rough mood."

And yet you still decided to come over... that doesn't say much about your intelligence.

Nor his self-preservation skills... though given his choice of profession - and his choice of girlfriend - that went without saying.

"Thanks for the concern," she forced a smile onto her face. The same one she often used when dealing with Roman or Adam. One of the gentler ones anyway, when she wasn't half-considering setting them on fire. "I've just had a rough day, it's hardly anything to worry about."

"Want to talk about it?"

Damn him... no, she didn't. She just needed some time alone to think of a solution, or failing that - something to distra- no! No, she wasn't doing that. This was just another result of being trapped in Beacon... back in the city she could have a drink, further her plans or just spend some time alone.

"Really, it's not worth worrying about," she said instead, trying to look as apologetic as possible, "I appreciate the thought, but I just wanted some fresh air." He looked like he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure what. Did he want to try and help her, to offer support as a good boyfriend should? That would only irritate her all the more.

"I like to come to this spot as well, when I need time to think. It's a really good view."

Oh? He was going to go with distraction, was he? A better choice, were she someone so easily swayed as to fall for it. She could admire his persistence, in a way... or rather, she'd admire it were it aimed at someone else.

"Sometimes I like to just stand here and close my eyes, just to experience it that little bit more. Try it with me?"

Cinder sighed, "very well." She'd humour him his games, before making some fresh excuse to find a new place to be alone. "I'm not sure what sight I'm supposed to be experiencing with my eyes closed however."

"Try taking a deep breath through your nose," the boy suggested, he doing the same beside her. Even with her eyes closed she rolled her

eyes. It smelled like air. The same as any other she breathed in Beacon, or anywhere else in Remnant. "I don't know why, but around this time in the evening the breeze comes in from the ocean. You can smell the salty air as it comes in, before being blown out once more - as though returning from whence it came."

Was that so? She concentrated on the breeze, trying to process what scents she could. There... she could just make out the tang of the ocean, a warm sensation - the air was hotter coming in, before being blown back with a slightly cooler edge. There was a difference in it too, as though the breeze coming back was somehow fresher, clearer.

"The heat from the sun too," he continued, his voice the only sensation she could make out with her vision obstructed. "As it sets behind the mountains, the air is cooler, yet you can still feel the sun's rays tickling your cheeks."

It was the contrast, she was sure. Between the cold evening air and the heat from the huge star. He was right though... it was soft on her skin, not quite as abrasive and burning as it was during the midday hours.

"Plus with the trees nearby, if you listen carefully you can hear the breeze blowing through the branches. There's that tinkling sound, as it passes through each individual leaf - pushing them against one another."

Like some kind of woodwind instrument... she could hear it too. A rustling, tinkling music, punctuated occasionally by the creaking of a thin branch, or the sound of a loose leaf scratching against the cobbled ground.

"This *is* a good spot," she agreed at last. Surprised to find she actually meant those words. When her eyes finally opened, it only seemed better. As though she was seeing it with more depth somehow, or maybe just noticing all the other little things, other than just the sunset.

Or maybe because she wasn't quite so focused on her own frustration.

Damn him...

"I spent a lot of time out in the sticks," the boy chuckled from behind her. He didn't touch or approach her, but with her newfound focus she could feel his breath on the back of her neck. "It was actually my mother who taught me to pay attention though... we used to visit this lake a lot, and she'd just sit there watching us, or the surroundings."

Lazy days... she'd never truly experienced them, not that such bothered her. She much preferred the rush that came from long-set plans coming to fruition. Simply sitting down and wasting time felt anathema. His words now wouldn't change that... such a beautiful sight would remain long after Beacon was gone. Long after he was gone.

"I guess you had an argument with your team, I'm sure it'll blow over."

"What makes you assume that?" Her, an argument with Mercury and Emerald? The idea was bizarre in itself, but she supposed it made sense from his point of view. He did think they were the same age after all, and though she'd never allow it herself, arguments did happen.

Neither of them would dare to openly oppose her however. Nor had they here... they kept their doubt hidden. But that didn't mean it wasn't there.

"Well whenever I wanted to be alone, it was usually because of fights within the team," the boy shrugged, "early on we had a bit of a problem, I guess. Mostly between me and my partner, but it spread to the rest of the team too. I wasn't the strongest of people back then, and they kept trying to protect and mother me... it got really annoying."

Had she asked for a life story, Cinder wasn't sure? It came as no surprise that he'd been weak however... not after his performance with that rifle at the fairground. Hunters practiced versatility in most forms, hence their reliance on mecha-shift weaponry. While it wasn't *unusual* per se, to find someone who eschewed such logic in favour of mastering a certain skill...

Those people tended to move with a little more confidence.

"I don't think they meant to," he said, "but they just kept doubting that I could actually look after myself, that I could fight without their help."

"What did you do then?" She played along and asked. Their situations weren't at all the same, though she'd admit he faced the same crux of the problem she did. Mercury and Emerald would not defy her, but their doubt might lead to them questioning decisions - if only within their own minds. It might not lead to anything... but *might* was not something Cinder Fall had ever been content with.

"I proved them wrong. I stood up for myself and ended up fighting not only the guy who'd been putting me down, but also an Ursa. It might not seem like much," he said with a laugh, "but at the time it was enough to prove I didn't need to be babysat by them. After that they just sort of... well, things sorted themselves out."

Prove them wrong? That would happen in time with her as well, wouldn't it? Come the following Wednesday and the Breach, where she would break ties not only with Beacon - but also with this fake boyfriend of hers. At that point both Emerald and Mercury would realise the truth of what she said, that nothing had changed.

"Thank you, Jaune," the older woman shook her head.

"Have I done anything worth being thanked for?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not." Her amber gaze flicked to him for a moment, in time to see the wry look on his face. How amusing, to be comforted by someone like him - even if it was only the slightest.

Even more amusing to consider a hunter-in-training, one as idealistic as him, reaffirming her commitment to the demise of everything he loved.

Certainly he hadn't done anything worth being thanked for by the people of Vale.

She was about say more, but for the interruption of a new voice. "So, the rumours were true after all. I thought you were with that long-eared freak?"

"Friend of yours?" Cinder asked as she stepped away from the blond teen, looking towards the new figure. Tall and wide, with a smirk that belied any real intelligence. Ah yes, she remembered him now... the Winchester brat.

"Not... quite," her companion sighed. "Velvet isn't my girlfriend Cardin, and she has a name. It's not freak."

"You can't expect me to remember the name of every animal or pet in Beacon." Ah joy, a loudmouthed racist. Those were always the worst. Not the racists, she could care less about the political or moral opinions of those around her - she was hardly one to talk. But there was nothing more disgusting than someone who liked to run their mouth in an effort to appear dominant.

"What do you want, Cardin?" Jaune sounded as irritated as she felt, at least in that regard they were similar. "Didn't I tell you not to mess with my friends anymore?"

The other teen looked at her then, his eyes narrowing before he glanced away, a scowl settling on his face. Cinder simply raised a single brow, as though challenging him to say something. If it weren't for the desire to protect her cover, she'd love the opportunity to put him in his place.

"And I'm not messing with your friends, am I? I'm here talking to you." He paused, gesturing at her. "Besides, the last thing I want is

your sloppy seconds."

"Watch it, Cardin," the blond warned, stepping forward, "I'm not going to put up with you insulting my friends anymore, especially not her."

"Ignore him," Cinder whispered, despite wishing to do the opposite herself. It would leave a bad taste in her mouth, but they didn't need to be drawn in for some kind of detention. Not over a stupid schoolyard scuffle. She didn't need to be within Ozpin's sight, not if Goodwitch might be able to recognise her. Blue eyes met hers as he glanced back over one shoulder, though to her relief the tension flowed out of his body.

"You're not worth the effort Cardin," Jaune sighed, his shoulders slumping as he put an arm around her waist. "Let's go, the air's starting to smell foul out here."

She wasn't sure he noticed it. The way the other boy's hand curled into a fist, or how the lines at the edges of his mouth tightened. Lips parted, the brute's chest was rising and falling in short breaths. All clear signs for one who was looking for them. So it was no surprise when they passed him that she heard a whistling of air behind her.

Cinder ducked out of Jaune's grasp, giving the blond a subtle push - just enough to place him out of harm's reach as she stepped to the side. If the idiot wanted a fight, then she supposed she'd have to oblige him. Though she wasn't going to get her hands dirty on some jealous fool... a flex of her power, a subtle use of dust... she'd have him begging for mercy - the perfect sacrifice to her mounting anger!

There was more than one way to sate her frustrations, after all.

Which was why it was such a surprise to see the boy sat on his ass, a lovely bruise blossoming on his cheek... as he stared up at the smaller teen stood above him. "I warned you, Cardin," Jaune seethed, breath escaping his lips in great gasps. One hand was held before him, skin red from where it had connected. "I told you not to

mess with me *or* my friends anymore... hell, I thought you'd learned too."

Stormy eyes seemed to glow, before disappearing behind golden locks, the teen shaking his head in disgust. "Guess they were right. You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

The Winchester brat made to stand, one hand pushing down on the ground as he tried to rise. *He* didn't allow it however, stepping forward to kick the boy's arm from beneath him, sending the brute back to the ground. Smaller, shorter - and clearly so much lighter... the blond stalked around the downed boy, face filled with naught but anger. Primal and unrestrained, with not a hint of mercy.

Cinder's tongue darted across her lips, teeth biting down on the lower.

"Let me make it clear for you then, if you're having trouble understanding." Jaune crouched down, squatting so that he was balanced on the heels of his feet. She watched as the fool made to strike at him, one last act of defiance from a defeated foe. Jaune slapped it aside with the back of one hand, the act almost lazy in its execution... as though it wasn't worth the effort. " *This ?* This has to stop... no more stupid attacks, no more bullying... in fact, no more *you*, Cardin. I'm sick of it."

He wouldn't kill the boy... she knew that. Yet despite that knowledge, the way the words were delivered came with all the finality of a death sentence. Winchester's eyes widened, even as her thighs rubbed together. Who could have expected this kind of behaviour from Jaune?

So callous, so cruel... she wanted it.

"Stand up, run away and stay away," Jaune sighed, stepping away and turning his back on the downed boy, "if I have to see you again, if I have to even *perceive* you... then we'll be having another conversation like this." Winchester climbed to his feet, one hand

clutching the bruise on his cheek as he looked upon them both with utter hatred.

"Tch..." he spat in their direction, but despite that pathetic act of defiance, turned to leave.

"But Cardin?" Jaune stopped him, and she revelled in the way the fool's shoulders tensed, suddenly afraid. "If I ever catch you harassing Cinder, Velvet... or any of my friends again, then we'll be skipping the conversation entirely."

Hardly the most terrifying words... he could use a little practice, maybe a little tuition on how to truly strike fear into someone. But that didn't stop the wicked grin that twisted her lips, nor the narrowing of her eyes on his back, as his foe slumped away in defeat.

"I'm sorry you had to see me acting so ugly," he sighed once they were alone. His shoulders were still hunched as he stood with his back to her, and his hands were still balled into fists, the man's frame *shivering* with pent up aggression.

"Ugly?" She whispered, wrapping her arms over one shoulder and below the other, so that her hands connected diagonally over his chest. Entrapped within her grasp, she could feel the vibrations running through his body. Against her arms, her breasts - even her legs, which she pressed against the back of his. He was filled with pent-up frustration, rage and aggression.

She *had* to have that aimed at her, unleashed upon her body in a moment of passion... when he fully lost control and gave in to his hunger. A desperate fight for control and satisfaction, one which she cared not whether she won or lost.

"I don't think that was ugly at all," she whispered, setting her cheek against his neck as she bit down on his ear, "why don't I show you just what I thought of it, hmm?"

His hands settled on hers, prying them open as he turned within her grasp. She could have stopped him, but instead wanted to see what he would do. She wasn't disappointed, as he pulled her into a searing kiss - pressing his lips against hers so hard she could feel them bruise. One leg came up to rub against his, his muscles tense against the inside of her thigh. So hard, unrelenting and angry... she needed it.

"Sorry," he whispered, breaking their kiss as he stepped out from her grasp, "I promised my team I'd do some training with them this afternoon. I just wanted to make sure you were okay, since you looked so down."

Another kiss, this time feather-light against her lips, and then he brushed past her, walking away with a smile and a wave.

What? She could only watch him, lips parted, his taste still on them as he vanished from sight, back within the confines of Beacon Academy. He was just going to... make her like *this*, then walk away!?

What!?

Had she - Cinder Fall - Just been... had he just...?

That would *not* do.

Sheesh Jaune, take responsibility for your actions xD - I know I would.

Some development between them, and hey, look - no sex! We're actually still on beat 3 here, for those keeping track - I know one or two are. Keep in mind that in my lessons I do say that beats 3 and 5 should last for much longer than the other ones. This is essentially the first time Cinder has ever been impressed with Jaune, or wanted him.

You'll also notice I made up new reasons for the breach here, as it's worth keeping in mind that in the show... it was utterly pointless. But had it succeeded, at a time when all the students were out - and the older hunters with them?

The breach could very well have been the hammer blow Amity was. I like to think of Amity as their contingency plan. Because there's no way Cinder would be foolish enough not to consider the possibility of failure. She just didn't expect the definitely-not-sharingan that Ruby has.

Next Chapter: 28 th March

. com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 7

Long story short. I have been getting spam flames from guest accounts since this story began back in chapter one. I've been ignoring it for a long time but the consistent insulting bile, combined with the work involved in moderating and removing it, has been playing with my patience.

Similarly things got a bit tough when my roof half-collapsed and I ended up ranting here a bit. I've altered this now to remove it, but allow a small message to remain.

I don't mind negative reviews. I will never delete them if I even think they are slightly relevant. To that note I have left in ones like "Lame" or "Rubbish" without any explanation. Those can stay because it might be someone's genuine opinion. But I am tired of the obscenity filled threat reviews, that say if I don't delete this story that they hope I get cancer and such. The usual drivel.

So there it is, just an ultimatum of sorts. Don't bother - I'm moderating guest reviews now so generic hate will be removed. I never wanted to have to do this... why would I - it's just more work? But apparently I have to...

In total there have been 89 deleted reviews for this now. All 89 from a Guest account that tends to use nothing but swear words and threats. Please... if you don't like this story. Leave. There are thousands of others that can be read.

Beta: College Fool

Chapter 7

How dare he!?

She was the one in control, it was *her* who decided when and where - not to mention the manner in which they would do it. He was a tool - nothing more than a form of relief; someone to satisfy that hunger within her.

So how dare he get her excited, how dare he turn her on so much?

And then walk away?

She wouldn't stand for it. That... this *slight* against her. She was irresistible. A paragon of beauty and illicit lust all wrapped up into one delicious package. She was everything a man wanted in a woman, and so much more at the same time. Men had fought for her attentions, women too.

And he had just walked away from her, to spend time with his *friends* ?

So turned on had she been, so *aroused*... that she'd been forced to bring herself to satisfaction alone in her team's bathroom; biting down on one hand as her fingers worked their magic on her hungry flesh. He'd left her desperate and wanting - to play with herself like some stumbling teenage girl.

No one had ever dared do that to her before. No one would be so foolish.

The night's sleep had done little to calm her frustration either. In fact, the dreams she'd had served only to irritate her more - sensual and erotic - in a manner she'd rarely experienced before. He needed to be punished for daring to put her through that. He *would* be punished. She'd see to it personally.

Leaving her high and dry like that; the only option was to do the same to him. She would make him want her. Want her so badly, be

consumed by lust and desire until he was a mess of barely restrained *need* . And then she would walk away.

It would be the perfect revenge... better still if he followed her; if he begged on hands and knees for her attention, for her to touch him. The mere thought of it was enough to have her thighs rubbing together, vicious smile working its way slowly to her lips. She could imagine him now, on his knees before her as she sat on the edge of her bed.

She wouldn't accept him that easily. Words were cheap... no, she'd make him *earn* her forgiveness. She'd make him *show* her why he should have the blessing of being accepted back into her bed. Her legs stretched out luxuriously; golden eyes closed as she imagined his hands and lips upon them, slowly working his way higher. Stopping when she commanded him to - a small frustrated whine coming from his lips as she teased him.

Gods, yes...

She couldn't wait. It had to happen, *today* if she could manage it. Her body desired it - *she* desired it. There were no other tasks to be worked on; it was Friday and all they needed to do now was wait for the students to have their missions, for the scheduled time to arrive and the breach to occur. Some might say that revenge was a dish best served cold; but to her that was only whispered by fools who had not the power to achieve it.

Revenge was a dish best served blisteringly hot. So quickly that her aggressor could both recognise and remember what it was they had done to deserve it, so brutally that they could do nothing but regret ever crossing her.

It was with that thought that she brought forth her scroll; typing a quick message to her little toy.

If he wished to play games... well, she was a master of them.

"You look beautiful," his azure eyes roved hungrily up and down her form, paying particular attention to her long legs - which she'd left bare. It was the first time she'd worn her normal outfit in a while; though she hadn't expected it to be for an event like this. "Red suits you."

"I'm sure it was the colour you were looking at," she whispered. The teen's face flushed, his smile taking a chagrined edge. He took her hand in his, drawing her close for a small kiss. She smiled against his lips, biting on the lower one gently while staring into his eyes. With other people around them he didn't dare do anything to deepen it, though she could tell he wanted to.

Perfect.

It had been the work of but a few moments to lead Jaune Arc into asking her on another date. Simply mentioning their upcoming missions - and the distance it would create between them - was enough to have him ask to spend time together. The cinema had been her subtle touch, merely mentioning they should catch a move *or something*. Of course, the inexperienced young man had taken that idea and run with it.

So very predictable, though in this case that was hardly a bad thing.

"Let's go - I've heard good things about this movie." Jaune pulled her along, his fingers intertwining with her own in a manner she was fast-becoming familiar with. He always seemed to want to keep hold of her and the act of holding hands, in some strange way, seemed to be something he was very keen to maintain. That had never been something she really bothered with in those rare and brief encounters she had with other men. Sex had always been just that; pleasurable, passion-fuelled and fulfilling. No one had ever mistaken it for anything else - and there *certainly* hadn't been any hand-holding or pillow-talk afterwards.

This felt childish by comparison. Then again this *was* Jaune Arc - so that sort of made sense. A few clerks gave them - or more likely *her* -

interested looks as they went through the tills. Even they could see the odd dichotomy of their relationship; particularly how calm she looked while Jaune appeared an over-eager puppy.

"Would you like a drink too, Cinder?" he asked as they shopped at the counter. The man serving behind the bar stared at her unabashedly, eyes glued beneath her neck. She could tell from the way Jaune's hand tightened that he had seen it too - and that he seemed less than impressed.

She might have encouraged his reaction; just to see another enactment of how he'd been the other night. But that would only serve to delay her plans - plus this was a little more public.

"I don't mind sharing yours," she said instead - reaching up with her other hand to pull his face to the side. Hard blue eyes left the gazing employee, meeting smouldering gold as she leaned towards him. At the last second she paused, darting her tongue out instead to lick at his bottom lip. She saw his eyes widen as she pulled away. Not to mention how he licked his lips, the better to savour her taste. "Is that okay?" she asked - nodding towards his fizzy drink and the straw pointing from it.

"Of course it is." He held it out towards her and she - seeing an amusing opportunity - leaned forward to accept it. She made him hold it as she drank, sealing her lips around the straw as her eyes remained locked with his. There was the barest hint of red left on the straw as she pulled away, making sure to draw her lips back up it as she did. Jaune Arc swallowed loudly - eyes lidded and dazed. The fool behind the till looked equally spellbound, ignoring his next customer as he watched them.

"We appear to have an audience." Cinder whispered, making sure to be loud enough that their little peeping tom could hear. Jaune's eyes snapped to the side again, a small growl escaping him, before he dragged her away from the area entirely. She allowed it with a self-satisfied smirk, wondering how far she could push his jealousy

before he snapped. That would be an interesting game for another time.

"I don't like the way he was looking at you," he whispered once the two were alone - or as alone as they could be - in the foyer of a cinema complex. Cinder leaned back against a handrail behind her, making sure to pose so that her body was pushed against him, defenceless and inviting. He took the bait, hands settling beside hers, so that he had the woman pinned against the railing.

"Oh, how so?"

"He was drooling over you," Jaune growled, "like you were a piece of steak or something." The blond leaned in towards her. She watched him approach, tilting her face up towards him as his eyes drifted shut. Before, at the last moment, she turned to the side - feeling his lips press against her cheek. She *felt* more than heard the distressed sound he made, though she pretended not to.

"It looks like our movie is starting," she pointed towards the doors which were now open, people milling through them. "Should we go through?"

He looked like he wanted to argue. Like he wanted to do nothing more than tell her to screw the movie - and then take her somewhere else and screw *her* too. But there was also that hint of innocence within him which he seemed to be fighting with. "Sure," he sighed at last, putting an arm around her shoulder as they both walked into the dark theatre. With the lights dimmed she allowed her small smirk to surface once more, taking clear pleasure in the jumble of emotions and desires he was fast becoming.

As they found their seats and the lights dimmed, she allowed her attention to pan to what was happening on the big screen. She hadn't actually thought to suggest what they should see. Honestly, she wasn't even sure what movies were on at the moment... it wasn't something she normally cared for.

She had expected Jaune to choose some kind of nebulous action film. One rife with explosions and poor comedy, where the hero couldn't tell what was going on and neither could the audience. Instead he'd gone for a romance, though she supposed she shouldn't be that surprised. He clearly cared about her opinion from how he acted, and likely though it would be the kind of movie she'd be interested in.

In a concession to that kindness, she *did* try...

The heroine was some kind of innocent and idealistic teen, falling for a rake of a man. One of those bad-boy types the media seemed to be so firmly in love with. She couldn't see the reason for the attraction - from either of the protagonists. Instead, they seemed to be paired together for no other reason than that the genre of the movie demanded it. To make matters worse the girl was whiny and prone to complaining... and the man somehow found that to be an attractive trait.

She supposed this *did* explain why the theatre was mostly empty, however. In a hall that could have easily sat two hundred, there must have been less than twenty people - all spread about in small groups. Golden orbs danced to her partner beside her. He at least seemed to be interested in what was happening on the screen - eyes glued firmly to the story unfolding before them.

She wondered how long he could remain focused on it.

It started slow. Little more than her knee bumping against his, the action disguised as she stared up at the bright screen. From the corner of her eye she saw him look down, his blue eyes shining in the dark room as his gaze was caught by her long legs. She could have left it at that. She could see his chest rising and falling as he gazed at her, but it was impossible to resist the allure to go further. One finger came down to sketch a pattern onto her thigh. Back and forth she tickled her own skin, acting for all the world as though she was distractedly moving her finger about. For the briefest second she roved further, pushing the edge of her skirt up just a tiny amount.

She glanced back to him. Only to see him watching the screen once more.

Hmph, she scoffed within her own mind. Trust him not to even notice. Well, if he wanted to play oblivious then she would simply have to up her game. The fingers left her leg as she instead moved to take his hand in hers. He always loved when they did that, so there was no resistance - and perhaps even a little pleasure from him - as they linked hands. He spared a brief smile for her, seemingly pleased.

She waited for his attention to drift back to the entertainment.

He didn't resist as she moved their joined hands. Even when she brought them to rest on her bare thigh. Slipping her own from his she watched his face as his hand came to settle on her skin. Blue met gold for the slightest moment, he giving her leg a soft squeeze, before he looked back up to the screen.

Hmm... too simple perhaps, even for him. He wasn't the virgin he once was so it perhaps made sense that a little bit of skin wouldn't phase him. Even if it was hers. She waited for a few moments nonetheless. Letting a few minutes tick by as she imagined his hand gliding further up, perhaps even dipping beneath the waistband of her shorts as he played with her in the middle of the cinema. It would be so deliciously sinful, that added risk of being noticed - even if there were so few others in the same theatre as them.

But of course he didn't. Too shy, too innocent - perhaps even too damn oblivious.

The movie progressed through the usual nonsense. The young woman's family didn't approve of her suitor. Not that she could blame them. He didn't seem to have any dreams or desires of his own - merely a two-dimensional character to it the necessity of the pairing. The girl on the other hand, and with her naïve attitude Cinder could only see her as a girl, was willing to run away if necessary. Trading her home and family for some kind of transient emotional attraction.

What a fool... both of them. If they truly cared that much, then why not simply keep their relationship hidden? Or the guy could always grow up and look to change himself to actually impress her family. What nonsense...

It was during an emotional kiss scene between the characters that Cinder made her next move. If the subtle approach wasn't yielding results, then it was clearly because he was too dense to pick up on it. This time however she leaned across his waist. Making sure to place her hands atop his own for support as she brushed her lips across his throat.

Jaune's arm wrapped around her shoulders. Leaning across the back of her seat as he tilted his head so that it rested atop hers. The action trapped her against his side, effectively halting her plan before it could even begin. As a low growl of frustration escaped her he even had the temerity to turn and kiss the top of her hair.

"It's a good movie," he whispered as he gave her shoulder a squeeze.

It's an awful movie, she wanted to shout - before she would push him back into his seat and force him to do something. Anything, she didn't even care what! So long as it meant the end of this, or that heaven forbid - she would get *some* kind of response from him.

"I'll be right back," she whispered as she disentangled herself from his grip. Jaune spared a concerned glance for her, finally tearing his eyes away from the movie.

"Are you okay?" Oh, finally - some attention?

"I'm fine, just heading to the restroom." A brief pause. As she looked down on him through her lashes. "Perhaps you'd like to come with me?"

"No, no," he laughed quietly. Somehow still mindful of the other patrons in the cinema. "I was just concerned. I'll hold your seat for

you."

Am I losing my touch? The words echoed in her mind as she stood opposite the mirror in the women's toilets. One hand on either side of the sink as she inspected her face for any blemishes. She looked fantastic - as she always did. Not much makeup at all, just a little around her eyes and the smallest gloss on her lips.

She pushed back from the sink and smiled. Sexy, mysterious, dangerous... she was all of those things. Yet... he didn't seem the slightest bit affected by them. Teasing touches, tempting kisses - seductive offers. He rebuffed them all. As though... as though they were common. Standard.

"Looking good," a male voice drawled. Cinder sighed, glancing into the mirror and to the side in order to see the man standing against the opposite wall. No one she recognised. He was as tall as Jaune with black hair, cocksure and - she supposed - somewhat attractive.

"This is the women's restroom. You might want to try next door."

"I'm not here to peek on women," the man chuckled, "just couldn't help but notice you looked a little frustrated. Take it that guy isn't exactly treating you right? He looks a little immature for you."

"Do you have nothing better to do than waste my time?" She had no loyalty to Jaune. Not to him as a person or as her apparent boyfriend.

"I could do you," the man grinned and cocked his head, "that's what it looks like you want."

Cinder scoffed, flicking her hair back. He was handsome enough she supposed. Older than Jaune for sure - which was a good thing realistically. Not to mention he had a more confident outlook on the world. Why mix things like love and business, he wanted nothing more than a quick fuck - as did she.

He, at least, wanted her. She could see it in his hungry grey eyes - not to mention the way they roved over her form.

"And do you," she smirked, walking up towards him, "think you can show me such a good time?" The man returned her smile, allowing her to back him against a nearby wall. The lust in his eyes, the increased rate of breathing.

She still had that effect on people.

It wasn't that she was losing her touch... it wasn't something wrong with her - but with him. He wasn't so susceptible to her charms, not so easy as *this* man. With a quick snort, Cinder drove her knee up between the man's legs. "Ugh-" he choked, collapsing to his knees as he cradled that sensitive part of him. Cinder stepped back, allowing him to look up at her. The smile was gone, as was any semblance of warmth in her expression. Instead she looked upon him like he was nothing more than an insect.

"I am *not* in the mood."

She didn't once look back. Leaving the broken man clutching himself in the women's toilets as she made her way back into the theatre. Jaune spared a brief smile for her as she sat down, not even noticing how she huffed and crossed her arms.

She hated movies.

"I really liked that movie," Jaune said as they sat on the Bullhead en route back to Beacon. "I thought it was great how in the end they were able to convince her family they wanted to be together."

"They could have just done that from the start, most of it was pointless." Cinder was less impressed. With the movie, with Jaune - with just about everything. So much for her glorious plan, he'd apparently proven impervious to her charms.

That just wasn't fun.

And now the night would come to an end, with her having utterly failed to get a reaction out of him - of paying him back for what he'd done to her.

"There was something else I wanted to show you - if that's okay?" Jaune smiled as he looked at her. She tried to mirror it. It felt wan and weak to her, but apparently it was enough for him. Really now, there was yet more? She was already bored and frustrated, ready for nothing more than a warm bath and a meal.

Tonight she would waste away alone with her scroll, ensuring that everyone knew their parts to play in the breach. She still hadn't heard from Adam either... she would need to call him tonight. Now wasn't the time for him to be getting cold feet. Or hooves, whatever.

"Follow me," he said once they had landed. Before immediately invalidating the instruction by taking her by the hand and dragging her off towards the edge of Beacon. To her surprise, Jaune already had somewhere set up ahead of time. Towards the edge of Beacon in a small copse of trees. Or more likely he'd asked someone else to set it up for them.

After all, he couldn't have set up a blanket and a picnic basket before their date. Not and still expect it to be here so late in the evening. The closely planted trees offered some small amount of privacy, though it looked like others had visited here before them. A small basket waited there, along with a large blanket, stretched out across the grass.

A woman such as her deserved every bit of extra effort. Even so... it was enough to make her feel vaguely flattered.

But feeling flattered did not equate with enjoyment. And as Jaune peppered her with small questions about herself, and Haven, she couldn't help but feel her patience waning. Possibly it was not his fault, he wasn't asking the wrong questions. Little things about her

school life, her family. It was just that he was asking them to the wrong person. Forcing her to come up with little lies and stories on the spot.

It felt too much like an interrogation, strained her brain as she kept trying to think up more answers. The poor boy, despite his best intentions, had effectively made this *date* nothing more than a job for her.

"Tell me about your family." She interrupted him instead, hoping to gain a few minutes to relax herself. He obliged. Telling her about a household with eight children, all fighting amongst one another while a loving but tired mother, and a stressed-out father did their best to balance it all. She chuckled at the amusing image. Enjoying his little tales of his parents trying to find time alone when they had so many kids. The funny circumstances he or his sisters had caught them in, to which he had only realised when he was older, had actually been desperate attempts for two adults to get some physical enjoyment.

It was during his next tale, when she was placing a deliciously sweet strawberry between her lips, that she caught his pause. Jaune's blue eyes were focused on her - though he looked away once she caught him. With a heavy swallow, he continued the story.

Oh?

She quickly glanced aside, trying to force a neutral expression onto her face despite the sudden rush of power she felt. She had to be certain though...

And so she granted him a few more minutes. Listening to him talk about some kind of regular trip to the lake his family often took. It was during the tale that she leaned forward, placing a single hand on his lap as she reached across him for the flask of cordial. She'd have preferred wine. But there was *nothing* sweeter than the strangled sound he made. Nor the rigid hardness beneath her palm. She pulled back, pouring some out for the both of them without so much

as glancing in his direction. His breathing was heavy as he took the glass from her.

Feather-light touches, little tilts of her head. He loved her neck - she knew that for a fact. And he struggled to keep his eyes from it as she brushed her hair back, revealing the creamy expanse of skin.

Seeing him struggle to look away was amusing.

Seeing him try to resist, infinitely more so.

Her hand snaked out to snatch another strawberry, golden eyes meeting blue as she bit down on it. He watched her. Watched as juice ran over her plump lips to dribble down her chin. With an impish smile she leaned forward, pressing the remainder to his lips while giving him a clear view of her cleavage.

A hand latched onto her wrist, the world spinning as he pulled her forward. Her back landed on soft fabric, his settling atop it. She didn't have the time to think of anything else. Not when the sky was suddenly blacked out and juicy lips were upon hers.

"You..." Jaune growled once he released her, leaning above her with one hand behind her head, the other on her shoulder. "You are impossible."

"Wh-" he didn't wait to hear it, diving back down once more. Cinder moaned into his mouth, his tongue playing against hers. The taste of strawberry and Jaune Arc all she was able to comprehend. She could have pushed him away but instead found her hands grasping wildly in his golden mane, trying with all her strength to somehow pull him closer. To ensure that he could not escape.

"Look what you do to me." Another kiss, lips almost painful against hers. "First at the cinema," his face dipped a little lower, teeth grazing across her delicate throat - before his tongue and lips connected a second later. "Now here as well... how cruel are you?"

"Cruel?" Cinder whispered past a haze of lust. "Whatever do you mean?" So he *had* noticed her actions at the cinema, and been affected by them? The knowledge had her purring in delight. Especially as his eyes raged like a stormy ocean. He looked angry. Angry, but also full of lust and need. Need for her.

"You know full well..." Those eyes narrowed. "No... you did it on purpose, didn't you?" She didn't answer. Didn't have to really. Not when she couldn't hide the victorious smile that spread across her face. It didn't fade, even after he sealed his lips to hers once more, dominating her in the only way he could. "You drive me insane!"

"I do?" A coy smile.

"I can't resist you..."

"Tell me more."

"Damn you," Jaune growled before initiating another battle between them. All tongue, lips and wandering hands as they fought. Something incessant buzzed from nearby. The familiar tone of her scroll demanding her attention.

Jaune pulled back, a short sigh as he opened his mouth to speak.

She wouldn't allow it. Tearing the scroll out and tossing it to the side, she grabbed him by his hair and dragged him back down. Neither of them heard the ringing stop - nor did they perceive anything else as he pushed down on her. Only the two of them, the heat and how soft each felt.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" Jaune sighed as he leaned down on her, pressing a brief kiss first to her forehead, then her nose, before finally moulding to her lips.

"You're supposed to stop *talking* ." She hissed back, legs rubbing against his as golden eyes drifted shut.

And to her mounting pleasure...

He did.

Cinder gets her revenge, or does she? Things heat up - if that's still possible - while the time until D-Day ticks down. As always, things to be read between the lines.

This chapter was pretty rushed and didn't all get to College Fool on time. Mostly because we had a bad storm here and my roof has collapsed - which is pretty bad! So I've spent all this weekend - and bank holiday Monday - trying to mitigate the damage while also stave off the massive loss of heat.

Good job I filled up on oil for our boiler like two weeks ago. Because I've a feeling I'm going to be going through a lot! Fuck my life...

Anyway, next chapter 11 th April

. com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 8

Hi all, another chapter here. Thank you for the many who have offered their support. I'll be pretty much ignoring the silliness that went on however, as always - best to ignore. One or two have mentioned how the PoV focus on Cinder might be a weakness. All I can say is... you might be right! But it's an experiment I'm trying. Next time I write a pure romance I will split the PoV's equally, but I just want to see how it works out this time ;)

Not saying I'm right in this choice or that you're wrong... just that it's something I want to try out. Personally I think you're correct and it *is* a mistake... but I've also read a lot of good single PoV Romance novels, and wanted to see how it worked.

Little else to say, but I will clear up one small thing. Cinder... is not my favourite character. I don't ship when I write, so I'm not ever "into" my pairings. Please don't mistake my writing this fic for me supporting her. She is a cruel, cruel woman - and I want to show that in this story too. I'm not, by writing this, claiming that she is misunderstood, deeper or otherwise a better person than anyone else. I used her in this fic simply because I wanted a mature romance around a very conflicted theme - and I thought; "hey, Cinder could work... with a casual sex theme!" In a way I don't *want* you to like Cinder too much, or I'm taking away from her character too much. Understand her... maybe - that would be good.

Nothing more ;)

Beta: College Fool

Chapter 8

"I do apologise Adam," Cinder spoke into her scroll, pacing about the room. "I had to maintain my cover, which meant I was unable to take your call."

Just what she had been distracted by she would not admit.

"That's fine." As always, Adam was short with his words. Maybe because she was a human, maybe because it was just his personality.

"Thank you for your understanding," Cinder rolled her eyes but held back the sigh she wanted to let loose. Dealing with him was frustrating at the best of times, especially since his racism shone through every comment.

He acted like it was he who made the biggest contribution to their little partnership. What a fool... she provided the dust, the connections, the plan and even the means. He was nothing more than a fanatic with an army.

One that she needed.

But needing his men was not quite the same as needing him. Adam would be removed in time. There was no place for one such as him in the world she would create. A simple explosive ought to do the trick, or maybe poison? It would be amusing to watch him slowly die.

"I have sent a small group of my men to Mountain Glenn to accompany Torchwick."

"I appreciate that. Have they had a chance to learn how to use the Paladins we sent with them?" Those hadn't been the easiest of things to get hold of. So she would be more than a little put out if his soldiers had failed yet again.

"Not to the level of professional pilots," Adam's voice was as toneless as ever, "but enough to suffice against Grimm and civilians."

I should hope so... Roman was able to pilot one without any training whatsoever. She supposed it was true what they said. You couldn't teach an old dog new tricks. Still, that wasn't any concern of hers. They could die in droves if needs be. So long as they completed their objective. Her legs crossed as she sat on the edge of her mattress, winding a loose piece of raven hair between two fingers.

"And what of you Adam?" she asked, "Will you be there when the time comes?" It wasn't enough to just have those on the train... when it struck Vale the panic would be incredible. Grimm pouring in from the inside... but that could be stemmed if the Council moved quick enough.

She needed something to strike from the outside simultaneously, something that would draw their attention away. With so many Hunters scattered across the Kingdom on their missions, the city would be just about defenceless.

"I am already in Vale. My companions are still arriving, but will be ready outside the walls in three days' time."

Hmph... was that the closest he would ever come to admitting that he was working with them? They would be cutting it close with that time frame, but so long as they were prepared come the day, there would be no problems.

"I'm glad to see you're willing to work alongside us," she didn't show any of the excitement she felt, "if there are any issues please get in touch."

"I shall." The scroll went silent in her hands, screen going black as he ended the call. What a fool he was... so blinded by hate and greed that he couldn't see the wood for the trees. *And he calls himself a revolutionary... how trite.*

Adam Taurus didn't fight for a cause. He fought for his own misplaced rage and grief. It wasn't freedom or equality he desired, but the opportunity to hurt those who had once hurt him. She

couldn't complain... it made him all the easier to control. Just dangle that opportunity before him - while allowing him to think that he could remove them at the earliest opportunity.

Oh yes... she was more than aware that he planned to kill her. The thought of it had the edges of her lips quirking upwards.

More men than him had tried.

What a fool...

And what a bigger fool she was! The scroll thudded lightly as it hit the floor, slipping from her fingers as she fell back onto the soft mattress.

Maintaining her cover indeed... she'd missed his first call because she'd been too busy making out with Jaune Arc, when she should have been focused on the truly important things. *So much for this farce not being able to distract me.*

How many times had she claimed that he had no effect? How many times had she assured Emerald and Mercury that there was nothing there? All this time she'd been mistaken. Fooled! It wasn't what they suspected... nor what they had suggested.

Affection, attachment, sentimentality? They feared she would become compromised. That she might turn on their plan because of some pathetic emotional bond. What nonsense.

Her distraction had been much more carnal in nature... far more insidious and cunning. She'd been distracted. No, she had allowed herself to be distracted. All because of temptation. Because of the sensations she felt when she dominated him - when he surrendered to her. Even now the thought of it was enough to excite her.

That was bad.

He was to be a tool, stress relief - something to while away the time. And in that regard he succeeded beyond all expectations. It didn't even make sense... his skills were nothing to write home about, nor his size. She hadn't even reached orgasm with him.

So what was it about him that plagued her so?

Was it the forbidden sin, the dark feelings that she was corrupting something so wonderfully innocent? Or perhaps it was how he surprised her... how it felt to turn a polite, young man into a passionate beast controlled only by lust?

The challenge, the control it allowed her, the sounds he made? Each and every aspect flashed through her mind yet nothing came to the fore.

And what did it matter?

How she had become distracted was of little consequence, as was why. The only question was what she was going to do about it now that it had done the one thing she swore it would not? Cinder's golden eyes drifted shut, thinking back on Jaune and his smile. Of his face twisted with desire as he pushed her down into soft grass.

A growl escaped her lips.

This was proof of it... she couldn't escape his influence even when she closed her eyes. It started simple... a small missed call on her scroll. But it would only grow worse from this point. Adam had known she needed to remain hidden and so accepted her excuse. What if he had felt offended enough to withdraw his support altogether?

Well, that was simple... she would have killed him and influenced whomever took his place. But the point was that it still would have caused more problems, and required more effort to solve them.

This relationship had to come to an end.

But then... it would anyway, wouldn't it? Her plans were to come to fruition in just three days' time, and from what Jaune had told her - he would be leaving for his mission tomorrow. By the time he returned she would be long gone.

For all intents and purposes, tonight would be their last night together anyway.

That... was for the best. Better to bring it to an end as quickly as possible. She was pleased to find the decision didn't bring any worrying emotions to the fore. It would be a shame to lose his services, and the pleasure he provided. But she was no more upset than she would have been at the loss of a particularly good source of entertainment.

She wasn't *that* compromised.

He had provided admirably as well, hadn't he? Considering how low her expectations had been, he'd really gone above and beyond. A distraction he might have become, but Jaune Arc had made her time in Beacon a little less gruelling.

He deserved her thanks for that... maybe she should reward him for his efforts?

...

What was she thinking? With a silent growl, she sat up, rubbing her forehead with one hand. This was moving far beyond a distraction... it was starting to sound more like an obsession. It was a good job she'd caught it now, before it could get any worse.

Tomorrow... tomorrow it would be over. There would be no more Jaune in her life, and nothing to distract her. She would be free of Beacon too, in just a few more days. When her desires sparked up again she would be sure to bury them in some fine wine and the company of a much more experienced man.

She'd soon forget about him.

And he would have the chance to forget about her. A lucky concession for him, since being absent from Vale due to his mission would save his life. He would come back to a school in ruins - but at least he would live.

She desperately wished she had a bottle of wine at hand. One she could use to wash away all the confusion she was feeling. *It doesn't matter. Tomorrow he will be gone and that is it. There is nothing to be concerned over.*

It was still her in control. She'd been the one to allow her attention to wander. She'd been the one to get distracted. He hadn't done anything wrong... nor anything she hadn't wanted. The sheets of her bedding ran through her fingers as she let out a long sigh.

Things were heading for a glorious conclusion for her. All the pieces were coming together; all her agents were assembled - even the White Fang itself was on board. Now should be a time for celebrating... not wasting time in needless frustration.

She would reward him. Cruel and ruthless as she might be, Cinder knew full well the value of keeping those beneath you happy. Only a fool shunned those who had served well... even if you didn't have need of their services any longer.

He deserved something to remember her by, even if it was just memories.

And she would make sure their final night was unforgettable. A true experience for him. One that he would recall until the end of his days.

He'd earned that much from her.

But no further. She wouldn't - couldn't - allow this farce to continue.

"Have they agreed to work with us?" her male companion asked, sitting dutifully on the nearby bed. He looked nervous, but there was an undertone of excitement there. Emerald stood nearby, struggling to remain calm when she was so clearly dying of curiosity.

"Was there ever any doubt?" she said with a smile, watching indulgently as they shared pleased looks and cheers. It was good to see the two looking forward to their plans so. Morale was important to more than just generals, after all. "We shouldn't expect to see any of them until the breach officially occurs. They know not to act until the signal is given."

It wouldn't do for those idiotic animals to jump the gun. That was always a concern with fanatics like them. That question of whether they would be able to hold their ground, to rein in that bloodlust long enough to wait for the opportune moment.

In that, Adam was invaluable. He ruled over them like a God, disciplining any that stepped out of line with a ruthless efficiency even she would shun. It made him respected, feared... but not loved.

She preferred to be all three.

"I just worried they might try something to mess it up or take control," Emerald played with her weapons, holding the blades up before her face. "They've always been pretty antagonistic towards us, and I'm sure Torchwick didn't help."

"Not to mention we gave them those Paladins to use," Mercury chimed in, "since they have all the dust too - what do they even need us for anymore?"

"Apart from creating plans that actually work?" Cinder teased, still laid back on her bed with an indulgent smile. "Worry not children, there are... safeguards in place, should they seek to renege on their agreement."

"Heh," Mercury and Emerald shared vicious grins.

She was not fool enough to give them so much weaponry without some method of control. The Paladins would self-detonate on her command, killing not only the pilots but all those around them. The Dust Generators Atlas had installed in them were truly powerful - capable of exploding with incredible force.

As for the dust? Those warehouses were also rigged. In most cases it was as simple as laying the smallest detonation device. The vast quantities of dust stored there would do the rest.

She could snuff out the lives of almost every White Fang operative in Vale if she wished.

That was how it should be. Who else but her could be trusted to wield such power? And soon she would have even more... once she located and finished that damnable maiden. This wouldn't have even been necessary if it weren't for Ozpin's dogs sticking their noses where they didn't belong.

So yes... Adam and the White Fang might think they could pull the plug on their little arrangement the moment their goals were met. But they would soon find that the reality was far different.

The only one who swept aside those who were no longer of use was her.

And maybe... just maybe... that was the solution to her other problem? Jaune Arc was a tool. That was all he'd ever been. Now that she had completed her little project, or soon would.

It was time to put the tool aside.

"It's just a mission to the outskirts of Vale," Jaune said when the two of them were alone in her room later. Emerald and Mercury had been dismissed on some errand. With a warning that under no circumstances were they to reappear that night. She had no idea what they would do to while away that time - or where they would

sleep, but it wasn't any concern of hers. "We're to shadow a sheriff for a week or two, just to see how we're supposed to act if we ever take any law enforcement missions."

"Sounds interesting," Cinder lied, trying to manoeuvre him to the lone bed in the room. She could tell from his movements that he'd realised. That little bit of excited panic within him, yet unlike most men he *still* fought to rein their meeting back towards conversation.

It was like he wanted more from this somehow. Such a ridiculous notion.

"Yeah well, my team really wants to go - I think Ren has someone he knows in the area. It's the only reason I can think of for how insistent he is." he paused as she pushed him so that he was sat down on the mattress. "Our friends already went on their mission like yesterday, so they've got an edge on us. Though they had to go with Oobleck, so maybe we win out there."

"Maybe," she barely heard what he was saying as she sat down in his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck as she knelt with her legs either side of him. She could feel his heat through bare legs. As well as that delicious firmness pressed against her core. Even fully clothed, she could still feel it.

"Speaking of - won't you meet my team before we go? I really want to introduce you to them."

This again? She wasn't even sure why he was still speaking with how they were sat, but this was a conversation she felt they'd had numerous times before.

"I like it when it's just the two of us," she whispered, that little bit of flattery and false praise mixing together in an effort to convince him against such foolishness. What use did she have for meeting his teammates? They were of no benefit to her, there was no gain - it would be nothing but wasted effort.

Kind of like all this talking was.

"I do too," he pushed his lips against hers, tongue diving through to wrestle with her own. She frowned when he pulled back a moment later. And that turned even deeper when he resisted her efforts to pull him back in. Clearly he felt this was necessary somehow. "But they're my team Cinder. I love them - it's like a family to me and I really don't like always rushing off and leaving them on their own." He leaned in to kiss her once more, "Plus I want to show you off to them. I want to show them how incredible you are, how wonderful and perfect a person Cinder Fall is. And then say that amongst all others in Beacon, she chose to spend her time with me."

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Cinder purred, leaning in to push her breasts against his chest as she nibbled on his bottom lip. His frame shifted against hers in a desperate attempt to close the distance.

"So you'll agree to meet them then?"

"Not tomorrow," she rushed on when he frowned, "it's too short for us to really talk before your mission. And not tonight, I want this to be about us. But when you get back, when your mission is over. I promise I will meet them, let you introduce me and even spend time talking with them."

"You will!?" he cheered, blue eyes going wide in pleasure. It was almost enough to make her feel guilty.

Heh... almost.

"I promise you, Jaune," she lied.

For when he came back there would be no Cinder. There would be no Beacon, perhaps even no Vale. She didn't care what happened to the city, but it would serve their plans better if some remnant remained. Something to stir such negativity as to drive the Grimm

into a frenzy. What better vessel for that, then to leave the city under White Fang control?

They would be so cruel, so vengeful and violent... that negativity would soar through the Kingdom like smoke.

Salem would be pleased.

"Thank you, thank you!" He lathered kisses on her chin and neck, amber eyes drifting shut as she luxuriated in the attention. "I can't wait to introduce you to Pyrrha, I just know you'll get on great. My best friend and my girlfriend, you'll love one another."

"One might consider it rude that you're talking about another woman while doing this."

This was to be their last night together. She did *not* want to spend it talking about whatever teenage strumpet he was friends with.

"Oh man, I can't wait. I'd been waiting for this mission for so long, but now I can't wait to come back from it!" She felt an alien sensation in her stomach at those words. Something heavy and nauseating, but she buried the feelings in kissing him - closing her eyes as he reciprocated. With a gentle shove she pushed him down into the mattress.

The night was young, but that had always been a meaningless comment for her. There was a certain finality to the meeting and she didn't want to waste any time. Not when she had no idea how long it would take for her to find someone else who could scratch that itch as well as he did.

A shame she could not take him with her...

No. One did not keep a tool around once it had served its purpose. *I have no need for you, Jaune*, she thought to herself - even as she pushed her body down into his. *You've served your purpose and I'm getting rid of you.* Her fingers intertwined with his, one of her hands

coming to wrap into his golden hair. *I don't need you.* She tried to transmit that knowledge through her lips against his.

In vague mimicry of what had happened the other day, his scroll began to sing - some terrible song she couldn't recognise. From beneath her he reached out to take it.

"It's Ruby... it's not like her to call." For a moment he looked like he was going to accept the call. One glance at her however, kneeling above him with hands on either side of his face.

The call ended as he turned it off.

"Good boy~"

Their last time... for she knew it would be their last, was sweet and soft. She pulled out every trick she could to bring him to the edge. Rewarding him for the service he had provided for her until this point.

He, in turn, used the intimate knowledge he had gained of her body, mapping out those secret spots with a touch that was almost expert. He had memorised those areas which brought her the greatest pleasure. Dutifully bringing her with him. Gasps and panting, prolonged glorious agony - she writhed and bit against him, grinning into his eyes as she drove him over the edge.

His climax was sudden, but no more surprising than her own. Golden eyes going wide, before closing as a ragged moan escaped her.

Their bodies shuddered together, her nails digging into his back as they collapsed side by side. As she lay recovering from the unexpected bliss, he leaned down and whispered into her ear.

"I love you."

She desperately pretended she didn't hear it.

I'm sure keeping in mind the time in the series that we can all guess what that call was about and what it signalled. I got this to CF really late this week, so my apologies there - but also if there are any weaknesses or mistakes then blame me, not College Fool.

For they are my mistakes! All mine! Mwahahaha!

Next Chapter: 25 th April

. com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 9

Hey everyone! I got one or two questions about this, which I thought I would answer (even as a few others pretty much got it spot-on). So last chapter, why did I have Jaune think that Pyrrha would be happy to meet Cinder? Was it stupidity on his part? Well... actually I believe that is the impression Pyrrha would give Jaune. She's so willing to sacrifice her own happiness for his (to the point that even Nora points it out), that I can't help but think if he *had* gotten a gf in canon, she would have been incredibly supportive, while insanely frustrated and jealous (but only in private). Essentially making herself miserable because she believes it is the right and kind thing to do. Sometimes it can be hard to understand girls at that age, especially when they clearly say one thing and totally mean another.

I imagine Pyrrha would be the first to just hug Jaune and congratulate him, wish him well and when he asks about a meeting say "Oh, I'd love to meet her..." all the while feeling her heart breaking. Just feels in-character.

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 9

It was his body moving which first woke her. An unfamiliar presence against her back, coupled with the warm sensation of a large hand resting on the bare skin of her stomach. Instincts long honed by dangerous situations flared to life, categorising every little thing that was going on. A second later, the memory of the previous night crashed back into her mind.

She kept her eyes closed.

The hand on her stomach moved. Fingers scraping gently across her skin as the figure hugging her woke up. There was a breath of warm air against the back of her neck, causing the little hairs on her skin to stand on edge. Yet through it all she kept her breathing even.

"Are you awake?" he whispered into the shell of her ear. A few seconds passed, as silence grew between them, punctuated only by the soft sound of her breathing. One of his hands trailed gently up and down her arm, tickling the nerves in such a way that she wanted nothing more than to turn into his embrace and see what he would do.

That would be folly however... whatever she desired, their time was over.

He disentangled himself from the sheets, unwrapping his arm from around her body even as he temporarily shifted the sheets off her naked form. Cinder missed the heat immediately, shivering as a wave of cold air brushed over bare skin. The young man made sure to rest the blankets over her once more, even going so far as to tuck her in - but without his heat behind her, it just wasn't the same.

"I'll be back in a week or two," he promised, and she felt the feather-light touch of his lips on her right temple. And then, with the sound of padding feet and a soft click, he was gone.

Cinder Fall allowed her golden eyes to open, sitting up in the bed as the sheets fell down to her waist, exposing her bare breasts to the world. She shivered lightly as the cool air ghosted across her, but otherwise let out a short sigh.

It was done. They were done. The charade was over and no longer would he dog her steps. She was pleasantly surprised to find that she felt only relief at the sensation. It felt like madness to suggest that she would miss it, that she would grieve over the loss like some kind of pathetic wastrel... but the times were strange. She'd been prepared for the sensation, no matter how much she hated what it meant.

But instead all she felt was a weight lifting from her shoulders. The bed was cold and hard without him, but that was an acceptable loss. Once this was all over she would find another to fill it.

A knock at the door interrupted such thoughts. The familiar staccato one that her two subordinates would use to alert her to their presence. With a quiet hum she stepped over to the wardrobe, pulling on some underwear before calling for them to enter.

Emerald came first, nodding a greeting as Cinder pulled out a fresh uniform for the day. She didn't miss Mercury's eyes roving across her form, but the young man caught himself and turned away a second later, affording her what privacy he could. She might have commented on it any other day, but her good mood provided him some leeway.

Also the subtle amusement at the fact they had been waiting outside all night... for how else could they have knocked on the door mere moments after her partner had left?

"He's gone then?" Emerald was the first to speak, the girl sitting down on one mattress. Mercury followed after her, sitting down on the opposite side with his back to Cinder. The near nudity mattered little to her, particularly since she had already covered herself enough. But she would spare him the frustration if that was what he wished.

"He is," the last few buttons of her shirt, before the woman flicked her raven locks behind her shoulders, clipping the collar shut. "His mission will be starting this morning and he will be leaving Beacon for almost two weeks."

"That will mean he gets to avoid what's coming."

"Most of the students will," Mercury shrugged. His tune certainly had changed, from the silent accusations of a few days ago... suggestions that she was compromised. "Isn't the whole point of this

that we're striking when the students are away, and the Hunters with them?"

"Exactly," she patted his silver hair as she walked by him, pausing to pull on her shoes. "Neither the Grimm nor the White Fang can hope to stand up to real Hunters, no matter how much they might claim otherwise. There will never be less Hunters in Vale as there will be in the coming days."

Oh, that meant they would all come back to Vale once the breach was over... an army of returning Hunters and students, eager for vengeance. But they would be gone by then, the Fall Maiden's powers with them.

The city would no doubt fall to the White Fang, who would take control. She wondered if they even realised that the Hunters and students would return soon after... all fully armed and hungry for vengeance? She doubted the silly animals would last the week.

Such a shame...

"You're in a good mood," Emerald grinned. As always her subordinates found themselves effected by her mood, grinning viciously between themselves as the excitement of the oncoming festivities approached. It was good that they were eager. Did they not all deserve some pleasure after the work they had done?

"Perhaps," Cinder chuckled. "How can I not be, when the future looks so promising?"

"Does your good mood extend to breakfast?" Mercury asked, "Because I feel like my stomach has started working on my spine."

"Well maybe you should have eaten more last night," Emerald fired back. Cinder shook her head at it, surprised to find how much she had missed their pointless chatter and banter. Far better that, then the silent recriminations they offered - those accusatory looks of concern that said they doubted her strength. Doubted she would

have the fortitude necessary to do what she had to do in regards to the blond who shared her bed.

What madness.

"I would not say no to some sustenance right now," she said, "we should all of us prepare as we can for the coming festivities."

Slaughter was hungry work, after all.

It was said that no plan could ever survive contact with the enemy. Cinder Fall knew that well enough. It could be because of incompetent lackeys, unusually competent opponents, or just unexpected circumstances or unrelated issues.

"But it's not for two days yet," Mercury ran a hand through his hair, pacing left and right. "What could have...?"

"Cinder," Emerald whispered, voice hushed but filled with nervous fear, "What should we do?"

She could hear the bones in her hand creak as she curled her fingers into a fist, every muscle in her body shaking in rage as she watched the plume of smoke spiralling high in the sky above Vale. From the floating academy of Beacon the view was unmatched, the distant sounds of screams and a low siren accompanying music.

Less pleasurable were the sounds of frantic panic, stamping feet - and worse, Bullheads taking off towards the city.

That fool Torchwick, what had he done now? She did not even imagine for a second that the blame could lay with anyone else. Not with how much control she had given him... between Neo and himself there was no chance any uppity White Fang soldier could have taken control - and Adam had assured her as to their loyalty.

Two days... it seemed so short a time and yet was so important. In two days' time Beacon's halls would be bereft of over 90% of its students, even some of the faculty would be out on missions like the history teacher currently was. But more than that, all the Hunters from Vale and the surrounding areas - who had come to the city to escort students - would also be absent.

Beacon would be on skeleton staff... and when it came to those able to fight, Vale would be a ghost town. That their plan had occurred two days early however, painted an ironically different picture.

Most of the students were still preparing for their missions. And because of that, there was an unusual over-abundance of professional Hunters in the city, who were here to escort them. Never had Vale been *stronger* than it was right now - and to top it all off, every single combatant was prepared... equipment ready and instincts sharpened. There were even more Bullheads than average just to cope with the sheer number of Huntsmen.

Vale was a *fortress* right now - and Beacon the barracks.

"We could still do this," Mercury whispered, eyes darting left and right to ensure no one was listening. There were no shortage of students watching on in shock, even as others rushed to aid the city, the three of them did not stand out. "We have the Paladins, the CCT, Adam and the White Fang..."

"Most of them aren't ready though," Emerald hissed, "I know *he's* here, but he said others would be arriving in the coming days. Even if they were, what are they going to be able to do against so many Hunters? We'd need a freaking army for this!"

"Contact Adam," Cinder's voice was calm, despite the raging thoughts in her mind. She needed the two to remain calm however, and not rush into anything foolish. "Tell him the plan has been put back, we'll be relying on our contingency plan for Amity."

Emerald cursed but dragged out her scroll nonetheless, stepping away from the group to inform the terrorist. No doubt he had already seen the carnage... she simply hoped he had not thought to leap into the fray. No, he was cruel and angry - but no fool.

Damn Roman, damn him!

"What are *we* going to do?" Mercury hovered beside her. He looked ready to fight at her command, whatever that directive might be. Valuable tools, the both of them... throwing them away lightly would be a foolish move and she did not like to gamble on uneven odds.

This was what contingency plans were made for...

"Defend the city," the words tasted like ash in her mouth, "Fight against the Grimm. Save as many civilians as possible and if possible make sure that fool Roman is captured *alive* . He's no use to us dead, and with this much bloodshed it is not inconceivable that someone might seek to remove him permanently."

"Adam and the Fang are holding back," Emerald reported quickly, "He says he will wait for further instructions but otherwise continue gathering forces until Plan B."

"It's a few weeks until the Vytal Festival," Mercury sighed. "I guess we're going to be stuck as students for a little longer."

"We'll be sure to make them pay for it," Cinder promised, stepping towards one of the Bullheads that had just landed. "Now come, it's time for us to play our part in the defence of Beacon."

And the day had started out so well...

Screams, bloodshed and fear. It was the perfect recipe for a Grimm incursion. The most suitable blend to ensure the beasts were whipped into a fury that would see them rage among the populace. It

was just so frustrating that she would play such a part in *stopping* this.

The world was a funny place... even if she failed to see the humour. Civilians ran left and right of her, fleeing in terror as they spread away from ground zero. A few bumped into her, bouncing from her body to the ground where they grovelled and crawled like worms. Were it not for the sheer amount of witnesses, she might have availed her temper upon a few.

As a single Beowolf loped down the street towards her, she was forced to concede that she would left to make do with just this unsatisfying prey. The beast ran on all fours, great strides and leaps as it chased after a few fleeing citizens. Chances were they had never seen such a monster in their lives... living a cossetted life in the city, surviving off the sacrifices of those brave enough to try and make a difference.

Even as she hated the Hunters, she despised these worms more.

"Help us," one of them screamed - rushing towards her with arms outstretched. Cinder's watched him with distaste. Even as the beast leapt from behind, bearing him down to the ground. The fool's screams were silenced with a great rend of blood and flesh, spraying crimson out across the cobbled streets. More screams echoed around them.

I can't believe I am being forced to do this, she thought to herself, heels clicking loudly on concrete as she rushed to meet the occupied Beowolf. With so much fear and panic around her it didn't seem to even sense her calm and even thoughts. At the last second it looked up, perhaps hearing her - maybe just sensing the danger. It made no difference as her hand lanced across its throat. Dark blood splattered across her arm, bringing a distasteful frown to her lips as she waved it away.

How disgusting...

A few foolish souls came forth to inspect the body of the man, some weeping - others attempting to revive him. She walked on without a care, knowing it was a lost cause. One did not need medical experience to know a man lacking most of his spine was a lost cause. *Hmph, idiots...*

How she would have preferred to use her weapons... the bow and short swords would make short work of the Grimm, while also allowing her to keep relatively clean. Blood was difficult to wash out of clothing on the best of days - one of the reasons she loved her dust-weaving so much. Ash was so much easier to shift...

But both had been seen by the enemy on at least one occasion. First with the Deputy Headmistress, who had witness more than enough of her fire-based attacks to be suspicious of a student wielding the same. Glynda Goodwitch was present at Beacon too, which meant she was certainly on her way here now.

And then there was little Ruby Rose... who knew both of her other weapons thanks to their little tussle at the tower. She'd heard the brat was a fanatic when it came to weapons. The chances of her failing to recognise the distinctive bow and swords combination was close to nil. The fact that she was apparently on a mission - if Jaune was to be believed - was irrelevant. Pictures and videos of this *tragedy* would be all across the news in coming days.

Better safe than sorry... particularly if she was going to be keeping her cover for weeks yet. How frustrating.

A few more explosions, followed by the sounds of gunshots, drew her attention to the central plaza of the city. If she recalled that was where the tunnels would lead to... what she affectionately called ground zero. The worst fighting would be there, along with the most brutal slaughter. She'd have liked to avoid it and revel in the destruction from a distance.

But Roman would likely be there too... and she needed him for their contingency plan.

That was the only reason he would live to regret this failure.

Another Grimm crossed her path en route, a Boarbatusk that growled and rolled towards her, spines threatening to impale skin. It was the work of but a moment to step aside, gently running a hand along its body as it passed her by. Smoke sizzled as the beast staggered free from its ball-like form, glaring hate towards her.

She regarded it with dispassion. As though she were looking at a bug that had the audacity to stand in her presence. There were no flames flickering about her, but even that monster could see the faint glow in her eyes.

The Boarbatusk roared and charged towards her once more. What a bother...

A metal pipe stuck from some ruined masonry nearby, bent and crooked as it jutted from the ground like a metallic sapling. Tearing it from the ground she ran her super-heated hand across the edge of it, turning the metal a deep cherry red even as she squeezed the tip shut, forming a rudimentary spear. The weapon would have been impossible for any other to wield, already a thousand degrees or more and rapidly rising.

For her it was nothing more than comforting warmth.

For the Grimm it was... well, like a hot knife through butter. The Boarbatusk didn't even have the time to squeal as the molten point pierced through carapace and flesh, melting insides as it delved deep into the creature's body. Whether death came from the wound or the explosion of its own organs within its body, she cared not. Only that the monument to her brutality remained... slowly fading away with a cooling piece of metal sticking from it like some kind of gory flagpole.

As she turned and walked away, she couldn't help but wish she could throw Roman atop it. Watch as he slid down the pole, impaled by his own weight. But such pointless catharsis would serve only

weaken her own forces. Neo would almost certainly vanish, never to be seen again - and with her, that oh so valuable semblance.

The contingency plan relied on it... as well as Roman's continued survival. Emerald and Mercury should already have found him by now. If she had heard the epicentre of combat then surely they had as well. If anyone wished to ask why two students had ignored civilians in danger then they could explain it away as seeking to cut off the source before anything worse happened.

With a light hop, she scaled some of the nearby ruins, making sure to keep herself hidden as she looked out onto the cause of all the chaos.

Cinder's blood boiled.

Ruby Rose and that *blasted* team of hers. It hardly seemed possible. How could one little team of four girls cause so many problems for them? First in interfering with Roman's robbery, and multiple times since? Roman had complained that they were a constant thorn in his side... and she had ignored him - labelled him a fool for being thwarted by children!

It did not feel pleasant to have the shoe on the other foot. But how, how had they managed to interfere with their plans and cause Roman to launch the breach two days before schedule?

It wasn't until she noticed the presence of Bartholomew Oobleck, that she answer came to her.

Ozpin...

Of course, that damned fool. Team RWBY had stumbled upon their operation at Mountain Glenn... with their base discovered and interference inevitable, Roman had decided that any result was better than nothing. In that he had earned some grudging respect from her... It would have been so easy to write it all off as bad luck, as a case of fortuitous happenstance for those young girls.

But for the fact they had been there in the first place. A ruined town, devoid of life and filled with Grimm? Hardly the most suitable setting for a team of students to undertake a mission. What use was there in exterminating Grimm in an area overrun - when there were many other villages that needed protection?

Ozpin had wanted them there... which meant that he had somehow found some evidence as to their movements in the region. Why a team of first years though... when he had older and more experienced students under his command?

The question ate away at her... was it a mere excuse to have the Professor there? As boring and dull-witted as he was, there were few who didn't know the name of Bartholomew Oobleck. Certainly he would be a match for Roman and whatever other untrained White Fang were present. But that would still place the children in incredible risk.

Unless Ozpin trusted them to be capable of looking after themselves... it seemed madness when talking about a first year team, but there was no denying what she could see before her eyes. Surrounded, injured and having just escaped a train filled with explosives crashing into a wall - the four of them were *still* able to fight off hordes of Grimm. From Nevermore to Deathstalkers, Boarbatusks to King Taijitu - they ducked and weaved, slaying any who attempted to climb onto the plaza that held.

So *these* were his pawns? This was group of people he would set against her? Four teenage children, one younger than the others by two years? It seemed laughable... yet it had worked, hadn't it?

The breach was ruined... her plan in tatters. Oh, she had the contingency - which would work to an even more devastating effect. But that didn't change the fact they had interfered in her plan and worse, looked ready to survive without a scratch.

Ha. Not on her watch...

Dust across her clothing flickered to life as she watched them, savouring every moment of fatigue that showed in their actions. If Ozpin wished to move his pawns out so early, it would be remiss of her not to take them. Who could find anything suspicious in a few casualties after such a tragedy? Their sacrifices would be mourned, but also glorified for the Kingdom.

If you wish to be martyrs so much, then I shall accommodate you.

It looked like her lust for bloodshed would be satisfied after all. Wouldn't dear Ozpin be surprised when his champion students returned as burned out husks, lifeless eyes staring up towards an unforgiving sky?

The bow materialised in her hands. Alien material crafted of dust and summoned at will creaking as she drew the string back. The shaft, black dust shaped as an arrow, held together by aura and will. Deadly in the right hands... fatal in hers.

Cinder smiled as the tip alighted on her first target, "Goodbye, Ruby Rose."

And then a Bullhead was obstructing her sight. Steel hull and riveted plates blocking the shot as she growled in frustration. What now, what new problem was about to appear before her?

"Ruby!" a familiar voice shouted. One that had her teeth gnashing together in pure rage.

No... no, no, *no* ! It couldn't be - it simply could not be. Yet as the vehicle moved away and her vision was once more unobstructed, she couldn't deny what lay before her. A new team had reinforced them at the last second... protecting them, while also doubling the number of people she would need to kill.

And he was among them.

"Jaune!" the damned girl cried out in joy, decapitating a Beowolf as she waved towards her saviour, "Pyrrha, Ren and Nora! You guys made it!"

Had he lied to her? Lied about his mission and absence, or had he simply changed his mind at the last minute? No... more likely he had seen the devastation as everyone else had and turned the Bullhead around. What else could she have expected?

But that fact didn't stop her hands balling into fists, gripping the bow so tightly that the frame cracked. The friends he spoke of... the team he occasionally mentioned as being so close to his own. She'd never really paid attention, dismissing them as easily as she dismissed the threat he presented for her - but never could she have imaged this.

Her stress-relief was in bed with the enemy.

And wasn't it ironic in how many ways that applied? But he was best friends with the team that had troubled her the most, the one that had now proven to be the valued pawns of her greatest enemy.

She should let them all die.

The Grimm were coming in ever-increasing numbers, pouring from the breach like a tide across the beach. Even with the eight of them, they were only children. What's more, the original four were already exhausted and low on dust and ammunition. She would not need to interfere at all to ensure their demise.

And with them, Jaune's.

She didn't care about him either. A tool, stress-relief he was nothing more - and to make matters worse he was now also aligned to her greatest enemy. If she was to undertake this contingency plan of theirs then she would be spending yet more time in Beacon. He'd already proven himself a distraction in what little time they had spent together. How much worse would it be in the run up towards the Vytal Festival?

How convenient would it be for her to be grieving his loss? An acceptable and believable excuse for any unusual behaviour from her, as well as spending much of her time sequestered away. Two birds with one stone... it would solve every single one of her problems.

And what's more, she realised, as he swung clumsily at an Ursa, barely managing to turn its claws aside on his shield. It looked like he wasn't a particularly good fighter at all... an almost certain casualty to the monsters before him.

She needed him to die.

He *deserved* to die...

Someone screamed his name. The man blocking a Beowolf's claw even as an Ursa reared up behind him, claw raised to tear his pretty head from his shoulders. She heard the warnings, heard the cries of those rushing to his aid.

Then she heard the bloodied gurgle.

And felt the drops fall down onto her face.

"C-Cinder?" he whispered, glancing back at her as she twisted the hand that was buried deep inside the Grimm's lung. Some more blood fell from its mouth onto her face, before with a rattling lurch it tore itself free from her super-heated hand, staggering back. Dust blossomed up around them as it died... already fading away.

"You fool," Cinder growled.

She didn't wait for Jaune to speak once they returned to Beacon. Grabbing him by the collar and dragging him away before his friends could even raise their voices. Mercury and Emerald fled immediately, knowing full-well her temper and what might happen to them.

He tried to speak to her as she pushed him through the door to her room, only for her to press her lips to his. He relaxed into the kiss for a few moments, before flinching as she bit down harshly on his lip.

She tasted blood.

"Cin-?" a hand slammed into his chest, knocking him back onto the bed. His words cut off as he let out a short gasp from the air leaving his lungs. She took that moment to mount him, pulling his stupid hoodie over his head and clawing at the buttons of his shirt. Half-way through she lost patience, gripping each half in one hand and tearing the clothing apart. There was a loud ripping noise as little pieces of plastic pinged left and right.

His unmarred skin faced her. Taunted her.

Jaune Arc gasped as she ran her nails down it, turning the skin beneath her red - even if she didn't pierce it. The pained hiss he let out excited her, drove her onwards.

Her own clothes soon joined his, the two of them divesting any such garments as they wrestled and kissed. All through it she bit and scratched, at his neck, his back - even running her nails across his most sensitive parts as she punished him. Her teeth pierced the skin of his shoulder, drawing a muted grunt from him as he came inside her.

She could feel tiny drops of blood on his back from where her nails had broken flesh.

He never spoke through it all. He never had the chance. Every time his mouth opened she would take it, forcing him into silence as she took out her frustrations on him. As she collapsed atop him, pressing their lips together one final time with force enough to make him wince, he finally spoke - shifting her to lay beside him as sleep began to claim her tired body.

"It's okay, I'm okay, I'm safe," he whispered into her ear, brushing a strand of hair aside. "You saved me."

She hated him.

Oooh, emotional - but also conflicted. This is *not* a simple romance. Hell, I wouldn't want to invest all this time into a simple romance.

Ugh, this weekend... I have a trapped nerve in my back which led to something of a weird weekend. The pain is bad, though only when I move and such... so I went to the doctor and they gave me some pain medication on prescription. Typically, I had a bad reaction to this like... all Saturday. I was shivering, some hallucinations, vomiting, all my skin was itching no matter how much I scratched it. I'm utterly fine now (and obviously not taking it anymore), but it really put a damper on my writing lol. I still have the pain, but compared to the weird crap of this weekend it's totally preferable!

For those who wonder, by the way, this is the official end of Beat 4 in the 7 Beat System. Beat 4 is always short, and included last chapter and this one only. Interactions with other characters comes next chapter, since if you recall she did say she would meet his friends when he returned... and she did just reveal herself to ALL of them.

Next Chapter - 9 th May

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Chapter 10

College Fool is currently in South Korea, so is going to be off the beta grid for a little while, just keep that in mind if there are any mistakes and direct all criticism to me. Other than that, on with the story!

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 10

Contingency plans were wonderful things. They allowed for a rapid and practiced response to a problem, wherein every single piece knew their place in the greater game. Only a fool went into battle without one - and Cinder Fall was no fool. Though the Grimm had been hunted down and exterminated by Ironwood's military automatons, the day wasn't yet lost.

Roman had been captured, escorted away by the General as per the plan - not to mention that Atlas' forces were now spread out across the city. She'd managed to switch the plan over so quickly that they hadn't even revealed their hand with the CCT yet, nor that the White Fang forces had been gathering throughout the city.

Truly, though it had been an obvious loss - this worked just as well for her.

Apart from the current situation, that was...

"- and this is my girlfriend Cinder." Jaune finished the introductions she'd paid approximately no attention to. She already knew the names and background details of Team RWBY, and Mercury had filled her in on his team as well. She wasn't sure how either of them

had missed the part where the two teams were best friends... perhaps they'd thought it unimportant.

She would be having words with them about that.

"A pleasure to meet you all," it was a testament to her ability that she managed to keep the seething hate out of her voice. "Jaune has told me much about all of you."

And he would be telling her more over the coming days if she had her way. What better way to get back at Ozpin, to undermine this whole operation of his - than to target the team he wished to use as his pieces? Knowing the enemy was half the battle... and her *boyfriend* would provide all the information she needed.

Truly even now he proved useful.

"Oh we've heard about you too, vomit-boy can't shut up about you. Though we were beginning to think you were more fiction than fact." The blonde one teased, wagging her eyebrows as though to embarrass her. Apparently Yang Xiao-Long seemed to think she was an innocent teen to blush and go red at the suggestion she was sucking face with someone.

How trite.

Jaune predictably complained about the nickname, not that it bothered her in any way. Her eyes trailed over the various figures, cataloguing their responses. Team RWBY seemed interested, but not bothered by the appearance of her. The only risk had been their leader Ruby Rose, who had seen her not only at the CCT but also when she'd been forced to help Roman out before the Beacon year began. That was a calculated risk however... she'd been masked at the CCT and she very much doubted anyone could have made out her features at such a distance in the dark, in the middle of combat.

Ruby Rose proved her correct through her lack of reaction. Merely nodding to a woman she had once bumped into in the hallways.

That, at least, was fortunate.

"Wow." The blonde, Yang, spoke once more. "What a day, eh? Torchwick behind bars, Grimm invasion stopped. Vomit-boy has a girlfriend. I'm not sure which surprises me more. This totally calls for a celebration!"

"The city is still in lockdown, shops are closed for mourning." The Schnee Heiress pointed out, causing the girl to deflate for a moment.

"We could get some food and have a meal together in JNPR's room." Ruby Rose offered. "All of us. Oh, and you can come too uh... Cinder?"

"I would be happy to." she answered, smiling at the little girl she would really have preferred to kill. But of course, a murder on campus would just draw attention... the things she put up with. Still, once they had confirmed that they were leaving, it would be a relatively simple matter to leave a little surprise for them wouldn't it? A dust explosive perhaps... at that point it wouldn't matter if the Headmaster figured out who was responsible.

And this was the ironic thing, wasn't it? Their initial plan had failed, leaving them to fall back to the Vytal Festival for the alternative - which left her, Mercury and Emerald stuck at Beacon. That meant, in some strangely official way, that she was still Jaune Arc's girlfriend.

And this was now public knowledge to the very people she could least afford to act suspiciously in front of. One did not jump into the fray and risk their life to save someone they would dump not a day later - not that her dispatching that Ursa had been any risk to herself... but it no doubt seemed it to them.

The choices were simple. She could break up with him, effect some kind of silly reason for them to split. No doubt he would back off, barring a few attempts early on to change her mind. But like any man he would give up in time.

The problem was how these two teams would react to their leader and friend suffering so. Threats on her person were fairly laughable but they might seek to `fix` or `help` with their sundered relationship - or at the very least pay more attention to her afterwards, if only to glower like little children. That would be a problem if it got in the way of her movements. She still needed to locate the Fall Maiden after all, which meant spending time searching Beacon's lesser used corridors.

On the other hand she could remain with him, use him as she always had while also working him for information on the two teams... If Ozpin was determined to use RWBY as his eyes and ears among the students, then being amongst their circle would allow her to manipulate exactly what it was he heard.

Ozpin would never suspect a loving woman doting on her boyfriend, would he? More than that, if she'd known where this blasted Team were going on their mission then she could have adapted the plan or had them killed. She *would* have known that... if she had but paid more attention to Jaune's words and less to the things he could do to her.

The next time they were sent out on a mission that might clash with her plans however, if she was close to Jaune - and by extension *them* - then she would know. It was perfect... literally the only downside to the whole affair was that she would need to continue dealing with her errant boyfriend.

That shouldn't have been a problem. Keep him happy, tempt him along while also making use of his services for her own pleasure. It had never been about emotions - nothing ever had with her.

Why did I save him?

She'd been right at the time... he had become a distraction to her, something that was a weakness and a problem. You didn't encourage problems - you removed them. She should have let him die.

"Come on," warm fingers intertwined with hers as he tugged her along, walking in the middle of the pack towards their shared room. His damned smile was wider than she'd ever seen it before, the teen positively glowing as he held hands with her publically.

It was so sickening...

She hated little displays like that, always had - even now she desired nothing more than to snatch her hand away and keep it to herself. There was no benefit in them touching like this, it only served to leave her without one hand to weave her abilities.

So why did she allow it? *It's to keep up the charade*, the excuse seemed thin. There were plenty of people in relationships who were less touchy than he was. *It keeps him happy - he's easier to deal with when he is content*. Wouldn't he have been just as content with what she was already doing to him, behind closed doors?

"Well we didn't get to go on our mission," he shared a secretive little smile with her, "But I'm glad to see you're sticking to the promise we made."

Promise, what was he talking about? "Of course," she smiled back - allowing him to make his own assumptions. Did he mean that throwaway comment about meeting his team after their mission? Had she made a promise about that, she couldn't recall? It hardly mattered - promises were fools who wished to tie themselves to a single outcome. In this case she would humour him, but only because it benefitted her to do so.

I didn't foresee any of this stupidity when I decided to infiltrate Beacon. They said the best laid plans rarely survived contact with the enemy, but this seemed a little out there - even for her.

She made sure to memorise the route to their dorm, noting as well that Team RWBY's was just across the corridor. Jaune's dorm was surprisingly dull as they all squeezed into it, room so short that she was forced to sit on his lap as everyone shared the beds. She almost

groaned when she saw that stupid stuffed dog she had won for him, balancing on one of his pillows. Good God, did he actually sleep with the ratty thing?

As everyone sat down and conversation began, Cinder wanted to sigh. Playing the typical schoolgirl should have been an easy task for her. It had been one every other day. But instincts honed by a life of danger were constantly drawing her attention to the redheaded woman in the room, whose gaze was still fixed on her.

Pyrrha Nikos was no danger to her, especially not when she was unlikely to have the callousness to attack her in front of so many people. But Cinder's instincts had been created in constant fights for survival and opportunity.

Simply ignoring someone wishing you ill had never been a viable option in the underworld.

Similarly, Cinder Fall did not take such attention from anyone.

Of course, she could not strike back as she wished to either. And while taking her to task in front of her peers was sure to humiliate Miss Nikos into submission, it would probably turn the rest of the teams against her. It might also cause complications with Jaune, who had to share a room with these people.

There was more than one way to hurt someone, however.

And the flash of pain that came over the jealous girl's face, as Cinder intertwined the fingers of one hand with Jaune's, was oh so satisfying. The way the sadness turned to anger, and then defeat, as their two eyes met...

She lived for that look.

Her attention was diverted however, as the blonde girl started to recount the tale of how they had stumbled upon a White Fang operation and thwarted it. Cinder nodded and gasped at the

appropriate moments, shifting slightly as Jaune's arms wrapped around her stomach. From the sounds of it those fools actually believed they'd managed to come across them by accident... as though their teachers had just so happened to arrange their mission in such a way.

Cinder's amusement did take a turn for the genuine when she listened to how the black-haired one had defeated Roman, though the humour was soured by the fact that he had thrown the fight on purpose. Again, they hardly seemed to notice... how foolish were they? Roman was a trained Huntsman in his own right, someone who had defeated so many Hunters and Huntresses sent after him... he wouldn't lose to a single little girl, fresh into her training.

Not in such a humiliating manner. No doubt he had realised they would be moving into the contingency plan the very moment the train set off early - and had created a situation where he could be arrested as they needed him to be. If he had truly wished to escape, then Neo could have affected it in an instant.

Once the tale had reached its conclusion however, it didn't take long to turn back to the elephant in the room. Cinder couldn't help but sigh as a seven pairs of eyes locked onto her, some looking bemused - others embarrassed - but all of them interested in learning more.

"So you and vomit-boy," the blonde cheered, "How did that start!? I want details!" A few of the others leaned forward as well, seemingly interested in the tale. Though she did not miss the sympathetic glances the only other male sent to the scorned Nikos.

Jaune seemed unsure on how to answer, his cheeks flushing. The others no doubt thought it was from embarrassment over the attention being focused on him. Cinder knew it was more along the lines of explaining how they had first gotten together. A story which was perhaps a little too much for innocent ears.

"We bumped into one another." Cinder explained for his benefit, her eyes crinkling in mischievousness as she met Jaune's gaze from the edge of her vision. He laughed nervously and nodded, apparently keen to agree to her not-quite-lie. "And then met in class a few times... I suppose it became official when we did some homework together."

When she had seduced and lured him back to her room... before taking him.

They never did get that homework done.

"That uniform, you're from Haven?" The Schnee indicated to her skirt and blazer, one arm of which was still a little damaged from where it had entered the Ursa. At least the bloodstains had dissolved when the Grimm had.

"Here for the festival with my team, yes."

"Oh, Emerald and Mercury!" Ruby Rose piped up, slamming one fist into her hand. "I saw them leading Torchwick to the prison transport. I didn't see them fighting though."

"We were there." Cinder offered with a shrug. "You likely had enough to focus on, with your being so close to the breach itself."

"Guess so, definitely saw you swooping in to rescue your damsel in shining armour though!" Xiao-Long mocked, punching Jaune lightly on the arm. Though considering she was wearing metal gauntlets, and Jaune rubbed his arm afterwards, she probably didn't know her own strength.

Once more the hairs on her arms stood up, alerting her to the glances of her apparent *rival*.

"Oh well, you know," she waved it off. "I could hardly let it hurt what's mine."

She knew it was childish. A bigger woman would have ignored it. But it was just too satisfying to see the girl flinch like that. She didn't miss the quick glare from the orange-haired teammate for that comment. It was enough to have her breaking eye contact with Jaune's partner first, sparing the girl any more. What was getting into her, bating and taunting the other girl so? She was no danger to Cinder, no matter how established her career was. Petty championship fighting and competitions were nothing compared to the rigours she had been through.

What purpose did alienating the girl serve, other than to make sure Jaune's team had a poor opinion of her? She needed to get her head in the game.

"How did you kill that Ursa anyway?" It was Ren who spoke, the intelligent young man she had considered a potential threat so long ago, "I didn't see you use any weapon, are you a close quarters fighter?"

"I am," she lied. In truth she preferred the bow and twin swords, along with the flames she could summon through dust weaving. But those were abilities used by enemies known by people in this room. She couldn't afford to use any of those skills if she wished to remain hidden. "My semblance allows me to channel heat to my limbs in order to give me extra hitting power."

"And you used that to pierce its hide," the boy nodded his head, "That makes sense. Either way, thank you from all of us for helping Jaune out."

"Yeah - thanks for saving our fearless leader." The ginger girl crowed, apparently happy now that she was no longer targeting the redheaded member of their team. Said redhead nodded as well.

Cinder accepted the praise with ease, tilting her head magnanimously. The excuse as to her semblance would work nicely, especially since her cover for the tournament had always been as a

melee fighter. At least this way she could explain away any use of her abilities as part and parcel of this fictitious semblance.

"You never told me about that," Jaune said into her ear.

She leaned her head back into his chest with a sigh, "We never really talked much about combat when we were together."

"Oooh," the blonde Xiao-Long wriggled her eyebrows suggestively. "So I guess there isn't as much homework done as expected in your little sessions, eh? Making sure you have a firm grasp of first - or have you worked your way to second yet?"

"First, second?" She was honestly confused for a moment. It wasn't until Jaune coughed nervously and she saw how red his cheeks were, that realisation dawned upon her. Oh my... a slow smile crept out onto her face at what the girl no doubt thought was quite the risqué question.

"Why don't you field this one, Jaune?" It was petty of her... but he deserved some form of punishment for what he was putting her through.

"Ah well," Jaune's face went even darker, if that were somehow possible, "You see... uh... how do I put this?"

Cinder saw it happen in slow motion. The dark-haired girl, Blake if she recalled, was the first to realise, though her reaction was the smallest too. Her eyes widened for the briefest second, before an amused smirk spread onto her face. She leaned back, content to wait and watch. Lie Ren and his partner the Valkyrie girl were next, the young man letting out a short sigh - though the girl's reaction was much more satisfying, especially the way her mouth seemed to be getting wider and wider.

To her surprise however, it was little Ruby Rose who ruined her fun, "*Ohhh, you've already had sex.*"

"R-Ruby!" the blonde gasped in horror. To Cinder's infinite amusement she then turned to the black haired girl, "Damn it Blake! I told you not to corrupt my sister!"

"I didn't do anything."

The blonde barely seemed to hear it, "Ruby tell me... tell your big sister," she started to shake the little girl back and forth by the shoulders. "You're still innocent right, nobody defiled my little sister!?"

"Y-Y-Yang, I-let go-" It took the Schnee to pry the girl's fingers from her sibling's shoulders. The small leader still looked a little frazzled as she swayed back and forth. "I've not slept with anyone Yang, sheesh. I know what sex is because I'm not seven years old."

"Someone ruined my sister~" the blonde girl wailed dramatically.

This is the team which has been ruining my plans? If Roman could see this he would commit suicide out of principle.

"Don't you think that's a little irresponsible?" All eyes shifted back to Pyrrha Nikos at those words. Cinder found her own narrowing at the frown on the girl's face. Jealousy was one thing and she'd expected this the moment she realised the girl was interested in her stress relief. As far as she was concerned the girl had him not only as her partner, but had shared a room with him for months. If she had somehow failed to make a move in all that time then she shouldn't be the slightest bit surprised if someone else swept in to take him.

Whether that was for a real relationship or just a roll in the hay.

"Pyrrha," Lie Ren whispered. The girl ignored it.

"You're only here for the Vytal Festival. Don't you think it's irresponsible to go that far with someone when you are bound to be broken up later anyway? What if you get pregnant, are you going to demand Jaune follow you to Haven?"

The entire party went quiet after her words. The negativity in her words enough for even the little Ruby Rose to sense, who appeared to be fidgeting with her hands. Xiao-Long seemed equally tense. No doubt she was mature enough to have noticed the rising tension in the room... maybe all the dramatics had even been her way of trying to diffuse it, to distract Cinder away from noticing those jealous little green eyes.

Clearly her eyes weren't the only part of her which was green.

"That won't be an issue," she would have said more, but for the stupid chit cutting her off.

"How can you say that? We're only seventeen - what if you get pregnant or have a child, what if the relationship doesn't work out? Are you really willing to put so much risk onto something like this?"

"I cannot conceive." The words thrust the room into utter silence. "It won't be an issue because I am barren."

The redhead looked aghast, "I-I'm sorry... I'm so sorry!" Cinder ignored it. She should know better than to start what she didn't wish to finish... angry enough to accuse and discredit her, kind enough to feel regret when she achieved that goal. What a bizarre girl.

"Forget about it. It happened a long time ago, Grimm-related." Close enough to the truth in this case, especially when talking about Salem. Cinder had lost the ability to conceive when the woman had bestowed power onto her, that being one of the sacrifices she had needed to make.

As far as she was concerned it was no sacrifice. Children would only be a distraction, a nuisance she would have been unable to deal with.

It didn't seem like they particularly agreed with her assessment.

"I... I sincerely apologise," Pyrrha Nikos looked agonised, like she wanted no more than to reach across and take her hand. "That was insensitive of me, I hope you'll forgive me."

"That's awful..." Ruby Rose whispered, those silver eyes looking so full of sympathy that Cinder almost wanted to accrue the name vomit-girl for herself. Even the blonde looked on in pity, as though the inability to sire brats was some great loss.

Jaune's hands tightened around her midriff, drawing the woman further into his embrace.

"You look exhausted," Mercury apparently couldn't hold back the comment the moment he saw her. Nor could she find it within herself to make anything of it, she *felt* exhausted after putting up with all the nonsense of those two teams. If she looked half as bad as she felt then Mercury was being very kind with his assessment. Dealing with so much emotion aimed at her had been ridiculous, more so that it was sympathy and pity - two things she had neither need nor want of.

"Jaune Arc is close associates with Team RWBY," she said instead as she sat down on her bed, shaking off her heels. "Why was I not informed of this?"

"We-" Mercury looked to Emerald for help, the smaller girl remained silent however - red eyes wide once she caught Cinder looking at her. "We didn't realise... we were so focused on what their abilities were and who might be a threat-"

"Who someone knows and interacts with is just as dangerous as what abilities they might have." She didn't raise her voice. She didn't have to, for the two of them to realise how hot the water they were in truly was. "That team is Ozpin's pawns and had I known their closeness with him I could have used him to find out more about their mission."

She didn't bother saying their actions might have caused their initial defeat... she didn't need to.

"I-I'm, we're sorry ma'am," Emerald gripped her sheets as she stuttered out her response. Mercury's eyes were firmly affixed to the floor as well. The two of them clearly expected some form of violent response from her, if not now - for the sake of her cover - then later, once they were away from all this.

"This *failure*... is not to happen again, am I clear?" They each nodded, "I said; am I clear?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Very clear ma'am!"

Her anger would not diffuse so easily, but that would have to do for the time being. Their actions had not yet caused their doom, and she could admit to some small guilt on not paying attention to Jaune's rambling about his friends. But she had specifically asked them to find out what they could about Team RWBY... and to miss something like this?

"If they're Ozpin's pawns..." Emerald waited a few seconds, just to see if Cinder would demand silence. When she did not, the girl continued, "Should we look to get rid of them? I know you said before no *accidents*, but since they're pretty much firmly against us...?"

"Still no accidents." It would have been easy - incredibly so. Not to mention tempting... but it would also raise suspicion for no good reason. "So long as we know who his spies are, we can control what information they are able to pass on. It suits us more for them to remain alive - for now."

"That means you're going to be staying with that guy... doesn't it?" Her silver-haired underling looked disgusted by the idea, which only served to spike that small bit of anger within her further.

"I would not have to, had someone done their job properly." He flinched, "Now I have no choice... we need to maintain contact with them and if they are reporting everything to Ozpin then the last thing I can afford to do is break up with him in front of them. If they even mention it in passing to the man, it will be more attention focused on us than we need."

"What are we supposed to do then, just wait for the Festival?"

Cinder's lips curved, sending shivers down their spines. "Why Mercury, the two of you are going to be helping me in this endeavour. After all, it only seems fair that I introduce my team to my boyfriend's, does it not?"

"Y-Yeah..." Emerald looked physically ill.

"Then it seems only to be expected that my teammates become fantastic friends with both Team RWBY and JNPR, correct?"

"... Yes ma'am..."

Neither of them liked the idea, they had made it clear enough. But they knew better than to argue with or reject her commands... that was good. Things would need to be changed, plans adapted for new variables. Making four students his pawns was an interesting move... it allowed him to have spies among the students who might notice things he did not. But it also opened Ozpin to criticism if they were found to perform poorly.

Amber eyes closed slowly, already imagining the various ways she could ruin that team. Did she discredit them publically, create some kind of scandal, or just break them apart - turn those teenage girls on one another. Whatever she chose, it would need to wait until the last moment, so the Headmaster wouldn't have time to react.

Jaune Arc would be her vehicle for both these things, which was why it was still important to keep him close - to keep him satisfied and eating from the palm of her hand. He had turned from a simple tool

into an infinitely more valuable one, but he was still nothing more than a tool.

That she didn't want to throw him aside was of little consequence... he provided her a service, their union was pleasurable - he had become experienced in pleasing her. There was nothing unusual in wanting to continue that, was there? It would be inconvenient, not to mention foolish to push that aside on nothing more than principle.

She didn't care for him at all... that Nikos chit could have him once Cinder had finished with him. The jealous girl could take him and do whatever she wished. Her fingers were white as she gripped furiously at the sheets of her bed.

I'm sure some people will accuse this chapter of Pyrrha bashing, despite my attempts to avoid it. Sorry to say this is realistically speaking how such a confrontation would happen, if not worse. Cinder cares nothing for these people and perhaps is the kind of person to take subtle pleasure in little digs at them.

On the other hand, Pyrrha is a teenage girl in love and isn't going to give up on him. Sorry if you believe this is me victimising her but there is no realistic alternative in my mind. That said, she's still kind enough to feel bad when she believes she has crossed the line.

That excuse Cinder gave as to her combat style? I actually ran with what we see in the show where she wears that outfit and wins a fight by kicking someone in the stomach. In that scene she is unarmed, so I imagine her cover was as melee martial artist like Mercury.

Next Chapter - 23rd May

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Chapter 11

Here we go, thank the lord I got last week's devastating real-life workload done. It really ate into my writing time for my fics, since I was working every night at home as well. Anyway, now that's out of the way things are back to normal. Yayifications!

Also frothing at the mouth for Total War: Warhammer at the moment... I just know it's going to be disappointing, I just know it won't meet the hype... but even my cynical, jaded heart is beating for it. I... need... to... WAAAAGHHH!

(Is actually going to be playing Vampire Counts or Chaos first)

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 11

"What an impressive display of ability," Emerald clapped her hands together as she looked at the bruised and panting Mercury. "Truly you are an example to us all."

"Can it. Any idea what crawled up that bitch Nikos' ass?"

"I have no idea," Cinder lied, fighting to ignore the amused pleasure bubbling up inside. Across the hall green eyes met gold, the redheaded champion looking away in something that might have been guilt. The raven haired woman laughed.

How wonderfully conflicted, how deliciously confused. She didn't think she'd had this much fun in some time. Young Pyrrha Nikos didn't seem to know whether she was coming or going... taking vengeance on Cinder out on poor little Mercury, only to be flush with shame the moment after. If the girl thought she was in some kind of

competition for the blond idiot's attention, then she was fighting it woefully.

She defeated herself long before Cinder had a chance to act.

"She's not normally like this," Jaune hurried to assure the other man, looking like he wanted to reach down and help, but was still afraid of Emerald. Perhaps that was the reason for the redhead's ire. That he had chosen to sit with them this combat session. "I'll try talking to her, she'll come round."

"Don't worry yourself on our account," Cinder purred, reaching out to touch his chin with one hand. "It's a shame if your partner doesn't want to get along with us, but ultimately the decision is hers. I would hate to force our presence upon her."

Jaune's face hardened a little, the young man clearly disappointed with his partner - as she knew he would be. *Poor little girl, she cooed within her mind, you can waste your time with guarded looks and barbed words, but this is how wars are truly fought.*

You targeted what they held dear... and destroyed it.

"It's not a bother," he shook his head, " *You're* not a bother. Pyrrha will have to get used to getting on with you, or she'll have to get used to me spending less time with her. I can't do both at once."

"Don't push the poor girl too hard," she allowed her fingers to curl round his, as honeyed words dripped from her lips. "I don't want to ruin your friendship. Not over something like this. I can put up with this for your sake." Oh, how noble she was, willing to face the pain for him - always for him. She could see his mind whirling, the way his azure eyes darkened for a moment, frustration mixing with disappointment to create a beautiful cauldron of repressed anger.

"You shouldn't have to. Don't try to change my mind on this Cinder. Pyrrha's my friend and partner, and that isn't going to change. But

she has to be willing to at least *try* to get along with my girlfriend - and especially not take it out on your team if she can't."

"Will Jaune Arc come up to the ring," the voice of Professor Goodwitch rang out over the hall, cutting through their conversation. "And to face him, Ruby Rose."

"Oh God..." the man in question groaned, climbing to his feet.

"Good luck," she whispered, getting a muffled grunt of thanks in return. Once he was gone from their group, Mercury quickly stopped his fake complaining and sat up. Emerald moved away as well, letting out a short sigh as she sat down beside the older woman.

"Sheesh, dealing with them is *hard* . They're just... just so *nice* ."

"What a terrible affliction," Cinder teased, listening with half an ear as she watched Jaune and Ruby stand off from one another. The teacher was going through the usual rules, as she did each bout. She wouldn't normally have cared for the bouts of lesser people, but it was such foolish underestimation which had led to problems with this Ruby's team in the past. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

"Yeah well, we'll see how nice they are when they're at each others throats," Mercury whispered. "I wasn't aware you were going to be playing them against one another like that. Nice move."

Cinder chuckled, "I'm sure I have no idea what you mean dear Mercury. I was just being the kind and patient woman that I am. Is it so wrong for my loving boyfriend to protect me so, when I clearly cannot defend myself?"

"So chivalrous," the other man rolled his eyes, looking back to the fight. Breaking team JNPR apart... the stress would then spread to their sister team, distracting them with petty grievances. She and her little companions could then easily slip into the middle. Arguments between teenagers was a common sight, particularly where hormones and jealousy were involved. Ozpin would see nothing

unusual in it - and it was all the more beautiful for not targeting his pawns directly. The cancer would spread from JNPR, an outside agent. Jaune, the carrier.

The plan was beautiful, like any other she might have concocted.

If she had actually planned it...

He's distracting me again, she thought grimly as she watched him clumsily dodge away from his opponent's weapon. At any other time, her actions would have only been due to the efforts of such a scheme. No action wasted, no energy spent where it would not bring results.

This had all begun from a nauseating desire to see that little chit squirm.

Pyrrha Nikos meant nothing... she wasn't an important part of her plan - nor was she necessary to reduce stress or get her closer to Team RWBY. Whatever green-eyed jealousy the girl held was utterly meaningless in the grand scheme of things. She could *have* him once Cinder was finished with him... that was how it should have been.

But it was not. Such an unfamiliar feeling, that bubbled up within her gut. It wasn't fear... Cinder Fall feared no one, no... that was perhaps a lie. She did fear one person, but a jealous seventeen-year-old girl was not that woman. Nor was it jealousy on her own part... what did she have to be jealous of? Cinder was beautiful, powerful and influential... she had nothing to want for, no desire that she could not reach out and grasp with her own two hands. She even had the one thing that girl wanted. So it could not be envy nor jealousy.

Am I...? Is this me being territorial? That bore some looking into... why would she feel that way? Certainly nothing in regards to her plans, the girl was under the impression she was a mere student of Haven. Was she feeling this way because the other girl posed a

threat to her little toy? That this puerile excuse for a championship fighter somehow thought herself worthy of sampling what delights Cinder had?

No.

It wasn't worth wasting time thinking on. This whole thing, the whole plan... it was to destabilise Team RWBY now. That was what her team believed and that was what she would let them believe. It would become the truth through action, no matter what foolish reason she had truly started it for. *Genius is not always in planning everything in advance... sometimes it is in twisting the situation to your advantage.*

Distraction or not, she was still on top of her game. And thanks to the connections of her *boyfriend*, her game had now become stronger than ever. A direct route to the enemy King, before he even realised his lines had been compromised.

"They're both crap to be honest," Emerald snorted. Cinder's attention snapped back to the fight just in time to see Jaune grunt and duck below a horizontal swing. To his credit he tried to lash out in return, but he might as well have been trying to catch smoke. His aura was now around the halfway mark, with hers barely having been dented.

"Don't underestimate them," she whispered back. "This Ruby... she may not look like much, but her team managed to ruin our plans at Mountain Glenn. That means they must have been able to get past Roman." And more worryingly, Neo... One was a small-time crook, skilled and dangerous in his own right - but hardly a powerful warrior. Neo, on the other hand, truly was a monster.

"They must fight better as a team then," Mercury's head shook left and right in amusement, hiding his cackle as Jaune was sent flying onto his ass, scrambling to climb back up. "Because right now, this is just pathetic. Though I'm not sure if she looks worse from having to fight someone as useless as this."

"He rides on the coattails of his partner," Emerald agreed. "I know he's the leader but that must be for something other than his fighting abilities. Something other than his intelligence too, judging from how easy he is to manipulate."

"Ozpin always was fond of potential," Cinder shrugged. Such a delicate and strange word... the power to become something more than you currently were. Potential was dangerous, weak and powerful all in its own way. Such a contradiction.

Cinder wasn't a fan of it. She needed results *now*. Back when this had all started she had looked at it differently. Emerald and Mercury had been picked up for the potential they offered, particularly the green-haired girl with her semblance. But preparation and planning were over. Jaune Arc might have all the potential in the world, and perhaps he did. For as much as she hated the Headmaster, there was no denying he had a fine eye for talent.

Was that something worth looking into...? Roman had failed because he underestimated Team RWBY, that had led to their plans being delayed and pushed back. Would she do the same in regards to their sister team now? It would be so easy to dismiss him, as he was knocked around the ring like some kind of blond chew-toy. But what if that came back to bite her later?

As easy as he was to win over to her side, as simple minded as he could be... she wasn't sure she could turn him to her cause. Or more precisely, she wasn't sure if it was worth the effort of turning him. If there were more time perhaps it could be a viable option - or less risk. But with only a few weeks left before the Vytal Festival, not to mention her being stuck directly among their enemies... making the attempt would be an incredible risk - and for what benefit - the potential of what he *might* become? She would be a fool to risk everything they had achieved on such a prospect. No... when the time came to enact her plan he would stand against her.

And she would kill him herself.

Would it not be wise to know all of his weaknesses, to have an in-depth knowledge of how he fought, how he acted and reacted?

"The bout is over, Jaune Arc's aura has dipped below 10% and thus Ruby Rose is the victor." The girl's team erupted in cheers, though few others bothered to get involved. Jaune's team clapped politely along, though she couldn't fail to notice the mechanical nature of it. They didn't act like they blamed him... but it was clear none of them were pleased with the fact he lost. If anything it looked more like it was a common thing they had to put up with, like they had expected the result but were disappointed still.

None of it matched the look on his face, as the teacher turned to him. "Mr Arc, you need to learn to adapt your style for the varying enemies you face. You cannot fight some like Miss Rose like you would Mr Winchester. You would do well to learn some versatility."

"Yes, Miss Goodwitch."

"And you, Miss Rose. While I understand that Mr Arc is your friend, that does not mean you need to drag out a fight longer than necessary. I'm not sure whether you were hesitant or simply wished to give him more chances, but fighting in such a way does you both a disservice."

"Aw..."

"Class is dismissed," the stern woman called out, powering down the dome as the two final combatants returned to their teams. With a subtle nod to her own underlings, Cinder pushed through the crowd, towards the blond man who was being comforted by his teammates. His blue eyes spotted her as she approached, his face twisting in shame as he glanced away. She wanted to gag at the petty machismo, the way he somehow thought he needed to show off for her.

"An unfortunate fight," she said instead, resting one hand on his forearm. "That was perhaps one of the worst match-ups for you."

"All match-ups are unfortunate for me..."

"I don't believe that. Miss Goodwitch would not have chosen you to face Ruby if she didn't believe you could win. It didn't look like you knew how to deal with her, though. Have you trained against a faster opponent before?"

"Well yeah... but not that fast," he glanced away. "I mean Pyrrha's faster than me anyway, but at least I can try and get a few hits in." So he trained with his partner? She supposed that made sense... and yet she had somehow still failed to make her intentions towards the young man clear? How pathetic... she was beginning to think the girl didn't even deserve to have him once she was finished with him. There were plenty of other women who would appreciate him more.

"If you like I could help wi-"

"That's fine," Pyrrha's voice interrupted from the side, as she stepped up to stand beside her leader. "It's kind of you to offer, but I've been training Jaune since he came to Beacon."

And such a good job you've done, Cinder wanted to sneer. "That's all well and good, but there's nothing wrong with training against more people. If he wants to be capable of fighting people like Ruby, then he needs to train like she does - I doubt Ruby only trains against Weiss."

Jaune looked to be considering that, eyes narrowing as he nodded along to her words. She didn't miss the worried look from the redhead, intrinsic defensiveness - clearly this *training* time also doubled as her valued alone time with the boy.

That made it all the more appealing for Cinder.

"I've been trained by some of the best in the business however," Pyrrha argued. "Most of the time I'm recounting their lessons, and obviously they know more about teaching than either of us do. Jaune

used to struggle against Cardin, but after only a few weeks with me he was able to hold his ground there."

"I have got a lot better, yeah. Thanks for offering Cinder, but Pyrrha *is* a championship fighter. I don't want to waste your time with something like this anyway." He sounded so contrite, so casual that all she could do was nod along. Nod, despite that burning anger she felt when that bitch dared to smirk at her.

"The offer is always open." she said instead, nodding as she turned and walked back to her colleagues.

Though it may soon become less of an offer...

Finding them had been a trivial task. Some short instructions to Emerald had led the girl to talking with Ruby, who seemed desperate to make a firm friendship with the reluctant criminal. From there it had led to the knowledge that they trained alone late at night, though she didn't know exactly where.

Cinder could make her own guesses though, from just what she knew about them. Neither were rule breakers, at least in the general sense of the term. So that meant sneaking into the practice rings and domes was out, similar to sneaking off of Beacon entirely. Pyrrha, the simpering fool, would also want the destination to be romantic - something she could try and use to shore up her own deficiencies that prevented her simply coming out and *asking* him directly. It also needed to be relatively open, private and probably outside, so they didn't damage anything.

Really, there were only two options - and the gardens in front of the school would be too open, visible to anyone looking out a window. She wasn't even slightly surprised as she nudged the door to the rooftop open, to see the two of them sparring together.

They were each so distracted that they didn't notice her either, though her skills would have prevented them spotting her had she

wished it. With a bored sigh she leaned against the side of the entrance, hidden within the shadows as she watched them train. Watched Jaune strike and parry, slipping into Nikos' guard before being knocked back time and time again.

Some might have called it beautiful.

Cinder snorted. To her it was a mess. Too choreographed, too familiar - they fought like two people who had become used to one another's style. They moved on instinct, the young man blocking before she even struck, because he knew from what angle her attacks would more likely come from. This was the true problem with sparring only against one opponent... the law of diminishing returns coming into force with crippling consequences.

Not that she cared about that... this was all just for her own petty games. They might have been pointless - but *no one* dared make a fool of Cinder Fall in that manner. Not and live to tell of it.

The bout wore down after another ten minutes or so. The fighters beginning to slow, before finally stopping altogether. Jaune looked disappointed still, but somewhat cheered as his partner walked over to speak to him.

Cinder walked out then. Hands coming together as she slowly clapped in applause.

"You?" Green eyes widened for a moment, "What are you doing here?"

"Merely watching," Cinder smiled at them both, but kept her eyes locked on Jaune's. "Is it so wrong, that after what happened earlier, I wanted to make sure my boyfriend wasn't still feeling down?"

"We're training here. I appreciate the sentiment but this is a little more serious."

"And I waited until it had ended," Cinder shot back. "I'm a team leader as well Pyrrha. I know the importance of training, and not to interrupt until it is over. It *is* over, is it not?"

"What did you think?" Jaune asked, interrupting the conversation before the redhead could come up with another excuse. "I'm not sure I'm really getting anywhere... even though I can hold my own against Pyrrha for a bit, Ruby still tore me to pieces."

"You cannot beat Ruby in the rings," Cinder delivered the words like a hammer to the face. "You will never be able to."

" *Cinder* !" Pyrrha shouted, "Don't listen to her Jaune, that's absolut-"

"Absolutely, the truth," the older woman snapped. "And it's no insult to say so. Do you want the *truth*, Jaune? Or do you want to hear empty words of encouragement, despite that they might never work?" Amber eyes remained firmly locked on his, willing him to make the right decision. It pained him. She could see that... even as she could see the burning rage in his partner's eyes, just catching it from the edge of her vision.

"Give me the truth..." he finally whispered, looking away when Pyrrha whirled on him in shock.

"A good choice," Cinder *purred* . "Ruby Rose has the speed advantage on you. She has that without her semblance, but with it activated is impossible for you to match. She also has the range advantage, both in terms of her weapon as a gun - and in melee form. As a sniper rifle, she can also easily pick out weaknesses and land shots past your shield. No matter how hard you train, no matter how much you focus on your speed. You will *never* be as fast as she is... and as such, you will *never* be able to close the distance."

"Jaune," Pyrrha whispered, "Don't listen thi-"

"Then what do I do?" He cut through his partner's words. Addressing Cinder instead of her. Golden eyes danced with mirth at that fact, the

sheer helpless anger on the redhead's face.

"If you recall, I said you will never be able to beat her in the rings. They don't simulate cover or the environment... being flat and empty. In the Vytal Festival however, you will have an entire arena to play with - filled with obstacles. You need to learn to use the environment more, lure her into dead ends or enclosed spaces where she cannot use her semblance for fear of crashing into things, that or wear out her stamina reserves. But better yet, ignore her entirely." Cinder spread her arms wide, tilting her head to the side. "If we talk about threats, then it would actually be *Yang* who is the biggest danger of Team RWBY, am I correct?" She waited for him to nod, "In that case, I think you would be best suited to holding her off while your team dealt with Ruby."

"Me against Yang? She's tear me to pieces, I can't fight her!"

"I didn't say fight. Your job would simply be to keep her busy, distract her so that your partner here can deal with Ruby, using her rifle to push the girl into a dead-end before closing in." She almost added that the girl could use her semblance, but caught it at the last second. The girl hadn't yet shown it to any of them, and for all intent and purposes they shouldn't know about it. "Your high aura levels, not to mention your shield, would all be good for defending against Yang's shotgun blasts and melee attacks. In fact, from what I've seen of her semblance in lessons, you'd be better off *not* attacking her at all." Cinder took one step forward, then another... slowly working her way closer to him as she spoke. By the time she finished she was before him, one hand coming out to stroke his cheek delicately. "You, Jaune, could hold off the strongest member of Team RWBY *alone*. You could secure victory for your team, by using what's in here," she touched his temple, "rather than brute force."

"You really think I could?" He was desperate, eager and afraid. In truth Cinder had no idea. It was how she would use him were it her. But then, she was used to throwing away pawns to distract a bigger threat - his sacrifice would be the correct move no matter how she looked at it.

"Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"That doesn't mean he should stop training," Pyrrha had apparently had more than enough, to the point that she stepped forward in such a way that forced Cinder to retract her arm. Everything from the look in her eyes to the way she held herself, screamed defensiveness - of someone making a clear statement of possession towards the young man. A simpler woman might have reacted to it, might have become angry and squabbled with the girl.

There was more than one way of crushing a person, however.

"It doesn't," she agreed. "Training will always be important, but if you keep training in the same way then you'll find yourself improving less and less. Jaune is already very good at fighting you, because he fights *only* you. I'm sure you mean well in keeping his training to yourself, but he could learn a lot about fighting someone like Yang, if he were to train with someone with a similar style like Ren, Mercury... or even myself. There's a reason Miss Goodwitch makes us fight against different people."

"But I have advanced training," Pyrrha argued, "I'm teaching him as I was taught, that has to mea-"

"Has he ever won against you in one of your spars?"

The redhead paused, "No..."

"Always losing, never being able to eke out a victory," Cinder slipped the words between them like poison. "They say the spirit is half the battle, do they not? That morale and confidence dictate how hard you fight. It can't be easy, always being crushed without mercy, it almost makes sense that Jaune has struggled since then. Never able to muster any belief he can actually win... because who can beat the invincible girl?"

"Is..." Pyrrha swallowed, turning to Jaune with a hesitant stutter, "is that true?"

"It's..." Jaune swallowed, "I'm not giving up, but... well, I don't ever expect to actually win against you."

"They say that the gifted crush those around them. Whether they like it or not, they tear down the confidence of everyone around them - robbing them of the desire to continue. What hope do normal people have in any career, when compared to those natural geniuses?"

"I didn't... I don't..."

"I don't think you mean it Pyrrha," Cinder reached out to stroke the distraught girl's arm, running her fingers gently over bare skin. "You've done everything you can for Jaune, you've made him more than he was. No one will ever take that away from you... Neither I nor Jaune hold any blame against you for this, right?"

"Y-Yeah, you've helped me out so much Pyr, you know that!" He sought to comfort her, to bolster her wavering confidence. The poor boy didn't even realise how painful his words were. Not what he had spoken, but how she had led him into agreeing with her.

How he had confirmed the thoughts that swam within Pyrrha's mind.

"I-I have to go," Pyrrha pushed past them, sparkling drops falling from her emerald eyes. The girl hid them well, face firmly pointed away as she stalked to the door and stairs leading back into the school. Jaune made to follow, but for Cinder's arms wrapping around him from behind. One over his left shoulder, the other beneath his right arm, as they linked in the centre of his chest.

"Let her go Jaune," she whispered into the shell of his ear. "Pyrrha needs some time alone to get over this. The last thing she wants is you following her."

"Are you sure? Isn't there anything I can do to help her?" He looked anguished, nearly as distraught as the redheaded girl running away. Cinder bit down onto her lower lip, stifling her pleasure as she

watched the devastation wreck itself across one who had dared challenge her.

"Trust me, Jaune," she whispered, "Have I ever led you astray?"

Man, what a bitch... you know a lot of people just assume I despise Pyrrha, but even I feel a little bad for her here. But this *is* Cinder we're talking about...

Plus this is still all muted by the "Squeeeee" going on in my head about tomorrow's release date. I've taken Thursday and Friday off work just to play it all weekend. It's embarrassing when staff turn to their boss and say "what will you be doing on holiday, then?" And my immediate thought is:

Hmm... write fanfiction and play computer games for four days straight.

" I'm going to... de-stress... and spend more time outside... yeah."

Next Chapter: 6 th June

. com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 12

Monday is here, my dog recovered from surgery - my house is a mess of broken and knocked aside furniture by virtue of her cone head. All is well, sort of. On an even happier note, Stress Relief now has cover art - ooooh. This was drawn by my Visual Novel artist, Rachel Marks, who is an awesome artist. It's not actually released yet, so I can't offer any links to it - but you can see it above, I'm sure.

Also, this chapter hasn't been beta'd (babysitting cone-head dog all weekend, so my bad) - any mistakes belong to me. Onwards!

Beta: *College Fool*

Cover Art: *Rachel Marks*

Chapter 12

"Remember to use more than the obvious weapons," Cinder called out. Blond hair flapped as he nodded, kicking out in an attempt to sweep Mercury's feet out from under him. The silver-haired boy dodged back, aiming to deliver a roundhouse kick to Jaune's face, but for the shield which helped to deflect it. The two boys sprang a little apart, breathing heavily as they looked for an opening.

It had been two days since she started teaching him. And it would be a fallacy to say he had shown any great improvement. Forty-eight hours was too short a time for such, and it wasn't in her best interests to make him *too* good a fighter anyway. What she had achieved, however, was teaching him to rely on more than just his sword and shield.

In a way that made him stronger, as could be noticed when he leapt forward, swinging his blade in a horizontal strike that would have beheaded Mercury had he not ducked. Even then, on hands and knees, the young man was unprepared for the boot Jaune sent into his face - sending him scattering back across the rooftop.

Emerald cheered loudly, more pleased with Mercury's misfortune than any achievement on Jaune's part. Cinder made sure to smile for him though, nodding her head to say he'd done well.

"Nice hit," Mercury complimented, stumbling to his feet with Jaune's help. The two shook hands, the silver-haired teen going so far as to slap a hand on the other man's back. "Sent me for a loop, my head's still spinning."

"Sorry about that," Jaune rubbed the back of his head as the two walked over to the girls. "I didn't mean to hit so hard."

"Fantastic work," Cinder took Jaune's face in her hands, leaning in to press her lips against his. He tasted of sweat and salt, a tangy and delicious sensation that had her rubbing her tongue across his lower lip. The small whine he made when she pulled away was icing on the cake, the need he felt for her - the most luscious feeling. "I'm glad to see you've taken our training to heart. You're already looking stronger than before."

"I *feel* stronger," Jaune laughed, his hands sliding down her sides to rest on her hips. One elegant brow rose as he stepped closer, drawing her body against his. "You're a good teacher."

"Or are you just a good student?" she asked, running one finger down his neck, feeling his pulse against her knuckle, before digging the nail a little into the top of his chest. "Perhaps if you prove yourself even further there might be a little reward for you."

His eyes became a little darker. And she could feel him hardening against her. How wonderful would it feel? Just the two of them on a

cold rooftop, seeking warmth from one another - his body slick with sweat-

"How's your team taking it?" Mercury asked loudly, killing the mood in a single moment. Jaune stepped back, suddenly weary - while Cinder shot her subordinate a warning glare. The rebellious teen looked away, swallowing nervously, but the damage had already been done.

"Pyrrha still hasn't come around," Jaune sighed, pulling forth a bottle of water and taking a quick drink. "She won't even talk to me at the moment. Not outside of answering direct questions anyway. Even then it's usually just one or two word answers." The blonde turned to look at her then, expression agonised. "I know you said to give her time, but it feels like she's drifting further away than ever. Shouldn't I do something?"

"Trust in me Jaune," she wrapped her arms beneath his, linking them behind his back as she planted a tiny kiss on the underside of his chin. "We women are difficult to understand at the best of times. When you don't know how to fix a leaky pipe you call a plumber, no? Then listen to a lady's advice on how to deal with another."

"I guess..." one of his hands fiddled with her hair, twisting and turning it behind her back. "I just want to understand why she's being so stand-offish, you know? Why is it such a big deal that I get training from you?"

"Don't worry about it," she repeated. This time she reached up and brought his lips down to hers, moulding her mouth against his. He kissed back, though it was clear he was distracted still. How, she had no idea... why was he so focused on this? "It could be any number of reasons," she sighed. "Perhaps she feels some pleasure at having you beholden to her. Or it could be that she feels frustration at not being leader of the team, but was able to put that aside so long as you looked up to her for taking care of your training."

If he needed reasons she would give him some.

"That's an unhealthy thing for her to be feeling, however, which is why you need to give her some time to come to terms with it, where she can overcome it in her own time." All the more time for the fool to wallow in her own self-pity, imagining the things she was doing to him. The things that she *would* do to him.

"And if she doesn't come round?"

"Then maybe she wasn't who you thought she was." The words brought some morbid humour to her mind, even as Jaune's face twisted in fear. "But you've proved to be a wonderful judge of character," she teased, "so I wouldn't worry about that. Why not seek to surprise her in the Vytal Festival with how far you have come?"

"Do you think that's a good idea - shouldn't I talk to her sooner?"

"It's only two weeks away, not so long for her to wait. Besides, if you go to her now, it will be you saying that you've done something wrong. We aren't doing anything we need to apologise for, are we?"

"Other than keeping people below awake?" he tried to laugh, but it came out as a weak sigh. "No, I guess not. I know you were right... Pyrrha helped me so much, but in this short time training with you I *am* improving. I've already been able to beat both Mercury and Emerald. I feel like I could even last a little longer against Ruby, though yes, I remember what you said about it being an impossible matchup." He quickly added the last bit as she shot him a warning look. The last thing she needed was for him to go and challenge that stupid little girl again.

"Then you see why you can't just go and apologise to Pyrrha for having me take over your training, don't you?"

"It would be taking away a chance for her to improve," it was Emerald who cut into the conversation this time. "From what we're getting, she helped you improve as a fighter, but also a person, right?" The younger girl waited for Jaune to nod before continuing,

"Well if you go in like a battering ram and try to solve this, then you're robbing her of a chance to improve as a person too."

"Exactly," Cinder breathed into his ear, shooting Emerald a pleased look over his shoulder. "You wouldn't have wanted Pyrrha to try and fight all your battles for you, would you?"

"No," he admitted. "She used to try... I hated that."

And checkmate, she smiled. "And that's why you need to do the same for her here, my dear. In time you'll both look back on this fondly. It's only been two days... we women are notoriously stubborn, so it will take a little time for Pyrrha to come around."

"But she will, right?"

She kissed him again. "Of course she will." Poor little Jaune... so uncertain, so eager to please and help. "I have complete faith in her. Don't you?"

"Of course!" His arms tightened around her, his chin coming to rest atop her hair as he looked out into the night sky. "Of course I have faith in her... I wouldn't be a good friend otherwise."

"You certainly are a wonderful friend to her." She whispered into his neck, not even trying to hide the wicked smile blooming across her face. And it would hurt all the more when the silly girl failed to repay that faith.

Mercury's panting stopped the moment Jaune was out of sight, having waved his good nights to them and parted after one final, passionate kiss. She would have liked to take it further, were it not for her two companions still standing around wasting oxygen. The silver-haired young man rose to his feet easily, cracking his neck to one side, while working some kinks out of his arm.

"Can't believe I had to put up with losing a fight like that," he scoffed, grey eyes blazing angrily. "Oh, you've improved so much!" he mimicked, voice high pitched. "Pah. What an idiot."

"The only idiot I see is you," she snapped back. His eyes went wide as he looked away, but that did little to stop him swallowing as she fixed a furious glare unto him. "Perhaps you would like to think next time, before inserting yourself into a conversation. I expressly did not want him to think about his team during sparring."

"I just don't get why we're helping him." She sighed as he tried to defend himself. A brief glance towards Emerald showed that the girl was also curious, though she knew better than to express it and land herself in the same trouble as her partner.

"We are helping him so that he feels indebted to us and thus we secure our position further into their teams."

"But we've already done that," he argued. "I mean, you're sleeping with the guy. You can't get any closer than that - and Team RWBY practically *loves* Emerald." The green-haired girl's face scrunched up at that, the distaste as clear as day. "Why then help him get stronger too?"

"The better to ensure their team gets further into the competition," she sighed. "We need to generate particularly high levels of negativity and a stadium packed with innocents will be a perfect source. But for that to work, we need to know just how to twist the knife. It's best for us if we know exactly what teams will be in the finals, hence why we're working to improve Jaune. He's the weakest member of his team by far. It will be he, if anyone, who holds them back."

Their own team would be moving into the finals, naturally... and with their strength they would be able to ensure their place. But the problem was the other teams. There were just too many. *Plus, I still need to decide who it would be better to sacrifice on the altar of the media.* Ruby Rose would be the best bet when it came to damaging

Ozpin, but she was also a relatively unknown girl in the grand scheme of things. Younger than the rest, certainly a tear-jerker if something untoward was to happen to her in front of all those people.

But some of them were more famous than others... more well-known and beloved.

"Besides," she continued, "it's not like we're really making him any stronger. The only thing that has improved is his confidence, and that's a result of the two of you throwing your matches against him."

"It's kinda pathetic if two crappy wins against us was enough to make him like that."

"You are hardly one to talk, if your ego was so bruised by your loss that you felt it necessary to snipe at him." Again he looked away, flushing in shame as she picked apart his actions. "I may very well require you to lose publically in the Tournament, Mercury. I trust you will be able to do so without feeling the need to whine like a child?"

"Of course! I know the plan, I'm hardly going to get worked up over some stupid tournament."

"Then why get worked up here?" She didn't wait for his answer, if he even had one, instead turning back to look over the entirety of Beacon. "It hardly matters. His improvement is minor. Confidence will be all he needs to get through his early bouts, especially with someone as powerful as Nikos on his team."

"And if it's not?" Emerald asked.

"Then we will fix his matches as well. If he receives advice before each match that is curiously specific to his opponents, then he will just have to bless his good fortune." All he needed to do was survive long enough for his team to clean up the chaff.

Their goal wasn't to make him strong. That would go against their plans entirely, if he ended up standing against them. A little versatility, teaching him to use more than his weapons... he always had that ability anyway. All she did was draw it to his attention. This way they wouldn't be caught off-guard by it and could learn how he moved, how he acted.

Besides, what use was his melee style against *her* abilities? It mattered not whether he used sword, shield, foot or hand - she would incinerate him in an instant.

"It just feels like a lot of effort to put into someone we're just going to throw away later on." Mercury looked back towards her, "You're not actually considering trying to bring him over to our side, are you?"

"No."

"Not even a little?"

"Did I perhaps stutter? Attempting to convert him would be a risk, and that's the last thing we need at such a late stage. The plan is already set, the pieces in motion - to change the board now would unbalance everything we have."

"That and we'd need to kill him if he said no," Mercury didn't sound quite as displeased with that suggestion.

"That as well," she nodded regardless. "Too much risk for too little gain, this is just an attempt to bolster him a little so we can have some certainty going into the Tournament. If it fails and they lose their match, well there's nothing suspicious about that at all. No risks if it fails, but good results if it succeeds."

"Heh," Emerald laughed, "I like those odds."

"I get all that then," Mercury interrupted once more. She didn't know what it was that was giving him such a mouth, but he'd do well to tame it before her patience reached its limit. "But if we're trying to

make sure they win their bouts... wouldn't it be better if he and his partner *weren't* at each others throats? I just think it's a little contradictory to go with both angles at once - we're basically undoing our own wor-"

"Mercury." She kept get gaze ahead, locked not on him but the stars creeping up into the night's sky.

"... Yeah?"

"Your place is not to question my plans." She heard them startle behind her, could read it in the small hitch in his breathing - a pause followed by a sudden exhalation of breath.

"I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to question you!"

"See to it that it doesn't continue." Without turning, she nodded her head towards the staircase. "Go. I will retire for the night soon enough." They didn't argue, their footfalls echoing into the distance as they left her alone on the rooftop. With a great sigh she closed her eyes, breathing in through her nose, just making out that faint scent of the salty ocean in the breeze. A hum of crickets in the trees and bushes so far below... the low buzz of the dust generators keeping the school supplied with electricity.

It was oddly relaxing... she couldn't help but feel as she allowed herself to let go. To relax and enjoy the atmosphere around her.

Just like he how he had taught her to.

"No Mercury and Emerald tonight?" Jaune asked the following night, after yet another day of trying to stave off insanity. That Oobleck fool had been particularly energetic, even daring to ask her a question in the midst of class! She had answered perfectly, of course, but that she had been bothered in such a way while she was within her own thoughts was still unforgivable.

"They have some homework to do." Hers and theirs, naturally - they would be busy for the next few hours. "I didn't think they would be needed tonight, however. I actually wanted to test your growth myself."

"A-Ah, really?"

Cinder loosened the brown jacket she wore, fingering the bandages that ran across her bust. It wasn't her preferred outfit, but those couldn't be worn at Beacon for obvious reasons. The outfit made the person after all, and hers screamed of someone brash and rough - who liked to engage in melee and fight it out one to one.

It would do for now. Even if the rough fabric chafed her sensitive breasts, and having her stomach open to the cool air was hardly the best feeling.

"We said we would have a spar one day, did we not?" She grinned at him, golden eyes sparkling. "Back before we were together."

"I remember." A nervous cough. "I think I said at the time that I wasn't sure if I'd be a good opponent though. Not sure that's changed all that much."

"And I said that there's pleasure in taking part," she shot back, "not just in the winning. Come now Jaune, if you get far in the Vytal Tournament you'll have to face me at some point."

"I guess." The blond let out a short sigh, readying his sword and shield on either arm. "Okay, I'll give it a shot. What's the worst that can happen?"

I could kill you, she considered with a roll of her eyes. Instead she squared her feet opposite him, making sure to leave a couple of holes in her style that she could fill in later. A win or a loss was immaterial here, but it would be an idiot indeed who allowed a potential enemy insight into their fighting style.

She didn't shout to begin. That was one of the first things she'd disabused him of. Instead she charged in with her head held low, both arms kept at her side as she waited for his move. Blue eyes widened in shock, his sword coming up and over in a clumsy overhead strike. With a dispassionate sigh she ducked beneath it, crouching and twisting before delivering a painful kick directly up into his chest. He cried out in shock as he was lifted off the ground, propelled a good five feet back.

She watched him with a frown, "Jaune. I understand you don't want to hurt me, but this is so that you can improve. I need you to actually put some effort into fighting me... that strike was a joke, as were your reactions."

"I-I'm sorry," he looked down at the ground beneath his feet, and it was the look on his face that had her cursing to herself. Damn it, she couldn't be too harsh on him... nor could she get away with treating him like Mercury.

Her boots tapped across the concrete rooftop as she walked over to him, crouching down to place a finger beneath his chin. He looked ashamed as he met her eyes, but she forced her expression into one of gentle kindness.

"Don't be. It means a lot to me that you would be willing to take a blow like that rather than hurt me, don't think I don't understand the significance of it. But I'm a big girl, Jaune. You don't need to hold back on my account." She stepped back up, holding her hand out for him to take. "After all, this is training to help me survive in the harsh world we live in, as well. Neither of us can afford to hold back."

He took her hand.

"I get it." he said, as she pulled him to his feet. He still looked displeased at the idea, but now that weak expression of uncertainty was gone, replaced with a mild distaste - that of a man who knew what he had to do, even if he didn't like it. "Sorry if I insulted you like that."

"It's fine," she stepped close to him, so that her bound breasts were pressed into his breastplate. "But perhaps I could sweeten the deal a little, if you're still reluctant."

His eyes watched her as she backed away, one careful step after another. The coy smile that spread across her lips only grew as she let one hand trail down her face, brushing against her neck before coming to rest just above her breasts. A finger dipped beneath the bandages, pulling them apart just a little. It was barely enough to show a hint of cleavage, but his eyes feasted upon it like a man dying of hunger.

"Beat me... and you get to take it off."

"The bandages...?" He swallowed loudly, azure eyes following her hands as they moved over the flat skin of her stomach, stroked across the buckle of her trousers. They came to rest over her thighs, before she fell back into a fighting stance, arms held up before her.

"The bandages," she smirked, "among other things."

His chest was rising and falling rapidly, she could see that by the way his silvery breastplate rose and fell. Or just from the lidded gaze he allowed to roam across her body. She had to admit that while her current outfit wasn't the most comfortable, it certainly had caught his attention. She licked one finger as an experiment, before wiping it gently on the side of her belly button. Her lower regions tingled as he licked his lips.

"Ready to claim your prize, Jaune?"

He didn't answer. It would have been hard for him to do so, as he swung his weapon towards her - crossing the distance in a few seconds. Eyes like solid gold widened, though in joy more than shock - as she slipped past the keen edge. Such aggression was so uncharacteristic of him, so primal and bestial that she couldn't help but approve. More so because *she* had been the one to cause it.

One fist hammered against his ribs, striking beneath the arm in a blow that would have gotten her disqualified in any typical fight, but which would only be considered intelligent in the Vytal Tournament. He didn't buckle, however, gritting his teeth through the pain as his shield came around to force her back.

She gripped it instead, wrenching it aside as she once more pried her way into his guard. Her left hand came up, catching his weapon by blocking his wrist instead of the blade. So close, so far into his guard, the reach of his vaunted instrument became his biggest weakness. She could have blasted a fiery hole through his torso, burning his heart and lungs to a crisp. Instead she drove a fist into his stomach, buckling him over her arm.

"You'll need to do better," she whispered into his ear as he coughed out spit. Feeling an impish amusement she bit down on it, running her tongue over the shell. "Or maybe you don't want it enough?"

"I want you," he growled, rising back up so quickly he almost head-butted her chin. He reared back with his sword held across him, to swing across his body. She snorted and prepared to catch it when it came round. She was already within his guard - he needed to learn that. Thus it was that when he struck directly towards her with the pommel instead, she was caught completely unawares.

But unaware or not, she was still Cinder fall - and he - nothing but a mere student.

"Close," she teased as the pommel sailed over her head, disturbing some of her raven locks, but doing no damage to her. "But not quite~"

"Oomph!" air exploded over her shoulder as he bent double, the wind driven from him from the sheer force of her knee cutting up into his diaphragm. Just to teach him the danger of it, and not because her blood was starting to pound, she grabbed him by his neck and pulled him back into a standing position. Blue eyes widened as he

dodged her first punch, just managing to turn his head enough that it skimmed the tip of his nose.

It wasn't enough to dodge the second however, as the back of her hand slammed into the side of his face, whipping him to the side. He staggered back, waving his blade before him more to ward off her following him than do any damage. She allowed his retreat, gave him the time he needed to build his guard up once more.

Because it was more fun that way.

"You hit hard," he winced, fingering the bruise on his cheek. She wasn't sure he even noticed the thin trail of blood dribbling from his lip. She did though... as she bit down on her lower lip, toes curling in her boots.

How long had it been since she'd had a real fight? Too long, and that would continue - she couldn't go all out with him either. But she *could* cause damage to him... make him hurt and bleed - and in some small way that was enough to get her pulse racing, her blood pumping and her thighs rubbing together.

"Want to give up?" she called. *Please don't give up.*

"Not a chance."

Good boy... She backpedaled from his attack, the smile ever-present on her face as he hacked and slashed - less technique and more a violent attempt to bring her down. Swordplay was one thing, but the actual act of cutting was enough in many cases. Against an unarmed opponent the goal was to keep them at the distance of the blade, not to go on the defensive and allow them to set the tempo. He was learning.

But it would not be enough against someone like her. "Not bad at all," she complimented as she let the tip of his sword whistle past her face. Her eyes narrowed onto his, blowing a small kiss with her lips - just enough to have his eyes dip down to them. She punished that

amorous mistake. "You should try to ignore distractions," she laughed, as he bent double before her, clutching his stomach. "Even if they *are* as delicious as I."

"Or maybe," he grimaced, quietly placing his sword on the ground, "You're the one who's been distracted!"

She saw it coming. The moment he placed down his weapon she knew what he intended. Already bent double, the transition from crouch to tackle was a sudden one, but not so quick that she couldn't have slammed her knee into his face if she desired. With all the momentum he put behind it, his brain would have rattled around the inside of his skull - almost certainly knocking him out.

But as his shoulder connected with her stomach, arms wrapping around her waist as she was lifted back - she was forced to ask... where was the fun in that? Aura flared as she landed on her back, skidding across the concrete as Jaune's weight bore her down. His positioning was bad. She could have flipped him off.

"Got you!" he cried, hands slamming down onto her wrists, pinning them above her head on the ground, her wrists crossed over one another, with his hands holding them down. His legs were on either side of her stomach. Another weakness... he'd failed to take her legs into account. With her flexibility, she could have looped them back behind his head, forcing him off.

If she didn't just use her superior strength to break her hands free.

"And what," she said instead, tilting her head so that she was looking up at him through her hair, "are you going to do with your captive?" He paused. Eyes going wide for a moment as he considered their position, as nerves and anxiety slammed into place. She waited through it, ignoring the fear, the shyness and the panic. They soon faded... replaced with an intent gaze that lingered on her.

"I'm going to give you what you deserve," he whispered, leaning down towards her, his legs moving further back as he lowered

himself on top of her. One hand left her wrists, Jaune apparently content that he could hold both her arms down with just one hand. She allowed it. Shivering as his large hand stroked down her bare arms, her body twitching as his fingers ghosted across her armpit, before letting out a longing sigh as his fingers splayed out over her naked stomach.

That sigh was soon swallowed by his lips, his mouth pushing down on her so hard that she could feel the bite of stone on the back of her head. She brushed her tongue against his lips, only to close her eyes as his burst forth - pushing her back and ravishing her with desperate lust. She wasn't sure he even noticed when his other hand left hers, even though she kept her wrists crossed above her head, delighting in the sensations that ran through her body. The wonderful sense of not being able to stop him - even if it was nothing more than fantasy on his part.

She felt his nails against her skin as fingers forced their way beneath her bandages. Felt him growl against her lips as they held firm, before he pushed himself further down, blazing hot patterns of his lips down her throat before his teeth were added below - biting and teasing them away as he bared her to the cool night air.

And then she felt his lips lavishing attention further down, her lower half bucking slightly as he kissed his way across her bare stomach, teasing her belly button with his tongue.

And then...

And then she saw her; stood at the entrance to the rooftop, green eyes wide, one hand before her mouth. He didn't so much as notice her, too focused on delighting in the softness of her body, the forbidden promise of sinful pleasure that lay beneath him.

"I want you," he growled against her stomach, hot breath washing across her in a way that had her back arching. Cinder looked down the length of her body, hands still trapped above her head. She didn't look at him, however, but over his shoulder - towards the redheaded

woman who looked so shocked and distraught. Gold locked with green, clear even across the expanse of space between them.

The smile of victory that spread across Cinder's face was nothing short of beatific. She made sure to maintain eye contact, even as she lifted her lower body up from the ground, allowing his fingers to tease her trousers down over her hips.

"Then take me," she said. More than loud enough for the girl to hear. "Take your prize."

He did.

And dear little Nikos fled.

Double whammy for Cinder here, the rift between JNPR stretches on - but Cinder's plans... well... Mercury is starting to notice things, it seems. So yeah, this goes a tiny bit further - I've had more than a few people asking me I think I'd be able to write an actual lemon. My answer is yes, I'm fairly sure I could.

And yes, there is a small part of me that wants to. My biggest concern, and it's an ironic concern I know, is getting reported on here for it. Odd, when there are RWBY fics where the sexual content is explicit, and then others where it's downright illegal!

So I'm unsure, still. It won't ever be a full lemon in this fic, though I might include one in a different one, just like the lemon that continues after one of these scenes cuts off. Maybe even this one, for I must admit some small appreciation for control-play.

But argh, I digress! Hope you enjoyed the chapter.

Next Chapter: 20 th June

P atreon . com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 13

Just for the sake of explanation. At the end of season 2, with the breach and all that - then the beginning of season 3, there's no great explanation as to time frames. I know a lot of people assume each is a trimester, and I personally do believe that there was a holiday period (hence Ruby able to visit her mother's grave). But for the sake of this story, I'm going to assume that there was no such thing.

I mean, it raises weird questions anyway, like; "What do Blake and Jaune do?" One has run away from his family, the other is essentially homeless and unemployed. Do Nora and Ren have anywhere they can live, either? It doesn't really effect anything, just thought I'd mention it in advance. Who knows, maybe Beacon keeps its boarding facilities open for those who wish to stay. Such would be a little unfair for the staff, though. Since they wouldn't be able to take a holiday... not unless they wanted to trust Beacon to the students. xD

Beta: *College Fool*

Cover Art: *Rachel Marks*

Chapter 13

There was a little over a week remaining until the start of the Vytal Festival. And already the excitement could be felt all across Beacon, not to mention Vale itself. Students sat together in small groups, gossiping and making plans, Bullheads flew to and fro, shuttling people back and forth as they shopped for ammunition, dust, whatever they could get their hands on to gain some kind of advantage. Even the very men and women themselves walked as though on the edge of their seats, tempers running high as

adrenaline took its toll. The teachers had been forced to break up more than a few fights already.

Cinder too was excited, though she hid it. No need to make a fool of herself after all, she was not as dramatic or impatient as these simple teenagers. The wait would only make her victory all the sweeter.

Of course, the oncoming date did cause small problems in its own way, even if this was a situation she'd known would have to be dealt with.

"So this is your fourth teammate?" Ruby Rose asked, tilting her head to the side as she inspected the silent, black-haired girl. Perhaps she was surprised to see someone of a similar height to herself, or just put-off by the fact Neopolitan didn't speak.

Emerald smiled, the expression looking out of place on her, "Yeah, her name's Poli and she had some family stuff to see to back in Mistral."

"Can she not speak for herself?" The Schnee snorted. Cinder's lips tilted at the edges as she waited her companion's response, as well as the impending guilt it would cause.

"She can't, *actually* ." Emerald took as much joy in needling the arrogant snot as Cinder did, pale blue eyes widening. "There was an accident when she was younger that robbed her of the ability." The Schnee's face twisted in shame, mouth opening and closing as she tried to think of something to say. Even her teammates shook their heads, disappointed.

Cinder ignored their apologies, leaving the silent girl to handle them. As necessary as she was, and the girl was definitely important for her plans, she still had reservations about the decision. She didn't have the luxury of choice... not when she needed Roman active for their final plans. Neo's abilities in both disguise and teleportation

made her invaluable in the assault. But it was those same abilities that also made her incredibly dangerous.

That and her loyalty, which was certainly *not* to Cinder Fall...

It was hard to get a gauge on her at all... naturally she didn't speak, but what little emotion she showed was often guarded and contradictory. She *knew* she could kill the girl if it came to it... or at least, if the girl stayed to fight her. If Neo wished to flee then there was little she could do about it, bar a pre-emptive attack.

She would not abandon Roman... but what was there to say she would not flee the moment he was freed? Ultimately, very little... it would all depend on the master thief himself. *He*, fortunately, was much easier to control.

Men always were.

Golden eyes drifted to her own man, who was sat on her left picking at some food. The cafeteria was unusually quiet this lunch time, though given the fact it was the last free Saturday before the tournament that perhaps made sense. What made less sense was her boyfriend's poor mood, which seemed to hang over the table like a shroud.

She wasn't sure what he had to feel bad about. His skills were improving, or at least it looked like it to him. In truth, his combat ability was the same as it had always been, but the boost in confidence and self-respect made it feel so much more. She had also made it something of a habit to reward him at the end of each session. He always reciprocated, turning to jelly beneath her fingers, and sometimes her lips.

She was giving him everything he wanted... so why on Remnant did he still look so pathetic?

She wouldn't have cared but for the fact that it was actually oppressive enough to drag her down as well. She wasn't normally

the most empathic of people, but depressive misery was still just that.

"What's wrong?" she whispered at last. Though it felt somewhat sickening to force her voice into that simpering concern for his welfare, she managed it - laying a hand on his knee as she did. Jaune started, flinching and looking around slightly before letting off what had to be the most unrealistic laugh she had ever heard.

"Nothing... I'm fine. There's nothing wrong at all."

Was she honestly supposed to believe that, as he sighed and looked back down to his plate of untouched food? Even some of the others appeared to have noticed, Ruby and Yang turning away from the conversation about Poli to join this one.

"You *are* kind of out of it," the older girl said. "I mean, it's not for us to say, but you look worse than when Cardin had hold of you."

"And that says something," the younger girl finished. "You're not going to keep this quiet from everyone else again, are you? You know you can talk to us if you need help with something."

"No, I-" blue eyes shot left and right, as attention was focused solely on him. "This isn't something I can... I mean, it's not that easy."

"If he doesn't want to talk then he doesn't have to." Pyrrha's voice came from across the table, cutting through the conversation like a hot knife through butter. Perhaps more so because she too had been silent for the last few days, the girl stewing in her own petty jealousy.

Was that what all of this was about? How over dramatic...

"Perhaps the two of us could go out into town then?" It took Cinder a second to realise the words had come from her own lips, but by then it was too late to take them back. Jaune's eyes widened as he watched her, as did a few others. It was too late to back out, and to be fair there really was nothing to do through the day. All their

preparations for the Festival were complete. All that was left to do was wait. "It's been a while since our last date after all."

"It has," he agreed slowly, no doubt remembering their time together at the cinema. Technically this would mark their third outing, she supposed. The first being when he had ambushed her on their way back from Vale. Neither had been a particularly fun experience for her, but it was a good way to waste time. At the very least it ought to stop his pathetic sulking.

"Then it's a date," she sighed. "Why don't we meet by the Bullheads in an hour? We can find something to do in Vale once we get there."

He *did* appear to cheer up a little at that. Though there was still a little fatigue to the smile he gave her. Any other woman might have been offended or maybe filled with concern. Cinder ignored it. He would either enjoy himself or he would not. What use was worrying over the little details?

The others wished him well as he stood and left, Cinder nodding her thanks as they did the same to her. Mercury and Emerald gave their own confused expressions, but otherwise didn't argue. It was little *Poli*, however, whose expression had her brows drawing together. Not confused, nor surprised, but more... intrigued. If the girl thought she could glean some advantage from this she would be sorely mistaken. Roman might seek to make life difficult for Jaune if he believed it gave him some leverage over her.

That wouldn't be a problem... Roman was a big fish in a small pond, a petty crook at best. He might be at the top of his game for what was essentially armed robbery and small-time crimes. But he lacked the ruthless killer edge she had. That was what separated them - and what would make sure he never dared cross her. She could - and would - kill anyone who got in her way.

Roman still clung to some small belief that he could limit his crimes. After all, if he avoided blatant murder then that would mean less security, less of a chase and a shorter prison term if he ever was

caught. With the things she had done, such threats held little. If only they knew, she might serve for ten lifetimes.

It was because of such activities that she was used to being followed. When she stopped in the middle of the corridor, however, her stalker finally spoke.

"Can we a private word?" Lie Ren, the quiet member of his bizarre little team. She had neither the time nor the inclination to deal with him. Not that she could admit as such.

"Of course Ren, is here okay? I do have a date to prepare for."

"Here is fine, thank you. And I won't keep you long." Despite those words it was he who paused, uncertain what to say or how to say it. She could have broken the silence for him, made small talk or given him some kind of prompt. Instead, she waited, allowing him to suffer. "I wanted to ask... if you could perhaps tone it down a little, in public."

"Tone it down?" Her confusion was honest. She didn't think she had been doing anything overt, not her of all people - and less so something that could be noticed by students. "I'm sorry. I'm not sure what you mean."

The boy sighed, "Are you aware of Pyrrha's feelings for Jaune?"

"I'd be a fool not to, with how often she glares at me." He winced at that. "But if you're worried about anything then rest assured I wasn't aware when I first met Jaune. I only noticed after he and I started dating." Mostly because she hadn't cared for the relationships of students. Jaune had been single at the time, which was all she had asked for.

"She's jealous of you... but to be fair she has had feelings for him for a very long time."

And I should care, why? "Why didn't she express them, then? She had all the time in the world to ask him out or tell him how she felt. Surely you're not blaming me for stepping in - when I didn't even know?"

"No!" he argued, "No, of course not... you haven't done anything wrong at all. It's just... Pyrrha is a shy girl and I don't think she knows how to handle what she's feeling right now. I'm not asking you to stop seeing Jaune. Just to... not do anything in front of her like that. Things that might upset her."

"May I be frank with you, Ren?" His expression became guarded. The look of a man who knew he was about to hear something he didn't want to.

"I have a feeling you will be regardless, so yes, I'll listen."

"I am not a public person. I am not an overly affectionate person." How amusing it was, deep inside, to be so honest like this - and to have him misconstrue every statement. "If Pyrrha cannot put up with what little affection I show publically, then I dread to imagine what she might be like if he were to date any other woman. I have not kissed him at our table, I do not hold hands with him - I merely asked him on a date in an attempt to cheer him up. Is that so wrong?"

"No... look, I agree completely with you - I do. Pyrrha had her chance and she kept delaying, this was bound to happen. Trust me, Nora and I warned her enough times. It's just that the Festival is coming up and our teamwork is worse than ever before." He clearly didn't want to mention that around her. No one wanted to talk about inter-team problems with those outside it.

"That seems to be a problem with her, more than I." Cinder hid her smirk. "It is I who has to put up with her dirty looks and longing gazes towards my boyfriend. I'm well within my right to feel angry at that, yet for Jaune's benefit I keep quiet. I don't think it's fair for you to now ask even more of me. Should I observe a ten metre rule in regards to him? Since I *know* you won't be bringing this up to him,

am I supposed to make an excuse as to why I suddenly don't want to go near him? Or should I wait until our relationship falls apart and Pyrrha has a chance to sweep in once more?"

"I shouldn't have asked-"

"No." she agreed. "You shouldn't. I understand why this affects you Ren, and I'm not going to shout or yell at you. If you will excuse me, however, *she* is completely out of line. It was only a week ago she brutally put down my teammate in sparring, for no other reason than he is on the same team as I. I don't mean to make accusations, but I am genuinely worried what this might mean if our teams end up facing one another in the tournament."

"It wouldn't... Pyrrha would never do anything like that." He sounded so sure, so confident... yet to her experienced eyes there was a small worm of doubt within his gaze. Even a single smidgeon of him that thought that maybe, just maybe... she might lose herself to such feelings.

"I will try and hold back even further," she surrendered. The 180 he pulled almost made her laugh, going from troubled to shocked in a nano-second. "Not for her. I will do it for Jaune... as I always have, and yourself and Nora too, I suppose." She twisted the knife deeper, watching the myriad expressions wash over him; relief, disbelief, guilt, shame and anguish. He would dwell on it... asking himself if he had made the right decision, if he had chosen sides in a battle between his leader and his friend. And maybe alone, in the sanctity of their room, he would start to question if that wasn't all Pyrrha's fault.

It was wonderful.

"I... thank you..."

"I won't say it's not a problem." He winced again, but she continued regardless, "One thing though... have you not considered approaching Pyrrha over this, other than me?"

"We've tried," he admitted, no doubt meaning his ginger shadow. "She's being stubborn and snappy... it's a trying time for the whole team. We'll keep working, however. Please don't think we're not fighting to make her accept you as well."

"She seems like quite the shallow girl," she threw the offhand comment out there, wondering what his response might be. Surely he could not argue it?

"In this..." he paused. "In this, I have to agree... she is in the wrong. But that doesn't mean we won't stand by her, nor that we won't do everything we can to help her. That's what being part of a team is all about. You have to take the bad with the good... and there's a lot of good to her. I know it doesn't excuse her, but you've just not had the best impression of her."

Cinder didn't argue as he walked away, leaving her alone in the corridor. *That's what being a team is all about*, she mocked, lips curling into a sneer. What a bunch of fools.

She would prove them wrong if she had to.

In the end she had chosen to default back to her old red dress, something she hadn't worn for a good few weeks. Too familiar within Beacon, there had always been the risk of Ruby Rose of Goodwitch recognising it. But with the crowds of tourists milling the streets of Vale, it was easier to stay hidden. Jaune seemed to appreciate it at least, if the way his eyes had trailed down her long legs had been any indication.

And would wonders never cease, she could approve of his choice for once as well. Fitted navy pants, a white tee with a black blazer over the top. The most unusual thing about it was that it was he who was wearing it, but she supposed someone must have taken him in hand and forced a wardrobe change on him.

He looked good enough to eat.

"It's so crowded around here," he kept one arm around her waist, as he looked at the people milling across the park. "I know the Festival is soon, but this is a bit much, isn't it? There are still eight or nine days until the first match."

"I suppose they wished to make sure they got the best hotels," Cinder shrugged. It was just like the foolish civilians, flocking to watch what was essentially a glorified blood sport. Of course, there was no way they would do anything if it was themselves in danger.

"You'd think the breach would have made people at least a little nervous though."

"The Atlas droids might have something to do with that," she nodded towards one of them, its white frame shining in the sunlight. Two soldiers stood nearby, answering some questions from some passers-by. "People feel safe because they were able to help seal the breach. In the end, when something tragic like that happens, people just like to ignore it."

And the breach certainly was tragic, alright. A tragedy it hadn't been successful.

"That seems a little cynical."

"Cynical, or realistic?" Cinder rolled her eyes. "It's always been the Hunters who have to fight. They would pretend nothing was happening even as a Beowolf rips off the- mph!" Her eyes widened as his leaps sealed over hers. Before she could even think, he had pulled back. "What was that for?"

"It's my patented `cure Cinder of cynicism` technique," he grinned, cheeks a little red. "Did it work?"

"I don't thin-" he dove in once more, punishing her with his touch, the hand against her back dragging her against him. Anyone else and she would have killed them, but from him it somehow felt exciting. Perhaps because he was normally so passive. "You're an idiot." She

said. It might have had more meaning if she hadn't been smiling.
"And now people are staring at us."

"Staring at you." He allowed his gaze to roam up and down her body,
"And I can see why."

"My," she smirked, "where has all *this* come from?" He wasn't normally so suave, nor confident. It wasn't that they were the best lines, for they weren't. But that he felt confident enough to speak them in the first place was a change.

"I suppose all that training was better for more than just my fighting." He laughed, holding one arm out and flexing the muscle there. She pretended she could see any difference, leaning into him and laughing along. A placebo then, she supposed that made sense. He was so gullible, she could fully imagine him falling for one at the slightest provocation.

"I can't complain then." She said. Once more she noticed how the people around them were staring. He was right, many certainly were staring at her with jealousy, desire and lust. What indolent fools... if they were so envious of his position then perhaps they should train, improve their bodies and take some respect with their appearance. There were plenty of women who would appreciate as such. But they would not... yet again, they actually preferred to wallow in their misery rather than make the slightest effort to improve themselves.

All because it was too much effort.

Her eyes drifted shut as he kissed her once more, his tongue roaming across her lips as she savoured his taste. He'd gotten good at kissing her... a testament to practice no doubt. So eager to please was he, that he paid attention to her every response. It was honestly frightening how much he knew about her. Even if it did allow him to make her toes curl with every kiss.

"You were thinking something cynical again," he teased as they parted. To her horror she felt a desire to follow after him, to claim his

lips once more.

"And you can read my mind now?"

"That's beyond me," he laughed, "but your expression was easy enough to read. What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that their jealousy is misplaced," she answered honestly. "Many of the people here would be able to find partners of their own if they but put a little effort into it. I suppose it's easier to be lazy and then complain." She fisted her fingers into his shirt, waiting for the wonderful sensation to pass. Her breathing was heavy, "You can't ask me a question and then punish me for the answer. That's cheating."

"You're not complaining. I suppose I see your point, though..." he let out a quiet sigh as he manoeuvred the two of them to a nearby bench. It overlooked a shallow pond, where people were busy over-feeding a small congregation of ducks. With how much bread was being thrown around it would be a wonder if they didn't all sink.

He sat down beside her, the arm around her waist sliding up to her shoulder, pulling her so that she was leaning against his side. It was not a position she was used to. She was off-balance, her reactions would be lowered and it would be all but impossible to react to an attempt on her life. It also showed great trust, letting your guard down to rely and lean on another for support. That was not her and never had been.

"I suppose that was a bit of a less-than-veiled snipe at Pyrrha too, right?"

Her eyes flicked to his, "You know?"

"That she's jealous you took the training sessions away? Yeah." As usual he missed the point by a good few metres. Somehow he was even able to come up with some other far-fetched explanation for the

girl's behaviour. Who would honestly be jealous over *not* having to train someone?

Cinder wouldn't do the girl's work for her, however. Not in revealing her feelings for him. He was hers now, no matter what that stupid girl dared to believe. Any chance she'd had with him was gone. It was herself who had put all this work into improve him, it was Cinder who had identified his weaknesses and taken steps to fix them. *She* had been the one to make the first move and claim him. That girl *had* her chance... for months.

"I can't make any excuses for how she's acting," Jaune sighed. "Even I can see that she's being unfair on you. Everyone else just looks really awkward whenever it happens too. Like they want to say something but don't know how to. I guess it's my responsibility."

"Jaune," she dug an elbow into his side. "No woman likes to hear about another when they're on a date."

"I know but, I think it needs to be said." He was so serious, so concerned as he looked at her, that she could not argue with it. She supposed if this was to be her victory, the moment that he finally condemned that girl's actions than she ought to savour it. "Cinder... I'm so sorry on my partner's behalf. Please forgive her."

She could hardly believe his words. The shock must have shown on her face, for he looked down at her with concern, trying to figure out what he'd said wrong.

"You are," she pronounced each word slowly, as though explaining it to a baby, "apologising for her?"

"I am," he nodded. "How she's treating you, how she keeps glaring. It's... well, it's not right. She's not a bad person though, Cinder. She's just going through a rough time, trust me." He sounded so distraught, like he wanted nothing more than for her and Pyrrha to shake hands, declare their feud over and become the best of friends.

"No."

"Cinder?"

"I said no." she repeated, angry. "You don't get to apologise for something someone else has done. That's ridiculous."

"I'll convince her to apologise in time," Jaune rushed to assure her, "this is just me saying sorry for now. I'll be having a talk with her, I'll make her come around and see you as you really are."

"You'll talk to her?" Cinder laughed, "She's been ignoring you ever since our first training session. Ever since you chose to have me take over your instruction. What makes you think she'll listen to you now?"

"Because I'll apologise to her," he laughed. Apparently he didn't see the ugly expression which flitted across her face. For if he had then he certainly wouldn't be laughing. "I'm going to fix things, make them right again. Then I'll start on fixing things between her and you as well."

She couldn't even think of a response, struggled to even find the words to express the mixture of disbelief and downright fury she felt. In the end she turned to him, pushing herself out of his hold and sitting back up as she stared into his blue eyes.

"Why!?"

"Why?" he asked, "Why what?"

"Why go through all of that! She's being a little," she shook her head. "She's being unfair; to me, to you, to RWBY and the rest of your team. *She* is the one in the wrong, not you and not us. So why are you apologising to her, when she should be the one crawling back on hands and knees?"

"She hasn't been that bad," he waved one hand, though it fell when he saw the incredulous look on her face. "Okay, well maybe she has been... I know RWBY's been down and Nora and Ren are miserable. But that isn't going to change if I don't do anything about it. I'm the team leader, just like you are for yours. It's our responsibility to handle this sort of thing."

"That doesn't mean you need to bend over backwards for her," Cinder snarled. He actually flinched, leaning back. Now that she thought of it, this was probably the first time he'd ever seen her angry.

Now that she thought of it... this was perhaps the first time she had ever *been* this angry.

"She is the one who has been ignoring you," she pushed on, trying to make him understand what was so painfully clear. "She has been treating me like crap, she's been treating her *team* like crap - and you're just willing to forgive all that?"

"Of course." The two simple words made her want to scream in fury. "She's made a mistake, but don't we all? Pyrrha helped me through a lot when I first came to Beacon... yeah you're right that her training was maybe holding me back at the end. But early on, it was a lifesaver. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for the strong foundations she gave me."

"And that just," she flung one arm to the side, "waves away all the pain she has put you through?" All the situations, the angry looks and bitter jealousy... the effort she had put into turning them against the stupid girl. Much of it was her doing, but Nikos was still just as guilty. "Why are you willing to just let all of that go? She's a jealous fool."

"She's my best friend," he was scowling now, his voice having risen a little as he squared his shoulders. "I know she hasn't given you the best impression of her, but that's no excuse to go around badmouthing her."

"She *deserves* to be badmouthed," Cinder's scowl back was just as fierce. She pushed his hand off of her, scooting to the side so she could level her glare on him. What a fool, he was just as bad as her. How dense did he have to be that he couldn't see what she could see!? "She deserves *worse* !"

"She is my partner!" Jaune stood up, towering over her.

" / am your partner!" She flew up opposite him, not at all intimidated by his added inches. Her breasts were heaving, pent-up rage and frustration finally exploding. "But apparently that doesn't mean anything in the face of her treating me like utter trash."

"She's part of my team. You're just my girlfriend!" His eyes widened, "No wait, I didn't mean that!" He reached out to touch her, but she stepped back, face carefully neutral. "Cinder please, I didn't mean it like that. I was just angry."

Just his girlfriend.

She wasn't even that, was she? He was her fake boyfriend, nothing more than cover to protect her - pleasure to relieve her. She classed him as nothing more than a tool, so what did it matter if he considered her similar? It didn't matter... not at all.

So why were her hands shaking so much, clenched into fists?

"Well then," she kept her voice quiet, measured and even. "Perhaps I made a mistake after all."

"Cinder?" he looked hopeful.

"I didn't seem to notice that the man I wished to make my partner already *had* a partner."

"Not that kind of partner. What you and I have is different!"

"You mean less important."

He shook his head, "No, it's not! You *are* important to me." She barely heard him. She'd been stupid to let the ruse continue this long anyway, he'd been distracting her over and over. She'd known that... had known it was foolish and dangerous, but waved those concerns away in favour of the relief he offered her.

But now there was only a week remaining. She could hold on until then if she had to.

She didn't need him. She'd *never* needed him. Bands of iron clamped down, steel-like discipline settling into place as her body stopped trembling. She *had* been compromised... there was no denying it. He'd been affecting her, in what ways she didn't know. But all of this... was it truly Pyrrha who was the jealous one, or was it her?

"Cinder, please. I love you." That word brought a sneer to her lips, face twisting in such an ugly expression that even his eyes widened. She pushed past him, making sure to knock her shoulder into his in one final gesture, sending him tumbling back onto the bench through the sheer force of it. Petty perhaps, but oh so satisfying as she strode away. She could hear him cursing behind her, swearing angrily as he slammed a hand onto the wooden seat.

She shook her head, banishing him from her mind. She had been distracted, but now things were clear.

She had a maiden to kill.

Nothing else mattered.

Oh dear Jaune, you've done fucked up a little there. Cinder starts to feel a little emotional, but then again - this is her central PoV, and as a central character she has to develop as the story progresses. We see so little emotion from her in the show, that there's just no telling how she would react to situations like this. But she *is* meant to feel confused and

conflicted over this... an emotion she just hasn't shown in canon.

She strikes me as quite the vengeful and angry woman though. While also being quite self-centred. Agree, disagree, let me know.

Then fight me! xD Jokes aside, writing this was tough. It's the show week for us at work, which means I'm in and out of the office, at the show Wed-Thursday, and stuck in mind-breaking traffic afterwards. I'm talking the kind of 4 hour delays that come from 70,000 people all leaving one area at the same time. Hate it so muchhhh!

Next Chapter: 4 th July

P a treon . com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 14

So we got robbed last night. Some thieves came by and broke into our garage using power tools and some barriers to muffle the noise. Took off with a £3,500 quad and a bunch of tools from the garage... it's all insured, but since this is the FIFTH burglary in 3 years, the insurance company has said that if we do claim, they will have to end their contract with us.

And since all new insurance companies would ask how much has been stolen in recent years... they would be unlikely to insure us either. Not to mention most criminals make repeat visits to steal the insurance stuff too. So we have to just accept the loss. Police useless, naturally.

So pissed off today, so very pissed off. It's a rural area so there are a lot of criminals come by to try and steal expensive machinery - especially since less neighbours and population density means never any police presence.

Beta: *College Fool*

Cover Art: *Rachel Marks*

Chapter 14

One finger traced over the surface of her scroll, elegantly dragging the window down so that she might better see the faces within. There were plenty of options. Oh, so many who sought after something as transient as glory within the Vytal Festival. What fools. Did they not realise the truth of their profession? That a Hunter's lot in life was with blood and death?

It mattered little. Once she had finished with them they would understand. That or they would be dead... either way they would no longer have to live with such ignorance.

The screen lit up for a moment, a new window appearing directly beneath her finger. You have a new message, the bold text happily blared. A growl tore itself from her throat as she ignored it, a tally in the back of her mind chalking up yet another message from that damned fool. That must have made it one hundred and twelve, or around that number anyway. One hundred and twelve messages within five short days.

He was persistent. She would give him that.

Five days and he still attempted to speak with her at every opportunity... five days and he hadn't gotten the message and given up.

Five days, and her own anger still burned hot.

What is wrong with me? The dark-haired woman shook her head, fighting back the migraine building in the back of her skull. *No, what is wrong with him?* It didn't make sense, he didn't make sense! He knew she was angry, knew she had called it off, so why wasn't he backing away like any other man would have? Everything she knew about him, every piece of evidence as to his character said he would not pursue her - that his confidence would be destroyed, that he would fall into self-pity or despair. Instead he was like a Beowulf doggedly stalking a Hunter, knowing full well that it had no chance but pushing on with mindless determination even if the conclusion was foregone.

She just couldn't understand it... not his determination or the reasons behind it, but she also couldn't understand why it made her so angry in the first place. What did it matter to her if he wasted his time on this fruitless pursuit? What had changed that would affect him so, to the point that his entire personality seemed to have altered?

He was a tool, something to be discarded - and she *had* discarded him - finally. It had taken time, more time than she had expected it to... perhaps even more time than it ought to, but she had done it at last.

It was over, done with. There should be no more Jaune Arc in her life.

You have a new message, her scroll taunted once more. It disappeared into the drawer beside her bed a second later, where she could ignore its constant reminders.

"Everything sorted?" Mercury asked from across the room, drawing her sharp gaze. Did he know? No, of course not, she was being paranoid. Naturally he was asking about the work she had been doing towards their plan. The headache came back stronger, along with the small voice in the back of her head telling her she'd been compromised. She hadn't. Not yet. And now she wouldn't be... she had been *distracted*, that much was undeniable - not to mention unforgivable.

Mistakes had been made, but they would not be repeated. "Our first opponents will be a team from Vacuo," she answered for the benefit of all three of them. Emerald put down the book she had been reading dutifully, while the ever-enigmatic new addition to their team simply crossed her legs happily. "I've decided it best not to tamper with the battlefield selection, so the terrain will be an unknown. Despite that, the team itself should pose no problem whatever is selected."

"Sounds fun," Mercury snorted and twisted his leg at an unnatural angle, pulling off his prosthetic so that he could tinker with the internals. "It'll be good to get a warm up before the main event. All this hiding our strength has started to make me frustrated."

"Be careful not to cause any unusual injuries," she warned, "we don't need suspicion in the first bout. I'll also expect you all to remain as

two-dimensional as possible. That means no Semblances, am I understood?"

"Yes ma'am," Emerald and Mercury echoed. The short girl with black pigtails raised two fingers in salute, though her smirk said she was not nearly as cowed as she deserved to be. No matter, if she proved a problem then she would be dealt with in time. At this stage, she was the easiest way onto the Atlas battleship and so indispensable to their plans.

But she would not be important forever, just like Roman. *Just like Jaune*, her mind whispered, *just like you*.

"I'll be going for a walk," she strode towards the door, ignoring their startled looks. A little fresh air would perhaps do her head wonders, and if not, then she didn't want to be in front of these three when she had a moment of weakness. Dragging on her shoes, she pulled the door open.

Only to pause. Blond hair, bright blue eyes - and of all the damn things in the world - an acoustic guitar. Jaune Arc had only opened his mouth for a split second before she slammed the door shut. The expression on her face was... complicated.

"He's still there?" Emerald sounded genuinely surprised, only to pale under Cinder's golden eyes. "Ah, well I mean... he was there when we arrived, what three hours ago?"

"Four," Mercury corrected, still focused on his leg. "He asked if we knew where you were. I suppose he knows we lied now." He didn't sound particularly broken up about that, but Cinder barely noticed - already lost within her own whirling thoughts.

What was he doing at her door? No, that was obvious - the messages said as much. The bigger question was why the hell was he doing this at all? And for four hours, no less - that was as impressive as it was foolish.

She had killed so many people... she had faced off against arrogant crime bosses, blood-thirsty terrorists and killers so twisted it would make even Marcus Black look like a saint. She had cheated, lied and backstabbed her way to the top. She had made men quiver in fear, had killed those who lay defeated in puddles of their own urine.

And yet here she was, cowering within her room because a seventeen-year-old idiot with a guitar was camped outside her door. Maybe he wasn't the biggest fool after all. It was clearly her. Was she a criminal mastermind, or a petulant teenager who had been grounded?

What had he done to her?

Should she open the door once more and confront him? She could send him packing in an instant, but the image it would create would make her a laughing stock, if it wasn't destroyed already. Mercury and Emerald pointedly did not look in her direction, but Neo was watching with rapt interest. No, there could be no facing him with her around.

"Why didn't you tell me he was here?"

"We didn't think you would want to deal with it," Emerald was contrite, but not incorrect. It was hardly something she could punish them for - and this was hardly their fault in the first place. "Do you want me to get rid of him?"

"No, let him waste his time. If a door slammed in his face isn't sign enough then he'll soon get bored."

"With that in mind," Mercury asked, "can we stop hanging out with their teams? Things are already getting pretty awkward there, if we were to back off then no one would even comment on it."

"Stay." He sighed but didn't argue. "Our purposes are still served by Emerald and you being close to their team. Report back to me as you have been doing, but if questioned just say you don't want to talk

about me or that it's personal." They had put too much effort into befriending them to just throw it all away. Plus, that would effectively be admitting that her relationship with Jaune had nothing to do with her plans. "What is the situation currently?"

"Awkward as hell," Mercury chuckled, only to quickly continue when he saw her unimpressed look. "He's obviously pretty broken up over the whole thing and that seems to have spread to the rest of his team. Team RWBY are trying to be supportive, but it's a bit clumsy, like they don't know if they should be trying to help Jaune or us."

"I wish they'd stick to helping him," Emerald rolled her eyes. "Just this morning I had Ruby crawling over me asking if there was anything she could do. They were even talking about arranging the two of you to be stuck in an elevator, but I said that might end badly."

"A wise choice," Cinder walked over to her bed, sitting down atop the mattress. "Regardless, keep close to them and if needs be you can also act like you are trying to comfort or support me." It was sickening to imagine, but it would aid their cover. "This only needs to continue for another few days or so, then we will be free of this place and such people."

"Do we have any idea about," Mercury looked around briefly, "our friend Amber?"

"She is here." Somewhere within the school, Cinder could feel it. It was something impossible to describe, a sense of half her presence being missing yet close. It wasn't enough to get an exact direction or location, but it did let her know that the vessel hadn't yet been moved. Ozpin would not trust anyone else with such a power. "Perhaps the more interesting piece of information is that an experimental machine has been provided to the school, or so our spies in Atlas suggest." The three perked up at that, suddenly paying attention. "Their reports claim it might be used to actually transfer the aura from one person to another - perhaps even permanently."

"A transfer then..." none of them needed to be told what such a machine might be for. "Do we have any idea who might be the next vessel?"

That was the real question, wasn't it? They would not have done it already or she would have noticed. Such a person would be unable to stay in Beacon, the power they would gain would make a school like this superfluous. Similarly, their Semblance and powers would change so much that there was bound to be some kind of period of adjustment. Since they'd not seen anyone flying around campus struggling with lightning spitting from their eyes, then they could safely assume the process had yet to start.

If it even did... risky didn't even begin to describe what this process sounded like. In the reports from her spies the word `experimental` had been thrown around like racism at an Schnee family dinner. There was a good chance whomever was selected for this might not survive, or would be changed even if they did.

Which meant its use would be pushed back... likely used as a last resort or when they were all out of options. Essentially, the moment of her invasion. For there would be *no* options for these fools when her plan was implemented.

"Apart from the fact the candidate will be female, the Headmaster must at least suspect that they would come under attack, thus he will choose someone strong - but also someone who he believes can be controlled or relied upon. That narrows the options down significantly."

"Any of Team RWBY," Emerald guessed.

"Pyrrha Nikos too," Mercury added, "she's got the strength and controlling her would be as easy as controlling her partner."

"Those would be the main suspects," Cinder nodded, "though there is one other I have also noticed. One Coco Adel, leader of a second year team. Their team has gone on an unusual amount of combat

missions with Professor Port, whom Ozpin holds in strict confidence."

"That's quite a lot of people to keep an eye on. There's only four of us."

Only two of you, Cinder thought. She had her own concerns to deal with, and obviously Neo could not be trusted for such a delicate task. Cinder's brows narrowed as she considered the short list of women.

"The Schnee won't be an option, there are too many questions as to her loyalties and we all know how much the Schnee family would enjoy having such power. Even if it might be a solution in the short term, Ozpin would not empower someone who might later turn against them. The same might be said about the faunus." As though her petty disguise had not been transparent enough, Adam had made them more than aware of who she was - and how he wished to personally deal with her. It had even become something of a condition in their agreement that she was not to be harmed before he spoke with her. "I doubt very much the Headmaster isn't aware of her past, so there is little chance he would trust such power with her. The others are all more than viable, barring perhaps the Valkyrie girl." Too unpredictable, too impulsive. "I have a plan in place for Miss Adel, so she will not be a candidate for long."

"That leaves Xiao-Long, Rose and Nikos," Mercury rested his head in one hand, "which is why we still need to hang around with them, so we can notice if one goes missing or acts unusually. Argh, it's a perfect plan of course, but they're just so *difficult* to put up with."

Cinder ignored the two as they descended into an argument over who had it worse. So long as they obeyed, she didn't care. Nikos, Xiao-Long and Ruby Rose... quite the selection there, though very tightly grouped. She was confident in her ability to kill any of them, even if they were to gain the maiden's powers... but the blonde's Semblance might prove an obstacle.

The power to absorb damage and then unleash it upon her foe... almost like a form of reflection. There was no telling how that might interact with the abilities of the Fall Maiden, but that they might complement each other posed a risk.

She would have to be dealt with too. A direct attack might be too obvious, killing her a risk in and of itself. Well, Cinder smiled, if Ozpin needed someone he could implicitly trust, then perhaps she should target that instead?

Truly, this was too easy.

It had taken another two hours for Jaune Arc to get tired and leave their room. All throughout that time she had received message on her scroll, the boy becoming more persistent since he knew she was inside.

Yet he never knocked on the door... she wasn't sure what to make of that.

"Nor what to make of him," she rubbed one hand down her face, fingers twisting the skin between her eyes as she tried to massage away the pain there. "This is a complete mess."

She could lie to him, she could lie to his team - but Cinder Fall did not make it a habit to lie to herself. Jaune Arc had... affected her, in some way. The stress relief had been there, as had the pleasure and the distraction - in that, he had served his part admirably. But there had also been something else beneath all the amusement and sarcastic criticism she had levelled on him. He'd been a bumbling fool, passive when he could have been aggressive, malleable and easy to control, nothing like what she usually would have liked.

But she had enjoyed leading him along, if only for a while. *Was that what this was, a power play - something I enjoyed because it reminded me how powerful I am?* Possible, but it also didn't make sense. She didn't *need* any proof her ability. Confidence aside, she

had Mercury, Emerald, Roman and Neo as proof of how strong she was. Each of them was powerful in their own right, each of them answered to her. Seducing and leading on a hormonal virgin hardly proved anything.

She enjoyed the sex... but that was natural, wasn't it? At first he'd been clumsy, but under her dedicated tutelage he had become quite the lover. Not experienced in the general sense of the term, but experienced with *her*. He knew the right places to touch, just how to bring her to climax - he knew what he should and should not do. Losing that was a shame, but she could bring someone else up to the same level. From the looks he had given her, she knew Mercury would leap at the chance.

So why did the thought of that have her sneering in distaste? Mercury was attractive in his own right. Sure the legs were a problem, but it wasn't those which turned her off. Perhaps it was the subservience or the fact that it would cause complications in her plans. Or perhaps... perhaps it was the fact that he was not Jaune?

"Foolish," she shook her head. This walk had not cleared her thoughts nearly as well as she had wished. "This is all foolish. I should never have entertained the thought of it." How easy it was to say that in hindsight. How much simpler life would have been had she simply squared her shoulders and pushed through the stress and frustration.

So why was it that she couldn't muster the regret she felt this so rightfully deserved?

Could it... surely not. But perhaps... just maybe - no. She didn't... like him, did she?

The thought was preposterous. Foolish, stupid and absolutely insane! How could she, Cinder Fall, have actually come to *like* someone as pointlessly stupid, as naïve and innocent - as downright *pathetic* - as Jaune Arc? She hated his dopey expressions, she hated the way he always tried to hold her hand, she *despised* the

attention he demanded from her. But those were just the things she hated about his dating style! She hated his loyalties, she hated the way he placed his team so high, she hated the way he would laugh and accept the criticism of others, she hated how weak he was, how unconfident and foolish - how he smiled and laughed, how he *looked* .

No. Hatred wasn't a strong enough word. She despised him.

"I wondered if I might find you here. Do you mind if we talk?"

But there was one person she hated even more than him, something that seemed so impossible. But if she despised that blond buffoon, then she *loathed* Pyrrha Nikos. Even as the redheaded snit stepped out from the shadows, Cinder could feel her fury burning. Had she been so distracted that she could not even sense someone approach her? Just another reason to hate him.

"You... you really hate me, don't you?" Her mask tried to snap into place, only to shatter instantly. The neutral expression, the easy smile or even her signature frown - all felt impossible to wear. And the sheer act of trying must have had her face contorting madly. "I don't suppose I can blame you."

"Goodbye," Cinder turned away, quickly stepping aside before she might do something utterly foolish. Her rage burned bright, but this simply wasn't the time to unleash it, not when it would draw attention to her. For Nikos' own sake, Cinder walked away.

"Wait!" A hand grabbed her by the wrist. It took all of her discipline not to destroy it, and the woman it was attached to. *Calm down, remember the plan - do not be a fool!* Her shoulders sagged, the motion almost forced as the raven-haired woman tried to make her body relax. Her breathing slowed, tension slipping from her muscles, but it did nothing stop the sneer on her face as she turned to face the other girl.

"I don't believe we have anything to discuss Pyrrha Nikos." The redhead flinched at the formal address, even if they had never truly been any closer. She looked down at the hand with clear disdain, the girl releasing it with a flinch. "Don't you have a partner to help?" It was meant as a snipe, and judging from the expression it had worked, but Cinder also felt a flash of pain herself.

"I think that's what I'm doing right now." The girl winced but pushed on, guilt written across her face.

"Then you might wish to have your eyes checked. I am not your partner." A feint, a provocation - people made mistakes when they were angry. The girl's emerald eyes flashed.

"Don't play stupid," oh, some spunk within the girl? Cinder wondered if it was flammable. "I'm trying to do what's right but you're not making this easy."

"Should I be doing *anything* to aid you?" She sprung her trap, catching the other girl unprepared. Green eyes widened, face flashing with guilt. The redhead backed away, seeking to recover.

"No... no, you shouldn't be. You have every right to hate me and I accept that. Hate me, detest me, abhor me," she placed one hand on her chest, "but please don't let that fall onto Jaune."

"Oh?" An arching brow, a flash of teeth, "And here I thought this was exactly what you wanted. He's hurt, lonely and single. That looks like a perfect opportunity from where I'm standing." Another blow for her, another flash of self-hatred and crushing guilt within those bright orbs. Cinder pushed on, wielding her words like blades, "That's what you want, right? Jaune Arc, all to yourself - no matter what he or anyone else wishes. Of course, he won't be happy, but that doesn't matter as long as you get what you have desired all this time." Nikos shook her head, frantically trying to fight off her assault, but Cinder would have none of it. "Congratulations Miss Nikos," she whispered, leaning close - the coup de grace, "another win for the Invincible Girl ."

" *NO !*" Golden eyes widened as she was pushed back, not only by words but also the two hands on her shoulders. She caught herself on a nearby wall, stumbling slightly but looking back to the frantic young woman. "No, this isn't what I wanted - this isn't a win. Don't say that!" Nikos' assault was clumsy, not at all co-ordinated like her barbed words, but it made up for that in desperate ferocity, "I was upset, I was angry and jealous - but I never wanted to break the two of you apart. I never wanted to make him upset like this. I just thought I would be able to get over it if I avoided you both, if I stayed out of the way and let it happen. Please believe me, this isn't what I meant to happen!"

"That's-" she tried to speak, but the girl hardly noticed.

"Everything is ruined. Jaune's broken, he doesn't know what to do, he cries in the bathroom when he thinks we can't hear him. Ren blames himself - he thinks it was something he said that made this happen and Nora is left trying to pick up the pieces, but she's just one person."

"So what you're saying is that you want me to come back and fix everything? To make your team work properly again so that you don't have to?"

"He loves you!" She shouted those words like they were supposed to mean something. But all they did was make Cinder all the angrier. What a stupid notion, what did that matter in the slightest? "What he said, it was just a mistake, he didn't mean it. I know you love him too so why not just give him another chance?"

The two squared off across the corridor, knees bent, shoulders rising and falling. Not a single blow had been thrown, nor even a single hand reaching towards their weapons. Yet they still looked at one another as though blood might be shed at any moment.

"Do not presume to know me, Nikos." No one did, but that this girl even proclaimed to know the mask she wore, somehow made her angry. She hoped against all hope that this girl would be the maiden

candidate... if only so that she could drag the powers from her broken body. "Whatever was between Jaune and I is done."

It was the best choice... the correct choice. She didn't need the distractions, not anymore, not so close to the climax of her plans.

And she didn't care how much her body ached when she made that decision. It would bend, just like everyone else would. *She* was in control, not her body.

"No! You can't!" The redheaded *bitch* clearly disagreed, crossing the distance between them in an instant - hand reaching out to grab her shoulder. Golden eyes blazed, patience shot as anger erupted from the surface. Pyrrha's eyes widened as the hand was batted aside, body bending as a fist planted itself deep into her stomach. The sound the girl made when air exploded from her lungs was more satisfying than any orgasm. It had been a long time coming, this moment.

"Don't," she gripped those red tresses, twisting them around her fist as she yanked the girl's face up, "you," her other hand clamped over her mouth, squeezing the cheeks together between thumb and fingers, "dare." Their eyes met, mere inches between them. Nikos' were filled with fear. "You do not have the *right* to make any requests of me. Let alone orders."

How easy it would be, she could feel her body singing in delight - her headache vanishing in an instant. A flare of her power, the girl's face would *melt* in her grip, her screams muffled into the palm of her hand as those bright green eyes popped in her skull. Nothing would be left, no evidence, no finger prints... they would need to identify the girl from her toenails!

Your cover, her mind warned, *don't be stupid*. It would blow her cover, if she were caught. But there was nothing to say she would be caught. *When did you become a person who put personal vindication above the bigger picture?*

She blinked. It took a second, but her eyes widened in horror - snapping down to the face of the girl she held in her hand. Her fingers cracked open, pushing Nikos away even as she tried to hide the way her arm shook. What was she doing, what had she been about to do? Years, no, over a decade of planning and preparation, gone in an instant.

She was a fool - the worst kind of fool.

"Jaune loves you," Pyrrha Nikos repeated, rubbing her jaw lightly. Cinder would have rebutted, but for the fact that she was still wrestling with her shock. "And unless I'm reading things wrong, you love him too."

"You're reading things wrong." He was a toy, she lusted after him, she enjoyed the rush of power he gave her - she had never felt such an emotion as love, and wasn't about to start now. This... this was just her being a little compromised. Devastating in its own right, a mistake that should never have happened, but fixable.

"I don't think I am. Your reaction just there proves as much..."

"That proves only how much I hate you." The words slipped out without her meaning them to, but the girl didn't even seem surprised. Did she even realise how close to death she had been? Of course not... she likely thought the worst she might have done was punch or slap her.

"And you hate me for being the cause of your argument with Jaune."

I hated you before, she thought angrily. But it wasn't true... at least, not to this degree. The girl had rubbed her the wrong way and Cinder had taken more than her fair share of enjoyment in belittling and humiliating her, but the animosity had never burned so bright.

"For what it's worth - and I realise that isn't much - I am sorry for causing this. Jaune is honest in his desire to make it up to you and I am honest in supporting it... so..." the redhead shrugged, backing

away, "Think about giving him a chance. What's the worst that could happen?" And with that, the girl was gone, her footsteps echoed down the corridor until even they were no more. In the darkness of the dimmed lights and abandoned hallways, Cinder Fall could only look at the palm of her hand. She could still feel the tingle of another's skin on it... and beneath that, the thrum of power ready to be unleashed.

What was the worst that could happen, she dared to ask that? The worst had already happened - and it could only go downhill from there. She... it was hard to say, but she *cared* for him. None of the sentimental idiocy others would speak of, but the signs were there. How long had it been since she had factored his death into her plans? How many times had she thought, in a small place in the back of her mind, that it wasn't necessary to do that to him.

When he'd gone on his mission, back when she had intended to launch their first plan... she had been relieved he would be absent, hadn't she? Such a small emotion, such a tiny thing, easy to miss in her distracted state, but now it seemed obvious. She shouldn't be relieved or affected if he died; he was supposed to be meaningless. He was *supposed* to be a toy.

Emotions were never meant to get involved.

The plan is too late to change. No, I don't even want to change the plan. She still felt the burning hatred, still longed to see the looks on their faces. She simply wanted him to be - *No, that's won't happen - it can't. There's no time to try and turn him and with the loyalty he's shown to his team, there would be no chance.*

He was stubborn, almost immovable... she wasn't sure if she liked or hated that, but right now she would have liked to tear it from him. This whole disaster had come about as a result of him choosing his team over her - it would be no different if he knew her true goals.

The Plan and Jaune Arc were two mutually exclusive objectives.

A split path with two very different destinations... They couldn't be changed now, if she even wished to. Adam and the White Fang were in position, the virus was active - the military infiltrated. Everything was in position, the world would erupt in fire at her command. But it would also erupt without it... the chain of events had already begun. And there was still her master at the end of it.

She hated Jaune Arc.

He'd made things complicated.

Oh dear. Cinder has come to an epiphany of sorts, but oh so late... with only two days to the Festival, can anything be changed - and would she even wish to?

For those keeping track - and I realise that I forgot to say it - we're pretty much in the mid-point of Beat 5, essentially the last climax before the true climax of the story.

Next Chapter: 18 th July

P a treon . com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 15

Another week passes. I've made the garage into Fort Knox after the burglary of last time. Alarms, more CCTV, iron grates - two sets of windows, and then a metal mesh wire over the back of it all. For added oomph, I have also installed a speaker system that would let me talk to anyone who got inside. Not sure what my plan is for that though... mockery?

I was just buying stuff off ebay, okay - that "recommended" bar at the bottom can be weird sometimes, and I was determined to get everything.

Beta: *College Fool*

Chapter 15

Once more the crowd cheered as a fighter was knocked down, their aura dwindling down to critical levels. As the commentators announced the young man's defeat, the stands in the stadium howled with noise.

It was disgusting. Nothing more than braying animals screaming and shouting at the pure joy of seeing others fight for their amusement. Glory, fame, recognition - the most pathetic of things, hardly worth the pain, both physical and emotional. Were her goals not far above such petty desires, she would not have consented to be anywhere near this place.

How satisfying it would be when the cries of the crowd was turned upon them. They shouted for more fighting, for more blood. She would give them blood. She would give them so much more.

She smiled at the thought of how their cries would change.

"Team FNKI wins!" The fat oaf cheered into the microphone, driving the crowd into a frenzy as the four haggard and exhausted teens held their arms high. They seemed so proud of their accomplishment. As though knocking *children* around a stadium was some great task.

"Weird team," Mercury sniggered from beside her, tub of popcorn in hand. "Can you imagine having to dress like that?"

"I don't know," Emerald smirked, "I think I'd like you more if you fought with a trumpet. At least that way you wouldn't be able to speak." Mercury rolled his eyes but decided popcorn was more important than getting back at his partner. Instead Emerald turned to Cinder, "Are they anyone we should look out for?"

"No. They are inconsequential." She would throw them against RWBY or JNPR in the next round. It depended which team she felt would be better suited to face them. The only use for this unusual team was in being a stepping stone for another. The only teams that mattered were RWBY, JNPR, CFVY and their own.

Naturally, they had already dismantled their opponents. It had been more a chore to hold back, to drag the fight on so that they didn't draw undue attention. In the end their fight had been average in terms of length, though few could claim they had not been in command from the start. Aura was not something you could fake, after all. So she had made sure Mercury and Emerald knew they were to take a few hits, just for show.

The crowd had loved their fight... particularly her revealing choice of outfit. *Disgusting pigs...* She knew how they looked upon her. She had seen the people screaming in approval, spittle flying from their open mouths. It reminded her of the breach, as those fools called it, but also the way the civilians had fled in terror - leaving behind their own in desperate attempts to escape the Grimm. It was easy for them to scream insults at those who lost their bouts, from behind the safety of their little barriers.

"Our next fight," one of the two teachers announced, "is our very own Team JNPR of Beacon." He paused for a few cheers, "And facing them will be Team BRNZ of Shade Academy." The applause was quieter this time, though still there. Clearly the home team had the crowd advantage, what little it was worth. So much for international co-operation. This had turned into just another chance to show off. Typical.

Cinder sighed as she watched Jaune and his team walk out into the arena, turning in awe and wonder at the sight of so many people watching them. She stiffened when his eyes passed over her, but of course he didn't see her. She was but another face among thousands, and against the glare of cameras and lights he could likely see little.

"Think they'll... win?" Mercury spoke between swallowing some food. She rolled her eyes and stole a few kernels herself, making sure they were eaten before replying.

"They had better. This Shade team was the weakest I could give them." She'd even used the records of Beacon to set the Valkyrie girl up against an opponent best suited to her, though even that should have been unnecessary. Team JNPR were simply above them, in terms of skill and Semblance abilities.

And that was important, since they needed Miss Nikos to continue further into the competition. Unbidden, her eyes trailed back towards where Beacon lay. The Headmaster would no doubt be watching this... judging. *If you're still undecided on who should inherit dear Amber's powers, then allow me to help.*

Between the potential candidates, Nikos was the most obvious choice - and coincidentally - also the one she was best suited to fight. No metal weapons, no tools that the girl could turn against her. And in terms of raw ability, the fight was even more uneven. Championship fighter though she may have been, she would soon find that her true opponent operated in a different league.

Adel and Xiao-Long were different matters. Not that Cinder didn't believe she could kill them if she had to, they would fall like any other. It was just a matter of time and efficiency. No amount of research had managed to reveal Coco Adel's Semblance, if she even had one, and that uncertainty could prove problematic. She did hate surprises... and what if it turned out to be something uniquely defensive? Or something that allowed her to escape? That would be unacceptable. On the other hand, Xiao-Long's semblance was well-documented... but it was also trickier to deal with.

No, Cinder narrowed her eyes. It had to be Pyrrha Nikos.

Which quickly proved problematic...

"I gave up my self-respect for *this* ?" Mercury scoffed. "Talk about disappointing."

"No..." Cinder whispered, eyes wide. It wasn't possible... it certainly wasn't what was supposed to happen.

Team JNPR was losing the fight. Golden eyes widened as she watched Nikos be pushed back, double-teamed by two opponents as the sniper continued to keep Jaune and Lie Ren pinned. The final combatant had drawn Valkyrie into the trees, where their fight was obscured by thick foliage. The aura metres showed it was still an even fight. But the impetus was completely on the side of Team BRNZ, as impossible as that sounded.

"Pyrrha should be able to handle those two," Emerald's eyes narrowed. "She regularly fights four in training. What's she playing at?"

"She's worried for the other two," Cinder's answered. That *stupid* girl could not stop looking towards her damned leader and his teammate, her attention split between trying to help them and defend herself. This was why attachments were foolish... this was perfect evidence of the idiocy they turned people to.

"Why doesn't she just focus on her opponents then come save the other two after?" Mercury scowled.

Because she is an idealistic idiot, Cinder didn't say. Was it even necessary to say it? Nikos would allow herself to be pushed back, and even taken down, so long as it gave her a chance to help her stupid crush.

Cinder's face twisted as she looked towards the rock that Jaune was hidden behind. This was the man she considered most dangerous to her plans? It would have been laughable if she weren't so completely *disgusted*. Hiding behind a rock like a coward? He was better than that.

He was better than his opponents... she knew, because she had carefully selected them to be so.

Stop hiding, she willed her voice to him, even as her teeth ground together. *Get out there and fight!*

"His confidence is shot," Emerald's words caught her attention. "You said it was all a matter of mind when it came to him. I guess losing you robbed him of what little he had left."

"That fool." And of course, his indecision had spread to the rest of the team as well. If the leader did not lead, then what were those beneath him to do? It wouldn't matter so much in a team of people who were largely independent. In a way Team RWBY had the advantage there - as each of them happily fought without direct instruction. But Nikos was naturally obedient to Jaune, and the gunman was also the quiet type who would not make a move on his own. Valkyrie was the only one with any real initiative and she was already doing her job in keeping one of them busy.

Without Jaune's leadership, the *vaunted invincible girl* had become nothing more than a bumbling idiot.

How the mighty had fallen.

Could their plans be adapted if the team should fail? It might mean that Ozpin chose somebody else, which would mean the effort they had put into finding out Nikos' abilities was wasted. It would also mean they would need to find out who the new primary candidate was, which might take time... time they did not have.

If Ozpin switched it at the last second, if he chose someone she did not or could not predict... then they might lose their chance to track down Amber at all. They needed Pyrrha Nikos to be selected... because when the attack began, she *needed* to know who she could follow in order to find the Maiden.

"Emerald," The younger girl turned to her, but Cinder's blazing eyes remained fixed on the battle below. "Would you be able to reach the sniper with your Semblance?"

"I-" Emerald swallowed back her comment and concentrated, eyes narrowed. "I... I think I could, but it will be hard because of the treeline in the way. But if I use it here... don't you think it might be a bit suspicious if I use it so often?"

"You've already planned for it to be used twice after this," Mercury whispered. "People aren't going to believe one random person saying what they saw wasn't true, but if we do this *three* times?"

Cinder snarled but didn't respond. They were right, of course. What was that old saying, once an accident, twice careless, three times a pattern? Ozpin, blast him, might dismiss one petulant defeated teen complaining that something had influenced them, but if they then used it on Xiao-Long too?

It would not take a genius to start noticing similarities, especially with how paranoid the man was. If he had even the slightest inkling of foul play then he might change his choice just to throw her off. It was too much of a risk...

"Hold off," she bit the words out, getting nods from the two. Neo watched on in faint interest, though Cinder barely paid attention.

Emerald's Semblance was out then, too risky... too valuable. But that didn't change what *had* to happen. Team JNPR needed to win, which barring a miracle, looked unlikely.

She quickly drew out her scroll and activated the code that had been placed in the servers. It showed the remaining matches, but also the pre-determined selections should each team advance. Even if they did not expect to reach so far, each team had to submit their choices for the 2v2 and 1v1 sections. They had selected Jaune and Pyrrha, and then Pyrrha alone.

So Jaune would need to fight once more as well? What a disaster. They couldn't afford to use Emerald's Semblance a fourth time. Even an idiot could see the connection with Jaune's opponents hallucinating left, right and centre.

Her eyes dipped to her former lover, crouched behind a rock as withering fire peppered above. She knew he could lead the team to victory, if only he could muster the drive to try. Had their distance actually created this much of a mental block for him? It seemed absurd. Yet, at the same time, it seemed so very him. He was such a sentimental fool, a man who wore emotions on his sleeve. It would be just like him to wallow in depression and misery, wondering how things could have been different. Cinder growled. That stupid, brainless *fool* .

"Target him instead." Emerald's eyes widened.

"Arc!? You want me to make him believe she's stopped firing?"

"And have him run out into a hail of bullets?" Cinder snapped, "I'm sure *that* wouldn't look suspicious. No. I want you to inspire confidence in him." If that was his problem, then surely seeing something to bolster that would help? It was the best she could think of, short of sabotaging the match in a more obvious fashion.

She would, if she had to... but that was a last resort for sure.

"Inspire him? I-I don't know how! I need something to work with, an idea."

"Don't look at me," Mercury held his hands up. "I'm not one for all this friendly goody-goody stuff."

That was it!

"Use his friends," Cinder said, "convince him that he just so happened to look into the crowd and that, despite the odds of it, he met the eyes of Rose or Xiao-Long, or anyone - perhaps the Schnee - and that they say or do something to encourage him."

"R-Right," the girl sounded uncertain, but she would not argue against the task that had been set. Cinder bore the way the girl slumped slightly against her, keeping her eyes locked on the huddled figure down below. There was never any reaction from those Emerald entrapped in her illusions, or at least, no obvious reaction. That was what made the girl so invaluable. Jaune did not even look up from the ground, for Emerald could not force him to.

Instead she made *him* believe that he had looked up. That he had seen something that did not exist.

"It's done," red eyes snapped open, the girl's voice tinged with pain. "I... I think I've done everything I can. Whether it works though..."

"Is up to him," Cinder nodded. To let her plans rest on his shoulders... things certainly had taken a turn for the god-awful where he was concerned. But it was all or nothing. They couldn't fix this fight and then also his next, not while fixing Adel and Xiao-Long's as well. If he could not defeat these foes, then she didn't believe there would be anyone weak enough that she could give him in the doubles round.

Prove to me that you're not worthless, she thought, eyes locked onto him. *Prove to me that I did not waste my time with you, Jaune Arc.*

The change wasn't obvious. To the eyes of anyone watching it was just the blond man on his knees shouting something to his teammates. But to her experienced gaze she could see the way the black-haired boy straightened, not to mention how the tide of combat evened out between Nikos and her foes.

"Oh," one of the commentators said, "it looks like Team JNPR is trying something new."

"About time, Peter. I was getting more than a little tired of watching the same routine taking place over and over."

She wished those two buffoons would shut up so she could focus more on the fight. With a quick word to his teammate, Jaune had leaped from behind the cover of the rocks, taking shots across his shield and legs as he landed. His aura dipped, but as the crowd gasped, he was able to get into a defensive position and rush forward. Lie Ren ducked and weaved behind, using the boy in front as cover, even as Jaune tanked the shots. His shield couldn't cover them all, but he pushed through those that struck his unguarded legs through the sheer power of his aura.

He would be exhausted by the time he reached the sniper. She wouldn't be a helpless lamb either, for in the world of mecha-shift weaponry, even the most long-distance of combatants could hold their own in the swirl of melee.

But Jaune did not have to face her.

The crowd gasped as Jaune fell, but Cinder could only smile. His shield and fist slammed into the ground, bracing himself as his teammate sprinted and vaulted from his shoulders. Two more shots struck the kneeling man, whipping his head to the side. No more followed, the sniper forced to disengage as a hail of rounds from Lie Ren flushed her from cover.

The agile gunman was on her tail a second later, chasing her through trees and branches, hounding her steps.

"Not a bad plan for a guy who can barely fight." Mercury was dismissive as ever, though his words weren't strictly untrue. For all intents and purposes all Jaune had done was make a target of himself and allowed someone else to deal with the threat, but it was teamwork enough to please the Hunters watching. And brutal enough to please the crowds.

Everybody loved an underdog, it seemed. "It worked here," Emerald agreed, "but unless he shapes up for the next fight, I'm not sure we can expect a repeat performance. They're not going to be quite as easy."

That was true... and the next time he would not have the aid of his two teammates.

"What are relations like in Team JNPR at the moment?"

"Still awkward," Emerald said. "Lie blames himself for the breakup. Nikos and Arc are... they're on talking terms, but there's still an element of guilt getting in the way. Things aren't exactly great."

So their teamwork would still be shot... Emerald didn't have to finish that statement. In truth, it would have been a better choice for them to use Lie Ren and Nora Valkyrie for the doubles, though that would have ruined her plans. Even now, as Jaune tried to support his partner, their efforts felt uncoordinated and sluggish. She wondered if they even trained together anymore... or if her rooftop gambit had yielded unexpected results.

It was bad. No matter which way she looked at it.

That would be a problem she would have time to think on, however. For this match was beginning to wrap up, thankfully in their favour. *How amusing that once again it was you who came the closest to ruining my plans. I should have smothered you in your sleep.*

"Good work Emerald." Praise given where praise was due. The girl had performed admirably. "Hopefully he will take whomever

encouraged him on faith and not feel the need to dig deeper." Even if he did, she was sure he would eventually dismiss it as a trick of the light or his own imagination. Their secret would be safe.

"Uh... yeah..." Emerald glanced away with a nervous cough.

It was so un-Emerald, that she was not the only person to turn and stare at her. Even Neo had one brow raised, arms crossed.

"Emerald." Cinder sighed.

"I couldn't think of anything that would make him move," the green-haired girl defended. That she felt the need to at all had Cinder's eyes narrowed into slits.

"Explain."

"You said to have someone who would inspire him but... well, I didn't think anyone would work. He's been a little *bitch* since you and him came to an end. Just about everyone has tried getting him out of his funk and it didn't work then, so I didn't think it would work here either. There was only one person who could have actually made him move."

"Emerald..." Cinder sighed as she felt the headache coming. It didn't take a vast intellect to understand who she meant.

"In Em's defence," Mercury stepped in to shield the girl, "she's probably right. He's been inconsolable for over a week now, he wouldn't have been moved to fight just from his little buddies piping up."

"What did you have me say," Cinder rubbed her forehead.

"Nothing! Just... well, I had you mouth the word *fight* . And then when he didn't move, I had you look like you shouted it. I swear that was all!" Nervous and worried, she could feel Mercury and Emerald's gaze on her, even as she closed her eyes and let out a long sigh.

"I assume you believed it was the best option?" They would know, she supposed... since she hadn't spent more than twenty seconds around him for over a week now.

"The only option, or I wouldn't have done it," said Emerald. "All of his misery, all this lack of confidence. I figured since it was caused by his feelings for you, that you'd be the only person who could bring him out of it."

"It's not a big deal," said Mercury, though he did wince when she shot him a dark look. "Just say he imagined it if he asks. Or hell, tell him you need some time but didn't want him to lose. We can just stall until it's time to leave."

"And what of his next fight?" she asked. "What of when he and Nikos must face whatever team I can find for them? If their teamwork is still non-existent, then it will be the same problem all over again."

"Unless the reason for it is gone..." Emerald cringed at the look she received, but pushed on regardless. "Hear me out, please. I'm just saying that your plan to sow dissent in their team worked - but it worked too well. Maybe it's time to buoy him a little bit so he can actually win the fights?"

"You wish to suggest I start a relationship with him once more?"

Mercury scowled, "I don't think that's necessary, right? You could just say you want to be friends or something, he'd jump at it. Just dangle the possibility in front of his face, you know? He only needs to buck up for like a day or two. Then it won't even matter anymore."

That would make him more confident, wouldn't it? If she were in her right mind, if she were clear-headed and focused, then she would have taken him back into her bed already. His performance was needed, and thus she should do whatever she needed to acquire it. Feelings need not get involved. It was just another form of trickery.

Except that was if she *was* clear headed. Cinder Fall knew she wasn't.

"Funny." She said, "I seem to recall you both being against this course of action initially." It was quite the reversal from the two of them, who had so steadfastly rejected the idea at before. The two shared brief looks, but it was Mercury who spoke.

"That's because... well... we were worried, I guess. It was stupid of us, but we had this panicked idea of you getting involved and then calling everything off." He waved his hands before himself quickly, "But clearly that didn't happen - so we were pretty stupid to panic about it."

"Clearly..."

"What this oaf is trying to say," said Emerald, "is that we're behind you on this all the way. If you decide it's a good idea to lead the idiot on again, then we'll run with it. At the very least if Nikos *is* chosen, then he'd be one of the first to know."

"That is true..." the insipient girl told him just about everything. No doubt she'd leap at the opportunity to let him know if she were to inherit such powers. From there she could subtly weave her own webs, either encouraging or discouraging the girl as she saw fit. All through Jaune, of course.

There were so many reasons to agree to the idea... and only one reason to disagree.

But what a powerful reason it was.

Can I run away from this forever? Do I really want to? In less than three days' time this will all come crashing to an end. Would it be wrong of me to take what little pleasure there is left, before it is taken away forever?

It would be wrong. She knew that. It would be foolish and risky, yet not at the same time. The risk was not in the plan failing, it was already made. It was ready to go. No, the risk was in the pain that would come later when she had to go through with it. But that pain would come regardless, no matter her decision.

What was the point in lying about it? She had... *feelings* for the idiot. She did not know how, she wasn't even sure when - but somewhere along the way he had become more than just a tool. Pretending the problem was not there did not make it go away.

"I will consider our options," she said at last, as she rose from her seat in the stands. In the competitor's section, there were few other people - so no chance of having been overheard. But she needed some time to think for herself. Uncertainty was not a trait she was willing to share with those who served her. "Continue to gather information on the following fights."

"Yes ma'am," they said, with Neo nodding lazily.

She had a decision to make.

Nikos spotted her as she approached. It could have been a moment for yet another confrontation between the two, yet the redhead's face lit up. Strange how she could manage that smile, when even Cinder could see the burning envy in those emerald orbs.

"He said you cheered him on," the girl whispered. "I wasn't sure if he hadn't imagined it..."

"I did," she lied. "May I speak with him privately?"

"O-Of course," a flash of irritation, of jealousy, but quickly suppressed. The girl didn't like this, but she was willing to put up with it for his sake. Such foolish obsession, it made her weak.

It made Cinder weak too.

She found him inside, shirt divested but alone, skin still dripping from the shower he must have just left. She admired his back for a moment, the interplay of muscles working beneath the skin, the way the moisture changed its course as it rode across each. The desire to touch it was strong.

"R-Ren!?" He startled when her fingers brushed against his back, though the name he shouted in panic brought a tiny smirk to her lips.

"Not quite," she whispered back, tracing her fingers across his skin so that they wrapped beneath his arms, locking across the centre of his chest. Her breasts pushed against him, his warmth suffusing her body.

She could *feel* his heart skip a beat.

"Cinder!?" He gasped and tried to turn, but for her arms keeping him locked in place. Now here, with him so close, she wasn't sure what to do with him. She knew what she wanted; both in terms of their plans, and also in terms of what *she* desired. But for the first time in what must have been years, she was lost when it came to a means of achieving that end. It was not a good feeling.

She turned him round and pushed his chest, knocking him so that he sat back down on the wooden bench, her stood between his legs. She was taller than him now. An important point - she could speak from a position of power.

"Cinder I'm so sor-"

No. She wouldn't speak at all. And neither would he, as she captured his lips with hers. He tasted of sweat and salt, a little of blood too - but that only made her push harder. Words were what had landed them in this problem in the first place. She was a master of them and yet he had left her unravelled in too many ways.

Things had been easier when he did not speak, or rather, she did not listen. When he had been nothing more than an object for sexual

gratification. A mere toy.

She would make him that again.

He groaned when she broke free, though she kept her nose locked against his as she shrugged herself out of the coarse leather jacket. His hands flew to her sides instantly caressing her through the tight bandages around her midriff. His lips sought hers once more, biting and sucking on her lower lip as golden eyes drifted shut.

No! They snapped open once more, her hands pushing him back as she latched onto his throat with her teeth. He groaned but she paid it no mind, hands streaming across his chest as she worked her way down the lithe muscle. He was soft and warm, yet slick from the shower. She could see and feel raised welts, red marks from the fool who had shot at him.

She would die for that.

Her fingers worked furiously at the buckle to his jeans, tearing them open even as a hand latched into her raven tresses, dragging her lips back up to his. His other arm wrapped about her waist, pulling down her trousers as she wriggled her hips to aid him. He dragged her into his lap with an animalistic growl, eyes burning into hers.

Yes. This was what she wanted, this was how it was supposed to be. He was nothing more than a beast, nothing more than primal need and instinct in her hands. No feelings, no emotions, nothing more than raw desire and two burning bodies. She had control.

And she did. At least until he started to move against her. A gasp tore itself from her lips as his teeth fell to that spot on her neck. The juncture between her neck and collarbone, an erogenous zone she had never known existed, but one that he had clearly recalled. She whimpered as he bit and lick at it, even as his fingers delved past the waistband of her underwear.

She buried the gasp in his shoulder, her teeth biting down onto flesh as he tortured and teased her desperate flesh. The last vestiges of her clothing were torn away, and she was already so close when he finally drew her unto him - when he drew himself into her.

She screamed his name not a minute later. She muffled it into his neck, but there was no way he could have missed it. It drove him on, even as she clamped her legs around his waist. She could only pant in exhausted bliss as he brought himself to satisfaction after her, his hips thrusting long after her body had lost all motor control.

Had she still been capable of it... she couldn't help but feel there might have been tears prickling at the edges of her vision.

Even this, he would take away from her then? Was she to be left with nothing?

"I love you Cinder Fall," he whispered into her neck as his hands gently caressed her back. She kept her face pressed into his shoulder, golden eyes fixated behind and away from him. "And I'll never do anything to push you away again. I promise."

Her hands settled on the warm heat of his back. Even as her face pressed down into his skin.

She had never felt so sick in her life.

Oh dear. Part of me fears the last line might make people think she's sick of his words, but hopefully not. I considered changing it to be more obvious, but the impact of the final line would have been robbed a little.

They say that the moment at which you open yourself to another is when true love can be born, but I say that's also one of the most terrifying moments of a person's life. Cinder's final vestige of power over him has been taken away. The one place where she still felt he could be nothing more than a tool.

On her plans, I wanted to come up with specific reasons for why she did each thing in the show. It seemed odd for her to specifically choose CFVY to face, unless there was a reason she needed to ensure their loss. The same with the other people... So I came up with this little head-canon that she is doing it to try and force Ozpin's hand with the Maiden. Sure, he *may* have already made up his mind, but if Pyrrha were to utterly bomb out of the tournament, then it might be enough to make him change - especially if she lost to Yang or Coco, for instance. Others who he feels he could trust just as much as Pyrrha.

And, of course, Cinder *is* uniquely suited to face Pyrrha, with her complete lack of metal rendering her safe from Pyrrha's polarity.

Next Chapter: 1st August - Sorry about the mistake, I originally said 25th July, this was incorrect.

P a treon . com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 16

Oh Gosh, I think I've really done it... I have... planned the final chapters. We are reaching it ladies and gentlemen. We are truly reaching it. Goodness gracious. When I first started this pairing, it was pure crack. I think I love those pairings, since Blake and Jaune was pure crack when I started that too.

Perhaps because those stories have the potential to surprise us a lot more than others do. We all know how an Arkos will go, because in a lot of ways it will follow canon. The reasons for why Pyrrha likes him are established, and his in return. It can be "lovely" to read them. But it doesn't come with any surprise factor in a lot of cases. The same can be said about any common pairing in fiction, Naruto x Hinata, er... (gosh my limited anime knowledge) Eren x Mikasa? Basically common anime pairings, is what I'm getting at.

But pure crack? Man, those can be crazy. I still love my Sun Wukong x Weiss Schnee pairing from the Writer Games with College Fool. It was probably one of the favourite ones I wrote out. Because in a weird way, after thinking about it, I found a way to make it work and feel realistic and sweet. And that made me feel all gooey. Oh gods, I'm getting sentimental again because I nearly wept a little when I finished OGT and now this is going to come to an end too. xD

Beta: College Fool

Chapter 16

Cinder relaxed as the commentators called out her team's victory. Mercury and Emerald stood with their hands held high, basking in the praise showered upon them by the foolish crowd. Cinder's eyes

were focused on someone else however, namely the fallen form of Coco Adel. The girl lay unconscious on the ground, defeated with ease.

And another Maiden Candidate falls. That only left two that the Headmaster could realistically choose from.

"That was amazing," Jaune said from beside her, drawing her attention away from the fight. "Coco's pretty damn strong. I'm surprised they were able to deal with her so easily!"

"Mercury and Emerald are skilled," she smiled at his energy.

"I know but still, their teamwork was great. Makes mine and Pyrrha's look a little lax in comparison."

"And yet the two of you were still able to win your fight handily enough."

"Well I had to," he turned to touch her cheek, his own flushed, "I had someone cheering me on."

His lips sealed over hers a second later, golden eyes drifting shut as she surrendered herself to that sinful pleasure. Hard and unrelenting, he had an animalistic hunger to his kisses that she enjoyed more than she ought to. The hand on her cheek cupped her gently, before slowly gliding across the skin of her neck.

"That was particularly corny," she said as they parted. He laughed but wrapped an arm around her in response, pulling her against his side.

She allowed it.

A part of her knew she shouldn't. A part of her knew she should be fortifying herself against the oncoming pain, that she should build distance now so that the inevitable pain of his demise hurt less. That

would be the cold, logical choice... the choice she would have made not so long ago.

Instead, she leaned into his embrace. As easily as she had surrendered to his kiss a moment ago and his arms and touch the day before. She gave in like she'd been giving in ever since she met the fool. Or was it her that was the fool? The days ahead would be filled with pain, she knew that. Better perhaps to have her fill now. Better to grasp what pleasure there was, while it was available.

Before she lost the opportunity forever.

"You alright?" Had he noticed her mood? She could not tell. But she mustered a smile for his sake nonetheless. He was warm, soft and hard - all at once. Right now she was definitely alright. She just wasn't sure what it would be like afterwards.

"I'm fine. Just imagining how insufferable the two of them will be over this."

"Probably not as bad as me," he laughed - and she echoed it softly. He *had* been rather pleased with his victory, lifting her into the air and spinning her around once he reached them. Poor Emerald's eyes had nearly popped out of her skull.

Not that she'd been any better herself. When was the last time someone had ever done that to her? *Had* anyone ever done that before? That she'd accepted it so easily, that she'd shared in his excitement when he put her down... that said something.

"Who are you sending onto the next round?" He asked.

"Mercury, I should think."

"Is he the strongest on your team?"

"He is the best suited to the opponents ahead." Let him think on that what he would. She could have torn her way through any of them if

that had been her desire. If only their goal had been so simple as to win the tournament.

"We're sending Pyrrha. I thought about going myself but... well, this is bigger than just me. This is about giving JNPR the best chance. I can't do that."

"I think you made the right decision." She kissed the underside of his chin, where she could savour his distinctive taste. If he had chosen himself for the final bout... well, nothing would have changed. But there would have been so much more risk for him.

The same thought that had haunted her last night came back. Could she somehow let him live, could she arrange things in such a way that his survival - and his escape - were assured? It was a foolish notion, sentimental beyond belief, but she couldn't argue against the desire.

Sleep had not come easily... for even with the three hours it took, she had been unable to come up with a single scenario. If only he had been anyone else's partner, if only he hadn't been a Hunter at all.

If only I'd chosen someone else, all that time ago. If only I'd never met you at all.

"You two are so cute I want to be sick," a loud and boisterous voice rescued Cinder from her morbid thoughts. Yang Xiao-Long strolled up to them, looking none the worse for her close fight against the unusual pair from that other team. Their fight had been a spectacle, if nothing else. "Seriously, if this keeps on I think I might end up stealing your nickname."

"Ah," Jaune flushed, "You don't have to watch us..."

"You think anyone can miss the two of you making out like that? Damn Jaune, you even got Blakey a little hot under the collar."

"You didn't," said girl instantly replied. "Ignore Yang. Ruby let go of her leash."

"Can we help you?" Cinder asked, before they could launch into yet another conversation. She had such limited time left, she wanted to enjoy it. Jaune's arm tightened around her shoulder, as though somehow sensing her thoughts.

"We wanted to invite you to a little party we've got going on," the blonde said. "Yours and Vomit-boy's teams anyway. It was going to be used to commiserate Jaune for his loss, but hey - you managed to pull it off. I guess it can be a winner's party now."

"Funny Yang," Jaune rolled his eyes. "I'm sure Pyrrha and the others will be up for it. I'm game... you coming, Cinder?"

"I'd love to." It couldn't be further from the truth, but she had no choice. The final fights were taking place tomorrow, which meant that this might very well be her last night with him. She wasn't going to let than be wasted by refusing to attend this asinine little event. Even if it wasn't how she truly wanted to spend that time.

"Great. Starts at eight, I'm going to grab some supplies with Blake. Don't be late!" She wandered off with a quick wave over one shoulder. The black haired girl gave a more polite nod before following after.

"You want to go tell your team?" Jaune asked.

"I'll send them a message later," she shuffled over so that she was leaning even harder against him. "Let's... just stay like this for a little bit."

He pulled her close.

"Sure..."

"I can't believe we're going to something like this."

"If you do not want to come, then don't." Cinder seethed as she walked ahead of her two teammates. "Neo chose not to attend. It is not as though your presence is necessary."

"Not like there's much else to do," Mercury shrugged.

Then stop whining about it so much. Their constant complaints were fast eroding what little patience she had left. Well aware was she of how excited they were to leave this place, but that did not excuse them for causing more trouble for her.

She already wished she hadn't told them about this damned event. She could have claimed they were tired or didn't want to attend. It would have made life much easier.

"Just be on your best behaviour," she sighed instead. "The last thing we need at this point is either of you casting suspicion on us. Whatever you see, whatever you hear, keep your thoughts to yourselves."

"Yes ma'am," they both nodded.

What a hassle... at least she knew where Team RWBY's dorm was, after the last time she had been there. As evidence of their little get together there were one or two pieces of silly string hanging from the wood. But otherwise it looked the same as it always did. She knocked on it loudly, praying that they would not be the first ones to have arrived.

"Hi!" Ruby Rose greeted them as the door was wrenched open, the small girl's face bright with joy. "Yang said you would be coming but I didn't know - oh, this is going to be so awesome! Come in, come in. Make yourself at home!"

And how were they supposed to do that, when the room was so small? It seemed some God had been smiling down on her, because

Jaune's team had already arrived. But that made the room cramped enough with eight in it. Twelve only made the situation far worse, with people having to crowd onto mattresses and spare bits of floor.

"Thank you," Cinder said nonetheless, accepting a plastic cup of drink from the girl. She sniffed it gently, noting the acidic tang of alcohol, but no discernible poisons. Not that these idealistic people would ever consider such actions.

"Whoah, that's strong," Mercury barked and thumped his chest with one hand. "Where'd you get the vodka, kid?"

"Vod-?" the little girl's face matched her cloak in an instant, " *Yang!* What the heck did you put into the drinks? Oooh, dad is going to be so mad!"

"Do you see the horror I have to put up with?" Emerald whispered as she nodded towards the aggressive midget she had been forced to befriend. Said girl was busy telling off her sister, not that the blonde seemed to be bothered by it. Then again, judging by the red on her cheeks, Miss Xiao-Long had already gotten more than a little merry with the bottle.

Children never could handle their drink.

"Hey Cinder!" An arm wrapped around her waist and bodily pulled the woman from her feet. She landed on a firm lap with a gasp, two warm hands settling on her stomach. "I missed you!"

"I see you started without me," she said, mostly in reference to the alcohol she could smell on his breath. Oh dear...

"I've not had much."

She wasn't sure how far she believed that. Not if he'd had enough to give him the confidence to ambush her like that. Or have her sit in his lap in front of everyone else. Cinder shrugged. Well, if he wasn't bothered by such a display then that was fine by her. She leaned

back into his chest, sipping from her own cup. Mercury had been right, it was overly strong. The kind of strength that suggested the person making it was still inexperienced and had liberally sloshed the bottle rather than measured out the servings. It made her lips feel bitter, but the burning sensation in her throat was appreciated nonetheless.

Poor little Ruby Rose's face crinkled in disgust as she tried a bit. It was definitely too strong for those unused to it - even the smell was enough to have the Schnee heiress cringing.

"Winner's party!" Xiao-Long crowed. The intoxicated girl clambered atop a chair as she whooped and waved her arms through the air. Not a single person made to catch her as she fell. How early had the girl started?

"Well, it certainly looks like she is having fun," Cinder whispered to Jaune. His eyes were a little hazy, but not enough that they couldn't focus on her.

"I think she started right after they won their match. That's Yang for you. I'm surprised Blake didn't stop her."

"I tried." The quiet girl on the other side of the room apparently heard them, not that she looked up from her own drink.

"Ah... well," Jaune said, "either way, Yang is pretty much gone. I've only had a glass."

"I believe you," Cinder took another sip of her own. At least it was a decent brand and not some watered down trash the girl had picked from a corner store. This had the taste of something Junior might serve. "Are they always like this?"

"RWBY? Not drunk like this... but usually causing a mess, yeah. They've got a dog too but we put it in our room now. Didn't want it causing a scene or knocking stuff over."

"Hmm..." Cinder had never been one for events like this. Oh, she'd wined and dined with the best of them. Influential men and women she needed to impress, to sway over to her side. But that had always been dinner with intent, a goal to be achieved. This was nothing more than a gathering of teenagers. The rules were likely very different.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed little Nikos off to the side and nursing a drink of her own.

"Is there something wrong with your partner?" Cinder asked. Or was it just a case of the girl falling back into melodramatics over seeing Jaune and Cinder together? And here she thought the girl had gotten over that.

"I don't know." He sighed. "She's been out of it almost all day. She was fine yesterday when we got back together, and she was fine during our match too. I don't think it's anything about you." He rushed to add.

"It didn't even cross my mind."

"It's just... Pyrrha went off with Ozpin earlier. She won't tell any of us what it's about, but she's been miserable ever since. I heard her talking about responsibility earlier... or maybe duty."

Golden eyes narrowed on the girl, a delicious thrill making its way through Cinder's body. So Ozpin had chosen, had he? And just the person she wanted. It was nice when a plan came together. With this she might even be able to spare Xiao-Long.

No. They had already made plans for her, and candidate or not such negativity from the crowds would serve Cinder's purpose.

"I'm sure she will be fine," Cinder stroked the skin on the back of his arm, smiling as he shivered and tightened his hold on her. She could feel him stir beneath her, something hard pressing against her rear. "Perhaps she simply feels the pressure of this tournament. Maybe

the Headmaster impressed upon her the importance of winning for Beacon's sake."

"A little early to call that with Yang still in the running," he said. A second later he stuttered, eyes wide, "And Mercury too, of course. I mean he could tot-"

Cinder pressed a finger to his lips. "If Mercury ends up against Yang or Pyrrha, then I don't expect he will do very well. Don't apologise. As sad as it seems, I do not think my team will see the end of this tournament." She could enjoy her little joke there, though it didn't provide as much amusement as she thought it would. It was hard to bring up any motivation for it.

"Come on!" It seemed Xiao-Long was back on her feet again. "Let's play some video games - loser has to drink."

Cinder sighed. It was going to be a long night.

The party, though that word seemed tame compared to some of the event she had been to, lasted for a good three hours. Not much came of it in all truth. Xiao-Long had already been well on the way to passing out, and once her little sister had started to feel ill, things had started to wrap up. It turned out little Rose was one of those people who seemed to skip drunk and go all the way to being ill. The last she'd seen, the heiress had been holding her hair back over the toilet.

Mercury and Emerald had taken the chance to excuse themselves upon leaving the room, but Cinder chose to stay with Jaune. She'd teased him through the evening, naturally. Little touches and caresses. Carefully rubbing herself against his length whenever she felt him start to soften. She'd felt his frustration in every action, from how his hands gripped her tightly, to the way his breath came out against her ear in little groans.

But now he'd been distracted by his own little problem.

"Damn it Zwei," his voice came from inside JNPR's room. "Why didn't it go in the bathroom? My sheets are bright yellow now. Ren, grip the end, Nora you get the other..."

"Sounds like they're having fun," Pyrrha Nikos was the only person left out in the corridor with her. Likely because Jaune didn't wish to leave Cinder standing alone, nor did he wish to ask her help in dealing with the dog's little accident. She just wished he'd chosen someone other than his partner. "I can't say I expected this to happen when I heard about the party."

"I suppose not."

"I hear your team won their rounds in the 2v2. Are you not competing yourself?"

"Mercury and Emerald work well as a team. They are also into this kind of thing much more than I am."

"It was kind of you to let them compete then."

The sound of changing sheets from within the room echoed between them.

"I'm glad you got back together with Jaune."

Cinder turned to look at the woman, one brow raised. Nikos flushed and looked away, hiding her nerves behind a small cough.

"I still feel jealous of you." The girl continued, "Sometimes when you're holding hands or kissing it gets even worse, and I can't help but feel sick to my stomach." Pyrrha frowned and rubbed her face. "I know I shouldn't feel like this, but I can't stop."

What did the girl want her to say - that it was okay and she understood? Cinder had never been so forgiving, nor would she ever be.

"But at the same time," the redhead went on. "I feel so happy when you're around him, because he is happy too. He smiles and laughs more, he plays with Nora and jokes with Ren, he and I even train more." Nikos shook her head, and Cinder noticed a few stray droplets in the air. "Things are... things are different now, and I'm not sure whether it's good or bad."

"Nothing stays the same forever." Cinder said, more for want of anything to say at all.

"I know... I think that I wanted them to, with Jaune always being there and me never having to admit how I felt to him. But I was too slow to act and things changed. I don't think they will ever be the same again."

"And this makes you happy?"

"Happy and sad," the girl paused, "I don't even know. I'm sad because I missed out, but I've only got myself to blame for that. But I'm also really happy because things just feel better now. Jaune's the life and soul of the team, when he is in a good mood we all are. And yes, maybe he isn't with me like I always wanted him to be, but now the doubt is gone as well. I spent so long agonising and worrying over what would or wouldn't happen. Evening after evening I'd just lay there in my bed and dread another day in which I couldn't find the courage to tell him how I feel. And time and time again it would happen. I'd back out at the last second."

Cinder watched her, even as the girl wiped her eyes with the back of one hand.

"But I don't have that anymore. I've lost and I know I have. He chose you and he's happy with you... I don't want to get in the way of that. But now that the possibility is gone, now that I can stop living in fear over whether or not he'll reject me... I kind of feel more alive."

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say," Cinder said honestly. The girl was making no sense. How could she be both hurt and happy at the

same time? When had anger and joy been considered the same thing?

"Me neither," Pyrrha almost snickered. The alcohol must have been getting to her as well. "I guess what I'm trying to say is thank you, but also that I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being so jealous and cruel to you at first and I thank you for giving Jaune another chance, and for making out leader and friend happy." The girl took a deep breath and looked into Cinder's eyes. "I also wanted to ask for your forgiveness, if I can. I'm Jaune's partner, but you're something more than that. I... I was hoping we might become friends."

And there it was... as the girl held out one hand towards her. Cinder eyed it warily. She half-expected some kind of ambush or betrayal, but of course there was naught but honesty in those eyes. Nikos really wished to make peace with her, no doubt for Jaune's sake.

"You... wish us to be friends?"

"I wish to try. I know I've not been the best of people to you... and I know you have every reason to hate me. But I don't want to keep living in pain like this. Always wondering what if, always watching and asking if it'll ever be my turn. I've accepted that Jaune will never return my feelings. And now it seems foolish to be at war with you."

What an incredible girl... Cinder was unsure if that should be incredibly naïve or incredibly foolish, but the adjective was still there. *I suppose this is the difference between us, she thought - as she took the girl's hand in her own. You are willing to bend to the demands of others... while I will fight to the death to take what I desire.*

A shame that it would be the shortest friendship she had ever heard of. Although... if there had been time, Cinder felt that she might almost have come to respect this girl.

"Hey you two," Jaune stumbled out of the room with a strained grin. It became more natural once he noticed the two of them shaking

hands.

"How's the bed?" Cinder asked, letting go of Pyrrha and stepping back.

"Ah, the bed's fine but the sheets are ruined. I didn't know what I was expecting, but somehow the idea that Yang or Ruby of all people would have potty-trained their dog *does* sound a little ridiculous." He sighed and glared towards RWBY's door. "Last time I agree to do anything for Zwei."

Cinder's smile widened, as she stepped forward to pat his arm. "There, there. If you're down a place to sleep, then why not spend the night in my room?" They could celebrate the victory of their teams another way. Cinder would not let him escape this night.

"C-Can I?" Her eyes narrowed as she watched his body straighten, like a Beowulf that had just detected some prey. She liked that analogy, even if she was perhaps the brave Huntress, and he the poor, defenceless Grimm. "I mean... yes, please. I'd love to." Poor little Jaune, he always tried so hard. "Is that okay with you, Pyrrha?"

"Of course." To the girl's credit she did well at concealing the pain such a question must have caused. Cinder could see it, in those deep green eyes. But it was a valiant effort. "But you'll still come cheer me on tomorrow, right?"

"Well yeah!" Jaune rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to miss that! You need to show Team RWBY how JNPR fights. We all know it's going to be you and Yang in the finals. I need you to avenge my bed sheets!" Pyrrha burst into giggles at that, one hand over her mouth.

"I will reclaim the honour of my leader, don't worry Jaune. Have a good night, the both of you."

"You too," Jaune whispered, as his partner closed the door behind her. Cinder took the moment's distraction to send a quick message to her team. Warning them of the consequences should they not

vacate her room in the next five minutes. "Sorry about that, I guess it must have been pretty awkward."

"No such thing," she said. "Pyrrha and I were just talking. She wishes for us to be friends."

"S-She does? That's great!" He coughed and turned away, though not before she felt his fingers seek her own. She smiled and wound her own with his, feeling his warmth seep into her. Hand in hand, the two slowly strolled down the dark corridors. "I feel like I should apologise on her behalf. If I'd done more, then she wouldn't have acted like she did around you the first time."

"You should never apologise for the actions of others. You should only ever consider your own, and decide whether you are willing to go through with them."

"But it's true here, with Pyrrha." Jaune sighed and looked away. "I thought that I could ignore it, that maybe if I didn't say anything it would go away."

"Her behaviour?" She asked.

"Her feelings."

She spared a glance for him. So he knew how the woman felt, did he? Cinder was honestly a little surprised about that... since he had always acted like he didn't.

"I didn't know for sure until you arrived," he said. "I guess it became obvious when she started to be jealous and everything just sort of clicked into place. I could have saved her the agony if I'd just talked to her. I could have saved you the pain as well."

"Hindsight is 20-20."

"I don't think that was it though. I knew she'd be hurt if I told her that I didn't feel for her the way she wanted me to. I thought I was doing

her a favour by pretending not to see it, that she might never have to hear me reject her if she never asked. I thought I was being kind... but it turns out I just hurt her more."

"She is strong. Men and women throughout the ages have gone through this. She will get through it as well."

"I know." He sighed. "And I know she will get through this. That doesn't stop me feeling like an idiot though." They'd reached her rooms during their conversation, and she pushed the door open with one heel, stepping backwards through the portal and drawing him in with her.

"Then don't think about it," she whispered, as she kicked off her heels and pulled him by the hand towards her bed. His eyes roved over her figure. "Tonight, I want you only to think about me."

"That's all I think of." He pushed his way out of his jacket, arms wrapping around her body as she was pulled into his lips.

It seemed fitting... that it should end back where it had all begun, in this very bed, where she had taken him the first time. Back when things had been simpler... when he had been nothing but stress relief. If she could, would she go back to those times?

Cinder wasn't sure.

But what she was sure about was his touch upon her, the aching need she felt - and the heavy weight within her breast. She didn't want to think about that as much as he didn't want to think about his partner.

She kissed him harder than she ever had before. She kissed him over and over until he no longer tasted of alcohol, but of himself and a tinge of her. Even as he pushed her down and slowly began to slide her clothes off of her, she continued to kiss him. Rough kisses, soft kisses, kisses with tongue and teeth.

"Somebody's desperate," he whispered, but she silenced him with a growl and her hands drawing him in once more. Their lips didn't leave one another even as he shifted above her, even as one of his large, warm hands dipped beneath her knee and lifted her legs apart.

She groaned into his mouth as they became one.

Slow and sensual, she wrapped her legs about him and ran her hands across his lithe body, feeling every contour and ridge of his wide back. Her nails dipped and scratched, never deep enough to draw blood - but enough to make him shiver. She too shivered, in excitement and lust as he picked up his pace.

Her pleasure came like an avalanche. With barely the slightest warning her legs clamped about him, her muscle contracting as she buried her screams in his willing lips. He pushed her back into the mattress, his body hard and hot against her own fevered flesh. She could feel him reach his end within her as well, his body going stiff as he worshipped her.

"More," she whispered. His sapphire eyes widened, but she had no time to explain. With a shift, she was able to push him onto his back, her hand reaching down to align him as she forced him back inside. Her head rolled back as she rode him.

"C-Cinder," he managed to grit out. She didn't let him say anymore.

His second climax was muted, his body already spent even as she flopped down atop him. Her hands left his shoulders to clamp onto his cheeks, keeping him locked to her even as she tried to move her hips once more.

He rolled them over, so that she was held on her side, back against him.

"No more," he whispered into her ear, kissing it gently. "You're going to kill me." He sounded exhausted but amused, the staccato of his

breath against her ear showing that he was laughing silently.

"I don't want to stop. I don't want it to end here."

Soft lips touched the side of her neck, even as his warm hands came around her. One underneath her side, it came to rest on her stomach. The other wrapped around her from above, coming to a rest gently cupping her left breast, directly over her heart.

"It won't end here," he said. Cinder's eyes closed, so that the only thing she could feel was his arms on her, his scent, and the sound of his voice. "I'll still be here in the morning." He kissed her neck. "And then I'll be here in the evening," her ear, "and then I'll be here the following morning."

He finally leaned over to kiss her lips.

"I'm never going to stop loving you."

She was glad for his arms around her... and for his body so hot against her back. For without them, she would have shivered at the bitter cold that settled upon her. There would be no more mornings after tomorrow, and no evenings after this moment.

This was their last night together.

It didn't seem fair that it had ended so soon.

Or that it had ended at all.

Wow... talk about a paradigm shift if we compare her to the early chapters of this. Cinder has really come a long way, though whether she would have wanted to is another matter entirely. I think it was in OGT that I said love can be terrifying because it causes great upheaval. What were the words I had Nicholas Arc speak?

"There's this moment, when you find that you're falling in love. It should be the most joyous moment and actually... it's not. It's the moment where everything is turned on its head, where another's happiness becomes more important than your own, where all your priorities are upset.

It's the moment where your world ceases to make sense anymore, because all your dreams have been replaced with new ones, and suddenly you don't want the world. You just want the right to deserve them - nay, just the chance to deserve them. And it's frightening too - to know that so much of you depends on them, that their words can hurt you more than anything a Beowolf can do. No one falls in love gracefully Jaune, no one."

I feel like I'm sticking to that a lot, but it's my own personal view on those emotions. Living alone is easy. It's painful, cold and lonely - but it's easy. Loving someone is where things get hard.

Next Chapter: 15 th August

P a treon . com (slash) Coeur

When this fic ends, another romance fic will replace it. Currently it's either going to be straight into the Yang x Jaune, or it might be a short (probably 7 chapters max) Arkos. Undecided as of yet.

Chapter 17

Some events and timeframes are a little altered here, just for reference. All I mean is the time between the Mercury x Yang fight and the Pyrrha x Penny one. Since they are both semi-finals, it would suggest to me that they happened on the same day. I think in the show that there was quite some time between them, but well... that was all from Yang's PoV, which kind of wouldn't make sense to use here.

I don't think it should negatively affect anything.

Beta: College Fool

Cover Art: Rachel Marks

Chapter 17

For the first time in the entire tournament the crowd was silent. Cinder hid her smile, even as she could hear the baited breath from those around her, the whispered mutterings that punctuated the agonised cries of her teammate.

Yang Xiao-Long had struck down an unarmed and defeated man. One who had done nothing more than try and congratulate his opponent on her win.

"Shut down the broadcast!" Cinder heard one of the commentators say. How like them to try and hide the truth. But the damage had already been done. There was not a person in Vale - or beyond - that was not at least paying some attention to the tournament. Those who missed this would surely see it in the news in coming days. Well... they would have, if the news wasn't to be overtaken by something much more dramatic.

Cinder crossed her legs and waited. Until, like a volcano erupting, the crowd finally burst into boo's and shouting, hurling abuse - and in some cases actual cans - towards the confused blonde.

And then there was only one.

"It can't-" Jaune shot to his feet, though it was clear he had no idea what to do. "Yang wouldn't..." He looked agonised and stricken, uncertain who he should trust. Cinder patted his arm gently, even as she noted the absence of Neo and Emerald, who had no doubt gone to ensure they were in the ambulance that would pick up Mercury. It would have been her, except that she had explained how she wished to stay close to Jaune - *just in case* something happened.

Cinder wasn't sure how they believed her, but by this point she no longer cared.

"T-There will be a three hour intermission before the next fight," one of the commentators shakily reported. "Until then we encourage all people to enjoy the festivities and amenities of the Amity Colosseum."

"I need to go make sure Mercury is alright," Cinder said, touching Jaune's elbow so that he didn't think she was angry at him. Jaune looked between her and his team, who had already moved to see Yang. "Go with them," she said. "I will meet up with you before the next bout, I promise." She leaned forward to plant a small kiss on his lips. Her body ached for more but she pulled back with a sigh.

He couldn't be privy to her conversation with Mercury and the others.

"Give Mercury my well wishes," Jaune said, "and... and tell him I'm sorry for what Yang did."

Cinder nodded and went the other way as Jaune left with his team. She wished she could watch the interrogation of Xiao-Long, but such pleasures weren't to be. Thankfully, it only took her twenty minutes or so to find the small medical tent that her team had set up in. The

ambulance was nowhere to be seen, doubtless disposed of and any witnesses as well.

Emerald and Neo knew their tasks, and were more than willing to get their hands dirty should they need to.

"Ma'am," Emerald greeted as Cinder pushed the flap aside and entered. Mercury had his lower half beneath the covers of some white sheets. It was a little incongruous considering how his face was the abject image of boredom.

"Good work, all of you," Cinder said. "I take it there were no complications with the medical staff?"

"I'm sure someone will notice the missing drivers in time," Emerald said, "but we hid the bodies. I doubt it'll matter once the show gets underway."

"And dear Mercury's injury?"

"A doctor from Vale came in to check on him. I made sure he saw nothing more than normal flesh and a broken bone." Emerald held up a small clipboard with details of Mercury's injury on it. Proof enough should anyone ask.

"Well done Emerald," Cinder nodded, "and you too Mercury. Jaune sends his love."

"Feh," the young man didn't look particularly impressed. "Can't wait to get this all over with. You mind if I take out Arc? Got more than enough pent-up frustration after having to throw those fights against him."

"Do as you wish."

He would not have the opportunity to kill Jaune. Cinder would do that first. She owed it to the man she-... the man who loved her. If

Mercury so much as tried he would discover the true meaning of the word pain.

"Just remember the plan," she went on. "I'm going to stick with Jaune, and by extension Miss Nikos, when the plan goes through. For all intents and purposes you will be on your own." And didn't that suggest a certain trust she had in the two of them. It was mere suggestion, however. Hence the glare she fixed on the two teens. "You *will* complete the objectives I set for you. Do *not* deviate from the plan."

"We won't, we won't..." Mercury waved his arms, while Emerald nodded quickly.

"It won't be a problem," the girl assured. "We just have to video things and stay out of trouble. It's not like we're going to be attacked. Not unless any Grimm spot us and we can handle those easily enough."

"And you Neo?" Cinder asked, turning to the silent girl. "You will complete your part of the plan?"

She nodded eagerly, and for once Cinder did not doubt her. What hold Roman had on the girl, Cinder did not know. But she was quite certain no soldier of Atlas would be able to stand in her way. All that was needed from there was for Roman to do his part. Something that should not have been too difficult.

Everything was coming together... it was finally happening. Cinder should have been happy.

She felt empty.

There was a knock on the wooden frame that surrounded the tent entrance. The four of them went silent as a figure ducked their way through. So close, it was hard for Cinder to resist the urge to smile victoriously.

"Good morning," General James Ironwood nodded to them all. Two soldiers flanked on either side of him, though they waited by the entrance. "I hope I have not interrupted."

"Not at all, sir," Cinder smiled at him. "We were just visiting our team mate to make sure he was okay. Forgive us if we were not meant to be here. We were worried."

"Understandable. I hold no ill will for you wishing to check up on him. Are you alright young man?"

Mercury shifted beneath the covers, "Yeah, I'm not so bad. They pumped me full of pain killers so it doesn't hurt so much anymore. Feh, I should have been able to dodge something like that. *Would* have been able to, if I'd been prepared."

Mercury played the part of arrogant teen caught off guard quite well. Likely because that was just what he was.

"I don't think any of us expected that," the General sighed. "And for that, I apologise. Such a sight is not something we wish to have seen, and I cannot imagine how frustrating it must be for you. Rest assured I will be speaking with the perpetrator after this conversation."

"What's going to happen to her?" Emerald asked.

"Disqualification at the very least, though expulsion might be a very real possibility. There's no excuse for such behaviour for anyone, but even less so for someone who represents Hunters and Huntresses. Miss Xiao-Long's actions were reprehensible."

Oh dear, it looked like the young lady was going to be in a world of trouble. Now Cinder really wished she could watch the resulting fireworks.

"I wished to talk to you about what is to come," the older man went on. "With Miss Xiao-Long's disqualification this actually means that

your team was declared victorious. While I understand that Mr Black is no longer able to fight, it would be allowed for one of your other teammates to take your place. You would receive a by straight into the finals."

Mercury and Emerald looked to her for guidance, as did the General for an answer. A straight route into the finals was a generous offer, not that those would even happen. In that, she supposed it was a no brainer.

"Thank you," Cinder said. "Mercury was the strongest of us, but I suppose I can enter the finals."

General Ironwood nodded and with a quick set of well wishes to Mercury, made his way out of the tent. *Good luck Miss Xiao-Long*, Cinder thought to herself in amusement.

"Shame we're not staying for the finals," Mercury said once they were alone. "Since we know Nikos is going to win the semi's, you could have used that opportunity to kill her. Make it look like an accident or something."

"The thought did cross my mind," Cinder admitted. "But Adam and his friends are already in position. I do not believe it best to change their instructions at this stage." Not when they had been collecting Grimm for the past few days. Capturing live Grimm was a dangerous task, containing them even more so.

Perhaps her master could have helped there, but Cinder did not wish the White Fang to see Cinder actually appearing to be in command of any Grimm. They were terrorists and fools, but not so stupid as to side with someone that represented the hatred of all human life. The silly little animals truly believed they were doing what was best for their people.

How cute.

"Heh," Mercury chuckled. "Guess not. You don't confuse a dog by giving it more than one command. I guess I'm stuck here for the next few hours?"

"It would be suspicious if you were up and about so quickly," Cinder agreed. "Have a small nap for now. Emerald will collect you once Miss Nikos' little display is finished."

"Where will you be until then?" Emerald asked, right as Cinder reached the flap of the small tent.

"I will be where I can do the most harm," Cinder didn't smile, nor did she turn to look at them. "Among the enemy."

"Yang's been disqualified," Jaune sighed as Cinder found him outside his room. The rest of his team stood nearby, though none would meet her eyes. The door to RWBY's dorm was shut. No doubt they were less than interested in visitors now.

"I know," Jaune looked at her with confusion. "The General came to meet with us first. He explained that she would be disqualified, perhaps even expelled." Team JNPR's eyes went wide. "Naturally we requested some degree of clemency for her."

"That was kind of you," Pyrrha said. "Fortunately he seems to have taken your request to heart. Yang is to be punished but not kicked out of Beacon."

Hm, it was a shame she hadn't been expelled, though it wouldn't affect their plan any. Golden eyes widened as she felt two arms wrap around her waist, drawing her into a warm chest. Jaune's chin nestled against the top of her head, even as she allowed herself to relax into him.

"Thank you for asking," Jaune whispered into her hair. "Yang's our friend, even if she did something like this."

A kinder person would have felt guilty for the lie. Cinder simply enjoyed the sensation, trying to catalogue it away in the back of her mind. She wanted to be able to remember this feeling. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, smelling his familiar scent. It almost felt like she could smell a little of herself on him. That seemed fitting.

"It's not a problem." Less than a month ago she would have glowered at her words being muffled into his chest, but now she couldn't care less. "Yang's behaviour was unusual. I don't think she would normally have attacked Mercury so."

"Our thoughts exactly," Pyrrha sighed. "Yang claims that she saw your teammate attacking her, that she acted in self-defence." The redhead's silence said what she thought of that. "I don't want to believe that she would lie to us."

"Perhaps she is not," Cinder offered. Whether they trusted Xiao-Long or not was immaterial, literally unimportant in the grand scheme of things. But if support of the blonde girl was enough to draw a reaction from Jaune then she would do it. His world would be turned upside down so soon... it would not kill her to make his last hours on Remnant kinder. "People see things in the heat of battle, and we have all heard her team refer to Yang as something of a berserker. Perhaps she thought she saw something, maybe she was running on adrenaline. It does not absolve her of guilt, but it's possible she did not act in malice."

Cinder felt Jaune's arms relax. It was a little paradoxical, how his muscles relaxed yet he held her tighter, but there was a certain tension that seeped out of him. The others seemed to be affected too, looking a little more cheered. Truly, cheering people up and destroying them was practically the same thing. It was just a matter of knowing what to say and when.

"Maybe you're right," the redheaded girl smiled. "It doesn't excuse her, but it doesn't condemn her either. At the end of the day Yang is still Yang. We all make mistakes."

"No harm was done on our end," Cinder added. "Mercury will recover soon enough and the General has offered me the chance of fighting in the finals."

"Then we might be facing off against one another." Pyrrha looked perturbed at the idea, and Cinder could imagine why. The two of them had not had the greatest of relationships in the past weeks. They had made some kind of peace, but there was no doubt some lingering jealousy that the girl was furiously trying to stomp down.

To her credit Pyrrha did a good job of it, she doubted Jaune could even sense it. But Cinder was sure some might come out in the unrestricted competition of a fight. It looked like the girl was genuinely worried that she would regress and try to take out some of her jealousy on Cinder.

Well... it might have, if the fight were to actually occur.

"Do your best," Cinder said into her lover's chest. "I am not afraid to be defeated if it comes to it. Just do not break my leg if I try to shake your hand afterwards."

"I won't," Pyrrha chuckled. "I would never do that to a friend."

A friend... Cinder wanted to laugh, though she wasn't sure if it would have been in amusement or something altogether more hysterical. How her plan had changed over the past weeks, how *everything* had changed. She had hated Pyrrha Nikos. Hated her for having power over Jaune, hated her for interfering, hated her for driving home Cinder's feelings before even she was ready to admit them.

She hated Pyrrha now as well. Hated that she could be a normal girl who could afford to fall in love and enter petty relationships. Hated that the girl had everything Cinder Fall did not.

"Friends," Cinder agreed, stepping away from Jaune to shake the other woman's hand. If the redhead felt how clammy her own were,

then she didn't mention it. Maybe she thought it just fear for the fight that might happen.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was Jaune's expression as the two most important women in his life shook hands.

He looked so happy.

"The last match of the semi-finals," the overweight professor called into the microphone, "From Beacon, Pyrrha Nikos!" The crowd went wild, many no doubt recognising her. She was a firm tournament favourite and it was no lie to say people likely had money riding on her. "And facing off against her will be Penny Polendina of Atlas Academy!" More cheers, some shouts and chants from the Atlas contingents.

Cinder caught Emerald's eye several rows down, by the exits from the bleachers. The red-eyed girl nodded back, signalling that she was ready and prepared. Emerald was alone. Mercury was waiting in the tent, by this point Neo would have already infiltrated Atlas' flagship. It was the moment of no return.

Cinder felt her hand touch Jaune's, their fingers intertwining as she closed her eyes.

"Go Pyrrha!" Jaune shouted, and Cinder managed a faint smile when he asked her something. She didn't hear what. The only thing she could hear was the sound of roaring in her ears. The crowd's, Grimm - or her own mind. She did not know.

She clutched his hand tighter. So tight that her knuckles went white.

"What's wrong?" he asked, face full of concern.

"Nothing," she said. After a moment's pause she even leaned in and kissed him. He looked confused as she pulled back, so she did it again, running her tongue across his. She wanted to do it a third

time, a fourth... Instead she forced herself to lean back and watch the fight that was about to begin. She could still taste him.

"Let the fight begin!" The crowd roared, made even louder as the two fighters rushed into combat. Steel clashed, red hair flew, as both combatants sought to gain whatever advantage they could. At any other time Cinder would have paid more attention to it, but the spectacle was utterly boring to her. Jaune shouted his support, cheering one second then wincing the next, gasps and sighs of relief as his partner got into and out of trouble. The rest of his team were very much the same. She had not seen hide nor hair of Team RWBY. Perhaps they were still upset about their disqualification, or maybe they were in hiding back at Beacon.

It didn't matter. All the players she needed were in their positions. It was time for the game to begin. Unbidden, Cinder's golden eyes glanced in the direction of Beacon, which was far down below. She could imagine Ozpin, sat in his tower, ready to make his move.

Cinder made hers first.

"No!" A voice screamed in pure grief. Cinder imagined it was little Ruby Rose, though such a voice would have been lost among the thousands who shouted the same. Jaune cried out in shock, people stormed to their feet. Pyrrha Nikos looked confused.

As the remains of her opponent rained down around her.

And with this I call check, Ozpin.

"Cut the feeds, get someone out there!" The screens around the stadium flickered off for a moment, before coming back on under her control. The pre-recorded message she had created earlier began to play, even as people recoiled and looked around in fear.

"What's happening?" Jaune gasped. He reached for a weapon that was not there, before cursing and looking down to his partner. Even

with the fear and uncertainty in the arena, people still booed and hissed at her.

The poor girl looked lost and alone, adrift in a sea of condemnation. Pyrrha had likely never experienced that kind of hate, not with how famous she was. There were thousands in those stands, shouting their displeasure, hurling abuse. It was enough to drive the girl to her knees.

It was enough to draw the attention of more than just a single girl, however.

"Nevermore!" Jaune cried, and the shout was taken up in earnest as an avian Grimm slammed down towards the crowd. Civilians screamed and fled, even as the barrier protected them from its murderous claws. With the panic and fear, it was inevitable that some would be killed in the stampede, knocked down and crushed underfoot not by Grimm but by their own kind.

Cinder rose calmly beside Jaune, already missing the warmth of his hand on hers. She felt cold and nauseous, lethargic too. From the corner of one eye she caught sight of Emerald fleeing the arena. The plan was underway.

"It's going to break through the barrier!" Someone screamed. More Grimm were appearing now, Gryphons and Nevermore, she could even hear the roars of Beowolves. By this point the authorities had to expect foul play, how else could such Grimm have reached a flying stadium?

The Atlesian soldiers on the border of Vale would already be dead, the White Fang streaming into the city with the goal of causing as much chaos and carnage as they could. The resulting negativity would draw more Grimm, whipping them into a fury that could not be contained - creating even *more* fear.

The cycle would continue forever.

It would never end.

"Pyrrha!" Jaune screamed. The barrier shattered like glass, the initial Nevermore breaking through and sweeping over the crowd. With an explosion of dust and concrete it settled in the middle of the arena, screaming its anger towards the sky. That it had targeted Pyrrha over thousands of terrified civilians. How much despair must the girl have felt? "We have to get down there," Jaune shouted, "call your lockers!"

He wasn't the only one brave enough to move. She could see students and Hunters in the crowd, bastions of solidarity in the panicked frenzy, standing like rocks in a raging river. The younger ones struggled against the press, trying to reach the arena to fight whatever Grimm came through. If everyone could have been like them then perhaps this would never have happened.

It was too late to change anything, however. The screams and roars told her that.

"Cinder, I-" Jaune tried to speak but she pressed a finger to his lips.

"Of course I will help," she said, "and unlike you, I am not unarmed right now." She held up one fist as indication. He believed she was a martial artist. Jaune nodded and vaulted over the barrier that separated the crowds from combatants. The barrier let him through with ease. Perhaps it had already fallen.

She watched his teammates leap after him, unarmed but not daunted. They would give their lives to defend their teammate, if little Ruby Rose wasn't doing that already. It was all so very foolish...

Cinder Fall leapt after them, prepared to do her part.

She was hardly needed. Ruby held the beast's attention long enough for the lockers to arrive, relegating Cinder to helping the fallen girl to her feet as the others dealt with the Grimm. Pyrrha's green eyes

were hazy and wet, her fingers clinging to Cinder's arm as though silently begging her not to let go.

"Everyone..." Pyrrha whispered.

"You think we were going to let you fight on your own?" Jaune laughed. The others all closed ranks, forming a rough circle with the redhead at the centre. More Grimm had worked their way into the arena and were circling above them. Cinder sighed. Gryphons could be a complication for even the most seasoned of Hunters. She could handle them if she had to, but that might end up revealing more than she cared to.

"Students," her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of the idiot duo from the booth. Cinder remained silent as the teens expressed their relief at seeing the two. "Leave the situation here to the professionals," the fat oaf laughed. "You should all return to Beacon and see what you can do there."

"Will you be okay?" Ruby Rose asked. The question prompted a loud laugh from the professor.

"Why my lass, this won't even be a challenge for one such as myself. Go now. There are others who might actually need your help."

They all nodded and made to leave, even as Cinder spared one final glance for the two. There was a very real possibility they would die there, not that it bothered her. Back to back, like fools until the end. It was honestly all so tiresome. She felt exhausted and she hadn't even done anything yet.

It would be good to get this over with once and for all.

"What the hell...?" Lie Ren said it better than anyone else, as they stepped out of the Bullhead and looked at the fight taking place in the courtyard of Beacon Academy. Grimm crashed on waves of Atlesian soldiers, who appeared to be fighting their own robots at the

same time. In the distance Cinder could also make out the distinctive shapes of White Fang masks. Well, it certainly looked like Adam had upheld his end of the bargain. Roman too, if the Paladins were anything to look at. She would trust him to deal with Ruby Rose, who had rushed off to stop him. There was no way Neo would lose to such a girl.

"Defend the school," Coco Adel snarled, deploying her weapon and jogging forward. "If the robots are against us then destroy them too!" Atlas vs atlas, atlas vs students, Vale vs Atlas... Cinder certainly hoped Mercury and Emerald were catching some good footage of all this. The other Kingdoms would not know what to make of it. Except that Atlas was firmly at fault.

Jaune cut through the first robot to stand in his way, while Cinder drove an elbow into the visor of another, crushing its face. For all Atlas' talk of advanced technology and AI, the robots were surprisingly slow and cumbersome, though that was not their true strength so much as numbers. It didn't matter either way. The virus they had uploaded would identify all people wearing White Fang masks, along with Cinder, and her fellows as allies.

No one seemed to notice as they fought, that not a single shot went her way.

A hail of bullets forced them all back, ducking behind cover as the remaining soldiers of Atlas took careful aim. The soldiers were trained, and the white automatons lacked aura, so their shots were able to destroy them where they struck. The numbers were just too vast, however.

"Can't you shut them down?" Jaune shouted to a nearby soldier.

"No. They're not taking any commands - they're acting completely against orders!"

"Jaune, Pyrrha!" A panting figure rushed up to them, white clothing stained with grime. "Where's Ruby?" Weiss Schnee asked.

"She went to board the battleship," Jaune pointed to the main one, even as Weiss cursed angrily. "Where are Blake and Yang?"

"Around," the Schnee answered. "They're dealing with problems elsewhere. Look, we don't have time. The Headmaster is asking for Pyrrha."

Pyrrha and Jaune shared a look, one that Cinder did not fail to notice. She took the chance to sidle a little closer to them, taking a defensive position with her back to Jaune's. It covered him more than he realised, since not a single robot would take a shot at her. From the corner of her eye she saw Headmaster Ozpin, stood alone by the entrance to the academy. Pyrrha swallowed, the sound loud even in the carnage around them. "I understand," she said woodenly.

"Well I don't," Jaune growled, "what are you talking about, why does Pyrrha have to go with Ozpin - what's *happening* ?"

"I can't explain here," the redhead sighed. "Come with me though. Please..."

"And myself?" Cinder asked, more to remind the duo of her presence than anything else. She would be following them, of course. The question was whether she would do that with or without their knowledge.

"Come as well," Pyrrha said. "But hurry please, there's no time to waste." Jaune turned to Cinder, then back to Pyrrha, then finally to Weiss Schnee.

"We'll be fine," the white-haired girl said. "We can handle things here."

They could not, Cinder realised. But perhaps they were waiting for a weapon to be unleashed in their defence. If Pyrrha gained the power from the Fall Maiden then she would be more than enough to defend them. She could even push the Grimm back and save all of Beacon.

Cinder could enable that, should she wish.

"Miss Nikos," the headmaster nodded as they rushed up to him, his eyes lingering on Cinder for a second. "And Mr Arc... I am not familiar with your friend, however."

"She's from Haven," Pyrrha shook her head. "I trust her. Headmaster please, I'm ready to go ahead with this."

"I am glad," the man said, "Follow me."

He didn't wait for a response, but rather turned and strode away, the three of them in tow. Pyrrha's word seemed to count enough for her presence, which was foolish. Ozpin was no doubt desperate, making mistakes that he would not normally make. It was hard to think rationally when those you cared about were in danger.

Cinder knew what that felt like. Or rather, she did now.

"The process is ready to be undertaken," he explained as the elevator they had entered silently descended. "We've done every test we can and this should be successful. I do not foresee any complications."

"Would someone care to explain this?" Jaune asked.

Pyrrha glanced away, while the headmaster didn't answer.

"It will be fine," Pyrrha said at last, turning back with a forced smile. "There's a procedure I can undergo here. It will make me more powerful. Powerful enough to push back the Grimm."

"Well that's great!" Jaune laughed. "What's the problem?"

To her surprise, Cinder found herself answering. "Such gifts do not come without costs. Nothing is ever gained for free."

"Indeed," the headmaster nodded. "Miss Nikos is going to have the abilities of someone else transferred into her. There is no telling what

merging one person's aura with another will do. It will not be dangerous in the physical sense, but there is a chance that Miss Nikos' thoughts and memories might be altered."

"Altered?" Jaune sounded uncertain.

"We don't know what it will do Jaune," his partner took his hand in her own. She looked agonised. "I might come out perfectly fine, I might not. I *want* to still by Pyrrha though, so please if something does happen, help me remember who I am."

"I-I don't understand," Jaune stammered. "But I promise... I won't let you forget. You'll help as well, right Cinder?"

Cinder sighed as they turned to her.

"Don't worry," Cinder said after a moment's thought. "I will not allow this to change you."

The elevator doors opened with a quiet ding, revealing an arched hallway with green tinted walls. Pyrrha and Ozpin rushed out into it, while Jaune hesitated. Cinder noticed, even if the other two did not. She should have chased after the objective, but instead she paused too. To make sure he was alright.

"This..." Jaune sighed, "I don't know how to say this, but I'm sorry for getting you mixed up in all this."

"What do you mean?" Cinder frowned, unsure where he was going.

"You just came here for the festival," he sighed. "And now we've been invaded by Grimm and you're trapped here. I just can't help but think life would have been a lot easier for you if you had stayed in Mistral."

Yes, it would have been.

"I don't regret any of this," she said, and to her surprise Cinder realised she meant it. With a sad little smile she stepped forward to

kiss him once more, sensually and softly. Not like the hungry ones from days before. This one lasted for far longer, during which her arms wound their way around his neck. His came to rest on the back of her waist. "I'm sorry about everything that has happened."

"Why are you sorry?" he chuckled sadly, "It's not your fault."

Cinder pulled back a little, though not out of his arms completely. With hers around his neck and his around her waist, she looked into his deep, blue eyes. There was no doubt in them, no suspicion. He looked at her with nothing less than love.

"Of course..." She smiled. "Forget I said anything."

"Mr Arc!" Ozpin's voice echoed down the hallway. Jaune let go of her first, though she reluctantly removed her arms when it was clear their time was over. Cinder tried to muster a smile, but it came out ill and sickly. She almost wanted to reach out and snag his arm as he rushed away, but instead she could only chase after him.

It didn't take them long to catch up with the other two, even as the strange machine was revealed. Pyrrha was already climbing into one of the tubes, while a comatose body occupied the other. The headmaster was busy working on the machine itself.

Hello Amber, Cinder thought as she looked at the girl. *We meet once more.*

"Guard Miss Nikos," the headmaster said distractedly, fiddling with various dials and buttons as the glass contained closed with a hiss. "The process is self-contained. It should not take long."

True to his words, the machine whirred to life, humming and glowing as some archaic mechanism began to extraction process. Cinder could afford to marvel at such technology, as cruel as it was. For what reason Atlas developed such a thing she would never know, though it could only be used for purposes as illicit as her own. Just

more proof of the world's cruelty. It had existed before Cinder Fall, and would continue after.

Pyrrha gasped as her chamber lit up, Jaune's hands slamming onto the glass as he called out to her. Cinder had no idea if the girl could hear her partner's words, but the redhead's hand met Jaune's. In the other pod, Cinder could see the Fall Maiden slowly stir.

The process had begun. All they had to do now was wait and Pyrrha Nikos would inherit the remaining powers from the girl. She could use those to clear the Grimm, to push back the White Fang and save Beacon.

To save Jaune Arc as well.

Cinder could tag along with them, they would never suspect her. Mercury and Emerald would take the first chance to flee. That or they would die; it mattered little in the long run. She could keep Jaune to herself. Grow old with him, do whatever it was idiots did with their lives. At least until Salem found them.

The Fall Maiden's eyes widened, not only in pain - but recognition.

And fear.

"It's working," the headmaster whispered loudly. "Readings are normal, the process will be uncomfortable but not painf- wait... something is wrong." The man slammed a hand on the dials, which flickered and faded. Cinder could hear Pyrrha's fist slamming on the glass as she tried to shout something, to warn them. Her voice could not be heard through the thick pane. "The process is terminating, why is it?" The man spun, eyes wide, "NO!"

Cinder Fall looked down at her own hands, which were wrapped around the handle of a curved, black blade.

Blood ran down it. The scarred girl on the end twitched once, then fell still.

"C-Cinder?" Jaune whispered.

She turned to face him, golden eyes glowing as the power of the Fall Maiden suffused her at last. Cinder smiled, the expression soft and filled with regret.

"I *am* sorry, Jaune."

Oh dear... what else can be said here?

For those who take lessons with me or have heard some of my other lessons in other fics about the seven beats of romance, this would be classified as the beginning of Beat 6 - the black moment (only the beginning though, the real is next chapter). Throughout the entire chapter should have been a slowly increasing sense of dread. If it's managed perfectly, it should be something you feel in your stomach as you read as events happen and you just *know* something is going to go wrong. In great stories it can even be a little visceral, in that it makes you actually upset or angry, or hate the characters. It's a little muted when you all *know* what is canon and what will happen, but ah well. Such is fanfic.

P.s. A lot of votes for the Yang x Jaune (even though I didn't mean it as a vote). I do think I will start on that one next, but I might write the Arkos on the side and release that as a special extra once it is finished. As one reviewer said, I do take more pleasure in the unusual pairings, so Arkos is less something I would write for fun - and more to complete my goal of writing a pairing fic of Jaune with every woman at some point or another.

So it's not that I won't be writing it, it's just going to come out a little unexpectedly at some point. I'm not sure when. I'll likely write it all before releasing it chapter by chapter.

Next Chapter: 29 th August

P a treon . com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 18

The finale, in a sense. Though one chapter still remains. Thank you to everyone who stuck with this, through the flames, the horrible reviews and everything else.

Beta: College Fool

Cover Art: Rachel Marks

Chapter 18

"Cinder..."

She could hear his heart breaking as he struggled to comprehend what was happening, what she had done. The final vestiges of power from the Fall Maiden swirled about her, the heady rush of power almost being enough to excite her. Almost.

"I am so sorry, Jaune." She stepped slowly towards him, allowing her blade to materialise in hand once more. The distance between them closed, even as he continued to stare, never once moving a muscle.

"Get back!" A green blur shot between them, Cinder reacting automatically and snarling as her blade connected with a solid metal cane. Ozpin's eyes were angry, furious even, but he still had the presence of mind to slam a hand into Jaune's chest, sending him tumbling off the platform. "Run Mr Arc, tell everyone what has happened here - do not let her reach the tower."

"Out of my way old man," Cinder sighed, winning the strength battle in an instant and blasting a conflagration of flames into him. She huffed as he pushed them back, green aura materialising around him.

" *Run, Mr Arc!*"

"I can't!" Jaune shouted back, glancing over to his partner's tube, where the redheaded girl continued to pound futilely on glass. Her words were swallowed before they could hear them, nothing more than muffled thumps.

The headmaster looked that way for a moment, and Cinder took her chance to attack, scoring a cut down the front of his jacket. Blood dripped to the floor.

"The best thing you can do for your partner is flee," the man pointed a hand towards her and golden eyes widened as a great beam of green energy fired forth. What a troublesome old fool. Cinder generated her own flames, intent to see if he could hope to match her newfound power. "She is focused almost entirely on you," he went on. "If you escape now then she will try to follow. If you stay here, you condemn not only yourself but also Miss Nikos!"

"I-" Jaune grit his teeth and looked towards them, eyes meeting Cinder's as she watched him. That seemed to make up his mind, the blond turning and running, Crocea Mors in hand.

Cinder made to follow.

"Your battle is with me," Ozpin appeared before her, making her leap back as he slammed his weapon down where she had once stood. "I'll thank you to leave my students alone."

"I don't have the time for you."

"Perhaps you ought to have thought of that before killing Amber."

Cinder sighed, stepping back to dodge his attack, before whipping her blade up to parry another. The second materialised in her other hand, striking out towards him. Her blows felt heavy and sluggish, even to her, as though she couldn't quite muster the energy. Even in

the midst of combat she found her eyes straying over to the elevator Jaune had left through.

How long she had waited for this battle. How long she'd dreamed of crossing swords with this man, of cutting him down and proving her superiority once more.

But right now, come the moment, the satisfaction was muted. She had better things to do. Like ending this charade once and for all, of freeing herself from this malady.

Ozpin skidded back from her next attack, carving a furrow into the ground as he stopped himself with his weapon, before green runes began to spread out towards her. Cinder snarled, leaping back and using the Maiden's powers to suspend herself in the air. Flames fanned to life behind her. She didn't care about this. She didn't have the time for this.

She just wanted him *gone* !

The final lights vanished, dissipating one last time as the flames that dotted the hall were slowly snuffed out of existence. Heels clacked lightly against the floor as she touched down once more, surveying the carnage with a disinterested expression.

Where was the joy of victory, she wondered, as she let out a long sigh? Where was the rush?

All that remained was crackling flame and the muffled pounding of fists on glass. Cinder looked towards that noise, meeting emerald eyes from clear across the room. Pyrrha stopped, frozen solid in fear.

"I wonder if you can even hear me," Cinder said, stepping onto the platform so that she stood before the tube. The machine had long since died, leaving the girl trapped inside. She would escape in time,

no doubt. If she were allowed that time. "I wonder what questions you have for me, what you would shout and scream."

The girl said nothing. Instead, she scowled through the glass, expression filled with hate. It made Cinder laugh, particularly the impotence of it. The girl had hated her for so long, and then that had somehow turned to the girl regarding her as a friend of all things. And now the world came full circle once more. It seemed fitting.

"You should thank me," Cinder said, tracing one finger onto the glass. "If I had allowed the transfer process to go ahead then I would have needed to kill you as well. I would have made it agonising, just to ensure that your last thoughts were of no one but myself." Her hand on the glass heated a little, steaming the pane. "We couldn't have you thinking of another at the end, and robbing me of what is mine, could we?"

She let go, stepping back and turning around. Pyrrha shouted something, but to Cinder's ears it was nothing but a full roar.

"Things cannot remain as they have, as much as we might all wish it. For what it's worth, this was never supposed to happen. At least, not as it did."

She doubted that would be any consolation for the girl, who had lost not only her headmaster, her school, but would now lose so much more. Cinder paused, fifty metres or more away, but voice raised regardless.

"Jaune and I... it is time to end this once and for all." The blades dropped from her hands, splitting into atoms before they struck the floor. They coalesced and swirled around her, forming into a dark shape held in one hand. "I will not condemn you to a world without him, however." Cinder said, as she turned, bow in hand. "I am at least that kind."

Pyrrha's eyes widened, mouth falling open in shock and horror. The string drew taut, resting against Cinder's cheek as she whispered.

"Goodbye... friend."

The arrow flew true.

Cinder turned away as the glass shattered, memorising that final scene within her mind. She would remember it, as some last favour to the girl. Golden eyes finally locked on the elevator Jaune had fled through, the carriage trapped at the top. Metal peeled away beneath her hands, the doors wrenched open as she stepped into the empty shaft. Far above she could see it, nothing more than metal reflecting the light from her own eyes.

"It's time to end this Jaune," she sighed, kicking off the floor and racing up towards the light. "Once and for all."

The floor of the elevator carriage exploded before her, sheering wood and steel aside as she slammed one hand through the door, melting it so that she could step through. The clash of combat, along with screams and the roar of murderous Grimm, it all assailed her ears in an instant, as people ran left and right before her. They did not even stop to look at her, too lost in their own battles. Naturally, the Grimm did not dare turn on her, though some of the White Fang proved not so fortunate.

Fools, all of them. Let them all kill one another. She no longer cared who proved victorious. She had what she had come for, and nothing else mattered.

A flash of gold through a window of the tower caught her eye. No, that wasn't completely true. She still had one loose end that needed to be tied up. Cinder shook her head, a tiny laugh bubbling forth as she rose up off the ground once more. If he wished to flee then he had chosen a poor path indeed.

But maybe he did not wish to run. Maybe he felt as she did... maybe he understood that things could not end this way.

As she flew up the side of the tower, she spared a glance for the dragon wreaking havoc behind her, spawning Grimm across the entirety of Beacon. So many would fall to its spawn, torn asunder by monsters they had no right being forced to fight. A part of her marvelled at how little she cared. Jaune would have agonised over it, he would have wept and sought to aid them and yet here she could watch, with nary a care in the world for those fools.

They were different. That much was clear. He personified everything that made a Hunter what they were. Not just skill or intelligence, which some might have said he lacked. But bravery, determination and compassion - the ability to care for those you did not know. The desire to protect and to create a better world.

We were always incompatible, you and I.

Cinder had never wanted to make a better world. Everything she had ever done had always been for herself. Those with power crushed the weak, it was the way of the world. She had lived by that rule. She would die that by rule. But she would never be weak again.

We saw the world in different ways.

He would see his partner in emotional pain, and seek to help her. Even if it placed his own happiness at risk. He would stand up against enemies he could not defeat, so that others didn't have to.

Where you saw inequality, you had to try and fix it.

She would have cast aside Emerald and Mercury in an instant. The very moment they stopped being of use, she would have happily disposed of them. The betrayed looks on their faces would have moved her little.

I am not like you, Jaune. I never was. And I never will be.

And as she flew up another level, her breath caught at the sight of him, silvery blade in hand, his shield in the other, charging up

staircase after staircase. She could have killed him at that moment, but she selfishly chose to watch, for just a little bit.

He was young, idealistic and foolish. Everything she hated in a person. Everything she had never been. Or was it... everything she had never had the chance to be?

The roof approached, not a floor or more - just a few more staircases. She had no idea what he desired of it, but if it was his goal then she could not allow it. Glass imploded inwards, as though struck with the force of a tidal wave. He was blown back, from the force but also the rolling heat that billowed inside. He roared in anger, in pain and grief as she lit down on two feet before him.

"What did you do to Pyrrha?" he shouted, pointing his sword at her. His face, normally so happy to see her, was twisted in pain and rage. It looked good on him. Better than she had thought it would.

"I killed her," Cinder said simply.

His eyes closed, body shaking. Cinder smiled sadly, cocking her head to the side.

"Did you expect any different?"

" *Why !?*" he rasped.

"Because she annoyed me. Because she was a jealous fool. Because she simply stood in my way. Take your pick."

"Why!?" he repeated, shaking his head and glaring at her. "Why did you betray us?"

Cinder sighed, crossing her arms and frowning at him. "I did not ever betray you. I was never on your side to begin with. You simply assumed that."

"You lied to us..."

"I did." She smiled. "I am a liar Jaune, never forget that."

"I *loved* you..." he whispered it. No louder than the times he had whispered it to her in bed, or into her ear - or when he thought she wasn't listening.

She always had been.

"That is because you're a fool." Cinder snapped, slashing one hand to the side as though to cut an imaginary foe in half. "You were nothing to me Jaune, *nothing* . I chose you out of a hundred other men, of which you were firmly the last choice, believe me."

There were tears in his eyes. It seemed odd that this would be what drew them forth, with everything else that had already happened. Maybe it was just the shock, or maybe it was the final nail in the coffin.

"You're lying," he whispered.

"Am I?" she laughed, "Ask yourself this Jaune. How many women before I showed an interest in you? And didn't you think it even a little odd that I would go through so much effort for you? Don't make me laugh. You were never anything more to me than a *fuck* . That was all you were ever supposed to be. That was all you ever were."

"But I loved you," he said once more, expression filled with agony. It spiked her anger immediately, making her grit her teeth as she summoned a single blade and took it in both hands.

"Then you should be happy to die by my hand. Go be with your partner. She at least would have returned your pathetic feelings!" She flew forwards, blade reared back as she delivered a strike that would have torn his head from his shoulders.

Sparks flew as her blade met against his, blue eyes, stained red with tears, stared back at her from above the cold steel. Her arms

strained to push him back, but it seemed like he had found strength he hadn't shown before.

"I refuse to believe that," he whispered, taking one step forwards - and to her shock - actually pushing her back. "I refuse to believe that everything I saw, everything I felt, was a lie!"

"Believe what you want," she growled. "It doesn't change the truth."

"The same applies to you Cinder."

She howled, spinning to the side and disengaging the blade lock as she drove a knee into his side. He buckled, gasping for breath as she looped her arm around his neck and tugged, throwing him into a glass table. It shattered beneath him, leaving small cuts across his skin as he staggered back to his feet.

"I'm not the one lying to myself," she said, holding one hand out as flame burned to life between her fingers. Drawing her fist back, she slashed it forward across her body, sending a medium-sized ball of fire hurtling towards him.

"Are you so sure?" Jaune taunted, throwing himself to the side. It couldn't be called a dodge. Not with how he hit the floor awkwardly, rolling across broken glass and cursing as he pushed himself back onto his feet. "If you were so sure then my words wouldn't bother you."

"After putting up with you for so long, even the *sight* of you is enough to cause me distress!"

She would kill him. She would put an end to this once and for all. He ducked towards the stairs but she cut him off. He caught the edge of her sword on his, but gasped as she drove her other hand into the side of his face. It weakened his hold just a little, enough for her to overpower him and try to impale him against the wall. He was faster than that, however, ducking at the last second and waving Crocea Mors before him to prevent her following up.

She sent fire instead, making him curse and dive for cover. The room had begun to fill with smoke, small flames licking greedily at wooden furniture. It created a haze before and between them, obscuring one another from view. It was thicker near the smashed window, as the smoke was drawn there and outside.

"Come out, come out, Jaune," she cooed, keeping one eye on the staircase as she paced softly about the room. How he could be so quiet was beyond her, but the sound of glass crunching beneath her feet, not to mention the battle outside, made it difficult to hear his breathing. "Do you hope to hide forever, until this is all somehow over without either of us dying?"

She laughed.

"You can't be that foolish. One of us must die tonight."

"Why?" he asked, and she tried to pinpoint where it had come from. "Why does one of us need to die? Why can't we talk this out, or come to an agreement?"

"Will you join me then?" she called back. "Will you put aside your friends and stand beside me as I wage war against the Kingdoms? Can you do that, Jaune?"

There was no response but for fire, glass and the screams of the dying.

"Your silence is answer enough," she laughed. "And it is the same in reverse. I cannot turn back from this path I am now on." Salem would not allow her to, even if she wished it. The Grimm parasite within her, that which gave her such power. It was insurance as much as anything else.

"So it has to end like this?" she could hear the pain in his voice. But more than that, she could hear where it came from.

"I'm afraid so Jaune," Cinder sighed, pointing her hand towards one corner of the room. "But worry not. I shall make it swift."

"Argh!" He cried out in pain, fleeing from that corner as the flames rolled in. She knew she caught him, and the way his sleeve burned said she'd damaged his left arm. His face was a mixture of pain and anger as he charged towards her, Crocea Mors gripped in one hand. It seemed he'd finally realise his only hope was in close quarters, even if it was a forlorn hope at best.

Cinder deflected the lunge to the side, reversing the grip on her sword so that she could draw it across his body. He surprised her, however, by driving even closer, blocking her swing with his own body so that the blade instead slapped weakly off his armour. His shoulder caught her breasts, making her gasp as he drove her back and into a wall. Her back roared in pain, but she still had the presence of mind to grip his sword-arm and draw fire to her fingers, scalding his wrist and making him drop his weapon with a gasp.

"Any last words?" she whispered, spinning her sword so that she held it backwards, the blade pointed towards his spine.

If he had any, he didn't speak them.

He kissed her instead.

Golden eyes closed almost automatically, relaxing into the kiss as one leg came to wrap around his waist, drawing him closer. He forced his tongue past her lips, wrestling against her own as one hand came up to massage her breast through her top, making her gasp. The other dipped lower, and with a clatter her sword fell to the ground, fingers grasping into his coarse hair instead.

Right before his forehead met hers.

"Guh!" she fell back, dazed and with the taste of him still on her lips. Her eyes widened as she saw his fist coming in, right before it caught her left cheek, knocking her to the floor. Cinder's breath was

still heavy, cheeks flushed, as she looked at him. He staggered over to his weapon, grabbing it and looking back, before half-climbing, half-crawling up the stairs to the next floor.

A tiny bit of blood dribbled from her lip. She had no idea if it was hers or his.

"Clever bastard," she tried to growl, but it came out as a laugh instead. She'd taught him well, it seemed. But now well enough, as she pushed herself up and summoned her weapon back. He should have taken advantage of the situation and killed her when he had the chance. "You can't keep running Jaune," she shouted as she made her way lazily towards the staircase. "This ends here!"

She reached the next floor as he fled higher, a sigh escaping her as she trailed slowly after him. There was no rush. There was nowhere he could go.

Another floor passed, and then another. Before she finally reached him.

It was not the final floor, or rather, it had not originally been it. The dragon must have struck it, that or a stray shot from the Atlas battle fleet. The walls were gone now, leaving nothing but a scorched ruin open to the elements. He stood at one end of it, staring out over the desolation, his blonde locks fluttering in the wind.

"Nowhere else to run," she said, stepping out into the freezing air herself. "I've told you Jaune. Your fantasy world cannot exist here. The only way this will end is with one of us breathing our last."

"How am I supposed to kill the woman I love?" He turned to her, and there were tears in his eyes.

"You love me, even after I killed your partner?"

"I hate you," he snarled. "But I love you as well."

"The two emotions are not mutually exclusive." Cinder took a stance, raven hair whipping to the side as she held her blade out before her. She could have floated far above him and rained fire down until there was nothing but ash, but she would not rob him his chance to fight.

"You say you didn't feel the same, but what was that down there?" He sounded victorious, pleased with himself even as she frowned.

"What we had was physical," she said. "But that was all it ever was. You were never more than a tool to me. Something I could use to slake my desires, and in that you did well." His smile fell, Crocea Mors rising to point at her. "But it is the fate of all tools to lose their use eventually."

She watched him grit his teeth, eyes flashing a dark blue as he glared at her. An expression filled with equal parts rage and grief, of despair and sadness.

"Come Jaune," she stood side-on, blade extended. "Allow me to do unto you, as I did unto your partner. As I will do unto everything you hold dear."

He roared and charged towards her. Such anger, such primal power as he propelled himself forward, with the full intent to bury his blade within her. Once upon a time that might have meant a different thing, and she might have welcomed him with open arms, drawing him into her. Their words would have been replaced with different things, with fevered breath and heavy pants. The bitter air of this place would have been lost in their own heat. An inferno of their own making.

Gone now. It was all as ash.

She caught his weapon on her own, only to widen her eyes when he let go of it entirely, ducking beneath and going straight for her. One hand caught her wrist, the other her collar as he tackled her. They hit the ground together, his weight pushing down on her, oh so familiarly, except that this time he tore not at her clothes, but in an attempt to prise her weapon from her hand. She drove a knee into

his legs, trying to knock him off but for his own legs pushing hers down. He reared up above her, taking her wrist and slamming it down into the hard stone. Her fingers cracked loudly, not broken, but in agony as he slammed them against the ground, using the hilt of her sword to drive them down.

She did not let go, however. She could not afford to. Instead she leaned up to bite his neck. Not as she might have once before, small nibbles with teeth and tongue - but with heavy teeth and a growl, making him cry out in pain as he struggled free. A hand cuffed the side of her face, even as her own knifed into his neck, making him gasp and struggle for breath.

There was no technique to it. No glorious combat or foolish notions of honour and fair play. He sought to cause her pain, while she did the same in return. The victor to be determined by whomever gave in first. Whomever decided that death would be preferable to the agony of living.

He groaned as she managed to get a knee past his own, driving up between his legs into his softest parts. He panted loudly, gripping his thighs together to stop her doing it again and driving his elbow into her sternum so that she gasped for air. His head came down again, not to kiss, but to crack his forehead against her own, sending dizzying spots of light across her vision. With a furious growl she broke her arm free, slamming the pommel of her sword into his temple with enough force to make him cry out in pain.

He fell off her, and Cinder surged to her feet as he crawled for his weapon. She spat a small amount of blood aside, surging forwards to kick the sword with all her strength.

Crocea Mors flew off the rooftop, shimmering away into the night sky.

She would have gloated, if not for the way he gripped her other ankle, wrenching to the side at the very moment she kicked, left balanced on one leg. Cinder gasped as she fell, arms flailing for balance before the cruel stone failed to cushion her fall. A knee

drove down into her wrist, crushing the nerves and making her hand open.

"No!" she growled, trying to close her fingers around his scrabbling ones. A hand cuffed the side of her face again, and with a blast of cold air she felt the sword torn loose. He pulled it back above her, holding it in a reverse grip with the point aimed down towards her face. Cinder's eyes slammed shut as he plunged it down towards her chest.

Pain did not come.

"I- I can't do it," he whispered, voice laden with pain. "I love you Cinder. I still love you... I can't do it..."

Golden eyes drifted open, glancing past the cruel edge of her weapon and into blue eyes filled with tears. Not even an inch separated life and death, but for both his hands atop the hilt, he did not push it any further.

"Then you are a fool," she whispered.

Blue eyes widened as the weapon in his hands faded to nothingness, ruining his balance as he pitched forwards. Cinder kicked back, propelling him up and over her as she rolled onto two feet. The motes of dust formed once more in her hand, as she walked up to him, using one heeled foot to kick him over. Flat on his back he stared up into her eyes, all fight gone from him.

"You were so very close Jaune," she said. "So very close indeed, but yet again you let your pathetic heart get in the way." She lowered the edge of her weapon to tickle his chin. His face remained defiant. "That is why you are a fool."

"Rather a fool in love then one destined to a life alone."

Cinder's breath caught, but she pushed through it. It did not matter. This was what had to be done. There was no other choice. Salem

had ensured it, or maybe Cinder was to blame. She no longer knew. She hadn't for a while.

"This is goodbye Jaune," she whispered. It hurt to say it. Even to her. Her throat felt dry, her limbs heavy. "Do you have any last words?"

"I love you Cinder."

"Heh," she laughed, eyes closing for a second before looking back down at him. "At this point I suppose hearing that doesn't even surprise me."

"That's all I want to say." He kept his eyes locked onto hers, and she didn't dare look away wither. "Send me to be with my partner now. Kill me."

Cinder smiled sadly. "You will be with her," she said. "Of that I promise you." The sword raised higher, leaving his neck and rearing back over Cinder's shoulder. The blow would kill him instantly, separating his head from his shoulders. His eyes scrunched shut, teeth grit in readiness.

The dragon continued to roar in the distance, great explosions from artillery and ships blasting down. One blue eye cracked open.

"Do it!" he gasped. "Kill me. Why are you hesitating? What are you waiting for!?"

Cinder smiled, sword still held high. It wouldn't be long now. An explosion of noise came from behind her, metal and rubble blown aside as she heard someone appear onto the rooftop behind her. She saw Jaune's eyes widen, as he whispered in shock.

"Pyrrha?"

His eyes flashed back to Cinder's.

"I'm not waiting for anything," Cinder whispered softly. "Not anymore."

Blue eyes widened, "Pyrrha, no!" he screamed, as something whistled through the air.

Cinder clenched her eyes shut, drawing on that one memory she had locked away. Of Emerald eyes, wide with fear, set in a pale face with hair the colour of blood. Pyrrha had looked so afraid, screaming in fear as the arrow hurtled towards her. Glass shattered, tinkling left and right - but the shaft quivered in metal, two inches to the side of her face.

It was important to think on that, as the agony struck.

Gods, but it hurt. It was like pure molten lava, striking the centre of her back, before cold air rushed in from the front. Cinder's eyes snapped open, blood dribbling from her lips as she looked down at the bronze point that protruded from between her breasts. Bronze once, but now it was covered with thick, red liquid.

The black blade melted away, power failing her even as she felt it transferring to the girl stood at the top of the staircase. Cinder looked back, in time to see the girl's face twist in confusion, in shock and then horror.

Two arms caught Cinder as she fell, familiar and warm, they lowered her to the ground.

"Why?" Jaune whispered, a face appearing above her, the tears on his cheeks mixing with blood and grime. What a silly boy he was, crying over a monster like her. She wanted to laugh but it hurt too much. Blood was filling her lungs, making it hard to breathe.

"I told you," she whispered brokenly. "I told you... how it had to be."

"But why!?" he cried, trying to stem the blood pooling from the wound on her chest. It hardly made a difference, since there was more pouring from her back. "Why didn't you dodge? Why didn't you get out the way!?"

Because then she would have lived. Because then she would have had to continue the fight. Because Salem would have known if she tried to betray her. Because she would have found Cinder. Because she would have found Jaune.

Because there had been only one other choice... and she couldn't kill him.

Instead, she reached one hand up to touch his cheek, to feel him one last time. He caught it with his, pressing her cold fingers into his wet cheek. She smiled, revealing teeth stained with blood, but her eyes still shone like flecks of gold.

"Because I suppose you made me a fool as well, Jaune Arc."

His forehead pressed down against hers, his tears falling down onto her cheeks. She had never been able to cry, but this was the closest she would come.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I-" she tried to reply, only to fail as her voice finally cracked. She struggled past it, as he called her name in horror. But it was for naught, her vision slowly dimming, robbing her of the sight of his face as she was plunged into darkness.

How cruel life was. That she would never get the chance to utter those wonderful words.

But she had experienced it.

And that was enough to make her smile.

T_T

One last chapter, to bring this story to an official close. I suppose the ending better explains an earlier comment this

chapter.

"Rather a fool in love than one destined to a life alone."

Cinder's breath caught, but she pushed through it. It did not matter. This was what had to be done. There was no other choice. Salem had ensured it, or maybe Cinder was to blame. She no longer knew. She hadn't for a while.

Yes, sadly that distress she felt was *not* aimed at herself. Because deep inside, she knows what the life he will live after this. What he will go through.

Next Chapter: 12 th September

P a treon . com (slash) Coeur

Chapter 19

The last chapter, it has finally come... It is short, yes. It just wraps things up a little. Also, by the time you finish this - the new fic should be out. Check my profile, though it may take an hour or so to load.

Beta : College Fool

Cover Art: Rachel Marks

Chapter 19

The snow fell gently, blanketing the world around them under a layer of frost and ice. Jaune didn't seem to notice it, crouched as he was before a collection of grey stones, his hands holding a stuffed animal of some kind. His eyes stared at it, though Pyrrha did not believe they perceived it. His mind was elsewhere, perhaps with the woman he loved.

She felt the cold where he did not. Her breath crystallised before her, a sheen of mist that was whisked away a second later by the stiff breeze that ran through the trees. No words had been spoken since they arrived. He came every day and she with him, even if their two teammates could not understand it.

Cinder Fall, the monster of Beacon... there were many who celebrated her death. Ozpin had fallen - or gone missing, Pyrrha hadn't been able to tell at the time. Beacon too - and much of Vale had suffered under the attack of Grimm, White Fang and those Atlas robots that had turned on their creators. It was probably only the two of them who would remember the woman as anything other than a violent murderer. Some had been suspicious of Jaune's grief... one

or two had even looked angrily at his tears, or asked Pyrrha to tell him the truth.

None of them seemed to realise that this was the truth. At least... to the two of them it was. Nora and Ren tried to understand but they could not. At the very least they never argued, nor did they have any bad words to say about the woman who had destroyed their home. Pyrrha was thankful for that. She didn't think she could deal with a split within the team itself.

The rebuilding efforts had been underway as they left, Team Juniper now camped out in a copse of trees in Patch. Their sister team was scattered; Weiss back to Atlas - Blake to wherever it was she had run. Only Yang and Ruby remained, though the former had been badly hurt, physically as well as mentally. They would stand by them, however, if only to offer what support they could.

Frost had begun to accumulate on her partner's shoulders. The tiny flecks of white piling up until it looked like he might be buried beneath them. The snow touched her too, but it did not settle. The power of the Maiden ran through her, and though it was not her season, she still found the ice melting the moment it touched her skin. Or maybe it did not come from the Fall Maiden at all, but the woman who had held her powers for but a moment.

"Ruby has woken up," Pyrrha said, breaking the silence as she waited two or three metres behind her partner.

"I'll go see her later." He leaned forward suddenly, to brush aside the snow that threatened to topple the small pile of stones. There was no body there. Pyrrha had used her new powers to set it alight atop the ruined spire of Beacon. It had been his request, his fear of what the people of Vale might have done to her remains. That Pyrrha held the Maiden's powers was proof enough of Cinder's fate.

"Nora spoke with her earlier," Pyrrha went on, knowing that he was listening. "From what Ruby told her, the exhaustion came from using

her eyes to freeze that dragon. There shouldn't be any side-effects, she just needed to sleep."

"That's good."

"Hmm..." Ruby had saved their lives with that ability. The power had been too new, and whatever control Cinder had over the great beast had disappeared with her death, turning it into a wild animal bent on pure destruction. If it hadn't been for Ruby, Pyrrha did not think they would still be alive. "Apparently Qrow mentioned something about Haven to Ruby, about an investigation taking place there."

That made him pay attention, even if it was just his shoulders shifting a tiny bit, scattering the snow from them.

"That coincides with what General Ironwood was able to get from Emerald and Mercury," he said. The two had been captured easily enough, bereft without their master's support. Suspicion had naturally fell upon Cinder's team, and once the robots were back under their control, Ironwood had been merciless in tracking them down. "Is she ready to leave?"

"Soon. Yang is... she's not taken her injury well. I expect Ruby will want to make sure she is at least okay before she comes with us."

Jaune nodded but didn't speak, his eyes going back to the stuffed dog animal that he held between his hands. He brought it with him each time, and every time Pyrrha wondered if he would leave it at the marker. He often tried, placing it down before inevitably coming back for it. She knew the tale of it, of course. Jaune had been enthused when he came back that first time, with tales of how his girlfriend had won him a prize at the carnival. At the time Pyrrha had felt such incredible jealousy... now, it filled her with shame.

"She loved you," Pyrrha said. "I know she never said it, but she did love you."

"I know." He shook his head, a bitter laugh slipping forth. "I always knew, perhaps before she even did. The little things she did, the way she would reach for my hand at the end. She was a liar and a cheat, but her actions were always honest. She just didn't realise."

Pyrrha could not have said it better herself. Cinder Fall twisted her words, she twisted the truth and the world around them, but there was no denying the honesty in what she did. Even at the end, even if Pyrrha had realised that too late. The threats to kill Jaune, the signs of combat - and her tall frame stood above him, sword raised.

She'd acted on instinct, hurling her weapon with all the force in her body. The memory of it made her eyes sting, as tears prickled at the edges of her vision, only to freeze solid a moment later. Such a strike should have thrown Cinder aside, but the woman's aura would still have protected her.

Unless she didn't want it to. It would not if she had focused on manipulating her aura away from her heart. Actions and words, indeed. If only Pyrrha had understood that truth earlier. She should have known something was wrong the moment Cinder's arrow punctured the glass beside her, smashing open her tube but not drawing blood. At the time the sheer relief of the woman having missed had overrode that thought, along with the fear of what she might do to Jaune.

But Cinder hadn't missed, had she?

"I think she would want you to keep that," Pyrrha nodded down to the toy in his hands, catching his eye as he looked up towards her. They were rimmed with red, the evidence of tears obvious. Pyrrha did not comment on them, she never did, simply offering silent support wherever she could. "I know she wasn't ever sentimental, but I think she would be happy to know it gave you some pleasure. At the very least, I don't think *she* would be thrilled with being given it."

"You're right," he laughed. "If I left it here she would just ask what the point of it was." The teddy was pulled tight to his chest, so that the

top of its head rested beneath his chin. Pyrrha smiled sadly at the sight, pleased at least that he would have some comfort at hand. "I don't hate you Pyrrha."

"You should."

He sighed and shook his head, both knowing it was an argument neither would win at the moment. How he could not despise her, Pyrrha had no clue. She had killed the woman he loved; she had fallen for what in hind sight seemed like such an obvious ploy. Pyrrha had been prepared for his angry words, for his hate and him to attack her. She would have accepted it all.

"I think I'm done here," he whispered at last, shaking his arms out as he stiffly rose to his feet. Blue eyes lingered on the marker one last time, before he shook his head and turned to look at Pyrrha. "It's not like she's here anyway."

"She's wherever you keep her," Pyrrha said, nodding towards his chest. Jaune's hand came up reflexively, clutching at his heart.

"I suppose so... I don't think I'll ever stop loving her."

Pyrrha didn't think he would either. He was broken now, and though one day he might bring the pieces back together, she didn't think he would ever be quite the same. That was normal though, wasn't it? The experiences people went through changed them for better or worse. There was no turning back the clock - and she would not try. To try and make him back into how he had been would be akin to removing Cinder from his life. She wouldn't do that, not to either of them.

"I'm going to go and speak to Ruby," Jaune smiled, weak, brittle - but the smile was still there. The recovery had already begun, even if the grief lingered still. "Do you want to come with?"

"Go on without me," Pyrrha returned his smile with one of her own. "If it's okay with you I'd like to say my own goodbyes as well."

Jaune nodded, clapping one hand on her shoulder as he trudged by, snow crunching underfoot. She heard him pause at the edge of the clearing, however, clearing his throat with a cough. "Cinder wouldn't have hated you either," he said, making her green eyes drift shut. "I just thought you should know that." He sighed and walked away, towards the wooden family home in the distance.

"I know," Pyrrha laughed softly, kneeling down to trace a finger over the cool stones. "I think you were always frustrated with me. But I don't think you ever truly hated me, did you Cinder?"

Irritation, impatience...

It wasn't Cinder Fall, no matter what she might have thought. In truth it was nothing more than the lingering feelings the woman had left behind, as Pyrrha absorbed the power from her body. It was the exact thing Ozpin had first warned her about when they had talked of Pyrrha taking Amber's powers. It was not the mind-merging she'd once feared, but rather an echo - a distant representation of their emotions. It had faded now... and seemed to be fleeting altogether. Nothing lasted forever, and this echo of a distant soul was no exception.

"Just so you know," Pyrrha went on, "The transfer was successful... you must have been purposefully thinking of me at the end."

Amusement...

"More than that, all your plans worked... even if it took me a while to notice them. You made sure to cause as much damage as possible when you fought Jaune. When it was all over there were some who thought he might have worked with you, but there was just too much evidence showing he wasn't. Even at the end, you played not only me, but him, Ironwood and the people of Vale."

Arrogance, satisfaction...

Pyrrha laughed, "I suppose you *would* roll your eyes at that." Her pleasure cut off soon after, as she remembered the look on Jaune's face. "He still loves you, though I guess wherever you are, you probably already know that."

A mix of emotions too complicated to decipher...

"I'm going to focus on being a friend to him now," Pyrrha went on, brushing her hair aside with one hand. "I think after seeing you and him... I'm not so certain of my feelings right now. I liked Jaune, I liked him a lot - I might have even been willing to die for him. But I don't think I could have done what you did, that I could have given everything up for him."

She had been a schoolgirl with a crush, one born of relief that he didn't know her fame - and pleasure at her ability to help and train him. She'd had little fantasies, of course, thoughts of what he might be like as her boyfriend, but it was *nothing* like what she had seen between Cinder and him.

"I think I just want to be his friend now."

Possessiveness, jealousy...

"I'm being honest! Even if I did still feel that way, it would feel cruel to spring that on him - not to mention to your memory."

Incredulity, surprise...

Pyrrha shook her head with a smile, unwilling to explain.

"Mercury and Emerald talked when Ironwood got hold of them. In the confusion Ren was able to eavesdrop on Miss Goodwitch and him. We found out that there was someone you answered to, someone who told you to do what you did."

Nervous, anxious...

"Jaune wants to hunt this person down, Ruby too. We're going to travel to Haven together and find him or her and make them pay for what they did to Beacon. Though I think Jaune wants to make them pay for what they did to you."

Panic, fear, terror...

"I will look after him!" Pyrrha said quickly. "I'll make sure he's okay - with the powers you gave me. Nothing will touch him. I'll make sure of it. You can trust me."

Relief...

"I promise Cinder," Pyrrha said, staring down at the marker. "I swear to you here and now. I will *never* let Jaune die, so long as I still stand. It will be me before him, I promise."

Peace, acceptance... and then... nothing...

Pyrrha felt a tear slip down her cheek as the sensations finally washed away, as though those last fleeting thoughts had been caught by the bitter breeze, tugged out of her hands and swept into the distance. She felt so alone with them gone, suddenly aware of the freezing cold and the flakes that fell on her bare shoulders.

But she wasn't ready to leave just yet.

"I remember when I was still in that tube. I remember those final words you said to me, when you said goodbye." Pyrrha shook her head, shaking the tears loose. "I never got it at the time, I was still too certain you were about to kill me, that it was some mocking threat. It was too painful when I realised, almost a full day after your death, when the grief was still so fresh. You weren't mocking us at all, were you?"

It would have been so easy to say Cinder hated her, but if that were the case, why would she have spared her? Why would she have

trusted Pyrrha to be the one to kill her? Why give Pyrrha the power of the Maiden? Why leave Jaune's fate in *her* hands?

"You were saying goodbye to us, and in our fear and panic we never even realised. Was it a cry for help, was it a hint - a subtle request for us to make it not goodbye? Did we miss a chance to save you?"

She didn't know... and the thought had haunted her sleep for over a week now. It was probably pointless, nothing more than her worried thoughts. Cinder's plan had been complete, she'd considered every stage, every angle - and then enacted it. The redhead stood once more, one arm rubbing across her eyes as she took a deep breath. She tried to smile down at the stones, but she had never been as good at lying as Cinder.

"I never got the chance to return the favour," she continued, "And that made me cry even harder when I realised. It's not fair that you got to say goodbye but we didn't, and then I feel worse because who am I to talk about unfairness when you had to die?"

Did she wish that Cinder was still alive? Pyrrha wasn't sure. If she were still alive, then surely it would not have been for long... the death she had caused would have ensured her fate was a swift and public one. Jaune might not have survived being forced to watch that.

Cinder had been right, as much as it pained her to admit it, there really had been no other way...

"What I'm trying to say is..." Pyrrha hesitated, shaking her head before continuing, "I need to stop looking into the past. I'm not going to forget you, but if I'm going to make sure Jaune comes out of this safe then I need to focus on protecting him. I'm sure you'd understand... actually, you'd probably call me a childish idiot for wasting time talking to a grave anyway."

She could just imagine the sneer on the other woman's face, the way she would have rolled her golden eyes. Pyrrha took a step back,

letting out a quiet sigh. One step becoming two, and two becoming three. She paused a few paces away, looking down on a resting place that was not even hers. But that didn't matter.

If there was something after life... then Cinder wouldn't even hear her. She would have been too busy watching over Jaune, making sure he was okay. Actions spoke louder than words, and Pyrrha would prove them to Cinder by looking after him. But for now... she still wanted to have her chance to say it. In place of the chance she'd so foolishly squandered.

She smiled one last time, not looking down - but instead up towards the blue sky.

"Goodbye... my friend."

So that's it... in a sense this chapter is just about tying up the loose ends, explaining things as how they are and how they happened, so that there aren't any big questions. Well, other than the `how will they cope` question. The truth being, like all people do.

Thanks for reading everyone. I've had a lot of fun writing this story, more because it was new and novel than anything else. Many feared it could not be done, but I tried to see it through regardless. In truth people likely know that I'm not a fan of Pyrrha (though I've always tried to make it clear it isn't Pyrrha I dislike, but rather her lack of character - which is RT, not her). But in all truth, Cinder is far worse in my mind. We never see why or for what reason she does what she does, and the Chibi episode recently seems to say it best. She is evil for the sake of being evil.

So I tried to mix her up a little, and therein lay the challenge - one that I truly enjoyed. Sadly yes, the story did end a tragedy. This was the plan from the start and I will admit to not labelling it as that on purpose. :D I'm sure there are many who would not

have read it, had they known it would be a tragedy, and honestly such a genre tag would have spoiled the entire thing anyway.

There were a few things I tried in this fic, ambitious though they may have been. The sex, for instance, was always meant to be an indicator of "show, don't tell" taken to the extreme. As you no doubt noticed, Cinder lies to herself as much as she does anyone else in this story, but the sex was always honest. If you dig into each act, you can sense the emotions behind it. Another thing is that Cinder never referred to the word "love" and "her" in the same sentence, up until the end. The idea being to explore that she refused to believe it ever existed at all.

Writing from her PoV was fun and interesting too, especially taking the "unreliable narrator" ideal to its extreme, with someone so used to lying that she deceives Jaune, herself *and* the reader all at once. Very fun.

And it may shock some, but when I first drafted this to CF, like... maybe a full year ago? I seem to recall that he wasn't 100% sure on the idea of the tragic ending. So don't accuse CF of having influenced this too much, lol. I wanted this to be a tragedy from the start, so that I could have a chance to practice and write one.

Thanks again everyone, and I hope you enjoyed what was honestly a fun story to write - even through the flames when my main character suddenly went and killed a main character (and Ozpin - why does no one cry over Ozpin?). Even at the time I remember wincing and going "Oh gods, I'm going to feel *this* in the reviews, aren't I?"

Next Story: Yang x Jaune - Released NOW

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