

# Auras and Alibis

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He was a boy, she was a girl, could it be any more obvious? He was a nurse, she was Vale's biggest and meanest supervillain hiding in plain sight. Welcome to Auras and Alibis.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2023-06-29

Updated: 2024-07-01

Words: 58777

Chapters: 14

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Humor/Drama - Characters: [Jaune A., Cinder F.] Ozpin, L. Ren - Reviews: 91 - Favs: 341 - Follows: 467

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/14249809/1/Auras-and-Alibis>

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# Chapter 1

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 1

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Jaune wasn't worried about her. He was *never* worried about her. Sure, she was over an hour late from when she'd said she'd be home, and sure, she hadn't returned any of his calls or texts, but that was no cause for concern. This was hardly their first time doing this song-and-dance - the nature of his fiancee's job often made it so she was away for longer than expected, often to the point where she couldn't return any of his calls. At least, that was the way she'd explained.

Still, the fact that he wasn't worried didn't mean he wasn't a little miffed. After his shift had finished, he'd spent most of his evening getting dinner ready. It was nothing fancy, just a basic baked ziti, but still. He was hungry, and the ziti had just gone back in the oven to get warmed up again for the third time.

Jaune glanced at the clock from his position at the dinner table. An hour and a half, now. A small sigh escaped him as he rose from his chair and approached the fridge. Cinder hated it when he drank anything but wine with dinner, but she wasn't here, and he could really go for a hard cider right now.

Naturally, the moment he popped the cap off the bottle, the door opened.

"Just my luck..." Jaune muttered. He put the bottle back in the fridge, praying that it wouldn't go flat in the time it took to eat. Still, he couldn't hide the warm smile that crossed his face when his fiancee entered the room. "Hey, babe."

Cinder actually jumped at the sound of his voice, turning to stare at him in surprise. "Jaune," she greeted. "I didn't think you'd be home."

"My shift ended almost three hours ago, Cin."

She blinked. "... It's been that long?" Casting a glance at the nearby clock, she scowled. "Sorry, Jaune; work kept me late."

"It's no big deal, really," Jaune offered. "So, what was it this time? Some celebrity get spooked and call for your services?"

"Something like that," Cinder said hesitantly. "It was... a stalking incident."

"Wait, for real?"

"Oh, yes," she replied, a bit too quickly. "One of my clients called me up all frantic, said she thought she saw a man with a gun wandering around her property. So I went over there to check it out; turned out to just be one of the local kids playing with those... what do you call them? The ones that shoot little plastic pellets?"

"Airsoft guns?"

"Yes, those." Cinder nodded. "He wandered into her yard looking for a good place to ambush his friends and spray them with plastic. So, false alarm, as per usual."

"Well, better a false alarm than the real thing," Jaune offered. "Still, surprised it took you that long to find a kid."

"He was hiding from me," she growled. "Said he saw the company car pull up and figured he'd be in a lot of trouble if I caught him. Little punk hid in the crawlspace under the house for ninety minutes before I found him."

"How'd you even think to check the crawlspace?"

"Because I checked everywhere else first, didn't find anything, and wanted to be thorough. Didn't realize how much time had passed."

"Well, at least you're here now," Jaune said. Her story explained her frazzled appearance, too - her hair was a bit frayed at the ends, and she was covered in small scrapes and bruises. She definitely looked like someone who had just crawled out from under someone's house.

Cinder shifted, and Jaune's attention was suddenly drawn to something held in her off-hand. He leaned in to get a better look, blinking as he did so.

"What have you got there?"

"Oh this?" she asked, nonchalantly. "It's just work stuff. Nothing major."

"What kind of work stuff?"

"Just my uniform."

"Cinder, you're wearing your uniform."

Cinder paused, then looked down at herself, her eyes widening slightly when she saw herself dressed the way he'd described. "So I am," she said, turning her attention back to him. "This is my spare uniform, Jaune. My other one got dirty, so I brought it home to wash."

"Oh, okay then," he said. "Why don't you go ahead and start dinner? You're probably starving. There's pasta being warmed in the oven, I'll just take your bag and-"

He reached for the large bag, only for Cinder to sharply pull it away from him.

"Actually, I think I'd better do my own laundry," Cinder hurriedly said.

Jaune stared at her. "Why? What's the matter?"

"Well, it's just... last time you did laundry, you turned your undershirts pink."

"That was your fault, you threw a set of lingerie in there with them by mistake."

Again, Cinder blinked. "So I did."

Jaune wasn't sure what to think at this point. Any other guy might have thought she was being strange, and she was, but that was par for the course for Cinder at this point - this was really just normal behavior from her. She was, for lack of a better term, *quirky*. That was part of what attracted Jaune to her in the first place - she definitely wasn't like any other girls he'd ever met. She had an air of aloofness to her, but deep down, she could be a bit of a goofball when she wanted, kind of like now.

That being said, Jaune was trying to do something nice for her, and she was resisting yet again for what had to be the hundredth time. And that just wouldn't do - after all, his parents had raised him right.

"Seriously, Cin, go ahead and start eating," Jaune told her. "I'll get the laundry taken care of."

"I really don't think you should," she said.

Jaune sighed tiredly. "Alright, what's in the bag?"

"It's..." she hesitated. "... A gun."

Jaune turned towards her, his eyes widening. "... You brought your service weapon into the apartment?"

"I forgot to leave it back in the office," Cinder said sheepishly. "Threw the holster in with my uniform by mistake when I was getting changed. Sorry."

"It's no big deal, really," Jaune explained.

"I know you don't like guns-"

"It's not that I don't like them, it's that I don't like the idea of having one in the house." Jaune sighed again. "It's not loaded, is it?"

Cinder paused. "... It might be."

"Cinder!"

"I know, I know. Hold on, I'll take care of this."

She hurried into the bedroom, brushing past him as she did so. Jaune watched her go, then quickly called out to her.

"Be careful, please!"

She didn't respond, and Jaune bit his lip, but ultimately chose not to go in after her; she'd been trained on guns as part of her private security job, so she definitely knew more about how to handle them than he did. In any case, he trusted her to handle herself just fine, though a small worry lingered in the back of his mind.

Another sigh escaped him, though he chose not to dwell on his feelings at the moment. Instead, he moved back into the kitchen, pulled the pasta out of the oven, and set the tray on the stovetop. He then fixed two plates before walking over to the table and taking a seat. He was just in time, too - the washing machine started up just as he sat down, and a moment later, Cinder emerged from down the hall and took a seat across from him.

"What's for dinner?" she asked. "It smells delicious."

"Just a baked ziti," Jaune said. "Nothing fancy. It might be a little hot, but-"

That was as far as he got before his fiancée began to dig in. Jaune watched her for a moment in surprise, but it didn't last - she had to be hungry after staying late for work; he knew he was.

"Where's the gun?" Jaune asked between bites of pasta.

Cinder paused. She thought for a moment, then said, "I put it in the lockbox in the closet. It's unloaded, don't worry."

Jaune nodded. Cinder's lockbox was the one thing they didn't share in the entire apartment. It was a case of some kind, one that only she held the key to, which she kept on a chain around her neck. Jaune had always been tempted to steal the key and see what was inside, but whatever it was, Cinder was *very* protective of it - she'd told him in no uncertain terms that if he ever looked inside without her permission, it'd be a major breach of her trust. And so, Jaune had shrugged and decided to just carry on not knowing.

He was sure that in time, she'd reveal its contents to him, but only when she was absolutely ready. He wasn't exactly desperate to know, either, so he was fine with letting her take her time with it.

Dinner went by in a flash. When it was over, they both worked together to wash the dishes and put the leftovers away. Once that was done, Jaune reached for his still-open bottle of cider, only for Cinder to grab his hand.

"And what do you think you're doing?" she asked, a mischievous smirk crossing her face.

"Having a drink," Jaune said.

"Mm... I think that can wait, don't you?"

"Oh? Did you have something else in mind, maybe?"

"You tell me."

Cinder leaned in for a kiss, and Jaune was quick to reciprocate. They held each other for a few seconds, their lips pressed together, before they separated. Jaune saw that familiar glint in her eyes, and knew where this was going; he wasn't surprised at all when she

suddenly took him by the hand and began to pull him back towards the bedroom.

It wasn't exactly uncommon for her to be this forward, but it also wasn't a regular occurrence, either. Still, he knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth.

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The next day, Jaune stirred awake first. Cinder was still asleep, one arm wrapped around him and her head resting on his bare chest. Jaune leaned down and kissed her on the forehead, earning a small, sleepy murmur from her in response; his heart swelled at the sound of it, and he shook his head.

"You're too cute for your own good, and you don't even know it."

Carefully, so as not to wake her, Jaune rose out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. A quick shave and a shower later, and he was ready to start the day. After pulling on his set of medical scrubs, he stepped into the kitchen for a quick breakfast, turning on the TV just as he slipped two pieces of bread into the toaster.

He was met by a scene of pure mayhem in downtown Vale. A jewelry store was on fire, with several squads of firefighters present to help battle the blaze. They were succeeding, by the looks of things, but the store itself was done for - even Jaune could see.

"-of destruction late yesterday in downtown Vale," the newscaster, Lisa Lavender, reported. "Noted villain Queen Malevolent has struck again, stealing tens of thousands of lien worth of diamonds before setting the store on fire. Nobody was killed, however the shopkeeper only barely managed to escape the store before being consumed by the blaze; he was transported to a local hospital for a concussion and minor smoke inhalation, but his injuries are not life-threatening and he is expected to make a full recovery."

Jaune's brow furrowed at the report. It was unfortunate that some people sought to use their Aura and Semblances for evil rather than

good, but on a certain level, he supposed it was inevitable - with great power came great responsibility, and some people simply weren't cut out to shoulder that kind of burden.

His thoughts were interrupted by a loud yawn from the nearby doorway. Jaune turned, a thin smile crossing his face.

"Morning, beautiful."

Cinder muttered a response he couldn't hear, then stepped into the kitchen. Jaune had been careful to get her coffee ready for her before now; she was not a morning person at all, and he knew it, so the least he could do was make things a little easier for her. As she sipped from her steaming, corgi-pattern mug, he eyed her up and down, a frown crossing his face.

"Is that my Peripheral concert shirt?"

Cinder flashed him a sly grin. "Perhaps."

"That's a limited edition, you know."

"But it's so comfy, Jaune. And besides, I wear it well."

She was right, he had to admit that much. The shirt was oversized on her, stretching down to just past her knees, showing off her slender, cream-colored legs. Jaune couldn't help but wonder if she was wearing anything underneath it, or if she'd just thrown it on and marched out for breakfast without a care in the world.

Cinder sniffed, her brow furrowing. "Toast is burning."

"Ah, crap!" Jaune exclaimed, popping the toaster and pulling the pieces of bread out. Sure enough, they were both blackened and completely inedible. He gave a frustrated sigh as he dropped them both in the nearby trash can. He turned towards Cinder, only to pause when he saw her bent over and rooting around in the lower

part of the pantry for something. A luminescent blush crossed his face as he stared.

*Definitely not wearing anything underneath it.*

He tugged at his collar as she continued to search for something. Finally, it became too much for Jaune, and he stepped over to her. Cinder paused, but Jaune paid her no mind, instead taking the shirt and gently tugging it down enough to cover her modesty a bit.

"I'm headed out," he announced as he stepped over to the nearby door. "It's a full shift today, so I won't be back until just after six. I'll pick up dinner on the way since it'll be so late."

That, and he *really* didn't want Cinder cooking. Once was enough.

Cinder pouted about something, but didn't argue. "Have a good day, love."

"I will. Love you, Cin."

"Love you too, Jaune."

With that, he stepped out and closed the apartment door behind him, leaving her all alone.

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The moment Jaune was out of the apartment, Cinder let out a frustrated sigh. She loved Jaune, really she did, but he could be oblivious at the worst possible times. Seriously, she'd straight-up flashed him and he *still* hadn't gotten the hint. He'd even covered her up! One might think of her as being ridiculous about it - after all, she was Cinder Fall, and Cinder Fall generally took whatever Cinder Fall wanted - but at this point, her enticing him was a game more than anything, one that he was very adept at beating her at, whether he knew it or not.

He was too good for her, in more ways than one. But that wasn't going to stop her from pursuing this path; after all, she took what she wanted.

Cinder retreated back to the bedroom, changing out of Jaune's old band shirt and into her usual red dress. Jaune had once asked her how much her clothes had cost, and she'd told him a little white lie, as she usually did when they talked about money. He was under the impression that they were constantly in the red; that couldn't have been further from the truth, but it was a lie that had paid dividends so far, and so she kept it going.

Of course, that just made it all the more frustrating when he felt compelled to pick up an extra shift in order to make up for what he thought was a shortage on their rent money. Cinder appreciated what he was trying to do, but the truth was that he could quit his job at any point and neither one of them would have to worry about money for a long time.

Of course, she couldn't exactly *tell* him that, so she was stuck suffering in silence while her fiance worked himself to the bone for no reason.

Cinder flopped down on the couch, turning the TV over to another news channel. This one had what she was looking for - close-ups of the burning jewelry store. She stared at the screen, transfixed by the flames as they curled up into the air, spewing acrid, inky-black smoke across several city blocks.

It hadn't been necessary to set the place on fire. It never was. And yet she did it anyway; at first it was just her message. She wanted Vale and the entire world to know her power and to never forget her. Years later now however, and it was almost a compulsion, or an addiction. Cinder enjoyed watching the flames lick and lap at their surroundings, consuming everything they touched and leaving little more than a withered, charred husk behind.

Power corrupted, there was no doubt about that. But fire was nature's power, and what good was nature's power if not properly harnessed, corruption or not? The fire would consume what it wanted until contained; it would burn away into embers until there was nothing left, and in its place, something new would arise in time. There was just something about the feeling of setting something alight and leaving it to burn - to do so was to literally hold the power of life and death in her hands. It was *thrilling*.

Jaune wouldn't approve, she knew, but that didn't bother her. After all, it would only be a problem if he ever figured it out. And he wouldn't - she was sure of that.

Cinder scroll suddenly beeped, and she drew it from her pocket to read the message.

*Unknown Number: Water's nice at Warehouse 13. Not a cloud in the sky.*

She smirked as her eyes darted across the screen. Without missing a beat, she closed her scroll and left it behind, then retreated into the bedroom to grab her gear. Once she had the bag slung over her shoulder, she exited the apartment and began making her way towards the docks. As she walked, she absentmindedly snapped her fingers, causing small embers to dance between them.

It was time to go to work.

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**And now, a word from everyone's favorite boi, Ickbard:**

**WHAT'S UP BITCHEEEEES! So Minnie here wanted to see some of my writing and I had this premise lying around for a lil over a year. It was an OC that I realized worked great as a FanFic and I pitched the idea to Minnie. Homie has swung away with this work and we both hope you enjoy the story! Remember to smash that like button and finger that subscribe button... oh yeah, this isn't my YouTube channel, anywho, till next time!**

And there you have it. This is something the two of us are working on together - it's a collaborative effort between us. Not to say the others aren't, but this one is even more so, since it was Ickbard's idea in the first place. He pitched it to me, I thought it sounded really cool, and now we're here.

This is basically a minor AU, of sorts? The players and pieces are all the same, but instead of Huntsmen, we have superheroes and villains. Admittedly, Ickbard's probably way more knowledgeable about that stuff than me, so it's a good thing we're working together on this one, because otherwise I'd be very lost lol.

Anyway, you all know the drill - regular rotation, trying for an update every couple of weeks same as the rest, etc. No idea how long this one's gonna end up being just yet, but we'll find out, I guess.

Past that, I don't think we've got anything else for you. Hope you all enjoyed, and we'll see you next time!

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*Enjoy my work and want to help me out a bit? You can support me, as well as read more of my writing, over on Amazon. My second original story is available for purchase now, you can find it by going on Amazon and searching for 'Dead World' by John Haruspex. The story is available now for three bucks in ebook format (or free with Kindle Unlimited) or twelve bucks in paperback format, if you prefer physical media. (Remove the spaces)*

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*My first original story is also still available at the following link as well:*

***www . amazon dp/ B0BLFL72MX***

# Chapter 2

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 2

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The day started about as busy as any other. In a world full of Grimm, it was inevitable that there would be a constant flow of injured people who needed help. Generally, however, Jaune knew what to expect from day to day - a steady trickle of injured Huntsmen and soldiers, maybe some occasional civilians who got in some kind of accident and needed help... nothing really took him by surprise much anymore.

But around noon, things changed.

Jaune was eating his lunch in the break room when the intercom suddenly buzzed to life above him, startling him and nearly making him drop his sandwich.

*"All staff, report to the emergency ward immediately."*

His eyes widened. That alarm could only mean one of two things - either there had been a major Grimm incursion, or a supervillain had attacked a sensitive area. In either case, his break was officially over - things were about to get busy.

Jaune left his half-eaten meal behind and bolted up from his spot, sprinting through the hospital as he went. As he ran, he nearly bumped into another male nurse.

"Sky," Jaune said, the two of them running side-by-side. "What's happening?"

"Queen Malevolent robbed one of the warehouses out on the docks," Sky informed him. "Security tried to stop her... I heard the EMTs

talking about it - it's not good, Jaune."

Jaune winced. Queen Malevolent was well-known throughout Vale - she was one of the premier supervillains that plagued the city. There were others, but she tended to be the one who caused the most destruction wherever she went. Not only was she apparently a kleptomaniac famed for her high-profile robberies, but she was also a serial arsonist who tended to light up wherever she was robbing. Nobody knew why she did it - by now, she'd robbed enough high-profile locations around Vale that she could live under-the-radar for years without worrying about money. And that was to say nothing of her proclivity for fire.

Frankly, Jaune just assumed it was because someone like her was rotten to the core. She had been given a gift in the form of a powerful Semblance, and rather than help the world with it, she instead preyed on people weaker than her. It disgusted him.

The two of them made it to the proper ward, and Jaune was stunned at what he saw. There was a double-digit number of wounded security guards scattered around, some of them in worse states than others. Some of them had severe burns, while others had large pieces of glass embedded in their bodies; one unfortunate man had a jagged shard jutting out of his right eye, while another had a large spike impaling him through his abdomen. His one solace was that both had passed out from the pain already.

That was another thing about Queen Malevolent - nobody really knew what her Semblance was for a fact, but it was suspected that she was able to superheat things, and that was how she was able to start fires as well as instantly make glass constructs out of Dust and sand. It was a dangerous, highly destructive Semblance - one of the most wicked and devastating that Jaune had ever seen. The fact that she was using it for evil was absolutely repulsive to him.

One of the surgeons, Doctor Aiden Gray, was examining the wounded men. Gray was an older man, in his mid-fifties; he had deep blue eyes, a head of receding black hair, and a set of thick

glasses on his face. Jaune had always thought he looked kind of silly, but not now - now, he looked every bit the seasoned trauma surgeon Jaune knew him as.

Gray stopped by the two men impaled by glass. He leaned in to appraise them, then turned towards the nurses who had gathered behind him.

"These two are priority," he said. "I'll take the one with the glass in the abdomen; Doctor Jade will take the other. Jaune, Sky, you're with me. The rest of you, get the remaining men as stable as you can, we'll deal with them in a bit."

Jaune nodded, then followed Doctor Gray and Sky into the operating room as he wheeled his patient in. The doors shut behind them, and Jaune hurriedly pulled on a set of gloves and a surgical mask, then took a breath as he prepared for what was about to happen.

He'd been working as a nurse for a few years now, but he was never going to get used to injuries of this magnitude, especially not when they were caused by such an injustice.

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Cinder paced back-and-forth in their shared apartment, restless. Her contact's intel had been dramatically off - he'd told her that there was supposed to be no resistance, and yet on her way out, she'd been set upon by several squads of armed security guards. They'd been no match for her, of course, but there were so many that, in the end, she'd been forced to go all-out if she didn't want to be captured or killed. She'd taken it too far, though, and she knew she had when it had happened - those men she'd struck with shards of glass... she hadn't meant to get so carried away and do so much damage.

"They should have had their Aura up..." she muttered to herself. "What kind of security guards don't know how to maintain their Aura at all times? Must have been new to the job..."

And why had her contact's information been so off? She'd already sent him a message about it, but there had been no reply.

Even worse than that, she'd been messaging Jaune constantly ever since his shift was supposed to end at six. It was now eight at night, and he still hadn't even read her messages. And that worried her, because it meant that of all the hospitals to take the wounded guards to, they'd ended up Vale General. And the last thing she wanted was for Jaune to have to deal with the aftermath of one of her raids.

The one solace she had was that the heist had been a success - she'd made off with several cases of expensive imported jewelry, which had been stashed at her safehouse before she'd made her way back home. She'd have to lay low for a bit after a heist like this, but that wouldn't be a problem - the money from the stolen jewelry would keep her going for some time.

The real problem was going to be dealing with her pyromania, and she knew it. But that could wait for now - at the moment, all that mattered was Jaune.

The clock eventually struck nine, and he was still nowhere to be found. Cinder was growing more anxious by the second. She considered calling him once more, but just as she dug her scroll out of her pocket, the door to the apartment came flying open.

"Jaune!"

She practically threw herself at him, pulling him into a big hug. Jaune hesitantly reciprocated.

"Hey, babe..." he muttered.

Cinder immediately pulled away enough to look him in the eyes.

"Jaune, what's wrong?"

She already knew the answer, of course, but that didn't stop her from feeling guilty when he let out a heavy sigh. "Long day... supervillain

attacked the docks; put a bunch of guys in the hospital. Nearly killed at least one of them; *did* kill one other. And, of course, that was the one I was tasked to work on."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Jaune, I'm so sorry."

Jaune nodded, numb. He made his way over to the living room, then took a seat on the couch, burying his head in his hands as he let out another sigh. Cinder hesitated, then took a seat next to him, leaning up against him and putting her head on his shoulder.

"We worked on that guy for *hours*, Cin," Jaune muttered. "But in the end, it just wasn't enough. Queen Malevolent impaled him through the abdomen with a shard of glass; glass severed one of his intestines. Guy went into septic shock as we were working on him and died on the operating table before he could even wake up from being unconscious. Fresh out of school, third week on the job, and then dead, just like that."

Cinder brought a hand up to gently rub his back. "I know you did everything you could."

"That's what bothers me," Jaune said. "We did everything in our power to save that poor man, and yet it still wasn't enough. Some people just can't be saved no matter what you do."

Jaune's face contorted in grief, and his hands curled into fists. "... And what did he die over? A bunch of imported jewelry, bought by a company who couldn't care less about him? But he still responded because it was his job. He was just unfortunate enough to run into the worst supervillain in the city. But that's okay - when it's your time, it's your time, right? We all might as well accept that, I suppose."

"Jaune..."

He let out another sigh. "Forget I said anything, Cin. Sorry if I worried you by not responding to your texts or calls, I was just... not in the right headspace to reply at the time."

"I understand," she said softly.

Jaune rose to his feet. "I'm going to take a shower. After that, I'll probably just go right to bed."

"You're not hungry?"

"Believe me, food is the last thing on my mind. Could do with some whiskey, though. Maybe a glass or two before bed..."

Cinder couldn't help but cringe internally. Jaune hated the taste of whiskey - he only ever drank it if he was having a particularly rough day. For him to openly want a glass of it worried her, but at the same time, she had no right to refuse him.

After all, she was the reason for his malaise.

"If that's what you want." She reached out to grasp him by the hand. "I'm here for you, Jaune. Whatever's bothering you, you can tell me about it. Always."

Jaune gave her a grateful smile. "Thanks, Cinder. What would I do without you?"

With that, he turned and disappeared into their bedroom; a split-second later, Cinder heard the shower turn on. When it did, she let out a sigh.

"Yeah," she said quietly. "What would you do without me...?"

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After several days of not burning anything, Cinder was beginning to get antsy. She found herself involuntarily creating small embers between her fingers when Jaune wasn't home, and even when he was home, she had to stop herself from idly doing it.

And, to make matters worse, the jewelry she'd stolen needed to be moved at some point. She couldn't afford to sit on merchandise like

that for very long, especially not when there was that much heat on it.

And so, at the end of the week when Jaune was at work, Cinder stopped by her safehouse and began the task of moving the jewelry to one of her contacts. She'd always hated Junior, but the man paid well and didn't ask too many questions, and so she found it in her heart to look past his faults and to resist the urge to burn his nightclub down whenever she walked by it.

After a few hours of moving back-and-forth, taking the jewelry with her bit by bit, it was all done. The two of them were standing in the back of his club while Junior's men sorted and cataloged the goods. Cinder watched them as they worked, then turned to Junior.

"By my estimation, that's all worth a few hundred-thousand lien," she told him.

"I'm inclined to agree," Junior said. "There'll be a nice payday out of this one, even after we get it cleaned up and distributed."

He reached into his jacket pocket, coming back with a stack of lien cards. "This should cover it."

Cinder took the cards, then began to count them out. As she did so, a scowl crossed her face. "You're short."

"No, I'm not," Junior replied evenly. "You killed a man to get this stuff. That means there's heat attached to every piece of it. Heat means that we're going to have to pay extra to keep the cops and the Heroes away from it while we sell it off. And since you're the one who fucked up, it's coming out of your cut."

"I'm not the one who messed up," Cinder growled. "The intel was off. I was told that there would be no guards. Clearly, if this is coming out of anyone's cut, it should be Torchwick's."

"Intel is only as reliable as the person it's purchased from," Junior countered. "Torchwick got someone who he thought was reliable and paid top dollar for the information; turns out he was mistaken, and the man lied to him and pocketed the money. Believe me when I say that he'll be taken care of - Torchwick knows who he is, and from what I heard, he's got his little friend working on it."

"How comforting," Cinder said dryly. She held up her stack of lien cards. "Need I remind you who holds the cards, here? Were I to desire it, I could burn down your club right now and expose your entire operation."

"And were I to desire it, I could have your face plastered across the evening news in five minutes," Junior countered. "I work with you because you're good at what you do. But make no mistake - I will not tolerate any further fuck-ups of the magnitude, not when they risk compromising my entire organization like this. Bitch if you want, but that money's as much as you're getting for this job. Consider it a dock in pay for leaving a body behind. Next time, if you're going to kill people, do us all a favor and burn them to ash instead - at least then they'll be impossible to identify. Got it?"

Cinder glared at Junior, but nodded. "Very well."

With that, she turned and walked away, sparks dancing between her fingers the entire time.

---

"Babe, you okay?"

At the sound of Jaune's voice, Cinder stood bolt upright, a small gasp escaping her. "F-fine! I'm doing fine, Jaune!"

"You sure? Because that water's been boiling for a long time now."

Cinder blinked, then looked down at the kettle on the stovetop. Sure enough, it was boiling like crazy, which was embarrassing because

the stove wasn't even on. She flushed red, then pulled her hand away from the kettle and pretended to switch the stove off.

This was becoming unbearable. She was going to have to take drastic measures - *something* needed to be done, and fast, or she was liable to lose her mind. Thankfully, she knew just the thing; it'd been a few days since Jaune and her had been intimate, despite her best efforts - he'd been in a bit of a funk ever since the incident at the hospital a few days ago, and he'd been missing some very obvious hints.

Time to throw all that back in his face, in the best way possible. The only question was how to do it without being confrontational about it.

"Sorry," she said. "Give it a moment, the tea should be ready by then."

"Sure, sure," Jaune said from his spot on the couch. "By the way, is something bothering you?"

"No," Cinder hurriedly answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it's just... you've been kinda scatterbrained these past few days. Like, even more than usual. It's a little concerning."

Cinder stared at him, racking her brain for an excuse. One finally occurred to her; it was going to be mean of her, but she knew Jaune would buy it instantly, and so she jumped right into it without a second thought.

"Well, it's just... I'm worried you don't find me attractive anymore."

Instantly, Jaune's eyes widened. Cinder had to suppress a smirk. Hook, line, and sinker.

"Why would you think that?" Jaune asked. "Cinder, I love you, you know that."

"I know, I know, but... it's like you're deliberately missing the hints I've been putting out there."

"Hints? What are you-" Jaune paused, his eyes widening. After a moment, he groaned, bringing a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. "... I'm such an idiot..."

"No, no," Cinder offered, a small giggle escaping her. "I'm sure it was very easy to misinterpret me strutting around the apartment naked all day yesterday as something else other than what I actually wanted."

"I just thought you were trying to be sexy for me, I didn't think that meant you *wanted* sex then and there," Jaune said. "Especially when you told me you were doing it to save from doing laundry. Can't believe I bought that excuse..."

Again, Cinder giggled. "It's all a game, you know - seeing how far I could push you before you finally understood what I was trying to tell you. Of course, at some point, I started to wonder how you were missing something so obvious; it made me worry you might have gotten used to me and started to find me plain."

"Never," Jaune insisted. "It's just... I'm a guy, Cinder - we're not good at picking up hints."

"Jaune, I don't know how much more obvious I could have made it," Cinder said, a grin crossing her face. "Do I need to draw you a map to it or something?"

"I mean, if you're offering-"

Cinder couldn't help it; she burst out laughing. After a moment, Jaune did too, both of them doubling over and clutching at their stomachs. It lasted for several seconds, and by the end of it, they were both wiping tears away.

Cinder flashed him a grin, then reached out and took him by the hand. "Come on," she urged. "You have apparently been slacking on

your anatomy lessons and need a reminder of how this all works - embarrassing for a nurse, I have to say, but luckily I'm here to help."

"You're insatiable, you know that?" Jaune asked as she pulled him towards the bedroom. "I'm just now realizing *how many* hints you've been dropping these past few days... geez, how much sex do you need?"

"If it's you, as much as I can get," she said playfully. "Now, hurry up and show me a good time, Jaune~"

The bedroom door closed behind them, and in that moment, all of Cinder's worries faded away.

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**Thanks to my co-writer, Ickbard, for the help with this story.**

**It begins! You were all waiting for when that drama tag would kick in, and it's finally started. Consider this a taste of what's to come. We're really going to be earning the drama tag for this one. Personally, I like to think of this story as a romantic dramedy - that is, a romantic drama with the occasional comedic part.**

**That aside, I don't have too much else this week, as I'm very busy. So I'll see you all next time!**

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# Chapter 3

Auras and Alibis

Chapter 3

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Ren pulled his hood over his head as the downpour started in earnest, the droplets gently falling over top the leather of his trenchcoat as he walked. None of the people he passed on the street gave him any attention; the most they did was swerve to avoid him as he moved across the sidewalk at a brisk pace. As he moved, the microphone in his ear suddenly buzzed to life.

*"Police scanners are going nuts a few blocks away. Sounds like a bank robbery in-progress; teller tripped the silent alarm."*

Ren frowned, bringing a hand up to key the mic. "Name of the bank?"

*"Vale First National. It's the big one with the sliding glass doors - you can't miss it. Keep me posted, tough guy."*

"I will. Thanks, Nora."

With that, the microphone went silent, and Ren increased his pace. Tonight was his night on patrol - generally, the two of them alternated; one night on patrol, one night working the scanner. It helped keep things relatively stress-free for the two of them, plus it let them get plenty of experience each.

He ducked into a nearby alley, pausing only to pull his mask over his head, then with a breath, climbed up to a nearby building using a fire escape. He crouched down on the roof, looking ahead for Vale First National Bank. Like Nora had told him, it was impossible to miss - not only was the building itself distinctive, but the flashing blue-and-red lights outside it gave away what was happening within. Ren

scowled, but wasted no time as he began to sprint across the rooftops, steadily making his way towards the bank.

He arrived in record time, leaping from a nearby rooftop and onto the bank. None of the police officers below saw him; if they did, they didn't seem to care. Ren hit the roof, then rolled, coming to a stop a few yards away before rising to his feet and dusting himself off. Once he was upright again, he keyed his mic.

"Talk to me. What am I looking at?"

*"Scanners say at least three robbers. Whoever these guys are, they're professionals - body armor, automatic weapons, the works. Apparently, at least one of them has their Aura unlocked."*

Ren scowled. "Anything on that one?"

*"Nothing. If they're truly a supervillain, then they're pretty small-time. That or they're really good at covering their tracks. Either way, you should be able to take 'em."*

"Hostages?"

*"Two tellers, one customer, a security guard, and the bank manager. Security guard's not looking too good, from what I hear - apparently, the robbers lit him up as soon as they entered the bank, and he took a few in the abdomen. He's still alive, but he doesn't have much time."*

"What about the interior of the bank? What's it look like?"

*"Pulling schematics now... ha, child's play. You're looking at a one-story building - vault's in the back, behind the counter; I'd wager that's where they're keeping everybody. Aside from that, you've got three offices - one on the left and two on the right - a main room, and a pair of bathrooms."*

Ren nodded along to the information. "Sounds like a simple enough job."

*"For you, it should be. Go get 'em, tiger - I'll keep my eye on the news."*

Again, the line went dead. Ren took a breath, then looked around for a way inside. He found it in the form of a nearby skylight. Beneath his mask, a thin smirk crossed his face.

Time for a dynamic entrance.

---

To say the robbers were surprised when the skylight above them suddenly shattered into a million pieces would have been an understatement. Two of them were in the main room, directly underneath it; panicked shouts escaped them as Ren came falling upon them.

He made impact with the first one as he fell, pulling him to the floor, his own Aura softening the blow of falling several feet through a pane of glass. The other robber shouldered his assault rifle, but Ren was faster - he brought one-half of Stormflower and fired a brief burst of three rounds into the man's unprotected right leg. His kneecap gave out, and the robber fell to the ground with an agonized shout, his weapon discharging a burst harmlessly into the air.

The other robber writhed on the ground underneath Ren, and Ren quickly quieted him with a brief strike to the side of his head, knocking him out cold. Of course, there was little time to rest, as a salvo of shotgun shells erupted from behind the counter. Ren dove for cover behind a nearby desk as the third man stepped out, an automatic shotgun held in his hands.

"Fucking heroes!" he spat. "Can't leave well enough alone, can you?!"

His statement was punctuated by several more salvos of buckshot aimed directly at Ren's position of cover. Ren listened carefully as the robber advanced on his position, waiting for his time to strike.

*Click!*

At the sound of the gun's hammer falling on an empty chamber, Ren *moved*. He leaped out from behind cover, dual machine pistols roaring as they spat round after round downrange. The armed robber jolted as the small-caliber bullets bit into his Aura. Ren hit the floor just as his weapons ran dry; without missing a beat, he leaped up, then charged the robber just as the man finished slotting another drum magazine into his weapon.

Ren got there just in time to hook the barrel of the shotgun with Stormflower, directing the shots upward. Plaster and dust rained down upon the two of them as shell after shell of buckshot discharged into the ceiling. After a moment of this, Ren flicked his wrist, and the shotgun was twisted out of the robber's grasp. Before the man had a chance to recover, Ren set upon him, carving at his Aura with the blades mounted underneath his machine pistols. The robber didn't stand a chance, even with his Aura - in a matter of moments, it was completely depleted, and with one final stab to the man's kneecaps, he fell to the ground, screaming bloody murder.

That was all three opponents neutralized, then. Ren paused only to move their fallen weapons out of reach, then rushed over to the vault. It was open just a crack; he pulled it the rest of the way, and was immediately hit by the stench of fresh blood. The security guard was there, and was thankfully still conscious, though very obviously in a lot of pain, his teeth gritted and his eyes screwed shut. The other hostages were fussing over him, all trying to keep pressure on his myriad gunshot wounds. When they looked up and saw Ren standing there, relief flashed across their faces.

"Come on," Ren urged. "We need to leave, now."

They didn't need to be told twice. Ren and the bank manager helped the guard up, each of them supporting him evenly, and together, they all marched out of the bank, the others leading the way. As soon as they left, the police rushed in to secure the scene. Ren and the manager helped the injured guard into a waiting ambulance, which took off into the night. As it disappeared down a nearby highway, Ren turned towards the manager and gave him an appreciative nod.

"Thanks for the help with him."

The manager let out a derisive snort. "Oh, please - we all owe *you*, not the other way around. Those guys were going to kill us, I know they were. You saved a lot of lives tonight. What's your name?"

"Dart."

"Dart..." the man repeated. "Well, Dart, I can't do much to repay you, but if you're ever in the market for a house, let me know - I'll pull out all the stops and call in every favor I can to get you the best loan possible, no questions asked. Least I could do."

The manager offered him a hand, and Ren didn't hesitate to accept the handshake.

"I might just take you up on that," he replied, grinning under his mask.

---

By the time Ren made it back to his small studio apartment, it was already after ten. Surprisingly, Nora was still awake, though she seemed bored out of her skull as she absentmindedly flipped through channels on the TV. Ren cleared his throat as put his rain-soaked coat up on the nearby rack.

"I'm home," he announced. "Don't get up or anything."

"Pizza's in the fridge," Nora said.

"You ordered pizza? Can we afford that?"

"Don't get too excited, tough guy - I had a coupon that was near expiration, and some spare lie in my bank account. Didn't quite have enough to tip the delivery guy tonight, but I'll give him double next time as an apology."

Ren nodded in understanding as he opened the fridge and pulled the cardboard box out. Despite Nora's voracious appetite, there was still half a pizza left - *his* half, if the olives and anchovies were any indication. He blinked, then looked over to her.

"I'm surprised you remembered."

"What, your order?" She waved him off. "How could I forget? The people are always weirded out when I ask for one that's half pineapple and half olives-and-anchovies, but different strokes, I suppose."

Ren shrugged, then picked the box up and carried it over to the couch. He took a seat next to Nora as he ate, turning his attention to the TV.

"Anything good on?"

"Just the highlight reel," she said. "Don't get too excited - it was on, and then it was off. You know how it goes - five minutes of coverage for a tragedy averted, five weeks of coverage for one that isn't."

"If it bleeds, it leads," Ren said. "Can't fault them too much, I guess - newscasters need to eat, too."

Nora suddenly thought of something, then turned towards him. "Oh, I just remembered - Jaune wants us over for dinner tomorrow."

Ren nearly choked on the bite of pizza in his mouth. He managed to force it down, then turned towards her, surprised. "He does?"

"Yup. Sent me a text and everything. I know, I know, it's weird."

Ren's brow furrowed. "Not really, if you think about it. He's been pretty quiet ever since the engagement, but that was months ago; he's gotta be getting pretty bored by now. Besides, those two could probably use a bit of something new for once." He took another bite of pizza. "Think the city will survive without us for a night?"

"Let's hope it does," Nora said.

---

"They're here!"

Jaune rushed past Cinder, wiping his hands on his shirt as he did so. He took a breath, a smile crossing his face as he reached for the door handle.

"Ren, Nora!" he greeted. "Great to see you guys again! How long has it been?"

"Too long, Jaune," Nora answered. She pulled him into a bone-crushing hug, Jaune's eyes bugging out of his skull at her strength. It only lasted for a moment before she pulled away, however.

Ren came in after her, a bottle held in his hands. "Where do you want this?"

Jaune stared at it, then sighed. "Guys, I told you not to bring anything..."

"What kind of guests would we be if we showed up empty-handed?" Ren asked, raising an eyebrow. "You're making dinner, so we brought the drinks. It's nothing special, just a cheap red, but I figured it'd go well with chicken."

"You figured right," Jaune said, accepting the bottle. "In fact, if you don't mind, I think I'm gonna crack this open right now and add a little splash to the sauce."

Cinder watched the entire scene as it unfolded in front of her, a forced, anxious smile crossing her face. She didn't *dislike* Jaune's friends, but at the same time, she didn't quite trust them, either. Jaune loved them, though, and he'd known Ren for years, so she wasn't about to come between them, but whenever they were around, it did put her a bit on-edge.

At this point, the only people she was truly comfortable being around were Jaune and his family. Anyone else left her with varying degrees of discomfort. It was less pronounced with these two than with some of Jaune's other friends, of course, but it was definitely still there.

"Cinder," Nora greeted, shaking her out of her stupor. "Good to see you."

"Nora," Cinder replied, her forced smile growing wider. "Glad you were able to come."

"You kidding? Wouldn't miss it for the world." Nora shifted a bit; Cinder had long suspected that the discomfort between them might have been a two-way street, and she couldn't blame her for it. "So, how's work going?"

"It's going well," Cinder said. "My client base is continuing to grow. That's important for private security - one person will recommend you to their friends, and the like."

"It pay well?"

"Decent, I suppose. Truthfully, Jaune is the breadwinner between the two of us, if only by virtue of having something stable. My chosen profession is a bit more touch-and-go at times. How about you and Ren? The jobs going well?"

"As well as they can," Nora replied. "Still stuck in retail hell, myself - had to look myself back from decking a customer today."

"I thought that was every day."

"Oh, it is. You'd think selling shoes would be easy, but it's not." Nora shuddered. "*So many* fat people trying to fit into shoes way too small for them..."

Cinder nodded. "And Ren? How's his job going?"

"Eh, pretty much the same. Restaurant business isn't easy, especially when you're just a server, but we're making it work."

"Still living in the same apartment?"

"Hopefully not for much longer," Nora emphasized. "We've been pinching our pennies for the past few months, putting everything we've got into a savings account. We're hoping to find something small pretty soon."

Cinder was surprised. "You two still want to live together after this?"

"Well, of course - we're best friends, you know. I can't imagine living with anyone else."

Cinder's brow furrowed. Truthfully, the nature of Nora and Ren's relationship had always eluded her. The two lived like an old married couple, and yet both insisted that there was absolutely nothing romantic between them, and that they were just really good friends. In Cinder's mind, that just raised more questions than it answered, but she didn't want to pry too much for fear of alienating them or hurting Jaune in some way.

Frankly, if these two wanted to be weird about their relationship, then more power to them, especially since it didn't concern her at all.

"So," Nora said, interrupting her thoughts once again. "You two have a date yet?"

It took a moment for Cinder to realize what she was asking, but when she did, she nodded in confirmation. "A few months from now. It won't be anything big or fancy - mostly Jaune's family and friends."

Cinder thought for a moment, then added, "I will need a bridesmaid, I suppose."

"Oh, do you?" Nora asked, giving her a wide grin. "I'll clear my schedule... assuming none of Jaune's sisters beat me to the punch."

"That's a tall order and you know it," Cinder replied. "Those seven are already poised to kill each other over that position. Try to grab it for yourself and they're liable to bite your arm off."

"Yeah, yeah," Nora said, a small chuckle escaping her. "So, who are you planning to invite?"

Cinder hesitated for a moment. She'd kept her past purposely vague from everyone but Jaune, and even the most he knew was that she'd had an abusive childhood from which she'd eventually escaped. She'd never elaborated on it beyond that, for obvious reasons.

He didn't need to know that was where it all started. If he ever learned it, the questions that were sure to follow would unmask her for sure, and that was something she knew their relationship wouldn't survive.

"I'm still thinking about it," she offered. "Truthfully, I want to keep things very small, and Jaune's family and friends being there already complicates that in terms of numbers."

"Well, you should invite *some* people," Nora said. "Still, I won't pry - it'll be your big day, after all. Though, I have to ask - how excited are you?"

Cinder's gaze traveled back to Jaune - her boyfriend, her fiancée... her soon-to-be husband. In that moment, all she could think of was the two of them standing at the altar, gazing into each others eyes as he slipped a ring onto her finger. Warmth welled up in her chest, greater than any fire she'd ever set herself. A small, wistful sigh escaped her, despite her best efforts to contain it.

"It's everything I've ever wanted," she answered without a second thought.

---

A few hours into the night and several glasses of wine later, and Ren and Jaune found themselves outside on the balcony overlooking the street. They were both red in the face, already more than a little drunk; the bottle Ren had brought was already almost gone, with only a small splash of wine left. They'd definitely gotten carried away, but neither of them cared.

"You know, I'm happy," Jaune announced.

"Any particular reason?" Ren asked.

Jaune shrugged. "I don't know, man. It's just... things have been going *right* so far. I can't really explain it. Life is good."

"Great to hear."

"How are you doing?"

Ren stared out into the street. "Living the dream, Jaune." It wasn't a lie.

Jaune let out a low chuckle, then brought a hand up to rest on his shoulder. "Great to hear. So, I have to ask - you and Nora-"

"You know we're not-"

"Yeah, yeah - not together-together, I know. One day one of you will wake up, though. And when that happens, I'm gonna laugh. Seriously, though, you two are good for each other. I hope one day soon, you both realize that."

Ren said nothing, instead continuing to stare out into downtown Vale. It was late, and yet most of the buildings still had their lights on.

The city never slept, but he already knew that; after all, he'd seen its dark side.

Jaune, of course, didn't know. It was better that way; the fewer people brought into that world, the better. Him and Nora hadn't had much of a choice, but they'd made it work as best they could.

Jaune's brow suddenly furrowed, catching Ren by surprise. "What's up?"

"Nothing much, just something that happened the other day at work," Jaune said. "Supervillain stuff; innocent person got killed during one of Queen Malevolent's raids."

"Right, I heard about that," Ren said. "Poor guy."

"Yeah. It wasn't an easy death, either." Jaune let out a sigh. "I don't understand what would push someone into a life like that. Heroes, I get, despite how tragic some of them could be... but villains? Why would someone do that?"

Ren knew. He knew because him and Nora had been faced with the same fork in the road before in their lives, the same choice anyone was faced with when their Aura was unlocked. Ultimately, though, they'd chosen to do the right thing. But the truth was that for every single person who'd had their Aura unlocked, they were all just one bad day away from turning into the next Queen Malevolent. And deep down, they all knew it.

Ren had never met her, and he hoped he never would. He couldn't imagine what would drive someone to become the kind of person she was - the kind who reveled in mindless destruction the way she did. Him and Nora had been through tragedy and had come out stronger for it, both mentally and morally. Her, though... whatever had happened to break her had to have been bad, so bad that he didn't even want to consider it. That didn't justify or excuse her actions, but at the very least, he could understand.

After all, it was so easy to be evil, and so hard to be good.

Jaune let out a sigh. "Sorry to bring the mood down, man. Just stuff that's been on my mind recently."

"It's fine, Jaune," Ren said. He looked up at the sky, frowning when he saw the position of the shattered moon. "It's getting late. I think we'd better call it a night before Nora strips down and puts a lampshade on her head again."

Jaune looked back into the apartment, a wide grin crossing his face. "Too late."

Ren blinked, then followed his gaze. Sure enough, Nora was standing in the middle of the room, clad in just her underwear, a lampshade over her head as she swayed unevenly from side to side. Cinder, meanwhile, had passed out on the couch and was gently snoring, her half-empty glass of wine still balanced precariously in her hand.

"Guess that's our cue to leave," Ren offered as he stepped inside. "Alright, you little nudist, time to head home. Give the good people their lamp back, the last thing we need is to get pulled for drunk and disorderly on the walk back to the apartment."

Jaune watched the entire scene unfold before him, a grin crossing his face as he did so. Eventually, Ren managed to wrangle Nora back into her clothes, and the two of them waved goodbye before leaving. Once they were gone, Jaune moved over to Cinder and carefully plucked the wine out of her hand, then picked her up.

"Time for bed, Sleeping Beauty," he said. "Hopefully your hangover isn't too bad tomorrow."

---

**Gonna go ahead and leave it there for now, because I legit can't think of anything more to add at the moment lol. Sorry for the short ANs, I just don't really have much going on these days.**

Hope you all enjoyed, and I'll see you next time!

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# Chapter 4

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 4

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The dream started the same way it always did. Cinder always remembered it vividly, because it was one of the big moments in her life where she'd been faced with a choice.

And it had all started with some spilled coffee.

To this day, she wasn't sure what had made her decide to stop at the small, corner-side coffee shop. At the time, she'd considered it little more than an odd craving that had hit at just the right time. Many events in her life had been the product of serendipity, after all, so this should have been no different.

And yet... it was almost *too* perfect. What were the odds that she'd enter that coffee shop at that time, right as he was leaving with his own cup? Perhaps it was the universe doing her a favor for once, or maybe it was her own intuition that had pushed her there, like a sixth sense. She didn't know, but whatever the reason, it had worked out. Jaune had run right into her and spilled coffee all over her, completely ruining her new top. He'd been extremely apologetic about it, stammering out how sorry he was over and over as the other patrons stared at her and mocha dripped down her upper body. She should have been enraged, and yet, she wasn't.

She was too busy losing herself in those beautiful blue eyes.

That was the first thing she'd noticed about him - his eyes. She'd once heard someone say that the eyes were the window to the soul, and in that moment, she believed it fully. Staring into that set of blue, she saw Jaune for who he really was. It was at that moment that she

realized she wanted him, in a way she'd never felt about anyone else. She wanted Jaune for herself, with nobody to come between them.

And in typical Cinder fashion, she took what she wanted.

"If you truly wish to make it up to me, then how about a nice dinner?"

His eyes widened, and in that moment, Cinder knew she had him. She'd known it when it had actually happened, and she knew it now, even three years later.

That was how they'd met, but they didn't truly start to *know* each other until that night's dinner. It had been on short notice, and it was nothing fancy since Jaune was just a student at the time, but Cinder didn't care. She had him there with her, and that was all she wanted. They'd gotten to talking, and as they talked, Cinder realized more and more that she'd been missing something in her life, she just hadn't known what it was until she met him.

She was wealthy now, she knew that - her crimes had made sure she'd never want for anything. She was powerful, too - there wasn't a single Hero in Vale who didn't fear her, to say nothing of the civilians who occupied the city streets. And yet, a part of her had always felt hollow. Now she finally knew why.

After all, what good was a Queen without a Prince?

"Jaune," she'd said, interrupting whatever it was talking about. "How about we get out of here?"

For as dense as he could be, Jaune hadn't missed that hint, which was something she was still eternally grateful for. That night together was when she'd *really* driven her hooks into him... and, for that matter, when he'd finally captured her heart. She'd never intended for him to be anything less than her Prince, but that first night... Gods, she *still* thought about it, in her more private moments.

She blinked, and the scene changed. Cinder was staring up at the ceiling now, Jaune curled up in bed next to her, her chest gently rising and falling as he slept. A slight grin crossed her face, and she leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek.

"Foolish girl. Do you truly believe you can leave it all behind?"

The voice froze Cinder's blood in her veins. Her eyes widened, and she pulled away from Jaune, frantically looking around.

"Where are you?" she growled. "I dealt with you already. You have no power over me anymore."

"You don't understand," the voice replied. "I will *always* have power over you, Cinder, because you always give it to me. After all, what am I, if not your reason for doing all this?"

Cinder scowled. She threw the covers off herself, then stood up, conjuring fire in her hands with her Semblance.

"Show yourself," Cinder demanded. "Show yourself so I may kill you a second time."

"You can't kill a memory, Cinder," a second voice suddenly chimed in. "If only you realized that, maybe then you'd finally stop running."

Cinder let out a small gasp as the second voice began to jeer at her. Pain lanced through her chest, and she fell to the ground, her flames contacting the carpet. Instantly, the entire room went up, the fire spreading far faster than it had any right to. Cinder shrank back, preparing to run for her life before she remembered.

"Jaune!"

He was still in bed, asleep in his spot. Cinder took a tentative step forwards, but a wall of flames suddenly sprouted up between the two of them, cutting off her route to him. She coughed as smoke filled

her lungs, tears spilling down her face as the acrid smog burned at her eyes.

"You don't seem to understand," the first voice replied. "Do you truly think this life you've made can continue unimpeded? You're delusional. You've forgotten your most important lesson - the one that's kept you alive all this time. Think hard, Cinder - I'm sure you can remember it if you try."

Cinder watched, helpless, as the fire steadily began to envelope Jaune. In that moment, he finally woke up, only to find the flames had already started to consume him. A panicked scream erupted from his throat, but it was too late. Cinder could only sit there and stare at him as he caught ablaze, tears spilling down her cheeks.

"The walls that build you up can burn you down the same," she said softly.

The last thing she was aware of before everything went black was Jaune's screams echoing through the burning room.

---

Cinder catapulted awake, gasping for breath. Cold sweat dripped down her body, and her eyes were wide with panic. Next to her, Jaune stirred, gently reaching out to take her by the hand.

"Babe?" he asked. "Was it the same nightmare again?"

Shakily, Cinder nodded. She'd never once elaborated on the actual nature of the nightmare to him - all he ever knew about it was that it always involved her losing him somehow, and that was enough to terrify her more than anything else.

Jaune gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "Cinder," he said softly. "It's okay. I'm still here. And I'll *never* leave you."

Cinder nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. She leaned against Jaune, resting her head on his shoulder. A quick glance over

at the nearby digital alarm clock revealed that it was just after four in the morning; far too early for him to be up, considering his shift didn't begin until eight, and the bus ride to the hospital was only around twenty minutes.

"Sorry for waking you..." she muttered.

"Don't be," Jaune urged. "I'm here for you if you need me, Cin. I always will be."

He leaned in and gave her a small kiss on the cheek. Cinder couldn't help but flush red at that, the panic steadily leaving her body. She took a deep breath, then looked back over to him, a small grin crossing her face.

"Thank you," she told him.

He returned her grin with a smile of his own. "Hey, what else is a fiance for, right?"

"Oh, I can think of a few things~"

This time, Jaune flushed red, and Cinder let out a small laugh. Still as easy to fluster as ever. In any case, it was clear that neither of them would be getting any more sleep tonight, so she figured she might as well take advantage of the situation that had presented itself to her.

Cinder threw the covers off herself, then rose out of bed, stretching as she did so. Once she was done, she turned to Jaune, who had been staring at her.

"I'm going to take a shower and start getting ready," she said. "Care to join me?"

Jaune didn't need to be told twice.

---

It was hours later, when Jaune finally left for work, that Cinder began to feel it again - that same itch, that *compulsion*, to burn. She grit her teeth as she felt it overcome her mind, resisting the urge to conjure sparks inside the apartment. Getting physical with Jaune over the past few days had helped her keep the feelings at bay, but now, they were coming back. Perhaps it had something to do with her nightmare, or maybe it was just a natural consequence of trying to ignore it for too long, but whatever the case, she needed to do *something* to quell the desire.

The only problem was the security guard's death still lingered in the public consciousness. She couldn't go out as Queen Malevolent, not when that kind of heat was still attached to her. No, she needed a different outlet.

A thought occurred to her, and she couldn't help but grin. It was crass of her, but it seemed like it would work, and she had the money to pull it off...

With that in mind, Cinder left the apartment, making a beeline for a local military surplus store. This wasn't going to take anything fancy, but if she could find *something* to conceal her identity a bit, it would certainly help.

It was time to play at being a hero for a bit.

---

It was surprising how quickly it came together - a brief shopping trip, plus a little time with a needle and thread, and her costume was done. It was nothing special, just some military surplus body armor stitched into a camouflage-print outfit complete with a balaclava, but it would do just fine at concealing her identity while she worked.

With her new outfit in tow, Cinder left the apartment, heading for Vale's city walls. The guards waved her through with barely a second look, and she stepped out into the Emerald Forest. Once she was outside, she changed into her outfit, then slipped the twin swords into her belt, and began to walk.

The thing about killing people was that they had loved ones - others who would remember them. For that reason, she tried her hardest not to kill unless she absolutely had to, though sometimes it was unavoidable, which was always a problem, since it tended to bring a lot of attention onto her.

The Grimm, however, didn't carry that same stigma with them.

Of course, she had fought and killed Grimm before - that was how she'd initially trained the use of her Semblance and skills, going out into the forest and killing as many Grimm as she could. It wasn't the same as fighting another person, let alone another Aura user, but it would serve to scratch that persistent itch that just refused to go away.

It didn't take her much time before she encountered her first Grimm. She'd wandered through the forest, allowing her negative emotions to flow through her, and eventually, one had stumbled on her. As soon as she'd heard the telltale low growl of a Beowolf, Cinder had grinned widely underneath her mask, one hand drawing a sword and the other beginning to smoke with pure heat.

"Come, beast," she taunted. "Entertain me for a time."

The Grimm rushed at her. After so much time spent fighting them, however, she knew exactly what to expect - Beowolves were fast and agile, but had paper-thin defenses. If she could avoid the first salvo of attacks, then taking it down would be child's play. And as it turned out, that's exactly what happened - Cinder easily dodged or otherwise parried every incoming strike, and waited for the Grimm to overextend itself. The moment it did, she struck, driving her sword through its chest and then tearing it upwards, nearly cleaving the Grimm in two.

Despite the damage, it wasn't quite a killing blow, and that had been by design. The Grimm stumbled back, black ichor leaking from its grievous wound. Its movement were now much slower and sluggish; she wasn't sure if Grimm could even feel pain, but they could clearly

tell when they were close to death, such as this one. But she wasn't done with it yet.

Cinder waited for the Grimm to take another swing at her, dodged out of the way before severing one of its legs. The monster fell to the ground, where it laid motionless, and she closed in on it, smoke already curling up from her off-hand. She placed her hand against the Grimm's back, a wicked smile crossing her face underneath her mask as the monster suddenly went up in flames. It thrashed around for a moment before giving up entirely, collapsing against the forest floor before dissipating into smoke.

Cinder stood up straight, taking a deep breath to soak in the flames as they continued to engulf the remnants of the Beowolf. A content sigh escaped her as she lost herself in the moment.

Sudden movement from out of the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she turned to find another Beowolf charging at her from behind some nearby bushes. Cinder tensed, preparing to counter the incoming attack, but it wasn't necessary - a high-caliber gunshot split through the forest, impacting against the Grimm's head and disintegrating it completely. Cinder stared as the Grimm's newly-headless body fell to the ground, completely devoid of life.

"That was close!" she heard a strange girl's voice say. "That one almost managed to sneak up on you."

Cinder scowled, having been deprived of another tool for stress relief. She turned towards the girl's voice, sheathing her swords as she did so. A flash of red suddenly emerged from between the trees, and the shooter presented herself to Cinder.

She was young, if her short height was any indication - maybe around eighteen or nineteen. Her outfit was completely red-and-black, consisting of black tights and a black corset worn over a black dress with red trim. The whole outfit was topped by a red cape and hood, which she'd pulled over her head, as well as a red domino

mask that covered most of her face. Through the mask, Cinder was able to make out a set of Silver Eyes staring up at her with curiosity.

"Hey, you must be a new Hero!" the girl said excitedly. "I haven't seen you around the Forever Fall before. What's your name?"

"I'm-" Cinder paused. She hadn't even bothered to think of an alias, figuring she was only going to use this outfit when she was *really* desperate to relieve some stress and Jaune wasn't around to help her with it. After a moment, she sighed tiredly. "... I haven't thought of one yet."

"Ooh," the girl said with a nod. "Yeah, I get it - I mean, it's not easy for most people to think of a name. I got lucky - mine came naturally to me, given my favorite color and my choice of weapon. I'm Scarlet Reaper, or Scarlet for short. It's nice to meet you."

Cinder nodded, hoping that would be the end of it. Unfortunately Scarlet didn't seem ready to leave just yet, as she kept eyeing her up and down with curiosity.

"Your outfit is cool," Scarlet offered. "I mean, I can tell you're a new hero and all, but you're really rocking the military surplus look, you know? Personally, I always thought the Great War-pattern woodland camo was a lot cooler-looking than the stuff they issue to our soldiers now. You've got good taste in milsurp gear."

"Thank you," Cinder managed to force herself to say. "I only got this stuff because it was cheap and I needed something to conceal my identity."

"Well, you've got the basics down!" Scarlet said cheerfully. "Let's see... mask and camouflage, that's a check. Body armor, that's a check - looks like ceramic plates, too, so good job avoiding the beginner's mistake of buying steel plates instead. Finally, you've got some weapons, too. I must say, though, pure swords are a little unusual. What made you gravitate towards those?"

Memories flashed through Cinder's mind, of something that had happened years ago - of the time she'd first received a sword from her mentor. That sword, as well as its sister, were now securely in her lockbox back at the apartment; these two were just cheap mass-produced replacements she'd picked up from the same store she'd gotten her armor from.

Nothing could replace the two swords she *actually* used when carrying out her heists. Not after everything she went through to get them.

Cinder shook that thought away, then turned back to Scarlet. "I... happen to have experience with swords, far more than anything else. Plus, I don't really trust mecha-shift weapons - too much that can break on those."

"Makes sense," Scarlet said with a nod. "That's a fair comment, no problem with that." She suddenly seemed to have thought of something, as her face lit up.

"Hey, you wanna come meet my friends?! We're all Beacon students! We're out here training to finish up our final year. I'm sure they'd love to know what kind of new Heroes are coming out of Vale these days."

Cinder furrowed her brow. Scarlet being from Beacon complicated things somewhat - Beacon was known for producing some of the toughest Heroes in all of Remnant. Even most people with Aura and training failed to gain entry into the school, as they were constantly flooded with applicants and their standards for entry were very high.

Moreover, Scarlet had mentioned that this was her last year in Beacon, despite the fact that she was very obviously too young to graduate that fast. Perhaps she'd been allowed to skip grades? In that case, it certainly made her seem a lot more impressive than at first glance.

Still, Cinder shook her head. "Sorry, Scarlet - I've got to get home."

Scarlet seemed crestfallen to hear her say that. "Oh... well, okay. Maybe we'll see each other around again sometime?"

Cinder merely nodded, and then waved goodbye to Scarlet before turning and walking away. It was only after putting some distance between herself and the young Hero that Cinder allowed her demeanor to change, the fake neutrality falling off her face completely, replaced with a deep scowl.

She'd managed to get some of her impulses out of her system with that first Beowolf, but Scarlet had denied her a full release by cutting in with the second, and now it was too late to spend much more time out without Jaune getting suspicious. She needed some stress relief, and she needed it *now*.

---

Cinder came bursting through the doors of the apartment, stopping only to drop her duffel bag by the door. Jaune sat up at his spot on the sofa, bewildered by her sudden appearance.

"Hey, Cin," he greeted. "What's-"

That was as far as he got before Cinder closed in on him and pressed her lips against his own. Jaune gave a muted grunt of surprise, but it soon gave way to a low moan as the two of them fought for dominance.

Normally, she let him win, but not today.

They pulled away after a moment, a thin strand of saliva still connecting them. Jaune looked like he was punch-drunk.

"Wow..." he managed to get out. "What's happening?"

"Take me," Cinder demanded as she began to strip off her street clothes, leaving herself clad in just a set of lacy black underwear. "Take me *now*. I *need* it."

"That kind of day, huh?"

She lunged forward and caught him on the lips once more. Jaune, of course, had no protests to offer, and the two of them held the kiss as they made their way to the bedroom.

---

Hours later, Jaune sat up, staring at the ceiling, a big grin on his face. It was hard for him *not* to be happy after what had just happened. It was rare for Cinder to go as far as she had been, but apparently, she hadn't been lying - she really *had* needed it that badly.

Of course, that just made him worry a little bit. What kind of day had she been through that she'd turn to him for that level of physical comfort? It hadn't just been the sex, either - she'd insisted on cuddling afterwards, for far longer than they normally did. She'd even fallen asleep in his arms, which was quite rare even for her.

Still, he supposed she had her reasons, most likely something involving work. He didn't like to pry - Cinder was a very private person, and he respected that. She'd tell him when she was ready, no sooner and no later.

Jaune's stomach growled loudly, and he looked back over to Cinder to make sure it hadn't woken her up. Thankfully, she was still out cold, which was good, because she clearly needed the rest. Of course, that didn't change the fact that he was *starving* - Cinder had come home before he'd had a chance to cook anything, and their little rendezvous had left him no time to eat... well, *food*, that is.

His stomach growled again, and Jaune decided that was enough. It was around midnight, but he didn't care - he was hungry. And so he carefully threw the covers off himself, then made his way to the kitchen. He'd just about stepped up to the refrigerator when he noticed something in the corner of the apartment, right next to the door.

It was Cinder's duffel bag.

Now, Jaune knew enough to know that this was something she used for work. Still, he couldn't help but be curious - in all the time they'd been together, she'd never really enlightened him on the nature of the work, instead speaking somewhat vaguely about all of it. He was certainly curious, but not enough to go snooping around in her private life.

... Then again, he was her fiance, wasn't he? Surely she wouldn't mind if he just took a peek...

Heart pounding, Jaune closed the refrigerator and stepped over to the duffel bag. He stood over it, one hand reaching for the zipper.

"Jaune."

He just about jumped out of his skin when he heard Cinder's voice from behind him. Jaune whipped around, and found her standing there, leaning against the door frame while she rubbed sleep from her eyes. She had the sheets from the bed wrapped around her body, but aside from that, he could tell from her bare shoulders that she was naked and hadn't even bothered to throw anything on before trying to find him.

"What are you doing?" she asked blearily.

"I was... going to get something to eat," Jaune offered. "Saw your bag lying here, figured I'd bring it over to you."

"You don't need to do that," she said. "Leave it there, please; I'll need it for work tomorrow."

Jaune hesitated for a moment. Clearly, something was up with that duffel bag just from the way she spoke about it, but he wasn't about to pry, especially not this late. Instead, he just nodded, then moved back over to the fridge.

"You want anything?" Jaune asked, peering inside. He looked back to Cinder, and she shook her head. He pursed his lips. "I didn't take you for a light sleeper."

"You weren't there," Cinder replied. "So of course I woke up."

"Oh? Am I your big teddy bear, now?" Jaune asked, a playful grin crossing his face. "Do you get lonely without me?"

"Only as much as you do without me," Cinder replied. "Come on, let's get back to bed."

"In a minute, I really do need to eat something," Jaune answered.

Cinder nodded, then turned and walked back to their room. Jaune watched her go, then once she was out of view, turned back to the duffel bag still lying on the floor.

He eyed it for a moment, then shook his head and continued to root around in the fridge.

"None of your business, Jaune..." he muttered to himself.

---

**I must say, we're both a little confused about you guys - you're all leaving all kinds of horny comments on the Eve Taurus story, and yet we're here giving you blatant dommy mommy Cinder energy and y'all ain't being horny at all. What's up with that?**

**In all seriousness, we both appreciate the hell out of you guys. You're all really good to us; hopefully, these chapters are a good way of repaying you for your kindness.**

**Anyway, we don't really have too much to say about this chapter right now. There are going to be some more developments in the near future, of course, but for now, we're mainly just teeing things up, you know?**

Also, a quick announcement, for those of you who don't read my other stories - I, that is, Minaris, will be in London for a work trip for three weeks starting very early in September. I have no idea what my schedule is going to look like or how much writing/posting I'll be able to get done, so don't be surprised if I can't do anything or can only do a little bit for not only this story, but for all my others as well. I'll certainly do my best to keep working, but it's all dependent on what my job's schedule looks like while I'm over there, not to mention my co-workers. So if I suddenly go silent and don't start posting again until, like, October, that's why.

What else, what else... shot my first multi-gun match last night. I shot like shit, which I figured I would because it was a fucking HARD match. But I had a lot of fun; multi-gun is just fucking awesome to shoot. It was a 2-gun match, so pistols and rifles only, but now I'm really interested in trying out 3-gun and adding shotguns to the mix, just to see how I'd perform. But that can wait for a time - first, I should probably get more comfortable with 2-gun and IDPA, lol.

That's about all I've got. I hope you all enjoyed the chapter, and we'll see you next time!

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*Enjoy my work and want to help me out a bit? You can support me, as well as read more of my writing, over on Amazon. My second original story is available for purchase now, you can find it by going on Amazon and searching for 'Dead World' by John Haruspex. The story is available now for three bucks in ebook format (or free with Kindle Unlimited) or twelve bucks in paperback format, if you prefer physical media. (Remove the spaces)*

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***My first original story is also still available at the following link  
as well:***

***www . amazon dp/ B0BLFL72MX***

# Chapter 5

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 5

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Jaune let out a wide yawn as he slumped against the window of the bus, doing his best not to let his eyes close and allow himself to drift off to sleep.

It had been another early morning, with Cinder's nightmares waking them both up again. As usual, she hadn't told him what they were about, but they must have been pretty bad, since immediately after they'd both been awoken, she'd grabbed onto him and hadn't let go for quite some time.

Eventually, though, he'd had to leave for work, much to her chagrin. It was unfortunate, but a Monday was still a Monday.

Of course, now, it left him sitting on the bus, doing his best not to pass out from exhaustion. He loved Cinder, he truly did, but sometimes he wished she'd swallow her pride and seek some kind of professional help for the things that haunted her. Why she refused to do that, he had no idea; he made a note to try and gently nudge her in that direction when he got home.

"Excuse me," he heard a man say from the aisle. "Is this seat taken?"

Jaune blinked in surprise, then turned towards the voice. He found a tall, gray-haired, bespectacled man in a green suit and sweater standing there, holding a steaming thermos. Jaune stared at him for a moment, then shook his head.

"No, it's empty," he offered, moving over a bit to allow the man entry.

"Thank you," he replied, settling into his seat. Once he was seated, Jaune went to look out the window again, only to find himself interrupted once more.

"I couldn't help but notice your outfit and badge," the man told him. "Do you work at the hospital, by any chance?"

"Yes, I do," Jaune replied. "Vale General; I'm a nurse there."

"Ah, I see. You do good work, I'm sure."

"I do my best," Jaune offered. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason. I was simply headed there, myself."

"Oh, are you not feeling well?" Jaune asked. He bit his lip. "I don't think I can really help until we get to the hospital, but I can see what I can-"

"No, nothing like that," the man replied, giving him a warm smile. "I simply have a meeting there with some people in a bit. I feel quite fine, though I appreciate your concern."

"Just doing my job," Jaune told him.

The man's warm expression faded a bit, and he looked up ahead. "Say... since you work at Vale General, you would have been familiar with the patients caused by the latest villain attack a short while ago?"

"You mean the incident at the warehouse?" Jaune questioned. "Yes, I'm familiar. I worked on some of those people."

"It's a shame, what happened," the gray-haired man said without looking back to him. "None of those people deserved to be injured, or even killed because of the desires of a villain."

"I'm sorry, did you know someone who was victimized in the attack?" Jaune asked, confused.

The man shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I just find it shameful, what this city is becoming. This used to be a haven away from the Grimm, a safe place for people all over the world to come and live without fear of needing to defend themselves or their families from the forces of darkness. But it would seem, as it always does, that the real darkness is that which lurks in our hearts."

Jaune's brow furrowed. "... You're not wrong," he said quietly. "I just don't understand what would drive someone to do something like that, for something as simple as money."

"That is the difference between a Hero and a villain," the man answered. "The world is a cold, uncaring, scary place; we all stare into that particular abyss at some point, whether we are ready for it or not. The difference between a Hero and a villain is simple - a villain is faced with an uncertain, uncaring world, and wonders why they shouldn't be evil; a Hero is faced with the same, but they instead wonder why they shouldn't be good."

Jaune nodded in understanding. "That's... a good point, I guess; I've never really thought about it that way. But what would drive someone to favor one option over the other?"

"A variety of factors, I am sure, but unfortunately, that is not something we presently have time to discuss." The man checked his watch. "It would seem our stop is coming up, so I suppose this is where we part ways for now. It was good talking with you, Jaune."

"Yeah, same to you," Jaune answered.

The bus stopped and the doors opened. Both men stepped out, and with a nod, they both turned and went their opposite ways, heading for different parts of the hospital. It was only when Jaune had made it to his assigned ward that a thought crossed his mind.

"Wait, how did he know my name...?"

---

The work day continued as normal, thankfully - the worst thing that happened was a few armored car drivers showing up with minor injuries from a small-scale villain robbery, though the perpetrator hadn't made it far before being captured by a passing Hero. It wasn't a villain Jaune had recognized, but it still left him a bit unnerved - the city really was getting worse by the day, with more and more villains popping up out of nowhere.

"Place is going to hell..." Jaune muttered as he watched the armored car guards be treated for their injuries. He shook his head, then turned and began to walk down the hall when the intercom suddenly came to life. He winced, expecting to hear something about a priority call come in, but instead, it was something completely different.

"All available medical staff, please report to the main lobby for a quick meeting."

That was all that was said before the intercom turned off. Jaune blinked, surprised at how mundane the call was, but knew better than to look a gift horse in the mouth. In any case, he wasn't currently busy with a patient, and that meant he'd been included in the announcement.

"Wonder what this is about...?" he muttered as he rose from his seat and began to move towards the main lobby.

He got his answer upon stepping out into it for the first time since arriving that day. The entire lobby had been set up as some kind of makeshift speech podium - there was a small table in the back, at which several of the hospital's chief staff and donors were seated; Jaune could see Doctor Gray sitting among them, which gave him pause.

Whatever was going on, it had to be something important if they'd dragged Gray out of the operating room for it.

There were already loads of people milling about in the lobby, so Jaune stepped over to the crowd, settling in among some of his

fellow nurses. No sooner had he joined them than did one of the hospital's directors step up to the podium and take the microphone.

"Thank you all for coming," he announced, silencing whatever stray chatter was still going on among them. "We will keep this brief, as we know you're all very busy, and because that is the request of our guest... or should I say, new board member?"

A small murmur went through the crowd at that. The hospital's board had been stagnant for a while now, so the announcement of someone new joining in was certainly a shakeup of sorts.

"Anyway, in the interests of time, I won't keep rambling. Please welcome our new board member and majority shareholder, Headmaster Ozpin of Beacon Academy."

Jaune's eyes widened in surprise as the man from the bus stepped out from in back, and took his position in front of the microphone. A round of applause erupted throughout the crowd, and Jaune was quick to join in.

He hadn't recognized Ozpin on the bus, but he'd heard the name before, and knew what it meant to the people of Vale.

Ozpin suddenly held up a hand, quieting the applause. Once that was done, he gave the crowd a warm smile.

"Thank you all for the warm welcome," he announced. "Now, some of you may be wondering why I decided to partner with Vale General so suddenly and without much fanfare. But to better understand that, I believe it necessary to bring up my qualifications first. I was a Hero for several decades before publicly retiring and unmasking in order to staff Beacon Academy for Heroes. It was my belief that we would need brave men and women to help fight the tide of not only Grimm, but also the increasingly-common villains that have claimed Vale as their own."

Jaune pursed his lips, nodding along with what Ozpin was saying. He was speaking sense so far, that much was for sure.

"However, I can see now that my plan was more than a little short-sighted," Ozpin continued. "In so fostering the Heroes who help defend us, I neglected to do the same for the equally as brave men and women who keep us alive when our Heroes cannot always be there. That ends today, however - as your new board member and majority shareholder, you all have my word that I will do everything in my power to support you, the same way you all have supported the city so much. I seek to create a partnership of sorts between Beacon and Vale General, between Heroes and the medical staff who help them. And in doing so, most of all, I hope to help make Vale a much safer place for everybody. Thank you."

With that, Ozpin stepped away from the microphone as another round of applause went up through the crowd. Jaune couldn't help but join in, a big smile on his face.

To him, at least, Ozpin seemed to have a good head on his shoulders, and everything he'd said made perfect sense - Vale was going to need some kind of partnership between Heroes and the medical staff if they wanted to more effectively police Vale.

Well, that and it gave him a chance to get closer to the Heroes he admired. But that was beside the point.

He couldn't wait to get home and tell Cinder the good news.

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"So, have you decided on a name yet?"

Cinder grit her teeth beneath her mask. She'd come back out into the forest to try and blow off some steam on some Grimm, but naturally, that little brat had been there, too. Not only that, but she'd been so distracting that Cinder hadn't found even a single Grimm so far. Even worse, as much as Cinder wanted to blow up at her, she

knew she couldn't - after all, she couldn't risk doing anything that would expose her as who she really was.

"I have not," Cinder replied as evenly as she could.

"Oh. Well, my friends and I could help with that, you know," Scarlet offered, hefting her massive weapon onto her shoulder with practiced ease. "Nightshade is pretty good at coming up with names. Must be because of all the books she reads, come to think of it..."

"I appreciate the sentiment," Cinder told her, a vein pulsing in her forehead. "But this is something I would prefer to do on my own."

"Ah, I get it - you're one of those lone vigilante types, huh? I can respect that. A lot of people don't, but I do - you may not have gone through the official channels or anything like that, but you're still out there doing good work, which means a lot to the city. You're good people, in my eyes."

Scarlet flashed her a grin, one that Cinder didn't even bother to return. It lasted for just a moment before Scarlet suddenly perked up.

"Ooh, it's still pretty early!" she said. "I can take you to meet my friends, they should be out here right now!"

"That's quite alright, but-"

"Nuh-uh!" Scarlet said, shaking her head. "I'm not taking no for an answer!"

Then, before Cinder could react, Scarlet reached out and took her by the hand, then began to run. Before Cinder knew it, they were both moving faster than humanly possible, rose petals trailing behind them as they went - her heart sank into her stomach, and her world began to turn as nausea started to overtake her.

But just as soon as it had started, it was over. The two of them came to a stop in a nearby clearing, and Scarlet let go of her. Cinder

immediately doubled over, dry-heaving and gasping for breath, both hands on her knees. After a few seconds, she looked up to glare at Scarlet, who gave her a sheepish grin in return.

"Heh, sorry," she offered. "My Semblance is always a bit of an adjustment for people when they experience it for the first time. At this point, I've learned that it's best to sorta just rip the bandage off and go all-in right from the start, you know?"

"No," Cinder snapped. "I do not." She looked around, frowning as she stood up straight and dusted stray rose petals off her clothes. "Where are we?"

"Right in the middle of the Emerald Forest," Scarlet offered. "My friends should be here right about... now."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than did several figures emerge from the treeline. Cinder took all three of them in as one - there was a white-haired girl about Scarlet's height, dressed in some kind of military officer's outfit and carrying a rapier with a revolving Dust cylinder; she had on a white domino mask to conceal her face. Next to her was a tall blonde girl, her hair trailing down her back like a wild lion's mane; her outfit was the most plain of the bunch, consisting of little more than a yellow bodysuit topped with ballistic plates and adorned with spare shotgun shells, with the arms left purposely bare to show off her muscles - the most striking part was the dragon-print, Vacuan-style *luchador* mask she had on. Finally, there was the last girl, who was just a bit shorter than the blonde, and was dressed in a black catsuit - fitting, given the Faunus ears atop her head. She had eschewed body armor and any kind of fancy design, instead opting for a battle belt that held several spare pistol magazines, plus an individual first aid kit. A black half-mask covered the lower part of her face, and was styled like a snarling cat.

All in all, they looked as ridiculous as Scarlet did, but that was par for the course for Heroes.

Not everyone could be as practical as Cinder's design was, after all.

"Great, you're here!" Scarlet cheered. "Guys, let me introduce you to... um... well, she doesn't really have a name picked out yet."

"A new Hero, huh?" the blonde asked. "That's cool."

Before Cinder could back away, the musclebound woman approached her and offered her a hand.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "Call me Golden Dragon."

Cinder hesitated, then took the girl's hand. It had been a long time since she'd touched anyone except Jaune; it made her feel uncomfortable.

"Charmed," Cinder forced herself to say.

"Heh. I'm sure."

"Don't mind her," the woman in black said as she approached. "She's just a bit overzealous when she meets other Heroes. Must run in the family, given how her sister acts."

Scarlet puffed out her cheeks. "I am nothing like Dragon! For one, I'm way cuter than she is."

"If you insist, sis," Dragon replied, crossing her arms.

"Anyway, I'm Nightshade," the woman in black said. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Uh, it's *Deadly* Nightshade," Dragon interjected.

Nightshade sighed tiredly. "Dragon, we talked about this."

"Yeah, and we never came to a proper conclusion. I still say *Deadly* Nightshade sounds way more badass than just Nightshade."

"I'm not *trying* to sound badass, I'm trying to be heroic. Having 'Deadly' in my name does not indicate heroics, it indicates

vigilantism." She paused, then looked over to Cinder. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, of course... provided you're not killing people like that one guy was a while back."

"Oh, you mean The Finisher?" Dragon asked. "Whatever happened to him, anyway?"

"Didn't he die?" Scarlet asked quietly.

"Did he? Could've sworn he was still around... maybe someone else took up the mantle..."

"You're all getting off-track," the girl in white said. She nodded towards Cinder. "Ice Queen. Nice to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine," Cinder replied. "Now, I must ask... what are you all doing out here?"

"Eh, killing time, mostly," Dragon explained, running a hand through her hair. "We'll be graduating in just a few weeks, and once that happens, we'll be patrolling the streets."

"It'll be a good crop of heroes coming out this year," Scarlet interjected. "The Red Huntress is part of our graduating class."

Cinder frowned at that. The Red Huntress was probably the most famous Hero-in-training in Vale; she'd never lost a fight while in school, and everything about her was a very closely-guarded secret, even more so than other Heroes, who tended to be a secretive bunch by nature. If she was even half as good as everyone made her out to be, then she would be a force to be reckoned with on the streets of Vale.

"Say," Dragon suddenly cut in, interrupting Cinder's thoughts. "If you're just a newbie, then why don't we show you a thing or two? You never know, it could save your life."

Scarlet blanched. "Dragon, please-"

"Oh, don't be a killjoy, sis," Dragon said. "Come on, I bet she'd be down for a quick spar, just the two of us."

"You can't just introduce yourself to someone by fighting with them--"

"I accept," Cinder announced, cutting her off. Scarlet turned to her in surprise, but Cinder was unperturbed. "I have been meaning to test myself against a real Hero for some time now. This will be a good chance to see how I stack up."

"Yes!" Dragon said, pumping her fist. "I knew you were cool!"

Ice Queen sighed tiredly, bringing a hand up to rub at her face. "This is going to be a disaster... Dragon, just promise us you won't set the forest on fire again."

"Yeah, yeah."

Beneath her mask, Cinder smirked as the two of them took up their positions in the clearing across from each other. This was going to be a great way to let off some steam, with just one caveat.

She was going to have to be careful and hold herself back.

"Fighters ready?" Nightshade called, earning a nod from each. "Standby... begin!"

Cinder was ready when Dragon launched herself at her. She'd known just by looking at the blonde that was an overzealous, shoot-first-ask-questions-never kind of fighter. That made her predictable, and so it was child's play for Cinder to parry her incoming attack, then lash out with one of her own, which bit deeply into her opponent's Aura. Dragons' eyes widened behind her mask, and she hurriedly back off.

"Whoa..." Dragon breathed. "I expected that attack to flatten you, what with you being a newbie and all. I didn't think you'd be ready for me."

"Perhaps I'll be the one teaching you a thing or two," Cinder mused. "The first being... never underestimate your opponent."

Dragon's eyes narrowed, and Cinder had to suppress a smirk. She was a hothead, too, then - excellent; that would make blowing off some steam even easier.

She just needed to keep reminding herself that the goal was supposed to be a friendly spar, rather than one of them taking a trip to the hospital.

Dragon suddenly angled her gauntlets behind her, then fired off twin payloads of explosive buckshot that sent her rocketing towards Cinder. Cinder held her ground, however, tensing and waiting for the exact moment to strike; it came when Dragon had just about closed the distance, one fist cocked back for what would no doubt have been a devastating blow. But at the last minute, Cinder pushed all her Aura into her own legs, forcing herself to move just in time to avoid the incoming shotgun-powered punch. Dragon's fist cratered the ground where she'd been standing just a moment ago, and Cinder was quick to follow up on her opponent's over-extension, striking her with a flurry of blades before darting back.

"Hm," Cinder grunted. "Is that the best you've got?"

Dragon tensed. "Oh, believe me, I'm just getting-"

She suddenly paused, her eyes widening as she stared at something. Cinder squinted, trying to see what she was looking at, and after a moment, she saw, it too - a single strand of golden hair, delicately floating to the ground below. Cinder blinked, unsure of what to think or do, when she noticed Dragon had started to grit her teeth, and her whole body had begun to tremble.

"Oh, no..." Scarlet muttered from the sidelines.

Cinder had no time to ask what what was about to happen before Dragon *exploded*. Flames erupted all around her, and with a manic

yell, she again launched herself at Cinder, but something was different - she had given up all measure of control, instead turning more into some kind of feral beast fueled by pure anger. The change was so sudden that Cinder had not time at all to react, and was forced to try and parry the incoming blows as fast as she could. She managed to block three of them before Dragon broke through her defenses, scoring a devastating hit on her chest. The explosive shotgun blast coupled with Dragon's Aura-enhanced fist sent Cinder flying backwards, and she collided back-first with a nearby tree.

There was no time to languish, however, as Dragon was upon her just a split second later. Cinder managed to keep her at bay with a few wild slashes, which bought her some time to put some distance between herself and her opponent. They stared each other down, both of them panting heavily.

This was no going according to plan. It should've been an easy fight for her - Dragon was far from the most skilled opponent she'd ever fought, or even defeated, for that matter - and yet, she was suddenly on the backfoot.

Dragon advanced upon her once more, and Cinder was just a split-second away from using her Semblance to literally fight fire with fire. She caught herself at the last minute, however - at this point, *everyone* knew what Queen Malevolent's Semblance was; if she used it here, it would expose her for who she really was.

And so, despite her pyromania bursting at the forefront of her mind, Cinder forced herself to quell it, and jumped back into the fray once more.

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Just a few minutes later, Cinder and Dragon separated, both of them breathing heavily, their Auras flickering. Cinder had held herself back, like she'd planned to from the start, but Dragon had proven herself to be a far more capable fighter than she'd expected. In the end, she'd had to push herself a bit more than she'd wanted, and

even then, it still wasn't an outright win - in fact, there was no winner, as far as she could tell.

"Well, that's... disappointing," Scarlet said. "Dragon, I thought you were better than that."

"What can I say, except that she's good?" Dragon offered. She stood up straight, shook herself off, and then marched over to Cinder and offered her a hand. "Good fight."

Cinder stared at the offered appendage for a moment, but then accepted the handshake. "Yes, good fight." She looked up into the sky, frowning when she saw the position of the sun between the clouds. "I need to go."

"So soon?" Nightshade questioned. "We barely even got to know you-"

Cinder didn't wait to hear more, instead turning and beginning to march away. It was almost the end of Jaune's shift, and she wanted to be home to greet him.

"Bye, Camouflage!" Scarlet called after her. "Ooh, that can be your name! It fits you really well!"

Cinder did her best not to grit her teeth as she walked away, and failed miserably.

As soon as she was completely out of sight, she began to snap her fingers, sparks flying from her hands as she walked.

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**Hey hey people, Minaris here. Back from my work trip, figured this one needed an update since it's gone the longest without one.**

**Now then, I do have something I want to say, which is that I'm honestly feeling pretty fucking burned out on fanfics in general**

right now. Not just this one, but all of mine. They're rapidly becoming less and less fun as time goes on. Originals are still fun, but fanfics are losing their luster pretty fucking quick for me.

This is probably understandable on a certain level, since I've been writing RWBY fanfics for about four years now, and I've really increased my pace over the past year or so. Burnout was inevitable, and in fact it's something I've dealt with before, but it was nothing a week or two off couldn't fix. Not this, though - this time it's different. I hardly worked on fanfics at all during those three weeks in London, and I was *still* feeling pretty burned out when I made it back stateside and tried writing them again.

At this point, I'm not really sure what to do except take a step back and slow the fuck down. Maybe make my originals the focus for the time being, since they're what really has my attention. I can still update my fanfics a bit for you guys, but they'll probably be updates I've been storing in reserve rather than newly-produced chapters.

I don't know if this is me entirely quitting fanfics in favor of originals or not. It's probably too early to tell. I think the smart thing to do would be to take a step back, take a deep breath, and reevaluate. So I'll probably take the month of October off of writing fanfics entirely and see how I feel afterwards. If I'm still feeling pretty shitty about them, then I guess I'll have my answer.

I'm going to keep updating through October, like I said. They'll be intermittent, and they'll be old chapters I've stockpiled rather than anything newly-written, but they'll still be updates in the end. But once I'm out of stockpiled chapters for everything... I don't know. Hopefully by then I've got an answer.

Thanks for reading, and thank you all for the love and support you've shown me over the years. I owe you all so much, and I'm

super frustrated that the burnout has hit me this hard. I'll see where I stand after about the end of October. Even if this does have to mark the end of my fanfic writing, I guarantee you all I'll still be around in some form, whether that's just lurking or getting my originals published, and I'll be in touch with all of you as best as I can.

Thanks again to all of you ,

Minaris

# Chapter 6

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 6

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Cinder got home just a little bit before Jaune's shift generally ended. She let out a tired sigh as she dumped her "Hero" duffel bag off in the safe in their shared bedroom.

Finally, she'd been able to work most of the kinks out of her system. If nothing else, the Grimm, at least, burned just as well as everything else in Vale did. And unlike when she did it in Vale, out there, the Grimm were completely fair game.

Of course, Scarlet had found her eventually, like the little nuisance she was.

"Little pest..." Cinder muttered as she closed the safe and spun the dial, leaving it securely locked. There was little inside save for the two duffel bags full of gear, plus some loose cash in case she needed to suddenly cut and run for a while; most of her real money was secured in either one of several safe houses scattered across Vale, or hidden in an offshore account. Even if they were to discover who she was and arrest her, they had no way of touching the vast majority of her money.

Of course, if they *did* catch her, they'd probably sooner fry her in the electric chair than give her a life sentence. Being Vale's number one supervillain would do that, she supposed. But at the very least, if they somehow did catch her, Jaune would be able to live lavishly for quite some time.

Cinder shook those thoughts from her head, then stepped out of the bedroom and back into the living room. She flopped down on the

couch and began to absentmindedly flip through channels on the TV. It was all mindless garbage, as it always was; idly, she wondered why they even bothered paying for the service. Jaune was gone for most of the day, and she didn't much care for TV in the first place. Even when they were together, they preferred other activities compared to watching a show or a movie together. Not just sex, either - Jaune was a bit of an old-school romantic, so dinners and walks in the park were very commonplace between them. Really, though, her favorite thing to do with him was just silently enjoy his company, and the peace of mind he brought her.

As insane as the world could be, at least she'd always have Jaune by her side, serving as her rock.

The door opened, and Jaune stepped into the apartment. The first thing Cinder noticed was that he seemed quite riled up, like he had too much energy he needed to burn.

"Let's do something," he declared.

Cinder blinked. "... Okay. What, did you mean like something new, or-"

"Yeah, why not?"

"I see. I'll go get the lubricant, and-"

"No, no, not like that." Jaune paused. "... Unless you're offering, of course. But that's for later! For now, I think we need to go out for a bit."

"Okay," Cinder said. Anything for him, after all. "What did you have in mind?"

"Drive-in," Jaune declared. "There's a retro drive-in not far from here. You pull up, they take your order from the window, and you eat while watching a movie together on the big screen. I think it'd be a nice change of pace."

Cinder frowned. "There's something you're missing."

"Yeah?"

"We don't have a car, Jaune."

"We can rent one," he said. "There's a rental place down the street from here. I figure since it'll only be for a night, we can borrow it for a pretty good price."

"Do you even know how to drive? That's a genuine question, by the way."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do," Jaune said, proud of himself. "Dad showed me how before I moved out, even made me get my license and everything. I'm road-legal."

"Your license isn't expired, is it?"

His expression faltered. "... It shouldn't be?"

"Jaune."

"Okay, more confidently, then - it's not expired. Good enough for you?"

"I suppose," Cinder conceded. "What movie were you planning on?"

Jaune rubbed the back of his head. "Well, it's a retro drive-in, so whatever they're showing will probably be at least a few decades old. Honestly, though, it's not really about the movie as much as it is the experience of something new. So, you interested?"

"I don't see why not," Cinder said, rising from the couch. "It beats absentmindedly sitting here and clicking through TV channels while complaining about how there's nothing on."

"We don't do that *that* often, do we?" Jaune asked. Cinder just stared at him, and he gave her a sheepish grin. "Alright, so I guess the two

of us need some more hobbies together... we'll figure that out after, I guess. For now, let's get going."

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As it turned out, Jaune had been right about the rental car. Since they were only taking it for a night, they'd gotten it at a low enough rate that they could afford it even on what little was in their shared bank account.

Of course, now that they had the car, the problem was actually getting there.

"Let's see..." Jaune muttered to himself. "Brakes in, then turn the key to start... after that, put it in drive, and should be good to go..."

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Cinder asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Shh, I'm driving here, no backseating," Jaune said playfully without looking over to her.

"Technically, we're stopped, so you're not actually driving yet."

The engine suddenly roared to life, and Jaune stuck his tongue out at her. Again, she rolled her eyes, but said nothing in response. Jaune put the car in drive, then began to carefully peel out of the rental place's parking lot.

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The movie, as it turned out, was one she'd seen when she'd first met Jaune - some sci-fi romp about a young kid from a backwoods planet taking on a galactic empire with a ragtag bunch of misfits. Cinder had never much been one for science fiction, but it had brought back memories of her early days with Jaune, and so she'd managed to enjoy the film nonetheless.

Dinner was as expected, too - a tray full of burgers and fries soaked in grease. Far from the apex of the culinary arts, but she'd certainly

had worse meals, and she'd never been one for high society, anyway... unless she was stealing from them, of course.

Experience had taught her that she'd never be accepted among the high society types, and so she had never bothered to try integrating with them.

In any case, they'd finished their dinner and the movie, and then they'd turned in the rental car. Now they were just walking home. It wasn't far, maybe fifteen minutes by foot. Cinder sighed contently as they walked, lost in her own little world.

The two of them walked hand-in-hand, gentle smiles across both their faces. This was what she loved most about being with Jaune - just being able to quietly enjoy each other's presence like they were now. There was certainly something to be said for being able to be around someone and just *know* they loved you and your presence without either of you having to say a single word. It was comforting.

So comforting, in fact, that she had almost completely missed the man moving out of the shadows of a nearby alleyway.

Cinder caught him in her sight at the last minute, but by then, it was too late - he'd already presented the blued revolver, aiming it directly between Jaune's eyes as he thumbed back the hammer. She watched the cylinder rotate almost in slow motion, her eyes widening at the anticipated shot, but none ever came. It took her a moment to realize why.

This was a mugging, not a murder. At least, not yet.

"Empty your pockets," the man demanded. "You too, lady. And make it quick before I lose my cool and do something you'll both regret."

Cinder's eyes narrowed dangerously. She was tempted to slip into her alter-ego then and there - how *dare* this man point a gun at *her* Jaune. It was unacceptable, and if it'd just been the two of them, she would have made him pay easily enough. But it wasn't - Jaune was

right there, and in typical Jaune fashion, he had already moved to defend her.

"Leave her out of this," Jaune said, stepping front of Cinder with his arms outstretched. "She doesn't have anything on her. I'm the one with the money."

"I'll be the judge of that," the mugger growled. "Empty your pockets, now."

"Okay, okay. No need to lose your composure. Just stay calm; I'm gonna reach into my pocket and hand over my wallet."

Jaune kept one hand raised, then slowly slipped his other into his pocket and retrieved his wallet, which he went to hand to the man. The mugger immediately shook his head, though.

"Throw it on the ground and back up," he said with a snarl. "Now."

Jaune nodded in understanding, then did exactly that, throwing his wallet a few inches away from the man's feet before beginning to backpedal. But not her; *never* her. No, Cinder stayed rooted to her spot.

"Cinder," Jaune said, panic creeping into his voice. "Cinder, it's just money. Let him have it."

Cinder hesitated. Jaune was right - letting this man rob them was the smart thing to do, at least at this point. But on the other hand... he'd pointed a gun - a *loaded* gun; she could see the hollow-point rounds lining the revolver's cylinder in the moonlight - at her fiance. If it hadn't been for that, she would have let the man go, if only to make things easier on herself and because it was what Jaune wanted. But not now.

No, he needed to learn what happened when someone messed with *her* Jaune.

"Are you fucking stupid or something?" the mugger said with a snarl. "I said, back up-"

He took a step towards her, leading with the revolver as if to threaten her further with it, and that was his undoing. Cinder immediately lunged towards him, aiming for the pistol; the gun discharged once before she could wrestle it away, and she heard Jaune let out a panicked shout, but she'd felt the bullet impact against her Aura. Good, Jaune was safe now and she could take her revenge.

It was an easy feat to disarm the would-be mugger - he was untrained and uncoordinated; nothing more than some punk with a gun. But that wasn't going to stop her, especially not when she had Aura-enhanced strength and he clearly didn't.

She introduced herself to him by breaking his dominant arm in three places with just a few well-placed strikes, and it was all downhill from there for him. Past that opener, however, she couldn't recall what she'd done - it was all one big infliction of sheer agony on her unfortunate victim.

And as she rained down blows upon the man, she thought back to earlier, during her fight with Dragon. The mere thought of it forced her to grit her teeth - she'd almost *lost* that fight, the first near-loss in a very long time. And that bothered her, far more than it had any right to. It bothered her such that thin wisps of smoke began to curl up from her hands as she beat the man to within an inch of his life.

She'd wanted to wipe that cocky smirk and angry look off Dragon's face. It reminded her so much of earlier in life, how the people she hated always gave her the same looks, even if for different reasons. Dragon hadn't meant to do it, but she'd dredged up some *very* bad memories, and Cinder intended to make *someone* pay for it. And now she had the perfect excuse to do exactly that and get away with it.

There was a loud crunch as she shattered the mugger's jaw, spilling blood and shards of teeth across the pavement. This wasn't the

worst beatdown she'd ever given out, but it was far from merciful. And it only ended when Jaune suddenly and forcibly pulled her off the man.

"That's enough," Jaune said sternly, yet quietly. Cinder looked at him in surprise, the haze of battle finally clearing itself from her mind, before she finally realized why he'd been so quiet.

The mugger wasn't dead, but he almost certainly wished he was by now. At this point, he was little more than a ball of sentient pain curled up on the concrete. Cinder herself was stained with streaks of blood, not a single drop of which was hers. The gun had been discarded a ways away, and was lying there, forgotten; Cinder stood up and moved to retrieve it. Jaune's expression turned to one of sheer terror, but whatever he'd been expecting, she defied it by simply opening the cylinder and dumping the remaining ammunition out on the street, then tossing the gun away.

The moment it was safe, Jaune rushed over to her, then began to look her over for injuries.

"Are you okay?" Jaune demanded as he fussed over her. "Where did he shoot you? Where does it hurt? Are you bleeding anywhere? Lie down so I can look you over."

"Jaune," Cinder protested. "I'm fine, really."

"How can you be fine?! I saw that bullet hit you, I saw-" Jaune instantly paused, his eyes going wide as he stared at her. "... You flashed gold when that happened. That... that was your Aura, wasn't it?"

Cinder didn't say anything, because she wasn't sure how to respond to that. Jaune was never supposed to know she had Aura in the first place - that was never supposed to factor into their relationship together; she'd always intended to keep it a secret, lest he attempt to dig deeper into it.

And now, it had been exposed with a single bullet.

Jaune hesitated for a moment. "... When were you going to tell me?"

"I wasn't," Cinder answered truthfully. "It's... not something I thought would help our relationship."

"Why is that? You know I love you. That will never change."

"Because..." She searched for something to say, some lie that could help her claw her way out of the hole she'd dug herself into, but came up empty. Instead, she sighed, then shook her head, and told the truth. "... It's not a happy story, how I got it."

Jaune's face went slack with shock, but just a moment later, he recovered, the surprise replaced with a face of patient understanding. "Does this have to do with your past?"

"It does."

Jaune bit his lip. Cinder had mentioned her past to him before - how she didn't like to talk about it. Jaune knew she wasn't lying, either - nobody could fake her reactions to the nightmares that plagued her almost every day. Cinder was no idiot, however - she knew he had to be wondering just how bad her past had been, but at the same time, she'd made it clear that discussing it was a boundary she never wanted to cross.

She could see how torn he was, how he longed to know more about her so he could reach out to her and try to help her move past it... but there was no way she was going to indulge him.

Some corpses were better left buried, after all.

Jaune must have seen the conflicting emotions on her face, because he hurriedly reached out and put a hand on her shoulder.

"You don't have to tell me anything," he offered. "That is, unless you want to. I understand it's painful for you; I don't want to reopen old

wounds that may have already started to heal. But just know that when you're ready to talk - and that day may never come, and that's fine by me... but if it ever *does* come, I'll be right here next to you, and nothing you say will ever keep me from loving you, Cinder."

Despite herself, Cinder felt tears come to her eyes. Jaune pulled her into a deep embrace, and she sniffled softly into his shoulder.

And a small part of her even believed in what he was saying.

Sirens caught their attention a few seconds later, and Cinder already knew what was coming. They broke apart just as the police arrived, hands on their holstered weapons.

"What's going on around here?" one of the officers asked. "Someone called in about a shooting."

"It was him," Jaune immediately declared, pointing at the downed mugger. "He tried to mug us, and fired a shot when it became clear we weren't going to comply. My fiance was forced to defend herself."

The officer looked over to his partner for confirmation, who just shrugged. The lead cop pursed his lips, then pointed to Jaune and Cinder.

"Watch them," he said to his partner, who nodded. The other cop moved over to examine the downed mugger, grimacing when he reached him.

"Yeah, I recognize this one," he declared. "Out on bail after robbing a liquor store a few weeks ago... somehow, I'm not surprised to find him like this." He looked up, turning towards Cinder. "You're the one who did this?"

"I am," Cinder confirmed.

"Shit... this might be the single worst educational beatdown I think I've ever seen. You folded this guy like an old lawn chair."

"Educational beatdown?" Jaune echoed.

"Yeah, you know - sometimes, some aspiring future doctor or lawyer - because that's always what they are, according to their parents - decides to do something stupid, and ends up victimizing the wrong person. Then they get the fucksmack laid on them. If they're smart, that will deter them from doing the same thing ever again, but then again, if criminals were smart, they wouldn't be criminals."

Cinder wisely chose not to comment.

"Anyway," the officer continued, "looks like there's a security camera on that building overhead. If it's working and your story checks out, then you're both free to go."

"And if it doesn't?" Cinder asked.

The officer shrugged. "Well, at this point, it's you two against him. And given that he probably can't talk all that well through all the broken teeth, I'm inclined to believe your side of the story."

"So we're free to go either way?" Jaune asked, hopeful.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," the other cop interjected. "This is still an active investigation. You're both being detained for the time being." He keyed his microphone. "Dispatch, we've made contact. Send backup and EMS to my position, over." Once he'd said that much, he turned back to Jaune and Cinder. "Let us check the footage first. If it's all good to go, we'll let you be on your way. Are you both pressing charges, or is his asskicking satisfying enough for you?"

"Of course we're pressing charges," Jaune said firmly. "He tried to shoot my fiance. I want him behind bars for a very long time."

"Shouldn't be an issue, then. Just give us a few minutes, we'll pull the footage and you both should be all set."

---

As it turned out, it did, in fact, take them just a few minutes to review the footage from the nearby security camera. Once the police had done that, they'd been able to verify their story, and aside from a few knowing looks over at Cinder, they'd let them both go without issue. The two of them had made their way back to their shared apartment in silence, though Cinder already knew exactly what to expect from the looks Jaune was giving her.

And once they were safely inside the apartment with the door shut behind them, Jaune all but pounced.

"Talk to me, please," Jaune said. "Your Aura is one thing, but those moves... where did you learn to fight like that?"

"Just some things I picked up over the years," Cinder hurriedly explained. "I've always had an interest in self-defense, and my company has only fostered that interest since I joined."

"Makes sense, I suppose... of course, I have to ask..."

*Don't*, Cinder silently begged. It was no use, however - Jaune began to shake with anticipation, and she knew what was coming before he even said it.

"Are you a Hero?!" Jaune asked excitedly, a huge smile on his face.

Cinder winced. Jaune had always been a fan of Heroes, much to her chagrin. On a few separate occasions, she'd even tried steering him towards villains, such as by pointing out Queen Malevolent's shapely figure and child-bearing hips, but he'd always brushed her off. That had wounded her somewhat, but not nearly as much as his incessant obsession with Heroes.

And now, it seemed, it had come full-circle.

"I..." Cinder hesitated, unsure of what to say. "... Dabble."

"You dabble?" Jaune asked. "What does that mean? Do you fight crime?"

"I... fight Grimm, mainly," Cinder replied. Sure, she'd dug herself this deep, why not go along with it? "To prepare for fighting criminals."

Jaune let out a decidedly un-masculine squeal of excitement.

"I can't believe it... !" he said. "I'm marrying a Hero!"

Again, Cinder winced. "Not so loud, please," she implored.

"Ah... right; don't want the neighbors figuring that out, yeah? You don't need to worry, Cin - I won't tell a soul. I'll take this secret with me to my grave."

"Good," she said. "Because... it would be very bad if anyone found out."

"Why is that?" Jaune's eyes lit up. "Ooh, do you have a nemesis? Do I need to worry about being captured by a villain? Ah, but then, you'd save me, wouldn't you?"

"Jaune," Cinder said, more sternly. "This isn't a laughing matter. Seriously."

Jaune's smile faded. "What's wrong, babe?"

Cinder rubbed her hands together, anxious. She did her best not to cause sparks to fly between them. "... This isn't how I wanted you to find out," she said softly. "I was hoping I'd have more time to put something together... I mean, I didn't *want* to tell you, since it'd be so dangerous, but... I figured I'd always need a contingency, just in case..."

"Hey," Jaune said quietly, moving towards her to put a hand on her shoulder. "It's okay, Cinder. You know I'll always love and support you, no matter what. This changes nothing between us."

Cinder sucked in a shaky breath. "... Thank you, Jaune."

Once again, she allowed herself to believe it.

Jaune gave her another smile. "Sorry if I'm excited; I never thought I'd be marrying a Hero. This is legitimately like a dream come true for me."

Cinder returned his grin with a sheepish one of her own. "You know, somehow I feel like this shouldn't surprise me."

Internally, however, she was panicking. And as she stared into those brilliant blue eyes of his, the same words from her nightmare came back once more.

*The walls that build you up can burn you down the same.*

---

**And there's the next one. Hope you all enjoyed it. I figured it's been awhile since there was any good Knightfall content from this story, so might as well throw a bunch at you guys at once lol.**

**The date at the drive-in was entirely Ickbard's idea. I had no idea what to do for a fun date with those two, and he ended up saving the day with that suggestion, which worked perfectly.**

**Ick: The date was based on a restaurant I went with my family to Disneyworld. It was such a silly and hokey idea that I felt it would be too good to miss out on a silly date.**

**And then, of course, we took that and ran with it, making sure to spice it up with a bit of the ol' ultra-violence along the way. Because it's not a story featuring Minaris without a bit of that, apparently.**

**Oh, and can't forget that Jaune knows the truth now. Kinda. Sorta. Alright, not really. But he's on his way there, maybe?**

**Guess you'll just have to keep reading to find out, lol.**

**Thanks again for all the support. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and we'll see you next time.**

# Chapter 7

Auras and Alibis

Chapter 7

---

"I think I need a new job."

Nora looked up from her spot in front of the mirror, surprised enough that she'd actually paused partway through pulling on her superhero outfit. "Seriously? I thought you enjoyed working in a restaurant."

"I wait tables, Nora," Ren said. He let out a dejected sigh as he flopped down onto the couch, pulling his black bowtie off in the process and letting it fall to the floor. "That's not nearly enough to pay the bills."

Nora's brow furrowed. "I could always try and get something else--"

"You're the more stable out of the two of us," Ren reminded her. "Relying on tips is not a good way to keep us going from day to day. And until we bust enough criminals for the city to take notice and start supporting us, we're on our own."

"I guess you've got a point," Nora reluctantly said. "Okay... what do you suggest?"

"I was just looking through help wanted ads on my break," Ren told her. "There's plenty of work out there, and it all pays better than waiting tables. Hours aren't as flexible, of course, but I figure that if there's two of us out there patrolling, it won't matter that much. That is, assuming you're okay with taking up my slack."

"Of course I am," Nora replied. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Just wanted to make sure you were fine with it, in addition to your regular job. And it goes without saying, but if I get something more substantial than what I have now, you might be operating without support from time to time."

"Plenty of people do that," Nora said, putting a hand on her hip. "I'll be fine as long as I don't run into Queen Malevolent or something."

Ren hesitated. "So long as you're okay with it-"

"Ren," Nora said, cutting him off. "It's fine. Besides, I'm as sick of living in this glorified closet as you are. If this helps us move out sooner, I'm all for it."

Ren blinked, but then he nodded, a thin smile crossing his face. "Guess I'll start applying, then."

"In a minute, if you don't mind - I'm about to head out on patrol."

"Of course, Nora." Ren stood up and made his way over to the computer, taking a seat at the chair and slipping on the headset nearby. The instant it was over his ears, he heard a police scanner go off, and turned to Nora.

"Shooting at Taupe Avenue," he reported. "One victim dead; shooter's barricaded himself inside an abandoned building and is in a standoff with police."

"Pssh, for real?" Nora asked, crossing her arms. "Come on, there's gotta be something better than that kind of small fry."

Ren shrugged. "That's what's out there at the moment, apparently. And besides, I know you too well to know you'd turn down the chance to stop a violent criminal like this."

"You're too smart for your own good," Nora told him, pursing her lips. "Alright, I'm headed out. Watch my six."

"Nora, I thought we talked about the military language thing."

"That's not military language. If I wanted to use military language, I'd say something a lot more off-color and dark than that."

Ren rolled his eyes. "You know what I meant. Now get going, would you?"

Nora grinned at him as she pulled on her mask, then stepped out onto the balcony. Their apartment was on the fifth floor, but that didn't bother her as she jumped off the ledge. The moment she was gone, Ren turned back towards the computer, watching as the news reports began to roll in.

Nora was sure to make short work of the perpetrator, which gave him all the time in the world to job hunt.

"Let's just hope she doesn't send this one to the ICU..." he muttered.

---

Jaune let out a wide yawn as he walked through the hospital halls. It was early in the morning, but he'd drawn the short straw, which meant he was working the graveyard shift for the week. Not fun, but there was a little extra pay in it for him for his troubles, which was nice. And at the very least, things tended to be a lot quieter at these hours - sure, all the violent crime happened at night, but there were far fewer car accidents, Grimm attacks, and the like, simply because everyone was too busy sleeping to do anything stupid.

Of course, there was always something, such as that guy who'd been admitted earlier in the week under full police escort with two badly broken legs. He wasn't sure what *that* had been about, only that the guy had gotten himself on a Hero's bad list or something. In any case, Jaune hadn't been stuck with him, thankfully, so he was currently free to do whatever until the next crisis reared its ugly head. This was both a blessing and a curse, however - a blessing because it meant nobody was currently dying under his care, and a curse because it meant he was very, very bored. Cinder wasn't responding to any of his texts, which meant she was asleep, and he couldn't blame her for it. But that just meant he was left with nothing to do

save for browsing the DustNet on his scroll and trying not to fall asleep.

Eventually, though, it was time for him to clock out, so to speak. Jaune breathed a sigh of relief when he realized his time was up. Pocketing his scroll, Jaune rose to his feet and tiredly shuffled his way to the front of the hospital.

As luck would have it, he was just in time to see a familiar face enter through the doors.

Immediately, Jaune's lethargy faded, his eyes going wide. "Ren...?"

"Jaune?" Ren asked, turning towards the sound of his voice. "You're working at this hour?"

"Yeah, I'm on graveyard shift this week. What are you doing here? Is everything okay? Nora didn't stick a fork in an electrical outlet again, did she?"

"No, not since last time," Ren answered. "And don't worry, we're all fine. No, I'm actually here about a job posting."

"You're applying for a position here?" Jaune asked.

Ren nodded. "Yup. They're looking for a security guard - I figure I could use something a bit more permanent and higher-paying than being a waiter. This seemed like as good a place to start as any."

A grin split Jaune's face. "Well, you've come to the right place, buddy! We've been looking for a new security guard, and you'd fit the bill perfectly for that kind of job. Although... how are you when it comes to dealing with violent criminals?"

Ren shrugged. "I've been around the block a time or two. One doesn't grow up in the slums of Mistral without learning things here and there. I'm sure it's nothing I've never experienced before."

"That's good to hear. Well, I mean, not *good* to hear, but I'm glad you're capable of dealing with it. A lot of people aren't." Jaune suddenly perked up. "Say, do you need a reference? I'd be more than willing to vouch for you."

"That's nice of you, but I don't think it's that official," Ren answered. "But if I do need one, you'll be first on my list."

Jaune grinned. "Well, I hope you get the job, man. And when you do, call me up, I'll cook dinner to celebrate."

Ren smiled at him. "That'd be great, Jaune. Thank you."

Jaune cast a glance up at the clock, his grin fading when he saw what time it was. "Shoot... I've got to get going, Ren. It was nice to see you."

"Same to you, Jaune. Be safe on your way home."

With that, Ren turned and continued on to his interview. Jaune, meanwhile, kept going through the hospital, eager to make his way home for the night.

---

Cinder was somehow awake by the time he made it back. She was doing some basic calisthenics on a mat laid out on their apartment floor; immediately, Jaune found himself stopping and staring at her as she moved, before she turned around and gave him a smirk.

"See something you like?"

"I, uh..." Jaune tugged at the collar of his scrubs, his face flushing red. "... Those yoga pants and that sports bra are a *crime*, and you know it."

"I try," she all but purred. Cinder stood up and walked over to where he was standing, then threw her arms around him.

"Tell me," she said softly. "Why is it that you're still so easy to fluster, even after all this time? You've seen me naked and heard me moan your name over and over again, and yet every time you see me like this, it's like it's the very first time once more."

"What can I say? A beautiful lady has that kind of effect on me."

"Mm... flattery will get you and only you absolutely everywhere, Jaune."

"They're special words for a special girl. You know I've only got eyes for you."

Cinder's grin widened. "Then it's a good thing that all of this is for your eyes only."

"Is that why you're always so careful about staying in shape?"

"Why else if not to give you a show? And, if I must say... the stretches do give me quite a few *ideas* for things to try~"

Jaune flushed even redder, and she gave a low laugh. Cinder leaned in, and the two of them shared a brief kiss before she pulled away, Jaune giving a small whine as she did so.

"Are you gonna make me beg for it or something?" he asked.

"I *was*, if only for my own amusement, but you sound so pitiful right now that I can't bring myself to do it," Cinder mused. "Truly, you are like a human golden retriever. How am I supposed to do or say anything unseemly towards someone like you?"

"You love me for it," Jaune replied.

"Indeed," Cinder purred.

She reached out and took his hand, then led him to the bedroom, closing the door behind them just as they fell into each other's embrace once more.

---

When Jaune awoke late in the day, Cinder was already out of bed. From the smell wafting through the house, she'd made some of those frosted toaster pastries for the two of them. Not exactly the breakfast of champions, but they would do in a pinch.

Not to mention, that was about the extent that he trusted her to actually cook anything.

"One of these days, I'll teach her the basics..." Jaune muttered as he threw the covers off himself and stood up, stretching. "At the very least, I can get her to make something simple. Macaroni and cheese, maybe? Or is that still too much of a fire hazard?"

"Talking to yourself?" Cinder asked from behind him. Jaune paused, his face flushing red; he was still naked from the night before.

"Hey, babe," Jaune greeted. "You, uh, mind handing me my underwear?"

"Now, why would I want to do that?" she asked, stepping into the room. "I'm quite enjoying the little show you're putting on. A girl could get used to this~"

"I still have to go to work, you know," Jaune pointed out. "So I'd prefer to not get down and dirty before then."

"Mm, I don't know, you haven't showered yet. Seems like the perfect time."

He could *hear* the smirk in her tone. It took every fiber of his being to shake his head.

"Honestly, I'm still pretty drained from last night," he admitted. "Maybe once I'm home from work?"

Cinder didn't even look disappointed. Instead, she just nodded. "Very well. And don't feel obligated or anything - my libido can wait if you

aren't feeling up to it."

"Oh, I don't think you'll have to worry about that." Jaune eyed her up and down, taking note of how the robe she was wearing clung to her figure, showing off her curves. Cinder had always been the most attractive woman he'd ever seen; frankly, he still didn't know what she was doing with a guy like him, though she'd always told him never to doubt himself like that whenever he'd voiced that particular thought.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder, for some reason.

"Breakfast, by the way," Cinder said, offering him a plate with two of the pastries on it. "Brown sugar cinnamon, just how you like it."

"Thanks."

As Jaune ate his breakfast, Cinder sat down on the bed, staring out the window. "So," she ventured. "What's on the agenda for today?"

Jaune swallowed what was in his mouth. "Eh, same old. Oh, there is one interesting thing that happened last night, though - I didn't get a chance to tell you about it before... well, you know."

"Yes, I know. But do tell; you sound excited."

"Ren applied for a job at the hospital," Jaune said, unable to hide the excited grin that crossed his face. "He's trying to become a security guard."

"Truly?" Cinder asked. "Well, that would be fun for you both."

"Yeah, it would. Ren's a great guy, and I think he'd be really good at that job. I certainly hope he gets it; I think he mentioned he'd be hearing back about it pretty soon. We'll have to invite him and Nora over for dinner if it goes well."

"That reminds me," Cinder said. "What are those two to each other, anyway?"

"Legitimately, I have no idea, and I don't think they do, either."

---

It was a few hours later that Jaune called her. Cinder immediately looked up from the book she was reading, her eyes going wide. Jaune never called her from work, which could only mean that either something very good or very bad had happened.

And for the sake of the entire city, she hoped that it was the former rather than the latter.

Tentatively, Cinder picked up her scroll and set it to speaker.

"Yes?"

"Ren got the job!" Jaune all but shouted. "He starts really soon, too - like, next week!"

Cinder couldn't help but purse her lips. Truthfully, she'd been trying to think of ways to get Jaune to quit his job and spend more time at home with her, but she knew he'd never go for that, since he enjoyed his job too much. And now with Ren there, he was probably going to end up spending even more time at the hospital, whether he intended to or not.

Still, she was happy for him, on a certain level - Jaune didn't have many friends, and of the few he had, the one he was closest to was Ren. And as much as she wanted to keep Jaune all for herself, she knew he wouldn't be happy if he didn't have any friends.

So she forced herself to grin, and for her tone to take on just a tinge of joviality.

"That's great, Jaune," she said.

"Yeah, it's awesome! I already told Ren that we're having him and Nora over next weekend to celebrate. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Cinder lied. She didn't *dislike* Ren and Nora, at least not in the same way she disliked nearly everyone else, but she much preferred being alone or with Jaune than being around other people.

It was funny - she'd always intended for Jaune to be a form of stress relief more than anything. And yet, here she was, having grown attached to him so easily. Her older self would probably be ashamed of her, but she didn't care; she'd somehow managed to find the one good person she could mostly trust, and now they were set to be married in just a few months.

It almost defied belief, really, but then again, she'd always had a habit of making her own destiny.

"Babe, you there?"

Cinder suddenly shook her head, focusing on her scroll once more. "Sorry, I spaced out. You were saying?"

"Oh, I was just saying that we should make something special this time around. Do you think we could splurge a bit and get some nice steaks? I know it'll be stretching our budget for the month pretty thin, but Ren and Nora are worth it... and you are too, of course."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Cinder replied. "Just don't ask me to help cook the steaks."

"Ha! Don't you worry. Though, one of these days, I *will* teach you how to prepare at least a basic meal. Can't go your whole life eating cold sandwiches, chips, and microwavable pasta when I'm not here to cook for you. Plus, it'll give us something to do together."

A genuine smile crossed her face. "That would be fun."

"Yeah, it would. Anyway, I've gotta get back to work. Just wanted to call and let you know the good news."

Cinder nodded. "I'll see you in a bit, Jaune. Love you."

"Love you, too."

With that, the line went dead. Cinder stared at her scroll for a moment, then sighed and set it down on the coffee table.

Somehow, things just kept getting more complicated as time went on. Thankfully, it was just going to be Ren and Nora, though - they weren't exactly her favorite people, but she knew how to handle them.

---

"You made it!"

Jaune's voice resounding through the front of the apartment caught Cinder's attention. She paused midway through putting in her earrings, then listened carefully. After a moment, she heard Ren and Nora begin talking, and allowed her guard to drop.

Some might think of her as paranoid, but she knew better than to expect that every knock at the door was going to come from a friendly face.

Cinder finished getting ready, then stepped out into the main room. Ren and Nora were already there, Ren midway through placing a bottle of wine on the counter. She couldn't help but raise an eyebrow when she saw the label; it wasn't exactly high-dollar, but it was a bit more expensive than the bottles the two of them usually brought to share.

Apparently, her and Jaune weren't the only ones splurging.

"Aw, you guys shouldn't have!" Jaune exclaimed as he examined the bottle.

"When we heard you were getting steak, we figured we ought to try and one-up you," Nora said with a grin.

"Oh, it's nothing major, just a couple of strips."

"Well, this is also nothing major, just a Valean red. See? Two can play at that game!"

Jaune couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Alright, alright - you win." He reached for the bottle, along with a nearby corkscrew. "Let's not keep everyone in suspense, then."

---

A short while later, and they were all sitting at the table, their plates cleaned. Jaune finished wiping his mouth with his napkin, then sat back, a content sigh escaping him.

"I don't know about you all, but I thought that was fantastic," he commented. "Which one of you picked out the wine?"

"Ren did," Nora said.

"Well, it was an excellent choice - complimented the steaks perfectly."

"I try," Ren told him.

"Heh." Jaune leaned forward in his seat. "You know, there's something I was meaning to bring up - you and Cinder have similar jobs now, Ren."

"Do we?" Ren asked.

"Yup. You work security, she works security... small world, I suppose. Though, I suppose her job is a little different than yours."

"How so?" Nora questioned.

"Honestly, she'd probably be the one to tell you that better than me." Jaune turned towards Cinder, a small grin crossing his face. "What is it that you do anyway, babe?"

Cinder pursed her lips. "... I guard whoever hires me for protection."

"Sounds lucrative," Ren commented.

"It has its highs and lows. Sometimes it's busy, sometimes it's not. It all depends on the clients."

"Sounds fancy," Nora interjected. "Get anyone rich and famous?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Ah, of course, of course. Well, can you at least tell us what it's like?"

"Boring," Cinder commented. "Most people know better than to mess with armed security. Generally, my days are very slow, aside from dealing with the occasional lunatic who stalked the famous object of their desire. But even then, my weapon has never even left its holster. Hopefully you can be as lucky, Ren."

"Indeed," he said with a nod. He leaned over to check the nearby clock, frowning as he did so. "Shoot... we've got to get going, Jaune."

"Oh," Jaune said, disappointed. "Any particular reason?"

"Yeah, we're... looking for a new place to live," Nora offered. "Since Ren's making more money and got a nice signing bonus, we figured it's time we upgrade from a hole in the wall to a slightly bigger hole in the wall."

Jaune waved her off. "Say no more, Nora - the two of us will clean up here. You two just stay safe on your way back."

Nora stood up and gave Jaune a hug, while Ren shook his hand. Jaune guided them both to the door, then gently closed it behind them as they stepped out.

"I must admit, that was kinda strange," Jaune commented as he stepped back over to the table and began gathering plates. "I don't think I've ever seen them in that much of a hurry before. And so early in the night, too..."

"Look on the bright side - they left the wine," Cinder said, pouring herself another glass.

"True, true." Jaune set the dishes in the sink, then sat down next to her, taking her hand in his. "You know, we haven't really talked about what happened the other night."

"You mean with that thug?" Cinder asked.

"That, and your Aura. I mean... I'm dating someone a Hero! I'm *marrying* a Hero!"

Cinder couldn't help but wince at that. "Keep it down, please," she said. "I don't want anyone else finding out..."

"Ah, right - your secret identity." Jaune nodded along with his words. "So, how many criminals have you busted? Is that what you do when I'm not at home, and you're not working your day job? No wonder you spend so much time around the apartment... Ooh, do you think I could be your sidekick, and-"

"Jaune," Cinder said, her voice stern. Jaune instantly quieted down, staring at her with surprise. Cinder felt a pang of remorse pass through her at the harshness that had entered her voice, but she pushed it away.

This was for his own good.

"This isn't a game, Jaune," she warned. "I know you're excited, but you understand that this has to remain a secret, right? Nobody can know about this, for obvious reasons."

Slowly, Jaune nodded. "... Right. Yeah, I get that."

"And you can't be my sidekick. I'm sorry, but without Aura and training-"

"No... no, I get it - it's too dangerous. That makes sense."

Cinder let out a breath. "Good. You know I love you, but I simply can't let you put yourself in harm's way like that."

"I understand, Cinder. Though, if you don't mind me asking... how'd you get your Aura in the first place? I thought someone had to unlock it for you."

That was partially true, at least - most people had their Aura unlocked for them by someone else. But there were cases of people unlocking it themselves during moments of extreme stress or trauma.

Memories flashed through her mind, of electric shocks and beatings. They only lasted for a split second before being replaced with flames, and the sound of people screaming.

"Cinder?"

At Jaune's voice, the scene faded. She shook her head, then turned back to him.

"... It was someone I was close to," she lied. "Long ago. They're not around anymore, unfortunately."

Jaune nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah... so am I." Cinder looked at the glass of wine in her hand, then downed it in a single go before setting her glass down. "If it's okay with you, I'm going to get to bed now. See if I can't get a good night's rest before waking up early tomorrow for... patrol."

"I get it," Jaune said, giving her a wide smile. "Sleep well, Cinder. I'll clean up here."

Cinder nodded, then stood up and marched back into the bedroom, gently closing the door behind her as she did so. The whole time, a strange feeling pricked at her mind, though she couldn't pinpoint exactly what it was.

All she knew was that it was the same emotion she hadn't felt since killing Rhodes, all those years ago.

---

**What is up, my dudes? Hope you've all had a good couple of weeks. I've been doing okay, myself - definitely can't complain too much. Work's a drag, but then again, when is it not?**

**Anyway, I am back with more Auras and Alibis for you all to enjoy. And I also have to announce that I think I've made my decision with regards to fan fiction. I mentioned earlier that I was considering quitting fan fiction entirely in order to focus on originals, but I think at this point, doing that would be premature. Plus, I'll be honest, I think I really just needed an extended break from it all, as well as a reduced schedule for this stuff. So basically, what I'm saying is that I'd very much like to continue working on fan fiction at this time.**

**Now, that being said, there will be some changes put into place. I'm going to still be focusing on my originals, but I'll keep the fanfics as a way to have fun and decompress on the weekends. So updates are definitely going to slow down for fanfics in-general. I'm also going to only focus on three of them right now, those three being this one, Black Sun, and Seeing Red. Darkbloom and Plastered Paradox are getting sidelined while I focus on those three.**

**I have all of you to thank, by the way - more than anything, you all convinced me to stick around and give fan fiction another shot when I was feeling pretty down/disillusioned with it. So thank you all for doing that. I love you guys, couldn't ask for a better fanbase.**

**Anyway, as for the chapter itself... shit's picking up once more. Or as Ickbard said to me:**

**" Much like my cholesterol at a Korean BBQ, the plot thickens! We hope you enjoyed today's chapter and as always please do**

**leave a comment below!"**

And that's pretty much the long and short of it, lol. Anyway, I'll have to echo his sentiments here - hope you enjoyed the chapter, and I'll see you all next time!

---

***Enjoy my work and want to help me out a bit? You can support me, as well as read more of my writing, over on Amazon. My second original story is available for purchase now, you can find it by going on Amazon and searching for 'Dead World' by John Haruspex. The story is available now for three bucks in ebook format (or free with Kindle Unlimited) or twelve bucks in paperback format, if you prefer physical media. (Remove the spaces)***

***www . amazon Dead-World-John-Haruspex / dp /B0C2RPGXVC / ref=tmm\_pap\_swatch\_0?\_encoding=UTF8&qid=1682982861&sr=8-2***

***My first original story is also still available at the following link as well:***

***www . amazon dp/ B0BLFL72MX***

# Chapter 8

Auras and Alibis

Chapter 8

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"Good afternoon."

Ren cracked both eyes open, a wide yawn escaping him as the blinds were pulled back and light flooded into the room. "Nora...? What time is it?"

"Time for you to get up," she said to him. "Your shift starts in an hour and a half. You've still got to shower, shave, get dressed, eat something, and get there. Don't want to be late on your first day, do you?"

Ren let out another yawn, then shook his head. "No, I don't. You're right about that."

He threw the covers off himself, then got up out of bed and stretched. He was only dressed in his underwear, but Nora didn't care - the two of them were long past having any sort of nudity taboo around each other.

Being best friends since childhood tended to remove any barriers or sense of personal space they may have had towards each other.

"How are the streets looking?" Ren asked as he stepped into the nearby attached bathroom, then stripped down and moved into the shower. He didn't even bother closing the door behind him, instead just shutting the sliding glass door and turning on the shower.

"Eh, same old, same old," Nora replied. From the position of her voice in the room, Ren could tell she was probably leaning against the door frame. "You gonna need a towel in there, by the way?"

Ren's eyes widened. "Shoot..." He looked around, trying to find one on the towel rack right next to the shower, but it was empty. A small, dejected sigh escaped from him. "Yeah, I will. Mind getting me one?"

"Not at all." He heard Nora peel herself off the wall, then begin to search through the bathroom. "You know, this wouldn't be quite as necessary if you actually got a haircut for once."

"I can't get rid of the long hair, Nora."

"Why not? It's not like it's integral to your costume or anything. If anything, it's a hazard in a fight, since someone could grab hold of it. I'd just like to point out that I do not have long hair, despite being the girl on our team. Want to know why? For the same reason I don't like capes."

"I can agree with you on at least that much," Ren conceded. "But come on, you love my hair."

She paused. "... Yeah, that's true - you do look good with it... in a purely platonic sense, of course."

"Of course," Ren hastily added.

"I mean, what other sense would there be between us?"

"There wouldn't be one."

"Yes, exactly. We're best friends for a reason."

"Indeed."

They were both silent for a few minutes before Nora cleared her throat. "I made you lunch, by the way... or would it be dinner, given how late it'd be? But then I guess that'd make what you're about to eat lunch... or would *that* be dinner, given that it's like 3:30 in the afternoon? I guess it could be a late lunch or early dinner... but then what would come after dinner? I'm so confused..."

"Nora," Ren said, interrupting her thoughts. "Thank you, I appreciate the thought. I'm sure that whatever you've made, it will be a fine breakfast-lunch-dinner-meal-thing."

"Yeah, I knew you would. It's leftover stromboli, by the way - hopefully they've got a microwave you can use at the hospital. Or maybe you can just throw it in an MRI machine or something."

"I don't think that's how MRI machines work, Nora." Ren reached for the shampoo, applying some of it to his scalp before setting the bottle back down. "I'm pretty sure all that'd do is give the stromboli an x-ray."

"That'd be kinda cool, you have to admit," Nora said. "I'd love to see what layers of cheese look like through an x-ray machine... and, for that matter, to see whether it actually *would* cook it or not."

Ren finished rinsing the shampoo from his hair, then turned the water off and opened the door to the shower, intending to reach for the towel rack. Instead, Nora was standing there, holding a towel out in front of her. Ren flushed red, but accepted the offered garment, wrapping it around his waist.

"Thanks," he commented, stepping out of the shower.

"You know, there's something that's been bothering me," Nora said as the two of them stepped back into the bedroom.

"Really?" Ren asked. "About what?"

"Jaune's fiancee."

"Cinder? You think something's going on with her?"

"Well, it's just... she seemed a little evasive when we last spoke to her, don't you think?"

"She's always been a very private person, Nora," Ren said.

"According to Jaune, there are things about her that she's never

even told him. And you know how Jaune-sexual she is. If she's refusing to tell him something about herself, then I'm sure there's a reason for it. Probably some kind of bad memory she doesn't want to dredge up."

"That doesn't explain why she refused to answer basic questions about her job, though," Nora pointed out. "Seriously, you two work in the same industry, and yet you could probably talk more about what the job is like than she did the other night."

"Again, she's probably just a private person... though admittedly, I can't help but be a bit curious now, too," Ren confessed. He shook his head. "Still, that's not really any of our business."

"Yeah, you're right." Nora sighed. "I'm just a little concerned, you know? I don't think she has many friends, Ren."

"Neither do we, Nora."

"That's different - we're both Heroes. She isn't. From the outside looking in, it seems like all she has is Jaune. And that's kinda sad, at least to me."

"Well, why don't you do something about it while I'm at work?" Ren questioned. "Take the night off from patrolling and go do something together with her. I'm sure she'd appreciate the gesture."

Nora hesitated, but then nodded a moment later. "If you're sure..."

"Of course I'm sure." Ren flashed her a small grin. "Take care, Nora. I'll see you in a bit."

With that, he left, closing the door behind him and leaving an uncertain Nora behind. She stepped out of his room, emerging out into their shared living, then turned to stare at her scroll, lying on the nearby coffee table, and bit her lip out of hesitation.

Finally, after a few seconds of mulling it over, she reached for her scroll.

---

Cinder was in the middle of her calisthenics routine when her scroll began to buzz. Initially, she thought it was Jaune, but her hopes were dashed when she saw it was Nora texting her. Irritation flared up in her mind, but she was quick to bury it.

Nora was Jaune's friend, and as much as Cinder didn't trust her, she wasn't about to upset Jaune by being rude to one of his few friends.

With that in mind, she opened her scroll and read the message.

*N: Hey, Cinder! I know we don't hang out much, but that's kinda why I'm texting you. I figured, why not reach out and see if she wanted to do something together, just the two of us?*

Cinder's brow furrowed. This was unusual, to say the least - Nora and Ren had both texted her before, but it had always been in relation to Jaune somehow. She'd known the two of them for almost as long as she'd been dating Jaune, and they'd never once made an attempt to directly reach out to her like this.

Still, as much as she wanted to refuse, Cinder knew she couldn't - Nora would surely mention that to Jaune, and then Jaune would be upset, and the very last thing she wanted to deal with was an upset Jaune.

And so, with her heart full of reluctance, Cinder typed out a message of her own.

*C: That sounds lovely, Nora. What do you have in mind?*

Cinder cringed as soon as she'd sent the message. 'Lovely?' Who talked like that, especially in relation to someone who was supposedly a friend of hers?

Cinder had never had a friend - the closest thing was, of course, Jaune - but she assumed that was the best approximation for what she and Nora had, even if it was all fake on her end.

Her scroll buzzed again, catching her attention. She opened it once more to read the message.

*N: Great! I'll swing by in a bit. I figure we can go out and have some drinks, maybe? You know, as friends. I know a great bar, and it's ladies' night, so they'll have great deals going on.*

Bars had never been Cinder's scene, and for that matter, she wasn't much one for alcohol aside from the occasional glass of wine. But if that was what Nora wanted, then who was she to refuse?

She sent Nora a quick confirmation, then set her scroll aside and let out a heavy sigh.

"This is going to be painful..."

---

"-So then I told him, that's not a refrigerator, that's Ren!"

Cinder grit her teeth as the two of them walked down the street. Nora had always been hyperactive, but it had also always been somewhat bearable to her, because she'd only ever seen Nora with Jaune or Ren around to attract her attention. But now that it was just the two of them, Cinder was being treated like a lightningrod for Nora's... Nora-ness, she supposed.

"Anyway, that was the first time we went fishing," Nora replied. "The second time we went fishing, it was a bit weirder. Let's just say, I can never go back to that hospital again-"

"Respectfully," Cinder interrupted, doing her best not to let her irritation show. "Can we please discuss something else? Something, I don't know, a bit more down-to-earth and normal?"

Nora shrugged. "Sure. Ooh, I have an idea - tell me about how Jauney's doing. I mean, I'm sure him and Ren are getting along great now that they're working together, but it's still good to confirm it, you know?"

Admittedly, he was doing a lot better, Cinder realized - Jaune had been a lot more easygoing and at-ease since Ren had started working at the hospital alongside him. She may not have liked Ren, but she respected that he was a positive influence on Jaune's mental health and well-being.

Of course, her taking a break from her villain role probably helped with that, too. She couldn't help but cringe when the thought crossed her mind - she was going to have to get out into the field again at some point, she knew - already, she could feel the tendrils of her compulsions closing in around her mind, and no amount of fucking or burning Grimm was going to stave it off forever. She *needed* to get out into the field, but she was going to have to be careful about how she did it. It was a quandary, to say the least.

Cinder shook those thoughts out of her mind, turning back to Nora. "He's been good," she reported. "Very good, in fact - better than usual, even. Getting to work with Ren has been a huge boon to his mental well-being. Not to say he was ever unhealthy in that aspect, but even I can see the improvement he's gone through."

Nora flashed her a grin. "That's great! You know, you two make a really cute couple. You're both really good together."

Cinder nodded, as that was something she already knew - that was why she'd picked him and stayed with him, after all. "Thank you, Nora."

"Yup. Ooh, we're here!"

Nora pointed ahead excitedly, pointing at a bar down the street. A large, well-lit sign overhead indicated that it was called The Black Cherry; it wasn't nearly as upscale as she'd expected it to be, but it

wasn't completely run-down either. If she had to place it on a list somewhere, it would be below Junior's club, but above some of the other dive bars in which she'd done business before.

Nora suddenly took her hand and began to drag her towards the bar. Cinder offered no resistance as she was pulled along, and before long, the two of them were inside. Nora seemed especially excited, for some reason, as she was almost quivering with excitement.

"Finally!" she said. "I haven't been out drinking in *ages!* Ren and I were trying to cut back to save money, but now that he's got that new job, I can spend a little on myself for once." She turned towards Cinder. "Go ahead and get us a table, would you? I'm just gonna scope out the bar for a bit and see what looks good."

Cinder nodded, and then the two of them split up. She found a table off in the corner, and settled in, but she only had a few seconds to enjoy the peace and quiet before a familiar voice caught her attention.

"Yang, I think you've about had enough."

Immediately, Cinder perked up. There was no mistaking that voice for anyone else's - that was Scarlet Reaper. Suddenly interested, Cinder leaned back to get a better look. Sure enough, there were four girls seated at the table behind her, and they all looked very familiar.

All the girls had glasses of alcohol in front of them, but only one - the blonde - seemed to be drunk, if the way she was swaying softly from side to side and letting out the occasional hiccup were any indication.

"I'm *fine*, Ruby," the blonde insisted. "Seriously. Let me enjoy myself for once."

Ruby crossed her arms. "I'd be more willing to do that if you knew your own limits better than you claim to."

Yang exhaled sharply. "I think I know my own limits well enough, thanks." She suddenly became aware that Cinder was watching them, and turned towards her. "Something the matter?"

"Oh, no, nothing at all," Cinder said, doing her best to disguise her voice. She apparently failed miserably, because Ruby's eyes widened.

"Camouflage...?" Ruby asked. Cinder was about to deny it, but never got the chance before a grin split Ruby's face. "It *is* you!"

She rushed over to Cinder's table in a heartbeat, standing there and appraising her. "Wow, you're even prettier out of costume..."

Cinder's brow furrowed, and a vein pulsed in her forehead. "I am spoken for."

"Ooh, you are? That's so sweet!"

"It is," she said tersely. "Now, if you don't mind-"

"Hold on, hold on!" Ruby insisted. She looked around for a moment to make sure it was clear before leaning in. "Why don't we hang out a bit here? I mean, we're already becoming friendly in the business, so to speak, so why not do a little bit of unofficial hanging out? Couldn't hurt."

Cinder was about to refuse when movement from over Ruby's shoulder caught her attention.

"Got us a bottle to start," Nora said as she reached the table. She paused when she saw Ruby standing there. "Who's this, Cinder? Looks like you know her. Is she a co-worker?"

"In a manner of speaking," Ruby said to Nora. "Nice to meet you, I'm Ruby Rose."

Cinder couldn't help but grit her teeth. Now she couldn't pretend like she didn't know Ruby or her friends, and she was locked into

whatever baseline story Ruby wanted. She could only hope that Ruby's explanations were either ironclad, or that they were vague enough that Nora wouldn't have any of her questions answered.

Nora nodded along. "Oh, so you two are friends."

"We are!"

"That's cool. I'm a little weirded out, though - Cinder's always been very private. I didn't think she had very many friends aside from her fiance, especially someone as outgoing as you are."

Ruby let out a surprised gasp, then turned towards Cinder. "You're getting *married?!?*"

"I am," Cinder said, trying not to let her anger show. Her palms were burning already.

"That's so amazing! When is the wedding? What's the venue? Do you need anyone to help?"

"Slow down, sis," Yang said, coming up alongside Ruby. "I think... Cinder, was it? I think Cinder needs some time to let this all sink in."

"Oh, do you all not know each other that well?" Nora questioned.

"Eh, kinda. The four of us are pretty close, but Cinder's the new kid on the block, so to speak. We all just started hanging out pretty recently."

"Makes sense," Nora agreed. "Say, do you four want to share a table? This one looks big enough for all of us if we pull some chairs up."

"That'd be great!" Ruby exclaimed. "Here, I'll get some chairs, and then we can get some more drinks!"

"I thought you said your sister already had enough," the black-haired girl pointed out.

"That was before Cinder got here!"

The white-haired girl brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "Ugh... she's like a human puppy, always so eager and excitable..." She shook her head, then looked to her teammate. "Blake, can you go help her get some chairs before she hurts herself?"

"Sure, Weiss," the black-haired girl replied with a nod.

As the two of them walked off to pull up some chairs, Cinder knew she was in for one hell of a night.

---

Against her expectations, things hadn't started out all that badly - they'd mostly made small talk while drinking, nothing too major. Nora was far more interested in Ruby and her friends than Cinder expected she'd be, but then again, Nora had always struck her as a bit of a people person, so perhaps her expectations had been off.

That was unusual for her, but perhaps it was the alcohol talking.

And speaking of alcohol, Cinder had been careful not to get *too* drunk. She was a bit tipsy after a few glasses of wine, but nothing a little sleep and some cold water couldn't fix.

"You know," Nora suddenly announced, her words coming out slow and slurred. She gave Cinder a lopsided look, smirking as she did so. "Jauney's a lucky man."

"Jauney?" Yang asked, her words coming out just as slurred as Nora's. "Is that what you call her fiance?"

"You know it. You should see them together - they're super cute. Soooo in love, it's not even funny..."

"Aw..." Ruby said. "That's so cute! I hope I have a relationship like that one day..."

"Don't worry, sis," Yang said, pulling Ruby over to her to ruffle her hair. Ruby thrashed in her grip, but was unable to break free. "You'll make some *other* lucky guy very happy one day. That is, unless Cinder was willing to share...?"

Cinder's eyes narrowed, and it took all her willpower to hold herself back from burning the entire bar down around her. Thankfully, it only lasted for a moment before Yang burst out laughing.

"Y-your face!" Yang said between gasps of air. "I can't!"

"Don't mind her, Cinder," Weiss offered. "She was just joking around, she didn't mean anything by it."

"Hmph. Very well," Cinder replied.

She was going to have to keep an eye on Yang Xiao Long, she decided; that girl seemed like she could be trouble. They all seemed like that, but Yang seemed especially so.

"So, I have to ask," Nora said, leaning in. "What do you four do for work?"

"Oh, we're all still in school," Ruby said nonchalantly. "Vale University, nothing major. We happened to room together our first year, and we didn't completely hate the arrangement, so after our first year was up, we figured we'd stick together."

"Makes sense. So none of you are working yet?"

"Odd jobs, here and there," Blake told her. "Nothing major or long-term; our studies and extracurriculars don't really allow for anything too official."

"Yeah, I get it. Personally, I've got a menial day job; nothing super exciting. Cinder's the one with all the excitement going on."

All eyes were suddenly on her, and Cinder had to bite her tongue to keep from cursing Nora out. Instead, she forced a smile. "Oh, I just

work private security, nothing major."

"Nah, that's not true," Nora teased, wagging a finger. "You take on all kinds of cool clients, don't you?"

"You know I can't discuss my clients," Cinder countered. "That goes against company policy."

"I don't see any HR personnel here. Do you?"

"Be that as it may--"

"I know, I know, you still want to abide by company rules." Nora waved her off. "You're too much of a stickler for the rules, Cinder. You gotta take the rod out of your ass sometime, you know. Then again, maybe that'd disappoint Jaune?"

Cinder couldn't help but flush red. Nora flashed her a grin. "Ooh... dirty girl."

"Change the subject, please," Cinder insisted. "Mine and Jaune's bedroom proclivities are our own business."

"Yeah, I suppose that's enough teasing for one night." Nora stretched her arms out, a yawn escaping her. "What time is it?"

"About ten," Ruby offered.

"Shoot, that late? I've gotta get going." Nora stood up. "Nice meeting you all. Cinder, I'll see you around. Have a good night, everyone."

With that, Nora left, leaving Cinder alone with Ruby and her teammates. Ruby waited until Nora was just out of earshot before leaning in to speak quietly to Cinder.

"The four of us were gonna go out on patrol for a bit after this," she said. "You know, walk around town, maybe beat up some low-level bad guys. You in?"

Cinder hesitated. Maybe it was the alcohol talking, or perhaps it was just the fact that it'd been awhile since she'd seen some action and she really needed to cut loose. In either case, the response left her almost completely involuntarily.

"I'm in."

---

**Hey hey people, Minaris here. Back at it again with another chapter for the ol' Auras and Alibis.**

**Anyway, hope you're all doing extremely well today. I am doing just fine, myself - no real complaints, at least. Mainly just trying to keep my nose to the grindstone and continue working on this stuff as best as I can.**

**Speaking of the stuff I'm working on, I think the next chapter for Seeing Red should be out relatively soon. Black Sun is probably going to take a bit longer, but that is still actively being worked on, too.**

**Speaking of Black Sun, someone left a comment on that asking for details about my 5.56 AK. I was going to wait to post something about that on that story instead, but in the off-chance that the same person is reading this story as well... I have two 5.56 Kalashnikovs at this point, one is a Zastava M90 and the other is a FB Radom Beryl. The M90 is a bit cheaper, but the Beryl is built to a higher standard, though the M90 is certainly no slouch. But between the two, the Beryl is my favorite. I'm not getting rid of either of these guns any time soon, though - I love them both.**

**I will say that the M90 is a different pattern of receiver (Yugo pattern) than standard AK rifles, so a lot of the parts for those will not work on the M90. Thankfully, most everything made for the Zastava M70 will work on the M90 as well, so the aftermarket isn't completely non-existent, it's just not as robust as the one for a standard-pattern AK.**

**If I was going to do it all again, I'd probably get a WBP Jack in 5.56 and drop it in a Sureshot Mk3 chassis or something. Maybe some day...**

**Anyway, that aside, that's pretty much everything I've got for this chapter. Hope you all enjoyed, and I'll see you next time!**

# Chapter 9

Auras and Alibis

Chapter 9

---

"Why am I doing this...?"

Cinder shook her head as she leaped from rooftop to rooftop. The alcohol had mostly left her system by now, leaving her free to reflect on the choice she'd made at the bar earlier.

Truthfully, she had a good idea of what was going on - she'd been *itching* to get back into the field as soon as she could. Grimm were good to practice against, but they didn't offer the same level of challenge or satisfaction as actual people did. Normally, there would have been a small part of her that felt bad for betraying Jaune's trust by still committing crimes, though she would have been quick to bury it, of course. But not tonight, though.

Tonight, she was playing the Hero for once. At least, that was the idea.

Cinder stopped at the pre-arranged meeting place, a three-story apartment building not far from the bar. The other four were already there, dressed in their costumes and carrying their weapons. As she stepped up, Ruby gave her a wide grin.

"You made it!" she said. "We were wondering when you were going to show up."

"Got delayed a bit," Cinder said. In truth, she wanted some time with Jaune; the four of them had agreed to meet back here in a half-hour, which was almost enough time for a quickie. But they didn't need to know that. Shaking those thoughts from her mind, she turned to Weiss. "What's the plan?"

"There's a drug den that's just been setup in one of the warehouses at the docks," Weiss informed her. "I figure it'll be a good way to stretch our legs to start. If we've still got time after clearing it out, then we can look for some other crimes to stop. Is that agreeable?"

"Works for me," Cinder grunted. "Shall we?"

The other four nodded, and they took off, charging across the rooftops of Vale.

---

The docks were some of Cinder's old stomping grounds. She knew them like the back of her hand - she'd done enough shady business here to know where everything was. The fact that a few drug mules had set up a den in one of the warehouses was a bit surprising to her, though it didn't take long for her to realize what had happened.

"Must be paying off the foreman," Cinder stated as the five of them stared down at the warehouse in question from atop a nearby building.

"Come again?" Yang questioned.

"I said, they're paying off the foreman. They wouldn't be able to operate out of here long-term otherwise."

"You know this place?" Blake asked.

Cinder nodded. "I've done some low-level crime-fighting here before. Nothing major, mostly just stopping muggers from robbing people and druggies from stealing copper out of the walls of the abandoned buildings. I haven't talked to the foreman personally, but I've seen enough of him around to know what he's like. He'd never allow something like this on his property unless someone was paying him to look the other way."

"Does that make things harder for us?" Ruby stated as she peered through the scope of her sniper rifle.

Cinder shook her head. "No, but it is something to be aware of. I would bet that once we deal with this one, another one will pop up shortly thereafter. Even if you were to implicate the foreman in this and get him arrested for it, he'd just be replaced by someone equally as dirty."

"Sounds like you're speaking from experience," Blake surmised.

Cinder shrugged. "I just know how these things work, is all. Crime is essentially never-ending. All we can do is work to stem the tide and keep it from taking over. Fact is, this drug den is going to get replaced not long after we knock it out of commission... but that's no reason not to put it down anyway."

"I'll drink to that," Yang said cheerfully. "So, how do we want to go in?"

"That's a good question," Ruby said without looking up from her scope. "We should probably expect this to be a hardened target, but not *too* hardened. I'd assume men with guns, of course, maybe a few Aura users as well, but nothing major. Looks like there's a front and a rear entrance, plus a skylight - I say we take a standard two-prong dynamic entry approach. Weiss and Blake can take the front, while you and Cinder can take the rear."

Yang flashed Cinder a grin. "I mean, we all know how much Cinder likes the rear, thanks to Nora."

Cinder glared at her, but Yang's grin just widened. Weiss and Blake rolled their eyes, while Ruby began to shake with barely-controlled laughter.

"T-that's... that's not funny, Yang... !"

"It's pretty funny," Yang countered.

Ruby took a few gasps of air to control herself, then brought her eye back to her scope. "Anyway, I'll be here, providing overwatch."

Cinder raised an eyebrow. "With a gun that big?"

"Don't worry, I've got it loaded with my specialty 'knockout' rounds - basically big rubber bullets," Ruby assured her. "I save my really spicy live ammo specifically for Grimm and Aura users. So trust me when I say nobody is going to die tonight, not on my watch."

Given the type of people they were going to be facing, that was almost a shame. Cinder had no love for drug runners or their customers; if anything, they made her job more difficult by snooping around her safe houses, trying to find a way to break in and rob her. The world wouldn't miss a few of them, but unfortunately, Ruby seemed to have other ideas.

"Very well," Cinder said. "Let's-"

The far-off sound of breaking glass suddenly caught their attention, followed shortly after by screams and gunshots. They all immediately stiffened, turning their attention towards the warehouses, which was being lit up by muzzle flashes in the night.

"Yang!" Ruby whined.

"What?!" Yang argued, sounding chastised. "I'm right here! How could it be me this time?!"

"Oh... sorry. Force of habit, I guess."

Cinder didn't wait for them to keep arguing, instead jumping off the roof before they could waste any more of her time. She hit the ground and rolled, her Aura cushioning the fall, then took off sprinting towards the warehouse. Gunshots were still erupting from within, which irritated her to no end - not because she didn't want the drug runners inside to be left alive, but instead because she so desperately wanted a piece of the action for herself.

Cinder burst through the warehouse doors and very nearly ran right into two men who had just about made it out from the other side.

They stared at her for a moment, shocked and unsure of how to react to her sudden appearance.

Then she saw they were both holding pistols, and all bets were off.

Cinder lunged forwards, drawing her twin swords at the same time. She dropped down just as the first shots rang out, passing narrowly over the top of her head. Her sword hooked one man around his ankle and she pulled, sending him crashing to the ground, his gun slipping from his grasp as he landed back-first on the concrete below with a loud yell. The other man tried to angle his gun towards her to take some follow-up shots, but she suddenly sprang to her feet, lashing out with the sword in her off-hand and knocking the pistol away, sending it sliding across the floor.

With both men now disarmed, it was easy for her to smack them across the head with the flat of her blades, knocking them out with a single blow each. By the time they had both collapsed in an unconscious heap on the warehouse floor, Blake, Weiss, and Yang had run up next to her.

"Camouflage, you okay?" Weiss asked.

"Fine," Cinder reported. She motioned for the others to follow her. "Fall in. I'll take point."

"Yeah, not happening," Yang said as she pushed past her. "You're good, I'll give you that, but you're still a rookie. For safety's sake, let us take the lead this time. We'll let you serve as pointman in the future."

Cinder wanted to argue, but bit her tongue regardless. She was supposed to be discrete, which meant playing along with their idea of her as a rookie Hero. So as much as it pained her to have to act dumb and helpless, she had no choice but to go along with it.

Reluctantly, Cinder nodded. "... Very well. I will heed your warning."

Yang brought her hands up, her gauntlets readying themselves as she stepped forwards. Blake and Weiss followed after her, with Cinder trailing slightly behind them. From the rear, shots began to ring out; Cinder whipped around, only for Yang to stop her.

"That would be our overwatch," Yang said without looking back. She held up a hand, giving her sister a thumbs-up. "Relax, Scarlet's got it under control. Nobody is going to sneak up on us."

"Right..." Cinder muttered. "Let's keep moving. I don't think this place has a lot of rooms."

"Or a lot of bad guys, at least anymore," Blake surmised as they turned a corner and passed by several fallen men, all laid out across the ground with their guns scattered around them.

Weiss paused. "Are they-"

"They're alive, just unconscious," Cinder reported. "Whoever took them out was using rubber bullets, same as Scarlet."

Weiss breathed a soft sigh of relief. "Good... I was worried we were dealing with a vigilante Hero."

"Not likely," Blake told her. "The last one of those got taken out a few months back... well, allegedly."

"Focus," Yang requested. "I think we're coming to the last room."

Sure enough, there was a large office at the end of the hall. From inside, Cinder heard someone gasping and sputtering; without waiting for anything further, Yang rushed forwards and blew the door off its hinges, and they all flowed into the room, weapons at the ready. As the smoke cleared, it revealed a head of flowing red hair and golden armor reminiscent of ancient Mistralian warriors, along with an ornate-looking rifle leveled directly at Yang's head.

Yang blinked, then steadily relaxed. "Hey, I know you. You're the Red Huntress, aren't you?"

The young woman across from them tensed a bit. "It seems my reputation precedes me. I take it you four are local Heroes?"

"You'd be correct," Weiss offered. She took a step forward, then motioned for the others to lower their weapons. They all did so, though Cinder with a lot more reluctance than the others. "I think it's clear that we have no reason to fight. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Indeed." The Red Huntress collapsed her weapon; Cinder watched it shift into a sword, which the Hero then sheathed at her hip. Once that was done, she stepped aside, revealing what had happened - there was an older-looking man dressed in a nice suit leaned over the desk, coughing and gasping for breath as he rubbed at his throat, glaring daggers at the Red Huntress.

"Fucking *bitch*..." he muttered. "I thought you Heroes had lines you wouldn't cross..."

"We do. But some of us are more flexible than others." The Red Huntress stepped over to him and grabbed him by his shirt collar, then pulled him up enough to stare at him eye-to-eye. "Talk, or I'll do worse than strangle you."

"Fine, fine! Fuck..." He shook his head. "You wanted to know my supplier? It's Torchwick."

"Who?"

"Roman Torchwick," Yang offered. "Local crime lord and overall scumbag. I'm not surprised he's involved with this one - he's got his hands in just about every criminal enterprise in the city in some way."

The Red Huntress scowled. "And nobody's thought to stop him?"

"That's the thing - he's got money and connections, and there's generally always six degrees of separation between him and whatever crime ring is being uncovered," Weiss explained. "We know he's involved, but legally speaking, there's never enough proof to get the charges to stick. And if there was, he's wealthy and connected enough that he wouldn't be in jail for very long."

"Figures, I suppose..." The Red Huntress let out a heavy sigh. "And to think I came here to try and escape the corruption... guess it's the same no matter where you go on Remnant."

Sirens outside suddenly caught their attention, Cinder very nearly took off running, before she caught herself - she was supposed to be playing the Hero now, which meant acting natural around the police.

"Well?" Weiss asked. "Let's go greet the cavalry, I suppose."

---

After a few minutes spent giving the cops a quick rundown of what had happened, the five of them marched off into the night. They were joined shortly thereafter by Ruby, who came sprinting alongside them.

"Hey, wait up!" Ruby called. She paused when she saw the Red Huntress walking with them, her eyes widening behind her mask. "Whoa... ! I know you, you're the Red Huntress! I mean, obviously I already saw you in action back at the docks, but it was dark and it was hard to see and I couldn't believe it was actually you and-"

"Easy there, sis," Yang said, throwing an arm around her shoulders. "The girl's new in town, she probably needs time to adjust."

The Red Huntress cracked a small smile, then shook her head. "I appreciate the warm welcome, actually. Makes for a nice change of pace from my native Mistral."

The six of them ducked into a nearby alley, then to Cinder's surprise, they all began to unmask. She watched in awe as they revealed their

true identities to each other, unsure of what to do. Eventually, she realized that this had to be some kind of etiquette between Heroes - obviously, they would be working together, so it would pay to know each other's true identities.

Reluctantly, Cinder reached for her own mask and pulled it off. The Red Huntress stared at her for a moment, then offered her a hand.

"Pyrrha Nikos," she greeted.

"Cinder Fall," Cinder replied, accepting her handshake. She very nearly added 'Soon to be Cinder Arc' to her statement, but caught herself.

The last thing she wanted was Jaune being dragged into this life.

Pyrrha let her hand go, then turned and began to formally greet the others while Cinder watched. As she did that, Ruby sidled up alongside her, a big grin on her face.

"Sooo," Ruby began. "This wasn't your first time out, was it?"

"That easy to tell?" Cinder asked without looking at her.

"Your moves are far too advanced for a complete newcomer on the scene. Plus, I saw how you tried to take charge before Yang stepped up."

"Well, you're correct," Cinder conceded. "I've been doing some solo stuff for a bit to try and get my feet wet a bit. Nothing major, but it's been paying dividends so far."

Ruby nodded along as she spoke. "Yup, I knew it. Well, good for you. Still, I hope you'll be patrolling with us more. We certainly wouldn't be opposed to having you along."

Cinder hesitated before letting out a small sigh. "... I'll think about it. You must understand that I am very busy right now."

"Oh, right, the wedding," Ruby said. Her grin widened. "So, when do we get to meet him? He sounds like he'll be a great husband to you."

"You want to meet him?" Cinder asked, a slight tinge of venom leaking into her tone.

"Well, sure. I mean, what kind of friends would we be if we didn't get to meet our friend's husband?"

Cinder paused, surprised. "Friends...? You think we're-"

"Are we not?" Ruby asked, her grin fading slightly.

Cinder bit her lip, unsure of what to say. She knew what she *wanted* to say, but at the same time, she couldn't risk drawing suspicion to herself by suddenly alienating Ruby or her team. So instead, she nodded.

"... We'll have you all over at some point," she promised.

Ruby let out a small squeal of excitement. "Ooh, that'll be great! I wanna see how cute of a couple you two are. Is he dark and broody like you?"

"I'm not-"

"Ruby," Weiss called, interrupting her. "We've got to go."

"Coming!" Ruby shouted back. She turned back to Cinder with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, we've still got school to prepare for tomorrow. But we'll be seeing you around, Cinder."

Without another word, she took off running after her teammates. Cinder watched her go, then turned and began to walk back towards her apartment.

"Wait."

Only for Pyrrha to stop her. Cinder let out a huff of annoyance, and then rounded on her, crossing her arms.

"Yes?" she asked. "Was there something you wanted?"

Pyrrha stepped over to her, that same friendly grin on her face the entire time. "It's nothing major, of course. I was just... wondering if you'd mind meeting up with me again? I'm new to town, and I'd really like to have a core group of people I can rely on, both as friends and comrades. And you seem like a good person, so..."

Cinder chose not to comment. Instead, she committed a second faux pas that night.

She swapped scroll numbers with yet another person.

---

The sun had started to rise by the time Cinder made it home. She yawned widely as she stepped through the apartment door, blinking heavily as she did so. As the door closed behind her, she flicked on the lights, only to be stunned when she saw Jaune sitting there on the couch, waiting for her.

"Jaune," she said. "You didn't have to wait up for me. I told you where I was going."

"I know," he said, flashing her a smile. "But I wanted to make sure you made it home safe regardless."

He rose up from his seat and embraced her. Cinder stiffened, but like she always did, she melted under his touch after a moment, leaning into it. The two of them shared a quick kiss before pulling away.

"I didn't mean to make you worry," Cinder softly told him. "Sorry."

"I know," Jaune replied. He bit his lip. "Guess this is something I'll have to get used to, isn't it? I mean, since you're going to be a professional Hero and all..."

"Jaune-"

"Don't apologize for it," he said. "I understand it's what you want to do - that it's a calling for you. And I support that wholeheartedly, don't get me wrong. This is just a hangup I'm going to have to get over."

Cinder stepped forwards. "If... it makes you feel better, I'm not alone out there."

Jaune blinked, surprised. "... Really?"

Cinder winced. "Yes. There's... a group of Beacon students I was out with tonight. We're going to start patrolling together."

"... What, they're, like, friends of yours?"

"I suppose so."

Jaune froze for a moment, and Cinder was worried he would disapprove. Her fear faded when she saw a wide grin split his face.

"Oh, that's a relief, in more ways than one," he announced with a small laugh.

"What do you mean?" she questioned.

"Well, it's good to know that you've people watching your back, sure... but it's also good to know you're making friends."

"I have friends!" Cinder protested.

"Name one."

"You."

"I'm about to be your husband, I don't count."

"Yes you do," she countered. "My understanding is that most people would be happy to marry their best friend, but not you, apparently."

Jaune let out another small laugh. "You've got me, I guess. But I have to ask... how many are there, and when do I get to meet them all?"

"There are five of them in total, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"We... just met the newest one tonight, I believe."

"Anyone I would recognize?"

"Probably not," Cinder hurriedly added. "And, I must emphasize that when you do meet them, their identities *must* be kept a secret."

"I understand completely," Jaune said with a nod. "You know me - I'm not one to brag, anyway." He paused, then suddenly perked up. "Of course, this does raise a question..."

"Which is?"

"I know we wanted a small wedding, but... well... I've got seven sisters who all want to be a part of it, and now you've got six bridesmaids when we include Nora in it."

"That... is true," Cinder admitted.

"Do you think we can do it?"

"It would be more expensive, for sure, but I think we could manage. And besides, you're worth it."

"That's *my* line," Jaune protested, despite the big grin on his face. "Anyway, it's still a few months out, so there's still time to put everything together. We'll make it work."

"And we're not changing anything yet," Cinder emphasized. "You still need to approve of them first, anyway."

"Cinder, I'll approve of any friends of yours," Jaune promised. "If you know them, then they must be good people."

For the second time that night, Cinder chose not to comment.

"Anyway," Jaune continued. "It's about time for me to get to work."

"Please tell me you did not stay up all night..." Jaune merely gave her a sheepish grin in response, and she glared at him. "You are insufferable."

"You love me for it." Jaune stepped forward and gave her another kiss, then gently brushed past her and made for the door. "I'll be back later tonight. Do me a favor and get some rest, and once you're up, why don't you try to set something up for your friends this weekend? Nothing major, maybe just a little cookout here or something. That should be a good time." He paused, then turned around to face her once more. "I'm really glad you're making friends, Cinder. I can't be the only one in your life, after all."

With that, he shut the door behind him, leaving her alone. Only once he was gone did Cinder allow herself to deflate, a small sigh escaping her.

"You're the only one I *want* in my life, Jaune..."

---

**Special thanks to Ickbard, as always, for the enormous amount of help he's provided not only with this story, but with basically everything I'm writing. And I do mean *everything* - you all should see the sick lineup of originals we've got waiting in the wings for the right time to start posting. But more on those in the future.**

**Anyway, here's the next chapter! I don't have too much to say about it, because I think it's pretty straightforward, all things considered. Mainly setting up for a meeting of the minds, so to speak. Cinder is now a part of the RWBY equivalent of the**

Superfriends, I suppose lol. Or maybe this is closer to the Teen Titans? I have no idea. My exposure to superheroes is basically a few movies and cartoons I used to watch when I was a kid. Between my co-writer and I, I would wager that I am far less experienced with superhero media between the two of us, so rest assured that if nothing else, he'll set things straight for me behind the scenes, lol.

But yeah, that's about what I've got for this one. Hope you all enjoyed, and stay tuned for the next exciting episode of Auras and Alibis. 'Till next time!

---

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*My first original story is also still available at the following link as well:*

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# Chapter 10

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 10

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It didn't take much to set something up for the weekend. Before she knew it, the five of them were set to arrive in less than an hour.

And Cinder was panicking.

"Babe, seriously, what's wrong?" Jaune asked as she paced back and forth through their apartment.

"Nothing," she said hurriedly. "It's just... I want you to approve of them."

His expression softened. "Cinder, we talked about this. They're your friends - of *course* I'll approve of them."

Cinder hesitated. She knew Jaune was trying to be his usual self and reassure her, but it did little to help. After all, it wasn't the real reason why she was so worried.

There had been people in her apartment before, namely Ren and Nora, but this was different - these were actual Heroes, people who would readily try to kill her if they ever discovered the truth about who she really was.

And they were about to be in her humble abode, around *her* Jaune. There was no telling what they would do if, somehow, they were able to discover something about her true identity.

Jaune must have seen that she was still distraught, as he rose from his seat and walked over to her, then pulled her into a big hug.

"I know you're nervous," he said. "But you don't have to be. Nothing bad is going to happen."

Cinder swallowed nervously. "How do you know?"

He just laughed softly. "Because when has anything bad ever happened between us?" He paused. "Aside from that thing with the mugger. That doesn't count."

Despite herself, Cinder couldn't help but crack a smile. She shook her head. "I'm so glad I met you."

"And to think it all started with some spilled coffee and a ruined top."

"Don't forget the sex," Cinder reminded him.

Jaune's expression faltered. "... Uh... you like it as much as I do."

She blinked. "Well, that was a letdown of a jab. Then again, I suppose you'll make it up to me later."

She expected him to blush, but instead, his smile just widened. She blinked again, surprised. "You're not flustered."

"Hey, I had to get used to your teasing at some point," Jaune said with a small laugh.

"Then I suppose I will just have to step things up."

"What is this, some kind of romantic arms race? I wasn't aware that this was a competition."

"It's *always* a competition," Cinder said. She gave him a mischievous grin. "And I am winning."

"Only until I do that thing with my tongue." She actually blushed at that, and Jaune laughed again. "See? You can get flustered, too."

Cinder playfully smacked him gently on the shoulder. "Just for that, I'm going to be on top tonight."

"You're in rare form today." Jaune leaned in to whisper in her ear. "We still have an hour. Why wait for tonight?"

That was her cue to take him by the hand and pull him into the bedroom, slamming the door behind them.

---

An hour later, and the two of them were once more standing out in the living room, desperately trying to make it look as if they hadn't been up to something and had just finished a few moments ago.

"How's my hair?" Cinder asked.

"Looking good, as always," he commented.

"Not what I meant. There's not anything in it, is there?"

"Why would there be anything in it?"

"Because sometimes we get a bit carried away. Remember your last birthday? You went into work the next day with hickies all over your neck. I'd prefer to avoid Yang's teasing as much as possible."

"That's..." He paused. "That's a fair comment, actually. Yang is the blonde one, right?"

"Yes." Cinder nodded. "Yang is the blonde one, Blake is the black-haired one. Those two are partners. Then there's the short white-haired one, Weiss, and her equally short partner and team leader, Ruby. And then there's Pyrrha, who's the tag-along we just picked up a few nights ago. But you'll know more about them when they get here, which should be very-"

There was a knock at the door. Cinder froze, a chill going down her spine. Next to her, Jaune cracked a smile.

"They're here!" he announced. "Cinder, do me a favor and check on the food, would you? It should be about ready, but just check and make sure."

Cinder nodded. Her mouth felt dry as she watched Jaune step over to the front door. She turned away, instead moving to the oven to check on the food. She winced when she heard the door open and Ruby excitedly call out.

"Hi!" she said. "You must be Jaune! Ooh, Cinder's said so much about you! May we come in?!"

"Absolutely," Jaune replied. "Please, come inside, all of you. Dinner's just about ready."

"Dinner?" Weiss asked as she stepped inside. "You shouldn't have. I was under the impression that this would just be a little get-together."

"Now, who gave you the impression that I would let guests into my house and insult them by not feeding them?" Jaune playfully questioned. "Cinder, was that you? Did you imply that I would starve them all?"

"I did no such thing!" Cinder replied, a bit too hastily. She stood up and straightened her hair out a bit, then forced a thin smile onto her face. "Hello. It's good to see you all again."

Yang stepped forward, looking around. She let out a low whistle as she did so. "Damn, nice place you've got here. Very comfy. Reminds me of Ruby and I's house back on Patch."

"Oh, right," Jaune commented. "I forgot you and her are related."

"We're half-sisters," Ruby explained. "Same dad, different moms. Hence why we don't really look anything alike."

"But don't let that fool you," Yang said with a grin, throwing an arm around Ruby's shoulders and pulling her into a headlock while Ruby

futilely struggled. "We're as close as two sisters could possibly be."

"I can see that," Jaune said with a grin. "Reminds me of my sisters, to be honest."

"Right," Blake told him. "Cinder mentioned you had a big family."

"Yup. There's me, my parents, and my seven sisters."

Yang's jaw dropped. " *Seven* sisters?! Your poor parents!"

"Believe me, they weren't complaining." Jaune laughed. "At least, that's the impression I get whenever my mom talks about grandkids. You remember that, Cinder?"

"How could I forget," Cinder said dryly.

Jaune's expression faltered. "Is there something you forgot to mention to me?"

"Just that time your mother had a bit too much wine and commented to me that she expected no less than four grandchildren from us."

Jaune's jaw dropped. "You never told me that."

Cinder shrugged. "I figured it was the alcohol talking more than anything. Didn't see a reason to bring it up."

That, and if she was being honest, she wasn't entirely opposed to the idea...

"Well, your family certainly sounds fun," Weiss commented. "I hope we get to meet them some day."

"Believe me, if you're friends with Cinder, you will," Jaune told her, cracking a wide grin. "After all, you're all going to be in the wedding."

Their jaws dropped. They all turned to Cinder, who shrugged. "He insisted," was all she said.

"We're all gonna be bridesmaids!" Ruby said, excited. She looked around. "Where's Pyrrha? Why isn't she here yet? She has to hear this!"

"I heard it from down the hall," Pyrrha said, stepping into the doorway. She was holding a bottle of red wine in her hands, and had a surprised look on her face. "And... not to imply that I'm disappointed, but this is a bit sudden, isn't it?"

Jaune shook his head. "Nonsense! You're all friends with Cinder, so of course you'll be at the wedding if you want to be. And anyway, it's nice to meet you, I assume you're Pyrrha?"

"That would be me, yes." Pyrrha tucked the bottle under her arm, and then offered Jaune her hand, which he shook briefly. "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise," Jaune answered. "Come in, come in! And thank you for the wine, as well."

"Of course!" Pyrrha said, offering him the bottle. She looked around the apartment. "Well, this is certainly very nice. Thank you for opening your home to us."

"Any time," Jaune answered. "If you don't mind, I'm gonna go ahead and open this bottle now. Everyone here is okay with a little wine, right?"

"I was wondering when this party was going to start!" Yang commented happily. "Crack that thing open, let's have some fun!"

"Behave yourself," Weiss chastised. Yang stuck her tongue out at her, and Weiss rolled her eyes before looking back to Jaune. "I would very much appreciate a glass of wine, Jaune, as I'm sure the rest of my friends would, too."

"No need to be so formal about it," he said with a chuckle. "I'll get some glasses out. Cinder, entertain your friends for me until I get

back, will you?"

"Of course," Cinder answered, though her heart was pounding the entire time. She watched as Jaune took the bottle and left the room, heading for the kitchen to grab some wine glasses. She took a breath, then looked back to her so-called friends.

That word *still* didn't feel right for them.

"So," Ruby said, rocking back and forth on her heels. "I can see what Nora meant."

"Which is?" Cinder asked.

Ruby's grin widened. "You're both so in love with each other! I can see it in your eyes whenever you look at each other." She paused, her voice taking on the faintest touch of a somber tone. "It reminds me of the old photos of my parents I used to see growing up."

"She's right," Yang confirmed. "It's very sweet. Frankly, I'm surprised Blake isn't bawling her eyes out at it."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Blake asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Oh, nothing," Yang said, cracking a smile. "Just that you're a hopeless romantic with this kind of stuff. I've seen you get teary-eyed reading those romance novels of yours."

Blake rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'll have you know that I am *not* a so-called 'hopeless romantic'... I just have an appreciation for the finer points of literature."

"Is that what they're calling crudely-made porn now?" Blake glared at her. "Well, it is!"

"Pardon me," Pyrrha interrupted. "Cinder, I apologize for bringing this up, but I think there's something in your hair."

Cinder's hand immediately flew to her head, panic lancing through her. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized it was just a small patch of hair product, rather than *something else*.

"Sorry," she said. "We were in a bit of a hurry, I didn't have much time to get ready."

"Aw, you shouldn't have rushed on our account!" Ruby said. "We're all pretty casual... well, except for Weiss. She can be pretty prissy."

Weiss bristled. "I am not 'prissy!'" she said prissily.

"Weiss, we went to a steakhouse to celebrate last year's graduation and you ordered a *salad*, " Yang pointed out. "Even Blake had the courtesy to order a filet."

"I would just like to remind you that you *forced* me into ordering that filet," Blake said. "You won the bet, so you got to pick the restaurant, and in typical Yang fashion, you picked the place that serves nothing but protein and carbs."

"Oh, I wasn't aware I twisted your arm behind your back and *forced* you to order a steak. You could have pulled a Weiss if you'd wanted."

"Well, I wasn't going to go to a nice steakhouse and *not* order a steak," Blake specified. "And what's wrong with a filet? It was good."

"I'll tell you what the problem is - it's not a prime rib or a ribeye. If I'm paying forty dollars for a steak, I want to be satisfied when I'm done eating it. A filet just isn't enough food for that price."

"Lesson learned," Pyrrha cut in. "If you serve a filet at your wedding, Yang won't come, Cinder."

Yang's jaw dropped. "Oh, that's just cold. I didn't think you had it in you, Pyrrha."

"You're all rubbing off on me, apparently."

At that moment, Jaune came back into the room, several glasses bundled in his arms. He set them down, then reached for the bottle of wine he'd set on the counter and began to fill them all up. Once the glasses were filled, he passed them around, then raised the final one to them.

"Cheers," he said, which they all echoed before taking a quick sip. Jaune let out a content sigh as he pulled the glass away from his lips, then gave Pyrrha a nod. "Excellent choice in wine."

"Oh, I can't take all the credit," Pyrrha said. "I just took the advice of the guy at the liquor store."

"Either way, this is great." Jaune took another sip, then looked back out over to the others. "So, you're all Heroes."

Ruby choked on her next sip of wine, coughing and sputtering as she pulled the glass away from her mouth. Yang gently patted her on the back, and after a moment, Ruby was able to recover, then turned to Cinder with surprise.

"You told him?!" she asked.

Weiss rolled her eyes. "Ruby, he's her fiance. *Of course* he's going to know."

"But... my secret identity..."

"It's not much of a secret anymore," Blake commented. "For any of us, really. At least among everyone in this room."

"In her defense, I think Cinder wanted to keep it a secret, but circumstances kinda yanked it out of her," Jaune offered. "Cin, you want to tell this story?"

"There isn't much to tell," Cinder explained. "We were walking home from a date one night when we got mugged. I stopped him-"

"You completely rearranged his face, Cinder. The guy's head looked like raw hamburger meat when you were done with him."

"Only because he tried to shoot you," Cinder replied. "Anyway, the bullet hit me instead, but my Aura stopped it. Jaune saw, however, and from there... well, I had some explaining to do, since he put the pieces together very quickly. But then, he's always been sharp."

"You give me too much credit, really," Jaune told her. "In retrospect, you didn't conceal it all that well."

"It's hard to do when you live with someone like this."

"So... that's it?" Yang asked. "Because that's kinda cute, if so. A lot of people don't want to put up with dating a Hero, let alone marrying one - the lifestyle is just too much for them."

"I am not most people, which is to say I'm kind of a weirdo," Jaune said. "Besides, I love Cinder with all my heart. She's worth going through anything for."

"Aw!" Ruby cooed. "That's so sweet!"

"Don't let him fool you," Cinder interrupted. "He's just always wanted to sleep with a Hero."

"I don't hear you complaining," Jaune replied. "In fact, you were the one who insisted on roleplaying in-uniform last night-"

"Jaune!" Cinder chastised, a blush crossing her face as the other girls laughed.

"Well, you two at least look good together," Pyrrha said. "I'm happy for you both. It's rare to find a Hero/civilian relationship that lasts. But something tells me we don't have to worry about any of that here."

Jaune slipped his arm around Cinder's waist, pulling her close. "We haven't exactly said our vows yet, but let's just say that when an Arc

says they're with you forever, they mean it. We never go back on our word."

"Alright, alright," Yang said, waving him off. "We get it - you're both sickly sweet for each other. It's nice, I'll admit, but I'm starting to get cavities from it."

"Yang," Weiss chastised.

Jaune chuckled. "No, no, she's got a point. We should probably dial it back a bit, lest you all start thinking the only thing we do together is breed like rabbits or something."

"Just *mostly* what we do together," Cinder said.

"You're trying to fluster me, and it's not going to work. Besides, I'm one up on you as of now."

"Give it time," Cinder said dismissively, though a smile had crossed her face. "The night is still young."

---

The small house party continued well into the night, before finally, the girls had to say goodbye. Jaune stood at the door, seeing them all out.

"Thanks for hosting, Jaune," Weiss said. "And for dinner, as well."

"Of course, Weiss," Jaune told her. "Any time."

"Well, don't let us keep you two out of the bedroom," Yang cut in with a grin.

"Yang!" Ruby protested as they all left and began to walk down the hall.

"What? We were all thinking it."

Jaune watched them go, then turned towards Pyrrha, who was just leaving. As she stepped out into the hall, however, she paused, then turned and looked behind her.

"Cinder," she said.

"Yes?" Cinder asked.

"Shall we go patrolling together tomorrow night?"

"Sure," Cinder said with a nod. "I'd like that."

Pyrrha's expression brightened at that, and she nodded. "Thank you both again for tonight. I had a great time."

"So did we," Jaune said. "See you around, Pyrrha."

Pyrrha waved goodbye, and Jaune saw her out of the apartment, and as she left, he gently closed the door behind her. Once she was gone, he turned back towards Cinder.

"Well, your fears were misplaced," he said. "Because I liked them all."

Cinder's brow furrowed. "I'm not about to have competition, am I?"

"Of course not, hon. You know you're the only one for me."

Jaune leaned in and gave her a quick kiss before pulling away, then turning and beginning to clean up whatever remained from the party.

"By the way," he said, "I was thinking that it'd be nice if we started doing more activities together. If you've got time for it, of course."

"If it's you, I will *make* the time," Cinder declared. "What did you have in mind, though?"

"Well, I was thinking something fun, but also practical," Jaune told her. "So, how about we take a cooking class of some kind together?"

She paused. "Cooking?"

"Yeah. I was looking into it, and I found a good class at the local community center. It should be fun."

"Jaune, you know I'm a disaster in the kitchen."

"Well, that won't last," he said, flashing her a grin. "Especially because I'll be eating whatever you cook, and if it kills me, I'll never forgive you."

For the first time in a long time, Cinder shuddered in fear and anticipation.

---

**Special thanks to my good friend Ickbard for the help with writing this chapter/story!**

**Sorry for the delay with this one, guys - I got super busy with work/family obligations during December, and I also got a bit distracted by some originals I was working on, too. But it's good to be back and updating this story again, I'll say that much! I did really miss it.**

**I don't have too much to say story-wise regarding this chapter, because it's really more of one of those sweet, feel-good chapters. After all, this is supposed to be kind of a romantic dramedy - can't just have drama all the time; there needs to be some lightheartedness there, too.**

**Anyway, I was having a discussion with Ickbard regarding some of the comments I've been getting. We both thought it was weird how much horny posting Seeing Red seems to be attracting, and yet we're giving you guys the good shit here, and there's very little horny posting going around on this one lol. Not to say I want you guys to horny post - I mean, I can't really stop you from doing it, but still. He feels the same way, too:**

Hi, this is Ickbard. You guys are really weird with the unsolicited cow milk DMs in Seeing Red when we're literally giving y'all primo stuff over here... but please still don't keep responding with porn requests, shit's weird.

But yeah, we can't really stop you from doing it, so it's whatever, I guess lol.

Anyway, about those originals I mentioned earlier. As of last week, I have launched my first piece of serialized web fiction. It's called *An Angel's Retirement*, and you can read it over on Spacebattles, Royal Road, or r/HFY. In each case, it's been posted under my name, Obsequium Minaris. I'll try to link it here, but FFN's wordfilter may make that impossible. In any case, let's try it (remove the spaces):

www . reddit r/HFY/ comments / 18xythv /  
an\_angels\_retirement\_chapter\_1/

forums . spacebattles threads / an-angels-retirement.1137358/

www . royalroad fiction 79445 / an-angels-retirement

And the synopsis:

*Captain Eric Anders thought his time in the military was over when the war with the Iprenians ended in a ceasefire. He was content to sit back, collecting his monthly pension and drinking his sorrows away. But everything changed when the government saw fit to drop one of its very own super-soldiers into his life. Suddenly, he finds his retirement interrupted by the need to babysit a socially-maladjusted killing machine who has known nothing but war for almost her entire life.*

As it turns out, the war itself may be over for the two of them, but the wounds it left behind are very much still present...

It's a serialized work, so I'm trying to keep the chapters very short for the sake of brevity and ease of reading/posting - around 2k words each. It's not super long, and I'd really appreciate it if you guys wouldn't mind giving it a read-through and upvoting it or even commenting on it if you feel so inclined.

Anyway, because the chapters are so short and it's currently the only piece of original fiction I'm working on, I will be aiming for weekly updates for it. I hope to do more in the future, but for now, weekly updates seem like the way to go.

Also, a note: No, my fan fiction is not going anywhere any time soon. I still very much enjoy writing not only this fanfic, but also *Auras and Alibis* and *Seeing Red* as well. I just also wanted to get a start on my originals again *very fucking badly*, which led to *An Angel's Retirement*. But yes, I'm going to keep writing my fanfics as well, too, so no worries there.

But yeah, that's about all I've got for now. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, I *really* hope you enjoy *An Angel's Retirement*, and I hope you all have an excellent day! I'll see you next time!

---

Enjoy my work and want to help me out a bit? You can support me, as well as read more of my writing, over on Amazon. My second original story is available for purchase now, you can find it by going on Amazon and searching for 'Dead World' by John Haruspex. The story is available now for three bucks in ebook format (or free with Kindle Unlimited) or twelve bucks in paperback format, if you prefer physical media. (Remove the spaces)

[www . amazon Dead-World-John-Haruspex / dp /B0C2RPGXVC / ref=tmm\\_pap\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=1682982861&sr=8-2](http://www.amazon.com/Dead-World-John-Haruspex/dp/B0C2RPGXVC/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1682982861&sr=8-2)

My first original story is also still available at the following link as well:

[www . amazon dp/ B0BLFL72MX](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BLFL72MX)

# Chapter 11

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 11

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The next day, Jaune woke her up bright and early. Cinder blearily cracked both eyes open, a low, tired groan escaping from her.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Time to get up," Jaune said. He moved over to the window and threw the curtains open, allowing light to spill into the room. Cinder brought a hand up to shield her eyes, giving a small grunt as she did so.

She cast a glance at the nearby digital clock, groaning once more when she saw that it was just after six. "Why so early?"

"Because we have that thing today," Jaune told her. "You didn't forget, did you?"

Cinder's heart skipped a beat. For a moment, she was worried that she'd forgotten something important, like their anniversary or his birthday. Then, memories from last night came flooding back, and she turned to him in surprise.

"Did you sign us up for the cooking class today?"

Jaune grinned at her. "I sure did! I figured, why wait, right? It was surprisingly cheap and easy to get into, probably because nobody wanted to do it this early. But I think that'd be better for us - this early, I suspect they'll be teaching how to make breakfast foods, which should be pretty easy."

"Do you lack confidence in my abilities?"

Jaune's expression faltered. "... Okay, I love you more than anything in the world, but I have to admit it - Cinder, you're a menace in the kitchen. I'm sorry, but it's true."

She let out a soft sigh. "Believe me, I know. So this is your way of fixing that, is it?"

"And a way for us to do something together," Jaune reminded her, his smile returning. "Come on, it'll be fun. And besides, I've already paid the fee for the class, so it'll be a complete waste of money if we don't go now."

"Alright, alright..." Cinder threw the covers off herself, then stood up and stretched. Behind her, Jaune let out a low whistle.

"You know, it never really hits me until it does," he said. "We're so familiar with each other that it's easy to forget sometimes."

"What is that?" Cinder asked as she dropped down into her first set of basic morning calisthenics.

"Just how out-of-this-world hot you are," Jaune said, taking a seat on the bed to stare at her. She was naked, of course, because what kind of crazy person wore clothes to bed with their significant other? "Seriously, you're *smoking*. I guess those stretches do a lot of good for you, not to mention the crime-fighting."

"You should join me sometime," Cinder said between grunts of exertion. "With working out, that is. I have read studies about the effects that exercising together can have on couples."

"Oh, yeah? Lay it on me."

"Aside from the obvious of getting us both into better shape? Apparently, it can make the sex better."

"Truly?" Jaune brought a hand up to his chin in thought. "Alright, then. What do I need to do?"

"Join me on the floor and do as I do," Cinder urged. "Do not worry if you can't keep up - you're not in bad shape, but you don't exactly have a Hero's build yet, not to mention your lack of Aura."

"Sure. Just let me-"

He went to sit down next to her, and when he did, Cinder *pounced*. She sprang up and landed on top of him, pinning him to the ground. Jaune stared up at her, his eyes wide with surprise, and she smirked at him.

"Of course, if we are to do this together, then I *must* insist that you strip down first," she purred.

"That eager to eat the eye-candy, huh?"

"Do not be ridiculous. Clothes inhibit your range of motion - makes it harder to get the most out of the exercise. And besides, it's not fair that I should be the only one naked right now."

Jaune grinned at her. "You have a point."

Cinder rolled off him, watching as he began to strip down. As she watched him peel the layers of clothing away from his skin, she couldn't help but lick her lips.

When she'd first met Jaune, she'd known he was special. But she'd had no way of knowing just *how* special he'd end up being to her in the end. He was clearly smitten with her, that much was true, but she was just as enamored with him, too.

Unfortunately, that meant having to suffer through this stupid cooking class, but it would be worth it in the end.

Everything involving Jaune was, after all.

---

Like Jaune had said, the cooking class was supposed to take place at their local community center. It was a large, multi-story brick building in downtown Vale; the class was going to be on the third floor. As they ascended the stairs up to it, however, Cinder couldn't help but be a bit apprehensive.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Of course it is," Jaune replied, following after her. "It's just cooking, Cinder. It's not like it'll be life or death."

She bit her lip. "I mean, we know how bad my cooking can get-"

"I'll be right here with you, so there's nothing to worry about," he assured her. "Though, admittedly, I'm a bit weirded out that we haven't really seen anyone else heading for this classroom... Then again, they're probably all just inside at the moment. I'm sure it's nothing to worry about."

"If you say so..." Cinder replied.

Eventually, they made it to the third floor classroom, and Jaune stepped forward to get the door for her. Cinder gave him a nod of appreciation, and they both entered the room.

Thankfully, they weren't the only ones in class. A few other couples were already there, though none of them were anyone Cinder recognized. There was no sign of the instructor, at least not yet, so they simply found a spot to sit down together, which ended up being at a table towards the back of the class, next to an open window.

As they sat down, Jaune looked out at the table in front of them. There was a small oven connected to it, along with a series of cooking implements spread out across its top. Jaune's brow suddenly furrowed, and he picked up some of the tools to examine them.

"Is something wrong?" Cinder asked. "Those aren't implements of torture, are they?"

Jaune shook his head. "No."

"Then what's that one you're holding for?"

"It's a whisk, Cinder. You use it to beat eggs, mainly. It's kind of a strange choice for a cooking class, though; a lot of this stuff is, in fact. I mean, measuring cups and spoons, stand mixer, flour-" He suddenly paused before letting out a sigh of resignation. "... Alright, I'm suddenly realizing why this class was so cheap."

"Why is that?" Cinder asked, suddenly concerned.

"See, it is a cooking class, but they didn't say what *kind* of cooking we'd be doing," Jaune pointed out. "Which is to say that I think this is actually a *baking* class."

She blinked. "... Is that bad?"

Jaune shrugged. "That depends. Baking is a lot more of an exact science than cooking is. Like, *a lot* more. Cooking is forgiving; baking, though? Baking is *rough*. But as long as the instructor knows what he's doing, there shouldn't be any problems-"

The door to the classroom suddenly came flying open, and a very large man with a bald head and a handlebar mustache dressed in, of all things, a bright purple suit and bow tie, came striding in, a big grin on his face.

"Hel-lo, class!" he announced.

Immediately, Jaune shrank back. "Oh, no..."

"What is it?" Cinder whispered. "You can tell he's not going to be good already?"

"I had this type of teacher before, in school. We might be in for a ride."

Cinder quirked an eyebrow at that, but said nothing, instead turning her attention back to the teacher as he clapped his hands together.

"You can all call me Peridot," he announced. "And I must say, it is absolutely *super* that all you lovely young couples have come out on this sunny and bright morning to participate in this class. Cheers to you!"

Cinder looked out the window. It was overcast. Slowly, she turned to look at Jaune.

"How much did you pay for this class?"

"Like fifty lien for the day," he answered.

"I think now we know why it was so cheap."

"Well, we're here now, so might as well make the most of it." He gave her a smile. "Frankly, I'm just happy to be here with you, no matter what we're doing."

Cinder felt a faint dusting of red cross her face. Just for that, she'd indulge this ridiculous class for as long as she could take it.

"Anyway, it's a pleasure to meet you all!" Peridot said, his voice never once losing its upbeat, jovial tone. "I figured it'd be best to start with something easy, so how about some super-basic and yet super-yummy chocolate chip cookies?"

Next to her, Jaune breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, good... those should be pretty easy." He gave her a reassuring nod. "Okay, just follow my lead and follow the recipe. Do that, and it'll turn out just fine."

Cinder nodded, a faint smile crossing her face at his reassurance.

Maybe it was just overconfidence on her part, but she was suddenly sure she could accomplish this task. She was Vale's number one criminal mastermind, after all - compared to her usual heists and capers, this was nothing.

After all, how hard could baking be?

---

Cinder watched in dismay as the other couples hurriedly vacated the room, coughing their lungs out the entire time. Peridot came walking over, waving his hands to clear the smoke pouring off of the stovetop.

"Well now, seems we've had a tiny problem here," he told her, never once losing that friendly smile or jovial tone in his voice. Her eye twitched at it. He bent down to get a closer look at the stovetop. "So, what seems to be the issue?"

"We're... not sure," Jaune said, giving her a glance from the corner of his eye. Cinder mouthed 'I'll tell you in a bit' to him, and he nodded in understanding before looking back to the instructor. "Seems our batter mixture spontaneously combusted, sir."

"Well, that's no good," Peridot replied, standing up straight. He brought a hand to his chin in thought. "Hm... admittedly, that's a new one for me to hear, but no matter. I'm sure there's a perfectly rational explanation for it."

Cinder let out a small cough, and not because of the smoke still filling the room.

"Anyway, why not try again?" Peridot asked. He gave Cinder a wide grin. "We'll turn you into a master baker yet."

With that, he walked away. Cinder's eye twitched.

"He is mocking me."

"I don't think so," Jaune offered. "He's just one of those teachers who tries way too hard to be everyone's friend." He looked down at their blackened and burned batter mixture, frowning as he did so. Under his breath, as asked, "So is that your Semblance?"

Cinder nodded, and answered in a hushed voice. "It is. I can superheat things by touching them."

"Huh. Sounds powerful."

"It is, but also hard to control. Sometimes if I focus too intently on something, it leaks out."

"Oh, is that why cooking is so hard for you? You're so concentrated on getting it right that your Semblance comes out?" She nodded, and Jaune nodded in understanding before bringing a hand up and resting it on her shoulder. "Take it easy, okay? I'm right here with you, there's no reason to get everything so perfect. And I don't just mean with cooking."

Cinder blinked, a faint dusting of red crossing her cheeks. "Thanks."

He grinned at her. "Hey, what are soon-to-be husbands for, right? Anyway, let's try again." His brow furrowed. "But first, let's get rid of the reject batter." He looked around. "Is there a trash can somewhere?"

"I think we're beyond the point of being able to scrape that batter off into a trash can," Cinder admitted. "There's no way it's coming out of the bowl, Jaune."

"Then we'll have to throw away the whole bowl."

"That would do nothing to get the smell of burnt batter out of the room."

"What do you suggest, then?"

Cinder stared at him for a moment before picking up the ruined bowl, waiting for Peridot to look away, and tossing the entire bowl out the nearby window. Jaune blinked as he watched the mixing bowl go out the window, then slowly turned back to her.

"I suppose that solves that problem," he admitted. "Okay, do me a favor and get me another bowl. Let's try this again."

---

A few minutes later, and the room was once again filled with smoke. None of the other students had come back after the first go-around, so it was just the two of them and Peridot coughing this time, though that did nothing to mask the shame that Cinder felt. She stood there, gritting her teeth and looking down at the floor as the instructor once again moved over to get a look, again waving the smoke out the nearby window.

"What happened?" he asked, still keeping that some upbeat tone. "Another spontaneous combustion?"

"Seems like it," Jaune said between bouts of coughing. "You know how this stuff goes, I'm sure."

"Hm..." Peridot again brought a hand up in thought. "Your stovetop isn't on, is it?"

"It was," Jaune hurriedly answered. "We, uh, turned it off just before you got here. I must have turned it on by mistake - my bad. Won't happen again."

Peridot clapped his hands together. "Well, it's no trouble, of course - making mistakes is part of learning, after all. Nothing to worry about."

"Not even the ruined bowls?"

"The fee for the class pays for more than just the ingredients, you know." Peridot winked at him. "Anyway, let's try again. Third time's the charm, after all."

Again, Cinder grit her teeth as Peridot walked away.

"This time, I am *sure* he is mocking me," she said.

"He's not," Jaune emphatically told her. "Look, I know it's frustrating, but baking isn't easy in the first place. It's *especially* not easy if you have a Semblance making things difficult for you." Again, he put a hand on her shoulder. "Just relax, okay? Let me take the lead this time. You put in the ingredients, and I'll mix them. We'll have to get an electric mixer for ourselves at some point, because I think the problem here is you're trying to mix everything by hand... you know, assuming we're not sick of hearing about chocolate chip cookies by the end of today."

Cinder let out a tired huff. "It's just frustrating. I am a Hero, someone who fights criminals and defends innocents. I have stared down dangerous people armed with even more dangerous weapons several times by now. Something as basic and domestic as cooking should come naturally to me, especially since we are living together. You should not be the only one stuck making meals for both of us, especially given the hours you work."

"Cooking and crime-fighting are two completely different skills," Jaune softly told her. "Your worth as a person and as a wife is not determined by how well you can cook, Cinder. That's not why I'm marrying you."

"And why *are* you marrying you?"

"Truthfully? Because you've got a great ass." She flushed red at his unexpected comment, and he grinned at her. "Chalk another one up for Jaune."

"I'll get you back for that one," she muttered. "And, for the record... that's *my* reason for marrying you as well."

She punctuated her statement by looping an arm around his waist and giving his butt a gentle squeeze. Jaune looked to her in surprise.

"Why, Cinder, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to seduce me, right in front of the cooking instructor."

"Perhaps I am," she purred. "It would certainly make this class more interesting, wouldn't you agree?"

"I won't argue that, but-

Peridot suddenly cleared his throat. "Not to interrupt your little moment, but if you both could please very kindly refrain from making love on the countertop? People eat off those."

Jaune looked to Cinder. "Now, what makes him think there wouldn't be any *eating* going on between the two of us?"

Cinder's blush was downright luminescent, even as she grit her teeth. "I am about fed up with this man, Jaune. I can deal with mockery, but blue balls, so to speak? I have half a mind to set the room ablaze."

"But our fifty lien, Cinder."

"Consider it an investment. One more comment and I am liable to explode, and not in the good way."

Jaune held up his hands in surrender. "Calm down, okay? All we need to do is bake some cookies, then we can call it good. I think he'd be just as happy to see us out of the room at that point as well."

Cinder let out another huff. "Very well. But you are making it up to me later."

"You're stressed," Jaune noted. "Perhaps you'd like a massage when we get home?"

"Mm... been awhile since you've offered me one of those."

"No, it hasn't. I do it pretty regularly. It's just that while they *start* as massages, they never *end* as massages."

"Arguable. My understanding is that a happy ending is expected at many of those places."

"Yes, but generally it's the guy getting one, not the other way around."

"Are you implying my endings for you aren't happy? Is this you calling me a selfish lover?"

Jaune paused. "... Loaded question."

"I know. Add one for Cinder."

"Oh, come on, I wasn't flustered, just confused."

"It still counts."

"Hmph. Maybe I *will* make you mix the ingredients, after all."

Cinder paled at that. "My apologies, Jaune. Please do not force me to burn another batch of cookies."

"Well, alright," he conceded. "But only because you're so cute."

He motioned to the lineup of steadily-dwindling ingredients in front of them. "Okay, let's do one more batch, then call it good."

---

For the first time that day, they succeeded in getting the cookies into the oven without burning them. Peridot even came over to examine them as they baked, eventually standing up and nodding, that same smile still ever-present on his face.

"Excellent work!" he complimented. "I knew you both could do it eventually."

"Sorry about the mess," Jaune apologized.

Peridot waved him off. "Oh, it's no big deal - that's what the janitors are for, anyway. Frankly, I'm not surprised to see new bakers burning the cookies... though admittedly, generally that happens *before* they get in the oven... but I digress! Good work." He checked his watch. "Now then, I need to step out for just a few minutes. If you two can just watch the cookies as they bake and pull them out when they're done? It shouldn't be much longer, just a few minutes."

"That won't be a problem," Jaune promised. "We'll be right here, watching them."

"Excellent! I will be back shortly."

With that, Peridot turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him. Jaune watched him go before shaking his head.

"Man, that's guy's weird. So, what should we do for the next-"

That was as far as he got before Cinder grabbed him, spun him around, and kissed him on the lips. Jaune stood there for a moment, shocked, but eventually, began reciprocating. After a few seconds, they both pulled away, panting and gasping for breath as they looked each other in the eyes.

"Okay," Jaune ventured. "Not that I'm disappointed, but what brought *that* on?"

"Oh, I don't know," Cinder said playfully. "Perhaps something you said earlier has been stuck in my head. Perhaps I've thought of a way you can pay me back for your earlier comment."

"I thought you wanted a massage when we got home?"

"Perhaps I can't wait that long. Perhaps I've thought of something we can do to pass the time." A wicked grin crossed her face as she leaned in to whisper in his ear. "And perhaps a certain comment you made about *eating* something has gotten me a bit *excited*."

She pulled away, and Jaune stared at her in surprise. "... Really? Right here, on the countertop?"

"Why not?" Cinder asked. "I know you're more than a little riled up right now."

"But... we'd be getting the counter dirty-"

"What are janitors for?"

"... Point," he conceded. "What if Peridot sees?"

"Consider it a challenge, then," Cinder said. "You have a few minutes. Are you good enough with your tongue to make them count?"

Jaune's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You know better than to challenge my tongue game, woman."

Before Cinder could relax, Jaune grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her onto the counter. She gave a small, surprised yelp as he spread her legs and got between them, looking up at her with a downright *devilish* look on his face.

"You are a bad influence," he said. Each word came with a pulse of hot breath on her crotch, making her flinch, her face turning crimson as she twitched. He grinned at her when he realized what was happening. "Seriously? I haven't even started yet."

"... Your comments from earlier may have gotten me more than a *little* excited," she confessed. "Do you intend to keep me in anticipation forever? Need I remind you of our time limit?"

"Alright, alright, I'll-" Jaune suddenly paused. "... What smells like burning chocolate?"

Both of them blinked and stared at each other before suddenly separating, Cinder scrambling off the countertop and watching on

worriedly as Jaune opened the oven and pulled at the tray of cookies. To her dismay, they were all blackened and burned.

And right at the moment, Peridot came walking through the door, whistling a tune. He paused mid-step as the scent of burning cookies hit his nose, then turned towards them.

"Well," he said, *still* somehow not losing his smile. "How unfortunate. Still, there's always the fourth try-"

That was enough for Cinder. Without missing a beat, she pulled one of the rock-hard cookies off the tray and threw it at him. It struck him right between the eyes, and he fell to the floor in a heap.

"Cinder!" Jaune exclaimed, putting the tray of burnt cookies on the countertop and moving to rush forwards. "Is he okay?!"

"He'll be fine," she said, reaching out to stop him. "He is merely unconscious."

"Still, we should check on-"

"Jaune," she said, stopping him. "He will be *fine*. Trust me."

"How can you tell?"

"Believe me, I've knocked enough people out to know. Though admittedly, this is the first time I have done so with chocolate. Still, I suppose there's a first time for everything. Besides, be honest - you wanted to punch him out too, didn't you?"

Jaune bit his lip. "... Okay, maybe a little," he confessed. "But still, we should-"

"We should do nothing," Cinder insisted. "Aside from vacate the premises, of course. Peridot will be fine, but being found standing in the same room as his unconscious body is... not a good look for us."

Jaune let out a chuckle. "Okay, yeah, you've got a point." He reached down and turned the oven off. "So, what now?"

"Isn't it obvious?" she asked. "We finish what we very regrettably did not have a chance to start yet."

Again, Jaune let out a chuckle. "You're a horny little minx, you know that?"

"Only for you. Now take me to bed or lose me forever."

"Well, between those two options, I don't really have a choice, do I?"

Jaune took her by the hand, and together they both left the room, stepping over Peridot's unconscious figure as they hurried home.

---

The next morning, Jaune was awoken by the scent of, of all things, chocolate. He groggily sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes before throwing the cover off himself and standing up.

"Cinder?" he called. "You here?"

"I'm in the kitchen!" she called back.

Jaune's blood ran cold. Without missing a beat, he ran in, expecting a horror show. And he wasn't wrong - the entire countertop was filled with bags of ingredients and bowls of rejected batter, most of which was at least somewhat burned. But that wasn't what really surprised him.

No, what *really* surprised him was the sight of Cinder, dressed in nothing but an open-backed apron, as she pulled a tray of unburnt cookies out of the oven.

Jaune stared in shock as she set the tray on the stovetop, then took a step back, wiping sweat from her brow as she did so. Tentatively, he took a step forward.

"What is all this?"

Cinder hesitated. "I... wanted to try it on my own," she offered. "It turned out that we had the ingredients here already, so I simply followed the recipe we learned in class. It took several tries, and I rejected anything that even *hinted* at being burnt, but eventually, I had one batch that turned out well enough to go into the oven. After that, I simply watched them like a hawk, and... here they are."

She motioned to the tray of cookies sitting on the stove. Jaune stepped forward, examining them closely. None of the cookies were uniform; they were all of varying shapes and sizes, which naturally meant that some were undercooked and others were overcooked. Still, despite that, these were a labor of love, from a soon-to-be wife to her soon-to-be husband.

Without missing a beat, he reached for one and popped it into his mouth. Sure enough, it was overcooked; the underside was burnt, and the entire cookie was dry. It wasn't exactly bakery-quality, but Cinder had made them for him, and that was enough.

"What do you think?" Cinder asked, anxious. "Be honest."

Jaune swallowed what was in his mouth, then turned towards her, a smile crossing his face.

"It's the second-best thing I've ever eaten," he told her.

It took her a minute to get it, but when she did, she blushed harder than he'd ever seen her blush before.

Jaune grinned, and silently gave himself an extra point for that one.

---

**Apologies for the delay, friends - things have been getting kinda crazy around here over the past few weeks. And they might be getting crazier still, since I've realized I fucking hate my job and really need to find a new one. So don't be surprised if there are**

further delays on the fanfics. I'll do my absolute best to keep consistently coming out with an update for each of them every few weeks, but life is keeping me busy, unfortunately.

That's about what I've got as far as a status update is concerned. Now for a word from everyone's favorite co-writer:

Jaune ain't the only one eating well tonight. Hope y'all you enjoy the chapter! -ickbard

And there you have it, folks. Speaking of Ickbard, very special thanks to him for the help with this chapter, as well as for the help with basically everything else I've written, lol. Love ya, man.

That's pretty much all we've got for now, so we'll see you next time!

---

*Enjoy my work and want to help me out a bit? You can support me, as well as read more of my writing, over on Amazon. My second original story is available for purchase now, you can find it by going on Amazon and searching for 'Dead World' by John Haruspex. The story is available now for three bucks in ebook format (or free with Kindle Unlimited) or twelve bucks in paperback format, if you prefer physical media. (Remove the spaces)*

*[www . amazon Dead-World-John-Haruspex / dp /B0C2RPGXVC / ref=tmm\\_pap\\_swatch\\_0?\\_encoding=UTF8&qid=1682982861&sr=8-2](http://www.amazon.com/Dead-World-John-Haruspex/dp/B0C2RPGXVC/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1682982861&sr=8-2)*

*My first original story is also still available at the following link as well:*

*[www . amazon dp/ B0BLFL72MX](http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BLFL72MX)*

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I have recently launched my first piece of serialized web fiction. It's called *An Angel's Retirement*, and you can read it over on Spacebattles, Royal Road, or r/HFY. In each case, it's been posted under my name, Obsequium Minaris. I'll try to link it here, but FFN's wordfilter may make that impossible. In any case, let's try it (remove the spaces):

www . reddit r/HFY/ comments / 18xythv /  
an\_angels\_retirement\_chapter\_1/

forums . spacebattles threads / an-angels-retirement.1137358/

www . royalroad fiction 79445 / an-angels-retirement

And the synopsis:

*Captain Eric Anders thought his time in the military was over when the war with the Iprenians ended in a ceasefire. He was content to sit back, collecting his monthly pension and drinking his sorrows away. But everything changed when the government saw fit to drop one of its very own super-soldiers into his life. Suddenly, he finds his retirement interrupted by the need to babysit a socially-maladjusted killing machine who has known nothing but war for almost her entire life.*

*As it turns out, the war itself may be over for the two of them, but the wounds it left behind are very much still present...*

# Chapter 12

Auras and Alibis

## Chapter 12

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For a few days after the cooking class, everything was relatively normal, with the exception of Cinder being more willing to try her hand at cooking with his assistance. The class had been a good move, in that it had undoubtedly led to them getting even closer, in a way much deeper than merely being physical.

And then, four days later, the overdraft notice had arrived in the mail.

Jaune stared at the letter in his hand, frozen in shock. He'd known they'd been living basically paycheck to paycheck, but he hadn't expected their finances to be in dire straits such as this. His eyes scanned over the letter, and he let out a grunt before setting it aside and reaching for his scroll.

"There must be something wrong..." he muttered. "Account activity shouldn't have been that different from previous months..."

"Jaune?" Cinder asked, causing him to freeze. He turned and watched as she stepped out from down the hallway, having clearly just woken up. Her hair was frazzled, she was rubbing the sleep from her eyes, and she was dressed only in one of his shirts, which was oversized on her.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

Jaune bit his lip. He was tempted to lie, if only to save face, but he knew that would get him nowhere. He gave a heavy sigh, then offered her the letter from the bank.

"... Overdraft notice," he said quietly. "We're out of money."

Cinder turned to him in shock. "Out of money...? What happened?"

"I don't know. I'm reviewing the account activity now - must have been some kind of extra charge I forgot about, or maybe the rent's gone up again, or I just didn't hand it in on time, or..." He sighed irritably. "... I'm sorry. This is my fault."

"No, it isn't," Cinder said harshly. "I know you, Jaune. You don't make frivolous purchases on *anything*. You're good with money. Whatever caused this, it's something out of your control."

"How can you be-"

"Jaune," she repeated, "it's not your fault. Don't argue this with me, please. Instead, let's sit down and figure out what we need to do. You putting the blame upon yourself doesn't help us at all."

He hesitated, but then nodded. "... You're right. Okay, let's... let's see what's up."

They both crowded around the table, with Jaune taking his scroll and looking through his bank account. It didn't take them long to figure out what the problem was. When he realized it, Jaune let out a heavy sigh, burying his head in his hands.

"... They raised the rent," he said, his voice coming out muffled. "And they did it without telling us."

Cinder scowled. "They can do that?"

"Probably not, but what recourse do we have? We're not exactly well-off enough to hire a lawyer and take them to court over it." Jaune let out a tired sigh. "So I guess now we're going to have to find a new place to live, and on short notice."

"What makes you say that?"

"Cinder, we were already operating pretty deep in the red on a monthly basis," Jaune pointed out. "We had just enough left after

rent and other expenses to afford groceries, a night out with friends, and occasionally a way to treat ourselves to something. But with this kind of price increase, we'll be lucky if we can stretch our money enough to cover food on a weekly basis. I don't know about you, but that indicates to me that we're going to have to find somewhere else."

"But you like this apartment," Cinder reminded him. "You're only a short bus ride away from the hospital, and all your friends are nearby. If we needed to find new housing, you'd be apart from them, and your commute would suddenly be much longer."

"I know," Jaune lamented. "But we'll make it work, I promise."

He went in and hugged her, but the entire time, Cinder was scowling.

She'd gotten used to taking time off over the past few weeks - spending it with Jaune instead, and also her new... companions, so to speak. She'd grown soft, and that had blinded her to the reality that Jaune's financial situation was a house of cards, through no fault of his own; honest work simply didn't pay that well, at the end of the day. And sure, she had the money to help him pay the rent, but the price increase was going to be permanent, at least until someone intervened on their behalf legally.

More than that, it wasn't about the money. She'd gotten used to resting on her laurels over the past few weeks, and had forgotten who she was. This was a reminder that at the end of the day, she was still the most powerful supervillain in Vale.

And perhaps it was time to make the city fear her once more.

Jaune suddenly sniffed, then looked to her in surprise. "What smells like something burning?"

Cinder hurriedly hid her hand behind her back, hoping that he wouldn't notice the small wisps of smoke curling upwards from it.

"Nothing in here. Perhaps the neighbors doing a poor job of cooking breakfast, as usual."

He stared at her for a moment, then nodded. "Makes sense... Anyway, I've got to head out for a bit - see if I can't get work to give me some extra shifts, or maybe find some new housing, or *something*."

Cinder was about to protest, but he rested a hand on her shoulder and gave her a reassuring grin. "We'll make it work, I promise. Whatever it takes."

Cinder looked him in the eyes, then nodded.

"Yes," she said softly. "Whatever it takes."

---

As it turned out, Jaune's attempt to temporarily get extra shifts ended up benefiting them both. He'd managed to find a way to make a bit of extra money for the time being, and it also got him out of the apartment.

Which meant that she was free to cut loose.

The lock on the warehouse door was easy enough to break through - one quick application of her Semblance, and it was little more than a heap of molten slag on the ground. She threw the door open and stepped inside, looking around as she did so. By her estimation, the silent alarm would give her just a few minutes to rifle through the place and see what she was dealing with.

"Let's see..." she muttered, approaching a locked shipping container. "What do you have for me today?"

She melted the second lock, then opened the container. Inside were several large wooden crates. Cinder broke one open, then peered inside, a wicked grin crossing her face as she did so.

"Well, well," she noted. "Can't say I've dealt with too many of these before, but they certainly look expensive."

Inside were several handgun cases, the weapons no doubt intended for either the military or a police force somewhere. Obviously, she wouldn't be able to take them all - that'd be far too heavy and bulky for her to carry. But she could load up the bag she'd brought with enough cases to at least temporarily offset the increase in Jaune's rent.

More than that, though, this was a good, low-risk job to prove to the world that she was still around. Not the most profitable, of course, but at this point, that was secondary to reminding the people of Vale who was *really* in charge.

Cinder finished loading up her bag with gun cases, then threw it over her shoulder and went to leave, checking her watch as she did so. Three minutes, meaning she still had some time before the police got here. By her estimation, she'd made off with merchandise worth several thousand lien; after Junior's cut, she still had enough left over to offset the increase in rent for a few months, and that was before factoring in her personal savings accounts.

So, all in all, a successful heist. Cinder grinned to herself as she stepped outside and prepared to take off into the night.

Her happiness faded when something large and heavy suddenly struck her in the side of the head, sending her flying backwards.

Cinder landed in a heap on the other end of the warehouse, the bag of guns slipping from her grasp. She recovered quickly, however, her Aura having shielded her from sustaining any kind of major damage. Leaping to her feet, she turned to look at who her assailant was, only to freeze in shock at what she saw.

Across from her stood a young woman dressed in a pink, white, and blue jumpsuit. She had on a pink domino mask, and was wielding

some kind of warhammer. But through it all, she was still unmistakably Nora.

"So we finally meet," Nora said, her voice only confirming what Cinder already knew. "Queen Malevolent."

The two stared each other down, Cinder saying nothing for fear of Nora recognizing who she was under the mask. Nora shifted across from her, her grip on the warhammer turning white-knuckled.

"Not gonna say anything, huh?" Nora challenged. "Well, no worries - I'm not planning on talking much, myself. After all, actions speak louder than words."

And then, before Cinder could think deeper about what to do, Nora charged at her, far faster than any ordinary unpowered human would ever have been able to.

Cinder's eyes widened as Nora brought the hammer in for a swing; it was only a quick draw of one of her swords to block it that saved her from sustaining more damage.

The two traded blows for a moment before Nora got in a sneaky jab to her side, one that had far more power packed into it than Cinder would ever have expected. She reeled from the hit, which left her open to yet another blow from Nora's hammer. She was sent backwards into a maze of shipping containers, and hurriedly picked herself up off the ground, gritting her teeth as she did so.

Jaune liked Nora, and so she wasn't willing to hurt him by possibly injuring her. That left escape as the only option.

"Still not saying anything?" Nora asked from somewhere inside the pile of shipping containers. "There's no point in hiding, you know. I'm finding you and taking you in myself. I hope it was worth it in the end, because you'll be going away for a long time. Or perhaps you're just afraid of me? I mean, it *has* been a while since you were spotted in

Vale. What changed, hm? Finally decided to retire, only to come out for one last job? Sounds like you've lost your edge."

Cinder's eyes narrowed dangerously. Nora was taunting her now, apparently having grown confident after their initial bout ended in her favor. That was bad, and not just because it was irritating to her - no, Cinder had a reputation she needed to uphold among Vale's criminal underworld, at the very least. If word got out that she'd been beaten by a Hero - and a low-level, new one at that - then her reputation would be in shambles, which she couldn't afford.

Fine, then. Nora wanted a fight? She'd get one.

Cinder peeled herself off the side of the shipping container she'd been sidled up to, then drew both her swords and began to *hunt*. It wasn't hard - Nora kept taunting her the entire time, calling out challenges to try and get her to come out.

When Cinder finally did, Nora was completely unprepared for it.

Cinder's first blow struck Nora in the back of the head in a surprise attack - fatal for an average person, but she already knew Nora had Aura, judging by how hard she'd been hitting earlier. Nora was stunned by the sudden attack, and that left her open to several follow-ups before she was able to recover and leap away. She turned back to face Cinder, and the two of them began to circle one another, staring each other down like a pair of predators.

Cinder made the first move, launching herself towards Nora; she was prepared for the sudden move, but was unprepared for Cinder to reach into her pocket for a glass vial of Dust and crush it, then superheat it in the same motion, causing a large cloud of smoke to fill the area. Nora took a step back, looking around for where Cinder could come from, and that was when she struck from off to Nora's side. Cinder's swords bit deeply into Nora's Aura, and Nora lashed out in a blind attack, desperately trying to fend Cinder off, though it was pointless, as Cinder had already disengaged and retreated back into the cloud of smoke.

Nora grit her teeth. "Okay... you want to play that game? Fine. Let's do it, then."

Cinder, meanwhile, had perched herself on top of a nearby shipping container, her black outfit allowing her to blend in with the night and the smoke. She watched from above as Nora's weapon began to shift, turning from a warhammer into a grenade launcher. She couldn't help but cock an eyebrow at that - clearly, Nora wasn't a normal Hero; they would have never used something quite so destructive as standard equipment.

"A vigilante, then?" Cinder muttered. "Very well... let's end this."

She jumped off the stack of containers, landing a short ways away. Nora must have heard her land, because she immediately whipped around and began to fire off grenades. Cinder sprinted through the cloud of smoke, grenade explosions going off all around her, before finally getting caught in one that launched her into the side of a nearby steel container. She struck it back first and fell to the ground, her twin swords slipping from her grasp. Before she could spring to her feet, Nora closed in on her, grenade launcher at the ready and leveled directly at her.

"Stop," Nora commanded, causing her to freeze. "Unless you want me to blow you sky-high, that is. Put your hands up."

Cinder paused for a moment, racking her brain for an idea. In the meantime, she complied with Nora's request, raising her hands above her head in surrender. Nora hesitated for just a moment, then began to close in, shifting her weapon back to its warhammer configuration just in case, her other hand reaching for a set of steel-reinforced zip ties in her pocket.

As she drew within just a few feet, Cinder struck. She pulled out another glass vial, this one of Fire Dust, and superheated it, then tossed it at Nora's feet. Nora's eyes widened, but it was too late - as the heated vial hit the ground, it shattered, and a split-second later, it detonated. Nora was blown backwards, her Aura completely

shattered; Cinder sprang to her feet and closed in on her, kicking her hammer away. Nora was still alive, but she was wounded, covered in myriad scraps and bruises, her outfit blackened and burned in places. Her eyes were scrunched tightly shut in pain, and a low groan escaped from between her lips as Cinder drew closer.

It was pathetic. She thought she'd be able to play Hero and go toe-to-toe with the deadliest, most dangerous villain in all of Vale? Pure overconfidence. And now it was time for her to see what happened to overconfident Heroes who picked a fight with the wrong person.

Cinder crouched down and took Nora's head in her off-hand, then raised her other, her palm already glowing red-hot. She stared down at the younger girl with malice. All this time, Nora had done nothing but bother her and compete for Jaune's attention, and now she finally had a way to get revenge on her and get away with it. And she was going to be sure to savor every second of it.

Cinder's hand drew closer to Nora's face, but as she did so, Nora's eyes opened, the heat emanating from Cinder's palm having disturbed her. She stared up at Cinder, and their eyes met.

And for some reason, as she stared into those eyes, all Cinder could think about was that night at the bar.

Cinder immediately froze as the memories flooded her mind. It shouldn't have meant anything to her - the only person she'd ever cared about was Jaune, after all - and yet there was something there, something that was screaming at her not to do this, that she'd regret it in some way.

Oh yes, that was right - Nora was supposed to be at their wedding. And how sad it'd be, if Jaune saw that one of her bridesmaids had been horribly disfigured.

*Jaune...*

How would he react if he saw what she was doing to one of his best friends? Even beyond the memories she had of Nora with her at the bar, that idea weighed heavily on her. Maybe he could forgive her other crimes, assuming her ever found out about them, but hurting Nora? Jaune would never forgive that.

Slowly, Cinder pulled her hand away from Nora's face, the heat dissipating off it as she deactivated her Semblance. Nora stared up at her one final time before giving a shuddering cough and then passing out. Cinder spared her one final glance before gently lowering her head to the ground, then turning to gather up her fallen equipment and bag of stolen guns. Once she had everything, she took off into the night, sirens echoing behind her the entire time.

---

Cinder jumped from rooftop to rooftop, her breath coming out ragged from stress the entire time. After several minutes of running, she finally stopped on a roof about halfway to her safe house, then doubled over, breathing heavily.

The fight with Nora hadn't exactly been physically demanding, but it had weighed on her mentally in ways that she was still trying to figure out. Jaune being disappointed in her was obvious, but the memories that had surged forwards in addition... those, she wasn't sure what to make of.

A tired sigh escaped her, and she stood back up, dusting herself off in the process. It didn't matter; she needed to drop the guns off at her safe house for now, before the police shut down the whole city trying to find her. In the morning, she'd begin the process of ferrying them all the Junior for payment. Until that was done, she'd lay low and bask in the feeling of a job well-executed.

Or at least, she would, so long as those damn memories stayed away.

Cinder let out an irritated grunt, then went to go pick up the bag, only for a sudden noise to catch her attention. She barely had time to

question what it was when another figure jumped up on her rooftop. And this time, there was no questioning who it was, not even from the start - Cinder would have recognized the flowing red hair without issue anytime, anywhere.

Pyrrha stood across from her, dressed in a set of ornate bronze armor and carrying a sword and shield. She had her shield raised to defend herself, but she wasn't moving. Cinder stared her down, her hands drifting to the twin swords sheathed at her waist. Pyrrha saw this, and shook her head.

"It doesn't have to be like this," she urged. "Come quietly and I won't have to hurt you."

Cinder couldn't help but give a small snort of amusement. Pyrrha was renowned for her skill, sure, but she was still a newcomer in Vale, and that meant she had no idea who she was dealing with. She needed to be taught a lesson.

Pyrrha, seeing that Cinder wasn't about to back down, took a step forward, and in that moment, Cinder drew her swords, the steel obsidian-black blades gleaming in the moonlight as they left their sheathes. Pyrrha eyed her swords with caution, shifting to put more weight on her support foot.

"Well? Come on, then," Pyrrha said. "You're supposed to be some amazingly powerful villain, right? Don't keep me-"

Cinder moved before she had a chance to finish. Pyrrha tensed, but made no attempt to dodge. Cinder grinned wickedly as she closed in - this was going to be too easy; Pyrrha was clearly focused on tanking hits rather than avoiding them, which meant she would be easy to wear down with sheer aggression. All Cinder needed to do was bombard her with enough small hits that they'd up over time, eventually causing her to slip up and drop her shield enough that the fight could be ended in one fell move. She'd fought shield-using Heroes before, and none of them had ever posed much of a challenge to her; Pyrrha would be no different.

Cinder's blade came soaring through the air, getting to within millimeters of Pyrrha's flesh, but at the last minute, something happened - an unseen force suddenly deflected the blackened steel sword, seeming to completely push it away from Pyrrha's body. Cinder's eyes widened in shock, and in that moment, Pyrrha struck, landing a powerful blow against Cinder's midsection. The wind was driven out of her, and she fell to her knees, just in time for Pyrrha to follow up with a shield bash that sent her skidding across the roof. Cinder hurriedly picked herself up just as Pyrrha shifted her sword into a rifle configuration and began to fire off shots at her. Rounds pinged off what was left of Cinder's Aura, and she forced to scramble for cover, which she found behind a small concrete structure atop the roof.

As she hid behind cover, Cinder's thoughts raced. What the hell was going on? Pyrrha was fighting like a woman possessed, not to mention that mysterious force that had saved her from what would have been the start of a devastating string of attacks.

Cinder didn't have much time to dwell on it, as that same force suddenly began to pull on her swords. She looked to them and was shocked to see some kind of thin black Aura had surrounded them; she barely had time to think about what was happening when something yanked on them hard enough to cause her to stumble out of cover, and the moment she did, Pyrrha lit her up with the few rounds left remaining in her weapon. Three shots impacted against Cinder's weapon, the third punctuated by Pyrrha's weapon automatically ejecting its spent en bloc clip with a loud ping, indicating she was out of ammo. There was no time for her to capitalize on that, however, as Pyrrha suddenly shifted her weapon to a *third* configuration - this one a spear - and threw it at her. Cinder managed to avoid it, but she was completely unprepared for the spear to come at her from behind, impacting against her spine before returning to Pyrrha's grasp. The force of the blow sent her sprawling, stars filling her vision as her Aura flickered and faded, and pain blossomed across her spine.

Cinder gasped for breath and grit her teeth as she picked herself up off the ground, stumbling as she did so, her back screaming in agony. Pyrrha was proving to be a difficult opponent to fight. She was fast and strong, sure, but most importantly, she was *crafty*. Every move seemed to flow together in a way that made it impossible to properly fight her, and even if she was able to get an opening, that black aura, whatever it was, kept her from actually landing a hit. Cinder looked around, her eyes landing on the bag of guns, which was now between her and Pyrrha. Slowly, her eyes narrowed.

She wanted to teach Pyrrha a lesson, yes, but that wasn't going to happen so long as she was still tired from her fight with Nora, and moreover, didn't even know how to properly fight Pyrrha yet. Besides, defeating Pyrrha wasn't the objective here; she'd already downed one Hero tonight, and she still needed to get the guns back to her safe house. So, much as she wanted to defeat Pyrrha, it was going to have to wait for now.

Pyrrha drew steadily closer to her, and as she did so, Cinder reached for another vial of Ice Dust and superheated it, then threw it at her feet. Smoke filled the area, and in the confusion, Cinder dashed forwards, grabbed the bag of stolen guns, and jumped off the roof. She landed on the street below, then took off running as fast as her legs would take her. There were no footsteps behind her; she could only assume that meant she had gotten away.

Cinder ran through the night, aiming for her safe house, the whole time anticipating the city's reaction to her sudden return.

It was good to be back.

---

**Special thanks to my good friend Ickbard for the help with writing this chapter/story! And speaking of which...**

Man, that'll leave a mark! -Ickbard

Indeed it will. Stay tuned for the inevitable after-action patchup, I suppose lol.

I don't really have much else to say beyond that. Like, for real, I'm sitting here and trying to think of something I can say, but I'm really struggling to find anything. So I guess I'll call it here. Hope you all enjoyed the chapter, and I hope to see you again next time!

---

I have recently launched my first piece of serialized web fiction. It's called *An Angel's Retirement*, and you can read it over on Spacebattles, Royal Road, or r/HFY. In each case, it's been posted under my name, Obsequium Minaris. I'll try to link it here, but FFN's wordfilter may make that impossible. In any case, let's try it (remove the spaces):

www . reddit r/HFY/ comments / 18xythv /  
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www . royalroad fiction 79445 / an-angels-retirement

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# Chapter 13

Auras and Alibis

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---

The sun had started to rise by the time Cinder came stumbling back into the apartment, the beams of light spilling through the windows that lined the hallway as she pushed her way through the front door, grimacing in pain the entire time. Once she'd closed and locked the door behind her, she pressed her back against the wall, only to let out a hiss when pain again erupted across her back.

"Cinder!"

She looked up, and instantly, part of her pain faded. Jaune came rushing over to her, a first aid kit in his hands. She couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at that.

"Jaune," she said, "why do you have that?"

"Because you were late coming home, and I *knew* something had gone wrong," he said. "Come with me, let me take a look."

She didn't argue, instead letting Jaune take her by the hand and lead her back to the bedroom. Once they were there, he urged her to lie down on the bed, then stripped off her top, leaving her bare-chested and face down on the bed, while he began to poke and prod at her lower back. She sucked in a breath with each ministrations, something that didn't go unnoticed by him.

"What happened, Cinder?" Jaune asked from behind her. "You've got a really nasty bruise on your lower back, right over your spine. If this had been just a bit harder of a hit, you could've easily been paralyzed. Who the hell were you fighting?"

Cinder hesitated for a moment, trying to think of a convincing enough lie. After a moment, she finally thought of one.

"... I thought he was just going to be some low-level crook," she offered. "I have no idea he'd be a former Hero."

Jaune froze at that revelation. "... A former Hero? You're sure?"

She nodded. "Positive. Those moves, and those weapons... he was trained. And I don't know of any villainous organizations that are training specifically to fight and kill Heroes."

Jaune bit his lip, then shook his head. "That's a shame... why would somebody turn their backs on being a Hero like that?"

"A variety of reasons, I'm sure, none of them good. How do I look back there?"

"Well, like I said, it's a bad bruise-"

"I wasn't talking about the bruise, Jaune."

He froze, and she couldn't help but crack a small smile as she mentally added a point for herself. After a moment, he sighed, then shook his head. "... Clearly, you're not in too much pain if you're yucking it up over there... anyway, you're lucky - like I said, a bit harder and you could've been paralyzed. But given that you walked back here, I don't think we'll have to worry about that."

Cinder sucked in another breath when she felt him suddenly place something cold on her lower back and hold it down with some medical gauze. "A little *warning* would have been nice, Jaune."

"Sorry. Anyway, keep that cold compress on there for a bit, that should help with the pain and swelling somewhat. Aside from that... you're out of commission for at least the next week. Don't even *think* about going out crime-fighting, or I'll be mad."

"Oh?" she asked, turning towards him. His eyes fell to her bare chest, and she smirked. "How mad would you be, Jaune? Enough to *punish* me, perhaps?"

He blinked, then shook his head. "I can't believe you're doing this... I just told you that you were almost *paralyzed*, and you're over there trying to seduce me."

"What can I say? Perhaps my minor brush with death has made me realize that I ought to be more appreciative of what's really important."

She sat up and pulled him into a soft embrace, then leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"And besides, don't act like you don't *love* it~"

Jaune stiffened in her grasp, but then pulled away, going red in the face. "... Much as I'd like to *indulge* you, I think it would be best if we waited for now. I want to give that bruise time to heal before we start potentially doing more damage."

"Fine, fine," Cinder said, her smirk widening. "I will just have to tease you more until then."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it *is* pretty hard to walk around with a shirt on when I've got the cold compress on, so perhaps it would be best if I simply didn't while I'm stuck at home."

"Two can play at that game, you know," Jaune pointed out. "If you're going topless, then I'm going *bottomless*. What would you think of that?"

Cinder let out a small laugh, only to wince when pain again radiated across her lower back. Jaune was immediately at her side again, fussing over her once more.

"I'm fine," Cinder insisted. "Just... hurts when I laugh."

"Take it easy, Cinder," he insisted. "Seriously. The last thing I want is for you to hurt yourself even more than you already are."

Cinder turned to him, surprised. "You know, I am very shocked that you don't seem to be worrying about this happening again in the future, or worse."

"Oh, believe me, the prospect of losing you *terrifies* me," Jaune stated. "But at the same time... I know better than to try and talk you out of being a Hero. I know how much being a Hero means to you, and I wouldn't dream of taking that away. Especially not when you do so much good for the people."

Cinder blinked, a pang of guilt suddenly lancing through her mind. Her lies to him were for his own good, she knew, not to mention her own as well, but that didn't make the act of lying to him any easier. Jaune was a good man, and he didn't deserve this level of deceit, but at the same time, it wasn't like she had much of a choice.

Ultimately, though, that just made his acts of unconditional love and support bittersweet, on some level. She knew he was being genuine with them, but would he still be if he knew the truth about her? She didn't know, and hopefully, she'd never have to find out.

"... You know," she said, interrupting the silence that had fallen over the two of them, "I *do* know how to pick them."

Jaune let out a small laugh. "Honestly, Cinder, I think it was fate that picked us, more than anything. Not to mention that cup of coffee."

"That, too. But I have to say... I'm glad to have you by my side, Jaune."

His expression softened. "And I'm glad we're together, Cinder. I love you."

Her heart skipped a beat. She'd heard Jaune say those three words to her many, many times before, but somehow, they never got stale. She leaned in and embraced him again, and the two of them held that position, the sunlight spilling in from the nearby window and enveloping them with its yellow glow.

"I love you too, Jaune," she said softly.

---

The day came and went, and Cinder found herself alone in the apartment, bored out of her skull. Jaune was away at work, despite his protests - he'd wanted to take time off and care for her, but she'd talked him out of it, saying that he needed to work and she was capable of taking care of herself.

Of course, that left her with little to do aside from lie down on the couch and idly flip through channels on the TV.

And eventually, she settled on something that caught her attention.

"-absent for several weeks, Queen Malevolent finally made her presence known to the people of Vale again last night," the newscaster announced. "The reason for her sudden return is unknown, but experts suspect-

Cinder stared at the TV. There was no mention of her fight with either Nora or Pyrrha, nor of the injury she'd sustained during the latter. More importantly, there was no mention of Nora having been seriously injured, either.

That thought suddenly made her pause. She let out a low growl, then shook her head.

"Ridiculous..." she muttered. "To think I'd worry about what happens to her beyond what it would do to Jaune... I'd never..."

She trailed off, her attention again falling to the newscast. There were no further reports of anyone being injured or killed, which was a

good thing, she supposed. At this point, the only thing the newscasters were bringing up was the nature of her crime, as if it mattered to her whether she stole pistols or jewels. They were all idiots, trying to dig too deeply into something that was so simple to understand; they simply couldn't fathom that everything she did, she did purely to sustain herself.

And, she supposed, to feed her addiction as well.

Cinder raised a hand up and stared at her palm, watching as thin wisps of smoke began to curl upwards from it. Slowly, she clenched her fist, gritting her teeth in the process.

It was getting harder and harder to hold her impulses back at this point, but it wasn't like there was anything she could do about it right now.

Her scroll suddenly began to vibrate on the table nearby, and Cinder let out a tired sigh as she stared at it. The caller ID told her everything she needed to know - namely that it wasn't Jaune - and so she leaned over and sent the call straight to voicemail. Once that was done, she sat back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling, then closed her eyes.

And not even a minute later, there was a loud knock at her door.

Cinder cracked both eyes open, a low groan of annoyance escaping from her throat. She looked around for something to put on, but couldn't find where she'd left her top. Not that it mattered too much - Jaune wasn't home, so she'd elected to wear a sports bra to keep herself at least somewhat covered. It wasn't much, but she didn't particularly care, especially not when someone was incessantly pounding on her door over and over again.

She had half a mind to materialize some glass and thrust it straight through the door at them, but thought better of it, as the stains would be impossible to clean out.

So instead, Cinder marched over to the door and threw it open, a deep scowl on her face.

"What?" she demanded.

Ren and Nora stared back at her, surprised. Nora's hand was frozen halfway to knocking at the door again. She gave Cinder a sheepish grin, then lowered her arm.

"Sorry," she offered.

Next to her, Ren sighed tiredly. "I tried to tell her not to pound on the door over and over again, I swear."

"It's not my fault! I had to make sure they weren't asleep, and neither of them answered my calls."

"Were you looking for Jaune?" Cinder asked, doing her best to keep her eye from twitching in annoyance.

To her surprise, Ren shook his head. "Actually, no. We know Jaune's working this weekend. We were looking for you, Cinder."

"What for?"

"Because we haven't heard from you in a few days. Same with Ruby and her friends," Nora explained. "We figured we'd show up and make sure everything was okay."

"Everything is fine," Cinder insisted.

Nora looked down, her brow furrowing when she saw the gauze wrapped around her stomach. "You sure?"

"Yes."

"Then what's with the gauze? Did Jaune blow your back out or something?"

"Nora," Ren chastised.

"Oh, come on, that's a fair question and you know it."

"I'm not dignifying that with a response," Cinder deadpanned. "All you need to know is I hurt myself at work and am now out of commission for the next few days."

"That's a shame," Ren told her. And somehow he even sounded like he meant it, too. "Well, if you need anything from us-"

"I'll call. Thanks for checking in, but I need to get some rest."

"Sure. Hope you feel better soon."

With that, Cinder shut the door in their faces, then let out another sigh as she marched back to the couch and laid down on it once more.

Another series of half-truths added on to a preexisting series of lies. The list of things to keep track of just kept growing and growing.

On the bright side, at least she hadn't told them to Jaune this time.

---

By the time Jaune got home, Cinder was finding it almost impossible to contain herself, the fire burning inside her far too great to hold back. She needed to scratch the itch, and badly. The moment he walked through the door, she was upon him, pressing her lips against his and doing her best to strip his clothes off as he stepped inside.

"C-Cinder?!" Jaune managed to get out, barely managing to pull himself out of her grasp. She stared at him in confusion, unsure what the problem was, only to freeze when she saw the expression on his face.

She'd never seen him look as downcast as this.

"Jaune?" she ventured. "What's wrong?"

He hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "... Bad day at work. Sorry, but I'm not really in the mood right now."

Cinder stared at him again. The fire inside her was still blazing, yearning to either be released or be satiated in some other way, and yet she could tell that Jaune wasn't going to be able to indulge her tonight. It was frustrating, but she knew better than to give in and try to force him into it.

Right now, Jaune needed her in a different way, so her urges were going to have to wait.

"Here," she offered, reaching out to take his bag. "Let me get this. You go and sit down."

"Cinder-"

"Do not argue," she said firmly. "Sit, and then talk to me."

Jaune bit his lip. "It's depressing stuff."

"I can handle it. And more importantly, you need to let it out. Now go, I'll be with you in a minute."

Jaune nodded, then stepped into the bedroom. Cinder set his bag down on the countertop, then took a few deep breaths to try and calm herself. Idly, she was aware of her hands shaking - the urge was becoming overpowering, but she wasn't going to give in. Not yet.

One more day, she decided. She would indulge Jaune's desire for her to lay low for one more day, but then she was going to have to do something about this.

She sucked in one more breath, then went to join Jaune in the bedroom. He was seated on the edge of the bed, looking down at

the floor, staring at nothing. Slowly, Cinder took a seat on the bed next to him, then took his hand in hers.

"Jaune?" she asked. "Talk to me. What happened?"

He hesitated once more, then let out a sigh. "... We had a bad one come into the ER today. Car accident; young woman. Six months pregnant. We couldn't save the baby."

His hands curled into fists, and she watched as tears came to his eyes. The moment she saw his eyes mist over, she gave his hand a squeeze.

"You all did all you could."

"We didn't do enough," Jaune managed to get out. "I just can't help but think... maybe if she'd gotten there a little faster, or we'd been a little bit better at our jobs, or something else, maybe we could've saved them both. Instead we had to tell a young girl fresh out of surgery that her child was gone." His shoulders heaved, and he grit his teeth. "I wasn't in the room when they told her, but the way she screamed afterwards... I'll never un-hear it."

"Jaune..."

"And you know what the worst part is?" he said. "She was about your age, Cin. I just couldn't help but think... what if it was you in that hospital bed?"

"Stop," Cinder told him. "Look at me, Jaune."

Reluctantly, he obliged, turning to meet her gaze. She gave his hand another squeeze when their eyes met.

"That won't happen," she declared. "Do you understand? I won't allow it."

"How can you be so sure?" he quietly asked. "It's just... I know how much being a Hero means to you - I would never take it away. But at

the same time... whenever you go out, I can't help but worry. What if something happens to you? Hell, something almost *did* happen to you, the other night - you were almost-

"But I wasn't," she reminded him. "My Aura did its job. I got careless, sure, but that won't happen again."

Jaune hesitated again. "... Promise me something."

"Anything."

"Promise me... no more solo patrols for a while."

Cinder froze at his words. Jaune didn't know what he was asking - all he knew was that she'd done something dangerous and nearly been severely injured because of it. But she knew.

He had no way of knowing that he had just asked her to give up being a criminal, at least for a little while.

And the worst part was that she couldn't refuse it. On its face, it was a reasonable request - he was worried about her being injured or killed, and now that she had other people she could rely on, there was no sense in her going off alone so frequently. He ultimately just wanted her to be safe, and in his eyes, that meant no more going off on her own.

But to her, it meant turning her back on her own way of life.

At the end of the day, though, she had no choice. She wasn't going to deny Jaune anything, even something as life-changing for her as this, and especially not when he had just been through something so traumatic.

And so, she locked eyes with him, and gave him a small nod.

"Okay," she said softly. "No more solo patrols."

Jaune didn't say anything in response, but he didn't need to. Instead, he leaned in and embraced her, and after a moment, she returned it.

As hard as it was going to be to give up being a criminal, she would deal with it.

Jaune was worth it.

---

**Thanks to Ickbard for all the help with this story!**

**What's up, dudes? Sorry for the delay on this one, I've been working pretty hard on the original stories (which are going great and which you all should totally check out BTW, links down below). I also went on vacation for like two weeks since my sister graduated from law school, so I wasn't able to write during that time. But I'm back now, and will be writing fanfics regularly again in addition to my originals.**

**Past that... I don't really know what else to say. I'm doing a bit better, I suppose, but still not feeling all that great. Trying to find a new job because I'm pretty sick of my current one. We'll see how that goes, I guess. For now, I'll turn it over to my co-writer:**

**Cinder did kinda go mask off with Ren and Nora. That surely won't backfire on her!- Ickbard**

**That's all we've got for y'all. We hope you enjoyed this chapter, thanks for all the support, and we hope you'll also check out the original stories we've been working on as well. Thanks again, everyone!**

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**I have recently launched two new original web serials, *Ballistic Coefficient* and *The Vampire's Apprentice*. Both can be read at the following links; if you're a fan of mine, I'd really appreciate it if you would check them out. Both are on r/HFY, Spacebattles, and Royal Road under the same name I use for FFN, or if you'd**

**prefer a direct link to them, that can be found here (remove the spaces):**

**www.royalroadfiction.com/84568/ballistic-coefficient**

**www.royalroadfiction.com/84566/the-vampires-apprentice**

**In addition, I have also launched a "P" "Atr eon" for these stories, which can be found at the link below. If you want to support me and also get a little something in exchange for your money, ten bucks a month will get you twelve additional chapters for both of these original stories - that's 24 chapters total, or 6 weeks of additional content each for these stories. That link can be found here (again, remove the spaces):**

**www.patreon.com/user?posts?u=112496374**

**Thanks so much, and I hope you enjoy the stories!**

# Chapter 14

Auras and Alibis

Chapter 14

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"Cinder, Cinder!"

At the sound of Jaune's voice and the sensation of someone shaking her awake, Cinder's eyes flew open, and she sat bolt upright. She looked around, only to relax when she found it was just Jaune.

"Jaune," she said with a sigh of relief. "What's going on? What time is it?"

"It's just after four in the morning," he said. "I have to go into work."

"What? They're calling you into work this early?"

Jaune nodded as he got out of bed and began to pull his clothes on. "Yeah. Something big just happened downtown."

"Something big...?"

"Mhm. They wouldn't tell me what, only that it was related to a villain of some kind, and there were a lot of casualties."

Cinder's blood ran cold at that. "And you're sure it's safe for you to be going that way?"

"Safe or not, it's my job. And besides, my understanding was that hospitals were neutral ground."

Her brow furrowed at that. He was correct that hospitals, as a general rule, went untouched by Heroes and Villains alike, if only for reasons of sheer pragmatism - Heroes generally weren't the sort to

attack a hospital anyway, whereas villains tended to stay away because the optics of attacking one were more trouble than they were worth. All it took was one little cancer patient taking a stray bullet for the entire town to descend upon whoever had done it with the wrath of the Gods, after all.

That being said, there wasn't any sort of formal agreement between the two sides to leave hospitals alone. With the right impetus, the more unscrupulous villains would absolutely attack a hospital to get what they wanted.

She remembered how well the gambit worked for herself one time she was swarmed by-

Cinder shook those thoughts from her mind even as her gaze landed on Jaune once again, her expression softening as she stared at him.

"Jaune."

He turned towards her, and she rose out of bed, still naked, and approached him, then planted a kiss on his lips. After a moment, she pulled away.

"Please be safe," she said.

Jaune blinked, but nodded nonetheless. "Of course."

And with that said, he finished getting dressed, then sprinted out of their apartment. Cinder watched him go, finally sinking against the wall with a tired sigh. After a moment, she recovered enough to head into the living room and turn on the TV.

And the moment she did, all her questions were answered.

*Breaking news: Famous villain Typhoon killed in showdown with Heroes at Vale Center Square. Civilian casualties estimated at over 20.*

Cinder blinked as she read the headline and listened to the newscaster speak. Suddenly, it all made sense.

She'd heard of Typhoon before - some hotshot young villain who was rumored to have come from Mistral. He'd only been active in Vale for a short while, and not in any of the usual parts of the city she tended to frequent, but if rumors were to be believed, he'd been the second most infamous villain in the city, just behind her.

That wasn't to say that her crimes were worse than his, merely that she'd been around longer and had more time to establish herself than he had. The two of them couldn't have been more different; Typhoon, from what she'd heard, loved hurting and killing random people for no reason, while she didn't. Mostly, she stuck to theft, with the occasional assault or regrettable murder to keep her crime spree going.

Cinder paused as that thought crossed her mind.

*Regrettable...?*

That was certainly a new one. In the past, she'd considered the few people she'd killed to ultimately be inconsequential more than anything. She'd never killed a civilian before; rather, it had always been someone who was actively shooting at her who'd ultimately left her no choice but to retaliate in kind. She'd considered these killings to be part and parcel of life as the number one villain in Vale, but not once had she ever thought of them as unfortunate or regrettable.

Until now, for whatever reason.

Cinder bit her lip as the newscaster rattled off the list of Typhoon's crimes. The things he was accused of dwarfed her activities in the previous months, and it wasn't hard to see why - she'd taken to lying low, for the most part, and had only started sticking her head out when there was a particular itch she needed to scratch. After all, it was hard to commit crimes on a regular basis when she was so busy preparing for her wedding. Her thoughts paused over the fact that

they hadn't *really* done much planning beyond the list of people who would be attending and how she wouldn't have a dad to walk her down the aisle.

That thought aside, Typhoon seemed to have taken her absence as an invitation for him to attempt to claim her spot as Vale's most infamous villain. The thought caused her to roll her eyes. If he'd wanted it so bad, he was welcome to it, especially because it ultimately got him killed in the end.

"Stupid..." Cinder muttered to herself as she watched the newsreel of police hauling lifeless Typhoon's body from the wreckage of a nearby building. He was covered in deep cuts and bruises, and had been riddled with bullets to the point where she suspected there was more lead in his veins than blood. It was certainly overkill on the part of the Heroes who'd done him in, but then, it wasn't hard to see why they'd done it - Cinder was the most infamous villain in Vale, in that everyone knew who she was, but at this point, Typhoon was far more hated than she was.

Cinder continued to watch the newsreel for a bit longer, trying to learn more about the civilians who'd been injured or killed in the crossfire. Unfortunately, the reporter was so focused on the details of Typhoon's demise that any mention of the civilians was incredibly sparse. After a few minutes of watching, Cinder let out a frustrated sigh, then placed the remote down and headed back into her and Jaune's bedroom to finally start her day.

The whole time, she could only hope that things at the hospital weren't too bad for Jaune.

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"Jaune, I need more painkillers, stat!"

"Got it!" Jaune called back to the doctor before turning and rushing down the hallway, looking for more medicine.

He ran through the halls, trying his best to pay no attention to the pained groans of the wounded people around him. Typhoon may have finally been killed, but he'd left a massive path of destruction behind him on his way out. So far, the death count had risen to thirteen people, and around thirty more had been seriously wounded. Vale General Hospital was crowded on a good day as a natural consequence of dealing with the Grimm, and whenever a villain went on a rampage like this, it just made things even worse.

Still, Jaune didn't let that bother him. He finally found the additional painkillers he was looking for, then turned and began to sprint down the hallway once more. As he ran, he very nearly ran right into Ren, who was rounding the corner at the same time he was; the two men avoided each other, and paused only to give each other a brief nod of acknowledgment before continuing on their respective paths.

They both still had jobs to do, after all.

---

"And that's the last of them," Doctor Pierce said, a relieved sigh escaping him as he brought a hand up to wipe at his brow. He turned towards Jaune, giving him a slow nod. "Thanks for your help."

Jaune mimicked the doctor, wiping sweat from his own face. He paused to glance at a nearby clock, blanching when he saw what time it was. He'd made it into the hospital at half after four in the morning, and it was now almost nine at night.

At that moment, the wave of exhaustion hit him all at once. Jaune suddenly collapsed against a nearby wall, with Doctor Pierce rushing over to help him.

"Jaune!" he called.

"I'm fine..." Jaune said.

Doctor Pierce gave him a stern look. "Jaune, how long have you been working without a break?"

Jaune hesitated. "... Since I came in."

"No food, no water? Nothing?" Jaune shook his head, and Pierce glared at him. "You should've known better. I respect your commitment, but being dead on your feet like this helps nobody. Next time, if you need a break, I expect you to take one. Understand?"

Jaune nodded. Pierce let go of him, a tired sigh leaving his throat. "Go get some water and something to eat, please. You need it."

"I need to get home to my-"

"I'm sure she'll understand if you're a little bit late because you needed to get some food and drink. Plus, between me and you, if you show up at home looking the way you do now, she's going to throw a fit. Do you really want that?"

Again, Jaune paled, and he hurriedly shook his head. "N-no... I'll take your advice. Thanks, Doctor Pierce."

"See to it that you do, please." Pierce checked his watch. "I have to go now. Take care of yourself, Jaune."

The older man gave him a pat on the shoulder, then left the room. Jaune, meanwhile, sucked in a breath before leaving the patient's room and stepping into the hallway. As he did so, a wave of relief passed over him.

Thanks to their efforts, all the people who'd been wounded in the fight against Typhoon had managed to pull through. They'd come very close to losing a few of them, but in the end, all of them were still alive. Jaune couldn't help but hold back a smile as he began the walk down the hospital halls and to the cafeteria.

He was utterly exhausted and Cinder was going to be upset that he was home so late, but he didn't care. Not when he'd just helped save several dozen people.

---

Jaune settled down into his seat at the cafeteria with a tray of hospital food, another sigh escaping him as he did so. He looked down at the tray of food in front of him; normally, he wasn't one for hospital food, but they'd given this to him for free, and he was starving, so it would have to do. With that in mind, Jaune picked up his fork and went in for his first bite of hospital spaghetti.

He was barely through his first bite when someone took a seat next to him.

At first, Jaune figured it was just Ren. He swallowed what was in his mouth, then turned to his side with a big grin on his face.

It faded when he found the hospital's new director sitting there, sipping on a mug of hot cocoa.

"Expecting someone else?" Ozpin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Jaune sputtered a bit before catching himself and shaking his head. "U-uh... not at all, sir."

"It's fine if you were. I understand you probably didn't expect me to be here. And do call me Ozpin, if you wouldn't mind." Ozpin flashed him a small smile. "Please do continue eating your meal, by the way. Don't let me interrupt."

"Um... my spaghetti can wait if you have something you wanted to-"

"No, it cannot. I heard about how you were rushing around all day. You must be completely famished. So, do me a favor and eat."

Jaune blinked, surprised, but ultimately did as he was told, picking up his fork and diving into his spaghetti once more. As he did, Ozpin took another sip of cocoa.

"I regret that I wasn't here to oversee things as they were going down," Ozpin said. "Regardless, all the staff handled themselves

quite well. I heard we did not lose a single patient."

"That's true," Jaune said through a mouthful of spaghetti. He paused, a blush crossing his face as he realized he was talking with his mouth full. He gave Ozpin a sheepish grin, then swallowed what was in his mouth before continuing. "Everyone did an amazing job today, especially the doctors."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Ozpin took another sip of cocoa, all while Jaune continued to eat. After a moment, he turned back to Jaune.

"I'm putting on an event for the hospital staff," Ozpin told him. "A way to pay you all back for your hard work, as well as to celebrate the defeat of one of this city's major villains. All staff are invited, as are their significant others. I would very much like it if you were to attend."

Jaune nearly choked on his mouthful of spaghetti. After a few seconds, he managed to force it down, then turned to Ozpin in disbelief.

"Not that I'm ungrateful, Ozpin, but why reach out directly to me?" Jaune asked. "I mean, I'm just a normal nurse-"

"No, you are a fantastic nurse," Ozpin pointed out. "Today's events proved that, with you putting the well-being of all your patients above your own. Granted, you could have done with some restraint in that regard, but your heart was definitely in the right place. I approached you because I can tell that you have a bright future ahead of you, and I wanted to make sure you were aware of that. You're doing very good work, Jaune."

Jaune stared at him for a moment, then nodded, a grin slowly splitting his face. "Thanks, Ozpin. And I'll definitely be at your event."

"Good to hear. I will send you the details later." Ozpin took another sip of cocoa, then checked his watch. "Oh, my - it seems I have stayed out far too late again. I simply must be going. It was good to speak with you, Jaune."

"You as well, Ozpin."

With that, Ozpin stood up from the table and walked away. Jaune watched him go before turning back to his plate of pasta, his grin widening as Ozpin's words finally fully sank in.

It didn't take him long to finish his food, then begin running for home to tell Cinder what had happened.

She was going to be so excited.

---

When the door finally opened around ten that night, Cinder stood up from her spot on the couch and raced over to meet him. Before she could embrace him, however, he met her, hugging her so tightly that he lifted her off the floor.

"Jaune!" she said, surprised. "What's gotten into you?"

Jaune set her down, and she noticed for the first time that he was smiling widely.

"Oh, something good happened at work," he told her. "I managed to really impress my superiors today. Granted, it was by doing something dangerous and bad for my health, but they liked my initiative, so it worked out."

Cinder's eyes narrowed. "Dangerous how?"

"Well, ah... we had a surge of civilians come in that were wounded, as I'm sure you're aware. I kinda... didn't take a break all day long, since I didn't want to stop helping them."

"Jaune-"

"I know, I know - that was incredibly stupid and irresponsible of me. I won't do it again. But the rest of the staff were impressed, even though they gave me a big dressing-down. The hospital's new director even invited me personally to an event he's holding for the entire staff, and I got the impression that he'd really like it if I not only showed up, but if I brought you with me, too."

Cinder paused at that. She knew who the director of Vale General was, of course - every Hero and Villain knew at this point. The prospect of Jaune getting close to Ozpin was worrisome, for obvious reasons. Still, at the moment, there wasn't exactly a reason to refuse; from the sound of things, Ozpin had been genuinely impressed by what Jaune had done, and had simply approached him to directly tell him as much.

She'd have to be careful around him, of course, but at the moment, she didn't exactly have a reason to refuse to go.

Cinder turned back to Jaune and gave him a slow nod. "Very well. Do you know any of the details?"

"Not yet," Jaune replied. "I imagine he'll probably send them to me tomorrow morning or something."

"Well, in either case, I'm very happy for you," Cinder said, giving him a grin. "It sounds like you did well today."

"Thanks, Cinder."

"Of course, I am also disappointed."

Jaune paused, his grin fading. "Uh, what?"

She nodded once more. "You sacrificed your own health for that of others. You told me you didn't take a break all throughout the day. Did you even eat or drink anything?"

"... I had some food after my shift ended-"

"Jaune."

He let out a slow exhale. "Alright, yeah, I messed up big time."

Cinder crossed her arms. "Don't do it again. I understand you want to help people, but sometimes, you need to put yourself first, not only for your own good, but for them as well. How are you supposed to do your job effectively if you're utterly exhausted?" She shook her head. "Come on."

She reached out and took him by the hand, then began to march down the hallway to their bedroom. The two of them walked right by the bed and into the bathroom, and Cinder closed the door behind them.

"Alright," Jaune said as she turned towards her. "What are we doing?"

"Clothes off," Cinder demanded. At his bewildered look, she added, "You smell like a hospital. I'm not sleeping next to you like this."

"Okay, okay," Jaune conceded. He thought for a moment, then said, "This is a new side of you-"

He was cut off by Cinder slamming her hand on the wall next to his head, then leaning in to glare at him. "This is me being mad at you," she said. "Clothes. Off. Now."

"Oh." He paused again. "I'm sorry, Cinder. I shouldn't have pushed myself like that. It was dumb, and it could have led to something really bad."

Her expression softened at that, and she let out a small sigh. "Jaune, I love you, but you do things like this all the time. There's a fine line between being selfless and what you do from time to time. You have to remember to take care of yourself."

"I understand," he said. "And once more, I'm sorry, Cinder."

She closed her eyes and exhaled, then after a moment, opened them again. "Good," she said. "Now, are you going to get undressed? Because you really need a shower. Seriously."

"I mean, I will, but I must say, I don't really see what your angle is here."

"It's not sex, if that's what you're wondering. You seem exhausted already. But I figure the least I can do is make sure you're properly taking care of yourself."

As she spoke, Cinder reached up and began to pull off her top, throwing it unceremoniously on the floor nearby. Jaune's eyes widened when he realized what she was getting at, and she gave him a small smirk even as she unzipped her pants and shuffled out of them, then sidled up to him.

"Jaune," she purred into his ear. "Let me take care of you."

And that was all he needed to hear to finally get it. Jaune began to strip, throwing his clothes onto the small pile Cinder had already started. Now naked, the two of them leaned in for a brief kiss before Cinder took his hand and stepped into the shower with him.

Ultimately, it was just a shower, and nothing more... but Jaune had to admit, it was the most relaxing and refreshing shower he'd ever had in his whole life.

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**Hello everyone, we hope you're all doing well today.**

**No big A/N this time, unfortunately, as I'm posting this before going to work. So instead, I just want to say thanks to all of you who are still reading and reviewing, and especially thanks to you who have checked out mine and Ickbard's original fiction over on Royal Road. We appreciate you all a ton.**

Next update should be for Black Sun, likely in a few weeks. It would be sooner, but Black Sun tends to have longer chapters in general. We'll see what we can do to speed that one up, though. I'd like to increase my posting frequency, but you know how it goes, I'm sure.

Once again, thank you all so much for reading, and we hope to see you again next time!

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*I have recently launched two new original web serials, Ballistic Coefficient and The Vampire's Apprentice. Both can be read at the following links; if you're a fan of mine, I'd really appreciate it if you would check them out. Both are on r/HFY, Spacebattles, and Royal Road under the same name I use for FFN, or if you'd prefer a direct link to them, that can be found here (remove the spaces):*

*www.royalroadfiction.com/84568/ballistic-coefficient*

*www.royalroadfiction.com/84566/the-vampires-apprentice*

*In addition, I have also launched a "P" "Atr eon" for these stories, which can be found at the link below. If you want to support me and also get a little something in exchange for your money, ten bucks a month will get you twelve additional chapters for both of these original stories - that's 24 chapters total, or 6 weeks of additional content each for these stories. That link can be found here (again, remove the spaces):*

*www.patreon.com/user?posts?u=112496374*

*Thanks so much, and I hope you enjoy the stories!*