

The Pro Jaune Argument

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In an unlikely turn of events, Jaune Arc managed to clutch a partner to the Beacon Dance at the very last second. This ripple in the timeline may come back to haunt him as future events unfold, however.

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Chapter 1

Hello People! First time I dip my feet into the world of fanfiction - or creative writing in general for the matter - but, hey, better to suck and to know you suck than to suck in pure ignorance. Or so I like to think as I type these words. Being this green there's nothing I would appreciate more from you, dear reader, than some constructive criticism and advice. Unfortunately my schedule is on the hectic side so I cannot guarantee a consistent publishing schedule for subsequent chapters or works. Became a fast fan of RWBY recently but am by no means a newby in matters of IPs and their fandoms.

With that all being said, please enjoy.

Edit: Goodness gracious, looks like this one needed another day in the oven! Heartfelt thanks to my friend, GGL for helping with suggestions and Proofreading!

Chapter 1

"We've gone over this a million times already," protested an inattentive voice from the dorm room of a team of future Hunters and Huntresses.

A dorm room Beacon intended for future Hunters and Huntresses at any rate.

"We've gone over it zero times tonight, Mercury. And besides, you're the sole reason I feel the need to repeat myself so close to our next move," explained the voice of the man's leader, none too thrilled about having to do so.

"I'm the reason?" is everything the aloof assassin could contribute.

"If you weren't so indolent I wouldn't have to impress on you the importance of fitting in. Every. Single. Day." Cinder spoke with a patronizing calm.

Emerald groaned in frustration. Her beloved leader copied the act internally. They were on the precipice of the next stage of the plan. A stage which would very likely see them in action once again. Utmost vigilance was the name of the game now and, despite the notable successes their operation has enjoyed up to now, not all proceeded smoothly. Their correspondence in Vale had made sure to make that explicitly clear.

Not that Roman's craven attitude was enough to deter a woman like Cinder Fall, but the long wait thus far did seem to have an adverse effect on her teammates' patience. Truth be told, being so close yet so far from her prey for so long wasn't ideal for her mood either. Had her team neutralized Amber sooner, she'd be freer to enjoy Salem's designs for the Hunter Academies with the added insurance of her magical power and importance to said designs.

And tomorrow wouldn't be just any day.

Tomorrow not a hair could be out of place. Tomorrow under the alibi of attending the Beacon dance, she would finally make her next move. Infiltrate the CCT, upload the Black Queen virus into the mainframe and make it out in a timely fashion to be seen partaking in the blasé festivities of an adolescent-ridden Beacon Hall. Emerald and Mercury will be there to reassure attendees of her eventual arrival.

All in a night's work for her. Provided her team didn't draw undue attention to themselves whilst pretending to know how to socialize with teenagers. Or with anyone for that matter, Cinder corrected with a mental addendum.

And Mercury had so far proven how profoundly uninterested in attending the dance he was, if his rapidly degenerating attention

span whenever she'd elaborate on his role and cover story was any indication.

A cover story she prepared specifically to justify her tardiness to the dance to her fellow aspiring Hunters, Huntresses and other hero wannabes who will be attending before she'll have the chance to join her date for the night. Joining fashionably late is certainly a good enough front, and the lethal woman had to admit she did have a certain flair for the dramatic. It's been too long since she was allowed to play. Still, joining while pretending her delay was to make Mercury's heart grow fonder with the wait was not a dramatic effect she'd be happy with; not for the dance, nor for any other occasion - the thought alone nearly made her gag.

More and more, Emerald's various protests to that part of the plan made sense to Cinder. Yet the plan would have to come into effect in less than 24 hours and implementing changes at the last minute and over something so small as Mercury's role was not something she would entertain, even for herself.

Emerald was clearly unenthused by the dance, frowning at every mention of either herself or Cinder dancing with Mercury. She never was much of a social butterfly and having to potentially address the ever nosey team RWBY about her leader's absence and eventual grand entrance must be a harrowing prospect for the poor girl. Yes, that must be it, she concluded.

Alas, the devil's in the details as far as Cinder Fall is concerned. Juggling the various disagreeable aspects of her minions' personalities was nary a worry; they know to disengage before risking compromise when mingling. They aren't stupid; having been undercover for so long and on the trail prior to that. They are just understandably testy. As was she, never getting the chance to bask in her newly acquired power or toy with the weaklings surrounding them.

"So what's indolent mean?"

Cinder's thoughts were assaulted by Mercury's out of turn question as well as the onset of a headache. Perhaps she did overestimate the intelligence of one of her disciples.

"The night is still young, I'm taking a walk. See to it you've forgotten whatever insipid hiccups you have about tomorrow by the time I am back," intoned the nefarious leader of the four person infiltration team, before slamming the dorm door behind her as she exited the room.

"Why'd she never ask Neo anyway?" Mercury wondered out loud.

"And what do you think Neo will say if someone asks her where her partner is?" the lettuce haired thief offered.

"... Ooooooh."

A beat.

"Probably something like this!" Declared the assassin, doing the clumsiest mime impression Emerald had seen in her entire life.

Tonight was not Jaune's night. Tomorrow wouldn't be Jaune's night either judging by how his latest confession to Weiss had gone. Or rather, by how it hadn't. He knew no plan survives contact with the enemy, but had always believed his worst enemy when it came to romantic pursuits was himself, not one Neptune Vasilius making his move on Weiss right before he had the chance to. In reality he still believed his worst enemy was himself, comfortably holding the record for most confessions ruined and social cues ignored.

"So take that, Neptune." Grumbled the crestfallen knight as he limped back to the dorm hallway he had darted out of earlier that night. He couldn't be mad at the young Vacuan man. Ultimately Neptune provided him with a sense of closure he was too pigheaded to accept otherwise. But the thought of Pyrrha's pep talk going to waste as he came back to the dorm empty handed did sting.

"On second thought, I don't have the energy to recount what happened to my team right now."

He sighed.

And they had such high hopes this time, Jaune could tell! He'd hate to take the wind out of their sails the night before the dance. Besides, tomorrow wasn't just about himself and he'd hate to turn the big event into a pity party with him as the man of dishonor.

"I'd better I walk some of the sulking off first. Night's still young."

With that he swerved and began making his way to the garden resting under the palatial arches of Beacon Academy's Dining Hall - a serene and relaxing place. The one farthest away from Weiss's and Neptune's moonlit rendezvous, of course.

"What's he got that I don't anyway?"

Actual combat aptitude. And an active role on his team that isn't just barking orders. And a badass electro staff-trident thingy. And those wicked cool fingerless gloves -Neptune knows to make his work-. *Aaaand a Junior Detective license. Aaaand* - He went on inside his head as he made his way to his destination.

Jaune's exercise in mental self flagellation was interrupted as his peripheral vision caught the form of another perusing the rich flora of the area as he entered.

Judging from her Haven Academy uniform, the young man could safely deduce she must've come from the Mistralian Hunter School to compete in the upcoming Vytal Festival. Though she currently appears to have other things on her mind. Woes, mostly.

Jaune noticed how striking the slender woman was, lethal and elegant. Her index finger rested on her chin as she stood in thought, her face contemplative. Her sharp eyes were almost predatory as she gazed into the dusk. So calculating and sharp. Her honeyed

irises were crowned by a film of golden light. Her eyes, flecked with iridescent specks, were dangerously deep, the kind one could get lost in. *Maybe it's eye glitter?* He postulated.

"You know, it's rude to stare." The terse jab from her lips broke his reverie.

A pair of full lips that - Jaune halted his train of thought. His plan to zone out in the garden had suffered the same fate as his plans for the dance. Albeit, he had managed to zone out, he quickly amended.

He had to salvage the situation.

"Oh hey I'm sorry, I was kinda lost in thought. You know, because of the dance and everything."

She looked entirely unimpressed.

Despite that, the knight felt pressured by the situation and elected to keep going. As fast as his mouth would take him.

"Okay, okay I stare when I think sometimes but it's not everyday your plans are trashed!" the tall blond managed to deliver in a single breath, frantically gesturing something between consternation and an apology as he did.

As soon as he'd finished it dawned on him that the listener wasn't privy to the information he was, making his outburst completely nonsensical. Aw man, that's just swell, isn't it ? He immediately took to internally chastising himself again.

"Stupid dance..." he audibly let out. It was clearly time he cut his losses and called it a night. He turned toward the exit.

" *Your* plans? Trashed?" drawled a female voice.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy," he defended with a sigh.

"I suppose you're right. Stupid dance," it was her turn to sigh.

"Huh?!"

Tonight was not unfolding as JNPR's strategic mastermind had anticipated.

Who are you again? Cinder pondered as she became aware of another entering the garden, examining them with the edge of her vision.

Oh, that's right, she thought, the information from Emerald's briefing on team JNPR swiftly coming back to her as she turned to better look at him; Jaune Arc. The tall, blond and scraggly pushover Pyrrha Nikos calls team leader. Team JNPR was among Beacon's strongest first year teams, if not the strongest. Likely in great part thanks to Pyrrha's celebrated combat prowess. And before Cinder stood the weakest link in the invincible girl's team easily. Easy on the eyes now that she'd taken a good look; an intermittent stage between lithe and boyish and hardened like a fully realized Hunter. Above everything he looked melancholic.

She couldn't blame the boy for needing a place to declutter his thoughts, he looked dejected enough to need to do so as he shuffled closer. Besides, the gardens are a nice choice of location for one to relax. She could still blame him, however, for depriving her of the opportunity to do just that with his unwelcome presence.

Cinder had been considerably faster at ascertaining her surroundings than him; his line of vision hadn't moved from her position from the moment he had spotted her farther into the yard.

She knew the reason why, of course.

Cinder was perfectly cognizant of the effects an attractive woman can have on another. She'd honed the perfect cocktail of decorum, scherzo, intensity and dominance. Even when someone isn't directly attracted to her, they intrinsically realize the power before them; a

tacit signal highlighting how venerated and craved an individual like Cinder Fall is.

All that, and no audience to wow since forever. The mission and her Master come first. She began questioning how worth it was to abstain from being mean to this one, just this once. Give him a glimpse into the astronomical gap between them.

"You know, it's rude to stare."

Jaune's body jolted and his focus seemingly came back to reality as he delivered a word salad and a little dance number excusing his faux pas.

At least it's amusing watching him struggling to come to his senses, she consoled herself.

He truly was a bundle of nerves. The rise she so effortlessly got out of this whelp of a Hunter gave further credence to everything she already knew set them apart. It was a faint rush. Unfortunately his mad scramble to get a grip quickly came to an end.

"Stupid dance..." she barely managed to hear as he made to leave.

Ah, but of course; naturally, it had to be this glorified prom again, she almost snapped back.

For as deadly and impossibly more powerful the half-Fall Maiden was, she could relate to the boy's pedestrian travails in her own way. To be so close and yet so far from exercising any kind of power. That had been her lot for a while now. She understood the vanity of such fancies, but was the dance not designed with such superficiality in mind anyhow? Or maybe it serves as a reminder of the social pecking order to losers. That's also fun.

" *Your* plans? Trashed?" she finally jabbed, relenting and being mean, if only a smidgeon.

"No plan survives contact with the enemy."

And for her tiny indulgence, the universe paid her in kind by having this peon yanking her focus back to the problem that drove her here. *Just grand.*

"I suppose you're right. Stupid dance," she exhaled.

"Huh?!" This bewildered the young man enough to stop him dead in his tracks.

"You?! No way. You're too pretty to not have a date for the dance!"

"Aw, you know just how to give a girl a lift."

Universe be damned, nobody can help but be sarcastic after that, she decided.

"It's fine, I know I'm really bad at this." His blue eyes darkened with the memory of something.

Cinder loathed those who try to endear themselves by coming off as insignificant or pathetic. However the goofball before her genuinely was this socially clueless and easily undone as far as she could parse. And she could parse much, as the somewhat lanky blond wore his emotions on his sleeve. He mostly wore embarrassment.

Of course that wouldn't ingratiate him from eating up her garden time by mopping.

"Look, I didn't mean it in any way, you know, haha..." he added, realizing the suggestion he left unaired earlier.

"Besides," he continued, "one rejection by Weiss is crushing enough for a lifetime."

Weiss? The Schnee? That caught her attention.

"Unless you're me, that is! Ha ha..haaa." he lingered on that last breath.

"Hah!" a mean snigger which caught him by surprise. Well that explains why he is so beaten down in retrospect, she realized.

"You mean to say this happens often?"

Jaune's bashful expression said it all. Regardless, maybe out of a sense of guilt, he soldiered on. "I... know this sounds bad, b-but..."

A long pause.

"But no buts. Guess I just suck."

This time she audibly laughed. How right he was.

His shoulders dropped in overexaggerated defeat. How cute.

"You misunderstood. As funny as it is watching you get beaten down by something so meaningless, what is even funnier is the image of a Schnee hounded around by an insignificant no name like you." She couldn't resist commenting.

It felt good to blow off some steam.

"It's Jaune. Jaune Arc, the ladies... *don't* love it." He delivered with a flop.

"And they're really not that bad! The Schnees I mean. The one I know, I mean."

"Cinder," she introduced herself in turn with a low voice and continued.

"I'm afraid you are simply naïve Jaune; naïve and clueless. You'll never be adequate in the eyes of somebody like her."

"Hey!" He protested. "First a no name, now naïve *and* clueless. I messed up, I get it already. I truly should've gotten a clue sooner..."

Get a clue now and leave, she wanted to scream.

"Oh, don't be too hard on yourself. Maybe you're just fun to tease," wreck as you are, she nearly added.

"But now, let's try to stay on topic. It might teach you something," she said before she expounded further.

"The Schnees are the posterchildren of the Atlesian elite. You will never find a more entitled and cushioned clique of parasites. Unless you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, you will always be a no name to them." *Learning this will do him good in the long run, really.*

"You have the looks," his stolid yet gentle dark blue eyes most notably "but not the *things* ; not the material decadence, not the blue blood to make you safe to socialize with."

"A shame really," she remarked matter-of-factly, delivering the fatal shot.

"She does socialize with me! And you're wrong about her anyway," he forgot how defeated he was mere moments ago to object to her explanation. His tormentor really hoped he'd squirm more from her choice words for Weiss, but she can't be too acidic now, can she ? Not while posing as a student.

As soon as Jaune had defended his little crush, something plunged him deep in thought.

"... If you really hate the Schnees so much, you could..." Looks like he is summoning his strength for what is to follow, Cinder curiously observed.

"... go to the dance with me to make Weiss Schnee jealous?" He exploded with the payoff.

"... What?" He well and truly subverted her expectations.

"W-Well, you did say that I have the looks haha. And I also have the moves! And you did kinda imply you didn't have a date to the dance. Two birds, one stone and all that."

His right hand absentmindedly started caressing the back of his head, fingers running through his fluffy flaxen locks. *Good grief is he petrified* . And still...

Taking a moment to assess him, the boy is clearly an idiot, Cinder ascertained. She supposed pretty boys like this tend to be. Was he presentable enough to scandalize one from the cream of the social crop like he'd claimed? Doubtful.

What he was, however, is totally whipped. Not every minion knows its place. Enter Mercury. Unlike somebody like Jaune, whom she knew would worship the ground she walked on if she were to grace him by agreeing. He was dejected, rejected and struggling in his position in the totem pole. He wouldn't possibly disobey her. Not intentionally.

He reminded her a decent bit of Emerald. Another supplicant she took under her wing in exchange for absolute submission out of her. Ah, it's been too long since she had proven her control in this way, having to lay low in Vale and then play the part of Student at Beacon.

Thralls like Roman and Neopolitan may momentarily fear for their lives but, behind closed doors, they curse her name. It just isn't the same. The utmost devotion she had conditioned into Emerald is far more gratifying. She'd considered making the little street urchin her dance partner but knew that'd only give Mercury permission to skip the entire event in his mind. Best to tether them together.

Thinking about it further, should Jaune actually be a decent dancer, it may be her only chance to enjoy showing off after so long, befuddling her many onlookers. Weiss Schnee included, if Jaune's word is to be trusted. Seeing her seethe is tempting enough. Plus the prospect of Mercury's metal toes accidentally kicking her shin is extremely unappealing...

Maybe she *could* kill two birds with one stone.

"And you're certain *you* can make her jealous?" She finally broke the silence.

No, he thought. "Yes," he said.

"And you really are a capable dancer?" she sandered to his direction, her eyes sizing him up.

"I think I'll surprise you."

"Hmm, your little revenge plot is intriguing."

Jaune was in utter disbelief at what was transpiring. She could see his posture stiffen.

"R-right?! Plus you like to tease people! No better target than the Ice Queen!" he said with renewed vigor.

"Please don't kill me Weiss..." he added under his breath.

"It's just that..." Cinder paused dramatically, "we don't know each other that well, Jaune."

"Oh, don't worry. We'll only be going as friends. I promise I won't get the wrong idea." I won't, not *again*, he continued in his head, desperately trying to convince himself.

"Goodness, you're still hurting, aren't you Jaune ?" She placed a hand on his shoulder to comfort him . He flinched at the touch.

"I trust you," she whispered, having closed the gap to his side. "But I also need you to trust me, think you can do that, Jaune ?"

"Y-yeah, I know I can," he flinched a second time.

"Good. See, I'd feel very reassured if you let me arrive at the dance hall a little later. After all, every girl wants to make an entrance."

"Right, makes sense." He could barely suppress the enthusiasm in his voice at the hail mary he was about to pull off.

"Also, I will require you to be a very good listener; you will arrive when I tell you, tell anyone who asks what I tell you and you will stop anyone from leaving the dance should I tell you."

Weird.

"Please don't misunderstand, I just had a lot of things planned out for tomorrow night and I will need this help from you if I am to see my plans through," the brunette faux apologized, drawing patterns on the ground with the tip of her heel as she did.

I can't believe I'm about to agree to this, a meek voice in Jaune's head protested. In truth, knowing very well it was already a done deal.

"Sure. I'm a team leader. I know the importance of a good plan! But please go easy on her ?" he offered with a squeak.

"Oh, Weiss? You needn't worry, I do not wish to make the night about her. It's going be about *me* ." she stated with a very satisfied expression.

"All right, that's good! I'll show you a great time! Man, first time I'm happy someone teased me."

"Oh?"

"I mean I could see you were just feigning interest before you started laying down the facts. It's nice to break the ice, you know? Also I appreciate honesty." It felt good to get that off his chest.

"I see. I suppose I'll be sure to stay brutally honest then." Her expression suggested she found his words quaint but not disagreeable.

"Now hand your scroll over Jaune. I will run late tomorrow night. I will keep you updated as to when I'll be ready."

Jaune pulled the device from his pants pocket and handed it to his alluring date to the dance.

"Good. Do not call me unless there's a commotion or attendees are departing. Also do not wait on me," she said coldly "I wouldn't want you to miss out on the party," she added with newfound warmth before returning the device.

"No problem. More time to hang out with my buddies!"

"So it's settled. I'll be seeing you, *dancer*," she declared, all amused and began making her way back to the building, leaving a stupefied teen behind. She knew he was hers.

Jaune stood frozen. Remnant's tallest garden gnome. What else was his reaction supposed to be? His lamest, laziest, corniest attempt to secure a partner for Beacon's biggest night was inexplicably successful. Not only that, somehow he had found said success with a mysterious beauty. It all seemed too good to be true. Did they really just hit it off that well? He was too afraid to allow this fluke to go to his head. His mind raced with possible explanations.

Cinder. She was... peculiar. Her demeanor had been so cool even though she'd apparently fussed over the dance enough to plan out the entire night. She delivered her instructions so naturally, she must've thought of them in advance.

Whatever, mused Jaune.

If she's too much of a control freak they can just end things with the dance. His track record suggested he liked bossy at any rate. Worth a try.

Maybe, just maybe Cinder was right and the problem was always Atlesian culture being snobbish, he concluded. The idea was enough to sate his search for answers for now.

"Man, can't wait to tell Pyrrha about this!"

Just to make sure he didn't hallucinate the entire exchange, he checked his scroll. Sure enough, 'Cinder' could be read among the contacts. He finally started walking to the dorms, giddy to break the news to his team.

"She'll be so glad I actually made something of all the resolve she gave me!"

Pyrrha should be glad her faith in Jaune was not misplaced, right? I think she genuinely would be happy for him... in part.

Chapter 2

Hello Again, Happy New Year! Hope the holidays treated you guys well. Now without further ado, the chapter ! Once again, I'm sorry to report I can't commit to any specifics about the next chapter's release date.

That being said I hope you enjoy this one.

Chapter 2

So far, each step Cinder made on her journey toward destiny posed its own unique set of challenges. Infiltrating Vale's Cross Continent Transmit System tower was no exception. Detection avoidance was practically impossible. The talking heads comprising Vale's Council had at least planned that far in terms of safeguarding the technological marvel Atlas so magnanimously shared with the Kingdom.

For her that only meant having to neutralize any active resistance in a timely and conspicuous manner. A kind of stealth Cinder didn't practice when hiding in plain sight around Beacon. All the same, it was a challenge she welcomed.

To further complicate matters, there was one additional parameter for this mission; no killing. The armor adorned by the personnel of the tower came fitted with an alarm system, set to go off should any of them die. It meant her blitz on them had to thread the needle between handily knocking them down and magnanimously sparing their lives. Having determined her vector of attack, she moved out.

The skirmish was over in mere seconds. There was never any doubt in her mind.

With that taken care of, she slotted the Scroll above the appropriate module and, just like that, the package had found its receiver and Arthur Watt's virus had found its home. A home from where it shall enable Cinder to carefully comb through every detail the CCT's data banks had to offer. Maybe even influence a certain few should the need arise, before, of course, dropping the façade and having the virus expose the true heights of Ironwood's folly.

To blindly place all his faith in nuts and bolts as he has.

Her flawless performance tonight further validated Cinder's belief the path she walked was the right one. The resolve of her belief has been briefly shaken after Amber and her magical prize were stolen from her, but now the information hoarded in this facility would soon illuminate the way forward. With a hint of satisfaction, she realized that before long the secrets hermetically sealed by Ozpin and his co-conspirators will be laid bare before their eyes. Just like her; secrets completely unseen by the old Wizard and his fools today, destined to soon become their ruin; When she's finally earned the power to take anything by force.

Suddenly, the distinct sound of a woman in heels approaching came within earshot of Cinder.

The doors to the control room slid open with a mechanical sheesh as Cinder seamlessly found cover behind a console. She was concealed there well enough to hide her location, while also allowing her to steal a peek at the surprise interloper.

If there was one thing she was starting to think even the Maiden powers could not secure, that would be competent minions. Ruby Rose had somehow waltzed her way into the heart of CCT tower and no one had seen it prudent to inform Cinder via Scroll. How the tiny reaper had managed to sneak past Mercury, Emerald and Jaune truly befuddled her. *She is practically doddering like a drunk in her short heels.*

Cinder's opinion of Roman reached abyssal depths with this realization. His supposed bitter rivals, the team of hunters that hounded him for the past few months... was led by an actual child. She would need to have a talk with her accomplices in general once she was out of the tower.

"Is anyone there? Hello?" Ruby tried gingerly.

Oh, screw it.

Cinder revealed herself, ambling directly into the center of her new target's vision. No plan survives contact with the enemy. What ensures victory is the ability to make do once matters inevitably askew. *Like they had now* .

Cinder lunged with superhuman speed.

In an instant their blades locked, Cinder's Midnight against Ruby's oversized giant scythe. Ruby was proving herself a rank amateur before Cinder; unable to even find stable footing after each altercation. The Beacon student came dressed in her dance attire; not equipped with any way to alert anyone of Cinder's infiltration. Cinder even doubted the young huntress's dress came with any pockets for her Scroll. Something which, to the half Maiden's delight, meant she'd have the chance to dispose of this witness the old fashioned way.

Or rather she would have, had she not detected the thud of panicked footsteps rapidly approaching the room. Another was coming to the scene of the crime and that would make for one too many. Once again she'd have to prove her ability to think on her feet tonight.

Her getaway maneuvers were near instant. She shook the floor with a volley of Dust infused arrows, stopping Ruby dead in her tracks and preventing any attempt to close the distance as she made her escape. The smoke screen her fiery attack left behind concealed her features to the man entering the room just as she was exiting. She was gone and they just stood there.

Another job well done.

Her Scroll vibrated with a new message as she made her way back to the Academy grounds. It was Jaune. It didn't come as any surprise to Cinder that this complete unknown would somehow outperform both Mercury and Emerald in giving the heads up. He had also managed to fail being of any use by warning her much too late.

'Oh wait, I think Ruby left,' his message wrote. He was still typing.

'Sorry I didn't tell you sooner by the way, couldn't find a place to put the scroll in my dress. No pockets!'

As the words on the screen were registering in Cinder's mind, her Jaune flooded their correspondence with more messages. Ones clearly hoping to provide a much needed - *and ideally sane* - explanation.

'... I can explain.'

'See, I kinda lost a bet...'

'Well I set a bet and now I owe it to a friend.'

'Look, I also brought a suit!' He finally assuaged her as best one could over text.

It was almost a shame he remembered to explain, even as clumsily as he did. Had he not, Cinder would've had the pleasure of watching him fumble with words attempting to explain everything in person. That would be entertaining.

Let the children enjoy their antics for the night, she thought to herself. This may be their very last chance to play before it all comes crumbling down. And she'll be there to dance atop the wreckage.

Cinder strutted into Beacon Hall with earned aplomb. Tonight she brought herself one step closer to victory. With one uninterrupted motion, she channeled the magic of the Maiden and used it to mold the dust woven into her catsuit. The fabric moved and reformed as the power willed it and, in no time, Cinder was dressed to impress at Beacon; a backless sheath dress of pitch darkness, highlighted by obsidian patterns from the dust crystals on display running along its surface. Haute couture is a magic of its own.

She was greeted by a funky if insipid tune permeating across the hall. One not deafeningly loud, thankfully. No DJ to be seen, which was probably for the best, Cinder surmised. Few things are as tasteless as teens trying too hard. And trying too hard via music can only cause headaches.

Or via what passes as music, at any case.

Contrarily to Cinder's worry, the hostesses of Beacon's little event had kept things in good taste. Perhaps a tinge bland, but that was a compromise she was willing to bear tonight.

A quick survey around the hall confirmed she had made the right call in attire. Not too revealing but not too modest. The student body had generally gone with simpler sartorial themes, with monochrome and pastel dresses being dominant among the women and the standard academy uniforms complimented with neckwear among the men. The hostesses themselves had gone with elegant if puerile simple white dresses, probably making a point about form over function. Or maybe playing host was their way of avoiding too much attention to begin with.

Children are such prudes sometimes. And somehow blowhards all the same.

Although one Faunus student did elect to go for a bolder look, Cinder noticed. Bold and ridiculous.

Learn to button your shirt.

Her entrance had struck the balance between eye-catching and unpretentious she was aiming for. Many were turning their heads in her direction as she ambled deeper into the court, some letting their eyes linger longer than others. Others still seemed to be focused elsewhere. A crestfallen Mercury among them. Lamenting the untimely demise of a giant fruit punch bowl, whose glass remains Cinder could see shattered and scattered before the credenza.

An accident had taken place prior to her entrance.

Was this what kept them from giving me a warning earlier ?

She put a raincheck on that thought as her vision caught Emerald approaching. Always eager to be near her mentor.

"Cinder! I'm so sorry! We would had warned you, but Mercury had gathered way too much attention to himself right after Ruby had-" Emerald began.

"There's no need to pry other people's business, dear Emerald", Cinder cut her off lest any eavesdropper intercepted whatever details her fumbling subordinate might let slip.

"Now, what happened to Mercury?"

"What happened to the punch, you mean," Mercury corrected, beating Emerald to the punch as he joined in on their conversation.

"The punch," Cinder intoned.

"The punch," Emerald confirmed.

"Nora Valkyrie, the girl from Nikos's team, punched the punch," Mercury finally clarified.

"I think you'll find the turn of phrase is 'spiked the punch'," Cinder corrected.

"No, that was Xiao Long. Valkyrie punched the punch. Left hook."

Cinder pinched the ridge of her nose in defeat. Mercury decided he would elaborate further.

"See, after her team's group dance thing, they decided to celebrate. And Valkyrie celebrated all over my gin spiked pineapple and cola."

"You know, drinking gin, pineapple and cola together is weirder than punching glass, she did you a favor," added a smug Emerald.

"At least I narrowly avoided the splash zone," scoffed Mercury. Clearly some others weren't that lucky, ergo the scene. But still no logical explanation for what devilry compelled Mercury to imbibe that pineapple concoction. *Nora Valkyrie did him a favor.*

"So what's in store for the rest of the night?" Thankfully Emerald was there to readjust the trio's focus.

Cinder elected not to spend the night with her socially awkward minions.

"The package has been delivered. You can run along now and frolic with your... *classmates* . Only, avoid any more *splash zones*, Mercury."

The silver haired man took the hint and quietly withdrew. Emerald begrudgingly followed, understanding her leader's patience for them had started to run thin. The girl was visibly dejected by the thought.

Don't beat yourself up too much, Emerald. There's only so much malarkey one can tolerate.

With those two taken care of, she turned her attention to finding her third assistant for the night. Her impromptu dance date was easy to spot; approaching her clothed in the same school uniform-turned tux every boy had gone with. He had just returned to the hall from somewhere and was currently trying to make his approach known to her by waving wildly in her direction. And stopping every other step to tighten his bowtie.

And every step after to ensure he waved at her enough times to be seen by the blind.

And to check if his laces were tied securely.

Is he doing these theatrics on purpose, wondered Cinder. She wouldn't lower herself to waving back at him.

"Hey! Hello!" the eager teen exclaimed as he closed the distance.

"And here I thought the plan was for me to make an entrance."

"Entrance ? Oh, right. I had to leave to get dressed again." he explained. It didn't explain much.

"Again ?" she raised an eyebrow.

"My man!" An admirer of Jaune suddenly appeared to interrupt her. A tall student with an abhorrent fashion sense, noticed Cinder. He must've also spotted the blond's loud return.

But seriously, goggles?

"Killer moves back there, Jaune!" He declared fervently.

"Hehe, thanks," Embarrassment crept into Jaune's voice as he tentatively accepted the other boy's compliment.

"Seriously, you were great ! Plus I was worried you were gonna set the bar too high for us guys when I saw you go to the dance floor. Turns out you showed up the girls!"

"Haha, Thanks Neptune! I think..." Jaune's hand awkwardly reached for the back of his head, ruffling his hair. Clearly feeling a tinge awkward.

"And, oh! Excuse my manners: Neptune. Neptune Vasilius." The teen introduced himself to Cinder with a half bow and an extended hand. Likely inviting her own hand to rest in his palm.

How can a man so young already have mastered the art of appearing that smarmy and overweening stumped Cinder. She supposed she should've expected to be approached by a vain teen who fancied himself a ladies man at a place like this. Though she'd rather not say anything, she elected to introduce herself using words alone, choosing to ignore Neptune's gesture. One world, rather; as few as she could spare.

"Cinder." She flatly stated.

"I didn't see you around earlier, guessing you just joined us."

"Yes well, my *date* was preoccupied changing into... men's wear. It wouldn't do for us to appear separately." Cinder purred as she leaned her head to rest on Jaune's shoulder. To the blond's credit, he didn't jump up at Cinder's unannounced theatrics. Cinder was pleased at that, she could see their little performance achieved the desired result on the blue haired flirt.

He took the clue, she could see it on his face. But to further drive the point, Jaune added something more.

"You know, Neptune, this is the perfect moment to ask Weiss for a dance, the slower tracks are starting to play."

So *that buffoon* was who the Schnee elected to choose over the goofy blonde ? Cinder couldn't help but let a snide smicker escape her.

"Haha, yea... totally... And thanks again, man." The idea didn't seem to enthuse Neptune. Cinder questioned if Weiss was this bad of a date. Jaune really is lucky if that's the kind of date the little heiress chose over him, after all. It would be reasonable to deduct the heiress must be equally rancid.

"Don't mention it, Neptune. You'd have done the same." The bashful teen said. Clearly not being nearly as annoyed by Neptune as Cinder was.

"I don't know if I would have before," the taller boy admitted " but I have your back now! I already liked your video on Dustnet!"

"My.... *video* ?" Jaune was lost.

"You know, of team JNPR's dance number!"

"Oh... that's already online. Figures." Jaune mumbled in bitter defeat. Neptune didn't seem to notice.

"Yup! Be seeing you guys! Nice to meet you, Cinder. You're one lucky guy, Jaune!" The Vacuan hunter said his goodbyes as he turned around and got lost in the crowd once again.

"Man, first time I wished the CCT didn't exist." A despondent Jaune murmured to himself.

"Monkey's paw." Cinder commented.

"What ?"

"Nothing," she dismissed, "I do believe you owe me a dance now."

She ended up being the one to invite him to dance, exchanging pleasantries with the prom's attendees growing dull fast. She signaled him to follow by raising her right hand at a right angle, her gloved palm facing forward, steadfast but relaxed. Jaune picked up on the idea behind the gesture and mirrored the motion, their palms hovering parallel to each other as they strutted to the dance area.

Jaune had certainly made an impression on his fellow dance attendees; Cinder could see how people would steal glances at the two of them as they cut their way through the crowd. That was partly to be expected, exceedingly rare prize that she was. What piqued her interest, however, were the approving comments and cheers Jaune was getting. Comments complimenting the boy, not for landing her, but for skill on the dance floor. She was pleased. Yet

another calculated risk she'd taken tonight was paying off; she'd gotten herself a dancer who won't foul up her performance and enjoyment of the night with incompetence. She made a mental note to look up that group dance number of his on Dustnet before bringing everything down.

Despite Cinder's newfound confidence in him, Jaune's expression betrayed how pressured to perform he felt.

By the time they'd arrived, Cinder could nearly feel Jaune's sweaty palms through her velvety glove. Which wasn't pleasant. Despite his previous exploits winning over so many, a sort of pressure was inhibiting him.

"Just pretend they don't exist." She advised snapily. Whatever hangup he had, she wouldn't have it.

"It's not them," he managed, his free hand opening and closing; possibly a subconscious tick.

Cinder realized what the problem was.

What a dork.

The couples dancing were holding onto each other in a closed position, the leads holding their partners with their right hands hugging theirs... and their lefts resting on their partners waists.

The nervous looks Jaune has been shooting Cinder were to allude to this triviality. He looked for approval, for permission before he made a move clearly much too bold for him normally. He was just too self conscious to ask.

Cinder tacitly sighed.

There was no helping what needed to come next. Without breaking eye contact, she took Jaune's restless hand in hers. His eyes

widened with panic, but the rest of him wouldn't react before she secured a resting position for it over her hip.

"There. That's nice, isn't it?" She gibed. Jaune's face was beet red.

The knight inaudibly gulped before giving an assenting nod. Finally, it was time for the waltz to commence.

As they reached the heart of the spacious dance court, they positioned themselves at the very epicenter of the floor's opulent marble pattern. Cinder leisurely motioned her gloved hand forward to lead with the waltz. The action jolted some urgency into Jaune, as he nearly fell over himself to follow in the tempo she was setting.

Despite that rocky start, step by step, move by move and sequence by sequence, the young hunter was proving his boasts from yesterday true. If only he could soothe his tensed nerves, he'd probably be able to outdo Cinder herself, the terpsichorean beauty realized. Not that she'd ever admit it.

She didn't know how to quite feel about that, for her part; his nervousness around women was clearly hindering his abilities on the dance floor. But he still was upholding his promise and keeping apace with her. All in all, she decided to be impressed by it. After all, it was another form of adapting to one's circumstances. And why let something so miniscule blemish the triumphs she achieved tonight ?

Their audience was even more impressed than Cinder. And they were equally impressed *by* Cinder. She *was* leaving the impression she set out to for the night, she surmised, with a healthy helping of satisfaction.

"I can't blame them", she said coolly.

"Pardon me ?" Jaune was either too focused on the dance or generally too oblivious to pick up on her insinuation.

"Admiring you, obviously", she half joked. Around half of them indeed were.

"A-admiring me ? Come again?" The boy had tunneled in on not blundering while dancing and wouldn't consider any of his surroundings but Cinder.

Oh, well, Cinder decided. Worth a try to get the boy flustered. Besides, at least his attention is where it ought to be.

"The other students, of course. I'd tell you where to look, but I'm worried you'd trip over."

"They are watching us", realized Jaune.

"As they should." purred a smug Cinder, leaning closer on Jaune, getting the two in a mock embrace for those watching. *Too bad Neptune and the Schnee were still absent from the dance.*

"When you are the best, admiration is... only natural."

They disengaged for a dramatic whirl. Cinder decided to reward their admirers with a masterful bend toward the ground. Jaune was quick to gracefully halt her fall.

"And you", she continued as she slithered back into position with his assistance "have made yourself the talk of the night."

"I just... know how to keep a promise, I guess." Jaune took the compliment surprisingly coolly. And the prospect of a scandalized audience didn't seem to fluster him.

What a shame.

The song playing slowly transitioned to another. The two kept the slow, close dance.

"That is two promises you kept tonight, isn't it ? And here I thought you said you had trouble finding a dance partner, Jaune." Cinder

said, voice all amused. She knew what this dance meant to one particular onlooker. She'd figured it out while skimming their spectators' reactions after their earlier vaunt.

"Oh, the bet ? I guess I was just trying to be there for a friend."

Trying and failing, Cinder wanted to add. Clearly Jaune hadn't realized what was really going on with his teammate, Pyrrha Nikos. And a quick second glance at the disheartened Mistarian champion watching from the sidelines confirmed all of Cinder's suspicions. This was the friend he made a promise to. Or made a bet with, the way Jaune saw it.

Poor thing, it's too painful to watch but too scary to look away, isn't it?

And Jaune shares living quarters with her? Cinder realized. How he could manage to be so oblivious truly confounded her.

Whatever solace Pyrrha had found before in her team's dance number was getting systematically dismantled before her eyes as she laid them on Cinder and Jaune dancing the night away. Dancing to the slow music. The slow music dance Pyrrha had wanted for herself and the blond - it was written all over her grieving features.

The little champion would do well to learn what defeat feels like, Cinder thought in reverie. This one is merely a hors d'oeuvre for what's to follow, really. Beacon's impending judgment.

And, lo and behold, everyone was as oblivious as ever. As ignorant of her master and her plan as Jaune was to Pyrrha and the torment he put her poor maiden heart through. Cinder drowned a chuckle before returning her attention to her partner. The music was changing again.

Two dances became three as the tune they moved to shifted into a Bachata. Cinder would soon retire from the dance floor, but, before

then, she decided she'd reward little Pyrrha for being such an attentive spectator.

And the others too, she supposed.

As the music neared a crescendo, she made her move. With a pirouette she let go of Jaune's embrace. Their hands letting go at the end of her furious whirl. Just as soon as they had broken apart, their eyes locked; Cinder could see Jaune understood what she had planned.

Her salto, returning her back to her dance partner was swift and silky smooth in equal parts. For his role, Jaune welcomed her into his arms right after the apex of her flying arc. He didn't jitter, he didn't bend, as they posed there. Like a statue of two star crossed lovers, the moonlight bathing their glistening forms. The perfect climax to their waltz.

Jaune landed Cinder on her feet and they continued at a more relaxed pace.

"Let us make this our last dance," she informed Jaune of her intention to retire soon, "I would rather leave before midnight."

"Early sleeper ?" He teased, trying to mimic Cinder. He needed a lot of work.

"Something like that."

"You know, I get it if it isn't my place to say anything, but you kinda hurt Neptune's feelings back there." Jaune said, seemingly out of the blue.

Cinder could hardly comprehend how the teen could be utterly blind to his own teammate's feelings toward him and yet somehow piece together what her words earlier meant for Neptune. She was even more astonished by the Vacuan philanderer's feelings somehow mattering to Jaune.

"I did." She said flatly.

She made a turn underarm. They locked gazes upon her return.

"With your assistance, of course. I wonder why..." The mirth in her tone came unmasked. Jaune was caught off guard by the implied accusation. His eyes darkened, he knew she had a point.

Neptune had clearly warmed up to Jaune after their heart to heart at the start of the night. He might even go as far as to call Neptune a fast friend by this point. But despite that, Jaune couldn't disregard the opportunity to be protective of his date when the teen approached the two. He had squandered his chances with Weiss long before Neptune entered the fray, and part of him did now wonder why he'd felt compelled to act that way - To play along with Cinder.

He felt protective of her. He also felt devious like her.

Cinder watched the cogs of Jaune's mind turn as they neared the end of their time dancing. Her remark had disarmed him. Part of her appreciated the honesty his reactions tonight betrayed; how he didn't, couldn't hide behind braggadocio and theatrics.

Too bad it makes him incorrigibly glubby. Unless...

"Ah." she realized, "It was payback for taking Weiss from you."

"That's not it at all." Jaune protested.

"Really? So what of all your talk yesterday? About getting back at her?"

Jaune's mouth opened but no retort came out.

"I only jest," Cinder eased his worries "I knew you didn't have the guts to follow through with anything unpleasant. I called your bluff yesterday and you broke immediately," she explained "asking me to go easy on poor Weiss."

The music they moved to gradually changed again. Cinder decided she had time to drive home her point and nudged Jaune to keep going.

"Am I to infer from that frown you actually feel bad for Neptune?"

Light returned to Jaune's vision. He looked at her like he had all night,

"The choice was always Weiss's. There was nothing to get back at her for. And I don't feel bad for Neptune, not really. I guess I thought I would."

"What was it then?" she asked in an unceremonious tone.

"I was feeling kinda bad for lying. Now I'm kind of relieved you knew." He was all too happy to confess.

"Is that so?"

"I didn't want to give you a false impression." He elaborated.

"How mature," her tone grew amused again "and yet you relied on your clumsy deception to get a date tonight."

"Sorry, I guess I can be a little immature at times," he sighed, guilt returning to him.

"Sorry? Don't be. You *are* immature, but not because of that little scheme."

"Okay," he intoned "this time I really don't know where you're going with-"

"The source of your immaturity is that naïveté of yours," she cut him off to elaborate, "Weiss and Neptune know what to say to get what they want. They are social chameleons, I bet they see the same quality in each other."

She knew a lofty fool like Jaune would never agree with her assertions about those two. But she still found some amusement in trying to plant the seeds of doubt in him and see him struggle with the suspicion and cynicism that shall sprout from it.

"And you're so much better ?" he countered, his mood clearly having worsened due to her commentary on his friends.

"Maybe I'm not. Maybe you're walking into a trap." She answered, a sardonic smile splitting her face.

"Maybe," he relented, guilt creeping back into his tone.

"Aw, don't feel bad. I already told you, you did not trap me. You never could." Cinder assured him.

"That's good, I think...."

"It is!" Now let's withdraw from the court."

The couple's performance on the dance floor was as advertised. The banter between the two entertained the deadly woman as well. Finally she was pleased Jaune was too tense to entertain thoughts of wooing her. He understood his part and played it as best he could.

As they exited the dancing area, the audience they'd gathered formed a crescent around them. Jaune froze, not quite realizing what they wanted. Before he could ask what the occasion was, their admirers showered them with adulation.

Hopefully this would undo some of the damage his dance with Pyrrha, Ren and Nora caused, Jaune hoped. He really should find out who uploaded it. Granted, he knew it would somehow wind up having been Nora.

Spectators applauded and cheered as the retiring Jaune and Cinder walked past them.

Pyrrha was not one of them.

And that is all for now ! The promised dance with Cinder was a runaway success, but the night, like this story, have only begun.

Once again I feel obligated to comment how bad poor Pyrrha has it sometimes.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Hello again! This is it! In many ways this is a make-or-break chapter for this fic depending on what you expected out of it. Please let me know what you think about the direction things are going in! Heartfelt thanks to Max for helping by proofreading as well as brainstorming with me for this chapter, you were invaluable help !

The slow melodies gave way to an energetic beat, forcing the couples to either retire or adapt to the new tunes . The show she put on the dance floor, much like the night on the whole, was a runaway success for Cinder. She formulated a plan, came in contact with her obstacles and adapted swiftly to get what she wanted.

First she was successful in infiltrating CCT Tower, then she succeeded in establishing a solid, if showy, alibi. Beacon's ball had been essentially turned into a victory parade for her under the very noses of the Hunters and Huntresses it celebrated. Not only that, she'd earned the envy of a substantial number of them, exposing their superficiality. The self congratulatory nature of this event was evidence enough for Cinder, but she didn't mind being proven right even further by the jealous looks so many huntresses shot at her. *Never content to share with others, needing to hoard everything to themselves.*

But life has a funny way of teaching us, she ruminated . For their hubris, humanity's supposed protectors would soon be taught a lesson. In many ways a reckoning of their own making.

The joke was on her enemies tonight and she could hardly mask her satisfaction at that. However she could -and indeed had- channel it into a splendid dance performance and generally amicable mood.

Amicable even to her present company. The same couldn't currently be said about her date.

The boy's furrowed brows framed a pensive pair of sapphire orbs. As their time dancing together ended, and he could stop being so nervous, his attention had gradually turned inward. So much so he had visibly retreated into his own thoughts as they were distancing themselves from the ballroom.

The boy had lost some of his cadence after they spoke during their final dance; her words about naïveté having possibly gotten to him more than he had cared to admit. Cinder gathered that ought to have been the cause; Jaune was embarrassingly easy to read and she hadn't said or done anything else that could have been the blond's chagrin.

She suppressed the urge to scoff at the thought. Having already shown him one kindness by agreeing to accompany the teen. Now he seemed just about ready to forget that and give her lip- *for her other kindness to him, no less!* She had only done him a favor by elucidating how people actually get what they want in social occasions like these. Strategy, politicking or even downright manipulation, should the situation call for it. Jaune failed to see the wisdom in her counsel and was only upset by it.

Jaune's innocent outlook on such matters was exactly as she might've expected given first showings from the idealistic boy. It was also partially the reason Cinder made the choice to take him up on his offer and fraternize with him, realizing how his resignation and gullibility made it a low risk proposition. He was entirely out of his league and he knew it. And he didn't know how to hide it. Cinder had seen completely through him during their initial exchange and surmised the blond would go along with just about anything she asked of him and count his blessings while he did. It was reassuring, knowing he lacked the backbone to object to her.

And for the most part he hadn't, being an oblivious accomplice to tonight's infiltration, although a redundant one. Unfortunately, his

obsequious streak was starting to break. Cinder didn't fear he might suspect anything but she equally did not care to barter words with him.

The frown worn by the young man did not blemish tonight's victory for her, he had already fulfilled his role and would be disposed of in good time. The Altesian soldiers, Ozpin and the rest of the teachers present had discreetly excused themselves by that point, likely to discuss the break-in behind closed doors. She knew if she indulged in pushing Jaune just a bit more she would not be imperiling her cover. It's not like she was planning to make an enemy of him anyway.

"Out with it. Something is on your mind," she declared, not caring to skirt around the topic.

"Oh, it's okay. It's no big deal," Jaune played it off nonchalantly. Probably thinking it politer to spare Cinder from his opinions.

He couldn't stop her. Though she agreed it was no big deal -it was absolutely insignificant to her. Unfortunately, Jaune's expression told her it wasn't to him, despite what his words claimed. *How callow* .

"I know you're lying," she intoned.

"It's a habit I'm trying to shake," the knight admitted, still rather guarded.

Whatever, mused Cinder, and turned her attention to spotting the court's timepiece. She had just pinpointed it above the room's lavish main entrance when Jaune finally spilled open with his thoughts.

"It's just that... you are wrong," he protested meekly. The woman was not keeping up. *Nothing she'd told him so far was anywhere near wrong*.

"Wrong to have picked you?" she shot back, "You do make some compelling arguments..." she jabbed.

"Oh! no no, not that!" he shot out, shaking his head in disagreement. Or distress, Cinder couldn't determine which.

"I mean, you were wrong when you said people get what they want by telling others what they want to hear," he explained.

She had to fight the urge to roll her eyes at him.

"Look at you for example," Jaune continued.

"Me... ?" She raised a questioning eyebrow. The knight realized he may be treading on thin ice. He quickly added more.

"Yes, I mean, you were honest with me!"

"Right," she said with a knowing smirk.

Still, his perceived win over the fiery woman could not stand. It was *his way of contradicting her. Haplessly wrong as he was*. She knew exactly how to put him in his place once and for all.

"Do you also make a habit of making fans wherever you go?" she set the bait, making her voice all saccharine sweet.

"Oh, the cheers? The laughs? That was inevitable the moment I showed up in a frilly dress," Jaune played off nonchalantly. His focus not quite on the topic at hand. Just like Cinder had hoped.

"Even world famous Pyrrha Nikos?" the fatal shot. She caught Jaune entirely off guard.

"Pyrrha? What do you mean?" he asked, with a mix of worry and sincerity in his voice.

"Don't tell me you didn't see her? During our time together?" she said breathily, enjoying every second of it. Jaune took the bait hook line and sinker. Cinder could tell he was the emotional type and had used that fact against him. He cared about Pyrrha. Hopefully to the extent of chasing after the downcast girl. Or, at least, enough to

close himself off for the rest of the night, making him less of a nuisance.

Jaune's eyes lit up with epiphany. Then immediately filled with panic and regret. He was putting on quite the show for Cinder. His mouth opened but no words came out for a long time before he finally pronounced a single name.

"Pyrrha...", his voice sank.

He stumbled backwards, not knowing what to do with his realization. His mind fixated on things further away than ever. Cinder decided to snap him back to reality.

"I'm parched," she drawled.

A beat.

Silence, but for music and distant chatter.

"Would you, uh, like something to drink?" he offered, too dazed to see Cinder was offering an excuse for them to go their separate ways, "The fruit punch is pretty good."

"Was," Cinder corrected, "But actually no, no it wasn't."

"They do have just regular juice and sodas," Jaune suggested.

The ravenette didn't expect the blond would fetch her something to drink. He was preoccupied with far more pressing matters. However it was the perfect opportunity to offer him an excuse to go after Pyrrha and free herself of him. After that, it wouldn't be long until Beacon's gargantuan clock tower chimed for midnight, freeing her to retire alongside her team. Finally free to report their success back to Salem and end the day.

"Do they serve wine?" she inquired.

After another delay he answered her, "Uh, no."

"Get me something a teacher would drink," she suggested, just in case the boy did remember his offer to bring her a beverage.

"Right," Jaune immediately turned to start his search.

"Not coffee," Cinder added before he got far, realizing that not giving specific directions to the boy could result in being served something comically replete with caffeine. She had seen Ozpin and Oobleck with a coffee mug later in the night than this. Damn nearly every night at that. It wouldn't shock her if the hostesses had accounted for the faculty's caffeine addiction; every other facet of the Academy seemed to.

"But isn't that the only thing they drink?" Jaune wondered out loud, confirming Cinder's worst suspicions.

"I'm sure I'll find something," the anxious teen said dismissively as he resumed his course. He was not heading for the tables.

Finally, Cinder thought, some quiet .

With Jaune taken care of, the half Maiden turned her attention to the intricate timepiece above the grand entrance of the ballroom. She had opted to sacrifice a bit of function in favor of form when creating her dress and that unfortunately meant she had to trust her Scroll with Emerald. It was a burner Scroll she had zero attachment to, but, without it, she did have to check the clock on the wall to tell how long it would be until she could gather with her underlings and leave.

Only a short thirty minutes. Not too bad. All in all everything went better than expecte-

"HELLO!" screamed a voice unfamiliar to Cinder, abruptly cutting into the woman's inner monologue. She turned to see where the greeting came from.

It was a shorter girl with short carrot colored hair. She had apparently made the call to attend the ball as somebody's bridesmaid, judging by her choice in dress. A less eye-catching Mistrarian boy, with a pink strand to break the monotony of his jet hair, accompanying her.

Nora Valkyrie. And Lie Ren.

Two names Cinder vaguely recalled from the student team briefings. The owner of the shrill and chipper voice greeting her was the former, currently cutting through the crowd to Cinder. All the while gesticulating wildly at her with one hand, whilst the other, linked to Lie Ren's, was dragging the unresponsive teen along. For his part, Ren had a distinctly apologetic look on his face.

"Woah! I can't believe you're real! I mean, I can, but you know what I mean. I'm Nora!" The words spilled out in a single breath.

"And I'm Ren," her companion added. Sounding sincere yet embarrassed. *Likely thanks to his date.*

Having to relinquish any hope for peace and quiet, Cinder begrudgingly played along with making introductions. "I see. I am-"

"Jaune's date!" She was promptly cut off by the ginger, "he mentioned he found one. Last night. Right before bedtime. At the very last minute he possibly could have!"

There was tension in the girl's voice. Cinder couldn't quite parse the cause. She decided it was better off being ignored. Both for the sake of her cover and of her nerves. Ideally she hoped to exchange pleasantries and be done with Pyrrha Nikos's sidekicks. She wondered if Pyrrha sicced them on her to do the dirty work the prim and proper champion wouldn't.

Ultimately it didn't matter to Cinder. Whether this was about Pyrrha's celebrity being eclipsed during the ball, or about losing her blond dork, or just plain bad luck, Cinder couldn't care less. She just wanted not to be pestered.

"Right, I am-

"An amazing dancer! I didn't think anyone could *touch our team's* dance number ! But you and Jaune did!" Nora thwarted Cinder's attempt to give her name again. Ren pinched the ridge of his nose.

"Cinder," she resumed as soon as Nora was finished.

"Block?" the high-strung huntress guessed.

"No," Cinder deadpanned.

"And I'm Ren."

"You already said that", Nora reminded her partner, Ren's attempt to redo the conversation from the start going up in flames.

"Charmed," Cinder at long last completed her greeting, "and I'm glad you enjoyed our dance."

"Boy, did we ?" Added Nora, "You really pulled some moves on Jaune!"

"Uuh... Nora?" Ren tried.

" *With* Jaune!" She amended quickly, "Pulled some moves with Jaune. Killer moves!"

"You were really good," the hunter assented.

"Thanks..." Cinder managed, understanding that Nora Valkyrie was not in fact a fan of her, or her dance with Jaune; The girl's chummy exterior was merely a front to disguise her real disposition. Despite seeing through Nora's act, she had no choice but to endure the thinly veiled belligerence. A slip of the tongue and she'd be giving Nora exactly what she wanted; fuel to ignite rumors to drag Cinder's name through the mud. Personally, she couldn't care less if Jaune's social circle approved of her. But she could not allow prying eyes to fixate

on her during her time undercover. *They'd look for insipid gossip but could potentially stumble upon much more.*

She resolved to give the girl nothing. She only has to humor her for a few minutes...

"You know, we care about Jaune a whole lot. He *is* our fearless team leader!" The girl explained.

"Well, I am glad he has such good friends," the woman gave a stock response.

"Oh *yeeah* ! We are practically siamese quintuplets! Joined at the hip, all of us! We spend every single waking moment with our fearless leader, don't we Rennie?"

"I like to think we aren't codependent," he politely protested.

"Aw, Rennie," Nora pinched his cheek, "We are totally all up in Jaune's face, all the freaking time!"

And you're threatening to be all up in mine, is that the idea, Cinder desperately wanted to ask. "If that's the case, why aren't you with him now?" she instead suggested, hoping to shoo the two away.

"Why aren't you? Trouble in paradise? *hmmm?*" Nora immediately countered.

Is this girl's semblance being an irritant ?

"He offered to get us refreshments," Cinder said. She ensured her voice sounded pleased enough to reassure Nora everything was fine between her and Jaune, aiming to end her interrogation. She'd have no luck.

"Already whipped, huh?" Nora remarked, her resolve to get up in Cinder's face unshaken. She stepped closer to the woman to drive the point home. A wide grin threatening to split her face.

These thirty minutes couldn't pass fast enough.

"Hey you guys," a new voice interjected.

In walked Yang Xiao Long, greeting Cinder's unsought companions before turning her attention to the Maiden.

"You're in one of the Haven teams, aren't you ? Awesome dancing back there!" The Huntress acknowledged Cinder, the joviality in her voice coming across as completely genuine. *Maybe she was her reprieve .*

"The name's Yang, pleasure to meet ya!" the taller girl announced.

"Cinder," Cinder begun.

"Not Block," Nora finished for her.

"Not Block," Cinder confirmed, "and yes, I came representing Haven," she said coolly.

"Cool! I hope you can *represent* as well as you can dance. Especially if we meet in the arena," the blonde blustered.

"If we do, I'll try my best."

"I'll say! You're certainly the second best exchange student on the dance floor," Yang grinned.

"Oh? And who is the first?" Cinder questioned.

"Clearly you guys didn't see Penny doing the robot. Freaking insane!" the flowing-haired huntress exclaimed. "Anyhow," she continued, "I actually came to ask you guys if you know where Pyrrha went." Nora's expression froze for a fleeting moment.

"You mean she's not here? haha," she asked awkwardly. Cinder sensed the girl was feigning ignorance. *What exactly did she know?*

"Nope. Jaune came by the reception earlier, asking if we knew where she went," Yang elaborated, "He was in a real hurry, should I be worried?"

Finding a Huntress when she didn't want to be found is a daunting task. Nigh impossible with one of Pyrrha Nikos's caliber. Unfortunately throwing in the towel was not an option for Jaune. He understood he was woefully inexperienced when it came to women, he understood his date with Cinder came to be under questionable terms. And he could live knowing those things. What he could not live with nor understand was his absolute blindness to Pyrrha's feelings. In hindsight the girl had practically come forward with everything during their talk on the balcony earlier that evening.

He felt terrible. Guilty of something heinous, something that wasn't part of him. And now he was letting two women down. Finding Pyrrha was only the first of his worries; he'd have to explain so much when he did. Both to his team partner and to Cinder. It was a difficult situation, the boy was keenly aware, but he couldn't afford to shrink from the challenge ahead. *Delaying the inevitable would only make things even worse.*

He checked the balcony, and every other balcony of the ballroom after. He sprinted into their team's dorm and to the rooftop he and Pyrrha would train. He checked the amphitheater, the combat ring and both locker rooms. He made a beeline to the cafeteria, only to discover its doors were locked. *Could she be in the teacher's lounge? Should he risk the girls' bathrooms?*

No, he decided to stop and reassess what he was doing. Obviously bolting after Pyrrha had failed. He'd have much better chances reaching her through a simple call from his Scroll. Though he did not wish to say what he needed to while hiding behind the device. The idea felt spiritless, mechanical. But he had no better option.

"Come on, come on," he chanted, urgency swelling in his voice.

His Scroll was left calling. He waited for a minute. He waited for five. He agonized every moment he spent. Every one of them was another he could've used searching on foot. *Could he try reaching her using someone else's device and number? No, he didn't want to trick her that way.*

The more he contemplated options, the more time passed with him calling Pyrrha in vain.

He was at an impasse. Stuck balancing against a column and gazing at Beacon's imposing central tower, waiting for her to pick up. Until inspiration came to him; the tower. Up until that point he'd omitted expanding his search outdoors, knowing the odds of finding her randomly around the vast campus were infinitesimal. The giant structure erected at the center of Beacon would allow him to survey the entirety of the campus from on high. Hopefully he'd be able to spot the redhead in the dark. With renewed hope, Jaune began making his way to the vantage point. He prayed the elevator was working.

Thank the Gods, it was . Ozpin's office at the top of the tower was bound to be locked, so he instead made his exit one floor below. The door windows adorning the floor's four walls gave him a complete view around the campus. His focus zipped from place to place, never lingering for long.

There she was! Slouched against a spruce tree at the northernmost edge of campus, her back turned to the boy's direction. If he descended the tower fast enough and cut across the ballroom, he might reach her before she moved. He didn't want to return to the dance. He knew it would be rude to run past Cinder and his friends, but it was a breach in etiquette he was willing to make.

Just as he turned to take the elevator down, its doors hissed open to let someone exit.

"I hope you don't mind I brought us some wine, James," Glynda Goodwitch announced, a glass of red wine in each hand and a

coquettish smile under her resting eyes. It disappeared as soon as she opened them.

"Mister Arc! You're not the General," she said abstractedly.

"No, I'm not," the boy verified, "I saw him leave Beacon, a while ago actually," he explained, hoping he didn't somehow anger the teacher. He wasn't trespassing, but he had just witnessed something he likely shouldn't have.

"Of course you did," Glynda huffed, her joyous mood leaving with the air she breathed out.

She sharply extended her left hand, handing him one of the glasses.

"Please dispose of this, it's no longer needed," she intoned.

"Will do... But what about the other glass?" the boy wondered.

"Oh, that glass and I will linger here for a while longer. *Alone*," she emphasized. Jaune didn't need to be told twice. After a nod he'd immediately taken off.

Well that's convenient.

Having to walk with a glass in hand would prevent him from racing to Pyrrha at full speed but gave him something to hand Cinder as he passed over her. And sprinting through the courtroom's densely packed crowd was never going to be an option.

His time with Cinder hadn't been perfect but she did give him a fair chance by agreeing to accompany him to the dance . Besides, everything she'd said to him was out of a desire to help and teach, Jaune decided. And she had helped, she had opened his eyes. In a way, he owed her. He didn't owe her enough to stay and chit chat, but he believed he could afford delivering her a glass of wine.

Agony, thy name is Nora Valkyrie.

That is what Cinder had discovered in her brief but torturous time around the girl. Lie Ren and Yang Xiao Long had long since given up trying to unglue the bubbly huntress from her. They had left Cinder all alone. The noirette had resolved not to let Nora get to her, but her patience had limits. And Nikos's orange crony had an incredible efficiency chipping away at it.

An efficiency only rivaled by her excessive talkativeness.

The infernal bridesmaid had an endless amount of talking material, never running out of topics and observations. Most observations concerning Cinder's looks and affect, all of them passive aggressive or patently insulting. Her grating voice added to the frustration.

Cinder was nearing her breaking point. Try as she might to divert the conversation, ignore Nora, or even stare daggers into her soul, the girl would always find a way to continue her mission. The Maiden had to admit Pyrrha knew how to pick her minions. If her only thought when looking at Nora wasn't to incinerate her using every ounce of magic she could muster, she might have even admired the girl.

"Oh, wow! Sparks flew out of your eyes, I swear," the huntress noticed, "You must have overdone it with the strass, sister!"

This couldn't go on.

Cinder had already tried the excuse of going to the ladies' room to which Nora promptly announced she'd be happy to join Cinder for 'girl talk'. She began frantically scooting for Emerald, Mercury, even Jaune. Anybody to give her a way out.

"Do you have attention span problems, *hellooo* ? We're talking here!" The huntress called out her attempt to find an escape, determined to hold on to her target.

She swore she would make Nora pay. Though she'd be preoccupied with realizing her destiny when they locate the Vault and the moribund Maiden, there'd be other opportunities before then. Maybe not opportunities to reduce the little huntress to ash, but death wasn't the only form of retribution. She'd find a way to repay her in kind.

Nora was there to protect Pyrrha, that much she had inadvertently made clear . Not the amazon's social status but *her*. Her feelings . Nora's endless prose always found its way back to Jaune. His multiple flaws, his *vomit boy* moniker, his complete incompatibility with Cinder and perfect dynamic with Pyrrha. *Cinder Fall* had to go through all this verbal abuse because Pyrrha was feeling territorial over the scraggly blond .

Regrettably, she had already pushed Jaune away and into the redhead's embrace. She never thought she'd lament getting him out of her hair. But revenge was a powerful motivator for Cinder.

"Excuse me! Coming through!" a familiar voice called out.

It was Jaune. Cutting through the rabble of students as he approached. The fiery Maiden couldn't believe it. Instead of rushing to Pyrrha, the teen was returning to her with her wine in hand. His actions completely contradicted his initial reaction to what she revealed to him about his partner. It was bizarre.

Had he really gone on a search for her drink of choice? Perhaps he simply didn't reciprocate the feelings Pyrrha had for him. Perhaps he tried and failed to find Pyrrha and, defeated, he came back to seek solace in his date. Whatever the case, he was now there . Cinder's eyes lit up.

Pyrrha will regret sending her hyperactive enforcer to torture her.

"Oh....Jaune!" Nora was completely taken aback, her shoulders tensed up in shock. Her team leader was the last person she expected to see coming.

"Hey," the boy swiftly called to the two of them.

Cinder sashayed to her target, her hand gliding under his before taking the glass from it.

"W-w-what brings you here, Jaune?" Nora inquired.

"I'm actually only passing thr-" he began, his attention dead set on Cinder's movements.

"Aren't you a sweetheart, dear," Cinder cut in, "you went through all the trouble of finding me what I asked," she purred in a breathy voice

It was time for revenge.

Before Jaune could answer, her arms came to rest on his shoulders as she settled right in front of him. He was as stunned as Nora.

Carry on this news to Pyrrha, chit, she gloated internally.

"I had a really amazing time tonight," her eyelashes fluttered. She oversold her theatrics and the mirth in her voice. Making sure her thickheaded audience wouldn't mistake them for anything but pure passion.

"Wait, you did?!" Jaune and Nora said in unison.

Cinder's answer came as she closed the gap between her and Jaune completely. His eyes widened. He was about to voice his protest when,

DING DING DING

The mechanical chimes signaling midnight came at long last. They drowned any objection as she stole his lips.

The sound drowned out many things.

Jaune couldn't hear the *oohs* and *aaahs* coming from admiring onlookers. He couldn't hear Pyrrha opening the heavy door far across the room to return to the ball.

He couldn't hear her walking away. He never saw her.

Chapter 4

Like always, thank you, thank you, thank you Max and GGL for all the help! Discussing writing with you is quickly proving to be one of my favorite parts about writing this fic.

Chapter 4

He had gone to face neither of them.

Pyrrha told him to be honest; to speak proudly and candidly and be true to his heart. Cinder advised him the opposite; to tell people what they want to hear to take advantage of them. Neither recommended him to be such an idiot as he was, unable to see past his own nose. Before Cinder quite literally spelled it all out for him, he was utterly blind to the way Pyrrha felt. Hopelessly blind. It mortified him.

How much more could he have missed?

He'd kicked off the day well enough. The dance itself had been uneventful before he followed Pyrrha onto the balcony. He felt good confronting Neptune, but even better that his assumptions about the boy turned out wrong. Turns out he was a pretty stand-up guy, only a bit too fixated on his own appearance.

The conversation with Pyrrha . How he wished to go back and redo it with what he knew now.

His partner gazed at the night sky in self-imposed isolation. When they spoke she explained to him it was because of the walls her status kept around her. It dissuaded any hunter or huntress less accomplished from connecting with her, let alone asking the champion out. Which, at their age, meant all of them. *Except him, if only because of his ignorance.* It just drove a wedge between them in a different way. *It always came back to that.*

At least his surprise wardrobe change and their ensuing dance together helped improve Pyrrha's spirits. The promised group dance and debuting white dress Jaune wore were a rousing success. *Not a single attendee flung rotten vegetables at him!* People took his gesture in stride and joined Team JNPR on the dance floor.

If anything, he'd left a positive impression with his surprising skill in dancing.

Finally, Cinder made her grand entrance. After a quick costume change he joined her for their promised waltz. It had also gone well. The mere act of dancing with a beauty like Cinder would count as a crowning achievement for the blond any other time, but there was something more. Be it her snark or her disarming outspokenness that forced him to try arguing with her. *Maybe it was simply her mean smile* . Whatever the specifics, there was something bewitching about them pushing him into deep contemplation.

Maybe what entranced him was knowing there was meanness but no malice. Seeing that this is who Cinder was; sharp tongued but earnest. But it also made him profoundly nervous. It was an engrossing cocktail of emotions. He had intense feelings warning him against earning the ire of the woman. They urged him to navigate the minefield he put himself in with absolute precision. He had no idea how. He had no idea how to process everything, especially after *it* happened.

The kiss.

She had kissed him. Cinder Fall had kissed him. A peck on the lips. It was right as midnight's echoes filled Beacon Hall. The timing couldn't have been worse. Another astonishing revelation and another woman slipping away right before Jaune could know what to think or say. In honesty he still didn't.

Call it cowardice, but he didn't dare think about it. Maybe it was guilt. He knew he could never escape it all the same.

She'd swiftly retired for the night with her team. They would have much to prepare for come morning, Jaune realized. The first year's mission assignments began in two days. Real Hunter missions Team JNPR will also have to brave through...

These real combat tours could not have come at a poorer time for his team. Right after he subverted his partner's trust in him and imperiled team cohesion. Right when he should be looking for Pyrrha and Cinder.

Browbeaten, he exhaled something fierce. The ball had defeated him. Now he was expected to trail a professional on the field and leave everything going on in Beacon behind. The field trip was an already daunting prospect for any first year team. And Team JNPR may have to defer to him for leadership on it. As far behind them - and indeed most of his peers - as Jaune was academically and in mock combat, he knew it would be a million times worse in genuine field conditions. A million more ways in which he'd be a burden.

He refused to have a repeat of Cardin before Emerald Forest, he could never live with it. He would never withhold things from his team again, not even things that challenged his pride. Back then, petty machismo held him back from doing the right thing, now matters felt impossibly more complicated. What he feared was that he'd already let his team down. *He hurt Pyrrha.*

With Cardin and his groupies, Jaune's mistake was obvious. He didn't speak up when he needed to. He dreaded the chance to speak had come and gone this time around. But how could he talk to Pyrrha now? He didn't even know what to think, much less what he wanted.

Should he be happy? Two stunning beauties, astronomically out of his league suddenly having expressed interest in him.

No.

After his tragicomical failure in reading women tonight, he wouldn't allow himself to indulge in such thoughts. He was as inexperienced with the opposite sex as he was being a Huntsman. And his gaps in knowledge were coming back to bite him.

All he could do is dread. Dread facing his team in their dorms. Dread not knowing what to say to Cinder. All his deliberation and delay only for the teen to box himself in his own uncertainty. He really was bad at following advice. He was ignoring both Pyrrha's and Cinder's.

He lethargically climbed the stairs to the hallway leading to their dorm. The corridor seemed endless. It wasn't long enough. Dragging his feet through it would not allow him to procrastinate forever, as much as he'd wished to. He knew it would be awkward, if not downright cruel, but he needed to join his team in their dorm. Making himself absent for the night would only invite more and worse speculation out of them.

He groggily lifted his shoulders. Ready or not, he wanted to face Pyrrha. Before he'd made it far, a voice called to him in an aloof calm.

"Weird night," Ren intoned. He must have been patiently expecting him, Jaune surmised, as he spotted the jet-haired hunter posed lazily against the wall. Not too far from their room to miss Jaune's approach, but not so close as to risk being heard by its residents.

"Yeah..." Jaune reluctantly whimpered.

"Why don't you join us ?" offered Ren, "Nora is just about ready to call dibs on your belongings if you don't."

"I have a feeling you know why, Ren," defeat crept deeper into Jaune's tone, his mask of calm a doomed endeavor from the start.

Never one to dance around a topic, Ren knew exactly what to say. "She's stronger than you think, you know - Pyrrha that is," his wan smile expressing more solidarity to the blond than words ever could.

"I know you worry because you care," he continued, "why don't you let her know too?"

The seemingly obvious suggestion knocked Jaune wide awake. The plainness of it reminded him of something he never really had forgotten; his brotherhood with Ren. The bonds with his team. He knew just how right Ren was and yet he had allowed himself to get lost inside his own doubts and lose sight of the present. It was a habit Jaune always had; losing himself in the horizon. The horizon made for fierce motivation when working to realize his dream of being a hunter, but could just as well crash him under suffocating pressure when storm clouds blot it out.

It must all seem silly to a stoic like Ren. Jaune finally returned his friend's smile.

"Nora put you up to this, didn't she?" he asked with slowly renewing cadence.

"Actually I volunteered," the student explained, "Nora's suggestion was to break your legs and drag you into our room."

"Thanks, Ren. I needed to hear that," Jaune rested a hand on his teammate's shoulder. Light but steadfast. They made their way to the dormroom.

"Oh, and thanks for saving my legs," the teen added.

He gingerly grasped the pommel of their door.

Cinder woke up in a cold sweat, the unwelcome imagery still playing inside her mind.

That was a first.

She had come across a variety of obstacles in the past, of course. The path she carved out was riddled with challenges. Admittedly, the

way she overcame the challenge of Nora Valkyrie was hardly her proudest moment. But tonight was no more volatile or adverse than she could handle regardless; she'd won.

Her infiltration mission was a success. Her dramatics bookending Beacon's big ball could only affect her in the form of petty gossip. The academy's grapevine would surely be abuzz with rumor by morning. She didn't care; swatting Nora away was her sole concern during the excruciating minutes spent around that buzzard. Only at the instant her lips met his did she consider all the clean-up and excuses necessary to prevent a potential snafu in the aftermath. It was a begrudging epiphany; part of her wanted to enjoy indulging in the suave role of seductress. Part of her was completely embarrassed.

It didn't matter. Retaliation against Nora Valkyrie and Pyrrha Nikos was the only goal behind her actions at that moment. Rebuffing Jaune's advances, should they ever come, would not be a complicated affair.

Though Cinder vehemently doubted Jaune would be coming back anyway. She never did figure out why he returned to the dance to begin with; she had practically served him to Pyrrha on a silver platter. *And he practically slept next to her in their dorm room.*

She checked on the two other beds of her team's room. Emerald and Mercury were dormant, lost in their own respective dreamlands. At least they wouldn't be disturbing her, questioning her about any meaningless nonsense. Emerald would jump at the chance. Cinder only liked her dreams of ambition. But she was no stranger to nightmares.

She wrestled with them often. Recollections of regret and suffering. The long years she was tortured and the many ways the world left her betrayed. The rut of her subconscious did show her mercy sometimes. Sometimes, it would break its monotony and dream of everything she was born to never have. Everything she grew up to miss out on. *Maybe tonight was such an instance .*

But it didn't feel like that.

It didn't feel like the aching of an old wound, but the opening of a new one. It did not track in the half Maiden's mind. Her vicarious competition with Pyrrha did not even begin to compare with the do-or-die world she was forged in. And it wasn't set in a battlefield she was keen to dominate at any event. Perhaps humbling the invincible girl in true combat could be enjoyable but Cinder had not dreamt about that. She had specifically stolen *him* from her.

She would rather dream of her fruitful espionage in Vale and all the weaknesses it would soon expose. She would much rather dream of finally finding the magic left unclaimed. The hunger for the tempestuous power never subdued from the moment she earned her rank among the Maidens. It was profoundly aggrieved by the unnatural division of the Fall Maiden. It scratched and gnawed at her to make things right. It was her sole craving. She couldn't possibly have urges of any *other* variety.

Especially not for that dense dork.

Cinder decided to go back to sleep. She prayed his gentle sapphire orbs wouldn't stare back at her when she did.

"Sorry, I'm late you guys..." Jaune spoke shakily as he opened the door to his team's room.

He wouldn't cross it. He was not emotionally ready to enter and invade a space he might've lost the right to be in.

"Hey Nora....", he anxiously greeted.

"Hey Jaune," Nora offered coolly.

She was resting prone on her bed, lazily flipping through the pages of a magazine resting over her pillow. Her tone of voice informed Jaune she was privy to what had transpired. Her nonchalant greeting

was either to ease his worries, or to just play ignorant for her own sake, the blond speculated. Either those, or he had messed up so cataclysmically that Nora had reached '*everything is fine*' levels of denial.

Whichever the case, he knew he couldn't afford to focus on Nora. He found the courage to show himself for one specific reason. He'd never forgive himself if he lost his nerve now.

"So *uh*," he stiffly began, "have you seen Pyrrha?"

"She's here, silly. She's taking a shower," Nora explained.

"Oh, that reminds me I forgot to take mine," Jaune commented as an aside.

"Yea, well, these things tend to happen when you roam around so late," the huntress jabbed, her vision unbroken from the flipping pages in front of her.

"I understand if you're mad too, Nora," Jaune sighed.

"Mad?!" she rapidly fought the blanket she was wrapped in to switch positions and face the blond, "Jauney, I'm not mad!"

As he inspected her features, Jaune verified just how sincere Nora's reassurance was. Her expression was pensive but profoundly caring. All his teammates were caring. As much for him as they were for Pyrrha. How could he have thought otherwise?

"You're the one who's mad at himself, Jaune," Nora correctly deduced, "That's why you feared we'd be mad."

"It's a habit of yours," Ren concurred, his tone attesting he felt much the same way as Nora. "You're always hard on yourself," he elaborated.

"You know I have a good reason for it, Ren," the taller boy countered, his gaze planted on the floor.

It wasn't just his streak of being ignorant; Jaune had the most to prove from the beginning. He was the weakest link on his team and, by all accounts, unworthy of Beacon Academy.

" *Do you have a good reason, Jaune?*" Nora wondered out loud, "Let me guess, you blame yourself for the kiss after you came back to the ball."

" *Pfff* ", she exclaimed, "As if you could've known. I assure you, no one present couldn't have known!"

"Well I-" he began.

"And you blame yourself for not noticing Pyrrha earlier." Nora powered through him, hitting the nail on the head once again.

"You guys don't get it," Jaune whined, "it isn't about putting the blame on anyone; it's about doing right by the team."

"You must still think you're not right for the team, then. You're wrong," Pyrrha interjected, breaking up their argument and calling out Jaune.

Jaune suddenly grew aware of the fact he never heard the drizzle of a shower from the moment he'd opened the door to the room. His partner joined them from the dorm's bathroom dry and in her pajamas, having finished bathing a while ago. Her voice was mellow, but oozing determination.

He was petrified. He knew his encounter with Pyrrha was unavoidable and yet nothing could prepare him for it. Her catching him putting down his own worth was the worst feeling. He knew she never doubted his potential or commitment to becoming a Hunter. The one who doubted him was himself and that only made her job harder. He tried making these thoughts known to her but his voice failed him.

"We aren't putting blame on anyone," Ren stated.

"Except Cinder!" Nora made a snappy addendum.

"No, not even Cinder," Pyrrha differed, shooting her ginger teammate a gentle but somber look.

"Eh Rennie, why don't we go buy ingredients for pancakes? You can make breakfast tomorrow!" Nora instantly suggested before springing up from bed.

"But it's two in the morning," argued Ren.

"Too late, I've made up my mind!" The bubbly girl declared.

"Fine," he relented, "can I just get something from my nightsta- oof " the boy was forced to pause as his partner glomped him back into the hallway, his attempt to reach his nightstand destined to fail.

"See you two later!" Nora bid as she slammed the door shut behind her and Ren.

Jaune didn't turn to face his new interlocutor, his focus still downcast. Instead, he resolved to rip off the band-aid immediately and say everything in a single breath; Say his apologies all at once.

"Pyrrha, I-"

"The only one putting the blame on anyone is you," Pyrrha interrupted him as if she knew what he planned. She gazed at the night sky, like she had on the balcony, as she deliberately ambled closer to him. It stopped him dead in his tracks.

"You didn't *do* anything, Jaune," she continued.

"But *not* doing anything *is* the problem," Jaune's watery eyes finally met hers as he snapped.

"Well... you're not the only one with that problem," she timidly admitted, bringing one hand around her side in a mock hug for comfort.

"No, you tried, Pyrrha. I was just blind," Jaune darkly countered, still very eager to blame himself.

"You tried more. You got yourself a date..."

"I....", he lost his words again.

"I know how frustrating it can be, Jaune. When things are so difficult, it is easy to blame yourself and think you're the problem. But you need to toughen up," she proclaimed.

"Pardon me?", he blurted out, her words not being remotely close to what he was expecting Pyrrha to have to say.

"Things don't always turn out as we planned. And it's enticing to blame yourself, when the only alternative you see is someone else being at fault. I know it's in your nature Jaune; you are kind. And a bit reckless," she remarked.

"Pyrrha..." he said in a stage whisper. Desperate to be heard but not knowing what to say.

"You are just desperate to put the blame on someone because the world being randomly unfair is too painful. Sometimes plans just fail and there's nobody objectively at fault. Sometimes the world is just random, Jaune," her words echoed in his mind as she spoke.

"I know you're right, Pyrrha, but... this isn't just some plan! This is you, this is our team, this is..."

"Cinder?" she guessed for him.

"I don't know Pyrrha. Really, I don't. I looked for you *everywhere* to tell you..."

"Yeah... Nora told me," she dolefully reassured the boy.

"I'm sorry," he said. His tongue had finally loosened but his only thought was to apologize. She extended her arm to caress his wet

cheek as she spoke. It hovered for a moment before shakily making contact.

"I am too, but not for myself. Do you feel sorry for yourself, Jaune?" she asked him stolidly.

"I... n-no," he admitted, more to himself than to Pyrrha. All night he'd worried how the events that unfurled might've hurt his team and Pyrrha especially.

"We can only do what we think is best, Jaune," she counseled, so much the boy in front of her as herself. His arm rose to weakly protest as he gently held hers at the wrist.

"It doesn't matter if nobody's at fault, I still want to make things right," he declared with newfound resolve.

"I know," she gave him a strained half smile, "I love that about you," she admitted.

They paused for a moment, both surveying each other's reaction.

His cheeks flushed crimson, but he still returned her smile. He beamed a comforting hope. He hoped it was as contagious as Pyrrha's unmovable resolve. She was strong. Not only physically, but emotionally. Jaune was blessed to have her as his partner.

Could he be blessed to have her as something more?

Did he even deserve to? Where did Cinder fall into all this and what did he actually want, really? Merely humoring the first question brought so many others to the surface. He was foolish enough to only consider his perspective on events tonight. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

"Thank you, Pyrrha," he said as she began retracting her hand from his. As if instinctively, he grasped it tightly lest he lost it forever. It

stopped Pyrrha in her tracks and, for a quick second, their touch felt electrifying before it was finally cut.

"I guess I'm not completely irredeemable when we ignore combat," he half joked.

"Ha ha." she laughed heartily, "You're not irredeemable in combat either! And you're a great strategist."

"If you really think so, you wouldn't mind I was strategic about my next move?" Jaune requested, the gears of his mind already at work.

"What do you mean exactly?" Pyrrha questioned.

"Tonight I was caught with my pants down. I'd like to think things through - carefully - to avoid making the same mistake again," he explained.

She swelled with pride at Jaune's maturity. His spirits lifted witnessing the improvement in hers. He was moved to discover more about himself through her eyes. He knew she'd never viewed him as selfish, but up until that point his opinion was the exact opposite. All night he had selfishly listened to his insecurities when all the advice and support he needed was right in front of him.

"And to think of a way to let Cinder down easy," he added. He was on a roll and saw no reason to stop now.

"Jaune, you don't have to-" the contrite champion started, still too kind for her own good.

"Yes, I do," Jaune abruptly cut her off, his tone dead serious.

"Let Cinder down," he repeated, " *heh*, never thought I'd say that," he quipped, his mood undeterred by the task ahead.

"Tonight had a lot of firsts, didn't it?" Pyrrha joined in reminiscing about the night. Jaune already had all he needed.

"Life can be surprising like that," he agreed pithily, "But we must still plan ahead."

"Life is what happens when we are busy making plans. Or so I hear," the redhead warned him.

"Pyrrha please, that was enough words of wisdom for one night," the teen grumbled.

"Haha, Sorry. So what's the plan, *team Leader*?" she teased, the tightness in her tone already a mere memory.

"I'm... still working on it," he quietly confessed, scratching his head in a mix of embarrassment and contemplation.

"I understand. Take your time, Jaune."

"I swear, you're way too understanding sometimes!" the blond whined sarcastically.

"Haha, well... in that case... don't take too long!" her voice mimicked a mix of aggrieved and blunt. Badly.

"I don't plan to," he confirmed.

A beat. Jaune heaved a sigh in relief.

Nothing more needed to be said as they nodded contentedly at each other.

"Ren, they stopped talking, should we come in?" asked a feminine whisper bleeding in from the door.

" *Shhh*, I can't hear what they're saying," complained a lower voice.

Emerald and Mercury had excused themselves from the room by the time Cinder woke up, likely realizing what would be in store for the first person her waking eyes landed on. She was a morning person

in normal circumstances and loathed getting up late. Unfortunately, after last night's enervating developments she'd required more rest than usual. As if getting heckled by Pyrrha's henchwoman wasn't exhausting enough, she couldn't even find refuge in her subconscious, as it chose to drag her back to Jaune and Pyrrha. That pesky dream and all the contemplation it put her through has stolen so much of her well earned rest. Worst of all, the point of it continued to elude her.

She massaged her temples to halt the onset of headache. Tragically she could do nothing for her morning having been wasted. Even when winning, the half-Maiden wasn't allowed to enjoy things.

She decided she needed something to take her mind off last night. She elected to reach for her sewing kit under the bed. The dance gave her an idea for an adjustment to her admittedly breathtaking black dress.

Pockets. Or at least just the one.

The dress's lack of storage space had proven to be a catastrophic design oversight during the ball, when Nora Valkyrie prowled on her and she had no means of sending a distress signal to her subordinates. Merely pretending to talk on her Scroll would have also sufficed. It'd be obvious to anyone paying attention and patently rude, but if anything, those were perks to Cinder.

As she spread the fabric on the mattress she lamented how scarcely she actually got the chance to show off like yesterday. It was downright blasphemous she wouldn't get the opportunity to wear her creation in the near future, but she really was not in the best business for high fashion.

Integrating a pocket on an already finalized design came with a whole host of issues. The dress's complex distribution of textures and patterns was already calibrated to perfection and any attempt to retroactively change it could irrevocably destroy its delicate balance. But at least it gave her something to focus on. The fiery woman

never cared for idle hands and Beacon's lazy Sundays were proving themselves particularly tedious.

Two knocks on the dorm room's door suddenly broke the tedium. She was not in the mood to humor guests, though in all likelihood it was simply Emerald, too afraid to enter unannounced. Cinder grudgingly got up to open the door.

Interrupted right as she had managed to concentrate on tailoring, she lamented.

Waiting on the other side of the door was not Emerald, though the boy before Cinder shared her typical apologetic expression.

He swallowed air nervously before offering his hello.

"Good morning!"

She did not have the time of day for this, but knew it was her mess to clean. Comeuppance for her stunt last night. She was hardly in the best mood to deal with the blond at the moment. Not cleanly, at any case. But it was best to broom the boy sooner rather than later; she'd come up with a diplomatic, if sappy, rejection on the spot and send him on his merry way to Pyrrha. If insisted on lingering after that, she'd make sure he'd rue the day their paths crossed. Granted she felt there was nothing to fear from the blond; there was a reason she picked him for dance partner and unknowing accomplice.

"Morning." she languorously returned his hello.

"So, I need to talk to you about something," Jaune diffidently announced. It was too cliché for Cinder.

You don't have to," she tried to skip his speech.

"No, I do," he insisted, "It's not what you think... *I think...*"

"Just say your piece, then," she drawled, already prepared to thoroughly explain to him why they could never work together.

"I had a great time last night," he started with the exact type of empty platitude Cinder was expecting. She could feel her headache creep back.

"So did I," she snappily cut him off, "But it could never work out between us," she repaid his canned phrase with her own, not having the patience to go through all the motions of this song and dance.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, caught off guard but relieved. She expected the shock in his reaction, but what she got was surprisingly tame. He looked almost thankful.

If he expected a likely rejection, why did he show up to begin with?

"Yeah, I don't think it would work between us either," he agreed.

With his tone took a downright jubilant hue. It was an affront to Cinder. *A rejection at the hands of a lethal woman like herself should be nothing short of world-shattering for a bundle of nerves like him.*

"And what do you mean by that?" The half-Maiden huffed, a single questioning eyebrow raised. She wouldn't allow Jaune to come out on top in any way.

"Nothing," he said, putting his hands up in submission to de-escalate any tensions.

"I just realized I still have a lot of growing to do. A lot of things I need to figure out before anything more, you know?" he explained in a friendly, soft tone, more pensive than anything else. Not the slightest bit mad sounding.

Whatever his reasons were, their outcome perfectly suited Cinder. Albeit she didn't believe for a second that Pyrrha was uninvolved. Not unless Jaune was into men.

"No hard feelings, then," she intoned, "You are excused," she dismissed the teen before returning to her work inside. In her

complete apathy toward their exchange, she left the door ajar; her aloof gesture on her way back barely failing to close it.

He caught a glimpse of her work as his vision followed her. He aloofly shuffled in only for Cinder to notice when it was too late. *He had already seen her craft.*

"It's the dress you wore," he reflexively stated.

The teen's complete inability to take a clue put her at a loss for words. Her boorish dismissal should have been more than sufficient to make him turn away and never look back. *But he somehow remained stupidly blissful.*

"So it is," she confirmed in a deeply patronizing monotone, "Now do you mind closing the door?"

His obliviousness shocked her once more as Jaune closed the door with him inside the room before taking a chair and sitting in front of her to better observe her handiwork. Before she could correct him, the sparkle in his adulating eyes gave her pause. The same eyes that besieged her dreamscape.

"I didn't realize you had made this! This is seriously amazing!" he gushed.

She prided herself on her tailoring skill and her eye for fine style, but getting recognition for them by a man as daft as Jaune was the last thing she'd expected.

"Thanks..." she tentatively said, her eyes quickly returning to the fabric on her lap.

"You will need it taut if you are going to add pockets," he advised.

"What?"

"The lines you drew near the waist; it's to add a pocket, right? It'd be much easier if you could see how the dress fell on you when you

thread the needle," the boy elaborated.

"How do you know this?" wondered a quizzical Cinder. His advice wasn't exactly a revelation to her, but she never had an extra pair of hands to operate to that capacity while tailoring.

"Well, you tend to pick up such things when three of your sisters take up sewing as a hobby," he awkwardly admitted.

"Three, huh," she commented aloofly.

"Out of seven," Jaune elaborated.

"That explains your dance moves, at least," she huffed.

"What's that mean?" the offended knight protested.

"It means I appreciate your feedback, but I prefer to work alone," the ravenette blankly stated.

"At least let me help you with this," he offered, as he took the dress from the bed and let it hang in front of him, offering her a good look of how it fell.

Suddenly she could better inspect the horizontal line she drew on the garment. It actually did help. Not one to let an opportunity pass her by, she decided to go with it. She threaded a needle with a thin black string and leaned closer to Jaune and the dress to finalize the pocket's outline.

"Unless you'd rather work alone, I mean," the assisting boy added bashfully, realizing the crudeness of his gesture.

"No. Stay still," she ordered him.

Having help was nice. Too bad she couldn't try the dress on with him present.

Chapter 5

Hi! Been a minute, huh?

Yea, I am terribly sorry for being so late to update. I do plan on finishing this fic, but plans seldom survive contact with the enemy...

Rooster Teeth's closure did contribute in the delay, sapping some wind outta my sails, but the main culprit unquestionably is a dramatic lifestyle shift I've undergone as I recently relocated due to work related reasons and now work 7 days a week. Coincidentally, this chapter might be a tad *undercooked* I fear...

At any rate, I shan't lament the horrible fate I've been dealt or whine about things I choose to be part of lol. However, I am bummed out to tell you, dear reader, that this does mean far sparser releases of subsequent Pro Jaune Argument Chapters. Until my (literal) work here is done and I can move back home ;)

All that being said, I sincerely hope you enjoy Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Insomnia is a cruel mistress. Not as cruel as other masters in Cinder has known but, all the same, one that would often conjure images of Evernight Cast in her mind, where she had first settled into a rut of sleepless nights. Or days; the impenetrable gloom and forlorn halls of the citadel made night and day practically indistinguishable. That dark and ancient place failed to inspire safety in the ravenette at the best of times. Windswept howls and glowing red stares were the sole furnishings of the Shadowland's scarred barren landscape. Guest of Salem or not, Cinder was still too human for the likes of everything eldritch lurking there.

Understandably, it was enough to keep her on edge.

Perhaps the problem was that she was too human. The Queen of the Grimm had taken measures for her young servant to better fit with her other monsters. Measures that would always remind Cinder of their presence. Their lurking and slithering was always there when she'd be uncertain or afraid. There was no use for such feelings for one such as her, that much she had decided a long time ago. The bounty of her journey was the thing her Grimm truly craved for.

She liked the hunger. It had awakened alongside the power in her; a constant reminder she'd been walking the right path. What she didn't like was losing sleep. It frustrated even the thing embedded in her.

She didn't have to wrestle with the same problem in her time incognito around Vale, though she remained an interloper there, much like during her stays at Salem's. It was such a shame. The cosmopolitan capital presented Cinder with the opportunity to have a good night's sleep after longer than she could remember. Away from her master and her monsters. No longer crammed into a ratty tent with Emerald and Mercury while on Amber's trail. No, superfluous as it was, she finally had the chance to rest decadently, in a master bedroom.

When they relocated to Beacon Academy, although cohabitation with her acolytes and Roman's diminutive hitwoman was far from ideal, it was a remarkably civilized living arrangement in comparison to everything the half-Maiden had to deal with before. Which is why her sudden bout of sleeplessness confounded her so much. She wasn't particularly anxious nor on edge. She did not feel eyes trained on her. And still the little hairs at the nape of her neck would sit at attention whenever she'd try to have sleep take her. It had been that way ever since his invasion of her dreamscape.

Thankfully she'd devised a method to offset the damage of being denied rest; ditch the earlier classes and sleep in late. Early morning classes were usually taught by that insufferable blowhard teacher anyway. She was losing nothing of value and, beyond that, she was

managing quite well at Beacon regardless. It was perhaps to be expected she'd experience some difficulty adjusting to a setting so antithetical to her cause and upbringing.

In the end, she was not a stranger to her subconscious tormenting her, it was nothing new to her. What she didn't anticipate was the way Jaune had managed to preempt her rest tonight. Her Scroll buzzed with his message. A warning of White Fang activity. Early word of their plans for Vale starting off prematurely. The intelligence he brought her, while useful, meant quite the headache. He had devised a way to annoy her in the waking world.

Team RWBY had stumbled upon Torchwick's post while on their little field trip, evidently. And apparently had also informed Beacon about through Jaune Arc. Whom, in turn, saw it fit to copy and paste the information to a handful of his Scroll contacts. Cinder could see numbers she didn't recognize alongside hers in the receiver bracket. Maybe his eyes were still heavy with sleep when he decided to warn Cinder and rob all the sleep from her eyes. She couldn't be too mad at him, were that was the case. A monumental gaffe or not, the information he provided could ultimately prove instrumental. Though he still lost points for unceremoniously ruining the remainder of her bedtime. Again.

As if dream-Jaune conspiring to keep me awake wasn't bad enough.

A yawn crushed against her sealed lips.

Was it too much to ask that I take Beacon and the power without bags under her eyes ?

Well, she wouldn't lose sleep over Roman getting caught. If that fool was sloppy enough to run into hunters every other day, he practically deserved getting caught. She had made the right call when she reassigned him to a place away from the city. And yet any operation can leave a trail and setting the stage for their plan could leave a trail to be followed back to her. Torchwick's fate now warranted close monitoring. Until he can be disposed of, anyhow.

Rubbing her temples, the sleepy Maiden contemplated how the timeline would have to adapt, but all the same, she wasn't obligated to bail Roman out tonight. With a silent groan she shifted to get off the bed.

At the very least Emerald and Mercury will be joining me in sleeplessness this time.

Jaune's scroll angrily jumped to life in the still gloom of Team JNPR's dorm room. It dimly lit the space but not without the squirming protests of Nora and a disappointed huff out of Ren.

Not the biggest fans of my taste in music, I guess.

Groggily, Jaune shifted his torso upright to answer the device and put an end to his bunkmates' suffering. Though to him the surprise call was a welcome change from his self-imposed insomnia.

Getting into bed after a spurious training session always meant the teen would need a tad longer for his system to calm down and allow him to rest in a well-earned slumber. It was just one more positive aspect of a day well spent at Beacon and around Pyrrha.

Except today. By the end of this day, he had a sneaking suspicion he had not in fact spent it very well at all. Nor very wisely. It was a day leaving him with a lot to mull over. Specifically, everything he resolved to make right and yet managed to render even more wrong with his attempt to.

As the lights of his dorm switched off for earlier in the night, all he could do was stare at his dark ceiling look back to when he found Cinder in her dorm room to confront her. He spoke to her about his, admittedly yet unsorted and rudderless, feelings. She seemed most understanding. It had gone well. So shockingly well that a massive weight was lifted off his shoulders and, in his reverie, he volunteered himself to spend time with the woman. At her room... Alone...

Ever since, he grew more and more and even more conscious of the situation.

At the time, he simply figure he was lending a helping hand because it was a nice thing to do. Maybe because he felt a tiny bit of nostalgia for all the times he would help his sisters out with their hobbies. It all seemed perfectly amicable and platonic while he did. In hindsight, however, all he could focus on were those moments, those dreary moments, when they'd pause. The times conversation didn't naturally flow out of either Cinder or himself. In truth after Cinder and he had found their work rhythm, they barely spoke at all. By now he had well pieced together his initial offer to help might've been too friendly. Maybe Cinder didn't speak because she didn't know what to expect from a man gently letting her down only to invite himself into her room right after. It seemed buffoonish in hindsight.

Life back home was never that complicated.

Albeit, in fairness, back home he had mastered the skill of avoiding women when he needed to, not running from confrontation to confrontation with them. The ladies of maison de l' Arc generally were not to messed with and getting roped into their personal affairs voluntary was in the realm of pure fiction for the boy of the house. Fast forward to Beacon's big dance and now he was the personal affairs aficionado.

Supine on bed, he had made the resolution to lay low, at least for a bit. Let the dust settle for a while before thinking of the next move with a clearer head. Still, an intermission didn't assuage his mind of worries. Not getting rest didn't either.

What do I even want anyway?

Ruby's surprise call -and probable butt dial- was exactly the kind of diversion he needed. He forgot all about his short lived relief as the breathless Huntress of the other side of the call all but confirmed he would be getting no rest tonight. He probably deserved that much for thinking the way that he did. Ruby was giving him really and serious

things to worry about. Bombs and the Grimm on board a berserk freight train. A massive breach of Vale with White Fang and Grimm alike pouring over the downtown capital.

Even prior to initiation, even before they were an official group, Team JNPR's sister team had a knack for finding trouble. Humanity's protectors lead exciting lives to say the least, with high octane action between man and monster lurking around every corner. All that being said, Team RWBY still stood apart from most Huntsmen teams Jaune knew. Which weren't all that many, but he could tell much of the school faculty agreed with the sentiment.

For one, student teams were still unlicensed and had no crime fighting prerogatives. More to the point, Hunter training included fighting the Grimm, not terrorist cells. Jaune was pretty sure terrorism fell outside their jurisdiction anyway, granted he never paid too much attention in professor Oobleck's class. Ruby and her team, in their brief time as Hunters, had mainly faced unorthodox challenges. This latest one sounded like the culmination everything they did was leading up to. It also sounded incredibly dangerous. He was lucky to have caught Ruby's call awake. The fellow team leader's brief frantic explanation told Jaune everything he needed to know.

Team JNPR had to gear up and rush to their sister team's aid.

The nightly call had already woken his team up for the most part. Now the teen knight had the unenviable task of telling them to gear up before filling the faculty in all the trouble RWBY had managed to dig themselves into this time. Though it could get them in some trouble, Jaune knew waiting for a green light from Beacon before rushing to the Ruby's aid was certain to cost them precious time. Hopefully their deeds at Vale will justify going without permission. He knew professor Ozpin would approve of some heroics, at any case.

His still-blurry vision began shuffling through his Scroll contacts. He was too focused on the potential implications of this development and too pressed for time to carefully consider what to send and to

whom. He mass sent a quickly thrown together string of words to a handful of his most recent contacts. By the time he realized his message would probably awake people he really didn't want to bother at hours like these, it was too late; the message had been sent and JNPR was already gearing up. There were much bigger things to worry about. The White Fang had somehow done the unthinkable tonight.

Professor Glynda Goodwitch may not be thrilled about getting up before dawn, or having to do clean-up once the catastrophe was under control, but Ozpin did have a shockingly cavalier attitude concerning the extracurricular activities of students. And after all, team RWBY was deployed to mountain Glenn while on official Hunting business. It wouldn't surprise the boy if the enigmatic headmaster had something to do with that...

Having briefed Pyrrha, Ren and a particularly yawn-y Nora on what little he knew, team JNPR moved out. With any luck, they would run into a faculty member to help prepare a Bullhead at the docks and back them up during the inevitable fight ahead of them. *And with even more luck, it wouldn't be Glynda....*

Vale's tall spires and ornate hanging gardens; smoldering. People scattering in a mad frenzy. A gushing wound had exploded into the stone floor of the cloister the White Fang's locomotive had crashed through. Mesmerizing destruction.

Gone to waste.

The sudden onslaught of Grimm and White Fang activity at the heart of the Capital was certainly conducive to planting the seeds of terror in the populace. But the timing missed the point entirely. Roman must've decided to pull the trigger while he still could and launched the train ahead of schedule lest he lost the chance to completely. Ruby Rose, the little huntress in training, had proven more than a match for the criminal bowl-hatter. Thankfully the timeline could progress from this point on with him inert. Or dead, really.

That said, Ruby's aptitude in sniffing out their operations was notable in its own right and needed to be taken into serious account. With Adam Taurus entering the fray soon enough, it would behoove the them to remove Roman from urban White Fang operations. The gangster was making no friends leading a cause he clearly only felt disdain for. Torchwick may have some objections to being taken by the authorities, especially with Atlas visiting to show off their supposed military might, but he would settle down quickly once he'd learn the alternative is to silence him permanently lest he finked. Cinder did not humor bargains with failures and conmen.

It was inevitable the plans would have to change in the wake of his repeated blunders, Cinder conceded to herself. Ultimately the zenith of Roman's usefulness was amassing Dust and weaponry within the city, where he was most used to operating. With that done, she couldn't be too cross with the situation and what was accomplished so far. Regardless, some time spent in time-out would do the glorified hoodlum some good. He needed to be taught a lesson for his snark and overreliance on petty excuses.

If he didn't want to get caught, he would've found a way to solve his student problem by now.

All that needed to be done now was locate Roman and describe to him his new role. One none too pleasant, but simple enough even for him to follow. To do that, one of their own will need to retrieve and apprehend Torchwick alone, before any actual Huntsman or other authority can get to the man.

The plan was being thought of on the fly and elegant in its simplicity thanks to that fact. Her team would join the fight under the guise of lending a hand. In the pandemonium of raging Grimm, angry terrorists and scampering civilians, one of her disciples would be discreetly deployed to fetch Torchwick from whatever hole the coward will have crawled into. All the while herself and the remaining teammate would be putting on a good show by cutting down a few beasties. Playing hero and ending the existence of some Beowolf cubs was the Huntsman modus operandi, after all. Plus, there was

the possibility team JNPR will be on the lookout for her support after its leader messaged her.

Best not subvert his expectations.

He wasn't entitled to anything from her, of course. One time lending a hand with dress-making and already the fool felt bold enough to call upon her for Grimm clean-up. Tragically she had no choice but to be seen playing the part.

It consoled her this would not be a dance for which she'd have to partner with Jaune.

"Get everyone at the center of the plaza where Ruby is!" Jaune directed his team, before plunging off the hovering Bullhead, eternally grateful it had hovered low enough for him not to need a landing strategy. Just hop down and pray Aura and knees prove sturdy enough.

"Break up and try to meet up at the center from every direction."

"But there's only four of us. We can't get there from every direction," Nora aptly noted while her eyes eagerly measured up her monstrous opponents.

"I... o-okay, fair enough. Get there from four different directions," team JNPR's team Leader quickly amended.

"Understood," assented Pyrrha, Miló and Akoúo at the ready.

"Heck yea!" the Valkyrie cheered.

And finally Ren gave a silent nod of approval.

His teammates didn't need to be told twice. Each of them began circling the square, effortlessly sliding around the Grimm they didn't feel like putting down just yet.

That left Jaune with the easiest route; carving a path straight ahead. Which was all well and good, barring one detail; he was also the easiest to take down.

He knew spreading themselves any other way only meant dispersing the Grimm even more, not to mention endangering the first friend he ever made at Beacon. With his plan they'd just need to hold them all in one place until help arrived.

Team JNPR hurriedly leapt off the Bullhead carrying them into the battlefield, but not before having formulated their approach to the mayhem right underneath. What kind of leader would Jaune be if he didn't plan at least somewhat ahead?

Foolhardy as it was, the team of trainee Hunters' best option was to spread themselves throughout the great plaza. As soon as they were able to pinpoint their friends, the plan was for each member to make a beeline for the Hunter they were closest to; doing so would ensure no combatant would remain uncovered. It would also maximize the chances to retrieve Team RWBY should things go south, since they would be moving from as many vectors as possible, dividing Grimm attention as much as they can. Not a stratagem the fearless leader considered particularly ingenious, as it would surely render regrouping with everyone nigh impossible. All the same, it was the only recourse to take given Ruby's borderline suicidal positioning at the very locus of Grimm activity. Jaune often worried the little reaper would wind up in a situation like this knowing just how headstrong her ideals about Hunters were. In darker moments he feared that those same values could prove to be hubris.

Whatever the case, her precarious positioning made everyone's lives harder, forcing them to juggle their attention between Ruby's melee and their own. I didn't help that she was goading all the monsters to come get her.

And speaking of monsters.

The numbers of Grimm were less mounting and much closer to mountain. Having landed just far enough from the great square to behold the battle in its true scale, Jaune could scarcely believe the ruinous spectacle.

Part of him was glad he was a bit tardy to join his allies. It made space for him to have pause and consider his approach more meticulously. He briefly humored attempting stealth, but immediately knew how silly the consideration truly was. A massive flat battlefield with no hiding spots and a foe that tracks victims via the sense of fear. A life affirming emotion the knight had plenty of. His gaze kept darting, looking for ideas on how to break through the initial ranks of beasts.

In the end he figured this best option was bolting it.

"Welp, here goes," he huffed to himself before his right sole pushed the ground below and the trainee initiated his charge, shield close to his chest and the sword part of Corcea Mors held aloft in a show of honor. Jaune always believed the family heirloom acquitted itself with pride and honor, at any case. The very image of it invoking countless stories of battle hardened heroes and veterans the Arc family produced in days past. If only he knew how to be the same.

He would have certainly had a better grasp of heroics had he any kind field experience to draw from. Of course, he knew first year students were probably not meant to do battle against a writhing mass of innumerable Grimm in the heart of an inhabited area. And with the teachers taking time to load additional equipment from the Bullheads, this truly was just a battle for the younger generation; unsupervised first years versus the Grimm. To think he was gritting his teeth over the prospect of his team's out-of-Vale mission just a day ago.

Now the action is all over me.

For the first time since Emerald forest, the teen was left to fend for himself on his own. He didn't have time to appreciate unreasonably

badass everybody was while driving off the monstrous invaders; every time his eyes wondered, he found himself having to duck under the swiping claw of a Beowolf and roll out of the warpath of a rampaging Boartusk.

He could still tell Ruby was giving it 101% alone from the commotion her combat raised. Having taken the high ground in the middle of the square to flock Grimm toward her and away from the various roads and passages shooting every direction away from it. An effective approach to providing citizens cleaner escape routes, but a very lousy one for surviving. Though she was her usual monster-slaying self for now, Jaune knew no one could keep up the effort forever. They needed to cut through the horde and join with her before fatigue set in.

As soon as he'd thought that far ahead, a different type of fear took hold of him. A creeping anxiety as he realized it very well could come down to the last Grimm, if they couldn't find a retreat route. He didn't feel confident in anyone's chances of not tiring in that scenario.

The logical part of his brain swiftly reminded him it wouldn't be a matter should help arrive in time. His messages warning Beacon aside, this episode had exploded into a full blown international disaster. Humanity's illustrious capitals like Vale were supposed to be the ultimate bastions of safety. There was the occasional criminal or terrorist, but never the primordial existential threat, hellbent on humanity's extinction.

His best bet was to constantly keep mobile while on his way to Ruby. Never straying too far from the plaza or the others, while not making his trajectory obvious enough for even a Beowolf to figure out. The other combatants had thankfully picked up on his approach. Even now, as she was entering the eye of the Grimm storm, he knew Pyrrha would be shooting him worried glances.

Not long ago they'd only make him feel self-conscious. Today they reassured him.

He internally chided himself. His mind refused to stop wondering when all of his brain power needed to be dedicated on the here and now. He needed field awareness, not to do googy eyes at his partner. An Ursa's claw swipe catching him unaware would not be a pretty sight for Pyrrha.

The Hunters were able to keep their heads above the mayhem for now, but their stamina was another story. Fact of the matter is that the train crash site opened a massive gash across Vale's aged cobblestone floor, overflowing with Grimm the more they got closer and closer to it.

Why hadn't Ruby abandoned her position yet? Can't she see everyone's coming to get her out of there? With Petal Burst she should be able to dash to Ren, Nora, Pyrrha - anyone- in a heartbeat and find better odds with someone covering her back.

Surely she didn't intend to plant herself on the spot she'd been fighting....

Team JNPR's heroic rescue was quickly turning into a battle of attrition against an enemy that never tires or quits. He needed to focus his restless mind into formulating a different plan should things get out of hand.

Well, more out of hand.

And before all that, Jaune needed to address a more immediate issue. An Ursa Major. *Of course it had to be an Ursa, didn't it?*

His internal doom saying must've made him a delectable treat in the beast's frenzied eyes.

He swallowed drily.

"You've beaten an Ursa before Jaune, you can do it again. Probably," he pumped himself up, barely out loud.

Instinctually on the back foot, he raised his weapon anyway.

"Easy now," the tremolo in his voice undermined whatever intimidation factor his battle pose may have had.

The Ursa's howl pierced through the hubbub and made plain how unimpressed the demonic yogi was.

This was it.

"Gah!"

Jaune dispatched the Ursa rather ungracefully, but dispatched it he did. An unbalanced mélange of wild sword swings, mixed in with the occasional faints and lunges Pyrrha taught him. Always keeping the mindless brute guessing.

Just like the ever shifting nature of the sprawling battle ground he was stuck in, as yet another furry monstrosity picked him as its target. Perhaps the previous bear's buddy. The grip on his weapon remained steady.

"I got this..."

"Oh hey, it's dance boy," the jocular tone of Cinder's male teammate came right above the second Ursa as he delivered a punishing boot to the beast's cranium. And it was a good thing that he did, as the surprise attack tipped the monster off balance enough for its swipe to narrowly miss Jaune as the Ursa stumbled on its hind legs.

Only for it to slump unceremoniously backwards, before disintegrating around Cinder's white hot palm. Not a trace of blood or fur left to dirty her crimson dress.

"Of course it's you," she huffed.

"Thanks for the save."

"Don't mention it!" Emerald's words somehow managed to marry enthusiasm with wooden delivery. For a master of deception, her acting skills still needed work, Cinder realized.

"How'd you guys even get here?" The blond teen asked as soon as he'd risen back to his feet.

"You left us a message?" Emerald was quick to point out.

"Well, yea, but my Team took off with the first Bullhead. How are you here so soon?"

"I'm a heck of a flyer," Mercury boastfully offered an answer before lunging into the action, hungry for more foes to style over.

"Right...." Emerald added, "I think I'll patrol that section," she said as she took off in turn, discreetly heading to Torchwick's extraction point to wait for the blundering mobster. The girl knew not to dawdle, at least.

That, but moreso because she shared a virtue with her Leader; hated small talk.

Small talk that Cinder quickly realized her lackeys offloaded on to her, as she moved with Jaune in tow. She would have to suffer him tagging along until the action gave her a chance to separate. Reacting any other way would raise too many questions and there was no time to come up with a plausible excuse to leave the blond. Atop all that, she now had to give her other chief irritant, Torchwick, the heads-up about a possible addition to their rendezvous.

They may very well have a plus one.

"I... need to inform my team about something," she managed as she pulled her scroll out.

"Now?! They just left." He called her stupendous excuse out for what it was, but was already redirecting his focus on finding people

amongst the calamity. Likely trying to regroup with his team and resume whatever tactics they formulated.

Her Scroll was pressed against her ear. She prayed Roman would have the sense to pick up on his end.

A beat.

Two.

Nothing.

Texting somebody in the middle of the battlefield risked jeopardizing her cover, not to mention getting attacked by unwitting Faunus thugs too oblivious to know when to quit. She was forced to take those chances.

'Come out of hiding on my que. Make it look like you are making a run for it,' she typed before sending out to the man who was the reason she was stuck in this tragicomical affair.

"In that case, could you... help me get to Ruby before you do?" The knight begrudgingly asked as soon as he saw Cinder's eyes focus back on him, clearly flustered by his inability to effectively conduct himself on the battlefield. Still, it wasn't all bad.

"I suppose it can't be helped," she mock lamented.

The boy had just provided her the out she needed. All she had to do was walk him to his little friend and then the two could go on their respective ways. Free to figure out how Roman exacerbated the situation this tim-

The device in her hand vibrated.

' *Oh I see you* ', it read, accompanied by a cartoonish image of a pair of lidless eyes.

The criminal had more to add.

' *So that's the kid. Pff you can do better,*' his message wrote. Painfully punctuated by a cloyingly round face brought to tears by laughter. Just charming.

"How do you guys even have time to text?!" Jaune bemoaned, having de facto been assigned the job he dreaded and carving the rest of their way to Ruby Rose.

' *If you have our visual you must still be too close to the crash site. What have you been doing fool,* ' she hurriedly typed, not caring for proper punctuation or the flare of emojis. The self-styled gangster needed to build some distance between himself and the legitimate Hunters on site who would very legitimately apprehend him.

' *Yea, thing is you specified the extraction point. Never the embarkation point tho.*' A pensive looking face presaged another shoe was about to drop.

'It doesn't matter. Move.'

In typical Torchwick fashion, he didn't do as ordered. Instead, the poltroon began typing away once again.

' *Yes... see if I do that... things will get complicated.*'

When aren't they ? On second thought, probably often, in the existence of a lowlife simpleton like Roman.

'You already made things very complicated for yourself Roman. If you don't want me to tie up your loose ends my way, you WILL follow orders when instructed.'

' *Well,*' his missive read.

'You asked for it' .

Jaune had initially deduced Cinder's Semblance must have been heat related. What with burning a hole through an Ursa Major with her flaming fist? That theory was gradually shot down the more the two made their way to Ruby. The beauty's power must be some manner of detection avoidance. How else would the Grimm blatantly ignore the woman as she sauntered behind him, her sight drawn to her Scroll's screen rather than the danger?

Perhaps she was simply that confident in her abilities. The only thing Jaune knew was that, with Cinder offering backup until they could safely extract Ruby, he could feel more at ease. Rather, he didn't feel tense enough to risk an aneurism anymore.

He knew Pyrrha would be proud of how he was conducting himself on this battlefield. Or at least relieved. For all his fear of the Grimm, the knight had failed to consider how training and Aura had elevated him to a level where boorish monsters were unlikely to get the better of him. And now as a group of two, they were steadily progressing toward the first friend he made in Beacon. As ironic as it was, relief washed over them about his team having to contend with the Grimm and not the White Fang.

Just imagine if I had run into one of the bad guys that Team RWBY had...

That's all the teen could muse while getting surveying his ever-shifting and perilous surroundings....

Unfortunately, the young Huntsman lost any chance to appreciate the backdrop of his fight as a high velocity object grazed past his right shoulder as it sped off. A man dashing away from the square. His vision followed and identified the features of a tall ginger man in a white attire bee lining for one of countless alleyways forming like roots around the courtyard. An alleyway clearly guarded by the White Fang. He only saw his form for a bit before distance and the raging chaos all around smothered it, but it was all he needed to surmise who the runner ought to be. He moved with purpose instead of panic. He wasn't fleeing the monsters, but following a specific route

guarded by his lackeys. Even more damningly, he perfectly fit the description of the thief team RWBY had repeatedly crossed blades with.

As if hoping that Ruby would dispel his notion, he darted at her a worried glance.

Unspringingly, she had her hands too full to notice. Her position remaining as unsafe as it looked from above.

"Ruby!" He tried raising his voice above the bedlam.

It wouldn't work, she was too far away; his sound being overpowered by the concerto of mayhem.

Said mayhem didn't prevent Jaune from realizing this development presented the best chance any of them had to catch the mastermind behind this incident. The red-headed man had to resort to winging it on foot. Whatever ground he could cover that way wouldn't be much more than what any of them could muster, Ruby especially. Between dodging the Grimm and shoving aside leaderless Fang members, the whitecoat was not particularly mobile.

Although...

A quick look around the plaza confirmed what he already feared. His allies had their hands full with clearing up the Grimm as it was. A dilemma was presenting itself...

"Forget about the Grimm, go after Torchwick!" A dilemma that was promptly spotted and addressed by Ruby Rose. The choice seemed obvious to her.

The scarlet huntress somehow had enough perception to gather what had stopped Jaune in his tracks; all the while she dodged and countered razor-sharp claws and beastly fangs from every direction.

"You too, Cinder!" her squeaky cry commanded. Her gaze never left the foes pouring all around her, leaving the task of pinpointing where exactly Cinder was to a still somewhat discombobulated Jaune. Despite lending him invaluable help, she didn't particularly observe the rule of good partner coordination, far more focused on her Scroll.

As uniquely impressive as having chit chat on Dustblr in the middle of the carnage was, witnessing her gaze still leisurely glued to her screen would've infuriated the student, had he not much, much bigger fish to fry. And so did she.

He wasn't about to risk doing this alone and coming back empty-handed, if not worse.

"Right! Cinder, we must-"

"Don't follow," her command barreled over his words, "stay and save your friend."

The hidden Maiden didn't require any convincing to rush after her retreating underling. A stationary backflip positioned her outside of the circle the Grimm were slowly forming around their position near Rose; a natural consequence of staying in one place for too long. It was time to get Tortchwick out of his mess and herself away from Jaune.

"Oh damnit! Wait, I'm coming with!" He half whined-half screamed at her.

So much for losing Jaune.

She briefly entertained the thought the mobster was making a legitimate attempt to escape her and their agreement but quickly rejected the notion.

The coward would never.

The chase saw the duo dash through the claustrophobic nooks and crannies Roman slithered across. Ever the proud Valean, it was as if the mobster was making a point out of the capital's scenic beauty the more he led them through its aged corridors. He'd chosen a very indirect route to Emerald and extraction.

Extraction and prompt relocation to one of Ironwood's Hard-Light Dust jail cells.

The undercover Maiden wasn't worried as they settled into a steady pace behind Torchwick. Not close enough for the blond to tackle the man, but never lagging so far behind as to lose him. Cinder had taken note of Jaune severely lacking as a combatant, but his patently ample pool of Aura ensured he could cope with the demands of the lengthy sprint.

The pursuit continued amidst the violence and clamor they were leaving behind. Despite the increasing distance, the ruckus only intensified, confirming to Cinder the Hunter cavalry must have arrived and that they had made their move precisely in the nick of time as Torchwick continued touring his pursuers through the claustrophobic nooks and crannies of his winding path.

Pride over his intimate knowledge of his city was on full display as the criminal was almost making a point out of his profound understanding of the capital's wavy passageways and bleeding-sharp turns the more he led the two through them.

Roman was taking his time; the question was why. They had an agreed upon extraction point where the course was always meant to come to an end, well sequestered from any prying eyes. She could tell Roman's path slowly but surely was getting them closer and closer to that location. Perhaps his seemingly random path was his attempt at shaking off the adolescent Huntsman barely keeping up with them. Maybe it was to render their trajectory indecipherable to any future investigation.

His measures to lose potential peepers were for naught. Jaune's prying eyes and attentive ears would be right there with them. So would his gullible nature.

She internally lamented how she wound up stuck with the boy once more, before resolving to put her mind to use constructing a narrative to sell the boy instead of attempting to incapacitate him so late into the pursuit. Clumsy and amateurish as he was, leaving him passed out this close to their destination posed too much of a risk. How know when he could rise and resume his search anew.

To make matters worse, there was no battle dust and bedlam around anymore for him to get lost in... She couldn't just knock him over the head and expect him not to ask some serious questions soon after. Another round of ad libbing was in her immediate future. The half Maiden only hoped Torchwick would for once prove as quick thinking on his feet as he was moving with them.

She hated it. She had resolved to cut Jaune off for good mere minutes ago; now she was forced into a situation she'd have to play hero with him.

Boooong

....Or she would have, had Jaune's forehead not left an imprint on the lamppost the teen just collided with. The melodic reverb of vibrating metal was still in the air as he collapsed. Jaune's clumsiness had delivered her from a situation entirely of his making. Hers too - the hunt on foot was her idea - but he wasn't supposed to spot Roman and tag along for it.

And now Jaune was spread like a starfish over the pavement. Quite ridiculous.

Ending the chase to inspect the unconscious body, she didn't feel anything at the improbable turn of events. She did feel an iota of disappointment that she and Roman had advanced just farther enough from Jaune for her peripheral vision to miss the moment of

impact. She contented herself with the pleasing hum of the lamppost.

The bowl-hatter also paused to inspect the scene.

"Wanna walk the rest of the way? It's been a long night, and my legs are killing me," he suggested.

"Uuuuuhhh..."

The world slowly came into focus as Jaune lifted his upper half from the unfamiliar bed he found himself in. He instantly regretted getting up as quickly as he did. The sterile white light bathing the cramped space he found himself in only exacerbated what Jaune realized was pulsating pain assaulting his forehead.

"What happened?" The banged-up teen asked nobody in particular as he gently probed over the bandages neatly wrapped around the right corner of his head. It was all slowly coming back to him; the massive battle at Vale, spotting the bad guy on the run, giving chase and bonking against a lamppost at full sail...

"You only got off with a concussion, thus the ambulance ride," explained Jaune's disinterested co-passenger.

"Oh, Cinder...." The teen quickly realized the presence of another.

She didn't respond. Her concentration unbroken from the cabin's windows.

"So... uhh, why are we in an ambulance?"

"You can relax, it's taking us back to Beacon. They were simply the first place I brought you to," her brusque tone explained.

"Oh... and the medics?"

"You have no need of any, you'll be fine by the next day, thanks to that Aura of yours. They stayed behind to help the truly injured. And your friend Ruby is safe," she outlined the situation with a forlorn tone. Utterly out of synch with the good news being delivered....

"Oh... and you?" His focus quickly shifted to examining her for obvious injuries, though her not being situated on a stretcher like him did bode well for her wellbeing

"A-and what about the guy?" He went on to ask when Cinder didn't react to his last query.

"In custody. Your teammates will explain everything as soon as you're back. They are already waiting for you, at the infirmary," she robotically clarified.

The pause after felt like it lasted a lifetime.

"When first we spoke, I believe you told me you knew the importance of a good plan."

"Well, that's..." He found himself completely blindsided by her chain of thought.

"And I told you I would require you to be a good listener," she went on undeterred.

"Sorry..." A woozy whisper was all he could muster.

"You endangered yourself, you endangered the mission," her head made a sedate turn to face him, her amber gaze obscured to him by the fringe of her hair.

Words choked in his mouth before they could come out. Caught between a splitting headache and mounting guilt.

"I think it's best that you leave me some breathing room to do my work," she finally made her case.

"I was only following Ruby's idea!" he was quick to protest.

"Ruby," Cinder let some air escape through her nose before she continued, "she was clearly too distracted to properly evaluate the situation. Or your abilities.

As the hardened woman delivered her damning verdict, Jaune quickly realized the burden he must have had. Poor Cinder probably had to catch their target all the while fending him, his lackeys, and the Grimm off his unconscious body.

"Cinder..."

"And what if she was killed? You're a Leader, you're supposed to make difficult decisions. Don't pawn off your responsibility because your friend asked you," She put the final nail in the coffin and killed any attempt he planned on making.

Her eyes were boring into the ambulance's blurry windows once again.

"I'm sorry..."