

Painting Penance

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Jaune hasn't had a home since he lost his friends, not since the world truly fell apart. But when he enters into a curious arrangement with Remnant's most dangerous artist, only time will tell if he's ready to find a new one.

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Chapter 1

"Thanks mister!" shouted the wide-eyed child, clutching his new wooden sword with both hands.

"Heh, don't worry about it." chuckled Jaune, rubbing the back of his head as he watched the kid dash back to the rear of his parent's wagon, waving it and yelling war cries at his sisters peaking out the back.

The man driving the wagon laughed heartily at the display, while his wife next to him merely rolled her eyes with a smirk.

"Don't find too many friendly faces these days, especially on the roads. We appreciate the gift, stranger." said the man, a few pronounced wrinkles on the man's weathered face growing with his smile.

"Times are hard everywhere, might as well do what I can to make it easier." said Jaune, closing a large backpack and slinging it over his shoulders.

"Ha! I'm sure you do a lot of it with that sword of yours, don't 'cha?"

"Less than you'd think nowadays." Jaune patted Crocea Mors, at his hip as it always was, "Though, you think you'll be fine alone out here? I cleared the few Grimm that I came across but..."

"Pay us no mind, most of 'em are cleared out around these parts, and the only thing to watch out for are any bandits dumb enough to attack us. Ol' Maddy here is Huntress-trained!"

Maddy, who was anything but old, whacked the man across the head with a gloved hand, frowning as he chortled to himself regardless.

The scene put a faint smile on Jaune's face as he nodded, walking off down the road with a wave towards the children in the wagon.

One particular face pushed himself past all the rest, shouting a war cry as he waved his wooden sword.

Soon the rattling of the wagon disappeared among the noises of the wilderness, and Jaune finally let out the breath he hadn't known he'd been holding. Adjusting the straps on his pack, he followed the gnarled and slightly overgrown path deeper into the woods.

It had been a long time since Jaune found himself back in Vale. By the end of the war, every other continent seemed preferable. The creature comforts of the cities disappeared with the rest of it, so it wasn't as if there was much allure in trying to find his way back to Beacon. Not that anything worthwhile would be left there anyways, other than rotting desks.

Atlas was his first choice, being the place he woke up in after the survivors dragged him from the rubble of Salem's tower. Weiss had offered him a place to stay, out in a northern SDC mining colony. The city had apparently fallen within an hour of them putting Salem down for good, with every possible Grimm going through some kind of final bloodlust. Everyone who survived was heading up north, where the isolation and security of the outpost would have prevented them from being overrun.

But it didn't work out, and so he found himself in Vacuo, wandering the deserts. The people had been scattered, and as a result only Shade academy had gone up in smoke. He found tribes wandering around and trying to form some sort of large tribe again all across the desert. None seemed worth joining in Jaune's opinion, knowing first hand how to spot a suicide mission.

The ruins of the wilderness weren't half as eye-opening or uplifting as he had thought they would be, sadly. Turns out a country full of testaments to failed civilizations wasn't exactly positive.

After nearly drowning in a sail boat, Jaune found himself in Mistral. It was anarchy, to say the least. Every person of every creed had turned on his brother or sister, each trying to scrape together some

kind of safety. Warlords clashed daily, slaughtering each other over meager resources while the weak found themselves clasped in chains. He did what he could, bringing down the monsters of people that cried havoc across the lands whenever he found them. Some were good nature, though pragmatic and brutal to protect their charges. Those ones offered him a life of pleasure if he swore fealty, and Jaune always declined.

One too many had fallen on Jaune's blade for some of the despots apparently, as a few of them banded together to hunt him down before he could take them out one by one. They didn't count on him knowing how to fly a Bullhead though, nor on him having *that* good of a throwing arm.

And so he found himself in Vale, wandering as far as he could away from Vale. Never even set eyes on its ruins, so dedicated was he to putting it behind him as he walked down the coast.

He wasn't really sure how it happened, but he started stumbling across small towns dotted along the country side. Some were on old maps, others weren't. Each one was filled with people just trying to get by. Kids ran around playing, not even knowing how low the world was at that very moment. A carving here and a bit of sewing there, and all of a sudden he felt like he coming straight out of some old fairy-tale. The kids never seemed to question it though, loving the gifts he gave out as he stopped in the small hamlets.

Man, if only the gang could see him now...

Jaune shook his head, pushing the thoughts far away in his mind. That way led to madness, surely.

Soon enough, the steady pace of walking under a bright sky was all it took to drown out any dangerous thoughts. Soon the path grew a bit less rugged, showing clear signs in the soft road that it had been used recently.

Knowing he'd soon be among people always filled him with a bit of unease, but also excitement. Normally he was able to trade his way into having a roof over his head for a night with a hot meal. It was always a nice change of pace, and the thought spurred him forwards.

Soon the tree's thinned slightly around him as he came to the edge of a large clearing. Inside it was a cluster of buildings, an unevenly spaced out row of stakes lined its edges. Taking a deep breath, Jaune stepped towards the village. A guard stood in front of a clear opening in the stakes, clutching a spear nervously as he spotted Jaune.

Hoping to allay his fears, Jaune waved one hand in the air and shouted "Hey there! Any chance I could come inside? It's gonna be a hard night if I have to stay out in the woods again!"

The guard flinched at the loud voice, but upon seeing the friendly smile, he waved Jaune closer, still clutching his spear warily.

The entire time it took Jaune to cross the space between the treeline and the entrance, he couldn't help but notice the guard never took his eyes off his sword. Fair enough, he supposed.

Making sure to keep his hands away from his sides, he kept both in the air, keeping his smile plastered on.

Once he was a few meters away, he stopped, knowing full well what the protocol was for entering these kinds of villages.

The guard eyed him up and down once, trying to seem serious and threatening. Jaune struggled not to laugh, as the guard was barely more than a boy, hardly older than seventeen. Old enough to be in Beacon.

The thought cut him, but he held onto his easy going demeanour.

"What do you want in this town?" grunted the guard.

"Well, I was hoping for a hot meal and night's rest where I don't have to sleep with one eye open. Got a bit to trade for it too, if people are interested in that sort of thing around here."

"Hmm, well Elisha and his lot were just here, so we're pretty set on produce and basic goods. Guess it'd depend on what you've got on you."

"Ah, Elisha was his name? I met them on the road here, lot of kids and a scary wife, right?"

The guard barked with laughter, far more at ease now as he saw Jaune was just some regular guy. "Ah, that'd be them all right. Come on in, and feel free to just set up your stuff near the middle of the town. If anyone is interested in what you've got, they'll come to you there."

"Thanks...?" Jaune trailed off, looking at the boy meaningfully.

"Connor." he replied.

"Ah, well thanks Connor! Hopefully you'll have a chance to swing by and see what I've got huh?"

The man waved him off as Jaune wandered into the town, smiling slightly at the few faces he caught as he walked to the middle of the square. People peaked out the windows of a few old buildings, though from what he could see most of them were new.

Soon he found what seemed to be the most well-worn part of the town, where a few vendors were taking down their stock and packing them away in carts for the day. The town wasn't jumping with energy, but not many did nowadays. All things considered, the people looked pretty well fed, even if they were wary.

Belatedly he realized he didn't even know the name of the town, shaking his head at his typical foolishness.

Putting his bag on the ground, he pulled out a large blanket and unfurled it on the ground, slowly unpacking his goods.

Out came boxes of ammunition, bundles of multipurpose wiring, whetstones, packets of candy, and even a small box of Dust crystals. Knickknacks and small oddities also filled the gaps in his wares. Stabbing Crocea Mors into the ground, he shrugged off his weathered jacket and hung it, revealing his pock-marked armour to the people. The sight of it was usually enough to bring curious folk over, wondering more about his story than his wares. And today was no exception, as people started to drift over and look at what he had to offer. His selection wasn't huge, which was why he always made sure to have things people really wanted in his pack. He kept a small haversack off to the side, sealed as he made idle chatter with the townsfolk. One expressed a great interest in the wiring, while another queried about the payload of his ammunition.

Soon, more and more people drifted over. Coins never changed hands, but goods always did. The wiring was traded for a sack of rations, while a small carved statue from Mistral got him a spool of sewing thread and bundle of cloth. A few smaller trades were made before he finally saw a small girl hanging on the edge of the crowd with the rest of the children finally build up enough courage to push to the front.

"What's in the bag?" she demanded, her inquisitive eyes burrowing into it. A few adults looked at one another in mild confusion, wondering where the girl's parents could be.

Jaune merely leaned over and picked the sack up and opened it, glad his target audience had finally shown up.

Reaching inside without saying a word or breaking eye contact, he drew out a small doll, put together with a small green cloth. Its button eyes were mismatched, and the smile was sown on crookedly, but that hardly mattered to the little girl. Her eyes nearly flew out of her head as she looked at him in awe with an unspoken question.

She squealed in delight as he leaned over and simply handed it to her, letting her tear it from her hands as she skipped off with a cackle and hoot.

The effect on the adults was immediate, as all of a sudden the offers became a bit easier and generous. One man inquired about the crystals, and Jaune was more than happy to ride the positive energy of the crowd.

"Ah, you'd actually be surprised, but that one is straight from a SDC crate."

"Huh, no kidding. Really?" said the man, holding a bright yellow crystal between his two hands.

"Yup, just look on the other side, you'll see the logo is still engraved in it."

"Well, I'll be! Haven't seen marked goods like this since... all the craziness happened. Where did you find this? Vale?"

Jaune grimaced for a second before shaking his head. "Nope, never even swung by that way. I happened to be in Atlas when it all happened. Friend was pretty high in the company, and managed to get me a few crates and a boat when I set off. This is all that's left, and I don't think I'm going back up to Atlas any time soon."

"Ah, then I'd imagine there's a price worth that story and the Dust alike, isn't there?"

Jaune nodded, glad someone had finally taken the bait. "That there is, but tell you what; if you give me a place to sleep with a roof and a hot meal, I'll give you that crystal and my story. Abbreviated, of course."

The man stared at Jaune in disbelief before laughing loudly and sticking out a hand to shake his own.

"You got yourself a deal!" beamed the man.

"Great, I'll just have to-" Jaune cut off as he looked right past the man towards a woman walking into the village. In one hand she clutched a picture frame, a small pack on her back, and in the other she held... nothing.

A scarred stump stuck out from her brown vest, though the woman didn't seem all that ashamed of it. She wore a heavy series of bindings across her torso, black pants and heavy boots. Something about her was familiar, but Jaune couldn't put his finger on it.

He missed catching a good glimpse of her as she passed, her raven locks blocking her face as she turned down a small alley in the village, vanishing from sight before even hitting the courtyard.

Jaune barely even realized he had been staring at her until the man he had been speaking to waved a hand in front of his face.

"You alright there lad?" said the man, one eyebrow raised.

"U-uh, yeah, for sure..." he blinked, before stooping to pack up his wares quickly. "Which house is yours, and when should I be there?"

"Oh... um, it's the one with the red shingles down the left side. You can't really miss it. We'll be eating in an hour or two, feel free to stop by then.

Jaune nodded numbly at the man before hoisting his pack and walking swiftly towards the alley the woman had stepped into.

He guessed his way through the narrow turns in the village, hoping he would bump into the woman.

After a few minutes of trying to see where she had gone, Jaune sighed and decided to give up. Not only was he not going to find her like this, but he probably looked like a cree-

"It's not polite to follow someone home. Should I be concerned?" came a voice from behind, a slightly sultry twinge to it. It made Jaune's blood run cold, and he had to force himself to turn fully to look at the woman standing behind him.

The smirk she had been wearing dropped completely off her face as she looked him in the eyes, turning into a heavy frown like lightning.

"You." she growled.

"H-how..." Jaune gasped, his eyes narrowing as his hand absently went to his side, only to curse as he realized he left his sword back in the courtyard.

"No." Was her simple response, pushing Jaune and rushing past him. He fell to the ground with a startled yelp, transfixed on his backpack like a turtle for a few seconds before he rolled himself into a sitting position.

"Damn." was all he could choke out, frustrated beyond belief that she had just brushed past him without him offering a shred of resistance.

As he made to stand and give pursuit, he took notice of the canvas she had left on the ground. Picking it up, he was stunned by the beauty he saw on it. So many shades of green dotted the leaves of a serene forest scene, each painted with loving detail and attention, with beams of light breaking through and on to the fur of an enterprising rabbit.

Cinder Fall, one of the worst people on Remnant was alive.

And was a damn good artist.

Chapter 2

Dinner had been a relatively quiet affair, though Jaune tried to uphold his part of the deal by telling stories to the family who had taken him in. His host's name was Ivar, as Jaune learned, and was one of the hunters in the village. Knowing a thing or two about survival, Ivar was rather interested in how Jaune had made his way through every wilderness on Remnant.

The few stories Jaune could get out were dampened by his lack of enthusiasm, and soon enough Ivar stopped pushing for them all together. The family of four had been disappointed, in particular the two boys sitting across from Jaune who looked dejectedly into their soup.

After the meal was finished, Ivar guided Jaune to where he would be staying for the night: a small mattress they had pulled down from the attic for him.

As he and Ivar put the finishing touches on the mattress, Jaune felt compelled to break the silence between them.

"Look, Ivar..." he started awkwardly, "I know I promised to be good company today but, well, I haven't been myself tonight. I wanted to apologize for that, honestly."

Ivar looked at him with a raised eyebrow before shrugging and turning back to his work. "Ah well, nothing to do about it I suppose. We all have those days, and even just having you for one night is a steal for Dust like that."

"Still, I'd like to make it up to you if I could," Jaune insisted, trying to shake the weird feeling of guilt.

"Hmm, well way I see it, you could either tell those stories tomorrow-" Jaune grimaced before Ivar continued "-or you could give the kids

some of those toys I saw you toting about. It'd mean the world to them, maybe even more than a story like yours."

Jaune smiled at the proposition, much more comfortable with that in his current state. "Yeah, that'd be fine with me. I'll leave them on the table before I head out, maybe even hand em' over during breakfast."

"Sounds good," said Ivar before patting the slightly dusty mattress and straightening his back. "Well, I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything else, alright?"

"Sure," Jaune replied, before gritting his teeth and speaking up. "Oh uh, actually, there's one thing..."

"Oh?"

"I saw a woman in town today. She was missing an arm. Long black hair, a bit of a scar sticking out from her-" Ivar cut him off, smacking his fist into his palm.

"Oh! You'd want Autumn! She lives outside the city limits, just on the other side of town." His enthusiasm faded as he spoke, eyeing Jaune carefully. "Why?"

"I knew her from my time back in the city, and I recognized her today in town. Tried to find her, but she had slipped off. Do you know where her house is, so I could swing by and visit?" Jaune tried to talk nonchalantly, but found the intensity of Ivar's look to be unnerving.

"What do you want with her?" Ivar pressed.

"Nothing nefarious," Jaune said, waving his hands in front of him, "S-she's just... a woman I could never forget."

The man hummed, nodding his head as suspicion faded from his eyes and was replaced with understanding. "An old flame eh? Can't

say I judge you, she must have been quite breath taking before whatever happened to her, eh?"

The whole statement was so absurd, all Jaune could do was laugh and shake his head.

"You have no idea, Ivar."

"So that means...?"

"Yup... an old flame... for sure."

"Ah well, don't let me get in your way!" Ivar chuckled, shaking his head as he walked out of the room. "You probably missed the trail to her house on your way into town; it's kind of hidden between some hills. You'll find it, I'm sure!"

And with that, Jaune was alone. He stayed completely still as he listened to Ivar's footsteps creak on the floorboards above him, waiting until they stopped. He waited for what couldn't have been more than a few minutes, though it felt like ages had passed.

As quietly as he could, Jaune took his armour out of his bag and slipped it on, clipping his blade onto his side. Taking nothing else with him, he stepped outside and eased the door shut.

His years of fighting against Salem's forces and sneaking into White Fang compounds taught him a thing or two about being stealthy, and the few guards that patrolled never saw him leap from the roof of a building over the stakes in the ground. He rolled as he hit the ground before dashing into the forest, hand on his pommel as he searched for the path that Ivar had mentioned.

He had missed it during broad daylight, and finding it at night would be nigh impossible for most people. But Jaune was driven, and stopped low to the ground as his eyes adapted to the darkness. Fate seemed to be on his side, as the broken moon above him cast light without a single cloud in the sky.

It took him an hour, but he found it eventually - just a small line through the woods, where no tall plants grew, leading straight away. Normally this wouldn't mean a lot, as any animal could make a path. The fact that not a single plant had been damaged was proof of a careful human moving through it. An animal would trample everything without a second thought, but a human trying to stay hidden...?

Jaune unsheathed his sword with a silent rasp, keeping the bright steel below the underbrush as he stooped and found his way through the path.

A few minutes later, and he gasped as he rounded a bend of elevated dirt. A small hut was sitting there, leaned up against the hill. It was a simple building, with only one floor and not a massive one at that.

As he drew closer, he saw that there was a faint light inside. It was either dying, or lit on the far end of the house.

Jaune couldn't help but feel a thrill of fear and excitement rush through him as he looked at the building, trying to get a hold of his emotions as he processed what was in front of him.

He had finally found her. He hadn't been looking for her, but that didn't mean he had forgotten her.

Steeling his nerves and taking a deep breathe, Jaune charged the door and slammed into it with his shoulder, blowing it off its hinges and into the house.

Instead of seeing the home of a nefarious woman, he saw the home of a regular person. The entrance was home to a table, a kitchen and a small radio resting on a counter top. Further in he saw the light of the dying candle flickering, hidden behind a door way. Cups and plates sat in a sink, a basket of laundry sat by the door, and on the walls hung...

Jaune almost dropped his sword at the sight of what hung on the walls, looking at the vast collection of paintings adorning all sides of the cabin. The colours were massively varied and stunning, all pictures of nature in all its forms.

Running water in winter-time, spring breaking through the cold, autumn in its changing beauty and the radiance of summer. Some were just pictures of animals grazing, others were of scenes Jaune didn't recognize or understand. There was even a picture of the town hanging near a small fireplace.

The image in front of him was baffling, to say the least. One thought kept racing through his mind: did she make all of these? The thought was laughable, if he was being honest with himself.

The humorous thought disappeared as that question was immediately followed by a more serious one: where was-

"I guess they really did teach a class on being a stalker at that miserable school, didn't they?"

For the second time today, Jaune spun around with wide eyes at the woman standing at the far side of the room. Blocking the flickering candle light stood Cinder Fall in all her proud arrogance, not looking at all surprised to see him.

"I guess it was inevitable that you'd find your way here." She lifted her hand in front of her as she checked her nails. "Who did you get to tell you where I lived? People here aren't normally that trusting."

Jaune's eyebrow twitched as he eyed her warily, cursing himself for getting distracted so easily. "Some guy in town, thought we used to date."

Cinder frowned slightly at that, before shaking her head and pushing off the doorway she had been leaning on. "Cute. But I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

Jaune scoffed. "You think I'm gonna leave? Just like that?"

"Well, not really. But I figured it'd be worth a shot." she flexed her good arm, raising it slightly in warning to the blonde.

Jaune was already deploying his shield as she spoke, raising it in front of him as he heard the telltale hum of a maiden activating her powers. "Oh yeah? Seems a shame to steal all this art, only to burn it to a crisp!"

He braced his shield as he waited for the crackle of her iconic fire, but instead the hum stopped abruptly. Looking over his shield, Jaune expected to see an avatar of fire and hatred.

Instead, Cinder seemed *offended*.

"Excuse me?" she exclaimed, her arm crossed over her chest as she scowled at his crouching figure. "I'll have you know I'm not some petty art thief."

Jaune raised an eyebrow disbelievingly, glancing from side to side before snorting. "So, what, you're telling me you pain-"

"These are all mine!"

"... Really?"

Cinder glared at him, not taking her eyes off his confused expression. "Yes. What of it?"

"I, uh... well I mean, you're actually pretty good at it, if you're telling the truth. Great, even."

Jaune had no idea why he was complimenting her, but he had pretty much no control over what was happening at the moment, especially not his mouth.

"Aw, you're too sweet. Really. I'm flattered your last thoughts are going to be of my paintings." Cinder sneered, raising her hand once

again.

"Could you paint something for me?" Jaune ventured, never taking his eyes off her hand.

The request made Cinder pause. "Why should I?"

"Urm well, if you don't, we'll probably fight. That means one of us would turn up dead somewhere and if it's me, people will know it's you," Jaune chanced.

"It's a big forest out there. Knowing you came out here and disappeared means nothing, maybe I'll just tell Ivar you ran into the woods, heart broken after I rejected you," she said, a small smirk appearing as she spoke. "And yes, I know it was Ivar. He's the only one who'd take a ragged drifter into his home."

"Ha ha, hilarious." Jaune rolled his eyes, surprised at how casual the conversation was feeling. "How about this: if you kill me here, you'd burn all your paintings up."

This, as it turned out, was enough to make Cinder lower her hand swiftly with wide eyes, shooting glances at the intricate artwork. A brief moment passed before Cinder turned back to Jaune.

"So," Jaune continued, noticing her hesitation, "Seeing as we aren't stabbing or setting each other on fire... can you?"

Cinder glowered at him. "Again, why? What would I get out of it?"

"Well, I have a bunch of stuff, maybe we could tra-"

"You have nothing I could possibly want," she cut off.

Thinking on his feet, Jaune's eyes flickered down to Cinder's missing arm, and then by his feet.

"How about two working arms?" he offered. He didn't expect Cinder to snarl and step forwards, startling Jaune into raising his blade in

warning.

"Is that... did you just mock me, you worm?!" Cinder bellowed, eyes flickering with the power of the Fall maiden.

Eyes wide, Jaune waved his hands, and his sword along with them without realizing. "Woah, woah! Easy! I just meant that, maybe, I could do chores around the house for you?! Ya know, dig holes, do what I can around the house, carry things for you, fix the door-"

"Which you broke," Cinder added.

Jaune rolled his eyes. "Yes, which I broke. I will work as long as it takes, in exchange you have to make it the best piece you've ever made. Hell, you'd even prove you were actually the painter of all these."

Cinder continued to glare at Jaune, eyes searching for any sort of cruel joke she hadn't caught. A moment passed, and the snarl on her face slipped away into a frown as she straightened her back, having found he was being honest.

"Fine."

"For real?!" Jaune couldn't help but smile, forgetting for a second just who he was talking to.

He was sharply reminded as she sneered and replied with ample snark in her voice.

"Why yes, *for real*. Now, get out of my house. Be here early tomorrow morning, preferably without a sword. I'd like to get a good night's sleep before I have to draw whatever uninspired drivel you come up with."

Before Jaune even had a chance to respond, Cinder's eyes flashed brightly. He deployed his shield with a yelp, bracing himself against the expected heat. But instead of fire, a gust of wind sent him flying

out of the house. Flying out the remnants of the front door, Jaune came to a stop on top of a gnarled root. Pushing himself up with a groan, he lifted his head just in time to see Cinder lift the door back up into a standing position and freeze it into place.

It took Jaune a few seconds to get his brain into order, and only then did he realize what he had just done. He'd not only failed to take her down, he made a deal to spend time with her.

Willingly. In exchange for a painting. Without violence.

With a groan, he let himself fall back on top of the lumpy roots beneath him.

A/N: Thank you for all the support for the first chapter! Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter 3

This is stupid.

The thought ran itself through Jaune's head as he stretched his arms above his head. Letting them drop down with a sigh, he took in the sights of the village in the morning light. Dew was still fresh on the grass as a few villagers went about their tasks, ambling quietly across the town square. Getting up early had been the bane of Jaune's existence as a boy, but due to circumstance and time he had learned the hard lesson. Granted, it still sucked, but his days had always felt more full when he woke up early.

A small group of woodsmen were heading out of town gates, towing carts filled with equipment and tools. Among their number was Ivar, chatting animatedly with one of the guards that accompanied them out into the forest.

That being said, the crack of dawn was a bit harsh, even for a villainess like Cinder. Jaune couldn't help but grit his teeth at the thought of her. His own idiotic behaviour from the day before still frustrated him. He should have just snuck in, slit her throat and sauntered down the road. Instead, he had made an utter fool of himself and wound up commissioning a painting from a woman he despised.

A pointless, worthless painting. And she accepted, the nerve of that!

The thought made him growl and throw himself to the ground outside Ivar's house, launching into an intense workout, dredged up from his days at Beacon. Nora had always been a task master, and even now the familiar forms helped right his mind.

It took nearly two full hours for Jaune finally work the frustrated tension out of his shoulders and replace with satisfied soreness. Covered in sweat, Jaune dragged himself to his feet and staggered

back into the house. The silence upstairs told him that the kids were probably still asleep, as was Ivar's wife - whose name Jaune had guiltily forgotten.

Rubbing a rag against his face, Jaune got to work packing his bags, refolding his clothes and working his small utilities into small pockets. Once he was satisfied with his job, he dug into his small haversack bag and pulled out two small toys.

The first, which he placed on the seat of the younger boy, was a small race car with chipped red paint and a fading red stripe. Jaune wasn't sure if the boy even knew about races, but he had a feeling he would enjoy it anyways. The well oiled tires would make sure of that.

For the older boy, he placed a figurine of a flexing Atlas soldier, with a great big smile full of the bravado and bluster the world had known. One arm didn't move anymore, but considering the state of the building he had pulled it from... well, Jaune just hoped the kid would like it.

His end of the deal done, Jaune slipped his armour on, idly scratching at the peeling paint on it.

"Ugh, let's see if we can't trade for a lick of paint in the next town." Jaune mumbled, trying not to pay attention to its yellowing edges.

Next, he swung his bags over his shoulders, frowning at the weight of his large backpack. It was getting a bit light, though his Dust would be enough to coast him over the next few towns. Still, it was probably time to make a scavenging run soon-

Jaune's train of thought left him as his fingers brushed the scabbard of his sword. Cinder's request came to his mind, idly asking that he leave his sword at home.

And for a single treacherous moment, he contemplated it.

Scoffing at his own ridiculousness, Jaune quickly picked up Crocea Mors and clipped it to his belt. The comfortable weights on his hip and shoulders gave him a sense of balance he always missed without them.

Walk, Kill, Trade.

It had been his way of life for so long, that he could barely remember a time before it. It was how he survived, and he liked it that way.

Though, the niggling curiosity sat in his mind, wondering just exactly what would happen if he left his weapon at home. Would she kill him? Laugh at him? Reveal her plans? Thank him?

Gods, he really was a fool, but he'd be lying if he didn't think that this whole situation was morbidly intriguing.

Stepping out from the home without another word to anyone, Jaune made his way towards the exit, fiddling with the straps on his backpack as he went.

As he got closer, he saw the guard on duty wasn't Connor, but instead a squat, round man with a bushy red beard. The gruff man turned at the sound of Jaune's footsteps and glowered at him, earning a raised eyebrow.

"What is your business in the town of Angort, drifter?" grunted the squat man.

Inwardly relieved that *finally* someone had said the name of the blasted town, Jaune flashed the man an easy smile.

"Ah, you seem to be mistaken my friend! I'm actually leaving the town, going to be on my way right now!" Jaune made to step past the guard, but the man stuck out his hand in front of him.

Instead of the ordinary spear Connor used, this man had a wicked-looking, if old, shotgun. The detail was weathered and worn, but

looked well maintained. If it didn't look like it had been made before the Faunus Wars, Jaune reckoned it would have been a real threat.

"First of all, I don't give a damn where you're going, I asked what your business was!" The guard spat to the side before continuing. "And second, I ain't your damned friend!"

Jaune's smile was becoming a bit forced as he made to step around the guard's hand. "I was here to trade, nothing more. And now, if you don't mind, I'm ready to leave."

The man furrowed his brow and grumbled before shooting his hand out once again.

"Wait, just who exactly let your raggedy ass in here in the first place?"

"Connor. Are we done here?" Jaune asked, visibly irritated at the grouch in front of him.

"Ugh, Connor! Of course it was that half wit fool of a boy!" the guard grunted, kicking the dirt in front of him as he muttered hatefully under his breath. "Why I outta..."

Rolling his eyes, Jaune finally pushed past the guard and out onto the open road once again, tuning out the frustrated grunting behind him.

With the sun out in its morning glory, the trail to Cinder's house was far easier to find.

Walking down it, the question hit Jaune again: why on earth was he even doing this? He didn't even want a painting.

The thought made him sigh, wondering how he came face to face with this situation.

Walk, Kill, Trade. That was what his life was, and as comfortable as it was...

This was exciting. It almost made Jaune feel like a boy again, the urge to chase the bad guy or figure out the wicked plot. The thought made him smile. A thirty year old man, chasing witches in the woods.

Maybe 'exciting' was the wrong word. Rather, this situation was intriguing. For the first time in a long time, Jaune had found something that surprised him.

The fact of the matter was that Jaune was one thing: tired. He'd been doing all this fighting and killing and losing for so long, that all he could do was keep putting one foot in front of the other. There was a lot of harm in playing nice with Cinder, but it wouldn't be to anyone innocent at the very least.

Jaune turned the bend of the hill and saw the sight of Cinder's home properly, slightly taken aback by the state of its exterior. The roof was rotting, the backyard was a mess of overgrown roots and weeds, and the blasted bits of shrapnel on its front lawn didn't exactly help the over all appearance.

Still frozen in place were the remains of the door, blasted to smithereens and held together with magic. Jaune winced at the sight of it, knowing that due to his own poor planning he'd have to build a new one.

Seeing no point in delaying, he took one final breath and stepped up to the frozen door, all tension now fully returned to his shoulders.

Raising one hand, he gave the door a solid knock, only to earn a dull sound in return. The entire door was covered in ice, so Jaune did the next best thing and started to slam the wall next to it with his fists, a slow heavy rhythm echoing into the house.

It only took a few moments before he heard muted shouting within the house, which sounded vaguely like someone yelling profanity into the air.

"Not a morning person, eh? Well how about that," he snickered, putting a wide smile on his face. At least she was still here, and hadn't snuck off in the middle of the night.

He stood outside for a few minutes, waiting for any sort of response from Cinder before the smile started to fade.

Nearly half an hour later, Jaune was wearing a full on frown.

"Fine, go back to bed you lazy hag." Jaune muttered, before looking for something to do. Just because she was grumpy didn't mean Jaune couldn't do something. Growing up with seven sisters and one crazily detail-oriented mother had given him a severe distaste for poor housekeeping.

Judging by the stacks of uncut logs scattered around her backyard, Jaune had a feeling his mother would throttle the Maiden if she had been given the chance.

Giving the sun one last glance, and seeing he still had plenty of the morning left, Jaune figured he could burn a bit of time with some gardenwork.

"This is getting ridiculous!" shouted Jaune, swinging the small axe he had found in a tiny shed tucked against the back of the house.

The slightly dull blade slammed into the log below it, cutting thanks more to his brute strength than any quality maintenance.

"It's well passed noon! How in the world are you still asleep?!"

His call went unanswered as he tossed the two freshly cut halves onto an ever growing pile behind him. The number of logs had been almost staggering, once he managed to get them free that is.

The fact that Crocea Mors had been reduced to a weed whacker was probably making his ancestors spin so hard in their graves they

caught on fire. And yet there it was, stuck into the ground outside not too far from him.

The fact that he had made it into a drying rack for his sweaty clothes probably wasn't that great either. His armour lay against it with slightly more reverence than his hastily discarded clothes, neatly bunched together.

With a grunt, Jaune picked up another piece of the chopped up logs and placed it atop another wider, gnarled piece of wood. With another quick motion, the wood split in half, though not how he had hoped it would.

While the log snapped in half, the axe head had kept going and buried itself into the stump. No big deal, except that Jaune was still holding what was left of the handle in his hands.

Scowling at the splintered wood, Jaune tossed it onto the wood pile before dropping down on one knee to pry the axehead out.

"Stupid axe, stupid logs, stupid Cinder, stup-"

"Ah, and here I was, wondering what all the racket outside my window was. And here it is, a man who brought his sword."

The sound of Cinder's voice made Jaune tilt his head to where she stood, leaning against the wall in a light orange sundress. Jaune frowned at the sight.

"Finally up? And here I was, wondering how you'd take over the world if you stayed in bed all day."

"Ah, you would be surprised how much you could take over from a bed." Cinder's teasing smirk grew as Jaune's frown deepened. "Oh, relax. It was a joke. A lady can sleep in every now and then can't she?"

That earned her a snort, to which she raised an eyebrow.

"First you're telling jokes, now you're a lady? Maybe I got the wrong psycho after all," Jaune replied with a smirk of his own. When her own faltered and her eyes looked down, he was thrown off.

Trying to break the sudden awkward silence that ensued, he rubbed his neck before continuing.

"Anyways, I figured I'd get started on some chores." The small talk seemed to have little effect on Cinder, who still looked a bit put out by his comments. "I hope that's alright with you?"

The address was enough to bring her out of her curious stupor, and she raised her eyes back up to meet his.

"Yes, sure. Anyways, it's lunch time, so put on a shirt and come inside."

Jaune hesitated, eyes flicking towards his sword a few feet away from him.

"Uh, I've got some food in my pack, I think I'll be good."

Cinder rolled her eyes before pushing herself off the wall, "Come on, don't be an idiot. We can talk about your painting while we eat."

Jaune raised his hand to respond, but she had already stepped inside.

He grimaced as he looked between his pack and the house, before stepping towards the former. Lifting the pack in both hands, Jaune was once again displeased by how light it was. He couldn't have too many provisions on him at the moment... so...

With a sigh of resignation he slung his clothes on and sheathed his sword.

"This is stupid."

Jaune stared warily at the plate of diced vegetables and broth covering it all in front of him. His host sat in front of him, glaring at him in irritation.

"Look, it's not going to kill you, okay?"

"Well how am I supposed to know that?" Jaune cut Cinder off as she made to answer, "And no, you saying it won't isn't good enough."

"For the love of- didn't you used to fight Grimm? How is a simple meal more threatening than them?" Cinder scoffed.

"Well, for one, a Grimm won't poison me through something deceptively, and admittedly, tasty looking." He poked a piece of carrot with his fork.

Without another word, Cinder swapped Jaune's plate with the one she'd been eating off of before digging back in.

He sat in silence for a few seconds before slowly separating the parts she had eaten off of from the rest of the plate. Satisfied, he decided that unless Cinder had been eating poison every day for the entirety of her life to build up an immunity, he could risk a bite.

Though, as his mouth closed around a forkful of broccoli, gravy and pork, the idea didn't seem so silly.

But with a few chews, Jaune was wonderfully surprised that the food looked as good as it tasted. Giving it a few chews, he unwittingly let out a sigh of contentment.

"Glad to see you haven't chewn off your own taste buds on the trail," commented Cinder.

Jaune rolled his eyes as he spoke around a mouthful of food. "Mhm, just surprised this isn't orphans in the food, is all."

Now it was Cinder's turn to roll her eyes. "They don't taste that good anyways, I'd have to come up with a whole other broth."

Jaune ignored her obvious attempt to get a reaction out of him, and instead asked his own question. "How does someone with one arm cook so well?"

To her credit, she didn't get angry. Instead, a raised eyebrow and a smirk was her answer. "With a lot of patience."

The two ate in silence after that, though not exactly a comfortable one. It was only when they had both finished did Cinder clear the table and come back with a pen and a paper.

"Alright, so how about we get this out of the way as fast as possible for both of us and you just tell me what you want me to paint?"

"Well," Jaune began, "I don't know, just paint me anything. Like, one of those you have in the hall."

"If this is going to be as good as you demanded last night, I'm going to need something a bit better than that. Any moments in particular? A special landscape?"

Jaune was silent for a few moments before taking the pen and paper out her hands, and instead scribbled something onto it before handing it back to Cinder.

She looked it over a few times with a frown before looking back at Jaune. "This isn't exactly a lot to go on, you know that right?"

"Look, can you do it or not?" he asked in irritation, uncomfortable with her scrutiny.

"Fine, fine. I can do it, though this may take a bit if you want me to get it done properly."

"I'm in no rush to get anywhere," shrugged Jaune, secretly relieved she had agreed to paint his request. It shouldn't have mattered, and he was annoyed that he cared at all.

"Okay then," Cinder began, standing up with him. "I'll get started right away. What I need you to do is to actually stack all that wood you chopped, rather than just scattering it around my yard. Autumn is already around the corner, and come Winter I'd like to actually be able to reach the firewood."

"Why did you even need firewood in the first place?"

"Because I don't want to set the house on fire with my powers? They're for fighting, not creating a cozy atmosphere."

"Alright, alright. No need to get snippy. You just stick to your end of the bargain and I'll stick to mine. The less we have to interact, the better." Jaune was surprised to see Cinder frown and walk away.

"If that's how you want it, sure." she called out behind her, stopping before turning into her back room. "Oh, and while you're at it? Fix my axe. You'll need it to chop down a nice new door for me."

With that infuriating smirk on her face, she left Jaune frowning after her before he grumbled and stomped outside.

"What do you mean I can't come inside!?" Jaune demanded, frustrated at the formerly-grumpy man now grinning like an idiot in front of him.

"Sorry sir, but we don't need the homeless in this town. Now, unless you got some lodging or business, I think it's best you walked back into those woods and found a cozy tree to sleep in." He followed up his statement with a non-subtle tapping of his shotgun, trying to quell Jaune into submission.

It would have been so easy to pummel the man and walk into town, it really would have. Jaune held no illusions about his power, he never had. But he was in his prime, taught by the most dangerous huntsmen in the last decade and a wizard who was probably as old as time itself.

The fact that this circle of a man thought he could stop him was laughable, except for the part where if he *did* flatten the guard, the odds of him having an uninterrupted sleep through the night was next to none.

So, with a sigh and not another word, Jaune turned on his heel and walked back out into the rapidly darkening woods with his sore arms swinging beside him.

Once he was well away from the road, Jaune climbed up into a tree and propped himself high up in the branches. Far from comfortable, and not unfamiliar, Jaune could only curse himself for his situation. Instead of sleeping in a nice and comfy bed in some inn, he was... well... in a tree, waiting for a painting he didn't even want.

He hated himself for trying to get comfy anyways.

A/N: Phew ! The struggle of this chapter was real. I nearly had the whole thing typed out, and then my computer crashed without saving any of it! Well, lesson learned; Google Docs only from now on. Had a friend help me out on this one, encouraging me to rewrite this all and then editing it! His name is Darthbrowser, check him out on Ao3!

Chapter 4

"No, I told you to put it higher."

"I put it where you pointed."

"That's not where I pointed, Jaune."

"Don't eve-"

She cut him off by pointing up at the ceiling again, to just above where he had been nailing a patch over a hole.

"You pointed where I put it before!"

"No, I didn't."

Jaune looked down at her from the ladder. "Yes, you did. We went over it several times."

"Then I don't know what you got wrong."

Jaune sighed loudly. "This entire area of wood is porous. I thought you wanted me to put it here because this part will hold the patch better. If I put it higher, it might leak anyway."

"Well, look, the roof isn't that great, I get it. Just do what I ask please."

He looked down again. "Why can't you use your powers to do this, anyway?"

"My powers are very strong and very blunt. I can't just levitate things with the wind exactly how I want, that would take great precision."

"You couldn't practice and develop your skills until you could?"

"I haven't been motivated," she grunted.

Jaune stared at her. "Ok," he said flatly, unsure of what to think. "Well, why didn't you have one of the townspeople help you?"

"I don't want anyone in here."

"I'm here."

Cinder rolled her eyes with a scoff, "And what a coincidence, I don't want you here."

Jaune didn't respond, instead focusing on adjusting the patch as he contemplated what he had learned about Cinder these past few days. She was still arrogant and snide, but subdued somehow.

"Are you seriously that hurt by comments?" she snorted, startling Jaune out of his thoughts.

"Yeah, as if..." muttered Jaune. Subdued, but certainly not afraid to speak her mind.

She couldn't just leave him to his work, could she? When he had asked her as much, she had the gall to shrug as an answer.

"Are you even working on my painting?" asked Jaune, stepping off the small ladder he had been standing on.

"It's in the preliminary stages, these things take time after all. If it's to be a representation of my best work, I won't submit anything shallow."

Jaune groaned, "Look, I can settle for average or even slightly below it."

Cinder raised an eyebrow in response, "Ha, sorry but no. *I'm* not a deal breaker."

"Wh- I'm not a deal breaker!" Jaune retorted, offended at the implication.

His offense faded when he realized he saw the smirk on Cinder's lips. "In that case, I guess I'll have to give it my all, hm?"

"Your all isn't very inspiring."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"The last time you gave it your all, you destroyed Beacon."

A bit of regret formed in Jaune as the words came out, despite how true they were. But rather than looking hurt, Cinder rolled her eyes.

"I'll have you know that wasn't the last time I 'gave it my all', as you so succinctly said."

"And when exactly was this?" Jaune queried.

"Now, now," Cinder tutted, "If we're going to start asking questions, then we'll do this fairly. For every question you ask, I get to ask you one in turn. Sweet and simple."

'Hmph, deal." Jaune said, "But in that case, I'm gonna change my question."

"Go right ahead," Cinder answered, plopping herself down on a chair by the unlit fireplace. Jaune made no move to follow, instead leaning against the wall across from her.

"How did you end up here?"

"An interesting choice, can't say I expected it to be your first one." Cinder admitted, pursing her lips.

"Just answer the question, lady."

"You know you can just call me Cinder, right?"

"Yeah well, you don't exactly call me Jaune either. And no, that's not an invitation to either."

"Very well then, you infantile veteran," she scoffed.

Jaune opened his mouth to respond, but Cinder cut him off. "To answer your question, I was flying a Bullhead to come to Salem's aid. I was maimed and limping from my fight with your little friend Ruby, but I was ready to defend Salem with my life..." Cinder breathed out reached her hand up to her neck before continuing. "And then my arm tried to strangle me."

The last statement caused Jaune to lean forwards, nodding for her to go on.

"I had to rip it off and even then it thrashed and tried to murder me. When Salem called for all the Grimm to destroy the lands, I guess it really went to *all* the Grimm. By the time I had finished killing my own arm, I had lost complete control over the Bullhead and sank right into the oceans outside Vacuo."

Cinder looked out the window as she continued, her sole hand gripping the side of her seat.

"And after that, I made my way back to Vale. I knew she must have been dead for it to happen, but then as I learned that every kingdom had been wiped out, well, I didn't have much to do but wander. Eventually, I found Angort and decided to settle down."

Jaune stood silently for a few moments, wondering exactly just how much of it was true. While she had seemed honest, Cinder was a legendary liar. Everything she said had to be taken with a grain of salt.

"I never saw you in Evernight, even after we finally put down the rest of your cult. I'd figured you must have been dead at that point, somewhere back where we left you to rot in Vacuo," Jaune admitted.

"First of all, it wasn't a cult. It was a group of people who wanted to see the world become better than it was, primarily for their own interests..." Cinder coughed when Jaune gave her a look of disbelief. "Except for Tyrian of course, he was a bit of cultist if we're being honest. And secondly, your friend Ruby seemed to have a hard time figuring out how to use a weapon properly, and left me maimed in the sand without taking my head."

Picking at her nails, Cinder shrugged. "Thankfully, her weird idea of heroics is why I'm still alive to paint you a picture. I'll thank her if I get the cha-"

"Alright." Jaune cut her off with a growl. "Just ask your stupid question."

"Sure. Since I told you how I wined up here, why don't you tell me how you did?"

"I walked." That earned a frown from Cinder.

"And what was that about not being a deal breaker, *Jaune* ?"

"I told you not to call me by my name, we aren't friends. Also, we never said how long or how honest it had to be." He crossed his arms.

"Well then," Cinder said, standing up with an irritated look at being denied. "Any other real questions you have for me can wait until you've held up your end of the bargain."

And with that, she walked gracefully to her room. Or at least, as graceful as she could get with a look of thunder on her face.

The pleasure of denying her something so small, so insignificant was wonderfully satisfying for Jaune. Silently cackling, Jaune picked up the small, recently repaired axe by the door and stepped outside.

The rattling of ice in a glass alerted Jaune to Cinder's presence, though he didn't react to it. Instead, he continued running a piece of sandpaper up and down the length of his current project.

The light, sturdy pine door in front of him was finally coming together. It had taken him two full days to get it together, asking advice from one of the lumberjacks as the group left in the morning. One nearly took his head off with an axe out of fright, but Connor happened to be with them.

Some light chatting and explaining of what he wanted to do was enough to assuage their suspicion. Though, Jaune tacitly avoided an explanation exactly *why* Cinder, or Autumn as they knew her, needed a new door all of a sudden.

A couple pointers and explanations on how to cut whichever tree he found into boards was enough to get him started, and Jaune spent the greater part of his time just trying to figure out how to fit the thing together.

But finally he had managed to work the boards together, fashioning a sturdy if somewhat uneven door.

Cinder apparently thought the same, as she commented. "Looks a bit lumpy, no?"

Jaune grunted and started half-heartedly rubbing at some of the more uneven parts of the door, "Well, if I had a plainer I could have done a better job." He looked up from his work, "And hey, you should be glad my first door is this good."

"Oh really?" Cinder raised an eyebrow, and Jaune was surprised to see she had two glasses of water balanced on a tray held in one hand. Tucked under her armpit was a small notebook, with a pencil stuck in her ear.

She set the tray down on top of the where the door rested. Sitting atop two stands, it was a well placed makeshift table. Scooping one

of the glasses up, Cinder sat down in the grass and leaned against Jaune's large backpack.

Jaune took the other glass for himself, chugging down the ice cold water. It was wonderfully refreshing, and Jaune hadn't even realized just how parched he was. Setting it back on the tray, Jaune cast a glance over to where Cinder was now furiously sketching in her notebook.

"Thanks." he muttered, half-whispering. Cinder, of course, heard it.

"Hm? Oh. You're welcome." she said without a hint of sarcasm.

Gods, she made it so simple. When Jaune heard snark or anger in her voice, this whole situation felt so much more normal.

But when she just acted like a normal person, he felt like his idiot teenage self. How do you react to a violent psychopath being an almost pleasant person?

Jaune didn't have an answer, and that bothered him more than anything else. Because as time passed, he was growing more and more convinced that she wasn't even planning anything. Just some mundane existence was out of the ordinary for him.

Some kind of atonement? Jaune wasn't sure. It seemed unlikely, even now she didn't show any remorse for everything she'd done.

Sighing, he turned back to his work, hoping the repetition would help him think. But as he started, one small question wormed its way into his mind.

"Where did you get the ice?" he asked.

Cinder merely scribbled in silence, staring intently at her work.

"Uh, you there?" asked Jaune, waving a hand at her.

"I thought I said no questions until you answered mine," responded Cinder, not looking up at him.

"Not true. You said *real* questions. Unless you stole the ice from an old man, I don't think it's exactly-"

"Fine, I'll tell you," she snorted, "If only to stop your infernal rambling."

"Hey, I don't ramble."

"Suuuure. Whatever your say." Cinder smirked as Jaune pouted, "In any case, I have a cellar. I take a pitcher full of water and hold it over a bucket. As I pour it in, I freeze the ice and let it smash on the bottom of the bucket into little chunks. Instant ice."

Jaune hummed in understanding before going back to work.

"In a world without Dust, powers like yours could be pretty handy."

"Indeed."

"Ever consider using them to help the town?"

"Oh?" Cinder asked and looked up. "And how would I do that? By keeping everyone's leftovers nice and cold in their fridges?"

"Yeesh, just saying. Could be nice."

"And yet, here I am. Not helping. Yet they survive perfectly fine on their own, do they not?"

"Well, surviving isn't exactly the same as living."

"Is this where you finally tell me the story?"

Jaune blew heavily out of his nose, "Fat chance of that. I'll be back, I'm gonna use the washroom."

"Thanks for keeping me informed, hero!" called Cinder after him.

Jaune returned a few minutes later, yawning heavily. Soon he would be done with the door though, and then he could sleep. All he had to do was set the hinges on the door and put it in place.

At least, that should have been the plan.

Pencil and notebook lay abandoned in the grass, as Cinder stood over the door with a palette of fresh paint in her hand, doodling intently on the wood.

Jaune wasn't overly upset, he had finished sanding it for the most part. But, he was just confused why she was doing it in the first place.

"Why paint on it? Don't you have canvases for that kind of stuff?"

"It's my door," came her response. "I can do what I want with it."

"Then why didn't the first one have anything on it," asked Jaune, moving to look at what she was drawing.

Cinder was silent for a second, hand freezing before continuing on. "This is Pine. Pine is good for painting."

Jaune waited for her to continue, but when it was clear she wouldn't answer he looked down at the scattered drawings beginning to decorate the wood.

Small animals, small flowers and the works were common, but the one she was working on right now was what caught his attention the most.

A small flame in the roots of a tree.

Rather than push his luck and ask, Jaune merely looked up at the slowly descending sun and settled down against his bag and got

comfy. Turning so that he could face Cinder and keep an eye on her as she worked.

As he shifted, he caught a quick glance of what she had been sketching. His heart tugged at his chest before he looked away, fighting the swell of emotions in them.

Well, it was nice to know she was holding up her end of the bargain.

Jaune awoke with a shiver, sitting up with eyes wide. Where there was once the bright light of the sun setting, was now nearly complete darkness.

The fact that he had fallen asleep around Cinder surprised Jaune, having taken pride in his alertness. If she had tried anything, he would have been minced.

Groaning at the soreness in his back, he made to stand up, only pausing at the sudden cold hitting his chest as a blanket fell from it.

The thought made him blink. A blanket?

Laying crumpled where it fell was a small weathered blanket, with small faded patterns stamped onto it.

Stooping down slowly to pick it up, Jaune straightened up and looked back at the house with disbelief.

"Did she..." he began before shaking his head, shouldering his back and starting into the forest for the tree he had taken to sleeping in.

Frankly, he was still too tired to deal with this right now. This was a question for tomorrow.

Though... the extra blanket would certainly help tonight.

A/N: Hey guys! I wanted to post last week, but a lot of IRL stuff got in the way, namely school. Wanted to post last night, but had such a killer headache I decided to wait until today :) Hope you enjoyed! And I wanted to say thank you for all the kind reviews, you guys are great.

Chapter 5

Jaune slept fitfully that night, thanks to both his earlier nap as well as Cinder's own mysterious actions. The blanket that caused him so much confusion sat bundled against the small of his back as he pushed it against a tree.

Soon, the sun broke over the horizon and Jaune climbed down from his perch. His irritation clung to his shoulders, weighing them down with tension as he readied himself for the day. He idly packed the blanket into his bag, with the aim to just leave it somewhere in Cinder's home.

Sure, it seemed nice, but if she was really looking out for him then why not wake him?

The thought stewed in his mind as he began the long walk to her house, noticing that the wind was starting to become stiffer and more frequent.

A sigh escaped his lips as he tightened his coat against the sharp cold. Soon, it would be Autumn, and he'd need to find a place to stay.

"Ugh, just my luck. Dealing with a Fall Faiden in Fall," grumbled Jaune.

Hopefully the painting would be done soon. Cinder had been at it for almost a week and a half now. Those sketches were probably a sign that she was about to get started on the real thing. If he was lucky, he'd be long gone from this neck of the woods before even a single snowflake fell.

He was surprised to see her sitting on the deck in front of her home rather than deep in her usual slumber. She had her hair up in a ponytail and was wearing the same outfit she wore when they ran into each other in the alleyway.

"About time, I figured you'd gotten lost."

Jaune scowled, "Not likely, though I know you wish I would."

Frowning slightly at his hostility, Cinder stood up and picked up a basket filled with large cloth bags she had by her side.

"And what's that for?" asked Jaune, still frowning.

"Shopping, what else?" she asked, walking towards him, "I need some things in town, and seeing as I have a big, *strong* man around, I'll pick up all the heavy things all in one go."

His eyebrow twitched at the emphasis, but otherwise didn't react to the sultry tone.

"I'm not some meathead for you to use," he grunted.

"Ugh. Look, just carry my things and be quiet about it if you can. Hopefully some shopping will break your grumpy mood."

Shoving the basket into Jaune's chest, she walked off towards the village, not stopping or checking to make sure he was following her.

Looking at the basket, and then back up at Cinder's form disappearing around the bend, Jaune let out a curse and took a second to throw his bags into her home before jogging after her.

Once he got a few meters behind her, though, he stopped. He wasn't some lapdog to chase after her. If she wanted to use him for physical labour, then fine. That was the deal after all.

Didn't mean he had to talk to her.

The two eventually made their way to the gates of the town. The guard at the gate was none other than Connor.

"Oh! Miss Autumn! What a pleasant surprise!"

The boy gave Cinder a wide smile before squinting at Jaune. While he may not have recognized him at first, he sure did once he got a good look at him.

"Oh, it's Mister Jaune!" crowed Connor, turning his smile towards him.

Current mood aside, Jaune couldn't help but smile at his upbeat attitude.

"Good to see you again Connor. A much friendlier face than the other blowhard who was out here the other day."

"Ah..Ah ha..." Connor laughed weakly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, sorry about that. My dad means well but-"

"He's your dad?" Jaune cut off, eyebrows raised in shock. "But he's so much more, well, *active* ."

Jaune nearly jumped when he heard Cinder laugh next to him, not realizing he'd closed the gap between them. Something about being this close to her put him on edge, and he didn't like it.

"That'd be typical Nort. Gave you a hard time?" said Cinder coyly, a small smirk on her face.

Jaune, however, just gave her an accusing look. The smirk dropped quickly, and she turned back to Connor with a neutral face.

"We'd like to do some shopping today, if you don't mind." Cinder stated with perfect calm.

The poor boy nodded and stood to the side, trying to look away with clear discomfort at how quickly the conversation had chilled over.

"Well... um, have a nice day?"

Cinder made no reply, and Jaune turned to give the boy an apologetic smile. To his surprise, the boy was looking at him in

confusion rather than Cinder.

It wasn't *him* who made the conversation awkward. It was Cinder, 'Autumn' as she was clearly going by nowadays. Not very inspired, hell it was barely even a cover name.

Why try and make casual conversation with him? When had they fallen into that hole?

Though, just when Jaune thought he would be able to ride the day out in silence, Cinder walked into the town square. Unlike when Jaune had set up in here, it was now bustling. Stands were set up under the heat of noon, townsfolk walked from vendor to vendor and chatted among one another. A pair of kids raced past the duo, one screaming as the other chased him.

The sight made Jaune smile, as it always did when he saw children enjoying themselves in a world as broken as this. His honed reflexes felt Cinder's eyes on him though, and so he straightened his face and kept his eyes forward and pointedly away from her.

The two wove their way through the crowd, a few smiling and greeting Cinder who in turn smiled back. It was weird to say the least, people greeting the second worst killer in history with a laugh and a pat on the back. More than a few gave him odd looks, though most just ignored him.

Eventually they made their way to a stand with plain fabrics hanging from various hooks and folded in numerous piles. The colours were numerous, if a bit a dull.

"Autumn!" shouted the vendor, startling a few potential customers.

"Good morning Bella," greeted Cinder, eyes already combing over the fabrics.

"It's been so long! I had half a mind to walk down to that hut and see if you were okay! I didn't of course, but that's only because I'd get

lost, I promise!" Bella babbled at Cinder, who payed half attention as the vendor unloaded all the latest town gossip onto her.

She went on for a few minutes, and Jaune reflexively just zoned out. Years of Nora and sisters had taught him the secret art of shutting off his brain, and basked in the calm of it.

"-he's just some hired help, doing work around the house and what not."

It took a few seconds before the words broke through the self-imposed trance, causing Jaune to look wide eyed down at the auburn haired woman looking up at him. She was pretty, he'd admit, but in a homely, civilian kind of way.

He must have been staring, because she snorted and stared right back at him. "He's a bit of a looker, though he must not be that bright."

"Hey!" came Jaunes shout of indignation.

"Wedding ring, pretty boy!" Bella smirked, waving her bejeweled hand in front of his face.

"I wasn't trying to- ugh!" Jaune threw his hands in the air, giving up with the fast paced woman.

The vendor giggled before she got to talking with Cinder some of the material. It took a few minutes before Cinder poked his arms. With a sigh, Jaune took a bag out of the basket and held it open as Cinder picked up her selection from the stand.

"How much do I owe you?"

"Ach," Bella waved a hand away, "Forget it. I still owe you for that lovely portrait ya' did of Rufus for his sixteenth."

"That was a gift."

"And so is this. Now get goin'! Don't miss out on all the goods on account of me! And nice meeting you ya temptation!"

The duo walked off to another vendor nearby, and Jaune was surprised by what he saw. Not just Bella, but almost every vendor greeted her amicably. The ones who didn't at least nodded in recognition, if not a bit of suspicion.

It was growing increasingly clear that this charade wasn't something Cinder had just recently picked up a year or two ago, but had clearly worked on for quite some time. The thought that she had been working on something out here for so long was concerning.

Soon, though, he couldn't spare the energy to theorizing about Cinder's intent. He was laden down with all sorts of jams, sewing materials, new tools, candles, wine, painting parchment, cans of paint, and the wicker basket. Resting inside it wasn't anymore bags, but instead a small cylindrical container.

Where she didn't trade favours, Cinder traded maps to Jaunes surprise. While he didn't ask about it, she saw his look of surprise and told him anyways.

"I had to learn all the geography and landmarks of Vale as apart of my... education. I still remembered the terrain and characteristics of each part of the continent all the way till Vacuo's desert. So when traders came into town talking of what had been destroyed and where new towns had popped up, I just started to write them down."

Cinder palmed the small container as they made their way to the edge of the crowd, "Eventually, people wanted to buy them, and I finally had a source of income."

"How do you eat? There can't be enough of a market for maps to afford groceries every week." Jaune's own question startled him and it clearly did the same to Cinder, who had gotten used to his silence today.

"Well, I grow it."

"How?"

"With my, how should I say... 'Semblance', if you know what I mean."

Jaunes eyes narrowed, "So you can just grow food?"

"Fall isn't just the season that comes before Winter, it's the season of the Harvest. What? You thought all the Maidens were the same?"

"That's not what matters. You could be helping these people, and yet you-"

"Are you seriously going to tell me how to use my powers? I'm helping these people how I want to, and if I want to." Cinder snapped, "and for the record, if all you're going to do is grouch, then maybe it's for the best that you keep your mouth shut."

Jaune's blood boiled, but his training and self control helped him keep it in check. She was just angry because he was right after all. Another point towards her having not changed.

Cinder stormed over to the outskirts of the market, where a oil stained and twitchy looking man stood over his ox-drawn cart full of scrap metal. The wood of his wagon was stained slick with oil and grease, and the man was no better.

"Huehuehue, how can I halp' you, Miss Purdy-lady?" slurred the scavenger, teetering on top of his wagon.

"I want to buy as much scrap metal as this fool can carry." Cinder spat out, while Jaune protested.

"What?! What do you need that much crap for?!"

"A private project! One you needn't know anything about!" she hissed.

'Welp, that's gonna cost you a wee-bit, marm.'" the scavenger scratched his head. "What you got to trade?"

Popping the top of her tube, she reached in and dug out the largest map she had on hand. "An up to date map with all the current towns in this area, *including* those that fell to the Grimm or bandits. You could certainly use it."

The man's eyes shown with sobriety as he quickly packed the scrap into the remaining bags Cinder had, hanging them off every inch of Jaune's available body, save his jaw.

Soon, he was a swinging mass of pure irritation, and Cinder walked away from the giddy vendor without another word.

They walked right past Connor, who didn't even try to say anything for fear of being the target of their palpable ire.

Cinder led the way, though this time it wasn't even thanks to Jaune lagging behind. Staggering along the rough path, Jaune felt like a pack-mule. Whatever right she thought she had to be so fussy was absurd! He was the one dragging all this crap around, forced into close proximity with some- some enigma!

He gritted his teeth and sped up after her as he noticed the forest beginning to darken, the sun the sun slipping under the tree line. As much as this stuff sucked to carry, he wasn't going to

take his time with it.

Eventually he plodded up to front of Cinder's home, setting down a majority of the bags with a sigh of relief. It was short lived as Cinder growled next to him, "Be careful with that, it's not yours to break."

"And it's not my stuff to care about either," he muttered.

"Gods, what is your problem?!" shouted Cinder, looking Jaune in the eyes with rage.

"My problem? I'm not the one treating people like her slaves!"

"Excuse me?!"

"I don't know what you're trying to pull out here, but I'm sick of it! Enough with this grand farce of being a real human being!" Jaune shouted, standing at his full height and towering over the villainess.

Cinder didn't back down and snarled up at his frame. "Farce?! I'm not the asshole who's wandering around like a bum, attacking cripples in the middle of the night and then moping about it!"

"You aren't a cripple!" Jaune cried, "God, stop pretending you are. You've got one arm and have more power than almost anyone in the world! You doing nothing with it doesn't make you defenseless, just selfish."

"I'll use it however I want, you have no claim to it."

"It's not even yours, you... you stole it," Jaune whispered, his voice deadly serious.

"I did what I had to" spat Cinder.

"And look where you are now," Jaune sneered, taking a step down and running his eyes up and down her body. "A shell of a monst-""

Before he even finished his sentence, Cinder's leg flashed upwards and swung right for his chest.

Jaune caught it in both hands before using her momentum to throw her out into the small clearing in front of her house.

Rather than hit the floor, Cinder's eyes flashed bright with the power of Fall. Hovering above the ground on twin jets of fire, Cinder looked down on him with a face twisted in fury.

"You think you have the right to judge me?" Shards of dust and glass rose from the ground to form a small obsidian dagger in her hand,

and she pointed it towards Jaune. "You're a worm, a worm with no drive or purpose! Don't you ever tell me what I am!"

Jaune drew Crocea Mors and roared, "You'll always be an animal, Cinder Fall, and I'll be the man who puts you down."

A/N: Here ya go! Hope you enjoy! :D

Chapter 6

Crocea Mors cut through nothing but air as Cinder flew just out of its reach, barely giving Jaune time to bring his shield up and block the torrent of flame that scoured it.

As soon as the first wave of fire was done another followed promptly behind it, except this one was aimed at his feet. Jaune's instincts told him to leap backwards, but he knew that would pin him against the walls of the hut. If he wanted to win this fight, he would need to have as much room to maneuver as possible.

Instead, Jaune pushed through the stream of fire, thankful his Aura was protecting his skin from the fiercely heated shield. The force of the element was great, but Jaune dug in his heels and gained a few steps worth of ground.

Rather than having her retreat as expected or double down and waste her energy the fire simply stopped. And not a half moment later, Cinder propelled herself feet first into his shield, staggering him.

As he struggled to get his balance, the villainess stabbed her dagger in between his guard, earning a strained grunt as his Aura absorbed the brunt of the damage.

Before a second blow could rain down on him though, he managed to bring his blade back up in time to deflect the strike. He braced himself for a rapid follow-up strike, but was surprised when he heard Cinder gasp as their blades met. When the attack never came, Jaune pressed his own as Cinder struggled to match the fury of his swipes. Without the advantage of momentum or flight, she caught a cut straight across the shoulder.

She stumbled with a gasp, and never even saw Jaune's follow up. Bringing his shield crashing down on top of her, Cinder swore and

fell to the ground. He was surprised at how easy it had been to knock her down, her bladework especially. She had clearly been out of practice, but that wasn't about to stop him.

"This is for- Argh!" began Jaune, cutting off with a cry as the prone woman turned the glass blade in her hand into very fine shards before throwing them in his face.

Jaune leapt backwards, thankful none had gone directly in his eyes. His Aura would have protected him from serious damage, but wouldn't have prevented it from getting physically stuck in them. However, even if it didn't hurt him, it was all the time Cinder needed.

"Burn you coward!" cried Cinder, outstretching a hand from her position on the ground towards him.

The dirt below Jaune glowed orange with heat, and he barely had time to dodge the pillar of fire that burst out from beneath him.

Several more circles appeared all around him as he rolled, bracing himself with his shield towards the ground. The explosions rocked the ground, sending him flying into the forest.

Mercifully, Jaune didn't hit any trees, instead rolling through the underbrush. Stopping his roll by slamming Crocea Mors into the ground, Jaune staggered to his feet and wheezed from the force of the blow.

From his place in the forest, he could see Cinder's glowing form flying straight in after him with little to no disregard for the foliage around her. Whole branches curled and smoked and she flew by, others catching fire entirely.

Though Jaune couldn't hear it thanks to Cinder's flames or see it through the treeline, the sudden drop in pressure was all Jaune needed to vault out of the way, wincing as a bolt of lightning defied physics and flew past all the tree's around him. The bolt slammed

into the ground right where he had been standing, and soon many like it were crashing down around him.

His options were fading as Cinder closed in on him, a spear of glass forming in her hand as she sped forwards. His lack of a ranged option wasn't a problem against underskilled bandits or Grimm, but right now he wished he had taken the expensive option of mecha-shift when he had the chance.

Instead, he settled for the best alternative he could think of. He dove around a large tree and heaved.

To say that Cinder was surprised was an understatement to the utter shock on her face as Jaune's shield came flying out of cover like a frisbee, its sharp edges spinning towards her face.

With a shout, Cinder tried to adjust in mid-air and avoid the makeshift projectile, but all she got for her efforts as the shield slamming into her chest rather than her head.

Seeing the lightning stop, Jaune sprinted out of cover as Cinder tried to recover. Winded and staggering to her feet, she couldn't stop Jaune's boot as it flew into her head, sending her sprawling once again.

Stooping to pick up his shield, Jaune broke into a sprint towards Cinder, who desperately raised a wall of ice between them.

With a roar, Jaune plowed through it and slammed Cinder into a tree. The woman howled in fury as her Aura crackled under the strain, but held. Her hand clawed desperately over the top of the shield, trying to gouge out his eyes as he started to squeeze the air out her.

He winced as she raked her nails over his head and neck, but kept his head bowed to avoid her nails as he continued to crush the life out of her.

He held her there for a few more seconds as her clawing grew less frantic until her arm went limp at her side.

Once she stilled, Jaune risked a glance over the top of the shield. Strangely, rather than having a face transfixed with pain, Cinder was smiling through it all.

"What the-" was all he managed before he felt something coil around his leg and slam him against a tree.

Branches from all around dipped down and clung to his clothing, launching him all around as he desperately swung his blade into the branches.

He howled in pain as his shield was wrenched from his hand and thrown deep into the woods, far beyond his reach.

Below him sat Cinder, wheezing as she struggled to stay awake as oxygen flooded back into her system. He could see now that the last remains of her aura were starting to fade as bits of amber began to flake off from her body.

Cinder must have noticed too, for her entire body went taut as she closed her eyes with a grimace.

"Stay. Still!" she grit out.

Jaune gave a shout of pain as entire trees bent forwards to lash out at Jaune, wrapping around his legs and arms, pulling them taut.

His Aura held his body together, Jaune realized, and he thanked the gods for what must have been a hundredth time for his large reserves. But even that would soon run out, as the branches were slowly surrounding the entirety of his body, clearly to form some kind of prison.

The branches readjusted around his forearms to hold him still, and Jaune managed to get a bit of room to maneuver his wrists.

Realizing he had only one chance to save his life, Jaune worked his wrist upwards, inching his hand over the hilt of Crocea Mors and onto its blade; wincing as his aura began to fail. Thin lines began to appear in his hand, nothing larger than paper cuts, but they were about to get a lot worse.

He focused all Aura around the joints of his body, and let the blade cut into his skin as he strained his wrist against their bonds. With a cry of pain, Jaune lobbed the sword with a sharp flick, cutting a deep groove into his palm. The blade spun in the air, flying towards the immobile and unaware Cinder.

The hilt cracked against her temple, breaking her Aura and her concentration as she collapsed, stunned from the blow.

Almost instantly, the branches began to unravel and return to their nature positions, some staying where they were in their warped forms. Jaune allowed himself to catch his breath before breaking out from the few branches that held him still, using what was left of his strength to escape their hold.

Dropping to the ground, Jaune groaned and stumbled towards her limp form. When he saw that his blade had merely knocked her unconscious, he frowned. He wasn't one to kill someone in their sleep. He had given up all illusions of fairness long ago, but the idea didn't sit well with him.

At least until he remembered who he was thinking about.

Hoisting his blade from where it lay on the ground, Jaune allowed himself a small smile as he saw Cinder rouse from her stupor, eyes glazed over and bloodshot from the trauma.

"This is it," whispered Jaune, causing Cinder's eyes to shoot open wide.

"This is when I finally get to kill you, Cinder." he continued, "I've played this over and over in my head for years, more than a decade

dreaming about how I would triumph."

"A- And is it everything you'd hoped it would be?" Cinder croaked, her voice trembling from exhaustion yet without fear in her eyes.

"No. It took far too long to do this. I should have done this the minute I saw you." Jaune scowled, "You didn't deserve a deal, or a second chance. I gave you one on random impulse, so unconvinced I would ever get to deliver justice."

His grip tightened on the worn leather hilt, "I won't make that same mistake again."

"Justice for who, Jaune?" Cinder barely coughed out the words before Jaune shouted, spittle flying from the corners of his mouth.

"Who?! Everyone! Thousands died in Vale because of you, hundreds of thousands died across the globe when the demon you called master decided to sweep the board. You could have just turned her down! Done something else with your life! Instead, you doomed humanity and you- you..."

"You killed Pyrrha. The only one who loved me for when I was my weakest. I had to kill to survive. To keep her memory alive." He felt sudden sadness, his sword shaking as he pointed it at Cinder. "And you're gonna die for all of it. I can't fix this world, but I can get rid of a mistake!"

Cinder, to her credit, looked sad rather than upset. Disappointed even. She was about to die and she had the gall to pity him. His saddened countenance turned to a snarl as he lifted his blade, aimed straight for her black heart.

"Would you like to hear what her last words were?" asked Cinder, voice perfectly neutral.

Her words hit him like an icicle through the heart. He hadn't known what they were, and it had always haunted him. Did she call for him?

Curse his name? Apologize like she always did?

His silence must have been enough for Cinder, as she continued on. "She asked me a if ' *I believed in destiny* '."

"At the time, I answered without question. My destiny was to rule over those before me, that much had been certain since Salem took me under her wing. Even when I lost my arm, that conviction stayed. Even as I dragged myself from a watery grave, I knew that it had to be my destiny, I had earned it after all."

"What does this have to do with Pyrrha?" asked Jaune, eyes looking at her with rapt attention.

Cinder ignored his question, "I didn't stop, not for a while. I killed the first woman I met, just for the food and clothes she had on her. I didn't feel a thing, because my destiny was greater than a lowly hermit in the woods." A strained laugh escaped her, "Funny, don't you think?"

"I ran a bandit gang too for a while. Stole, murdered, tried to build an empire. It failed of course, people are too desperate to care if I threaten them into obedience. Had to kill half my own group, the rest just ran off into the woods. A few even made it out."

"This isn't making me want to spare you," Jaune said, raising an eyebrow.

Cinder's head rested against a tree trunk, closing her eyes. "It's not supposed to. I wandered for a long time after that. Trying to find my mark when I finally found a landmark. Forever Fall. I was near Vale, I thought I could find something- anything to give me an edge or direction in there. All I found was chaos. The city was completely overrun, not a single living soul in sight other than the Grimm. The only landmark left was Beacon's tower. The CCT still had that useless Wyvern clinging to the top of it, so I made my way to the top, and there I found it."

Cinder sighed, "I guess it was inevitable. But I think you know what I found up there, don't you?"

Jaune's face contorted with grief, confirming that he did.

"A small stack of rocks with her tiara sitting atop it. And all I could think about were her damned words."

"I didn't get what I wanted, Jaune. But I think i'm better for it. The view from that tower was the first thing I ever painted, and since then I've been out here."

She looked up at Jaune, "I found peace in these woods and penance in the brush. If I have to die because of that, then so be it. I'll have died finally spending my last few years finding happiness rather than chasing it."

"So what? You think because you've repented, you're free to go on as you please?" Jaune questioned in disbelief.

"On the contrary, I think it's why I'm okay with dying. I'm tired Jaune, I've always been tired. Once you stop chasing some impossible goal, you have so much more energy I find. Still, I don't think I'll ever really rest. All I can do is be happy with what I have. You don't have to stop chasing your goal, though."

"W-what do you mean?"

"What do you want, Jaune?"

"Justice."

Cinder rolled her eyes at that. "No, I mean what do you actually want? You didn't wander the planet hoping to bump into me. But if you think Justice is your goal, then you can reach it right here, right now. All you need to do is lean forwards and let a weapon do its work."

"I... I want my friends back." Jaune's voice cracked, "I want things to finally settle down in this world. It's always been crazy, and I spent the last thirteen years trying to fix any small part of it. I just want this crusade to end."

"Then end it. Take your justice, bring some lasting peace to this world."

Jaune looked from his blade to Cinder, who looked so damn peaceful about everything that had just happened. She really felt no remorse did she...?

Or rather, maybe she'd just stopped running.

Jaune hefted his blade, gripping the hilt firmly.

A/N: Hey guys, hope you enjoy! Thanks for all the supportive reviews, you guys are great :)

Chapter 7

A better man would have hesitated.

Jaune swung down with all that remained of his strength, grinding his teeth together as a wild anger overtook him. Cinder sighed right before he moved, seemingly ready to accept her fate. His aim was true, straight for her exposed pale neck.

Before he could land the blow, a loud scream shook the night air. Jaune was so focused on his task that the sudden noise sent his instincts haywire, causing his blade to flick off course and cleave right through the tree right above her head.

Cinder lay still, her eyes squeezed shut and her breath slightly laboured as the tree crashed to the ground, next to her. Jaune's eyes flickered between her form and the sound of the cry, weighing his options.

If someone was caught by the Grimm, he was already too late. But if he let Cinder live, then the damage could be far worse.

Shaking his head, Jaune raised his blade once more until he heard a loud shout, followed by screams and yelling accompanied by the tolling of a loud brass bell.

Without hesitation he burst off in the direction of the alarm, sparing only just enough time to kick Cinder in the head as he turned on his heels. He glanced back as he was running; she was on the ground unconscious.

As he leapt through the underbrush, hacking his way through any bush or tree that stood in his way, Jaune took stock of his current resources. All he had was his sword, and dangerously low aura. His armour was smouldering and starting to crack from the intense heat

and subsequent crushing it withstood, definitely in need of a paint job now. And lastly, his shield was still back with Cinder.

The very thought of her frustrated him, as she would no doubt be long gone by the time he got back, probably ferreted away by whatever minions she had lurking about. Not that it mattered anymore. These people needed saving, and as ill equipped as he was, Jaune was the man for the job.

He wasn't going to let anyone else die because of Cinder.

Soon, the shouts and alarm drew increasingly loud until he burst from the treeline. What he found was the town of Angort in utter chaos. People had dragged wagons into the main entrance with several horribly young faces looking over the top, rifles clutched in their arms. All through the holes in the wooden stakes that made up a perimeter he saw men and women clutching weapons, some so rusted they could hardly count anymore while others clutched farming implements.

The showing was one of a prepared and pragmatic people, something Jaune could appreciate and even respect.

However, a makeshift defense manned by greenhorns was hardly going to stop any real threat of Grimm or gods forbid; bandits.

Running to the front of the defenses, Jaune shouted out and waved his free hand at the guards on the wall.

"Hey!"

He must have been quite the mess, as the boys shot up in alarm and surprise. One even went so far as to raise what appeared to be an old Atlesian Knights rifle. Before he could fire though, a gnarled hand clamped down and shoved the barrel down towards the ground.

The guard yelped, but stepped to the side as a fat headed man with a bushy beard popped out of cover.

"Ah piss off, the blazes are you doing here?" shouted the old guard that had harassed Jaune a few days before. Jaune could have sworn his name was Nort, if Connor was to be believed.

"I heard the alarm! I'm a huntsmen and I'm here to help. Where do you need me?" Jaune asked, familiar with how civilians needed to maintain some sense of control during a crisis.

The man clearly hadn't been expecting it, as his eyes widened with something akin to respect before they narrowed in suspicion.

"Where in the hell did you come from?" asked Nort.

"Cinder's hut, I-"

"Who in the seven layers of a fat cats belly is *Cinder*?" growled Nort, causing the other guards to bristle alongside him, eyes focusing in suspicion.

Jaune felt his irritation spike at the man, barely holding back his anger. The man was simply stressed, clearly.

"You know her as Autumn. I just came from that way, and I saw no bandits. Though you'd be interested to kno-"

Nort cut him off *again*. "Wait a damn minute, Autumn? She's North of here! Connor!" shouted the man, concern clear on his face, "Get the boys together! We gotta go save Miss Autumn!"

"What? What's going on?" yelled Jaune, not comfortable with his back to the shadows.

"We heard explosions and cracks from that direction, it's why we sounded the alarm. If you young'uns weren't rutting you'd probably have heard it!" howled Nort as the men removed bits from the barricade. Jaune grew red in the face and was about to lob his sword at someones head for the second time today when he realized that the man was preparing to send a squad out to find Cinder.

He wasn't gonna let Cinder go, but he sure as hell wasn't going to kill a bunch of teenagers either.

"A pack of Grimm wandered into the land around her homestead. Vicious beasts, but we drove them back," he said, thinking on his feet.

"Well, that's good to hear. There could be more though, all that screaming probably got however many in the area there are to move in on us like a dog to a bone." Nort looked Jaune over once he was standing in the light. "Must have been one hell of a fight, you look like crap."

Jaune rolled his eyes, "Yeah, was a real monster. Glad I'm the one who got to put it down."

"Heh. Well, go and get your damned lady then you fool! I don't know why you left a poor, defenceless gal in the middle of a crisis but the least you could do is take care of the woman who took in your vagrant behind!" Nort fired a shot into the air for good effect, though his flushed face made it clear he was out of breath from talking so much.

"She's not, argh! Never mind!" fumed Jaune, before he took off at a run back into the woods. Once he reached the treeline, he stopped in the shadows to see the guards replacing the defenses. As soon as he knew no one would be following him, he raced back towards the house.

With the town concerned and waiting for a Grimm attack that was never going to happen, Jaune was free to finish what he started. A part of him felt weird for thinking of this as some sort of job when it was obviously a lot more than that. He was finally going to get resolution, some damned closure on all these years of frustration.

All he was going to have to do was track her down as soon as he got back to the battlefield.

Already he could feel some of his Aura starting to seep back into his system, giving his legs the extra time to push forwards. Cinder would have no such luck, as regenerating an Aura was far easier than completely rebuilding one.

He followed his carved path of destruction right back to the remains of Cinder's garden, some embers and wisps of flame still licking at the grass. He moved straight through the clearing and to where the woods continued, stepping over the thrashed and ashed remains of trees to where he knew her trail would start.

... Which was also apparently where it ended as well.

Cinder had recovered, apparently.

"Hey," Cinder said casually, sitting on the freshly cut stump that Jaune had accidentally chopped. She was staring ahead, and didn't look at him.

"Why are you still here?" Jaune asked in disbelief, eyes darting around for the inevitable ambush.

"Why wouldn't I be, Jaune?" Cinder asked, her tone a combination of emptiness and annoyance.

Jaune paused, questions flooding through his mind as the adrenaline of battle finally subsided. Since they met Cinder had acted frustrated with some ignorance Jaune just couldn't perceive he had, as if there was always some in joke just didn't grasp. What - really, what - was going on?

She slowly looked up at the star filled sky, only visible thanks to Jaune making a hole in the canopy of leaves. She was bruised and battered, her brown vest highlighted with patches of darker shaded blood. In the light he could see a new addition; a large gash on her head from where he kicked her. He knew she must be in great pain, but she didn't seem to be bothered.

"I'm... I'm going to kill you," Jaune said. He didn't have time for questions, as interesting as they were. He had spent days playing around with her. It was time to end this chapter of his life. He walked over to her.

"Ah. Well, you would have done that anyways right? Besides, this is my home. I'd rather die here than in some river in the woodlands."

"So... you're just going to give up?" He heaved his sword, and her lack of action answered him.

"... remember when we had that deal?" she asked wistfully, unconcerned by his sword. "I'd only start answering important questions again if you answered mine?" Cinder tried to flash him a cocky smirk, but all she managed to show were her bloodied teeth. She coughed once and looked away, as if disturbed by reality's intrusion.

"A poor game," Jaune answered.

"Yeah well, you weren't a great sport about it."

"I guess not. Not that it matters anymore."

Cinder sighed, a frown tugging at her lips before it disappeared completely. "Yes, I suppose you're right. Well, I guess there's nothing left to say then. Go ahead and kill me."

That was when he saw it. Or rather, when he let himself believe it. There was no lie in her eyes, no falsehood in her voice. She had always been an exceptional liar, but behind intrigue and seduction. Now there was no make up, no schemes. She didn't have anything to hide behind... because she really had nothing.

This was her existence, her life. And she had been happy with it. The thought was alien, almost unthinkable. She had given up on her shadow war against humanity, and was perfectly content knowing she had lived out her last days properly.

His mind drifted towards the final moments of the fight, when she was trying to crush him with branches. At the time, he didn't think anything of it, but she really could have just torn him in half. Instead, she just tried to contain and lock him down in a wooden prison.

If that wasn't proof she had no more interest in killing, then it simply didn't exist.

"You're really done, aren't you?" asked Jaune, his voice barely a whisper.

"I told you Jaune, I'm tired. Or at least, I was." she snorted, "I can't say you were an expected appearance at this point in my life. It was interesting though."

Despite himself, Jaune found himself nodding. These past few days had been interesting, though not how he had expected. At the very least, he was going to end this fiasco the right way.

He leveled his blade at her heart this time, dead center and an inch away from her bosom. All he had to do was lean forwards. But the curiosity came back. He had tried to quell it long enough that he knew he would forever regret if he never found his answers.

"Do you regret it?"

"No. I don't." Cinder said, chin lifting slightly in the air in a small act of defiance. "I don't regret any of it. Everything I did, I did with purpose and a goal in mind. Ultimately, that goal was never reached but none the less I can't say I didn't try. I do, however, wish I had realized it was pointless far sooner." She sighed, "So much left to paint."

"And you, Jaune?" she asked, making Jaune uncomfortable at her complete disregard for his weapon. "Do you regret it all? Saving the world, losing your friends, entering the war of immortals?"

"No... I don't." Jaune said, his eyes dropping down to the ground.

Cinder closed her eyes as she waited for the final blow. She must have heard Crocea Mors drop to the ground beside her, along with Jaune, but she didn't react. She really didn't care. The two sat in silence for a long while, neither making a noise aside from laboured breathing.

Up above, clouds started to move in front of the stars and the chill of night finally fully settled in. It felt as though an hour had passed before someone finally broke the silence.

"How did you do it?" Jaune choked out, surprised by his own surge of emotions as he processed her words. "How did you just... leave it all in the past? How doesn't it follow you?"

"Well," she began, looking uncertain. "It does, clearly. You're proof of that. But for the most part I just... decided I wasn't going to stay on the same path even though I had been on it for so long."

"Even if it means abandoning everything you've worked for?"

"That's just it. At a certain point you've got to evaluate when it's time to stop. Mine came at the top of Beacon's ruins, and I'm going to assume you've just reached it."

Jaune clutched the sides of his head and shook it furiously, "Argh! But if I stop, then who'll take up the torch!? This world is a damned mess and I'm stuck picking up the pieces. Hell! I can't even kill the woman who started all this chaos!

"Hmph. The world's been fighting and dying since before either of us came to be. This is humanity's second try, after all."

"I... I need time to think about this." He looked up at Cinder, and then back down at where his blade lay. "All of this."

Without another word, Cinder slowly stood up and staggered down the newly formed path of destruction. With her hand grasping the side of her head, she slowly worked her way to her front door.

Stepping over a smoldering patch of grass, pushed her way inside and closed the door shut behind her.

Jaune watched her the entire way, bemused yet finding himself oddly relaxed. He hadn't forgiven her, he wasn't sure he ever really could. But seeing someone like Cinder change as she had and find purpose was oddly reassuring for him.

Maybe his life wasn't doomed to end in some ditch like every other huntsmen in history.

Standing up with a stretch, he slowly worked his way down that very same path Cinder took. Once he found himself standing at the edge of the clearing, he had to whistle at the amount of damage they had caused. Normally this kind of stuff didn't bother him, but seeing how badly mangled all the grass he had cut was enough to make his eyebrow twitch. Embers needed to be stamped out, holes filled in, and the numerous weakened and dying trees around them needed to be cleared.

And somehow, through all of it, something had managed to knock down his carefully stacked pile of logs.

"Welp." Jaune spoke to no one in particular as he tore off the remains of his armour. "A deal's a deal."

A/N: Hey guys! We breached 100 favourites with the last chapter! I'm actually so happy, it really fills me with a drive to write this story every week. And a whopping 177 follows! Incredible. You guys rock.

Big shout out to my Beta Reader: Darth Browser. The man is continuously pushing me to upload and do my best, so big round of applause!

Chapter 8

It was early in the morning when the door opened.

The brand new hinges he had put on it barely creaked as it gently swung open, yet Jaune still heard it. He placed a small gardening spade down as he rose from his crouched position, his work left unfinished.

"You're still here," said Cinder, her tone making it clear it was a statement rather than a question. She wore a plain dress, a faint green with threads of a brighter shade running in patterns on it.

"Yeah," came Jaune's response. Her eyes flickered down to his handy work around the yard. Every hole they had torn up had been filled, and he had tried to save as much of the grass as he could. It had been taxing to work through the night, even more so with the thin streams of illumination he could get from the moon. He was already exhausted, but when he saw the bruises laid bare on her arms and the gash on her head from where he kicked her, it nearly doubled.

Cinder almost seemed to look past him as she placed her hand on the door way and spoke.

"Do you want something to drink?" she asked softly.

"Yeah."

She stepped back inside, disappearing for a few seconds before reappearing with a tray with two glasses resting on top of it.

She slowly made her way across the grass before she stood at arms length of him and extending the tray towards him. Jaune took his glass and her own as she sat down on the ground next to him, before handing it back to her.

Sitting down next to her, he drank quickly and desperately.

Cinder didn't sip from hers.

"Thanks." Jaune said, extending the now empty glass towards her, though she didn't react. The tray was sat on the other side of her, so rather than reach over her to put it down he simply set it on the grass.

"So. We should probably talk," Jaune started, eyes watching carefully for how she would react.

"Oh," Cinder roused from whatever had dazed her, before getting more comfortable, "Yeah, sure."

It was only then that Jaune realized just what Cinder had sat in.

"Hey, you know you're gonna get your dress all dirty if you sit right there."

To his surprise, she gave him a small smile as a response.

It wasn't one of the usual smiles she gave him either. Those normally had a bit of bite or snark to them, a part of the verbal joust they found themselves in over the course of the last few weeks. This one seemed gentle and real.

"So." Jaune began, deciding not to beat around the bush, "last night."

Cinder just looked out into space with a blank look on her face, so Jaune continued, "How are you feeling?"

"I'll live. Yourself?"

"Likewise."

"Hm. Why did you stay?"

The question was sudden, though to be expected. Jaune let out a sigh, "Because I made a deal."

"You care about deals now?"

"I guess I do." Jaune winced, "Particularly after you... explained some things last night."

"Some things had to be explained, or no one else would know my reasons. You were about to kill me after all."

"Yeah. I was."

"And is that going to be a recurring theme?"

"N- no." Jaune stated, gaining more confidence as he continued, "It won't. I can't forgive you for what you've done but..."

He almost ended his sentence right there, but memories of how Cinder opened up and just explained everything so clearly flashed through his mind. "But I've decided that maybe I can move past it. For both our sakes."

A hum was all the response she gave him, shifting slightly as she started to play with the grass beneath her.

"You had a perfect chance to get vengeance. To 'set the world right' last night. Why didn't you?" she asked.

"Because I didn't think it would. Another death... we don't need another of those. Not from someone who's trying to make the world better."

A raised eyebrow appeared on her face. Good, he thought, that's an improvement.

"Oh? And who said I was trying to make it better?"

"If you aren't murdering and brutalizing innocents, then you're doing a better job of it than most people."

"Heh," she laughed.

"Not to mention," he added, "I think that you've kinda got the right way about this whole thing. The old world really is gone, isn't it? Not saying that makes it worthless, but it puts a lot into perspective."

"Indeed. Though I'll admit, I wouldn't have expected anyone to stay after last night."

Jaune shrugged, "Eh. I've been through more awkward scenarios before."

Cinder snorted, "Wow. Do I even want to ask?"

"Probably not."

"Oh?"

"I'm way too tired to do them any justice." Jaune smiled as Cinder made a noise of understanding.

His smile faded as he saw a serious look come over her face, not harsh but inquisitive. "I will say, you seem to have dropped this idea of vengeance rather easily. Most people don't process this kind of shift in perspective so quickly."

"Well. For the sake of transparency, I really haven't. And I'm sure you're still thinking about last night too. I know I will be for a while."

"I am. Though, it's hardly the first time I've come close to death. It's more that... well... I guess I am still thinking about last night." Cinder muttered.

As they spoke, Jaune noticed her words hadn't been as harsh as he had been expecting, nor his own. As violent and earth-shattering as

the previous night had been, Jaune found an unexpected respect for the woman next to him.

He had a long time to think about it as he worked through the night, and Jaune realized they were rather similar. At least, they had been. Cinder had the same drive as he did in a lot of ways, and while her goals had been horrible and monstrous, she pursued them in every way she could just as Jaune had done.

That she had been okay with opening up to her potential killer and life-long enemy about her own personal struggles at the end of a sword spoke miles about how her lifestyle had changed her. If she had stayed the same, she wouldn't have bothered trying to explain herself to him and instead have taken herself out in order to kill him.

And if someone like her could find peace, well. It was reassuring.

Jaune decided to break the silence that had started to form between them as he thought of her, while she continued to stare into space. "So. I woke up in Atlas."

"What?" was Cinder's surprised response.

"I'm telling you what I was doing when Salem died. That was apart of the deal we made, no?"

"... go on then."

"So, I woke up in Atlas. Or at least, what was left of it. It was Argus, actually. One of the Atlas soldiers who had survived the battle dragged me from the rubble of Salem's castle. Together with the few survivors who remained, a boat was patched together from what remained of the Mistral Navy and sailed all the way to the only fortified port city we knew we could reach. Weiss told me that when they made it to the city docks, everything was either burnt or destroyed. The walls had been torn down, and blood dripped off the docks."

He shut his eyes as grief welled within him. Too many people had to be mourned on that day. He shook his head and kept going, still clenching his eyes.

"When I woke up, they had taken shelter in some convenience store. The only ones who had made it from Beacon were myself and my old teammates Weiss and Yang. Everyone else..."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, Jaune."

"No, I think... I never told anyone anything about all this. I need to talk about it."

He heard her shifting beside him, clearly giving him her full attention.

"There was nothing living in that city other than the Grimm. Weiss took charge of the soldiers and led us north after we took everything of value we could get without dying. People were afraid, all of us grieving but Weiss-" he smiled at the thought of the former heiress. "She didn't stop. She knew of a small outpost far to the North, past Atlas. We were in the summertime, so the weather was far less harsh than during the rest of the year."

"Soon, we came close to Atlas. Weiss didn't bring us anywhere closer than eye-shot of it. Some people wanted to go and look for their families, mostly Atlas soldiers. Weiss let them go with some food, and I'm pretty sure they died out there. Every kingdom is a death trap now, but Atlas more than anywhere else. Things moved into those hollowed homes that shouldn't exist anymore, or so I heard. We eventually made it to a small mining outpost in the mountains. It was untouched and very confused. It had thick walls and a bunch of workers afraid for what was happening. With our numbers and Weiss' birthright, they let us in."

I stayed for a bit longer, but as the number of Grimm in our area thinned and thinned, I found myself antsy. Yang left. Weiss and I... we argued a lot. She wanted to stay put and wait out the apocalypse. She let in those who arrived of course, but never went out of her

way. I disagreed. But we parted as friends, and she gave me three crates of Dust I could use to help people out as I found them. At first I directed people to the outpost, but as I got further and further away I just ended up trading for the things I needed."

"Eventually I found my way back to our boat in Argus. I... I had family there. My... I didn't look for my sister and her family. Not even when I woke up. I didn't want to. Didn't need to."

The wetness that landed on his knees was surprising, and he thought for a brief moment that Cinder was crying. A hand touching his own face revealed that it was his tears. Finally he opened his eyes, finding that he had been letting them roll down his face without his knowledge.

Cinder had reached her hand up to wipe away a stray drop before pulling it back.

"So, yup. Heh, that's um. That's it I guess. The rest is just wandering in Vacuo and I-"

"Jaune." Cinder spoke, earning his rapt attention. "Thank you for... for telling me. That must have been hard. If you want to tell me, then I'd like to hear the rest someday."

"Are you sure?" Jaune shook his head to clear it of the fog of physical and emotional exhaustion. "It's not a happy story."

"Still."

"Then sure."

Jaune exhaled loudly as he looked up at the now brightly shining sun.

"Maybe one one day you can return and visit your friends at the outpost? It's not like you'll be doing anything else once I finish your painting."

"That'd be nice. It would be good to have a goal for once, right?" he smiled at her.

She smiled and nodded back.

"Wait," Jaune paused in realization, "You're still going to finish my painting?"

Cinder snorted, "Of course. Now I really can't back out of the deal, can I?"

Jaune laughed, standing to his feet and hoisting her up to hers.

"I guess you can't."

A/N: Hey guys! Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Some things to note and head off right away: No this doesn't mean Jaune is over the shit Cinder has done. No, Cinder isn't perfectly okay with Jaune trying to kill her. This is just the start of them processing what's happened and interacting as regular people rather than the unhealthy and weird deal they had going on beforehand.

Massive thanks to all the wonderful people who followed, faved, and reviewed! Reviews literally sustain me, I have no idea why. I didn't think this story would get much attention when I started writing it, but I'm glad you guys like it :)

Chapter 9

"You know, it would be easier to do this without you asking so many questions."

"Yeah, but what would be the fun in that?" asked Jaune, popping another grape as he watched Cinder work.

"I think the fun would be that I wouldn't be standing in the sun all day, watching you eat my food," Cinder grunted as she wove her hands in the air around her, making a slow dragging motion as though she was pulling an invisible cord.

"Eh. Overrated," he said around a mouthful.

"Well, I'm glad that at least one of us is living the life." Cinder rolled her eyes as she shifted her position in the garden, carefully stepping around the produce she was growing.

From all around her, small plants steadily rose out of the ground and grew. They expanded and snagged at her jeans, earning the ire of their maker. The going was slow though, and Jaune could tell that she was getting slightly annoyed with his questions.

And so he felt prompted to ask a new one: "Why can't you do this faster? Aren't you magical or something?"

Her eyebrow twitched for a second and Jaune nearly laughed at the irritation on her face before she turned away to focus on a stubborn group of plants.

"Well, I figured that it'd be best to take my time and let you get some rest in before it's your turn to pick all of this," she answered, though Jaune could practically *feel* her smirk.

"Wait- seriously?" He squawked.

"You eat a lot. It's fair."

"Hmph." Jaune pouted, turning his attention back to the project on his lap. It was one he had made many times before, given its simplicity and how easy it was to make materials.

What wasn't easy was all the patterns and forms of stitching he had to remember as he folded, wrapped and stuffed scraps of cloth together to form a pale imitation of a person.

It could barely even be considered an accurate doll, more like a head with two buttons for eyes with an unsettling mouth and neck-length dress.

Jaune swore as the latest stitching came apart the second he pulled at it.

Normally, trial and error was his method of creating toys like this, but this particular doll was proving to be particularly obstinate.

After his third attempt to get a proper stitching around the neck failed, Jaune tossed the half-finished cloth onto the small table he had set up next to himself under the nearby shade.

"Okay. I give up. These kids can make their own toys!" grunted Jaune with annoyance.

A quiet chuckle drew his attention though, and he could see Cinder smiling as she worked. He found himself smiling at the sight, though he wouldn't be lying if he said that this whole situation wasn't still strange in his eyes. The fact that she seemed completely relaxed around him, and that the two of them had reverted back to normal after their conflict.

No... reverted wasn't the right term for it. It was definitely something different than it was before. He wasn't sure he could consider Cinder a friend just yet but, but she certainly wasn't his enemy.

Seeing her do such mundane things would always surprise him though. At least, as mundane as watching a magical woman grow plants from nothing could be.

"Isn't it weird that you can grow plants?" he asked spontaneously, feeling the need to break the silence.

"Because of the fire?" she asked, not turning around.

"Because of the fire," he affirmed.

"Not really. Maidens embody their seasons in unique ways, though admittedly it does seem like there's a bit of an overlap." Cinder crouched low among the blooming foliage, sticking her hands into the soil as she continued to speak. "For example, Fall is the season of Harvests. I can grow plants, make them larger and encourage a bountiful harvest. It wasn't uncommon for Maidens to be worshipped as Demigods. The Winter maiden, on the other hand, controls passion and comfort. She can cause deep, restful sleeps and a sense of community among the people."

"But you can all shoot every element out of your hands?"

"I think 'shoot' is a childish way of saying it, but essentially."

Jaune made a hum of acknowledgement as he pondered this newfound information. "So, Ozpin just gave every maiden the same combat prowess? Weird, yet unsurprising."

"Yes, the man clearly lacked some... vision, in certain regards," said Cinder, earning a laugh from Jaune.

"Oh, don't I know it. He let me into Beacon," he said, shaking his head.

Cinder, for her part, looked confused as she dug her hands deeper and deeper into the soil. "How is that foolish? You're a capable

fighter, even though you weren't so when we first met. You can't blame yourself for such a power difference."

Jaune popped another grape into his mouth. "He threw me off a cliff with no Aura. I'm pretty sure he knew it too."

Cinder's eyes twitched for a second before turning them back towards the earth below her. "Ah. I see. Fair enough."

Before Jaune could add to it though, Cinder tore her hands from the soul in a trained and measured motion. As she pulled herself out, every already healthy fruit swelled to unbelievable levels. Jaune stared in awe as peaches the size of his fist swung from drooping branches nearby, fit to burst with juice.

Cinder, however, swayed a bit on her feet before steadying herself. The effort had clearly exhausted her, as she dragged herself over to Jaune's position in the garden.

Pointing to several large wicker baskets resting nearby, Cinder gave Jaune a meaningful look. "Switch."

Knowing he had a job to do, Jaune groaned and rose from his comfortable position and stepped into the beating sun. Cinder picked a freshly grown cluster of grapes from a nearby vine and dropped down into his seat, savouring the sweet sensation.

Jaune picked up a basket and moved to the edge of the garden where thick berries had sprouted from their bushes. His lack of options in clothing had never really been a problem before, but considering his shirt had been torn apart in the battle three nights ago he had been forced to wear his sweater.

Deciding he needed a distraction, Jaune turned to look towards Cinder, but found her fiddling with his discarded project. "Oh, don't mind that," he called. "Just a little something I'm working on."

"Your stitching is terrible, you know that right?" she answered, not looking up from the would-be doll.

Jaune frowned as he turned back to his work, "Yeah well, no one's complained about it so far."

Cinder made no reply, instead picking up his needle and thread. She immediately went to work, fiddling with the small thing with an intense look. Jaune was tempted to watch, but knew she would be annoyed with him if he did instead of work.

Nearly an hour passed before Jaune was close to finishing his harvest and Cinder finally spoke up.

"So, do you always take your clothes off when you work?" she said, causing him to look up at her. Her appraising look would have made a younger Jaune stammer and blush like a fool, but Jaune could tell by now when someone was simply teasing him.

"I mean, yeah. It gets stuffy in that thing an-"

"It's made me feel inspired." She cut off, suddenly standing up and walking quickly into the house without even looking at Jaune.

"Wh- How does that even work?" Jaune asked, bewildered.

She didn't answer until she came back outside with all of her painting essentials hanging off parts of her body. Setting up the canvas, she spared him a moment. "When I'm inspired, I must paint."

"Even in the middle of-"

"I **must** paint," she stated firmly, before turning her eyes to the canvas and unleashing a flurry of strokes with her brush on it.

Jaune laughed at her intensity, though she showed zero sign of having heard him.

He turned back to his work, feeling an unsettling cramp starting to form in his back from bending down for so long.

Though as Cinder started to hum gently as she worked, Jaune found staying silent about it wasn't so hard.

It took nearly half an hour more for Jaune to finish picking all the fruit, and as a result his hands were completely covered in juices, thorns and dirt. His body was sore, and it honestly felt like he had just done one of his regular workouts for the second time that day.

"How do farmers do this everyday?" wondered Jaune out loud as he stood up, wiping his hands on his jeans as he observed his hard work. Nearly half the garden was picked clean, the rest sitting pleasantly for now. The freshly plucked and pulled produce was sitting in five wicker baskets to his side.

His stomach growled at the sight of the tantalizing fruit, prompted to hunger by his delicious task. Surely, he was entitled to *something* to eat.

"Don't even think about it," came Cinder's voice, the woman in question standing up and collecting her paints.

Jaune gave her a blank look before picking a blackberry from one of the baskets and flicking it into his mouth.

Her eyebrow twitched. "Are you going to eat my fruit all day or are you going to take it inside?"

Nodding his head, Jaune slid his arms under the baskets, two apiece. The things were heavy, yet not so much that he would actually struggle with it.

They were however, unwieldy. Struggle as he might, Jaune just couldn't get the final basket into either of his hands.

"Just make two trips," came a suggestion from a feminine voice.

"No, that's stupid," was his reply, before stooping over and gripping the final basket with his teeth. Almost immediately, he regretted his choice. It turned out that his jaw was not, in fact, as conditioned as the rest of his body.

But he committed all the same. A snort from behind him caused him to turn, which caused outright laughter.

Cinder's laugh was just like the rest of her. Mature, not too loud but not delicate either. He hadn't heard it before, not in earnest. The snorts and chuckles they had shared weren't anything more than that. Amusement, more than anything else. A way to pass the time, to keep the silence from becoming awkward or stagnant.

But when she laughed? It felt alive. Jaune almost forgot what that sounded like. He must have heard it in his travels, but he had drowned it out. Too easy to stick to his stoic tempo.

It was refreshing to hear it though. Even as she gave him a sly look.

"Do you have a lot of practice being a pack mule, then?"

"Ofte pgt clothes. Sishas couf nebah pkligh."

Slinging her easel over her shoulder with a small leather strap, Cinder took the basket out from Jaune's mouth.

"Phew, thanks." Jaune said, working his jaw a few times. "But yeah, all the time. Seven sisters, and not one of them knew how to pack just *one* bag."

Cinder's eyebrows raised in surprise, "Seven? Why, your parents must have had rather-"

"Yeah, yeah, I know it. My mother was an animal, without a doubt."

Another laugh. "How did you survive?"

The duo walked towards the house, laden with their work. Though Jaune was carrying the most stuff, Cinder looked woefully unbalanced, with an easel, a basket and a canvas all on one side. Twisting the knob with the tips of his fingers, Jaune pushed the door open and stepped aside so Cinder could walk through first.

"I played outside. A lot. Came in handy on the road though. Taught myself to camp out there. And by camp, I mean I built fires and ate berries until I got sick and my sisters had to drag me back home."

The walked into the kitchen and set the baskets down, Cinder going ahead and leaning her tools against a wall in her living room. The portrait hastily had a cloth thrown over it, to prevent Jaune's peaking eyes.

"Sounds like a wonderful youth," Cinder said as she walked back into the room, looking a bit down at the thought. The change raised questions in Jaune, but he knew better than to push. They were sticking to safe, fun topics these past few days. Whatever bad blood between them that remained was being dealt with, but that didn't make them each others's confidant. Instead, he opted for an easier route.

"Yeah... hey, you know you don't have to cover that up right? I know what I asked for."

"It's not finished," Cinder simply responded, cleaning off a potato from a basket before starting to cut it into wedges.

"So?" Jaune said, taking another one out and starting to do the same. He hadn't even bothered to ask what they were eating, but so far Cinder had failed to disappoint.

" So, it means I'm not going to show you it until it's perfect. It's better this way, trust me. It also means you can't ask me to change anything once it's done. My perfect image, if you will."

Jaune sighed, though he was secretly grateful to see whatever that layer of melancholy had been peeled away soon enough.

"Fine. Keep your secrets. At least tell me what we're eating tonight, then."

"That-" she spoke in a clipped tone as she plucked Jaune's freshly cut wedges away from him- "is irrelevant. You decided to snack out there, so you can wait until I'm good and ready before you come snooping around here for food."

"Wh- for one berry?!" He cried, aghast.

"Quit your whining. I'm still going to feed you. Now, I need you to run into town and pick up some of my orders from the butchers. We need meat for tonight and I'm getting sick of vegan meals."

Town. The thought hit him in a way he didn't expect. It had been when he had nearly... locked himself into his path. He shook his head, unable to truly clear away the uncomfortable thoughts that had fallen on his chest.

"Sure... yeah, I'll be back, no problem," he muttered, stepping outside and out towards the path, finding it was becoming more and more visible with each day.

Even with his gardening, the front yard still had patched holes and shrapnel buried beneath blades of grass. The gaping hole in the treeline was painfully obvious too, a constant reminder of what he had nearly done.

Killing her would have been the right thing to do, but maybe that was the problem. He wasn't an avatar of justice. No one was. As a bird fluttered from one broken branch to another, he wondered if he would regret his choice.

A sharp rap on a window pane shocked him out of his stupor, and he turned to see Cinder standing in the window before she opened the

front door.

"You forgot this," she called, tossing an object through the air.

He caught it with one hand and looked down at it.

It was his small doll, perfectly stitched together with beautiful patterns.

"Give it to some kid who looks like they need it."

Jaune smiled at her before turning back to the path.

No. He didn't think he would regret it at all.

A/N: Hey guys! Hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Sorry it took so long to get this one out. Life, school and holidays really took one out of me. But now the semester has started, and for some reason having over 200 pages of readings due each week has filled me with an urge to write! Glad to be back in the saddle, that's for sure.

Chapter 10

"Oi, Thend, run up ahead and let the healers know we're coming! We should be close now." came a shout, breaking through the surrounding woodlands.

Jaune stopped right in front of the path leading to Angort, his hand coming to an easy rest on his sword. Slowly easing backwards into the treeline, he cast a sharp eye through the underbrush to see if he could catch the source of the noise.

Soon enough he saw a young boy sprint right past him, breathing heavily and carrying a rattling quiver of arrows on his back.

The boy clearly knew where the village was, so odds are it was one of the groups they sent out every day. Forcibly relaxing the tension in his shoulders, Jaune stepped out from his spot and on to the road. His hand didn't leave his sword, though. After all, it never hurt to be ready for trouble, especially in these times.

Even then, he removed it a second later when the owner of the voice came around a bend in the woods, accompanied with a wagon and a couple hunters dragging it. Game hung on their pelts and off the wagon, though three of them carried a makeshift pallet made from bows to carry a comrade of theirs.

"How are things over there?." Jaune said calmly, though not quietly. The party stopped for a second to look up at who had spoken, before one of the men bearing the pallet recognized him. "Ah, Jaune! Give us a hand, will you lad?" cried Ivar, the hunter looking surprised yet relieved to see him.

Jaune nodded and jogged towards the group, shifting some of the weight from the front of the pallet into his hands. He probably could have carried the front half on his own to give Ivar a break, but knew not to cross that line. People looked after their own out here.

"What happened?" Jaune asked, glancing over his shoulder to the groaning man they carried.

"The fool, got gored by one of the stags out here. Was a city boy when he came here, and some people just never get used to how aggressive these animals can be." Ivar looked dour for a moment before laughing, "At least ya' got em' though, didn't ya' boy!"

The man, clearly not a young boy, moaned in pain again, clutching his stomach. Ivar snorted before flicking his head at the cart.

"Stabbed the bastard right in the eye."

Jaune gave a grunt of approval. Civilians had a hard time keeping their eyes on the prize in tough situations. That he'd managed to finish the thing was to be commended, even if he'd nearly gotten himself killed in the process.

The man didn't have his aura unlocked, or Jaune could have healed him then and there. Though, that was probably for the best. Projecting your soul outwards with Aura was a surefire way to attract Grimm to you. A whole town full of such souls would be shaking the wasps nest.

Adjusting his grip, they plodded down the road towards the village. The game in these parts was clearly plentiful, as they seemed laden down with plenty. It almost seemed like too much for one day, in his opinion. If they hunted too much too quickly, then the game would all be scared off.

He thought to mention it, but one look at the worried faces of the party was all it took for him to keep his mouth shut. Maybe he'd ask about it the next time he was in town, or once this was all sorted.

Conversation stayed quiet as they trotted towards the gates, the guard seeing the state of the men and waving them through without a second thought. Though Jaune didn't know where to go, Ivar guided them well enough through the town, passing by whispered

concerns and going to the far side to where a large longhouse sat. Standing in the entrance was a middle-aged woman with greying hair.

"Come on then, I've been waiting for him!" the woman barked, stepping inside and beckoning them in and up the steps. Carefully, they maneuvered the hastily built contraption through the doorway and into the hut.

Jaune had been inside more than a few makeshift hospitals since he started to wander, but he had never seen one so organized. Most of the time, it was just midwives doing what they could. This place was clearly run by a professional, despite the clear lack of proper medical technology. The place was big, but tightly packed with clean beds. That only a few were empty was a good sign.

"Over here." The woman said curtly, her narrow features focused on the wound even as they lowered him on to the bed. Two young girls, probably assistants, ran up to him and began to slowly pull the bows out from under him, handing them off to the hunters.

Soon, they were all standing around quietly as the healer began to cut away at the layers around his wound, tossing scraps of clothing to the ground as the two girls scurried around her.

It only took one sharp glare at them from the healer to let them know they were no longer needed, leaving them to shuffle awkwardly out of the longhouse. The men jogged off towards the entrance of the village to help their comrades unpack the hunt, though Ivar stayed behind.

"Didn't expect to still see you around, lad," the man said, not sounding at all displeased with the idea.

"Me neither," Jaune said, giving him an easy smile. It was rare he had recurring conversations with people, and Jaune was surprised how much he missed it.

"Ha! Women do that do us, eh?" And just like that, he wasn't so sure he did.

"Hey, that's not exactly-" he began, but Ivar had already started to run off, but not without calling back.

"Looked to me that ya' memorized the way to her house pretty fast!" Ivar called, laughing as he turned a corner and slipped away.

Jaune felt an uncharacteristic blush creep up his neck at the insinuation. Gods, what was with this town? Admittedly, he felt the temptation to run after the man but decided against it. Ivar would probably just laugh at him even harder for it.

Rolling his eyes, Jaune began retracing his steps through the town. While not a large town as some he'd seen, it was clear it had grown rapidly in a short amount of time. Buildings were squeezed tightly together, with only small and narrow alleys rarely breaking up the wall of houses. The street wasn't that much better, as Jaune weaved his way down the cramped street, dodging around groups of townsfolk chatting away.

Soon, he found himself back in the marketplace, eyebrows raising at the clamour as an unexpectedly large amount of people haggled and bartered in the square. It seemed like the number of shoppers had nearly doubled since the last time he had been in here.

Sighing, he drew out the small notepad Cinder had given him, with a small list of errands scribbled into them. It took him a few seconds to squint at the items as he tried to make heads or tails of the words.

Cinder had atrocious handwriting. Huh. Who knew?

Slowly, he worked his way from one end of the market to the other, slowly gathering what she ordered while he checked out the stalls around him. New stalls had sprung up, some with rather interesting products he hadn't seen in ages. Someone had clearly gotten their hands on a large supply of toothpaste, and the stuff was selling like

hotcakes as people swarmed the stand. A man so fat that it looked like he didn't have a neck sat in a lawn chair by his stand, which was essentially just a rack filled with a motley assortment of weapons, though most looked to be of decent quality. A few even looked to be huntsmen-grade.

The arms-dealer saw him looking and waved him over, not saying anything as he gestured for Jaune to take a closer look. He raised an eyebrow as the man tiredly waved a fan in his face, despite sitting under shade. That, was provided by two heavily customized Atlesian Knights holding umbrellas over him, though their eyes were locked permanently on the weapons rack.

Jaune hadn't seen those in ages, and if he was honest, it was far more interesting to him than any of the weapons.

When he asked the man about it, he laughed heartily, "Good sir, you have a keen eye indeed. These bodyguards of mine were assembled from none other than the remains of those present at the Fall of Beacon!"

The reminder of that brutal event was all it took to make Jaune frown deeply, which the other man noticed.

"I-I found them, and decided to rebuild them!" The man stammered under Jaune's withering look, "I rerouted their command systems to run on old AK-130 code, making them independent of that foolish 'hive-mind' Atlas was so fond of!"

Jaune leaned forward and inspected the vivid paintjobs completely covering the once pristine white armour. The logic was sound, in a way. Why leave valuable technology sitting around when you could make it work for you?

"Not a horrible idea, though I have no idea how you power them. The Dust for that just isn't around anymore."

"Ah, I'm working on that. So far, I just use them as displays and toss them in the wagon when I'm not. Been looking into some way to harvest a substitute form of energy, but I've had no luck so far."

The man had such a determined look on his face, that Jaune had to smile. It was surprising how quickly he paced and waved his hands as he spoke. It was rare to find a man eager to move forwards nowadays, even though greed was probably his motivation.

Some other customers were looking keenly over his shoulders though, and Jaune could tell it was his time to move on.

"Well, I hope you solve it for all our sakes." Jaune called as he walked off. The thought of a world no longer dependent on Dust was one to aspire to, even if it was nearly impossible. At the very least, the SDC was no longer around to stonewall research funds.

Digging himself back into the small crowd, Jaune took to touring tables until he came across a familiar face.

"Temptation! You're looking slightly less grumpy than last time!" came a cheerful call as he neared the stand, bright eyes drawing him forwards. It came from a busty woman with long brown curls and two emerald eyes looking at him with mirth.

Putting on an easy and practiced smile as he walked towards her, Jaune desperately wracked his brain for her name. He'd really tried to improve his memory over the years, but he was still a trainwreck when it came to names.

The woman, thankfully, spared him the torture, "It's Bella, we met a ways back. Remember? You hit on me and I almost called my husband?" She leaned forwards, letting her locks drop onto her ample cleavage.

Jaune, however, had grown up around Yang and so his eyes firmly locked on hers. "You must be mistaken, I only remember the quality of your wares and service," he said, tone polite as he glanced

around the stall, bearing a small range of poor to actually decent quality fabrics. The latter part surprised him, however. A lot of classical weaving and loom techniques had been lost when the kingdoms industrialized, so being set back so hard led to most villages struggling to create the basic necessities.

Bella merely snorted, "You're damn right I got quality goods..." she muttered before crouching behind her stall. Jaune raised a hand to the side of his head as he looked towards the sky, praying for something to save him from strong women he didn't understand.

Predictably, the Gods kept their hands clean of the trainwreck that was Remnant, and Bella popped back out with a large bundle held in her two hands. It was neatly folded and covered in a thin, slightly waxy paper held together with a string tied into the shape of a bow.

"Okidokes," Bella said, dusting the "Here we are. Most of this stuff was still with the caravan's until yesterday, so it's good you stopped by when you did," she commented, quickly sifting through order forms in a small ledger.

"Thank you," Jaune said with a nod, reaching over to take the package out of Bella's hands. She, however, danced it out of his reach without even looking up from her task.

"Ah ah ah! Not so fast." she tutted, "first I have a question for you. Or, a few actually."

Jaune lifted an eyebrow. "And why exactly should I answer them?"

"Eh. Consider it a downpayment on her next order."

"I have a feeling I'm not going to get a choice in this matter, am I?" he sighed.

"Tragically, you don't. Besides, I figured you would *love* the chance to talk with me for a bit longer." Bella smiled lazily, finally looking up from the ledger to flutter her eyes at him.

Jaune just snorted.

"Sure, I'm sure you have a lot of stories about your time with your *husband* you'd like to share."

Bella pouted, "Hmph. You're no fun. Can't take a little teasing?"

"Not when you tried to make me eat your wedding ring last time."

She laughed, waving him off with what was her ring bearing hand, ironically. "Fair enough. But yeah, how exactly do you know Autumn?" The question was asked innocently enough, but Jaune still felt his muscles tense up.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked cautiously, mostly to get a feel for how she was going to keep probing for information. Most likely, it was for some inane reason like feeding a rumour mill, but he couldn't help himself from choosing his words carefully.

The curse of experience.

"Well, I never see her with *anyone* in town, except for when she comes in to town to buy things. She's pretty secluded, though she got sick once and stayed with the healer for a few days. Just figured there was probably an interesting story behind how you two met."

Jaune closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. Yes, it really was an interesting story. One full of murder, love, heart-break, plots, monsters and a cutting hopelessness slowly eating away at everyone in the world until a final battle for the fate of the world.

"We ran into each other a few times in the past, even studied together for a while. She's... been there for almost every important event in my life, though not always when I wanted her to be. I thought she was dead until I found her here."

"So you've just been here, catching up all this time?" Bella asked, apparently having bought his hilariously vague story. Though, murky

backstories were common enough. People didn't like to remember life before the fall.

"Sort of. I do housework and heavy lifting for her, and in exchange she's painting a picture for me."

She made a noise of understanding before suddenly leaning forwards and leering. "Heavy lifting, huh? So you two are a thing then?"

Jaune spluttered in indignation, "Wh- No we are not! Why does everyone keep saying that?!"

Bella rolled her eyes. "Because you aren't staying in town, and you're with her in the woods?"

Jaune stared at her blankly.

"Alone?" she continued, looking at him in confusion.

"We are not sleeping together, thank you very much. I camp in the woods."

"Oh..." Bella said, deflating somewhat with a small frown.

"Sorry to burst your bubble, now if that's everything...?" Jaune prodded, sticking one hand out for the package.

Bella pulled it a bit further away, causing his eyebrow to twitch.

"Then what exactly are you?"

The question made Jaune stop in his tracks. And it was a good one indeed. The two of them had made-up of a sorts, agreeing to leave their hatred for the other in the past. It wasn't easy, and sometimes he would feel his anger spike when he looked at her.

... And other times she would make him laugh, and he'd be happy to be around her. She wasn't how she had been in the past, her

murderous and conniving self becoming diluted with time to snark and a temper. Jaune couldn't say he hated being around her now, and he felt himself less and less jumpy with each day he spent near her. She was an acquaintance? A business partner? He wasn't sure what to call their relationship.

"She's a friend," he said quickly, as though the word would bite him for his treachery.

It was weird. It didn't really feel like wrong once it was out there.

"Shame. But at least someone's talking to her. It's a wonder she hasn't lost it out there with only her paintings for company."

She probably had, if Jaune were being honest. Was it possible to drive a crazy person sane?

"Thanks for being a good sport," Bella said, interrupting his thoughts by placing the package into his waiting hands.

"No problem." Jaune replied, feeling more than a bit drained with all the socializing he had done. "Have a good day Bella, I'll see you around."

"For sure! See you at the festival!"

Jaune stopped in his tracks, turning back to look at the vendor. "Festival?"

She looked back up at him, surprised. "Yeah? Didn't you know? It's nearly time for the harvest festival."

"No, sorry. I arrived in Vale in the Spring, so I haven't been in any of the towns for it so far."

"Ah, don't worry about it then. For the most part, it was something only the most backwater or fringe towns did. But hey, Angort used to be a backwater! I don't know if it's the same in other villages, but now's the time when the last harvests are being pulled in. People

from all around the woods come to town for a big festival and feast. Helps people make connections and remember the sense of community that makes us strong... or something like that."

So, that explained the sharp increase in population around here, as well as the abundance of game being brought in. It was probably to trade and use in the feast.

"When is it?" Jaune asked, surprised to find himself slightly excited by the idea. It had been a long time since he'd seen a real party or festival. Atlas couldn't afford to have them, neither could Vacuo.

He'd only been to one in Mistral and that was... pagan, to say the least.

"It's in two days! With the Grimm starting to fade out in this area, more and more people can make it into the town! This may be the biggest one yet, so bring an appetite." The woman beamed, before her eyes flashed with an idea, "Oh! And Autumn! She never comes, not even once! You're our best shot of seeing her have fun."

Jaune smiled and nodded at the girl before stepping away, off in search of the next item on his list.

"I'll try!" he said.

And to his surprise, he realized he meant it.

Chapter 11

"You're back," Cinder noted as the door creaked open, not even looking up from her work as she slowly dragged a brush across its canvas.

"Yup. Would have been back sooner if the lines weren't so huge," Jaune said, draping his various purchases over a chair by the fireplace.

"Oh?" Cinder raised an eyebrow at that.

"Yeah, Bella said it was-" he hesitated. *Why did he hesitate?*

A short silence stretched before Cinder broke it, an eyebrow arching up as she tilted her head slightly towards him with her eyes still on the painting. "Bella said...?"

He snapped out of his brief daze, looking at her dumbly as he couldn't really find the words. He had seen her not even two hours ago, and yet she looked so different. And even then, it wasn't like anything he hadn't seen before. Her hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, stray hairs poking out from the rushed knot. Wrapped around her chest was a smock, fresh paint clinging to her cheek from where she must have rubbed it.

"They, um-" he swallowed dumbly as she rolled her neck, exposing her soft skin tones towards him. "She said that they just had a bunch of traffic recently. Safer roads and all that."

Cinder made a noncommittal sound as Jaune started to pack away the various purchases, wracking his head for why he was acting like such a ditz. Why had he even bothered to lie about it, anyways? It wasn't like Cinder cared about the festival, as Bella had said. And yet, he had floundered like a fish for no discernable reason.

It wasn't as if the question was weird, right? Gods, he was in his thirties for crying out loud! Almost all of his friends had been girls, and he couldn't even ask one to hang out.

"Well, let's hope that we don't have too many intrepid explorers around these parts," Cinder said with a snort, blowing a loose strand out of her face.

"Oh, a little company never hurt anyone," Jaune said with a shake of his head, "Besides, maybe you'd benefit more from speaking to new people."

"Jaune," She spoke his name, and to his confusion he felt a bit of hope at that. He wasn't sure towards what, however. "Are you calling me a shut-in?"

Jaune fought to keep a neutral face as she raised her attention to him and narrowed her eyes. Or, at eye at least. She wore her eyepatch as always, but Jaune couldn't help but imagine she was giving him the stink eye.

"No no, of course not," Jaune said, smiling. "More like a hermit."

Light flecks of blue paint splashed against his shirt as a response, adding some very visible colouring to the admittedly stained apparel.

"Wh- Hey!" Jaune squawked, earning a wide smirk from Cinder who had turned her eyes back to the painting.

"Bad manners to insult a lady like that," Cinder said simply.

Jaune grumbled as he weakly rubbed at one of the stains. And surprising no-one, it simply spread. Giving a groan of dismay, he tore the shirt off and tossed it over a chair as he walked past Cinder.

Her eyes widened as he did, eyes flickering between him and the chair. Jaune wasn't surprised, and sort of pleased he had gotten a

reaction. If she was going to get his shirt dirty, then he was going to share the wealth with her furniture.

Grabbing an apple, he took a large bite into it and turned his attention to the meal Cinder had prepared: a small bowl of coleslaw, accompanied with some caramelized mushrooms and bowl of thinly sliced ginger. He had no idea why she did it, but in Jaune's time with Cinder, he learned she adored the stuff.

He couldn't stand it, but recently he had tried to eat just a little bit of it each meal. Not that Cinder would have felt weird if he didn't, but it just felt polite.

Pots and pans cluttered the kitchen table, as well as the counter as he eyed the results of the last two days of cooking. He knew she'd make him drag it down to the river to clean them all any day now, but if he could avoid it he would.

That being said, his stomach rumbled loudly, unsated by his current snack.

"Hrp-" Jaune swallowed, "You want those meats now? It'll be a late lunch but I can probably cook em' if you want."

"That would be great, actually. I'm currently in the mood to paint, and don't quite feel like cooking anymore," Cinder called through the door.

Nodding along, Jaune got to work, tossing a few logs into the stove and finding one of the few remaining clean pans to work with. Stepping back into the room, he noticed Cinder's eyes linger on him for a few seconds before he looked her in the eye with a raised eyebrow.

She looked right back down at her painting.

Huh.

Jaune shook his head and went to a small little ring hanging off the side of his bag. Hanging off of it were several small useful tools, like a multitool and a bottle-opener. One of them was a fire starter, and so he unhooked the whole lot. Stooping for a second, he picked up one of the wax bundles and stepped back into the kitchen.

In a matter of minutes he had a fire going and pork loin sizzling in the pan. He wasn't the best at actual *meals*, but his sisters had always insisted he work the grill when their dad was away. When you had that many women demanding something from you, he figured it was probably in his best interests to actually do at least one thing right.

Unbidden, a tune from the annals of history worked its way into his mind, and Jaune found himself whistling lightly to the song "Baby Don't Drink My Milk" by the Achieve-men. The blasted, infernal song was half as old as him by this point and he still couldn't get the thing out of his head forever.

A thousand faces, hundreds of locations and countless attempts on his life and the one thing he infallibly remembered was a dumb song. At least he was cursed with a song that was catchy.

With a flick of his knife he turned one of the loins, trying to keep the juice in before the sound of humming cut through his concentration.

Turning slightly without breaking his tune, Jaune saw Cinder bobbing her head along to his slightly-off tune beat, mumbling the words as she picked up a different brush and dipped it into the palette.

She had a really... pleasant voice, Jaune had to admit. It wasn't beautiful, just pretty and warm. Cinder would have throttled him if he said it, but it was was something he'd love to hear more.

Experimentally, he opened his mouth and took the plunge.

"Bay-beh!" Jaune shouted, making Cinder audibly jump. When no fire came, he continued:

"I gotta get **stronga-h!** " he bellowed, off-tune and throwing his head in the air as he flicked another piece of meat over.

And to his immeasurable surprise and pleasure, he heard a response.

"Stay awaaayyyyyy from *mah MILK-ah!* " Cinder half sang, half laughed.

Jaune found himself laughing too, shaking his head as he internally sighed in relief. It had been a long time since he had let his hair down and just laughed like that with someone. No jokes, no barbs. Just fun.

Cinder's mirth cleared after his, though she was smiling brightly as she casually brushed the canvas.

"So," Jaune began, flicking small bits of pepper onto the meat.

"So," Cinder echoed.

"Achieve-men?"

"I was looking to conquer the world, Jaune. It didn't mean that I was deaf to it." Cinder rolled her eyes, "That blasted song played *everywhere* for that entire summer."

"Right? Now imagine a chorus of sisters shouting every single line whenever it played. Every. Single. Time," Jaune bemoaned.

Cinder, for her part, was highly amused. "Ah, sounds like a tragic backstory."

"Truly. I'm surprised I wasn't driven to villainy," Jaune said, though his lips sucked together like a lemon as he immediately regretted his choice in words.

Thankfully, Cinder just sighed and shook her head, failing to hide a smile, or perhaps just letting it shine through. "If only. Sadly, I don't

think you'd have made the cut."

"Oh? And why is that?" Jaune asked, putting on an affronted air.

"You have no flare. Villainy takes style."

Okay. That one hurt. "I have plenty of style!"

"Hmm, yes, I'm sure." Cinder cast a glance to his discarded shirt. "Sadly, stains aren't in season right now."

Jaune scoffed, feeling a bit self-conscious at the jab towards his shirt. He just didn't have a lot of options on the road! Big, comfy clothes that didn't get in the way of a fight were rare, was all. "And what is, exactly?"

"Me, of course." Cinder preened.

"Ugh. Terrible," Jaune groaned.

The duo fell into a comfortable silence until Jaune placed two pieces of meat onto the one clean plate left and a bowl he had found. Taking the bowl for himself, he set the two dishes on the table as Cinder was drawn in by the pleasant aroma.

Unable to contain himself, Jaune barely had time to pile food onto his plate before digging in, marvelling once again at Cinder's skill with produce.

Cinder raised an eyebrow at his ravenous hunger, but Jaune raised one right back at her as he poured himself a glass of water and drained it.

Shaking her head, Cinder started to calmly cut into her portion. Forking a piece of meat into her mouth, her eyes lit up briefly before allowing a small smile onto her face.

"My, I didn't expect you to be quite so good at this. This is possibly the juiciest I've had in years," Cinder said appreciatively.

"Well, I've been handling meat for most of my life-" he cut off, feeling a bit of heat creep up his neck as she dragged her eyes from his chest up to his eyes.

"Oh, I'm sure you have," Cinder dragged out, her classic sultry tones slipping out with it.

"That's not what I meant at all!" Jaune slapped a hand to his forehead, much to her amusement.

"Mmmh..." Cinder put another forkful in her mouth, and to Jaune's already fading embarrassment, mirth still danced in her eyes.

He opened his mouth to respond in turn, but paused when he saw her tongue dart out and lick clean a bit of stray coleslaw.

Feeling his mind freeze as he stared at her glistening lips, Jaune clicked his mouth shut and shook his head. Cinder looked at him in confusion, but Jaune just focused on his meal.

Cinder was attractive, for sure, but this was getting ridiculous! He wasn't some hormonal teenager anymore, and yet he was floundering. Between wanting to kill each other and whatever *this* was? Jaune wasn't sure which was worse.

Jaune cursed his fried brain and desperately searched for some new topic he could distract himself with.

After a few moments of thinking, he came up blank. But just as the silence was starting to stretch into the uncomfortable, Cinder broke it mercifully.

"So, did you give the doll to anyone?" she asked, waving a fork casually in the air as she spoke.

"Hm? Oh, not yet. I normally hold on to them until I go to a new town or tribe. Helps settle tensions," Jaune answered simply, though cringed slightly at the deadpan look Cinder shot him.

"Seriously? After all my hard-work on that one, you're going to give it some brat on the other side of Vacuo?" she asked, looking thoroughly unimpressed.

"Well, as opposed to some brat close to home?" Jaune shot right back, surprised at the irritation he saw on her face.

"Precisely. How am I supposed to know if they lost it when I can't even see it?" Cinder rested her chin in her palm, lazily swinging the utensil back and forth.

"That's kind of the point in giving something away, Cinder. You... give it away." Jaune explained as though to a child, grinning when she sat back heavily and blew up at the strands peeking over her eyes.

It has a good sign she was flustered, he had noticed. Or aggravated. Either was entertaining to him though. He kind of got a rush when he ekked out emotion other than smug or sarcastic.

"Seems foolish. I want to *know* the kid is enjoying it," Cinder grumbled.

"Then I can be sure to give it away here. You really did a great job with the stitching and design, by the way. Way better than anything I could ever do."

"Ah that, it's something I picked up in my youth." Cinder added nonchalantly, cleaning up the rest of her plate.

"Could you show me some time? I'd love to learn," Jaune said, standing up and clearing away both plates.

"Sure, though you'll need to adapt the techniques I use," Cinder agreed, dabbing a small cloth on her lips.

"Why's that?"

She set the napkin down and waggled her fingers. On her one hand.
On her one arm.

"Ooooooh. Right."

"Yeah. Right."

That woman was incorrigible, to be sure. It was nice though.
Someone with a bit of snap but not afraid of the truth was good mix.

It really was a shame not too many people got to see it, though...

"Hey Cinder..." Jaune began uncertainty, before steeling himself and pressing on, "There's this festival next week and I was-"

A sharp knock on the door interrupted him, and Cinder stood with a sigh. Jaune's words died in his mouth as she walked away from him, his eyes unwittingly glued to her figure as she slipped through the doorway.

He could have sworn she was swaying her hips.

Realizing his suddenly dry mouth, Jaune finished the pitcher of water and took his glass to the doorway, leaning casually against the wall dividing the main living area from the entrance. Eavesdropping wasn't the right word for what he was doing, more like... he was listening in.

For threats. Danger. Yes.

"-all, but we just wanted to make sure that everything was alright out here. What with the scare the other night, then the festival and all." A masculine voice came through the door, though a cough as he spoke told Jaune there was at least a second person with the man.

"That's very kind of you, Garth, but you don't need to worry about me. I can more than handle myself," Cinder answered, with the tone that Jaune could recognize as patient suffering.

"Ah. Yes, yes. I forget you were a Huntress once. Also, I've heard a rumour that there was a man lurking around here...?" this Garth fellow asked.

"A friend of mine. You need not worry."

"Good... good... " the man muttered, and Jaune sipped at his water with a smirk as he listened to the man fumble through a conversation with the mildly intimidating woman.

"If that's all-?" Cinder prodded when it was clear the man was searching for something to talk about, and he could have sworn he heard the third person there snicker.

"Oh! Uh, right well, yes. No!" Garth stuttered and stumbled with his words. "I was just wondering, if maybe you'd accompany me to the festival this year? It would be a pleasure to have you with me, Autumn."

Jaune's heart fell. Not that he thought she would actually go with the man, but mostly because he had a feeling he was about to get the same answer once he asked. Platonic or not.

"No thank you, I already have plans for the evening. Is there anything else?" Cinder asked, her voice a little bit softer with the rejection.

"Oh." The man sounded crestfallen, "No, no don't worry about it. Maybe next year I'll see you there."

No more words were exchanged as the door closed and Jaune heard the two shuffling through his torn lawn.

He heard Cinder sigh as she stepped around the corner, nearly bumping into him and startling.

"Don't you know better than to eavesdrop?" she asked, eyebrow arched.

"Eh. More like backup, not that you needed it," he gestured with his head towards the duo, though he couldn't see them through the wall. "Happen often?"

Cinder blew a strand of hair out of her face, "Often enough. He's a nice man but a bit..."

"Old-fashioned?"

"No he's... soft. Not very hardy, I think. It'd probably break his heart the first time I made a joke at his expense."

Jaune clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth before finishing his water and straightening up. It was a bit tough to stamp down his disappointment that she wasn't even considering the festival this year, but he was an adult. He would manage.

"Welp, I think I'd best get back to work. Was thinking about cleaning out the gutters around th-"

"Jaune?" Cinder cut off, looking unsure for the first time since he'd known her. Anger, violence, sadness, sass, peace, laughter, joy, and even a small burst of melancholy... but never actually anxiousness.

"Yeah?" Jaune answered, feeling a surge of discomfort at the intensity of the room.

"I was wondering if... you would be interested in accompanying me to the festival this year?" Cinder asked, biting her lip before she hurried to add, "as friends, of course."

Jaune tried his hardest to stomp on the joy in his gut at her suggestion, but failed and let a bright smile shine across his face.

"I'd love to."

And yet, he couldn't help but feel a bit sad she had clarified.

Chapter 12

Out of all the things Jaune thought would bankrupt him, he never placed 'buying new clothes' at the top of that list. The glare he had given the tailor was worthy of Weiss Schnee herself, and Jaune took some small pleasure at how the man trembled as he robbed Jaune blind.

Seriously, the tailor made some fine clothes, especially considering his available resources, but that Jaune had to trade *three whole Dust crystals* for an outfit was absurd. Jaune could only sigh at the price, just grateful that someone had taken his order so close to the festival. He shoved the door away, the outfit tucked away in his basket as he stepped off onto the street.

He was almost immediately slammed into by a family of eight, all chatting animatedly between themselves as they shoved him up back up against the door. Irritation flashed through him as one girl skipped merrily right on his foot, but faded away as the happy family melted back into the herd of people shuffling in to town.

Jaune felt a pang of sadness as he watched them, knowing all too well how similar to his own family they had been. Hell, the whole festival scene was reminiscent of their trips to Shion village when he had been a little squirt.

Adjusting his grip on his basket, Jaune pushed their memories to the side. He had lost and mourned, there was no sense in doing it in the middle of the street. Shoving off the door once again, this time keeping an eye out for stampeding families, Jaune weaved his way through the packed town.

The beautiful smell of cooking food hung over the crowds as crowds of cooks rushed too and fro in the town square, prepping as much food as possible before the festival could start. Some people rushed

straight to the makeshift kitchens to lend a hand as soon as they arrive, others hauling carts of produce in non-stop.

That there was any food at all left in the area was a bit unbelievable to Jaune, but he figured that the farmers and hunters probably knew that better than he did. Even if he was a bit skeptical on how they would feed everyone through the winter.

Most of the people coming in over the last few days looked rough and tired, clearly having made a long trek to the village from the surrounding woodlands. Angort didn't have a lot in the ways of external security, but when Jaune saw the sheer number of weapons being carried out in the open he realized it was probably because they simply didn't need it.

The village grew and shrunk all the time, people coming in from their outskirts whenever they needed something fixed or a rash looked at. The more people in the town, the greater the number of defenders. And when everyone was bottled up in their neck of the woods, the population was too small to really attract any serious, focused Grimm attention.

Of course, there was still the problem of thieves and bandits, but in a world where people can leap the height of houses and kill six men before they hit the ground... well, a low stone wall probably wouldn't help much anyways.

The town guards still looked swamped, from what Jaune could tell. He'd only seen Connor once since the rush started, and the boy had only grunted a greeting before checking another cart for anything hazardous.

Jaune had left him to his work after that, and made an effort to keep an eye out for anything suspicious he could take care of to help lessen the workload.

So far, Jaune had only seen the odd pickpocket or thief that appeared at these sorts of events. A few broken wrists were an easy

and quiet solution to the problem though, and Jaune was glad he could do some small part for the town.

But largely, the flood of people was a happy affair. Old friends greeted each other in the streets and laughter was in the air. Jaune passed by two elderly men hugging each other tightly and laughing softly as he slowly made it to the outskirts of the town.

Even the back alleys were packed, and since his first day in town Jaune had known how narrow those were.

Thankfully, he managed to break free of the town's limits and out onto the now heavily worn trail leading in to town. Taking the familiar path, Jaune was relieved to not have bumped into anyone on the short walk. He just didn't have the patience for it.

Normally he would have loved to make some new connections or find a new village to head towards, but right now his nerves had him completely on edge.

"Ugh," Jaune grunted, slapping himself lightly in the cheek with his free hand. "It's not even a date!"

And yet, he had bought a new outfit he'd probably never wear ever again...

For what had to be the tenth time today, he felt a thrill of nervousness run through him. Stepping on to the now worn path to Cinder's house, Jaune tried to roll his shoulders and get rid of the tension that was building up.

Gods, expecting an ambush was better than this. At least then he knew he could fight back or plan. Now, he was just waiting for the sun to set and his stomach was positively rolling. He hadn't seen Cinder in almost two days now too, so it wasn't like he could just talk himself out of this coiled misery.

She had been out in the woods for the entire time, only coming back in the evening to eat, and not even saying a word to him when she was around. She simply dragged her painting supplies out there and muttered about being '*inspired*' and told him rather forcefully that he couldn't join her.

He hadn't even asked, but it still felt like he was being put to pasture. Even worse, he'd had to deal with people deciding they wanted to explore the area. Most of them were harmless, but after nearly of cleaning pots downhill by the river didn't leave Jaune with a lot of patience.

Who let their kids wander off into the wilderness anyways? Brothers save him from irresponsible parents. They even threw rocks at him, the brats.

Jaune frowned at the memory. He helped kill Salem, Queen of the Grimm and singular threat to humanity's existence and what does he get as thanks? Rocks to the head.

Ducking below a branch he really should clip, Jaune stepped into the small clearing in front of Cinder's home, grateful to be out of the claustrophobia of the town. Still, it was nice to be around people for such an extended period of time. He'd been on the road for far too long, apparently. Seeing familiar faces was as refreshing as a good night's sleep.

Though, it had been a bit long since he'd slept in a bed. His back was probably going to fuse any day now from sleeping in that damn tree, but he'd trek on through like he always did.

Really, he was just in a mood, clearly. Jaune knew he wasn't normally this grouchy, but he couldn't help but spit venom at everything in sight.

Or at least he was, until he threw open the door and squawked as he dropped his basket, covering his eyes to accompaniment of a door slamming shut at the end of the hall.

"Don't you ever knock?!" came Cinder's uncharacteristically shrill voice through door.

"I- I didn't see anything, I sw-swear!" Jaune lied loudly, blushing furiously. If he had been paying attention, he would have noticed the red that followed her into the room, but he was focusing elsewhere. He just saw her bare leg before it disappeared behind the door frame of her room.

The whole damn leg.

Jaune blushed harder than he ever had before in his life, and Cinder must have felt it.

"Liar!" she shouted, the frantic opening and closing of cabinets in her room making Jaune wince.

"Alright, a little bit, but it was an accident!" Jaune conceded, cleaning up the basket and scrambling to find something worth doing. He grew up with enough sisters to know when he needed to ease the tongue lashing he was going to get.

He dropped to one knee near a discarded bowl by the fireplace and began cleaning the floor of any microscopic debris he could find, combing the old wood panelling.

Nearly twenty minutes later, he heard Cinder's door creak open slowly and the soft patter of footsteps. Despite his better judgement, he looked up and winced at the glare she was shooting at him.

But, there was no mistaking the hint of red that crept up her neck. He was sure he mirrored it. Once again he was struck with the audacity of the situation he had found himself in, as he failed to meet her eyes and turned back to the ground.

He wasn't exactly the *innocent* hormone filled dork he was back in Beacon. One didn't live as long as he had on the road without seeing a little skin. That he was still blushing was frankly more

embarrassing than anything else. Gods, he'd shared a room with two women for crying out loud!

"Good morning, Jaune," Cinder said neutrally, sitting down on a small chair by the fire and crossing her now fully clothed legs. Jeans and a black top, nothing fancy at all.

"Good, and you?" Jaune asked with a cringe.

"Oh, I was fine until some brute thought he could shake my brand new door off its hinges while I was getting dressed," Cinder continued, letting a pout break through her emotionless visage.

"Sorry about that, honest. I just figured you were out in the woods again. Didn't figure you were home or... uh... yeah." Jaune said weakly.

"Yeah well..." Cinder said, turning her head slightly. "I'm here today."

The two sat in an uncomfortable silence for a few moments, in which Jaune thoroughly mentally flagellated himself for acting so strangely. He'd gone and embarrassed a hardened criminal, and somehow he felt like it was his fault.

"We're still going tonight, right?" asked Jaune tentatively.

Cinder stilled, but then relaxed and finally let the blush leave her body. "Yes, we are."

"Good, good," Jaune said, relieved that she wasn't going to make him go alone.

Cinder smirked. "After all, I need you there to ward off any suitors."

Jaune rolled his eyes, "I highly doubt *you* need protecting."

"Agreed," Cinder nodded, "But it's still more entertaining to watch someone else scare people off for me."

Jaune shook his head and laughed. "You know, some people would have a problem with being compared to a scarecrow."

"I'm sure you've been called much more creative things, you big baby," Cinder teased.

Yang. God's she was insufferable. Just thinking back at all her nicknames and jokes had Jaune groaning as a crippling wave of awkward situations helpfully came to mind.

Cinder laughed, one hand in front of her mouth, "Oh my, now you *have* to tell me."

"No way," Jaune said resolutely.

Cinder leaned forwards and grinned, "It'll help time pass by faster, unless you'd rather I start setting fires out of boredom?"

Jaune knew when he had lost, and so he pulled himself off his admittedly uncomfortable position on the floor and onto a chair.

"Alright, alright. So," He began, Cinder leaning back and lounging with mirth already dancing in her eyes. "Back when I first started Beacon, I was a bit nervous. That and, well, I had a particularly weak stomach..."

Jaune was seriously regretting not building a house in the time he'd spent in Angort. Getting ready for a platonic/friendly 'date' was enough to stress him out, but the fact that he couldn't even see what he looked like was driving him nuts.

He had gotten a small, blue coat with four large round buttons and a cream coloured shirt to wear underneath it. Gone were his tattered jeans and instead replaced with black slacks from who knows where. He'd swapped his heavy brown boots for a pair of slightly worn running shoes he'd traded for.

The outfit felt and hopefully looked nice, but the shoes were a disaster. A putrid, if somewhat attractive disaster. Hopefully, as long as he kept them on he wouldn't poison the entire festival.

His hand lingered over Crocea Mors for a solid minute as he weighed the pros and cons of bringing a sword to a festival. On one hand, everyone in the damned village was packing heat. On the other, he had Aura and it really didn't mesh with the rest of the outfit he'd picked out.

With great reluctance, he left it behind. Or at least, a solid forty feet in the air buried halfway into a tree.

Tentatively, Jaune picked his way through the foliage and soon enough he was right at her doorstep... like he had been countless times... even earlier today.

He stood there, stock still as his heart thumped in his chest.

"What am I doing?" Jaune whispered to no one in particular before he swallowed. Raising his hand tentatively, Jaune made a point of knocking loudly on the door.

"Just a minute!" Came Cinder's call from inside the house.

Jaune felt a thrill of excitement at her voice, but stamped down on it. He refused to let himself get confused about her feelings or his own. They were friends, good friends, but still nothing more.

He had fought and chased her most of his life, and though they'd buried the hatchet there was no way he was going to-

The door swung open revealing a considerably done up Cinder Fall.

Her raven black hair was perfectly straightened until it ended in small curls. Her sole bright amber eye glowed with a nervous joy, and to Jaune's surprise there was even a bit of makeup on her too. He had no clue where she got it, but it accented her sharp features

wonderfully. Her eyepatch was still in its usual place, but Jaune barely even noticed it anymore.

And of course, there was her dress. On anyone else, it would have been a simple dress, but on Cinder it was like a work of art. It was bright red with and reached down to her thighs, hugging her stomach tightly. Her shoulders were bare and sleeveless, and it looked like the whole thing was being held up by the golden choker around her neck.

Jaune was speechless as she looked him up and down, a smile spreading across her face at his reaction.

"Do you like it?" she said, twirling in place: an action that Jaune noticed barely even moved the tight dress. "I had to call in a few favours, but considering Bella's husband is the best Tailor this side of Vale... well, it was worth it."

"Uh..." Jaune said dumbly, causing Cinder to roll her eyes and slip her hand through one of his arms and start guiding him through the forest path.

"You clean up well, I have to say," Cinder mused. "I half expected you to show up in a hoodie. Instead you look... nice," she finished with a smile.

"You... just you..." Jaune tried to articulate, but a playful bump of Cinder's hip against his was enough to clamp him up again. "Just wow," He managed to mutter, causing Cinder to preen.

"I'm just glad I got to save the surprise until tonight, you nearly caught me twirling around in the house like a little girl this morning." Cinder said nonchalantly.

That pulled Jaune out of his daze.

"Wait, what?!" Jaune exclaimed, pushing a bush out of Cinder's way as they walked. "I thought-"

"That I was naked?" Cinder snorted. "Fat chance. Still, it was rather entertaining the way you locked up like a civilian riding a Nevermore."

Jaune groaned. "Brother's spare me, I'm going to a festival with a maniac."

Cinder nodded, pulling herself closer to Jaune as the loud sounds of music and laughter grew louder.

"Yes, yes you are."

Chapter 13

It was strange to Jaune.

A kingdom, with all its resources and technology, could put on the most extravagant parties and events imaginable. Weiss had bragged about the ballrooms of Atlas, Ruby had fawned over the Vtyal Festival, and even Pyrrha had told him once about the elaborate silent dinner parties she'd been forced to attend in Mistral.

Yet, somehow, none of them really seemed to compare.

Wreaths and streamers and branches and flowers connected every rooftop, weaving through each other as people chatted and laughed underneath them. People manned the tops of narrow towers, using large stained pieces of glass to cast different colors of light on to the streets. A beautiful aroma rose out of the thick clamouring of people, slowly luring people towards the centre of Angort. All around, people were thriving with an honest and open excitement.

Jaune moved a half step in front of Cinder and slowly shouldered his way through the crowds, his other arm still locked around hers. Jaune knew she didn't need him to do it, but with the smile on her face staying higher than he had ever seen it, he wasn't going to make her do push through the crowd herself.

Though, if he was being honest, she probably could just part them with her outfit. She was stunning, and to the ire of wives all along the street she was drawing their husband's eyes.

Yet, she bore it with grace and poise. Jaune didn't, but that's what his shoulder was for.

"I've never-" Cinder began, cutting off when Jaune lightly toppled a drunk out of their way.

"Sorry about that, you were saying?" Jaune said, looking back and flashing her a smile.

"I was saying, I've never seen this many people in Angort before. The festival has always been big but..."

"That's the benefits of Grimm-less future, I suppose. Less Grimm, means people from further and further away can come." Jaune explained, "I saw the same thing starting back in Mistral."

Jaune weaved around two youths passionately kissing, before he continued. "Of course, bandits become a bigger problem."

"Bandits? In Mistral? Surely not, that sound *impossible*," Cinder snorted.

The noise around them started to get louder and louder, but the crowds in front of them started to thin.

Soon, the duo stepped into the familiar town square that Jaune had traded in on his first day in town. But much like he had changed since that fateful day, so had the square.

The ground was still padded dirt, but you could hardly see it for all the tables and benches that had been spread out across it. Row after row of people sat squashed in next to one another, passing bowls and platters of food down from the overworked servers who squeezed through the isles. A bunch of the tables looked brand new, like they had been made just this morning.

People were packed in right up until the edge of a massive, roaring bonfire stacked with wood to nearly Jaune's height. The backs of the festival goers were only slightly singed, but with the amount of drinks being passed around, Jaune wasn't so sure they minded.

"Oh, over there! Two spots!" crowed Cinder, stepping past Jaune and dragging him forwards.

"Where?" Jaune yelled as she bulldozed through the isles and earned more than a few shouts of indignation as they bumped peoples drinks.

"Over there!"

"... I repeat, where?"

"Look Jaune, it's not like I can point them out right now," Cinder said, shaking her stub of an arm in the air. And though he couldn't see her eye he could imagine it rolling.

"Ah. Fair point."

The 'seats', as Cinder had claimed, were hardly seats at all. Instead, she chose a spot that was very barely able to seat one narrow person comfortably, and shoved him down into it.

Jaune squawked as he pushed up against a man who was passed out in his food, and was about to voice a complaint until Cinder pushed right in alongside him. His words died in his throat as her tightly clad body pressed against his side, her light curls brushing against his shoulder as she angled her body into a more comfortable position.

Her red dress wasn't overly revealing of her cleavage, but Jaune summoned all of his gentlemanly skills to look her straight in the eye as she turned to face him.

"See? Seats," Cinder said simply, shifting her vision to the fresh plates of food that were starting to make their way towards them. Somehow, two clean plates were passed to them from a pile in the middle of the table and Jaune fought to regain his breath.

Cinder's cooking was great. Really. It was. But Jaune could only survive on hard tack for so long on the road, and the largely green diet he had been enjoying as of late made him yearn for the simple meats he used to enjoy daily.

As an entire rack of lamb was settled on their part of the table, Jaune could have cried. His eyes frantically roved in search of cutlery he could use to start carving the meat up, but couldn't find any that hadn't been stained, snapped in half or buried in to the table.

Cinder frowned as she reached the same conclusion, and Jaune couldn't help but agree.

"Huh. I didn't know this was a 'bring your own' kind of event," said Jaune, sighing as he prepared to eat with his bare-hands.

Cinder untangled her arm from his and did the same, but then her frown disappeared and with a plotting smirk as she lowered her head. Jaune watched in confusion until he saw the faintest flicker of light flick out from her obscured face.

But that was all it took before Cinder looked up, and placed a set of jet black utensils in front of Jaune.

"Now we've brought our own," Cinder stated matter-of-factly.

Jaune took a second to admire the sudden craftsmanship in front of him. The technique was all too familiar to him, as he had been subject to it both in his youth and in their unfortunate battle. To see it used in such a refined manner was strange, and yet reassuring. Anything could find a new purpose.

His contemplation was broken as Cinder tapped her plate with an expectant look on her face.

"Oh, right," Jaune started, slicing up bits of meat and dropping them on to Cinder's plate as she shovelled vegetables and grits from bowls nearby onto both of theirs. Soon though, people nearby were raising their plates and asking him to cut bits for them and Jaune was passing food around.

People laughed and joked with him as he served them, earning enough attention from one of the barmaids swirling around to drop

two mugs of beer in front of them.

Cinder chatted with the woman next to her, though it was far too loud for Jaune to have any clue what the other was saying.

It felt nice. The whole situation was unhygienic, rambunctious, cramped and uncomfortable yet Jaune felt right at home.

Cinder looked a bit out of sorts, but Jaune chalked that one up to having never been to something like this before. Living with his massive family, Jaune had been far more prepared for the madness of the festival.

But when he sat back down to finally eat his own meal, Cinder fit easily alongside him as she continued to chat. He noticed she hadn't even touched her own meal, but now that he was back in his place her fingers gripped her fork from the table and started to dig in.

He smiled and ran his thumb along the small inscription that he had felt when cutting up the meat, bringing it up to the light.

In the obsidian fork was carved the tiniest letter: a J.

"No way, are you serious?" Jaune laughed, enjoying a discussion after they finished their meal.

"Indeed. The two had obviously been fraternizing, but could you be anymore obvious about it?"

"Well, maybe you misunderstood what was happening, ya know? Guys can be oblivious some times."

"Jaune, one does not witness a renowned racist and a timid rabbit faunus bruising each others lips without understanding that teenagers have very weird relationships."

"Still though, Cardin and Velvet?" Jaune mused, bringing his cup to his lips.

"Ah, that was their names. It was so long ago I had simply forgotten, if I even ever knew at all," Cinder nodded.

"But you remember them sucking face in a tree?"

"Truly, if you understood how awkward it was to bear witness to, you would also be scarred." Cinder shuddered, "of all the wretched things I've seen, that is one of the few that still makes me cringe."

"It couldn't have been that bad," Jaune replied, downing the last of his drink.

"It was like watching two seals fight over a grape," Cinder said as she did turn her empty cup over on to the wooden table.

Jaune and Cinder laughed deeply as they leaned against one another, some breathing room being earned as the children were shuffled off to bed and the benches became less cramped.

Cinder had definitely shocked him by being a beer drinker. Jaune had her down as either a straight edge or a wine connoisseur. Instead, she had been able to match him cup for cup as they ate and spoke.

The topics had ranged wildly, though they stayed largely safe. They had nearly swerved into politics about the old Kingdoms principles, but were saved by Jaune's neighbour telling them it didn't matter because they were all gone anyways.

Jaune was grateful for the save, but even more grateful when he stumbled off. He had started to reek and Jaune's patience was starting to fall apart.

"You'd have never thought it, though." Jaune mused.

"Hm?"

"Cardin and Velvet, I mean."

"Ah, well it's proof that even the most unlikely couples can form," Cinder said easily, though she probably felt him tense at the phrase. Jaune cursed his weakness as the thought made his heart beat faster.

His mouth felt dry, but he continued despite his mind telling him to shut up. "And... do you think tha-"

He was cut off by a deafening silence that cut across the festival. His instincts tensed and he clutched his knife. Cinder tensed with him, eye darting around the fire for an explanation for what was happening.

It was made apparent as a rough looking man walked in front of the fire wearing a white sash over what could only be the garish colors of a huntsman's outfit. Behind him were ten other people, who fanned out around the fire and stood close enough that they stood serious risk of catching fire from the stray embers.

Though Cinder didn't explain, it was obvious the man was the chief, if not from the respect he commanded then by the respect his voice *demand*ed .

"It's been eleven years. Eleven long years, since the Kingdoms fell," the huntsman boomed out. "We don't know why. We probably never will. We all knew someone in Vale when it fell, and I would like to take the next minute to remember their memories."

Jaune actually didn't have anyone in the city. Everyone he cared about was either dead or at Evernight at the final battle. But he had friends who fell. People he loved and fought with who died or became shells of their former selves when the dust settled.

Jaune took the minute to mourn, and he could feel Cinder staying deathly still next to him as the whole crowd closed their eyes. It wasn't hard to imagine what she was thinking at that moment, but

Jaune let her think. She wouldn't want words of forgiveness or affirmation. That was something he admired.

After some time had passed, the chief spoke up once more. "But, while we mourn the past, we must celebrate the future! The Grimm have become scattered and the horde seems to thin every day. In this crowd I see new faces or those I long thought dead, and all are welcome in the town of Angort."

"So join me, my friends, in mourning the loss of the Kingdoms, and celebrating the survival of our future!"

With that, the chief and his ten assistants were handed eleven brightly coloured paper lanterns, whose fuel source was lit from the roaring bonfire they stood around.

"TO VALE! TO THE KINGDOMS! TO HUMANITY! AND TO OUR NEW DESTINY!"

The group let go off their lanterns as the crowd exploded in cheers and roars of approval. Jaune smiled at the lanterns as they drifted across the night sky, like stars going to join their brethren.

A strong gust of wind blew overhead, and a few of the lanterns were separated from the pack. People around them gasped in alarm, and though Jaune had no idea what that meant, he could guess it had some ominous symbolic meaning to it.

Cinder's eyes flashed, brightly this time, and a strong gust of wind came in from the opposite direction and pushed the lanterns back into the group. No one even noticed her obvious display of power, no one except Jaune.

Jaune looked at her, a proud look on his face, but instead of the self-satisfied smirk he loved to see, Cinder's eye followed the lanterns with a sad look on her face.

His hand settled on his lap as he contemplated what to do, and then tentatively placed his on top of hers.

She startled, a shocked look on her face with the barest flush of pink on her neck as she broke her vigil and turned to Jaune.

"Is everything okay?" Jaune asked, worried at the sudden shift in his da- friend's face.

"I..." she gripped his hand. "I think it will be."

A loud crash earned their attention as the chief placed an Aura-filled boot straight through a rickety table and blasted the thing apart. The people who sat at it howled in annoyance before picking up the debris and tossing it into the fire.

All the other tables around the fire were either being smashed to bits or being passed overhead through the crowds behind them. Servers and barmaids rushed to collect the dishes before they were destroyed as the sudden carnage cleared a third of the tables away.

"Alright then," the chief shouted as someone rushed forwards to hand him a fiddle while a cluster of musicians produced their own instruments and grouped alongside him. "Let's dance!"

Jaune watched as people poured in to the circle, dancing wildly to the frantic playing of the makeshift band.

"Cinder. I want to dance," Jaune said, finally finding his courage as he rose to his feet and took her hand with him.

"Ah, well, go on ahead," Cinder said teasingly.

"No. I want to dance. With you," Jaune said firmly, but with a tone of voice that made it clear it was still a question.

She gave him an overly appraising look, before she slowly stood up and shook her legs.

"Only if you promise that I'll be able to walk back home on my own two feet after this." Cinder smiled beautifully.

"Only if you think you can stop at one dance," Jaune said, wrapping one arm around her waist and the other delicately grasping her hand.

"Well then," Cinder purred as she leaned into his chest, "Let's see if you can convince me, Jaune."

a/n: I'm still alive :) Semester has been kicking my pants in, but I'll try and upload as I can. Hope you enjoyed, and thanks for your patience!

Chapter 14

Cinder was an incredible person. There were times when Jaune could hardly remember to breath when she smiled or absently painted. Her talents and knowledge trumped nearly every living being left on Remnant.

But she was decidedly *not* a good dancer.

Jaune had to suppress a grunt as his pinky toe was mercilessly crushed beneath Cinder's stumbling feet, instead opting for a smile as he spun her around.

Thankfully, having little sisters who demanded he dance with them had given Jaune a remarkable tolerance for pain. And to see her blush and wince with every misstep would have been worth losing the whole damn foot.

"How-" Cinder gasped, breathless for air as the two danced furiously and clumsily around the fire "How do people do this all the time?"

"It's an art! Like fighting, or painting," Jaune half-shouted over the din of other wild dancers flailing about, trying to ignore the accidental grabs and shoves.

"This, this is nothing like art," Cinder playfully scowled.

"Better than fighting though," Jaune replied flashing a grin.

Any words she said were lost as they swept near the band, where an ancient man with cheeks as red as Cinder's dress stood atop a pyramid of hastily stacked tables and blew heavily into a dingy old trumpet.

It was off tune, random and completely pointless, but the crowd around them cheered at the arrival of a new instrument and Jaune found himself shouting alongside them.

There was something infectious in the air, everyone around them forgetting their loss and pain in favour of laughter.

Men on top of the makeshift spotlights that they had seen before cast a rainbow of colours onto the crowds. Jaune had to admire the ingenuity of it all, honestly. He and Cinder wove in and out of these small spotlights, both giddy on good ale and each others company. Jaune felt young again with every song they played, though this time he was holding a beautiful woman in his arms rather than attempting a serenade.

Sadly, the moment was ruined as more and more people rushed to join in on the dance. What had already been a packed crowd became stuffed. The flashing lights, janky music and crush of bodies made the town square feel like an old-world club.

Maybe that was the point, but Jaune couldn't see the appeal in that very moment. Or rather, he was trying really hard not to. Cinder was pressed right up against his chest, their faces only inches apart.

Though, a balloon shaped woman clapping his rear was enough to break even that tantalizing position, and Jaune suddenly felt like he had had enough dancing for the evening. As had Cinder apparently, as she started to drag the two of them out of the crowd.

Even if she hadn't been the avatar of a season, Jaune would have felt confident in calling her a force of nature. Bowling people out of the way, they made a beeline out of the throng of people. Gasping for air and glad to be out, Jaune and Cinder gave each other small smiles.

The duo made their way to one of the toppled benches and sat it upright, collapsing as they watched the frenzied dance continue.

"It boggles my mind how they can just keep on going," Cinder mused.

Jaune let out a small chuckle. "You'd think we'd be able to outlast the entire town, but I've been outjigged by a man in his eighties wearing nothing but cargo pants."

Cinder laughed and leaned her head on Jaune's shoulder. "Do you think it was the cargo pants that tipped the scales in his favour?"

Jaune wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer, his heart no longer thudding violently in his chest from the close contact. "Hmm... tough to say. Semblance?"

"Not every loss is because of a semblance, Jaune," Cinder tutted playfully.

"It wouldn't even be the most ridiculous one out there!" Jaune countered.

"I very much doubt that unparalleled prowess on the dance floor is a semblance."

"Look, if I can be a walking energy drink, then there's nothing wrong with that man having..." Jaune tapped his chin with his free hand, "Stamina? I guess?"

Cinder shot him a coy smile as she shifted into a more comfortable position, and the two sat in companionable silence as they watched the proceedings unfold.

A strange emotion welled up in Jaune's throat. Maybe it was the drink, or the fire, or the fascinating woman stuck to his side. But it was powerful. He tried to swallow it down, but found that he just couldn't.

Cinder looked up at him, and saw the conflicting emotions racing across his eyes. "Is everything alright, Jaune?" she asked with concern.

"It's... yeah. I just, I never thought I'd ever get to see something like this again, ya know?" Jaune said, rubbing his eyes with his sleeve and surprised to find it damp. "I spent so long, well, you know... and when the world ended I was sure I'd never see real peace again. I didn't see it in Atlas, or anywhere else. Just a whole lot of suffering."

"But... it didn't end. We're still here aren't we?" Cinder said quietly.

Jaune looked down and locked eyes with her. Her singular, amber orb shone in the flickering lights. Where once, Jaune saw only the fires of rage and destruction in it, he now saw a flame more akin to a hearth.

"Yeah... I guess we are. For better or for worse," Jaune agreed quietly.

"Definitely for the better." Cinder stood up and pulled him to his feet. "Come on then, Jaune. I think I've got a few more dances in me."

"Do you think I'm getting those back?" Jaune asked, mildly annoyed at this turn of events.

"Judging by the stains he's sporting, do you really want to?" Cinder responded. Jaune shrugged and the two moved on, stepping around the man that drunkenly sprung up from the ground and hugged Jaune's feet as tight as he could. The man had the strength of a Beringal, and Jaune had no choice but to abandon the second-hand sneakers.

The barmaids and waiters had passed out mid-stride, no doubt incredibly overworked and paid not nearly enough. Up in the makeshift spotlight towers, their operators lounged lazily with their feet hanging over the side, some asleep while others nursed beers as they relaxed.

The only ones who were still wide awake and alert were the guards standing watch at the entrance of the town. There were about a

dozen of them at the entrance, half of them sitting around a crate playing with a weathered set of cards. Half eaten plates were set aside as they spoke quietly among themselves, sliding small notes of IOU's across the table for bets.

The six who were actively scanning the entrance noticed their approach, the wolf faunus being the first with a wrinkled nose.

"Ech, I volunteered to work tonight *because* I didn't wanna smell rancid people." The faunus shuddered uncomfortably.

"It's from some old shoes. Second hand." Jaune explained, earning a few understanding nods from the card players. Apparently the struggle of finding shoes wasn't just limited to himself.

"And you didn't take them off?" The faunus responded, an unimpressed eyebrow raised.

Cinder let out a polite cough, and a couple of guards came over, sending the duo a few sheepish smiles as they were quickly frisked. It made sense to search people going out rather than in. Dust was so scarce that any explosives were impossible to come by, where as drunk people losing their possessions was all too common.

Jaune sent a withering glare at one guard who got a bit too handsy with Cinder, but before Jaune could do anything one of the other men shoved the errant guard to the ground. The flat of the faunus' blade whacked the man's hands and the faunus, clearly their leader, waved them through without another word.

Cinder kept a calm, controlled face throughout all of it, as though a slight breeze had grazed her. She flashed a thankful smile at the faunus as they passed out of the town limits, but Jaune had learned to read the signs of her rage. Her sole hand twitched into a slight claw, and as they walked away he saw the faint flickering of light in her eye.

His mind lurched a bit at the thought of Cinder roasting a man alive, despite her history of doing exactly that. Stepping around to her other side, Jaune slid his hand into hers and squeezed it. The flicker in her eyes disappeared, and Jaune felt her fingers tighten around his.

She didn't say anything, but as they walked off into the creeping darkness of the woods he could feel her breathing calm down. The two made their way down the now thoroughly beaten path, walking in companionable silence as the sounds of the festival faded away into the background.

As they picked their way through the darkness though, it became clear that the moonlight was not enough for them to properly see through the woods, despite how well they knew it. After Jaune's fourth misstep into a root, Cinder laughed and untangled her hand from Jaune's, to his quiet disappointment.

With a small flourish a tiny flame hovered in her palm, illuminating the way forwards.

"An open flame surrounded by low-hanging trees. And here I thought we had moved past the dastardly plots," Jaune quipped.

"Well, if it happens, then that's just nature," Cinder taunted, flaring the flame.

"Mhm, yeah somehow that doesn't seem to hold much water."

"Shame, then let's hope we don't need it."

Jaune could only shake his head with an amused smile, Cinder mirroring his own. Suddenly she snuffed the light out, and Jaune could see why. The moonlight was more than enough out here, as they entered the clearing with Cinder's home in it.

"A welcome sight, to be sure." Cinder said, sliding her incredibly warm hand back into Jaune's. The two started walking towards her

front door, with Jaune taking slow steps to stretch the distance as much as possible. He noted with a thrill of excitement that Cinder was doing the same. "I wasn't too sure that I would enjoy myself, at least in the past years. Too loud. Too dirty."

"You live in a hut in the woods, Cinder."

"As opposed to the tree you nest in?" She shot back playfully.

"Nest is a strong word, I'd call it a-" Jaune tried to respond, heat creeping on his neck for no discernible reason.

"A roost perhaps? Monkey's also live in trees but somehow I feel as though that may be a bit harsh of a comparison."

"The world swoons at your mercy, Cinder." Jaune rolled his eyes.

Cinder hummed and leaned on his shoulder. She smelt of apples, like she always did when she came near him.

"But honestly, I had a wonderful time. I wouldn't have gone if it wasn't for you Jaune and I'm... grateful," Cinder said, looking a bit uncomfortable for the first time he could remember. "For a lot of things," she added.

"Me too, I, well- I don't really go to these sorts of things either," Jaune admitted, rubbing the back of his neck like he was a damned teenager again. "I... don't really do well in crowds. But having you with me made it easy... easier?" He finished lamely, shoulders half raised as he tried to put his thoughts into words.

Cinder seemed to falter, and Jaune hurried to add, "I just never really thought I could have so much fun anymore, you know? It felt so, so-"

"Normal..." Cinder finished for him.

"Yeah, normal..." Jaune whispered.

He shifted on the heels of his feet, turning to face her and hearing wood creak below them. He hadn't even realized they had made it to her front porch and consequently her front door. His heart pounded in his ears as he stared at her face in the faint light. She was worn, tired, and bore scars from a hundred battles that even Aura couldn't heal. But at the same time, she had a radiance that he'd never seen on another woman in his lifetime. The way she carried herself, the intelligence in that single gorgeous eye, the slight smirk she had when she thought of something funny and thought better than to say it. Even better than getting her to say it was the laugh that came out when she did. Cinder Fall.

Gods, this was insane, wasn't it? He didn't even think of her as a former enemy, it was like he was looking at someone completely new.

And in a way... she was. She was someone completely different after all these years, and so was he. A part of him wondered what she thought of as she looked at his face, what lines he carried that he couldn't see for himself, what storms he had etched on his face.

It felt like he watched her for ages, and she did the same to him. He struggled to find the words, not really sure what to say as she looked up at him.

"|-"

Cinder pressed her lips against his, so hot it felt his skin might burn. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her back, all words flying out his brain as he held her as close as he could. They stayed for as long as they could, savouring the moment.

For the first time in longer than Jaune could remember, he felt as though a fire started to burn in his soul. His senses sharpened and dulled all at once in some wonderful chaotic jumble. It wasn't destined to last, as a stick broke from the woods and the two snapped apart, with Jaune cursing as he reached for a sword that wasn't there.

A deer sprinted through the clearing, not a Grimm or bandit. It ran, probably sensing the killing intent that was sent its way.

The two stood there in stunned silence, before Jaune completely lost it and started laughing hysterically.

Cinder, for her part, nearly howled into the night sky. "Are you kidding me?! *I've been waiting almost two weeks for that!* "

Jaune tried to interject at that sudden revelation, but the absurdity was too much for him. Soon, even Cinder's ire faded and she couldn't help but giggle at the situation.

Jaune, still laughing, looped his arms back around Cinder and pulled her close to him. They didn't kiss, but their foreheads touched lightly. "You know, I had been waiting for something like that to happen. Life had been too good recently for the universe to not throw me a curveball," Jaune muttered.

"Well, how do you think I feel? I'm not used to-... pining like some schoolgirl," Cinder whispered, a fierce blush on her face.

"If it makes you feel any better, me neither, and mine goes a bit further than two weeks, now that I think about it," Jaune admitted, thinking back on his irrational behavior the day they had fought.

"It does. Though, this timeline interests me," Cinder said, her blush fading.

Jaune answered by kissing her softly, with just as much passion as the first one but a lot more patience. When they finally separated to breathe, Jaune couldn't help but beam.

"It just doesn't feel real, you know? My whole life there's always been something waiting to rear its head whenever things would start looking up. Ever since I joined Beacon there was always *something*," Jaune finished with a choke.

Cinder's hand came up to touch his face, stroking it gently as she kissed his cheek. "Then maybe-" She bit her lip as she lowered her hand and reached behind her, opening the door to her home, "Maybe we should take the night off from worrying about the next big thing?"

A/N: Hey guys! I'm alive! Sorry this took so long to get out. My last bits of school were beating the crap outta me, and then when I finally had free time I couldn't bring myself to write. 5 essays in the course of like two weeks kinda burnt me out. But then I got sick *and* threw out my back, so I was stuck indoors with a serious writing itch!

Thanks for your patience, and I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

Chapter 15

It was the sound of the breeze whistling through the trees that finally stirred Jaune from his slumber. His eyes cracked open slowly, wincing at the bright light that lazily shown through the small pane window in Cinder's room.

Cinder's room.

His eyes opened wide for a second, instinct taking over at the unfamiliar setting. However, whatever he was going to do next was cut short by the shifting of the covers next to him. Jaune's heart calmed as he remembered the events of the night before, and smiled as he saw Cinder's normally prim and perfect hair all tousled and scattered about. He could only see her hair though, as the rest of Cinder was completely enveloped in blankets and pillows. Their legs were still entangled, and he wasn't exactly eager to untwine.

Jaune settled back into the warmth of the covers, feeling a quiet contentment he hadn't ever felt in living memory. Cinder absently shuffled a bit closer to him, her evenly spaced breathing informing Jaune that she was still fast asleep. Not wanting to risk waking her, he tried not to move, instead slowly scanning the one room in Cinder's home he had never been in. Jaune felt almost like an intruder, having crossed that final threshold of privacy that had divided.

And honestly... it didn't look anything like he would have expected. Clothes, both their own from the night before, along with various outfits he recognized from his days spent with Cinder lay scattered all over the room. The queen-sized bed took up quite a bit of space, but Cinder had managed to fit in a small dresser, a wardrobe closet, a desk and a small chest at the foot of the bed. Leaning against the wall, on top of the dresser was a mirror, one that looked like it had been roughly cut out of a larger piece.

The dresser was weathered and looked ancient, as did the wardrobe. Like the rest of the house, Cinder's room was obviously heavily used. Hanging off the handle of the dresser was her ever present eyepatch. It felt a bit jarring to see it hanging there, but it was quickly taken over by the desk. It was plain, and relatively new, with little actually sitting on it.

A small, half burned candle sat in a small metal tray in the far corner, alongside a small leatherbound journal. Jaune didn't think much of those, after all Cinder was a private person and was entitled to her own thoughts.

What *really* caught his attention was the discoloured picture sitting in a weathered picture frame. It was small, probably from some old polaroid back in the day. Jaune looked back to Cinder, still completely bundled up and dozing peacefully.

Carefully, Jaune untangled himself from Cinder, sliding out of the bed. He picked up his crumpled pants off the floor and slipped them on, trying not to make any noise on the old floorboards. He made his way to the small table, daintily picking up the picture frame and holding it up to the morning light.

It had clearly been through a lot, the picture itself sporting numerous folds, stains and rips. The top half of the picture had begun to fade away completely, while the whole thing seemed drained of most colour.

Even then, the contents were still clearly visible.

It was a picture of man kneeling on the grass, holding a fishing rod in one hand with his other wrapped around the shoulders of a young girl. He had short, cropped hair and a thick mustache, while his eyes were crinkled with mirth as though he had been caught mid-laugh.

Jaune's breath caught in his throat as he looked at a beaming Cinder Fall, clutching some sort of river trout with both hands, struggling to stand upright. She couldn't have been more than eight in the picture,

but it was definitely her. Jaune couldn't help but smile as he pictured the powerful, intelligent and historically malevolent Cinder as a wild haired, scrawny teenager.

"He was a good man."

Jaune jumped at Cinder's voice, turning around and giving her a sheepish look. He didn't put the photo down though, and instead moved back towards her and sat back down in the bed. She didn't look upset. Not about the photo, him being in her room or what they had done the night before. She did, however, smile sadly at the photo.

"In all my time, with everything I've done, I can say with confidence that there is no truly selfless and merciful person on Remnant. But... he did right by me, he always did," Cinder said, reaching a hand out to carefully take the picture out of Jaune's hands, which he let her do without any resistance.

"We didn't have a lot, but he made time for me. He was the kind of man who would always make sure he came home with enough food to feed you and at least an hour to listen to you babble about your day." Cinder leaned back, setting the photo on a small bedside table before turning back to Jaune. "One time, he woke me up after I had gone to bed, since he was out late working with the mayor. Said he wanted to know about my day so he could ask the Brother Gods for a better one tomorrow."

"What happened?" Jaune asked quietly, and Cinder sighed.

"Nothing, at first. I decided I wanted to run off and be a huntress, with absolutely no training and no direction. Was tired of the small town with the same things happening day in and day out. My dad wasn't a fighter, but he gave me all the lien we had, some Dust and put me on the next transport out of town. I was only thirteen, but he contacted an old friend who said she could help me get into a junior school in Mistral. I came back a few years later and he was gone."

Jaune let out a breath and rubbed a hand down his face. It was all too common for towns deep in the wilds to disappear, at least back then. Now every town was on the frontier.

"Grimm?"

"No, and not bandits either."

Jaune shuffled closer to her, sitting next to her and slipping his legs under the blankets. His hand found hers, and Cinder instantly tightened her grip on his hand. "Pneumonia. He overworked himself, and without the proper healthcare out there..." she trailed off.

The two sat in silence for a while, as Jaune mulled over what she had just told him.

"Did you know your mother? You haven't mentioned her."

"No, but maybe that was for the best. I'd like to think my best features are my own," Cinder said, with a small smile, resting her head on Jaune's bare chest. She was hot to the touch, but it felt like the warmth of a campfire rather than the heat of a blaze.

Jaune let out a contented sigh, reaching up a hand to absently stroke her tousled hair. "So," Jaune said, holding back a laugh as Cinder grunted into his chest.

"So."

"Two whole weeks? I'm surprised, Cinder Fall. You seem like the kind of woman who takes what she wants."

Her hand pinched his from underneath the blanket, and she lifted her head to shoot him a playful glare. "As I'm sure you can remember, I *did* take what I want."

Of course he remembered. Jaune wasn't sure he would ever be able to forget. The memory was seared into his brain. Jaune let the blush

show on his face as he let out a good natured laugh, which Cinder matched.

"This... this is nice," Cinder said, after a few moments of good-natured silence settled between them.

"Yeah," was all Jaune needed to say, wrapping his free arm around her waist and pulling her closer to him. The two laid there for a long time, just enjoying the comfort of each other as the breeze picked up and kept the room from getting too warm.

Jaune could feel himself slipping in and out of consciousness, taking the time to sleep in and do absolutely nothing. He hadn't done that since his days before Beacon, when his mother would forget he was still asleep and he was content to lounge around for as long as he wanted. A morning without anything to do... it felt like a surprise vacation.

It wasn't meant to last, sadly, as Cinder grunted next to him and slowly untangled herself from his arms. Jaune whined slightly, and Cinder leaned back in to kiss him daintily on the lips. "I'll be back in a few minutes, sit tight." Jaune frowned slightly but let her go, and she slipped out from underneath the covers, naked as the day she was born. She tossed on an old loose shirt he hadn't seen before and a fresh pair of linens, only stopping to roll her eyes at Jaune's appraising stare.

"Keeping busy?" She said with a smirk.

"Eh, could be busier," Jaune said, curling up into the recently vacated blankets.

"Agreed, though that reminds me. I was talking to Mrs. Larson at the festival yesterday, and she asked about you." Cinder said as she pulled on a pair of shorts.

"Oh?"

"She was wondering if she could put in an order with you over the next couple of weeks."

"I don't follow."

"She saw some of the kids running around with new toys, and was wondering if she could barter with you to make some for her grandkids. She's got quite a few, and her husband is a blacksmith about a few miles east of here. Would be worth bartering with her for some repairs to your armour." Cinder tied her hair into a ponytail and stepped through the door, though a second later she put her head back through it and added "I took the liberty of accepting on your behalf, by the way."

"Huh. Well, I appreciate it, not that I have a choice," Jaune said. "And besides, I can probably swing by that way for a few days before I keep heading south."

The smile on Cinder's face faltered slightly, "Right. Sounds good." And with that, she finally slipped out of the room.

Jaune untangled himself from the blankets, finding himself uncomfortably hot as the idea of him leaving this cabin hit him. He had been in Angort for about a month and a half, but it felt like he had been here for ages. Jaune hadn't really been apart of a community in almost ten years now, since he split with Weiss and her group.

He had made friends and acquaintances, ones that he actually spoke to more than once. He laughed more in a week than he could remember out of all his time on the road. He had sold almost everything he owned and yet Jaune had never felt so wealthy in his life.

And that was it, wasn't it? It felt good but... maybe that was the point. Everything good has to end, so why wait for it to happen on someone else's terms. If he... there was a risk in staying put. Moving

forwards had kept him alive all this time, but it didn't make him happy.

Cinder did.

And that scared him. He knew he made her happy too, or at least he thought he did. When was the last time he had enjoyed that with a person? It made him feel alive, but the fear of the frontier came back more-so than ever.

Jaune had lost so many people, could he risk caring about anyone else?

A part of Jaune's mind had hoped that to Cinder, this was just sex. That she didn't *really* care that deeply about him. That Jaune could take the heartbreak and move past it, because that was what he was best at.

"Jaune?"

Jaune looked up to see a concerned Cinder standing in the doorway, eyes watching him carefully. Jaune felt his mouth go dry at the sight of her, even though she was dressed exactly the same as before. Thinking about her leaving was hard, but thinking about it when he looked at her... it was impossible. She held the sketchbook he had always seen her with in her hand, thumb resting in the crook of a page.

"Is everything alright?" she continued, nervous as she stared at him.

"No, I was just- just thinking... is all," Jaune stuttered slightly.

Silently, Cinder made her way next to him on the bed, slowly sitting down on top of the covers. She leaned against his shoulder, before placing a small kiss against his neck. The two didn't share words. Instead, Cinder quietly slid the sketchbook into his hands before quickly stepping out of the room again.

Jaune stared after her dumbly before turning his attention back to the weathered leather binding in his hands. A symbol was carved into the front of the book, possibly with the end of a knife. It was a tree, with a small flame sitting in its roots. He had seen it around the house, and remembered seeing Cinder doodle it on the door he had made.

Tentatively, he opened it to the first page.

He felt his mouth grow dry at the unmistakable view. Sketched inside was the view from Beacon's once illustrious CCT tower, within the ruined remains of Ozpin's office. Cinder had captured the sprawling expanse of the city, with it curving in the horizon much like how Jaune remembered it. But that was where the similarities ended. The small nature of the sketchbook made it hard to make out the details, but the message she had intended to send was clear enough.

The city had been flattened, with only ruined crumbles and smoke drifting endlessly out from the former pillars of civilisation. Jaune's eyes combed the picture over and over, eking out every detail. He hadn't gone to Vale because, well, it was a deathtrap. But even if it wasn't, it would have just locked him in his own head if he surrounded himself with memories.

Gulping, Jaune forced himself to turn the page, slowly flipping through the sketchbook as small notes and thoughts. Some were smeared with charcoal, others scribbled in with some ink she had clearly gotten her hands on and others with whatever she could get her hands on, apparently. Some were just simply lines capturing the shape of objects she found in the woods, others were slightly more gruesome sketches of burnt out landscapes.

Time seemed to flicker by as he absorbed every page, etching the details into his mind. He had seen several of Cinder's pictures throughout the household, but none of them had ever felt so... raw.

As he worked through the book, he occasionally shot glances up to the doorframe to see if Cinder had returned. Jaune had so many

questions as he read through the notebook, with each page having more and more drawings being crammed into its margins. He wanted to know where they were made, what she used to make it, and countless others to just pick her brain.

Eventually he flipped a page towards the end of the sketchbook and he was faced with a blank page. Turning the last few pages revealed much of the same, leaving Jaune a bit confused. The last drawing had been of a cluster of rotting arrows stabbed into a tree, and most of the art had been scenery.

So where was the sketch for his picture?

As he went back to the first blank page, he noticed the remains of the page still stuck in the spine of the book. It had been very finely torn, and easily missed unless you had gone looking for.

Frowning slightly, he swung his legs over the bed and onto his feet. He immediately groaned from the soreness dancing and *dancing* had inflicted on him the night before. Shaking his limbs out and popping more than a few joints, Jaune hurriedly gathered his clothes off the ground and redressed himself. He stepped out of the room, sketchbook in hand. Cinder was nowhere to be found in the rest of the small cabin, but before Jaune stepped outside to look for her, he couldn't help but notice the small differences around the house. The floors were dirtier than they had ever been, and there were more dishes piled up in the sink than any reasonable adult should have. Rags, baskets, and materials were spread and thrown into available nooks and crannies.

It was far messier, for sure, but at the same time it was more... lived in. Chairs weren't perfectly tucked in, the firewood was low, and the pantry was in a constant state of being half empty. Jaune smiled at the sight, thinking about the times they had spent together, and how it had led them both here.

He had broken into her home and confronted her right by the door, and then a few days later was building her a new one. He had to let

out a small chuckle as he shook his head, recalling his initial suspicion that she would poison him. Maybe it had been justified back then, but now all it made him do was cringe a little bit inside at just how cagey he had been.

Smiling, he pushed open the door and looked around the clearing. His smile faded and was replaced with a jolt of alarm when he didn't see Cinder resting outside. A quick tour around the house showed she wasn't in the garden either. Eyes narrowing, his mind quickly went through a list of possible explanations. Before it could finish though, he noticed that a small path had been cleared through the mildly charred leaves that coated the forest floor. It cut straight through the path of carnage they had torn up during that fight, and the mere sight of it made Jaune's stomach lurch.

He had nearly made one of the greatest mistakes of his life that night, and even thinking about it made Jaune shudder. Stepping onto the path, Jaune moved quietly and carefully through the woods. His caution had been all for naught, however, when he finally caught sight of Cinder.

She was sitting atop the stump he had made when he missed his swing, narrowly avoiding taking off Cinder's head and instead brutalizing the innocent tree.

She sat there, staring off into the air with an empty look on her face. Jaune fought back a frown and decided right then that he hated that look. It was a lie, a mask hiding the brilliance and vivid woman behind it.

"So, is me finding you on this stump going to be a recurring theme?" Jaune began, trying his best to probe exactly what was wrong.

The look on her face shifted just a fraction as she let out a snort, then collapsed as she quickly followed it with a sigh. "No, no I don't think it will." Cinder said, turning to face Jaune. "It's interesting though isn't it?"

"Yeah. It is." Jaune agreed, not needing an explanation about what she meant. She had been thinking the same thing he had.

"You know, you probably could have killed me on that first night."

"At the time I still thought you could rip me in half." Jaune snorted, "And if I remember correctly, when we *did* fight you actually could have."

Cinder didn't reply, her hand fidgeting in her lap. Disquieted, Jaune slowly closed the distance between the two of them. She flinched as Jaune wrapped his hands around her own, as though she was afraid of the contact.

"Is everything okay?" Jaune asked softly.

"Do you hate me?" Cinder asked suddenly, shocking Jaune.

"Wh-? No, no of course not. How co-"

"You should. You really should." Cinder said in a raspy whisper. "I don't deserve any peace, not like this. I took so much from you, I locked you into a war you never wanted. I took your home, your friends, your childhood, y-your entire life."

"Cinder..."

"It's true. I'll admit it," Cinder gasped, tears that had been held back behind stony composure poured out onto the forest floor. "I was the one who looked for Salem. My idea to crack open Beacon. Gods, I didn't even know who you were when you confronted me in Mistral! It was so unbelievable for someone who never mattered in the scheme of things to take anything I did so personally. And I didn't even care afterwards, I really really didn't."

Cinder looked directly at Jaune with a wild look in her eye, hand coming out from between his hands and grabbing onto his upper arm. "There's nothing I could possibly do to make up for all I've done.

I spoke so highly of just living, as though moving on with your life is the best possible solution to simply existing. But how can I do that when I *know*, th - that even when the dust has settled I'm-

Cinder cut off as the force of Jaune hugging her slammed into her. He wrapped his arms tightly around her back, pressing her face against his shoulder. Jaune clenched his eyes, fighting back his own tears as Cinder wept softly against him. All this time, she had kept this bottled away under a veneer of indifference. Jaune could only wonder in horror how long she had been thinking about this. Since last night? A few weeks? Not that it felt like a betrayal, but realizing that Cinder still hadn't forgiven herself worried him more than anything else.

"How could you say that...?" Jaune muttered. He heard Cinder gasp quietly, and rushed to continue "How could you pretend that... Cinder, you've learned to live more in these past few years than most people do in their entire lives. You've harmed, but we can't live in the past anymore. We just can't. Ozpin and Salem did that, and destroyed the world with their war. Whether they deserved it or not, I've killed just as many as you have over the years." He blinked a few times, the water in them starting to overflow. "... and some of them definitely didn't deserve it."

Cinder's crying slowly calmed as he spoke, listening to his words as he continued, "And you... you're important to me..." Jaune spoke, choking on the words as he struggled to get them out. His neck felt flush with heat and fear ran down his spine. "And... the world would be darker without you and the beauty you breathe into it."

Silence prevailed between them as the words bounced back into Jaune's head, afraid of revealing how he really thought of her yet glad to have finally said it.

Slowly, Cinder unravelled herself from Jaune's grasp, eye still wet and face red with emotion. She opened her mouth to try and voice her thoughts, but closed it with a click after a few seconds. She gave Jaune's hand a quick squeeze before as she stepped off the stump.

She took a few steps out into the treeline, before reaching behind a cluster of trees and pulling out a large, cloth covered canvas.

"Could you grab my easel and set it up? I had it around here somewhere." Cinder asked with a steady voice, betrayed by her still red, puffy eyes. Jaune scrambled to get the small stand set up, like he'd seen Cinder do a hundred times now.

Carefully, she set the canvas down on its stand. She smiled weakly at Jaune as she stepped away from it. Jaune's eye's flickered between Cinder and the painting, not knowing if he was ready to see it, or run from it. Cinder saw it and snorted, despite the somber mood.

"Well, Jaune. A deal's a deal."

A/N: Hey guys! I'm still alive! This chapter took a lot longer to get out because I wanted to get it right and give you nothing less, I hope you understand! I was planning on writing this chapter and the next into one massive chapter, but I felt you'd all waited long enough. We're getting to the end of the story now, and I'm so freaking excited to get the second half of this one up. Let me know what you think, because I love hearing back from you guys!

Chapter 16

It was only a painting. There was absolutely nothing to fear from it. Jaune knew he would see it eventually, but it had never felt so... intimidating. It had always been a distant thought, an event always resting on the horizon ever since he made that spontaneous decision to ask for one.

But now that it was in front of him, it felt like an indomitable beast in front of him. It represented so much of his time with Cinder, that a part of him felt that time would end the moment he drew back the canvas.

Internally, Jaune registered that it had been years since he felt this kind of fear. Not that he was fearless, Gods no. It kept him sharp and wise, saving his life countless times. But that was a fear of death, capture, or worse. But this wasn't physical or mental it was... just confronting something abstract.

His instincts and reflexes slammed into each other at full force, different reactions crowding his head all at once. One told him to run, another told him to come up with some excuse, while an eerily-adolescent one told him to curl up into a ball. As a result, none of these things happened, resulting in him staring wide eyed at Cinder.

She sat there patiently, though not without a bit of worry in her own eyes.

And that was just it, really.

Jaune's jaw worked uselessly up and down for a few seconds before the words came out weakly, "Can I-...?"

Nothing changed in Cinder's countenance; she was still sitting with that look frozen on her face. Jaune nodded to himself, and dragged himself up to the canvas.

"It's just a painting," Jaune whispered, even though he doubted his own words.

Gripping the covering with both hands, Jaune tugged it off. And there it was.

Ruby. Yang. Ren. Nora. Blake. Weiss.

Jaune's reached a trembling hand out in front of the painting, though he didn't dare touch it. Lovingly drawn was a page right out of history. It was all of them huddled together and smiling with the long towers and awnings of Beacon visible in the background, little more than a thinly painted shadow. Every curve gave the sense that it had been planned, fitting into a master plan. Nora's figure didn't have the accented, crystal definition of Ruby, while Yang's hair was far longer than it had been towards the end. No one could have seen the minor discrepancies hidden here and there in the painting except Jaune.

And it all made it better. As he looked at the painting, memories washed over him as though they had happened not even a day ago. Laughter, moments, and experiences he had long thought lost or locked away all came back as he compared these figures with his friends in his mind's eye.

He knew he was crying, he could feel it, yet he didn't feel his vision blur as he looked on, admiring just how *much* Cinder had gotten right. Their stances, the smiles, their eyes, and how much they meant to each other. She had managed to isolate the quirks of his best friends and keep them alive.

His mind lurched off the beaten path as he heard Cinder move. He didn't dare take his eyes off the painting, eyes still absorbing every detail. She wordlessly moved against his side and wrapped her arm around his waist, leaning her head on his shoulder.

There in the middle of it all, standing perfectly straight with a proud smile etched in time- was Pyrrha.

It was a smile Jaune hadn't seen in so... so long. It was one that had always been reserved for him, one that showed such an unshakeable faith in him.

Every single detail of her was perfect. Etched like a photo, it was a flawless depiction of her. Her hair was slightly tousled like it was after a good fight, her face flush with exertion. Cinder had somehow even managed to convey the slightly weathered buckles and engravings on her weapons.

And her eyes. Her gorgeous, green eyes stared straight into his soul from beyond the grave, holding that proud crinkle in them as she looked on. Jaune couldn't help but wonder as a thought wiggled its way into his brain - would she still be proud?

Ten years ago, he would have said yes. Two months ago he would have said no. But now...

"It- it's... yeah. How did you-..?" Jaune said, adding after a minute.

Cinder was silent for a while. Eventually she sighed and moved away from him, holding a hand delicately over the image of Pyrrha.

"It never left me. Some people remember every face, but I don't. Not something so small. I couldn't even tell you who my first was. And that's because it was just normal to me after a while. You don't remember how many times you've looked at a clock or gotten sick. It was never supposed to be something to think about in the grand scheme of things. But... not her." Cinder shivered. "It was like- like a bright light in my eyes every time I closed my eyes. I could remember every single part of her face and outfit, burned clear as day into my mind. I can even remember what she sounds like."

"She didn't have her powers for... for a long time. And she barely had any of the Fall Maiden in her. I didn't inherit her memories either," Cinder added when Jaune's eyes widened. "I just knew. Not that I was given much of a choice but I..." Cinder trailed off.

Instead, she pushed a small scrap of paper into Jaune's hand.

"I'm just glad I remembered her."

Scribbled on the note was a curt sentence in Jaune's own handwriting:

Better Days.

Tears still ran down Jaune's face, ignorant of the smile that blossomed. It still hurt to look at the painting, it really did. It probably always would. But he finally felt the last piece of the puzzle slide into place.

If he could go back in time, knowing what he did now, Jaune wasn't sure if he'd stop himself from going to Beacon. Those final years of his youth were the greatest and worst parts hand-in-hand. And he didn't know what he'd do if he could change any of it.

But he couldn't. And standing right here, in this moment, he finally knew.

"So, do you like it?" asked Cinder tentatively. Worry and hope flickered across her face in such an openly raw way that Jaune reached a hand out and cupped her face gently.

"I love it. It's perfect." Jaune rasped out, not even trying to get his breathing under control.

Cinder's eye watered, her lips trembling as she tried to control her emotions. Jaune leaned forwards, pressing his forehead against hers.

"I just- I finished it a week ago and... and I was so scared to give it to you, th-that you would leave and I-" Cinder cried, tears falling freely as the last of her walls came crashing to the ground.

"Thank you, Cinder... thank you for everything."

Their lips connected, a gentle and personal spark between them. When they separated, Cinder looked him in the eyes, her own still sporting tears. Jaune could see it slowly bubbling out of her, until she was snorting quietly and looking away.

"What?" Jaune asked, bemused.

"I'm just glad you liked my 'art' so much you placed an order instead of killing me."

"Hey! In my defence, it was good art."

"Oh yes, yes I'm sure it was."

"Ech. Come on, I didn't know if you could blow my head off. I had to think fast."

"Simply saying 'I'm lost' would have been a better way to get out of trouble than that."

"It worked, didn't it?"

Cinder bit her lip, "Hmm, I suppose it did."

Jaune kissed her again, pulling her close and holding her there. He held her until he a strong breeze swept against his back. All around them, the signs of the seasons immanent change were appearing.

"You know..." he began, "I've been thinking... now that the deal is over..." Cinder stiffened in his arms.

"I was just thinking that, well, maybe you'd want to keep doing this."

Cinder narrowed her eyes at him, "What, the painting or the se-"

"Both!" Jaune said hurriedly, "and everything else. Maybe. I don't know, this is all fast and I just... I just realized that I could do this for the rest of my life. There's nothing else out there for me that'll be better than you. I *want* to do this, if you're up for it."

Cinder's face looked blank, a carefully composed form as she processed his words. Jaune almost started to panic before Cinder kissed him and took his hand in hers.

"I'm sure we can come to some sort of an arrangement to make that work. Perhaps over tea?" She said slyly.

Jaune's free hand picked up his painting and tucked it under his arm.

"Lead the way."

"Thanks mister!" Screamed a small boy, holding his new trophy high above his head as a gaggle of his friends swarmed around him gabbling questions. It was a long, wooden sword, though with the way it was painted, it looked like it was freshly forged steel.

"You be careful with that now, Stevie! If you lose an eye your mother will have my head!" shouted, holding back laughter Jaune. Shaking his head, he stepped back through his door and closed it behind him, breathing in the deep scent of fresh wood. It always felt good to be back in his workshop, nothing but him and his work.

"You're letting all the heat out, close that door properly," came the irritated voice from the other end of the room.

Eh. Well, mostly just him.

"Ah! But my love, it's not like we're lacking it, are we?" Jaune said sweetly as he closed the slightly ajar door *properly* this time.

"It's for appearances, dear. Can't have people thinking we're well insulated," Cinder replied, hunched over a large map spread out across a table. Bits of wet paint and thumbprints marred its edges, but on top of it was Cinder's great undertaking. An entire, updated map of Remnant. Progress was slow-going, and for the moment she had focused entirely on the larger towns that had managed to hold out against what was left of the Grimm and banditry.

Jaune had a feeling she would have gone out and checked them all herself instead of relying on information and lesser maps if not for her condition.

"You know you're not supposed to be standing like this, right?" Jaune asked, easing his heavily pregnant wife onto a waiting seat, to which she grudgingly complied.

"Yes well, sitting around doing nothing doesn't exactly get better with time," Cinder grumbled as Jaune stepped around the corner and came back with two hot mugs of tea.

"But you've had so much practice!" Jaune said coyly.

Cinder jabbed a finger at him, "That's your fault!"

" **I'm** not the demi-goddess of fertility."

Cinder narrowed her eyes at Jaune. "Oooooouh, your luck knows no bounds, Mr. Arc."

"And neither does your mercy, Mrs. Arc."

Cinder preened slightly under that title, even after all these years. If he had to admit, so did Jaune.

"Could you paint some of the toys instead? You could probably do that sitting down without exerting yourself too much," Jaune ventured.

She hummed. "Don't think I didn't see you giving away that sword to Stevie Noire. You know his mother hates violence; she'll come for you eventually."

"Bah, his dad paid for it in advance, said I should make him feel like it was a gift to make him care more about the community or something."

"Rather, you've just armed a small menace. Or one of his friends."

"It'll teach him to be tough enough to hold onto the things he cares about."

The two sipped at their tea and enjoyed the last moments of peace and quiet of the day. Outside their windows, they could hear the rattle of wagons on cobblestones as farmers and lumberjacks brought in their hauls for the day, all eager to make it home for supper.

It had all exploded so quickly, and Angort seemed to be getting bigger all the time. What had once been their remote cottage soon became the heart of the city's downtown, and they'd decided it simply didn't fit the city anymore. Plenty of renovations, a basement, and a second floor later, and they finally had a chance to open up their store.

It had been a long debate, arguing what was best to sell and which name would fit the most.

A whole winter was spent bickering about it, leaving notes in sandwiches, names painted at the bottom of mugs, and in one creative case glued to the underside of the toilet lid.

But now, both of them were proud of the sign that hung on the outside of their home, and painted beneath every toy they made together.

The peace didn't last long as three pairs of boots thundered up the street, jeering and calling out to one another. Cinder snorted loudly in the way she only did when they were alone, and Jaune could barely see the tops of three figures running below the windows.

"Took their time, didn't they?" Cinder whispered conspiratorially to Jaune.

"They're exploring. They get it from their dad," Jaune whispered back.

The door slammed open and the trio stampeded in, a frenzy of pigtails, blonde hair, black hair, and one very large backpack. Jaune rose to his feet, stepping in front of his wife and bracing himself to catch the tangle of limbs as it came slamming into his chest.

"Whoa there! Easy, easy!" Jaune laughed uproariously as two young girls and a boy clambered onto him.

"Dad! Dad!"

Jaune swayed back and forth under their weight, but finally managed to get some stable footing thanks to his reflexes, dulled as they may be.

At least, until one of the girls kicked him in the back of the leg.

Cinder, as helpful as always, laughed as her family tumbled to the ground amidst cries of indignation.

Outside, curious faces looked at the house as they walked by, alerted by the noise. But then they would look up, see the sign and shrug before moving on.

Swaying gently in the calm winds of winter was a paint-brush with a flame at its end crossed over an empty map. And below it, painted in simple, golden letters, was its name:

Painting Present's

A/N: Well. This is it.

Man, it's really hard to say goodbye to this story. It's been a constant companion for a while now, and it really helped me finally find my confidence as an author that I could really produce something good if I tried. I really just want to thank you guys for being with me this whole time, with your loving support, eye opening reviews and simply asking very casually

how long it will be until I get another chapter out there. Knowing people were eager to read my work was a joy that I can't really explain.

I know some people are disappointed that it ended, and I get that. More than once I was tempted to drag the story on, add some black moments, drag out the slow burn and really crank out extra chapters of nothing. But then I kind of realized that that wasn't the story I wanted. I'd read so many of them on this site, and I guess it's hard to remember how two adults can just... fall in love and enjoy each others company. No external forces pushing them together.

That's why I was really proud with how it turned out. I don't know if there's any chapter I would change, including the chapter where the painting is first brought up (man did my beta beat me over the noggin afterwards for sneaking that by him).

And that brings me to arguably the most important person in this whole endeavor, my editor and numero uno Beta Reader: Darth Browser. Honestly, thank you man for always being there to read my snippets and keep me in line when I try and put a fart joke in the middle of a serious scene because I don't understand comedic timing. And oh yeah, correcting my numerous grammatical errors and teaching me that a semi-colon is not a decoration to be placed anywhere I want. 3

But! I'm not done writing ladies and gentlemen! I've just uploaded a new story called "Old Order", which is a story from a Weiss POV set immediately after the end of RWBY, exploring the apocalypse, being a leader and learning how to run a colony. It's got all the exciting issues of supply, scavenging, sickness, laws, morale, diplomacy, war and the eternal battle to stay warm when the night seems coldest.

It really focuses on building on the world so many of you have commented on or said you enjoyed. I've loved this idea ever since I think chapter 2 of this story, and I'm so excited to

publish it. It shall be the second part to my AU I should probably name! And who knows, maybe one day I'll come back to PP and release an epilogue of snippets/slice of life? No promises, but I'll keep you all abreast if it does!

Thanks again for following me on this wild ride! Cheers!