

Where did I go right?

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Where did I go right?

by [JAlban](#)

Summary

Cinder's attempt to steal the Fall Maiden's power went horribly wrong. Now weakened, heavily injured, and stranded in the middle of a remote forest, she has little hope of survival—until fate (or sheer dumb luck) intervenes.

Jaune Arc, an idealistic dork with dreams of becoming a Huntsman. He doesn't recognize her. He doesn't fear her. And, for some reason, he insists on helping her.

What starts as an inconvenient act of kindness soon spirals into something neither of them expected. Cinder finds herself in an unfamiliar role: a reluctant mentor to an ambitious fool with too much heart and not nearly enough skill.

Or: How Jaune Arc accidentally redeemed a pyromaniac, strength-obsessed war criminal.

Chapter 1

She wasn't going to make it. Of that Cinder was certain.

It all had gone wrong so fast.

She would be the first to admit that the opportunity was too good to be true. A Maiden walking without bodyguards in a relatively isolated part of Vale. The perfect target for a small assassination squad.

Cinder had Watts, begrudgingly so, compile an entire folder on the woman and her whereabouts. It had everything, from her description since she entered into Shade to now, her mostly used weapons, her usual partners and bodyguards, even most used routes and inns. Cinder knew everything there was to know about the Fall maiden.

Amber Solstice was this generation's Fall Maiden. She was well known for butting heads with Ozpin and running away from her bodyguards. Which made the opportunity less suspicious but not less dangerous.

While the woman wasn't an S rank huntress, she had been trained in Vacuo and had been part of a B rank team before inheriting the Maidens power. She was now to be considered a rank A until her powers came in full, in which case she would be at least S or on a completely different scale than normal huntsman.

Still Cinder had prepared. She searched for the best assassin possible, one specialized in huntsmen, and one that money could buy until Salem truly bound him to her service. And when Marcus Black had been killed she got the one responsible. While yes the kid wasn't as good as his father he was still an outstanding assassin, he was fast cunning and most important of all? Brutal. The fact that he was still young and could be molded and made truly loyal to her was far more valuable than a few extra years of experience, or so she thought. Maybe she could convince Salem to free the child's semblance. He had the strange idea that his father had stolen it. Semblances were part of one soul, they couldn't be stolen, but locked? That's another thing entirely.

The second member of her team, Emerald, had a great semblance and was as loyal as a puppy dog. A simple illusion semblance may seem weak, hers was outstandingly realistic. While limited to only one target at a time, that one person would see, hear, smell and even feel wherever Emerald wished. If she made snakes coil and constrict around you, you would feel the cold scales and the pressure. If she wished for you to feel the burning, smell the scent of charred flesh while you saw your arms disintegrate into burned coal so you would. Of course it would still be an illusion, but smelling yourself burning alive was very distracting in a proper fight.

Both should be enough distraction so she could've used her trump card on the Maiden. Her mistress had created a one of a Kind Grimm for her, the Khepri beetle. The hand sized egyptian beetle was a Grimm designed to siphon away magic. Useless against most creatures in reamnet, but absolutely fatal for the Maidens.

Everything was perfect.

She had a team she trained to a coherent fighting style.

She had a way to force the power out of the Maiden even if she couldn't truly kill her.

And most important of all, she had an opportunity to prove to her mistress that she was worth not only the Falls Maiden power but the others too.

It would've been perfect! She would've been the first member of her new council to kill a Maiden! A feat not even Tyrian had. She would've become Salems right hand woman. With enough power to bend the world to her and her master will. None would ever touch her again, she would've been truly free for the first time in her life.

And it all fell apart when Ironwood's bitch and Ozpin's little crow interviewed.

The fight had started well. The huntress was good but her powers hadn't come in full yet.

Emerald kept throwing nightmares against the woman while Mercury would harass and bottle her against Cinder. Having to concentrate to properly use the Beetle made her less effective than Cinder liked, but she would not risk letting the power pass at random by killing the maiden.

She had got the beetle on her twice before she threw a whirlwind of ice at her and Mercury, an excellent distraction so she could run away. Problem was that she wasn't running away, not truly. She was dragging them deeper into Ozpin's trap.

One second she had the beetle bound to her hand and said hand strangling the young woman. And in the next a gigantic sword made of ice tried to bisect her. Had she been at a quarter or even third percent Aura, Cinder would've died instantly. While Mercury should've been watching her back, she couldn't deny that the boy had bigger problems at the time.

Ozpin's little crow had swepted in and almost ripped the kids head off with his scythe. The boys Aura survived barely and broke as soon as he kicked him full force into Emerald.

Qrow Branwen. Ozpin's most useful minion. He had been a pain in her mistress' side since before this version of her council was built. He and his late team were actually responsible for the death of three of the anterior members. He was growing old, but by no means weaker. His dossier said his weapon was called Harbinger, and shifted between a Shotgun, a massive sword and a war scythe. He was deemed Rank S even with a semblance that batheth everything, him included, in misfortune. Weakness: Nieces, alcohol and prone to be affected by his own semblance the more time a battle dragged on.

Cinder never had much hope of the street rat actually becoming anything better than a rank C huntress, B if she ever learned to properly multitask in a fight. But Emerald was close to useless the whole fight. Mercury had the decency to keep fighting even with his aura broken. And Emerald helped distract Qrow. But that left her with Winter Schnee and a Maiden to deal with.

Best choice would've been to run. They couldn't win against Two S ranks and a Maiden.

But if Cinder could get the beetle a few more times into Amber then she could keep on siphoning the power to herself. Subtracting a Maiden from their side and into hers. Emerald and Mercury would've probably die as soon as Qrow stopped holding back. That didn't truly matter to Cinder, all they needed to do was buy enough time so she could steal the Falls Maiden power.

She had rushed both huntress. Hands clasped into her superheated glass swords. Her semblance makes them inhumanly sharp and hot. And while doing so she tried to remember all she could about Ironwood's little lap dog.

She knew she had read the files, just not paid enough attention to them. Winter Schnee was supposed to be in Atlas. She should be Watts' problem, not hers!

Winter Schnee, eldest daughter of Jacques Schnee, actual head of the SDC. Specialist under direct control of General Ironwood. Possibly in the know about the secret war. *I guess we can say for sure now that she is a member of Ozpins little cadre.* Considered an honorary Rank S Huntress. Semblance was summoning constructs that resembled Grimm and armor knights with a few glyphs that Cinder hadn't memorized. Weakness: younger siblings and a semblance that took time to properly activate.

She dodged under another swipe of the gigantic ice armor Winter had summoned and jumped to score a deep slash against its arm. She couldn't destroy the armor yet. The only thing keeping winter rooted to the ground was its summoning circle. She had to play with it until an opening appeared and she could rush either of her enemies.

Dodging got harder when Amber was finally back on her feet. The Maiden kept tossing shards of ice at the woman every opening she got. But to do so she had to stay mobile. And in one such moment she stepped too far from Winters protection.

Cinder shattered her right sword above her head and wiled the pieces to shoot forward into a storm of overheated sharpened glass. Amber tried defending as best as she could, even blocking some with a twirl of her staff. But every piece that hit started melting and burning over her aura, causing further damage to the Maiden.

Her aura was fading just a bit more and it would break.

The scream of the girl distracted the Schnee specialist for less than a second. But it was enough opening for Cinder to get to her. Her sword was flying through the air, poised to either cut through the woman's aura and take her head or impact so hard that she would cause enough damage to be out of commission for the foreseeable minutes.

But her sword never reached Winter Schee's neck.

Cinder screamed. She screamed and held to the stump that was now her left arm. Her aura had broken by such a powerful slash that even after it simply cleaved through her arm.

Those useless bastards! She thought. All they had to do was hold him back for a few minutes! Incompetent, useless children...

Amber didn't let the lack of aura detain her. Even in pain Cinder was able to dodge the woman's few fireballs.

“Come on lady, just give up. Ya can't beat us now.” Qrow said.

“Surrender now!” Ordered Winter. Moving to block view on the weakened maiden.

I'm dead either way. At best they capture and torture me for every scrap of information I know Might as well try everything.

The Khepri beetle still contained something close to a half of the Falls Maiden power. Absorbing it now would be useless, as she had no knowledge of how to properly use the power. And nothing said it would regenerate her aura, not that she could win this fight even at 100%.

It would be a gamble, but it wouldn't be the first time.

It was still bound to her left arm, the arm that was discarded close to both huntress. Nothing more than a simple whisper. “Overload....”

In a second the entire forest was in flames. The tiny grimm had flew in the direction of the huntress and maiden before exploding into a supernova of fire and torrential winds.

She saw the Maidens aura break. A fireball having hit her directly on the stomach. Winter rushed in her direction trying her best to contain or defend from the raging storm of fire that threatened her and Amber. Qrow was there a second later, taking the injured woman away.

The lost of the arm and her flesh burning hurt far less than losing the Falls power to Cinder. But surviving today could mean another chance at them in the future. So she ran.

She wasn't sure for how long, how far or even in what direction.

In truth she was unbelievably lucky that the fire she caused was drifting to the opposite side. A change of the winds would have her burned alive inside the forest.

At some point, she wasn't sure when, the loss of blood and the burnings finally got to her. She stumbled and fell painfully to the ground.

Cinder was a tough woman. By far one of the strongest the hell hole of Mistral ever produced. And she was a survivor through and through. *Just need my aura back*, she thought. She could cauterize the wound with it. And the aura would start healing most of the weaker burns by itself. Then the only problem would be infection, but she would cross that bridge when she got to it.

She dragged herself to a tree and sat herself as best as she could. *Just a small pause, a few seconds to breathe is all.*

She heard the crushing of leaves nearby. But couldn't bring herself to open her eyes. She was just so tired.

At that moment it didn't matter anymore to her. The pain and exhaustion were simply too much.

Serve the queen of all grimm and end as a lowly Beowolfs chow? The absolute irony.

She could kill Goliaths by herself. She could march in any academy or guild and be made a Rank B or A huntress. She had enough money and connections to rule any underworld in Vale.

And up to a few moments ago she had touched magic. She had in her possession a power so strong, so ancient that whole kingdoms could only dream of possessing. The last piece for her glorious future had slipped away between her fingers.

And this is how she met her end.

What was even the point? She thought as her mind finally gave up into slumber.

Damsel in distress?

Chapter Summary

Jaune meets a very hurt huntress.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He wasn't going to make it. Jaune was certain of this.

But it wasn't like he had any other choice!

He couldn't just abandon her to the grimm! He was going to beacon to be a Brothersdammed huntsman! What type of hero would just leave a poor wounded woman around?!

And momma Arc would tan his hide if he didn't offer help to those in need. Not that she actually ever had to enforce said rule on most of her children. Arcs tended to be the optimistic nice little balls of joy wherever they were. Or so she constantly boasted about.

Thanks the Brother gods for the Huntsmen app and survival for dummies book he had been reading. He wasn't his sister Catharine, the girl was still at school but had enough credit to not only graduate but go to a proper doctors university! She probably wouldn't be panicking as much as him right now!

He needed to help her! She was a hero like his dad! *Dressed like that she kinda needs to be a huntress. Who else would waltz trough a forest in a short dress and heels?*

He had done everything the app said for first aid.

He laid her down gently, made sure nothing was blocking her breathing and set at cleaning and categorizing her wounds.

Okay Jaune think. Start with the worst and go for there.

He took a quick look around her mostly exposed body. *Yeah, missing arm for sure. Gods what grimm could've done something like this? Since when do they even breathe fire?!*

Can't do much there other than cleaning and bandaging it up. Thank heavens she didn't bleed out. Probably due to the whole stump being burned shut.

He started disinfecting and cleaning it with the water bottle and cleaning alcohol he had packed. The huntress hissed as soon as the alcohol started bubbling.

“I’m sorry!” He tried to keep her still. “Everything is going to be fine, I promise. Just try to stay still.”

Jaune owed the men that sold him the traveling bag an extra tip next time he saw him. The bag had a full first-aid kit!

He cleaned the stump, passed some sort of green gel with a very long and medicinal name - *it says to cover the full wound, but I’m not sure its designed for things like this* - and applied the bandages as tight as he could without constricting what was left of the arm.

Okay, secondary wounds now! I can do this!

Secondary wounds were any that weren't life treating. Or the guide said so. But wounds weren't prettier just because they weren't life treating. She was burned, and very badly.

The left side of her face was burned so badly that he wasn't sure her eye was still there. He quickly searched the huntsmen app about what to do but it had no tips about such injury. And thanks to the CTT tower being so far away he couldn't really call for help or search the net for it.

Pending a better idea he decided to simply let it lay. He was going to treat her face as best he could and hope a proper medic could save the eye in the future.

He repeated the process for the side of her face. The cleaning took longer this time. It churned his stomach to no end, but the app had been clear, he shouldn't let any dirt on open and burned flesh. So with shaking hands he cleaned, and removed scorched hair and skin from it. He tanked the gods as soon as it was all over.

Poor lady, the burns got even to the side of her hair and ear.

Now what?

Well we can't wait here, suffering, anger and sadness attract Grimm. And no way anyone wakes up on her state and is not pissed and sad to all hells. And I'm not even sure she killed whatever grimm did this.

He needed to transport her, but how? He wasn't a weakling, he helped move the wine barrels at home and bringing in the grapes during harvest time, so he had a decent bit of muscle. But no way he could properly carry her without opening or worsening all her wounds!

Wait! What if she is bleeding internally?! How do I check that?! Hells how do I fix that?!

He again opened the app and started reading as much as he could. His cheeks went red at the idea of having to inspect the body of the huntress.

Classy Jaune, really classy. Poor girl is almost dead and you think of that!

He decided against doing so. First he would've had to cut or rip most of her dress to properly inspect her body, which he wasn't sure he could do without hurting her, then after that he really had no way of treating anything internal and afterward he would have to dress her up in

either rags or on his spare clothing. The idea of putting a hoodie over her burns and tender skiing didn't really seem a good one.

Back to transport then. And again to his immense satisfaction the app had the solution. I Don't know who made this thing, but I love you! I also now know why this was a 4gig download. Thing has everything on it! His screen was displaying how to build an emergency stretcher out of camping supplies and some wood! It even had an entire section of how to do it with only wood and random forest stuff!

He sat on creating the stretcher. It didn't go particularly well.

First he needed two long and resistant branches for the sides. They needed to be longer than his patient. Since if they were smaller her feet would drag out of it. He couldn't find any at first, so he just chopped some down with his sword.

I'm so sorry granddad. But it is for a good cause! I swear I will take better care of it in the future!

He also used to properly remove any extra branches or snags that could poke his mysterious patient.

Second part was making a bed between the branches. He had to find a way to connect both in such a way that it would not break, leave her mostly straight and not dig into her wounds....

Can I really do this? Maybe I should wait for her to wake up and just risk it with the grimm.... Nah, she is a huntress, even hurt she would try to protect me from them, and in this state we would probably end both dead.

Painstakingly he opened his tent and curled the cloth around the branches. *How do I make sure this doesn't slip though? The app says to bound or knot it but I don't really have anything for this.* Maybe he could just hold it? It wasn't a great idea but it was his best at the moment.

It took almost two hours, with some intervals to curse and check on the wounded huntress, but he had done it! A, somewhat, decent stretcher lay in front of him!

Okay, now I need to secure her to it. Wait, I need to get her on it first.

That proved relative easy if not speedy. He put the stretcher by her side and gently, ever so slowly dragged her feet and upper body over it. In the process he noticed that her skin had grown paler, and she was hotter now. *Damn, I don't have anything for a serious fever here, best is a few pills for a cold, those have stuff for fevers right?*

He was racing against the clock it seemed.

Well, Sun sets in the west. I was a day or two from the next village walking straight east.

He put the sun to his back, grabbed the makeshift stretcher and started walking. He had to cover as much ground as he could. *Probably walk into the night if there is enough light to not get lost. Does the app have star maps? Bet it does....*

He had to pause a few times to check on his patient, not to rest his aching arms thank you very much, and make sure she wasn't slipping or getting jostled too much. He didn't expect it to be easy to drag a stretcher through the woods, but he also didn't expect it to be such a pain. He needed to look at the ground for every step and make sure he didn't drag her over a root or hit a rock.

Once night started falling he decided against trying to navigate by the stars. Yeah, the app had a star map and instructions on how to navigate using it. But he barely understood them, and the foliage made it really hard to properly see the sky. So instead of getting lost in a dark spooky, grimm infested forest he decided to set camp and review the bandages on the huntress.

Should her aura thing be back by now? Also, screw dad for never telling me about all that aura stuff! And I guess screw me for not doing better research ahead of time.....

Gods I love this app. He thought for the hundredth time.

He'd been listening to each chapter on the playlist "Introduction to Hunters" since meeting the fallen huntress. Most of his travel had been spent listening to audiobooks or podcasts that he had downloaded beforehand. But he bet that the audio classes on the app probably had useful information and it was high time for him to properly listen to them.

Would she unlock my aura if I asked? I mean I saved her life, doesn't seem that big of a favor.

He finished cleaning and changing the bandage on her arm. It wasn't looking good. The area was still very red and it seemed like one of the bandages had absorbed too much blood and got stuck on the wound. Only saving grace was the fact that it didn't present any pus or necrosis. *Does necrosis happen this fast? It told me to check for it, but I have no idea.*

The face on the other hand was getting better. Or more specifically, it didn't get worse and seemed to be not as irritated as before.

Ok, bandages are done. Now I need to get some food and water on her. Should probably have done that earlier, but the app only talked about remedies and saline solutions type stuff.

He spent a few minutes making a small fire and putting a pot with boiled water to heat.

"Hope you like soup lady. I doubt you can eat anything else. But you are in luck! I'm one of the best cooks in my family!" She didn't respond. The most he had heard from her since the start of their impromptu journey together were moans and grunts.

It didn't take long for the food to get ready. He barely had to cook in truth. Just adding the powder and some cut pieces of chicken and random vegetables he had packed.

He cautiously sat the huntress up against a tree.

"Hey can you hear me?" He asked softly. She grunted through gritted teeth. Maybe she had awakened when he tried to put her against the tree, but she clearly wasn't all there yet.

“You need to eat. I made us soup, do you think you can try a spoonful or two?” He brought the soup closer, got a spoon full and blew cloning it a bit. “Here give it a try.”

She did. As it seems almost dying made someone hungry. Problem was that she was also parched. The soup was a bit too rich to go down easily and caused her to cough violently.

“It's okay, everything is okay.” He brought a bottle of water to her lips. “Small gulps, just a bit at a time.”

Dinner took way longer than he imagined. And he ended up eating his portion cold, but he didn't care. He spent most of the time feeding the huntress. He settled her down and covered her with the only cover he had brought. His hoodie would be enough for a night like this one.

“Good night lady. With any luck we will find the village by tomorrow.” He faded to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I will try keeping on publishing new chapters every week :)

Safe?

Chapter Notes

I plan to keep on bouncing from perspectives as the story continues. One to train different voices for each character and two to give more insight in what our mc's are thinking. Do let me know if I'm doing a good job at it! :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The world refused to focus for Cinder.

She spent almost a week between flashes and pain. And not in one of her most lucid moments did the damned world around her come into focus or even had the decency to make sense.

In the beginning it was just a simple flash of gold, then it became a soft loving voice. She didn't truly understand what it was talking about, but she knew it was safe, and it was trying to alleviate the burning and pain that ran all over her body. She didn't trust it, not one bit.

She had woken up on the third day, she tried to move from what she now knew was a soft bed only to hit her stump of an arm against the wooden bed frame. Cinder wasn't sure if she opened the wound or ripped a few stitches, ones that she didn't even remember receiving. But she remembers him. The golden little light rushed to her side. It helped her sit and talked softly while it looked over her wounds.

He also brought someone else to examine her. It was a small grayish blob. Sounded old and female, but that's as far as Cinder could discern. Even then he didn't leave. He hovered close, lending a hand and offering useless, if kind, words of encouragement.

He'd even offered her food later that same day. It seemed to have become a habit of him sitting by her bedside during lunch and dinner. He would feed her and talk about some random thing she couldn't really discern or be bothered to care about.

By the end of the week her aura had finally done enough to fix her hearing and eye, singular it seemed. She expected to be more enraged by the loss of her left eye, but she lost so much that day that it really seemed like just a footnote. *Both eyes weren't payment enough for the magic lost.*

Still, Cinder kept quiet when the boy entered to feed and change her bandages. She had grunted and shaken her head as a form of response the past two days, so he wouldn't really find it so strange. She needed more information about him. Who was he? Why was he helping her? Why did he show so much concern and care for a stranger?

At first she was sure he had some ulterior motive. He was young and male. Maybe he was after her body? But that didn't make sense, she was broken now. Even if she had kept any

semblance of her beauty, he didn't show any desire for her. Well, not any, she did note how red he became when she dragged him close to point at the glass of water. It wasn't really a test, but it did wonders to her ego knowing she still could get a rise of men in her state.

As far as she could gather. His name was Jaune Arc, he wanted to be a huntsmen, he was working for whoever owned this house as a farm hand in exchange for shelter and medical aid for her. And he was also an absolute golden retriever of a man.

He smiled easily and formed friendships even more. Cinder observed him from the window by the side of her bed. He would work with the horses, while playing with the creatures and joking with every other person or faunus around. He seemed to brighten the day of everyone around him. Even more when it came to his turn in the kitchens.

Cinder never truly cared for food. Yes, something that tasted good was preferable, but as long as it kept her going and not starving she wouldn't complain. That was until she tasted the kids cooking. Gods was the kid good. She had noticed that sometimes her food was simply way better than others, but she didn't know why until he brought her chicken soup. He insisted that it was an ancient Arc recipe. His mom told him it could cure pretty much anything. *Figures he would be a mamas boy. No kid talks so much about his family and cooks like this without being one.* She mused.

He also started cooking for the others in the house after that. Seemed that the night was cold and he had made enough for everyone. Now he got to stop work earlier to help in the kitchens.

On that note she seemed to remember the others. *At this point I should have all of them memorized. Why haven't I yet?* Cinder should already know all their names and gotten started on their secrets. Like she always did. But it didn't seem to matter anymore.

I failed Salem. They know we are after the maiden. She will be protected like no other now. I lost my team, which took me almost two years to make. I have absolutely nothing to bring back to her.....

She was aware that if she didn't return Salem would send either grimm scouts or other members of the council after her.

I'm dead meat if Tyrian is not given explicit orders to bring me back alive. Even then I bet he would make sure I couldn't put in a fight.... I can deal with Watts though. I can kill him if necessary and he can't really force me back, traveling with him would be an absolute pain, but still better than that crazy zealot.

And if she sends Hazel? Then I for sure can't run or fight. But at least the journey back would be painless. Silent and awkward, but painless.

Should she try to contact them? It's not like she could excuse what happened. And any contact would be traced by Watts in seconds..... She had a decision to make here. She just wasn't sure what the options were and what they really meant for her future and continued existence.

She startled at the sound of the door opening. The thing had hinges rustier than most horror movies.

“Hey! You are awake!” The blonde happily sat by her side. “How you feeling? I brought something a bit heartier today.” He sat the plate by her night stand. “I noticed you didn’t like the mushroom soup from last night, so how about some propper noodles and pork!” He made a little flair showing her the typical mistralien food.

Cinder replied with a simple raised eyebrow. No story about the food this time? No boasting about the Arc recipe.

He sheeply raised his head to massage his neck. “Yeah, mistralien isn’t my forte. But it’s still delicious! That I can guarantee!”

And he was right. As always they sat and ate together. Sometimes he would tell her about his day. It was an innocuous little thing. A complete waste of time for someone like her. Yet, she cherished each second. Those tiny windows of time where she didn’t have to plot or think about her now very precarious future.

The stories ranged from how he helped clean or groom his favorite horses, stories about his sisters and home to cleaning and preparing food for the others in the farm. He knew all by name, and had already gotten a nickname from them.

Jaune Arc was blondie. All people on the farm were from the same family it seems, and all had dark brown or hazel hair. Jaune and the husband of one of the trainers were the only ones with different colors, him blonde and the faunus deep black.

He kept on talking. Saying that he wanted to prepare a surprise for one of the brats she saw running a few days ago. Something about her helping him train in his free time. To Cinder it looked more like the kid was inserting herself in the few moments that Jaune actually was free to do his own things. But the blond seemed to either not notice or not find it nearly as obnoxious as she did.

It was in one such training that she noticed his bandages. They were mostly hidden by his work overalls and the tacky, somewhat cute, bunny hoodie. But he wore simpler and lighter clothing when he was “training”, if you can call the basic muscle exercises and the even simpler sword stances training. He never said anything about the wound. Never brought it up or even mentioned it around her. She saw him cringe back werever something hit or touched his left arm. Oh, he kept working, but he couldn’t hide that werever was under the simple bandages was still to heal.

That made Cinder curious. Why never talk about it? Men loved to brag about their exploits, even more when they got hurt or “survived” something. And yet, it never came up. That got her thinking, there were few options for the why. One, he got it by doing something unbelievably stupid/shameful. Two, he didn’t want to compare scars, and complaining about a hurt arm to someone missing one was at the least tasteless and insensitive. And last, it was her fault, she wasn’t sure how but if what laid under the bandages was burned flesh she would be sure.

She decided to take a risk then. Curiosity killed the cat they always said. But everyone forgot the ending to the little saying. *But satisfaction brought it back.* And Cinder was simply too curious about *her* little blond.

“Wh-” She coughed a bit before taking a greedy gulp of water. “What happened to your arm?”

The kid seemed in shock for a second. “Hey your voice is back!” He got even close to her now. He seemed to be fighting not to hug her. “I’m Jaune Arc!” He seemed to realize something. “Which you already know, because your voice was the problem not your hearing...” He added sheepishly.

She fought a giggle down. Cinder Fall did not giggle, not even at surprisingly cute blondes.

“I’m Cinder.” She froze for an instant. Her real name, she had given him her real name! ...It didn’t really matter, did it? Salem didn’t need her name to hunt her down and the mage’s little pawns probably didn’t know her name yet. *Not that they need it. Just look for the one armed burned black haired woman. I’m very easy to identify now.* “What happened to your arm Jaune?” She asked again, just as curious and praying that the story distracted her from the possible huntress and huntsman searching for her.

Cinder was sharp, she had to be to have survived so long in her line of work. So when the blond’s eyes grew smaller and he slightly flinched? She was sure she had something to do with his wound.

She wasn’t aware of the battle going inside the blonde’s head. Something about proving that he could be her disciple or not wanting her to feel responsible. He decided to lie, well, half lie.

“O- oh? This is nothing!” He brought his arm up, flexing it easily. “Just a scratch really! Should heal anytime now.” Jaune Arc was many things. A great cook, good dancer, decent singer but not even close to a passable liar.

Before his stutter and complete avoidance of her face during his small excuse Cinder suspected she was the cause for the wound. Now? She was sure.

Did I burn him at some point? He seems to not really want to talk about it. I will not force it out now. It could put a strain on the growing of trust between us. I can probably extract that information from the little doctor that came around last time.

“Are you taking good care of it?” She asked in mock concern, if it was life treating or truly serious he wouldn’t be playing around with the horses for most of the day. “I remember a doctor? Or an old woman helping take care of me. Maybe you should have her take a look at it?”

“Oh! Maggie? She’s the one that actually bandaged me up!” He got up suddenly. “Oh brothers! She wanted me to go get her as soon as you were talking!” He hushed out of the room to, she guessed, go fetch said Maggie.

Good. I can get the reason behind the bandages on him and get a proper list of my wounds.

It didn't take long. Ten or so minutes and Cinder heard the creaking of the wooden stairs. Seemes her room was close to them. Which was good for a quick escape, but not a silent one. Did everything in this house creak at the slight touch?

He entered back with a woman that could only be described as grandmotherly. She had gray long hair tied on a flattering bun that left some strands to frame her old chipper face. She had sun beaten skin and even if Cinder wasn't sure she would've guessed that she was accustomed to farm work. She was a bit hunched but her arms showed that she probably still helped around when needed. Which wit the walking stick and thick farm clothes made her a strange little sight.

“Less than a full week and already back in the saddle girly?!” She said happily as Jaune pulled a chair close to the bed for her. “Aura's a hell of a drug huh?”

That Cinder found concerning. People knew of Aura of course. But most thought it just a strength booster and shield. The old woman knew about its regeneration abilities, and doctors that know how to treat Aura users deal with either huntsmen or criminals. Cinder bet on the former in this case.

“Not fully healed yet miss...?” *Be polite. Make a "friend". Extract each and every bit of advantage possible.*

The granny snorted. “Miss? Hun I'm old but I'm not having none of that! It's Maggie or Marigold if ya need to be impolite.”

“Then let's go for miss Maggie for now.” Cinder was wearing her fake smile again. “Can't be impolite to someone I own so much to.”

“Look at that sonny!” She slapped Jaune, the blonde was just standing by her side. Happily watching. “Owning! Ha! Lady ya a huntress! And whatever can make a number like that on one of yous would've torched our farm to cinders!” She took a thick pair of glasses from her coat's pocket. “Sonny go get me bag. The one with all the stuff. We are taking a look at all wounds now that her Aura has kicked fully in.”

Again Jaune left.

“If ya want to own someone something deary. Ya own him.” She cracked her neck motioning to the retreating teenager. “We would've helped anyone, even more a huntress. But you weren't even close to us. Kid dragged you through the forest for two days before finding us!”

Two days?!

“Between us here? Kid's has to good of a heart.” She started undoing, carefully and with surprisingly soft and agile fingers, the bandages. “Ya both didn't die out of sheer luck! You were almost a corpse when we found him dragging you into our fields. He wasn't that much better to be honest!”

“He was hurt? He seems mostly fine.”

“Bleeding quite a bit. But mostly just exhausted. Arm up please.” Cinder did so. “Kid rushed through the night when you got worse. Thank the brothers he did too. Few more hours and you’d be dead!”

She could use a few lessons in bedmanners... but I much prefer people like her. Less secrets and veiled words.

“Your aura seems especially good at dealing with burns. Semblance around heat?” She mused, looking at the retreating burning flesh on her torso.

Clever old crone. Ex-huntress or worked directly with them.

“I can supercharge fire dust, I guess that translates to a bit of fire resistance. At least I don't get burned that easily.” *Now even if you search for my semblance in the registered archives it wont come back to me.*

Semblances were unique to an individual and all kingdoms had databases of awakened semblances and their holders. So Cinder made sure hers didn't seem all that impressive or noteworthy.

Maggie let a low whistle. “Fire resistant and something still got you like this? Wha-” Jaune entered the room once again.

“Sorry for the wait! You left it on the other side of the house Maggie!” He complained.

“Ya have long legs kid! What you complaining for! Not like it is that far for you.” She grumbled. “Pass me the green ointment and start preparing the new bandages.”

He did so. Jaune seemed to either have done this before or had learned really fast how to care for her injuries. In a few seconds he had separated all bandages, two types of creams and a little flask with either water or alcohol, she wasn't sure on the last one.

“As I was saying. I don't know any native grimm from here that could've done this much damage.” Cinder knew of three elder grimm around the ambush site that could do much worse, but said nothing. “Is it still out there?”

“Not anymore.” Cinder smiled toothily. It was full of fake bravado and pride. Perfect to sell a wounded huntress. One that just killed something extraordinary.

“Was it a salamander?! Or a drake?!” For the first time Jaune brought up something to do with her accident. His enthusiasm would've been adorable if it didn't complicate things so much.

The old woman had huntsmen knowledge, which Cinder wasn't sure was absorbed through keeping them as company or being one. In any case she would have a decent idea of the type of Grimm in the area. No one lived away from cities and settlements without knowing the risks. Cinder knew salamanders weren't native from this part of Vale so those were out. Drakes and Wirms were migratory creatures, but most were tracked or kept on watch. An

elder Drake could wipe settlements alone, and they were far more dangerous in packs when young.

She could lie and say she met a weakened pair of drakes. *Maybe just one. Huntresses capable of taking down two alone aren't that common.* With any luck there would be a report of them close by.

Huntress alone stumbled into a weakened grimm and survived through sheer luck. Decent sell if not a bit fantastical. Now all she needed was a reason to be there.

“I was looking for a small group of bandits nearby. Found a cave that seemed like a decent hideout.” Cinder smiled again, a bit of fake joy entering her words. “Got it right twice there. They did try to use it as either a hideout or as shelter, problem was, it already had a young drake in it. I will give them credit, they hurt the thing a bit. If it had both wings working I probably wouldn't be standing here.

“You are laying in my bed girl.” The old woman pointed out as she tied the last of the bandages to Cinders stump. “Bandits, where is Remnant ending on! As if we aren't up our knees in grimm!” the crone complained. “At least the roads are a bit safer now.”

“Jaune!” The kid straightened, trying his best not to look startled. “Out! I want to take a look at the deeper burns.”

“I- I can help Maggie! I've gotten pretty decent at first aid.”

The woman swung her walking stick and hit him in the shins.

“I said out! I will not have you ogling her while I examine her back!”

“Ogling?”

Cinder couldn't resist. “While help in taking the shirt off would be appreciated I believe I can manage it myself Mister Arc.” The smile came easily this time. “You are being a bit to forward for someone so young.”

“Shirt?” It took a second but the coin finally dropped. He went red as a tomato and spurted excuses and saying he would be just outside if needed. It was *endearing* to Cinder.

“Why did you send him out? We both know he probably already saw quite a bit when patching me up in the forest.”

“It's called bedmanners kid. Didn't want to make ya uncomfortable.” Cinder threw the diminutive woman an incredulous eye and raised an eyebrow as if to say try again.

“Clever kid. It's about yer eye. Don't want the kid blaming himself.”

Did Jaune cost her an eye? Had he bandaged it wrong or done something to destroy it accidentally? *Doesn't matter in the end. Still saved my life.*

The crone seemed ready to strike Cinder with her stick. “Don’t go getting any funny ideas! Blondie did his best on taking care of ya!”

Of that Cinder was sure. The teenager resembled a golden retriever in personality and demeanor. Never would he harm someone intentionally. Which, stopping to think about it, made him poor huntsmen material.

“Blame himself? For what? Not being a field-medical?”

“Did you notice how his eyes sparked when you talked about the drake? That kid already thought of you as some sort of hero, now he is sure you are one.”

Cinder remained quiet. Waiting for the old woman to go on.

“Your eye is not that hurt. At least I don’t think it is entirely gone. Problem is, I can’t really get to it for a proper inspection. The kid did a great job cleaning and removing debris from your wounds, it will scar anyway mind you, but we didn’t have to deal with various infected or necrotic bits at least. When he cleaned and bandaged your eye he kinda left the skin all together. So your eyelids kinda melted together, if he had separated them maybe they would’ve healed individually and not as a full piece of flesh. Not that it is 100% sure that your eye would be back, maybe it is completely burned or blinded under there.”

“You said it probably isn’t that hurt? Now you tell me it’s burned or blinded?”

“Well, it’s been enough time that if it was dead tissue it would’ve started an inflammation and possible necrosis of the cavity. As it looks now? I think it is just hurt enough that your semblance can either heal or maintain it.”

So it wasn’t a complete lost cause. The arm was easily replaceable. Watts would provide a top of the line prosthetic under orders from Salem if she returned. *And if she doesn’t kill me for my failure.* But it’s not as if prosthetics are all that rare or expensive. The huntsmen level ones do tend to cost a decent penny, even more here on Vale. But going to Atlas and securing a military one wouldn’t be that big of a problem. The spider gang could probably get her a decent low maintenance one if she *asked*.

The eye would be far harder to fix. Only remaining with one would be foolish, she could learn to deal with the lack of depth perception. But the reduced field of view was too much a risk. Right now she had an entire blind side that she couldn’t even defend for the lack of an arm.

Need a surgeon if the eye is salvageable. And a prosthetic and a very good one if it isn’t.

That was going to be a problem. Eye prosthetics existed, and in some cases could even bring back people from total blindness. But they cost a fortune, and can only be “installed” by very few and expensive doctors. And worst of all? Are really on a case by case basis. So even if she could arrange for the first two, it would be impossible for the third.

But that all gave her a line and a line led to a plan. One she didn’t have yet. But a few steps were coming together in her mind.

I will remain here until I'm back in fighting shape. Then I need to decide on going back to Salem or not. I have possibly two months before having to deal with that. As that's when I should be arriving at Beacon to start the Fall Protocol. Beacon is a hunters town, I can import or arrange for a suitable arm to be delivered to me there.

It wasn't a good plan. Cinder was aware that Salem probably felt the disruption in magic or the death of the Khepri beetle. But she needed time to be in any shape to defend or negotiate with the other members of the circle. So resting and healing were not really something she could pass on.

So be polite. Thank the woman, don't raise any suspicions and find a way to get some sort of weapon before leaving. Best yet would be an escort to beacon.

Cinder wasn't the best at expressing gratitude. She would argue that she had no reason to. As all times her dealings were simply that, dealings. And payment and no further violence were already enough shows of gratitude. But she tried nonetheless.

The diminutive woman had finished bandaging her wounds a while ago, and was now done packing back her bag. She didn't make a move to grab it though, probably would leave it there or ask for Jaune to take it. She got up and was leaving the room before Cinder called to her.

"Maggie?" The woman turned to her. "Thank you very much for your help. I can't say how glad I am that Jaune was able to find a doctor as good as you close by."

"Doctor?" The diminutive woman cackled softly. "Deary you are not wrong, but I think there's been a misunderstanding here." She added with the biggest grin Cinder had seen. "I'm a vet!"

Chapter End Notes

What character interactions or just appearances are you guys interested in seeing in the future?

Dinner time

Chapter Summary

Jaune cooks dinner and Cinder meets the rest of the farm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I need to step up. She took down a drake by herself! She isn't going to train me how I am today. Like brothers, she must be at least A rank right? Maybe S?! The app says drakes go from B to S treats...

Jaune had put even more effort in his training since hearing Cinder's story. She was a hero! The type Jaune had dreamed of being. Hunting bandits, slaying terrible evils and protecting the innocent!

He had downloaded two more of the recommended apps. One for weapons maintenance and creation. *How come they teach weapon engineering in prep-schools?! Who can even make a mechashift at under 15?!* Somewhere a red reaper sneezed. And the most important - well second, nothing was better than the Vale huntsmen app in Jaunes mind - a proper muscle training app.

All hail the almighty apps!

There was so much stuff to do! And he was so far behind!

He needed to cram a lot of new extra information just to try and pass the written exam for the second round of admissions in the middle of the year. There was basic weapons knowledge, Grimm basics, geography, history, field preparation and strategy and that's not even getting into the combat test!

How in the golden brother holy name was he planning to actually just stroll into Beacon?!

Well I could just get some fake transcripts for the written test. Any previous experience in combat schools serve as a replacement for the first batch of tests at least.

He'd still had to pass the main entrance test. Which was a mystery it seems. Most schools had standardized tests for admittance. He had spent half a night just watching a podcast about the Atlas one!

Brutal just dropping new formed teams on the tundra!

Not that the other schools were much better. Atlas at least gave the possible students a flare and an emergency retrieval kit. Vacuo just tossed you in the desert and the teams that got back with the bigger or most grimm bones were in.

How do we even have huntsmen when we start their training trying to kill them?

But back to Beacon. It seems that headmaster Ozpin likes to surprise his new students every year. Last was a maze full of Creeps and Beowolfs! You had to find a partner and get to the center before a certain time limit. Beacons entrance test always seemed to have a strange little gimmick. Mazes, relics, championship, defending a place or random object from enemy teams, stuff like that.

I guess the headmaster likes to have fun with his tests. But beats me what protecting a relic has to do with hunting grimm, maybe it is for bodyguard training?

Jaune couldn't wait to hear about what this year's test was! By now it had already happened, but there weren't any reports about it. Well there were dozens of people on social media saying dozens of different things, but Jaune kinda wanted to wait for a proper report and breakdown. It was no use trying to guess who was telling the truth when he could have spent the time studying for the written test.

So he kept on training, he had two hours before having to get started on dinner. He was planning Pasta Primavera for today! He'd checked with Jorge and Lucia if everyone was up for pasta, got a resounding "if ya cooking yeah!" so he had simply made a list and asked her if they had all the ingredients.

Shame we only have black pepper right now, red pepper flakes would do wonders for Jorge and Cinder. He had noticed a day ago that the mysterious huntress liked her food a bit more on the spice side. So he had started to bring small sauce pots with peppers and spices for her. Maybe I can try spiced paprika? Just need to make sure it isn't the sweet one.

Miss Lucia wasn't much for organizing her kitchen, so the spices were not really labeled. In her own words "it's my kitchen, my spices and I know where everything is so why bother?". In Jaunes opinion she should bother because she had three containers of paprika that were identical and in the same brothers damned shelf! And no! He wasn't salty about using the wrong one on his spiced potatoes.

Done with the sword training he went to find Jorge and Newt. Both men had said that they didn't mind helping Jaune get a bit of muscle in before the next exam. He was sure their help would be absolutely incredible!

Jorge was a bull faunus that had married into the Florentia family, the actual owners of the farm. As one could expect from a bull faunus that worked 24/7 on a farm, the man was absolutely enormous. He stood around 1,90 meters, probably weighted thrice as much as Jaune and his muscles had muscles. He was also an absolute bro!

Jaune adored Jorge, he was like the big brother he always wanted. Big, strong, cool and always ready to help him with stuff.

Except cooking. Never with cooking. He should've heard the haunted tone in Maggie's voice when she had told to not let him in the kitchen, but no Jaune thought he knew better.... Now he did.... but at what cost?

“Done blondie?” asked Newt in a thick valean accent. He was about Jaune's age, maybe a bit older, but was just as tall as his father. He had sun tanned skin, a mess of brown long hair braided on the sides - courtesy of his younger sister no doubt - and deep yellow eyes like his dad. “Up for some sparring or right for the weights today?”

“If we spare, can I skip legs today?”

The taller boy hit him good naturally in the back. “Yer call man! But those sticks aint gonna get defined if you skip it” He pushed up his pant leg showing an impressively toned leg.

Man, why is everyone ripped here!

It was a bit of an overstatement, not everyone was ripped, but even Joshua the older head of the family still had more muscle than him. And the man was pushing sixty now!

“I just want to be able to walk tomorrow, Newt. Last friday I could barely keep pace with the sheep!”

“We can go a bit lighter and focus on stamina. Like less weights, more repetition kinda stuff. Whatcha say?”

Jaune nodded and followed Newt to the furthest barn.

Jorge had been kind enough to let Jaune use his equipment for training. And did the man have equipment for training? Seems that Lucia got herself a fitness freak. He was still to get the story of how the lovebirds met.

He had a full five in one machine for his arms, a squat bar and leg press! For cardio he just ran around the farm. Which was by no means easy. Jaune had yet to properly finish any of Jorge's training regimes. That was one of the reasons he had downloaded the muscle app. Jorge was a bro, but he had no idea what a beginner should be training or how.

The next two hours passed with squads and an hour of stamina runs. That was divided in jogging and sprinting between barns and wooden posts on the farm.

Newt, bless his heart. Keep pace with Jaune trying his best to hype up his new friend. Which was great! Even if he didn't break a sweat while Jaune wanted to drop on the grass and keep there for a half an hour.

A loud voice called from the main house. “Starting dinner boys! Go clean yourselves or finish yer stuff! Dinner in an hour!”

That was his cue. He bid farewell to Newt as the boy had to still finish a proper round of the farm limits. Running with Jaune was nice and all, but it wasn't as if he could properly use that to gauge if the wooden posts and fence were still good and not bent.

Lucia left a bucket of warmish water and a towel for him in the door before the kitchen. Jaune always used it to clean himself before coming in. A shower would be great but he kinda liked stewing in the hot water, and having to rush in and out not to make dinner late didn't sound appealing.

“So what's the orders chief?”

Lucia Florentia was a small but cheerful woman. She was the one that actually found Jaune and Cinder by the west field. Much like her son she had long brown hair, the difference was that hers was completely braided and thrown over her left shoulder. She had cute freckles and a smile that lit her whole face.

“Pasta Primavera Lu. Got everything ready?” He said putting his shirt back and twisting the towel up before leaving it hanging by the door.

“Yup! All ready to cook, kid. Just waiting for my little chef to arrive.”

Lucia never really liked to share her kitchen. Mostly due to the fact that she and her dad were the only decent cooks. Her husband could burn water, her brothers barely could make instant noodles and her mother could suture a raging bull but was also able to mess up a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. So the kitchen was a no go zone for most of the family, Newt and Emily helped from time to time, but mostly due to obligation. So when a new kid appeared that not only knew how to cook but also loved doing it? Lucia jumped to trade recipes and to have him help in the kitchen with her.

She thought it was quite a shame Emily wasn't born first, what she wouldn't give to have Jaune as a son in law.... Tall, hardworking and good at cooking! If she could put some muscle in the kid he would fit in perfectly! Also helped that her little darling seemed to have a bit of a crush on the errant knight.

“Let's get started then!”

While she cooked the pasta Jaune got started at chopping and sautéing the vegetables. He got the large black skillet that she had left for him in the fire, added a generous dose of olive oil before adding the onions first and the bell peppers, zucchini, and broccoli after they'd turned translucent and soft. Once the rest of the vegetables were crispy he added a few cherry tomatoes and peas, letting them cook just enough to get soft.

By the time he was done Lucia was already putting a gigantic pot of cooked fettuccine to his right.

He threw it all together in the gigantic pot and started mixing it while sprinkling salt, pepper, and paprika.

“Em!” Lucia screamed from the kitchen. “Table set?”

“Yup!” Came a happy reply from the sitting room.

“Jorge! Get yer butt over here!”

The big man came, and wearing silly little pink mittens, took the gigantic pot to the main table.

Lucia was bringing a few extra sauces Jaune had prepared and the boy had two pitchers of iced tea just out of the fridge in hand.

Everyone was already on the table.

The Florentia family had a total of eight people. The grandparents Joshua and Maggie, their daughter Lucia, her husband Jorge, the brothers Mike and Peter, and the grandkids Newt and Emily.

They had a big old wooden table in their dining room. One that Jorge has told Jaune his father and grandfather had made together. And today the table was set for ten.

Jaune still wasn't sure about this dinner. But Maggie had pestered Cinder about coming down and starting, as she said, finally moving her butt. He shook his head, he was fond of the old lady, but gods did she need some lessons in tact.

Cinder had just smirked and shrugged. Saying that she didn't mind exercising a little more.

Coming down the stairs to eat shouldn't be exercise, but in her case? It was the equivalent to maraton. Aura or not, your body isn't supposed to heal that much trauma in two weeks.

But she said okay. So Jaune needed to make sure everything went as well as possible.

First he decided on a special plate. Something like a small commemoration for her no longer being bedridden. Then he made sure the food was easy to eat with only one hand. At first Cinder was only eating soups, so the idea never really passed his head, but how would she cut her food now? Since then he had made sure that all her food had always been bite sized. It was an easy thing to do since he was the one cooking and bringing it to her. Not today though, today he had to just hope nothing too big ended up on her plate. He had diced the vegetables well, but he couldn't stop worrying.

Everything needs to go well. She doesn't look that hurt emotionally, but any bad experience could trigger it right?

How strong did someone have to be to get as hurt as her and keep its head held high? Jaune kept coming back to that question, and if he would ever reach such a point.

He'd asked Em to put Cinder by his left side. This way she would have someone she recognized nearby and he could maintain his movement and sounds to a minimum. Maggie had told him that it would take time for her to grow accustomed with her new narrow eyesight, so he should always try to be in her line of sight so as not to cause her extra stress or panic.

I would be paranoid for sure. I'm having nightmares about Creeps and they'd only got a few bites in. How isn't Cinder waking up screaming in the night?

Everything was ready. Table set, people arriving and sitting down.

“I’m going to help Cinder down, You fill our plates up?” he told the people around the table and asked Lucia, the matriarch already dipping and scooping large doses for her kids.

“Knock first kiddo. I left a change of clothes for her, but she didn’t want my help changing.” Maggie swished her cane at him. “Ya better not perve on my patient!”

“I always knock Maggie.” Not like her, he almost added. The old lady had caught him semi naked almost three times now. Looking back, not one of the Florentias knocked. Maybe because they were all family? It didn’t feel right locking a door in a house that wasn’t his, but he started doing so while bathing and changing.

Shaking his head he came up the creaking stairs and knocked on Cinders door.

“Cinder? Dinner is ready.”

“Come in, I could use an extra hand.” Came a muffled reply from behind the door.

He opened the door slowly. “Hand with what?”

The room was as cozy as ever. All rooms in the house had that lived feeling for him. But he wasn't sure Cinder appreciated the wooden decor and simplistic style of it all. Getting stuck for almost two weeks on a bed probably didn't help either.

She was wearing a long beige summer dress. It seemed quite baggy on her, he then noticed that there was a lace supposed to serve as a belt, but she clearly wasn't able to tie it properly.

“Seems I overestimated my capabilities.” She added testily. She didn’t seem happy, not at all.

“I can tie it for you if you want.” He gave her his most disarming smile. “We don’t have to sit downstairs if you don’t want to. I can bring the food upstairs like always if you aren’t comfortable going down.”

She is meeting the rest of the family today. It's the first time Mike, Jorge, Jamie and Newt will see her. I would be nervous too. Not being able to do something simple like tying a knot probably isn't helping with her nerves.

She paused for a moment, weighing the pros and cons of Jaunes offer.

“I do prefer quiet dinners. But it would be rude to refuse our hosts, wouldn't it?” She smiled at him. He tried his best not to blush or make a fool of himself.

He quickly tied the knot in the dress. He made sure that it wasn't thigh enough for her to feel it, since it kinda went over some of her burned side. “Now would you help me down the stairs?”

She extended her arm to him and he took it as softly as he could. He had accompanied his sisters to enough dances and events to know how to properly escort someone.

“I’m sitting by your side. If it gets too much just poke me or something and I will find an excuse to get us out ok?” he whispered to her.

“My, my mister Arc. You truly wish to keep me for yourself don’t you?” The tone was joky and light, but he still went a bit red. Even light flirting was new to him.

“I just want to help. They are lovely people, but they can also be a bit much.”

“If they are anything like Maggie this will be a fun evening.”

By the end of their little talk they had made all the way down the stairs and were walking to the dinner room.

Thank the brothers for wide stairs and ample corridors.

It was one of the many good points of life outside the cities. You actually did have space to make corridors and rooms wide and spacy. As no one really cared much for proper field delimitation when you were the only farm for quite a few miles.

A trade off really. You had more freedom for sure, but much less security and access to dust and other important day to day items. Still, it wasn’t as dangerous as most city folk thought. Sure, the risk of Grimm encounters were exponentially bigger, but only because of the lack of walls.

Grimm don’t care for animals. They hunt Humans and Faunus exclusively, and they do so by tracking and feeding on our negative emotions. A farm, with few people in the middle of nowhere, doesn't attract as much of their attention as a huge city. So small familial farms can actually work outside the walls of most cities.

That's not to say that the farmers aren’t normally armed to their teeth, have a bunker/safe rooms and an emergency flare or integrated huntsmen call system. They were farmers not idiots.

It still needed a strange type of mind to do so, deciding on packing up and setting shop in the middle of the wilderness wasn’t for most sane folk. And the Florentias were a prime example though Jaune.

Not like the Arcs or the rest of the people in Ansel were much better.

As they entered the dining room Jaune pushed a chair for her and sat by her side.

“Nice meeting ya miss Cinder!” Newt said. The other boy's eyes seemed to shine just as much as Jaunes when seeing the Huntress finally out of her room.

“A pleasure to be sure. Sorry for the later introduction, I’m Cinder, I'm a huntress from Vale.” She smiled at each person sitting on the table and with a simple nod added. “I own you all for helping me and letting me ‘mope and sulk’ in your guest room.” She said smiling evilly at the the grandma in the table

Lucia looked shocked at her mother. “Ya fucking didn’t, did ya ma?”

The granny just chuckled softly.

“No offense taken miss. I actually wish most doctors were this straight forward.”

“Vet. Told ya that already.”

“And I will continue to ignore it until you finish my treatment.”

The rest of the dinner went by with the rest of the table introducing themselves and easy conversation between the family members and Jaune. Simple things like the shoes and little things they needed fixed before winter arrived. Cinder was content in just listening and eating the unsurprisingly delicious pasta.

“Is it true you took down a drake alone miss?” Newt asked. The teenager had spent almost all the dinner to this point throwing small glances at the huntress. It seems that he finally couldn't contain himself, much to his mother and father's chagrin. Not so much his sister and uncles, who looked just as curious.

Cinder put her fork down. “Not sure how much miss Magie has told you. But it wasn't nearly as impressive as you seem to believe. For starters I wasn't even after the drake, I was hunting a small group of bandits that had been operating on a road nearby. Tracked them to a cave a few days away from here, it seemed that they decided to set up shop inside.” Cinder smiled predatorily to the young girl at the table. “Together with a young drake!”

“But you still killed it alone?!” The question came from Emily this time. “They are like the worst Grimm around!”

She was wrong of course. There were far worse things than a young drake. The elders Cinder had awakened with the burst of magic were just an example. But none on the table was aware of this, not even the one responsible for it.

“The bandits kinda helped being honest. Seems like they fought the beast inside the cave before I arrived. They managed to cripple one of its wings. Lucky for me it hadn't regenerated before meeting me. Landbound drakes are dangerous, but if it had access to the sky and could pepper me from afar with its fireballs I wouldn't stand a chance.”

“Don't ya hunters have those fancy shifting weapons for range?” asked Mike, the bearded man speaking with her for the first time since the brief introduction earlier.

“Mine shifts into a bow. Great for stealth, not so much penetrating the thick plates on a drake. There is also the problem of range, while my bow was far better than a normal civilian one, not even it could hit a fast flying drake with any precision that mattered.”

“I'm sorry I didn't find your weapons Cinder.” Jaune said.

“Doubt you could Jaune. I'm not sure how far away I walked before passing out. And I'm pretty sure my weapons were discarded far before any of that.”

“Did you kill it with a arrow to the heart?! Like in the movies?!” Newt was almost jumping over the table now.

“Actually stabbed it with my sword. I think the only arrow that did any actual damage was the one I hit his eye with. I took advantage of their expanding sternum during the generation of fire and slid my sword between the plates on the neck and shoulders. Fighting grimm is all about knowing their weakness, where and when to strike.”

She couldn't see the expression on Jaunes face as he was seated on her left. But in that moment the young boy knew he would do anything to have Cinder as his teacher. She was strong, knowledgeable and above all else, humble! Anyone would be basking in the adoration of those children, retelling the battle with flare and pride! But she made sure to tell the truth to them! And how dangerous and lucky she was to have survived this encounter.

During the second day dragging her through the woods Jaune had learned that he lacked power to save himself and others. He saw how hard and scary it actually was to be a hero. Yet, he still wanted to help people. But now it wasn't about being a hero, but about not letting people he could help down, it was about raising up when he could. About extending a hand to those that couldn't defend themselves. And who better than Cinder to teach him that?

While he was lost in thought, the huntress was describing her fight with the creature. How it broke her aura with a swipe of a claw and a tail strike. How her gambit with the sword had been in desperation after it had clawed her arm off. She described it surgically, making sure to specify how and when she had been hitten. There were no embellishments, just a pure retelling of the never happened event.

Jaune thought that's how she was processing the event, as logically as possible. How else would you be able to tell a story as traumatic as that.

Her retelling had doured the mood in the younger children. They probably expected a gran story about a hero and an epic fight against a dragon. And while the kids were disappointed, the parents were truly glad Cinder hadn't embellished her tale or tried to make it into an amazing adventure for them. Lucia and Jorge would support their children in wherever path they'd chosen, but they truly hoped it wouldn't be one as dangerous as a huntsmen one.

The mood did improve after Jaune asked Peter about how the shearing and the next steps for the wool were coming along. That got the man rambling about skirting, grading, sorting and scouring he would have to do this week. It also ended with him begging Lucia to make him a new jumper as his was coming undone. That had gotten the matriarch in a mood and she had started talking about knitting Jaune and Cinder some proper thick clothes for winter. About what colors they liked, if they liked patterned clothes, and from there jokes were thrown around about her absolutely terrible holiday patterns and gifts.

Dinner ended up being as tiring and fun as he had predicted. But it also was a great introduction for Cinder to the Florentias. They had pretty much adopted both and now seemed to have no problem with their staying until winter, even further if Lucias had her say.

Cinder seemed to have had fun. And Jaune was content to watch her smile easier around the other people in the farm.

He was never the most perceptive, but he had noticed how some of her expressions seemed forced or faked, they mostly appeared around the Florentias. It seemed that she wasn't that

accustomed to having this many people around. Either that, or she was putting on a mask of a proper and strong huntress for them. He wasn't truly sure. But one thing he knew, the dinner had been a success and that's all he could've hoped for.

Chapter End Notes

Not sure if I should've spent more time introducing and describing the rest of the people in the farm. In reality most of them are completely irrelevant to the story. I did need to add a bit more to the world-building and having Cinder finally meet and interact with them seemed like a decent use of a chapter.

Next we are finally getting Cinder on physiotherapy!

P.S: Are you guys also interested in seeing the POV of Crow and Winter about the elder grimm and fallout of the ambush fight?

That probably wont impact this story until it is time for Cinder to make a choice about the future of Beacon, but could be something cool to see.

Birds point of view

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Qrow didn't want to make it. Oh he could, make no mistake. He just didn't want to.

But he knew deep down that his only chance to get less headaches was to make it. And he couldn't budgeon the damn alarm from his nest of blankets. So he got up, hit the damned thing and went to take a proper bath.

The last weeks hadn't been kind to Qrow. Depressingly, very few things were to him.

But he had done his job, hells he had done so much more than his job this last week.

Ironwood was all 'Its all planned. We have every contingency down to the minimum scale. My ace ops will be there, bla, bla, bla'. Where were all those plans when two elder grimm woke up from his little sting?!

He had to deal with a freaking elder Nevermore by himself!

Yes he was an S rank and he did get the title of elder slayer, but even in elder slaying missions you are given enough time to at least prepare a bit!

But no, Qrow was left with a very simple choice, one leave the elder grimm alone to build its horde while he prepared, send the snow woman after it while he took care of the now also awakened spriggan or just take the damned bird out himself.

He did find it funny that he had out-birded a gigantic raven though.

Nevermores, at least the elder ones, aren't accustomed to watching for attacks from above. They don't really need to, they are the ones hunting ships up there. All Qrow had to do was fly higher than the thing, far higher, and drop down at break aura and neck speeds at it. In doing so he made sure to have harbingers blade in scythe form latch to its bone protected wing.

As soon as the first hit connected the grimm was now under his samblance effect. Misfortune Scale was, as he put it, an absolute shitshow of a semblance. But in the right hands it was an ace that no one could truly fight against. You could run from super speed, you could destroy summons, absorb or block emission attacks, but you couldn't run from your luck.

In reality it was a simple effect, any that directly had contact with his aura had its luck, or misfortune, now on a balance. Each movement, attack and defense was now subjected to a roll of the dice which would either do nothing or saddle you up with bad luck. The fun part about it? The scale balanced itself against whoever you were fighting. So your opponent's gun misfired three times? Well yours may explode in your hand next time you try to fire it.

Qrow was a gambling man, had always been. And he had made an art of using his semblance against other Hunters and grimm. He was specialized in taking the small openings his semblance made. At the start they were small things like bad footing, sun in your eyes or minor things. But as the fight went on? Guns started jamming, dust became more volatile and perfect armor started to have openings and small gaps.

When dealing with Qrow your only choice was to end the fight fast enough that the amount on the scales didn't become fatal. Not that most people knew that.

So when he had hit and crippled the grimm's wing he knew that the first dice roll would be its fall in the forest. If it fell and hurt itself even more then the next bad luck was on him, if it fell and nothing happened? Then he was golden.

His objective in fighting the thing was kill if possible or inconvenience/distract it until help arrived. The small group of Hunters they had brought had radio in as soon as the elders' awakening was registered, and he could've asked for help earlier.

But the more people affected by Misfortune Balance the harder it was to keep track of it. It also made it so he couldn't use his crow form. And it was the only thing making sure he wasn't skewered by the dozen razor feathers the Nevermore insisted on throwing at him each damned second of their fight.

You can tank nevermore feathers with a decent metal or really sturdy chainmail, for an alpha you'd need proper plating or aura but for an Elder? The thing is accustomed to skewering airships from all possible angles, and we are talking proper battleships, the ones with a few meters of proper metal armor. So either you have an stupid strong defensive semblance or you dodge for your life.

So that's what he did. He jumped, slid under and shapeshifted around the barrage of feathers. Always looking for a small opening to hit the creature.

It took him almost half an hour to build enough bad luck to hit the thing with a true killer move. At this point his aura couldn't take more than two hits and his reflexes were getting slower by the minute.

He had been hit squarely in the liver by a feather arrow, one that actually penetrated his aura. That was an almost fatal hit, one born of pure luck as his aura was diminished but not broken. So his next attack was almost guaranteed to be just as dangerous. By now the misfortune debt was in his favor, if his next attack missed the counter wouldn't be fatal as well, as that would be two very unlucky rolls for him on a sequence. Possible, but not probable.

He turned into a crow, flew directly at the nevermore face and in the last second before its outstretched beak could close on him whole he transformed back. The creature tried to turn too fast and in a position too wrong to properly use its bone beak to skewer him. The angle was so awkward and strange that his armored vertebrae rustled against one another and creaked as they slid above or below one another. The result was the bone vertebrae that covered the connection between his head and neck opening just enough for Harbinger blade to slide inside.

With a twist and a heavy blast from the shotgun on the side of the scythe Qrow was over and dragging the blade through with him. He firmed his legs on the other side of the monster's neck and pulled with all his aura enhanced strength. By the end he was falling with the nevermore head, it falling by his side and away from the rest of its body.

As soon as he confirmed that the head was fully off, he fell down on the decomposing body.

The whole fight was a gamble. Every member of team STRQ was a rank S and other than Summer, they all had gained the rank by being elder slayers. Not that Tai hadn't also gotten the horde breaker title, but Summers' record was kinda impossible to beat.

It was good to know he still had it in him to solo an elder grimm. Even though he was sure going to be sore to hell and back tomorrow.

By the time reinforcements had arrived he was already done. The expression on Winter and her two little ace ops was gold though. She was sure thinking that he needed saving. Poor girl had no idea the type of creatures that could actually be a problem to him.

If it was only that then he would've just complained and grumbled a little. Problem was all the rest.

Elder grimm caused all others around to go on a frenzy, which meant that he now had to start culling the forest population and helping reinforce or protect any settlement nearby. Which there were four....

That was a pain, then came the response from the team that had taken Amber and the two prisoners back.

The two kids didn't know shit!

They were just hired muscle. Not even Black's kid had the decency to have any useful information. Just his luck killing the one member of Salem's cabal. Not that he regretted it. Pulling your punches against any of Salem's goons was a great way to end up six feet under.

The fact that Ozpin had sent Glynda, Peter and Obleck to escort Amber back was also a problem.

For starters Peter and Obleck were supposedly retired, but that didn't mean the both weren't absolute power houses. Hells, Port was pushing fifty and still wrestled ursas in his free time. Most kids just thought he was a complete blowhard, they had no idea that the stories were exaggerated but quite a few were real. He was a certified horde breaker in his youth. Obleck was one of the best strategists in this side of Remant, his semblance making his brain work at speeds that few could even dream of. Simply put? You don't want to be on the other side of him in any game or battlefield. The kids rarely thought their teachers were impressive, but they also forgot one very important thing about both, they were old men in a job where the good die young. Very few get to retire from hunting, even fewer due to old age.

And then there was good old Glym Glam.

Glynda Goodwitch didn't leave Beacon. She was the resident Guardian of the school. And an absolute force to deal with. Rank S, with both Horde and Slayer titles. All schools had their own in-house S rank true. It was an established rule after all, but each and everyone of them would trade theirs for Glynda. She was possibly in the top 5 if not the strongest S rank active at the moment.

To see Glynda walking out of a bullwing with all her dust weaponry floating around her was surreal. She rarely got the big guns out. But what a sight to see. Dust infused arrows and swords floating around one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. *As dangerous as she is gorgeous....*

She would also ring his neck if he made them wait longer. By this time he was late and thoroughly cleaned. The latter hadn't taken the first ten minutes of his shower time.

So he dried himself up, quickly put on his cleanest clothes and took a short flight through the settlement until he found a nice spot around a big tree to change back.

Of course little miss Schnee had a compound made. Maybe this was on Ironwood actually. The man was incapable of living outside a militar structure.

Waste of time. We are already done with the cleaning here.

He walked past a few tents in the direction of the center one. Some Huntsmen and soldiers noticed him, but none moved to intervene or check on him. He wasn't famous per-se, but anyone that worked with him for a few weeks would remember him. Either by getting a few lien from him in cards or having their butts saved during the extermination.

"You are late Qrow." He hadn't even let go of the tend flap.

"Eh, got a bit tired having to pull double shifts to make up for your tinmen not being good in the forest."

Antagonizing people never got old. Extra points if they were as tight winded as her and Ironwood.

"Would you like some coffee Mister Branwen?"

"Amin you absolute lifesaver. Any chance we have some toast here?"

Marrow Amin was one of the two extra Aces Ironwood had sent for this sting. Originally they were posted with a team on the other side of the forest. They ended up not being part of the actual fight thanks to that, but had Salem little pets managed to run or tried to attack Amber in the forest? Well they'd not gotten very far.

Qrow wasn't a big fan of the militar types, came with being Valean and bandit born he guessed. But damn was the young faunus hard to dislike. He was always smiling, trying to help and, different from most, didn't actually get on his way.

Also helped that the guy was shit at hiding his emotions. His dark blue tail was a giveaway of his feelings to any that paid enough attention. So by being nice, capable and not being able to

hide things from him, Amin had suddenly become Qrows favorite Ace.

The other one was a woman called Elm. She was big, had no filter, a huge fuck off hammer and talked far to fucking laud for Qrows poor drunk ears.

He liked her somewhat. She brought him a nice shiny bottle of tequila on the last mission. Something about saving a few of her men. The important thing was that the drink was good and the bottle sparked when the light hit it right.

Marrow came back with a mug of hot coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon for him.

“Man I love ya. You don’t want a job on Beacon?” he smiled as he took a big bite out of a crunchy bit of bacon. “Headmaster owes me a few, I can get you a full teacher package.”

“Please do not scout our operatives, Mister Branwen.” Winter interjected, throwing a glare at him.

The faunus just laughed softly. “Sorry sir, I still need to prove General Ironwood's recommendation right. Maybe in a few years?”

Jamie got lucky with his operatives it seems. *Good for him, shame for me.*

“We will not be waiting for you to finish Mister Branwen. We have delayed this enough already.”

Winter sat down at the right end of the table, Elm and Marrow sitting to her side and front respectively, and turned on the holo screens.

They beeped a few times before the faces of Ozpin, General Ironwood and Glynda appeared on the bluish monitors.

“Good morning my friends. I hope we have good news to share today?” Ozpins greeted as he drank from his habitual white coffee mug.

As if I haven’t been sending you updates every two or so hours.

“Good Morning Headmaster, General.” Winter stood and with a flick of her tablet made a new screen appear with a map of the region and various numbers and charts by its side. “I’m happy to report that both Elder Grimm have been exterminated, and the building hordes have been either destroyed or are crumbling under our conjunct work.”

The graphs did show a very sharp decline in the grimm populace around the settlements. But that was only half the story. And Qrow was sure that Atlas didn’t care for the other half.

“What about the people and the state of the settlements' defenses?” Qrow asked, before taking a long sip of the dark coffee. *Damn, I need the kid to at least teach me how to make a coffee this good.*

Winter didn't seem to care or was even going to change the current ongoing explanation, but had to when Ozpin confirmed his interest on the fortifications of the attacked settlements.

“The two settlements that suffered most were the Atsaguri and the Mentfis ones. The first is a small Mistralien colony focused on the production of silk and wool, the second is a Valean village focused on the production of grain.”

Qrow had helped evacuate Mentfis. They were a bit too close to a northern mountain and the horde call had brought some manticores down. When they were done more than half the fields were either burned or destroyed.

As if living in the boonies wasn't hard enough.

“We have already started on the cleaning and reconstruction of the wall and affected houses.” That surprised him. He was sure they were just going to get up and leave. Saddling Vale and its Huntsmen with the cleaning and reconstruction. “We do not have enough equipment or supplies to properly finish said work.” She tapped a few times on the tablet and the display skipped a few slides before stopping on a resume of the states and supplies necessary. “I've sent copies of the manpower and supplies necessary directly to the Huntsmen guild of Vale and the Council of Vale.”

“I can leave some of my troops here until the council or guild sends the appropriate people Oz. But I cannot leave the Ace Ops here.”

“Neither would I ask you to James.”

The meeting kept on track after that. Winter restarted from the slide Qrow had interrupted and he didn't find it necessary to change the subject this time.

I tend to forget that Tinman actually has a heart. On the other hand he can lend us so many soldiers because he brought half an army to Vale..... And used our maiden as bait for Salem little cabal..... Asshole, decent dude, but asshole nonetheless.

While Winter kept going through her plans and requisitions Qrow got the tablet allocated prior to his arrival to every seat on the table.

He ignored the presentation mirrored on it, quickly closing it and opening the battle report from the team sent to hunt the Spriggan. Sure the report had been made available to him almost half a week ago. But he was busy then! Still mostly was. But enough time had passed that he actually got curious about how the three specialists dealt with the creature.

As he expected the team consisted of the three specialists. They had found the creature almost three clicks away from the place the ambush happened.

A bit closer and the woman could've called it for help. If Salem gave her that power at least. She wouldn't be the first member in the cabal to be given power like this. He remembers reading about the Bad wolf and Tik-Tocks crew from Ozpin's record. The former was a Faunus in her inner circle that was gifted the ability to command hordes of Beowolfs. The

file said three full teams of S and A ranks were necessary to take the man down. And even then the collateral damage had been insane.

But he had to give credit here to the specialists. They found the elder, quickly engaged it before it's horde came into full power and control. Seems like the Ice Queen and her summons were used to thin the begging of the horde while Amin and Elm fought the Spriggan.

Those two are A rank right? At least individually. He confirmed it on the profile page on the tablet. But the team was considered S rank. *Makes sense, they are trained mostly to work as a team.*

Seems that the fight was actually very straightforward. Amin's semblance Freeze was able to burn aura to keep a person or creature in stasis. So he would freeze the Spriggan and Elm would hit it with her heavy hammer or a variety of dust powered rockets.

Amin it seems was made to hunt grimm like geists and spriggan. As long as you could keep him protected his semblance would restrict both types easily. And when dealing with creatures that can become incorporeal or fuse with other objects it was definitely an ace.

Only reason it seems that it took so long was the fact that the Spriggan had had time to build a decent sized armored body before their arrival. The big thing also came really close to breaking Amin's aura during battle. *His semblance is pretty good, but his aura reserves aren't that above normal. It probably cost quite a bit of aura to keep an elder grimm like that in place.*

Still, they did an amazing job. Elder grimm are not a joke. Sure, high rank Hunters like him and little miss Ice Queen made it look easy, but each kingdom counted with less than a dozen S ranks at a time. He also knew how dangerous this specific type of grimm was.

Ray and Tai had hunted an elder Spriggan once.

They burned an entire circle in the forest. Impeding the creature from running through the trees, building their colossal wooden body or using it to hide. It did wonders for containing the Spriggan. It minimized its abilities to create the wooden armor and destroyed its ability to tree walk, reducing its mobility by quite a bit. But, they still burned half a forest for said advantages. You either came prepared or you took each and every possible advantage against an Elder.

Team STRQ had a reputation for collateral damage for a reason.

Question our methods but never our results. He taught with a smile.

“That concludes the presentation on our side. Would you like further information or clarification on any point present here Headmaster?”

No question for the general huh. Bet he either got this doc yesterday or simply isn't his problem.

“Thank you Miss Schnee. The presentation and complementary document are more than enough at the moment. I thank you for taking time to help us with all of this.” Ozpins voice always sounded like a calm and understanding parent. Qrow knew better, he skimmed over the doc at best, Glynda is the one that properly read it.

“How are things with the prisoners Headmaster?” Qrows eyes narrowed, he wasn’t sure how much the other three specialists knew about. Winter hasn’t been inducted into the Yellow Brick road yet, but James clearly wanted her to. He probably hasn’t flat out told any of them about Salem, but that doesn't mean that they don't have any knowledge about the ongoing hidden war. *Best stay quiet then.*

“I’m afraid good news will stop here.” Oz sighed. “We’ve got a pitiful amount of information from the captured children, and even that is mostly useless. Glynda if you will.”

The blonde traded the presentation on the screen for a summary on our captured Hunters.

“This full dossier will be made available to you all at the end of the meeting. I’m afraid we haven't updated it much from last week's version. The prisoners' names are Emerald Sustrai and Mercury Black. Both are wanted criminals with varying levels of danger and criminal offenses. Miss Sustrai was a pickpocket and thief in Minstral, mostly minor offenses, her semblance is an Illusion type focused on a target per time. She has tried to escape twice now and with these attempts and the testimony from Miss Amber we were able to map the full extent of her semblance. The doc will outline her aura levels and further semblance details.” Glynda paused to fix her glasses and the presentation changed to the silver haired boy.

“Mister Black is another story completely. He is the son of a known Huntsmen Killer Marcus Black. And the man has trained and inducted his son in the family business as it seems. He is wanted for murder, conspiracy to murder, kidnapping and stealing. He has been the most cooperative out of both captures.”

“Really?” Elm asked.

“As it seems Mister Black has no attachment to the leader of his team or her employers” *quite vague Oz, so no talking about the cabal or Salem, got it.* “His father sealed his semblance and during the fight ensuing the kid killed him while losing both legs. In his own words ‘she gave me my legs back. I had to work at least to pay them back.’”

“The kid’s a pragmatist, shame he is in the wrong profession.” Qrow added.

“Yes. He doesn’t even seem to care about being in our possession. He just sits and trains in his cell. He barely reacted to the news that his leader was dead.”

“Different from Miss Sutrai.” Glynda sighed. “The poor girl seems to be quite attached if not dependent on her former leader. She is now under observation, we fear she might do something.... Irreversible if left alone.”

Qrow cut the tense silence that followed Glynda insinuation. “What do we got on the leader of this little merry band?”

The screen shifted again, now showing a mostly blank dossier.

“We were able to confirm the name Cinder Fall. The rest is mostly circumstantial. We are cross checking with Atlas and Minstral if any Huntress in their databases matches her. She was clearly trained but the name is an alias and most traces we found of her so far indicates that she is accustomed to work outside the grid.”

Or she had someone good erase her tracks. Gonna pay the Spiders a visit as soon as possible.

“Shame she decided to go out with a bang.”

“Her dismemberment may have been too much.” Winter looked pointedly at him.

“Frosty, she had her aura almost broken, was fighting both A ranks and almost got a fatal hit on you right before also almost breaking Amber's aura. I wasn't taking any chances with the crazy bint.”

The room descended in a cold silence. He was right to not take a chance against an unknown assailant. But he also made sure everyone in the room knew why he had to be so brutal. Winter hadn't taken her bodyguard duties seriously, she had let Amber intervene in the fight. When her priority should have been protecting and securing the Maiden while Qrow took care of the rest of the enemy party.

“Are we really sure that she is dead though?” Amins eyes bulged for a second, understanding what meant to question his direct superiors so bluntly. “Not that I'm saying you are all wrong! It's just that we didn't find a corpse or something to confirm her death!”

“Calm down dude.” Qrow laughed softly. “Glym can you bring up the pictures of the field after the fight?” The blond woman glared at him from the bluish screen. “....Please?”

The screen shifted once more, revealing an expansive clearing where the ground was nothing but blackened earth and lifeless gray ashes. Charred remnants of once-vibrant Valean vegetation lay scattered across the ashen ground, their shapes twisted and deformed from the intense heat.

“Crazy lady decided to use something close to a heavily energized red dust bomb. Problem is? We think it wasn't properly refined dust, or that it had various traces of black and green on it at least. It caused a tornado of fire to form, the heat in the thing only getting stronger as the dust ignited and dispersed into finer powder. Do you see the trees there?” The photo zoomed in on a set of two trees that looked more like sculptures of charcoal. “Those were like a hundred meters from the center of the explosion. We barely survived with our auras on. Her, without an arm and auraless? In the middle of that?”

Need to thank Myra later. She came in clutch with what type of bomb could have caused this.

She was wrong of course. But other than him and Amber no one in the strike force knew of magic. So the enormous output of power needed to be explained in some way, and who better to analyze a possible bomb than the head specialist and teacher of dust science of Beacon?

It also helped that she had been an Atleasian lieutenant at one point. Qrow was pretty sure the only reason they actually agreed in letting her take control of the investigation was thanks to it.

“So were does this leave us James?” Oz's voice hasn't changed from the beginning of the meeting, he still sounded calm and unbothered.

“As Miss Amber is still in healing we will keep an armed escort for her and a few extra battalions for the Vital Festival. We will have to find another lead about whatever they were planning for it.”

Not even sure they really cared for the festival though.

“Do you still believe that this wasn't just about Miss Amber? Not an isolated hit on a precious target?”

“I'm afraid not headmaster. We've detected strange movements from extremists to Vale on this past month. We believe that this attack was just one of opportunity. But their target is far bigger in scope.”

“Then Beacon thanks you for your support, old friend. I shall start tightening our security too. The Vital Festival must continue as planned.”

To train the new kids and the spare maiden..... Damn Oz, they are kids still.

Qrow didn't like the fact that kids so young were being already scouted for future members of the Yellow Brick Road. Even more than his nieces were part of said group. But she had silver eyes..... Salem would send people after Rubes sooner or later, better she be prepared.

All in all, this just kept on getting worse for the old crow.

Couldn't just have knocked the bitch out. Had to make sure she didn't cut frostys neck out. Now I have to go looking for some terrorist blind and with James' little team looking over my shoulder every second.

He chugged the rest of his now cold coffee. *Hate fucking Tuesdays.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update, but I kinda had to re-write this chapter.

I noticed that I'm trying to actually make the Grimm feel scary and dangerous. But having two Elder Grimm awake and be killed with just a few paragraphs of, 'they appeared and we took care of it' would completely dismissify the power this creatures are suppose to have.

But I also didn't want the first grimm fight scene to not be Jaunes. So I kinda described

the danger and the why it was so 'easy' to deal with the elder grimm. And even this 'easy fight' took more then two weeks of cleaning and an entire battalion of Huntsmen and four very high rank huntsman.

Also I changed Qrows semblance. Reason is simple, no semblance other then his is negative. His is more like a curse than a semblance. it makes no sense. Semblances are supposed to be reflections of your character and soul, literal semblances of magic manifested into the world. Why would one curse its user to have bad luck?! So I changed his to be more of a gambling with misfortune semblance, I think it makes sense for him and it can still be considered a bad semblance or like a curse. In reality it is only a good semblance in the hands of someone crazy and that doesn't care to actually bet his life constantly on it. It fits right?

So what do you guys think? Now it makes sense why they aren't searching for Cinder, we have were all characters that were introduced are and what they've been doing to this point. I also hope that knowing how powerful an elder grimm can be it will make Jaune second day story even more impactful, but that you guys are only getting on the next chapter.

Strength of the weakest

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

She was finally back on her game—well, not completely, but close enough.

It had been three days since she began having dinner with the Florentias. The second night had been spent gathering names and sketching out the basic profiles of each person. By the third night, she had already started 'mapping' them. Cinder now knew their names, some of their likes and dislikes, and felt confident that, given the opportunity, she could extract any other useful information from them.

She had also taken the time to explore the second floor of the house. Using the excuse of looking for Maggie, she'd claimed an interest in the old woman's offer to start exercising more, seeking to find out what areas she was allowed access to. Through this, she had learned the layout of the family's rooms upstairs—discovered which doors creaked, which floorboards to avoid when moving quietly, and had mapped out three potential escape routes.

The first was the simplest and closest to her. Her bedroom window faced the animal grazing field, and only two rooms lay between hers and the forest—Emilie's and Maggie's. Even without her aura, she could jump from the second floor, cross the field, and disappear into the trees. Simple, somewhat hidden and effective if used during the night.

The second escape route was the large window in the corridor. It was bigger than the one in her room, making it easier to jump through. The downside was that the corridor was long and straight—there was a high chance she'd be seen, and the tight quarters would limit her ability to dodge until she reached the window. Useful if she was ambushed in the second floor corridor.

The third option was the most straightforward: simply walking out through the front door and down the road. After all, she wasn't a prisoner here, and she doubted anyone would stop her. The path to the front door was just a staircase and a porch away.

Her plans naturally included securing provisions and transport as well. They probably wouldn't even mind if she took a little food for the road. But she did take note of what they had in supply that would last a long journey to Vale.

Transport, however, was trickier. She knew of horses—quite liked them, actually—but she had never learned how to properly ride one. Being Mistral-born and raised, horses weren't exactly common in the tundras where she grew up. She had ridden Grimm in the past at Salem's insistence, but she wasn't sure if the knowledge of riding a nightmare or a gryphon would translate to handling a horse.

Stealing the family's truck was another option, but driving on a dusty road with only one arm and in an old, beat-up vehicle seemed like a disaster waiting to happen. She also wasn't the

best with cars overall. Motorcycles in the other hand? Those she could deal with. And basic bullheads, the low altitude ones.

No. She would walk. None of the Florentias had aura, so she could outrun and outlast them if necessary. And if worse came to worst, she could lose them in the forest easily. Which wouldn't be possible with a horse or car.

Some might call Cinder Fall paranoid. They wouldn't be wrong, but she didn't care. Paranoia was a survival tactic, and Cinder had more than enough reasons to always be prepared, always on edge.

What troubled her, though, was the nagging thought she refused to examine too closely—that in many of her escape plans, she wasn't alone. She kept imagining taking the blonde with her. Or perhaps, that he would simply follow.

Now, she walked along the farm's perimeter under the pretense of rehabilitation, when in reality, she was scoping out the easiest ways to escape unnoticed. She searched for spots where she could jump the fence and slip into the woods without leaving any obvious tracks behind.

Just like yesterday, she finished her circuit near the horse pen, where her 'little blonde' was brushing a stunning deep, rich brown horse. Its coat gleamed like polished mahogany under the sun's soft light. Jaune was gently brushing its mane, which cascaded down its muscular neck like a silk curtain, the breeze tousling it ever so slightly. The horse's tail, long and luxurious, swished gracefully with every subtle movement.

She hadn't planned on stopping to watch him, but she found herself unable to look away. Jaune seemed to have the same magnetic charm with animals as he did with people. The horse adored him, preening and playfully nipping at him.

Noticing her for the first time, Jaune turned and offered her a beaming smile, free of malice or hidden intent—something so rare in Cinder's world.

"Evening, Cinder! Want to say hello to Nini?" He didn't wait for her answer, already bringing the horse closer to the fence.

"Evening, Jaune. She's absolutely gorgeous." Cinder didn't move to pet the horse, content for the moment to simply observe.

"I'm supposed to give her some sugar cubes after brushing her. Want to try?" He produced a few cubes from a pouch at his side.

"I think I'll save my appetite for after dinner," she teased, a mischievous smile playing on her lips.

"Wha—no! I meant giving Nini some!" Jaune stammered, clearly flustered by her playful tone.

She laughed softly at how easily he became flustered. It was so simple, so innocent. Teasing him wasn't about manipulation or control. It was just... fun.

"I'm not sure how." She raised an eyebrow, glancing at the horse. "Besides, I'm not sure she'd trust me."

"Here, give me your hand," Jaune instructed.

She extended her hand, and he gently placed the sugar cubes in her palm before guiding it toward the horse.

"Keep your palm open and don't force it. Let her meet you halfway. Oh, and don't pull back—it's a bit ticklish," he added with a small smile as Nini sniffed her hand.

The horse's velvety lips brushed against Cinder's skin as it eagerly took the cubes, its large, dark eyes full of trust. The delicate crunch of the sugar was accompanied by the steady warmth of the horse's breath against her fingers. For a moment, Cinder allowed herself to smile—a genuine smile—as she felt the small, simple connection. It was such an innocent thing. The trust of an animal should not matter to Cinder Fall, but somehow, this fleeting moment of peace and calm was worth more than any treasure trove of Dust.

"Want to pet her?" Jaune asked softly. He didn't wait for her response; instead, he gently shifted his hand under hers, guiding it toward the horse's muzzle.

Together, they stroked Nini's soft face, their fingers brushing lightly against each other. The horse leaned into their touch, eyes half-closed in contentment.

Cinder wasn't aware of her own expression. She wasn't wearing her usual mask—there was no cold facade, no hard edges. Her smile was unguarded, her eyes softened in the moment. For the first time, she realized that some things were worth treasuring, even if there was no immediate gain. No plan was advanced, no power acquired, yet this quiet moment still had value.

"She's a great girl, right?" Jaune asked, breaking the silence.

"She's beautiful," Cinder whispered, almost breathless.

"Want to keep us company while I finish up?"

"Can I?" Her voice was unfamiliar to her—soft, without any trace of command or flirtation, just simple, honest want.

"I wouldn't mind. And I'm sure Nini would love it if you stayed." He patted the horse's neck, returning to his work.

They fell into a comfortable silence for a few minutes before Cinder remembered her true reason for approaching Jaune. She hadn't come just to just enjoy his company, after all. Her hand continued stroking Nini's face and neck, but her mind refocused on her objective. She knew the whereabouts of all other Florentias. The boy and his father were moving the sheep while one of the uncles was sheering. The little girl and the other man had taken the truck to

the nearby village and the Doctor and her daughter were doing something in the house. She wasn't sure what, but she wasn't welcomed into the kitchen. She had a suspicion though. So her blond was cornered to perfection.

"Jaune?" she began.

"Hmm?" He looked up at her, blue eyes wide and innocent—aggravatingly so.

"Tell me what happened on the second day."

He froze, visibly uncomfortable. She knew that, given the chance, he would try to slip away, just as he had done twice before. But this time, there was no escape. He was cornered, and she had no intention of letting him off so easily.

He sighed, running a hand through his messy hair. Another tell.

"...It was all my fault," he said softly, as if confessing to some terrible sin.

She raised an eyebrow. "I wasn't aware you were part of the bandit group I was after." His eyes widened in panic, and she smirked. "Or was the drake yours? I'll be honest, Grimm don't make for great pets." She knew that for a fact.

"...WHaT?! No, I mean your injuries!"

"That's exactly why I'm asking. I don't remember seeing you in the cave or the ensuing Grimm fight." Cinder narrowed her gaze, locking onto his—those striking blue eyes that always seemed so wide and innocent. "Those were responsible for my wounds." No they weren't, but he for sure wasn't part of the Wizards bunch.

"I made them worse! I almost got you killed!" he half-shouted, the words spilling out as if they physically pained him.

That wasn't right. Maggie had told her that without Jaune's help, she would've been dead within hours. The only thing that had kept her alive long enough to be found was his, as Maggie had described, "amateurish but surprisingly competent" bandaging and the fact he had carried her back to the farm.

"So, are you telling me that Maggie lied to me?" Cinder asked, her tone even, though there was a faint edge of challenge in her voice.

"What?!" Jaune's confusion was genuine, his expression shifting from hurt to bewilderment.

"I've been told that I would have died without you. And even if I somehow survived, I would've been lost and delirious, fighting an infection in the middle of a Grimm-infested forest. I fail to see how you did anything but save my life, Jaune."

"...I got lucky," he whispered, his voice barely audible.

"No." Cinder's voice softened, almost tender, and fully alien to the woman. "I did."

He glanced at her, clearly wanting to argue, clearly intent on blaming himself for something inate. She wasn't sure what yet, but she could see the struggle in his eyes.

With the gentlest tone she could muster, Cinder urged, "Tell me what happened, Jaune. Let me be the one to decide if it's truly your fault."

Whatever he thought he had done, Cinder doubted it was anything she'd hold against him. There wasn't a thing he could confess that would make her turn on him now—not after he'd saved her life. *Wherever you could've done I bet I've done worse.*

Jaune hesitated. She could see the gears turning in his head, his mind racing, looking for a way out of the conversation. Was he afraid of telling her? Of admitting something? She could understand being afraid of *Cinder Fall*, the woman she used to be—the monster. But that wasn't who she had been living as for the past month. And still, he was scared.

"I promise you, Jaune," she continued, her voice steady. "I will listen. And I swear it won't change anything between us." She wasn't used to reassuring others, but she was learning, slowly.

"You can't promise that, Cinder," he said after a beat, his eyes downcast. "You don't know what happened."

"But I know how it ended," she countered. "And honestly, unless you could've somehow reattached my arm and healed it, I don't see what miracle you think you failed to achieve." She gave him a wry smile, trying to lighten the tension.

That earned her a small, sad quirk of his lips—a ghost of a smile that quickly faded.

Jaune went back to brushing the mare, his motions deliberate and calming. Cinder didn't interrupt. She could see it was helping him center himself, and if he needed a few more moments to gather his thoughts, she would give him that time.

"I didn't want to keep walking through the night," he began, his voice low. "I was scared we'd get lost, even with the star map on my scroll. So, I made a little camp for us. You didn't eat much, but I got a few spoonfuls of soup and water into you." He paused, his jaw tightening, eyes growing hard. "But when I woke up... you were burning up. So pale. I... I couldn't do anything. I panicked. I didn't even pack up the camp properly. I just made sure you were tied up securely before I ran through the forest like a madman."

Cinder tilted her head, still not understanding what crime he thought he had committed. So far, all she was hearing was that he had taken care of her, as best he could, given the circumstances. Was he blaming himself for not covering her properly? Or for covering her too much? The infection in her wounds wasn't his fault—that was more likely a result of her arm being hacked off by a scythe that probably wasn't the cleanest of weapons.

"I forgot the basics of survival," he continued, his voice cracking slightly. His eyes, glassy with unshed tears, met hers.

And then it clicked.

First rule outside the cities—Grimm are drawn to negative emotions. Fear, anger, panic... all of it acted like a beacon, calling every Grimm in the area straight to you. Jaune must have been terrified, and in that state, he would've been a walking signal flare.

"I attracted Grimm to us," he confessed, his voice barely above a whisper.

Cinder blinked, the realization hitting her hard. *How are we even alive?* He didn't have aura—Maggie had told her that, and she'd confirmed it herself. He wasn't lying; Jaune was far too honest, his tells too easy to read. He was waiting for her judgment, as if expecting condemnation.

"...It seems I owe you more than I thought," she murmured, her voice softer than usual. *Far more than I expected.*

"No! You don't get it!" Jaune burst out. "I almost got you killed!"

"Us," Cinder corrected calmly.

"What?"

"You almost got *us* killed." She gently placed her remaining hand on his cheek, guiding his gaze back to hers. "Jaune, I was in pain and delirious. I should've been attracting Grimm from half the forest just by existing. Your panic didn't help, sure, but it wasn't what put us in danger."

Did the lingering scent of the khepri beetle mask me during my escape? Or was the call of the two elders Grimm?

Her words seemed to calm him, if only slightly. His shoulders relaxed a little, though his eyes still held that flicker of doubt.

"How did we survive?" she asked, genuinely curious now. The odds had been stacked against them, yet here they were.

"I got lucky. It was just a small pack of Creeps."

No, he didn't. Killing one might have been luck, but a pack of Creeps should've torn him apart.

"How many?"

"Only five..." He looked almost ashamed, his voice dropping. A trained civilian could take down a Creep, maybe two with the right weapons. But a teenager with no proper equipment? He should've been ripped apart for sure.

"How did it happen?"

"I didn't see them at first. I heard a truck in the distance and rushed toward it. That's when they jumped me. The first one got my leg." He winced, glancing at her sheepishly. "I... I

kinda dropped you then. The second one went straight for my face. It only missed because I fell when the first started thrashing my leg.”

Not for the face... for the neck. Cinder knew Creeps were ambush predators, weak but cunning. They always aimed for the kill.

“I swung my sword at the one on my leg. Almost broke my own leg smashing it. If the scabbard hadn’t been on, I probably would’ve hacked a chunk of my own leg off. I don’t even know where I hit it, but it started dissolving. Then I saw one going for you. I thought it was the same one that missed me, but it wasn’t. I swung at it, and it jumped back. I thought I’d scared it, but it was just distracting me...”

Jaune's voice grew tight as he recalled the next part, his hands unconsciously hovering over his bandaged arm.

“The second one was still at my side. It jumped and bit deep into my arm. I was lucky the first one only got my boot, not my leg, but the one on my arm... My hoodie was the only thing protecting me, and its teeth tore right through.”

Cinder watched as his demeanor shifted. His hands had stopped brushing Nini, and his focus was no longer on the present. He was reliving it.

“I started swinging wildly, trying to dislodge the thing. I smashed my arm against a tree until it let go, but then the last two... they went for you. I stood over you, trying to keep them at arm’s length. One of them jumped, and I managed to hit it with my sword, but the other came at my side while the last one went for you again.”

He paused, his voice thick with frustration. “I threw my scabbard at it, and it accidentally shifted into a shield, which made the Creep jump back. I elbowed the one at my side away and impaled it. The last one jumped me twice before I could finish it off.”

“Lift your shirt,” Cinder commanded, her tone firm.

“What?!”

“I want to see the bite on your side.” She wasn’t accusing him of lying, but something didn’t add up. Jaune Arc wasn’t supposed to be strong enough to survive this kind of assault. He had qualities, sure, but strength wasn’t one of them.

Jaune hesitated, his fingers lingering at the hem of his shirt before he slowly lifted it just enough to reveal the fresh scar running along his ribs. The wound, still pink and slightly raised, jagged and ugly, marred his otherwise pristine skin. His gaze dropped to the ground, a flush creeping up his neck as he shifted uncomfortably, his breath shallow. The vulnerability of the moment was palpable—he clearly didn’t want her to see this side of him.

“I told you, I got lucky,” he muttered, “The Creep bit mostly into my chest plate. Its teeth just scraped my side.”

Scraped? Cinder narrowed her eyes. The wound was nearly seven centimeters long and clearly deep enough to need suturing. “Why didn’t you just leave me?”

Something inside her needed to understand. Why would anyone take such a reckless risk? Cinder had never seen the point in risking one's life for someone else—especially for a stranger. She didn’t have the words to describe it politely, but deep down, she thought it was as idiotic as it was absurd.

“Are you insane?! How could I leave you?” Jaune’s voice rose in frustration, the first time he had actually raised his voice *at her*. Before, it had been more about him berating himself.

“So you would die for me?” Cinder asked incredulously, her voice sharp as she searched his face for any sign of doubt. It didn’t make sense to her—none of it did.

“I... I don’t know,” he confessed, his voice faltering. “I don’t want to die, but I couldn’t just leave you behind.” His tone wavered, raw and hollow, as if the admission brought him shame. There was something painfully vulnerable in the way he spoke, a trace of self-loathing that clung to his words. *Jaune Arc was weak*, and Cinder could see now that he knew it.

“Why?” she snapped, her voice tinged with scorn. “Do you want to be a hero that badly?” Her lips curled into a bitter, mocking smile. He wasn’t after money or glory, so that could only leave one reason—a desire to be something more than he was. A hero.

Jaune’s face flushed deeper as he fumbled for words. His hands clenched into fists by his side, trembling slightly, but he couldn’t meet her gaze.

“At first? Yeah... I’ve never been much, Cinder. This is the first time I’ve ever done something for myself—truly for myself. Without my parents or sisters...” Jaune paused, his voice cracking slightly. “And the first thing I did was almost die and get you killed. I just... I want to be better, stronger, so next time, I can actually do something...”

“You killed a pack of Creeps, Jaune. That’s more than many could’ve done,” Cinder said softly, her voice gentler than she intended. There was a warmth in her tone that surprised her, just as much as it seemed to surprise Jaune. Her eyes softened as they rested on him, and she wasn’t quite sure why she felt the need to make him see his own worth.

“I got lucky! I barely remember any of it! Just flashes of me swinging my sword and scabbard around!” Jaune protested, his frustration evident.

“And I’m alive because of that,” she countered.

He didn’t seem convinced. Cinder could tell the entire ordeal had been traumatic for him, but now she was realizing just how deeply it had affected him.

“What does it matter if it was luck?” Cinder asked, his gaze finally lifting alone to meet hers.

“I’ve had a difficult life, Jaune,” she admitted, surprising herself with the honesty of her words. She wasn’t even interested in discovering why she was willing to reveal this to him.

“I’ve become what I am just to survive—cunning, brutal, and unrepentant.” She paused, allowing her words to settle. “But even I wouldn’t be here without a little luck. It was luck you found me. It was luck I survived.”

She extended her hand, gently brushing back a lock of his disheveled hair, so she could look him in the eyes.

“At the end of it all, luck is what we make of it. It’s a chance, an opportunity. But you have to seize it and make it work for you. You could’ve used your luck to steal whatever I had on me and leave me to die. You could’ve used me as bait and run from the Creeps. You could’ve played the hero and let the Florentias spoil you for a while. But at every turn, you chose to be better. You chose to help, to protect, and to work for what was freely given. You are a...” she hesitated, searching for the right word, “...a good man, Jaune. And lucky or not, I’m sure you’ll do great things in the future.”

Cinder wasn’t aware of a key trait shared by every Arc family member—they were huggers. And nothing in the world could stop an Arc in need of a hug.

She would never admit that she panicked when Jaune suddenly moved, or that for a split second, she nearly ignited him in reflex. What stopped her was the broken half-sob that escaped him, followed by the string of muffled thanks he blurted out as he embraced her tightly.

Cinder was not accustomed to physical affection. In truth, she hated it when it wasn’t her initiating it—despised it, even. But this... this felt different. She couldn’t bring herself to hate the warmth in Jaune’s embrace. It was simple, free of any power play or domination, unlike the harsh reminders of her smallness from Salem or the Madam. It was just a hug—warm and sincere, a gesture of gratitude and affection. She decided she didn’t mind the small sting of her healing burns when his arms brushed against her sides. If this warmth could last a bit longer, she could endure it.

She wasn’t sure how long the hug lasted, but it wasn’t her who broke it off.

“I-I’m sorry,” Jaune stammered, taking a step back, his face red as he shuffled awkwardly.

Cinder waited, unsure of what to say next. Was it her turn to speak? What should she say?

“Do you still want to be a huntsman, then? After all that?” she finally asked, her voice more measured.

“...Yes,” Jaune answered quietly, his resolve clear.

Cinder had a choice now. The logical one would be to have nothing to do with this suicidal child. The decent one would be to not drag him into the chaos that was her life. But the choice she made was neither.

“Do you want me to train you?” she asked.

His eyes lit up, as if he were a drowning man who had just been thrown a lifeline. There was so much hope in his expression that Cinder couldn't look away.

"I-I would—" he began eagerly, but was interrupted by a nudge from the horse. In truth, Cinder had completely forgotten about the mare, but it seemed she had grown tired of waiting for their attention.

"How about we talk about this after you're done for the day?" Jaune suggested with a small smile. "I'd like to see what you're already doing for training." She added.

Jaune smiled back, albeit sheepishly, and nodded. He turned back to the mare, muttering apologies under his breath and promising her more sugar cubes later.

Cinder found a small place to sit by the shade. It would take the blonde at least an hour or two to finish his chores. She had nowhere better to be and even if she did, she deserved a small indulgence after all that's happened.

So she sat by the shade of nice tree, enjoyed the warm of the sun, the swift breeze and the view of an impossible bright young man at work. A completely useless moment to her a month ago, but a small treasure now.

Chapter End Notes

Now we have it!

It can be silly to think that a simple encounter with the weakest of the Grimm would traumatize someone. But I would like people to remember that the Grimm in this story are real and actual treats to most people. Civilians are not killing anything bigger than a creep or infant beowolfs.

And Jaune just noticed this. He almost died and cost someone else their live. Someone that he was responsible for. We know how self deprecating Jaune can be and having this happen even before he has anyone to support or help him deal with his feelings? Boy has problems to say the least.

But I promise I will make a better fight scene for him in the future, not the scramble of panic he had against the creeps.

Proper Training

Chapter Summary

Jaune learns what proper training is and glimpses just how stronger a true Huntress is.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Saying yes wasn't a mistake. But it wasn't anything like what he expected.

Jaune had known that real training would be harder—much harder—than the practice he'd been doing on his own. But he never imagined he'd be getting tossed around by a one-armed, unarmed, and injured woman.

Is it sexist that I wasn't expecting it? he wondered, wincing as another bruise began to blossom on his ribs.

The first thing she did was ask him to suit up, grab his sword, and give it his best shot. Jaune hesitated, fumbling with his words as he tried to explain that swinging a real sword at someone could be dangerous, that he might accidentally hurt her. She laughed—a sound that was more dismissive than amused—and told him she'd be surprised if he managed to land a single blow. The confidence in her voice stung, even if he tried to brush it off. But it hurt less than it would have a week earlier.

Still, he hesitated, his grip loose on the hilt. That was when, with a swift, no-nonsense motion, she grabbed his sword herself and swung it down at her own leg. He yelped, eyes widening like dinner plates, bracing for the sight of blood. But there was nothing—just a burst of orange soul energy as her Aura flared, stopping the blade before it even made a dent. Right, Aura, he reminded himself. It was so easy to forget. He could hammer her for an hour, and he'd probably do nothing more than exhaust himself.

Once he stopped apologizing, she smirked. Now, she said, they'd begin what she called 'proper practice'.

It didn't go well. At all.

Jaune had put in time. He wasn't just swinging blindly—he'd studied basic sword forms, listened to sparring tutorials on his scroll, and memorized combat tips from online trainers. He knew the basics: swing, but don't overextend; keep the shield up, but don't hide behind it. He had this, right?

Wrong.

His first swing—a simple overhead slice—was meant to set up for a horizontal strike. He had it all planned. She dodged to the side. Perfect. He could transition the slice smoothly. She wasn't on his shield side, so he didn't even need to reposition or attempt a shield bash. This was his moment. He knew what he was doing.

But before he could complete the swing, a leg connected with his stomach, hard and precise, slamming right under his armor. All the air rushed out of him, and before he could suck it back in, another kick slammed into his back. His spine arched in pain, and he barely registered the impact of his head hitting the ground before the world blurred into a haze of pain.

For a few moments, he stayed down, gasping for air. He stared up at Cinder, and all he saw in her eyes was a cold, calculating gaze—no pity, no hesitation.

She isn't going to go easy on me. Good.

His body ached with every breath, but what stung more was the blow to his pride. He'd barely lasted a dozen seconds. *Focus, Jaune. He set himself small goals: last ten seconds, defend at least one attack, and, most importantly, don't break anything.*

The rest of the session followed a grim pattern. No matter the attack he tried—overhand strikes, shield bashes, even a few thrusts—she slipped past him with ease, her counters precise and brutal. Every evasion felt effortless, and every hit she landed was like a lesson he was too slow to learn. Cinder struck with a variety that kept him guessing: kicks to the ribs, elbows to the shoulders, jabs to the kidneys. Each hit was measured, targeted. He could feel it—she was testing him, assessing his weaknesses.

But he simply wasn't fast enough. His shield, no matter how desperately he maneuvered it, couldn't match her speed. He wasn't quick enough to dodge, and his footwork, which he thought he had down, failed to create any openings.

Maybe I should defend and wait for an opening... he thought, as he wiped sweat from his brow. It was a decent strategy, but she had given him a goal—he needed to land a hit today. And time was running out.

One last try. He positioned himself for a shield and sword rush, placing Crocea Mors above his shield. It was a classic move—one that protected his battered stomach. His plan was simple: if she dodged back, he'd keep pressing. If she dodged left, he'd swing the shield; if she dodged right, the sword would follow in a quick arc. Perfect.

Except she didn't dodge.

She jumped—vaulted clean over him, almost gracefully—and kicked his support leg hard enough that his body twisted. He had a split second to register the shift in his weight before an Aura-boosted elbow crashed into his shield, sending him flying. He felt the ground rush up, and when he hit, he bounced.

This time, he stayed down longer. The ragged breaths tore through his lungs, his eyes swimming with exhaustion. His shield arm throbbed, vibrating as if it had been struck by a

sledgehammer.

“That was an interesting idea. Where did you get it?” Cinder’s voice came from above, calm and collected. She looked down at him, barely breaking a sweat, and offered him a water bottle.

“Someone was narrating the Invincible Girl Rush win of the last tournament...” he mumbled, taking a sip as he pushed himself up.

“You really shouldn’t try to imitate a champion at the very beginning,” she remarked with a small smile. “But it’s a good idea—watching, mimicking, learning. Just... not yet.”

I didn’t even watch it. Just a five-minute audio clip about shield bashes. He nodded anyway. *Definitely need to add downloading more video exercises for this style to my list.*

“Can you get up?”

He tried, and his muscles screamed in protest. “Do I have to?”

“Sit then.”

It took a moment, but he managed. Sitting, at least, made it easier to drink from the water bottle.

She sat opposite him, her eyes cool but not unkind. “You aren’t half bad for a civilian, Jaune. But you’re an amateur. That’s clear in almost all aspects.” The words stung, even though he expected them. Or maybe it was all the bruises. “But, you did better than I anticipated.”

“Really?!”

“No fancy moves with the sword, no hiding behind the shield, and the most important thing—you got back up.” She ticked off the points on her fingers. “That’s what matters most. I can’t teach you that. If you give up when you hit a wall, you’ll never get through it. I can make you faster, stronger, sharper. But your spirit—that’s all you.”

Great, he thought. *Being a decent sandbag is an achievement now.* But he knew she was right.

“Today was just to see how much you know about your weapons. The real training starts tomorrow, if you’re still willing.”

“Of course I am!”

“I won’t go easy on you, Jaune. Neither of us can afford that.” Her voice was calm, firm.

“Pulling my punches would teach you nothing. You can keep training the basics and aim for a Huntsmen prep school next year for proper instruction.”

“Do you mind training me?” he asked, his voice a little more serious. She shook her head.

“Then I want you to train me, Cinder.” He flashed her a grin. “I doubt any combat school has a drake-hunting huntress willing to train nobodies.”

She smiled, extending her hand to help him up.

“Get in position.” He did. “Start swinging.” He obeyed. “And tell me what you learned.”

That I bounce when hit hard enough?

He *could* joke. He even *wanted* to. But something in the way Cinder was watching him—that sharp, unblinking eye—made him think twice. This felt like more than just training; it felt like a test. He took a deep breath, organizing his thoughts before he spoke.

“You’re faster, stronger, and more agile than me,” he started, stating the obvious. But of course, she already knew that—that wasn't what she wanted to hear. “You weren't relying on your Aura for most hits. Only the elbow strike was fully charged. Your Aura is orange, and it stays close to your body, so it's not the defensive type.” *I think*, he added mentally. Finding reliable information about Aura had been harder than he expected. “You didn't use your Semblance, and I haven't seen you use Dust or a weapon, so you've got at least two trump cards I don't know about. Oh, and you know martial arts!” That last one felt a little too obvious—he cursed himself for not picking it up sooner. “You don't have a weapon on you, but you still move like someone trained to fight against both armed and armored opponents. I'd guess your weapons focus on finesse and speed. I doubt you use a hammer or something like that.”

He risked a glance, trying to gauge if he was on the right track. Her expression was... hard to read. Maybe she was impressed? Or curious? It was difficult to tell, given that one of her eyebrows was raised but the other half of her face was scarred and bandaged, making any clear expression difficult to interpret. At the very least, she didn't seem angry or disappointed.

Guess I passed? Or at least, I know enough not to disappoint.

“An excellent analysis, Jaune. But it wasn't the answer I was looking for.” She paused, her tone still calm. “The fault lies with my question. Your analysis of your enemy was well done, but my focus was on what *you* learned about your attacks and defenses when faced with a real combatant.”

Oh. He felt his cheeks heat up. But hey, at least I got some of it right.

He took a moment, mulling it over while continuing with the basic swings and shield movements. He kept his breathing steady, trying to keep his focus.

“I need to get stronger—strong enough to take regular hits, and even basic Aura-enhanced ones. I need to be faster, so I can dodge the ones charged with Aura.” *Or I could get Aura myself...* he mused briefly before continuing. “I don't have Aura right now, so I can't afford to take those hits. And my shield... it's getting in the way of some of my swings, but without it, I don't stand a chance of blocking or deflecting attacks.”

He glanced at her again, but this time, her expression was less encouraging. She stepped forward, adjusting his shield hand, moving it higher up his arm. “Less arc. Your swing

doesn't need to cover your entire field of vision; it only needs to connect with your target—and preferably in a way that you don't need to swing again.”

She continued, her eyes locked onto his. “You're not entirely wrong, but your assessment is shallow. You're thinking about the basics, not about the opportunities you could create. But let's build on those basics first. Yes, getting stronger is important—you're building muscle well.” Jaune felt his face heat up again at the comment. “But strength isn't just for defense. You should be using it to add power to your strikes. A strong offense is often the best defense after all.” The glint in her eyes and the small, grim smile she wore showed just how much she believed in that philosophy.

“As for your defense, you're missing the mark entirely.” She raised a finger, making her point clear. “First, you're not even trying to dodge certain attacks—you're relying solely on your shield. That's a mistake. You should only use the shield when there's no other way to avoid or counter an attack. What would've happened if my first strike had been enhanced by a Semblance that could cut through your shield entirely?”

The question wasn't rhetorical. “I would've... lost my arm.”

“No, you'd be *dead*,” she said, her tone darkening. “A wound like that, when you're not accustomed to pain or prepared to react, would leave you completely open for a second hit. And that's the one you wouldn't survive.”

Jaune felt the weight of her words. His grip on the sword tightened as he slowed down, his swings coming in sluggishly. *If I fought someone who wasn't holding back, someone who truly wanted me dead, they wouldn't hesitate to use a trump card. And I'd just let them hit me...* His mind wandered briefly, and he couldn't help but wonder: *What kind of training did Cinder go through to fight after having her arm bitten clean off?*

“I didn't tell you to stop.” Her voice snapped him back. “Shield up, sword at the side. Legs shoulder-width apart. Start jumping. Switch your front leg every third jump. And do it as fast as you can—without hitting yourself with the blade or lowering your shield.”

He obeyed, his legs burning as he pushed himself through the drill.

“You don't need to be faster *per se*. You need to be *nimbler*. Speed is important, but if you're quick to move in the wrong ways, all you end up doing is creating openings for your opponent.” She raised a second finger. “Second: fights between Huntsmen aren't decided by armor or defense. It's about how much damage you can inflict and how quickly. It's all about depleting your opponent's Aura. Only then can you properly *ki* — *neutralize* your target. You could have the largest Aura reserve in all of Vale, but if you can't hit me, it wouldn't matter.”

“But I could use my Aura to create an opening!” he countered, starting to feel like he was getting the hang of it. “I shouldn't let any attack hit me unless I *know* I can tank it or have no other option, but if I *do* take the hit, I can use that moment to find an opening, right?” He risked a glance at her, his legs burning as he continued to jump, already feeling the fatigue set in. *I won't be able to get out of bed tomorrow...*

She smirked, a glimmer of satisfaction in her eyes. “Clever, blondie. But can you capitalize on it when you’re hiding behind your shield?”

No, he couldn’t. And he knew it. Even without the shield, he wasn’t sure he’d have the speed or precision to follow through.

“No...”

“Then how do you do it?”

“I counter?” He offered tentatively, but she shook her head. *Same problem*, he realized. *I can’t counter when I’m pinned*. And if he couldn’t use his sword effectively, he’d be stuck. *Could I shield bash when my sword is locked?* Wait—there was another way. “I don’t just defend! I guide the strike away. I make sure I’m not pinned, or if I am, I redirect it to create an opening.”

This time, she smiled—a full, genuine smile.

“Now you’re starting to get it.”

“Nice to see you use your head for more than just its looks, Arc.” Cinder’s tone was sharp, but there was a hint of amusement in her eyes. It wasn’t the cold, assessing gaze she usually wore when analyzing her surroundings or when she thought no one was looking; there was something else there, almost like a challenge. But then, her expression shifted, and the amusement faded as her eyes hardened into a piercing, focused stare. “But talking is easy.”

She stepped closer, her voice lowering as if she were delivering a truth he wasn’t ready to hear. “You can be the cleverest person in the room, the best analyst in Vale, or the most brilliant strategist in all of Remnant.” Her eyes locked onto his, the intensity making him feel like he was being judged—not just for his words but for the core of who he was. “But none of that will do you any good when the chips are down—when you’re alone, with nothing but a sword to your throat.”

Her words were like the strike of a hammer. He felt the truth in them, the weight of experience she carried that he didn’t. She’d been there, on the edge, fighting for survival, and her eyes—hard and unyielding—made it clear that this wasn’t hypothetical for her. She was speaking from *hard-earned knowledge*, and he knew his understanding was shallow by comparison.

Then, as if a switch flipped, her lips twisted into a grin that was almost feral—a grin that promised pain but also growth. “But by the time I’m done with you, you’ll at least not have to worry about bandits or the likes of low-level Huntsmen.” There was a hint of mockery in her tone, but beneath it, Jaune sensed an underlying promise: she *would* make him stronger, even if it hurt.

He shivered, feeling both a chill of fear and a spark of determination. If she could teach him that, if she could give him even a fraction of her confidence, maybe he’d have a chance out there.

He smiled back, a surge of pride swelling in his chest. He'd done it . He was going to be a Huntsman. And no matter what Cinder needed him to do or what she threw at him—he would overcome it. He wouldn't let this chance slip away. No matter what, he would prove himself worthy of her time, make her proud that she'd chosen to spend her energy and effort training him.

Jaune Arc was going to a Huntsman. And one of the best, no matter what.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to point out that Jaune is has indeed a lot of potential and is very smart. He is often overshadowed by being around genius and people simply stupidly gifted. But lets not forget that in a few months of training he got to the level to fight and sometimes win against people that had years of training and are going to the literal best Huntsmen school in Remnant.

That said I will not make him OP out of nowhere. Boy is going to suffer and fight for every ounce of power and ability.

Baptism by fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cinder was pleasantly surprised by the Arc boy.

She would never admit to having a soft spot for *anything*, but she couldn't lie to herself when she saw just how much potential Jaune might have. Her old self would've *salivated* at the prospect—a clever, analytical mind ready to be molded into the perfect puppet, as devoted as he seemed to be. *And I don't even know the extent of his Aura or what his Semblance is*, she mused. Right now, he was just an unpolished river stone, nothing exceptional on the surface—but in her hands? Oh, she could shape him into the centerpiece of any jewel.

His assessment from the previous day still lingered in her mind. The boy had a sharp head for analyzing both his opponent and himself. No ego, no delusions—just a cold, honest grasp of reality. His mistakes stemmed entirely from a lack of experience, and that—fortunately—was an easy fix. Experience could be forged like iron in a fire, and she knew how to wield the hammer.

But something continued to nag at her: his Aura. He hadn't yet asked her to unlock it. In fact, she'd expected it to be the first thing he did—demanded, even. Most civilians had a skewed understanding of Aura, thinking it was as simple as finding a random Huntsman, paying a fee, and bam — you were suddenly superhuman. The reality, of course, was far different. Unlocking someone's Aura required finesse, control, and a deep connection and understanding of one's own soul. And that was not even taking in account the fact that not everyone had the capacity to manifest Aura; some people barely had enough to keep their shield stable, let alone use it in combat. If she unlocked his Aura and found it lacking, he'd become nothing more than a beacon for Grimm, as Aura manifest its soul far strongly then simple strong negative feelings. And all that wasn't even considering the myriad things that could go wrong during the awakening process.

I could do it, she thought. *I have the skill*. But she dreaded what might happen when she did.

Two troubling scenarios circled her mind like predatory Nevermores. The first was that he was playing her, waiting for her to unlock his Aura before abandoning her. It made little sense — he clearly idolized her, and it showed in every movement and extra care he took in any thing remotely tangential to her. But that deep, instinctual part of her still feared betrayal. Rhodes' betrayal had left a mark on her soul, molding her into who she was today, a ghost forever whispering that 'trust is a fool's game'.

The second option was stranger, and in a way, more unsettling. It wouldn't necessarily harm her as much as the first, but the consequences could be just as dire. What if Jaune Arc didn't have enough Aura to become a Huntsman? What if he was just a regular civilian — a dreamer with no means of fulfilling said dream? Would he give up, returning to the small, nowhere village he came from? Would he still follow her if she crushed his hopes? In

practical terms, all she stood to lose was a pawn, one less piece on her board. But the thought of being the catalyst for the destruction of his dream made her stomach churn in a way she hadn't felt in years.

She watched him train, her eyes lingering on the determined set of his jaw and the way he threw himself into each swing, each movement. She'd managed to secure a few more hours of training time with him, thanks to the Florentias. The way it happened had been, frankly, amusing.

They had returned for dinner, the table already set and laden with dishes. The Florentias had prepared a small celebration for her recovery — or, as Maggie put it, for finally getting out of bed. It would have been a surprise if she hadn't noticed the rushed whispers and the awkward way they had unceremoniously shooed her out of the kitchen. They hadn't even let Jaune help, which probably had more to do with the fact that he couldn't keep a secret from her.

The meal was a feast of chicken and potato dishes — variations of hearty, homely comfort food. It seemed Jaune had sparked a competitive streak in Miss Lucia, thanks to little Emily's enthusiastic declaration that he was “the best cook ever.”

The food, as always, was excellent — though Cinder secretly preferred the blonde's cooking. Lucia was undoubtedly a skilled cook, but there was something about the care Jaune put into each meal that made it different. The fact he also cut portions — at least hers — on sizes that could be easily eaten without having to cut further into them also helped.

As the conversation and dishes dwindled, Cinder seized the moment to secure more time at the Florentias' home, and with Jaune. She cleared her throat, catching everyone's attention, and put on her most sincere fake smile. “I want to thank you all again for your help and patience.” She glanced at Maggie, meeting her stern eyes. “And now that I've been cleared by the doctor, I'd like to repay you by helping out around the farm. It's the least I can do after all you've done for me.”

“You sure about that, Miss Cinder?” Mike asked, raising an eyebrow. “No offense, but we know Huntsmen are on another league and all that, but you're still hurt, ain't you?”

“Mostly bored, actually. Walking around is nice, but helping Jaune train isn't enough of a distraction. I need more active exercise — I'm getting too rigid sitting around.”

“Rigid?!” Jaune exclaimed, his voice laced with mock shock. “You *somersaulted* over me and swept my legs out from under me! And I barely saw you coming!”

“You better not hurt him,” Maggie interjected, pointing her cane across the table. “I swear to the Light itself, if I have to patch him up again, I'll open your stitches myself! Are we clear, girly?”

Cinder had to hide her smirk behind her hand. The sight of a doctor threatening to tear out her stitches was new even for her. But it was cute, really — Maggie was just looking out for Jaune, making sure she didn't harm her other patient.

“I promise not to break your patient, Doc,” she replied, a playful glint in her eyes. “But if I could take on some of the work from your hands—or Jaune’s—it would give me more exercise and free up time for his training.”

“Well, I could use a hand getting some supplies from the shed to fix the fences on the west side,” Jorge offered.

“Dad! Those poles weigh a *ton* ! You can’t make a lady carry them!” Newt protested, his voice high and indignant.

Cinder stifled a laugh. *Lady? Oh, kid, you have no idea the monster sitting at your table. A few chuckles echoed from the adults as well.*

“Newt, she’s a Huntress! With Aura and everything! I bet she could lift the truck!” Emily chimed in, eyes wide with enthusiasm.

“With only one arm?!” Newt looked up at Cinder, his eyes shining with admiration. “That’s so cool! Can I see it?”

“Sorry, kid.” She winked. “Even with both arms, the best I could do is kick it a few feet.”

“Oh... That’s still cool, though. Just not *as* cool,” he replied, deflated but still amazed.

“You kick my truck, and you’ll be sleeping in the stables, missy,” Joshua added with a grin.

The rest of the dinner passed in that warm, lively atmosphere. Cinder promised to help out, and Joshua, Jorge, and Mike agreed to call for her when they started the fence repairs.

Morning came early, and as most mornings did for Cinder on the farm — too damn early, with that damned rooster making entirely too much noise. Breakfast was the same hearty spread of breads, jellies, eggs and sausage she’d grown accustomed to, the kind that filled you up for a day’s hard work. Today, instead of her usual morning walk, she accompanied the Florentias men to the main shed.

At first, it seemed they had invited her out of courtesy, not expecting much help. It was charming, in a way — frustrating, too. But their attitudes shifted quickly when she started hauling whole pieces of wood and equipment with her one good hand. Her Aura might not enhance strength like some specialized Semblances, but it provided enough of a multiplier to make her more than capable.

Most of the morning passed with her testing and removing broken stakes, hammering in new ones, pushing and exchanging quick words about what was needed. The men seemed impressed—grateful, even—since her Aura-enhanced strength was cutting down the work time significantly.

“I don’t see any electrical setups for a shield or field array,” she commented, her gaze scanning the farm. “Do you keep them inside?”

Joshua shook his head, tightening a cord of metal around a new post. “We don’t have any, miss. Shields are expensive as all hells, and none of us know how to maintain ’em. They’re

just as much trouble as they are worth. We've got one of those fancy emotion cloakers in the bunker, but that only works inside."

Bunker? she thought. *I assumed it was just a heavily reinforced basement.* It certainly looked solid enough to withstand a hurricane, but calling it a proper bunker seemed like a stretch.

"That's already a pretty decent setup. Most people think a good shotgun is all they need." She shrugged internally. *Those people don't tend to last long outside the walls.*

"Can't go cheap when family's on the line, missy!" Joshua, the older man, puffed his chest with pride, clearly satisfied with his preparations. Cinder decided not to poke holes in his strategy or pry further. There was no sense in antagonizing the family's second patriarch.

"Is that why we're replacing so many of the fence posts?" she asked, glancing at the scattered wooden poles. "I see a few that you could probably keep without any problem." Of course, she knew full well that no wooden or barbed wire fence would stop a determined Beowolf. But, she supposed, it could keep the smaller ones occupied long enough to shoot them down.

"We need the poles to hold up against a Boarbatusk charge and to keep the Creeps out until we can either reach the bunker or put those vermin down ourselves."

For some reason — perhaps the day's familiarity or the trust they had shown her—Cinder felt the impulse to be honest and helpful. The words left her mouth before she could second-guess them. "I'm sorry, but these fences won't stand a chance against a Boarbatusk, at least not one older than an infant." She mentally winced, reminding herself that she'd resolved not to contradict the man or risk the goodwill his family had extended to her. "You'd need spiked iron poles for that. Boarbatusks are dumb and often charge headfirst into obstacles. If you put spikes in their path, hidden enough that they don't see them coming, they might impale themselves. You might not kill one outright, but you could injure it enough to buy time—time to run with your family if you need to."

"That's a nice idea, but metal spikes are expensive, especially when they need to be custom-made." Joshua called over his shoulder to Mike, who was unloading equipment from the truck. "Hey, Mike! Think we got enough wood to make stakes to reinforce the posts?"

"Yeah, but why in the good Light would you wanna do that?"

"Huntress tip!" Joshua grinned, gesturing toward Cinder. "She says we could trick a Boarbatusk into impaling itself if we set the stakes right."

Mike looked skeptical, one brow raised. "Really, Miss Cinder?"

"Absolutely," she nodded. "Even if it tries to avoid the post and goes for the barbed wire, it could still get caught. From the way you've set the tension, I'm betting you've already had some get tangled in it."

"Yup! Mike's got a big tusk mounted above his bed from when we found an adult tangled in the fence last year. Thing was so stuck it tore down three posts before we managed to put it down!"

And just like that, the men launched into stories of the Grimm they'd encountered or killed on the farm. Cinder expected them to brag—men usually did, especially in front of a Huntress—but their tone was different. They weren't showing off; they were swapping stories, genuinely interested in what she had to say. Mike, in particular, seemed eager for advice, mentioning how he wanted to impress a girl named Bertha — a rather unfortunate name, in Cinder's opinion — from the nearby village.

Most of the day continued like that. They were interrupted occasionally by Maggie, Lucia, and Jaune, who brought refreshments and subtly—at least, they thought they were being subtle—checked to make sure Cinder wasn't overexerting herself.

She found it absolutely adorable.

How would they react if they knew Salem used to keep me training even with broken bones? she thought, smirking. Or that Callows poisons every member of hers circle until they build enough resistance to fight properly while poisoned?

Jaune always returned quickly to tending the horses. Maggie, meanwhile, would sit on the truck's cargo bed for a bit, keeping an eye on Cinder to make sure she wasn't pushing herself too far. Lucia would drop off a pitcher of juice, pinch her husband's bottom, and kiss him before leaving. *How they only have two children is beyond me*, Cinder mused, shaking her head.

By the time the sun started dipping in the sky, she had finally broken a sweat. The men were drenched, looking as if they'd jumped into a river, but that made sense. It was hot out, and while she had her Aura and heat-resistant Semblance to help her cope, they didn't.

They had managed to complete the entire west side of the fence and even set up stakes on alternating posts. All in all, it had been a productive day—one that, by all accounts, she should have hated. Yet, as was becoming more common lately, she didn't mind it. *In fact, it wasn't half bad.*

She was already dreaming of a hot bath and whatever creative dinner Jaune had prepared to outdo Lucia's meal from the night before when the gods decided to laugh at her rare moment of peace.

A shrill scream pierced through the twilight. It was a scream of pure, primal terror—a child's scream.

To their credit, the men reacted immediately, sprinting toward the source of the sound. One might think it was a natural response for parents or family, but Cinder knew better. She'd seen enough of the world to know that fear often paralyzed people. The fact that they moved without hesitation only made her feel more like an outsider. And yet, despite the unfamiliarity of it all, she ran with them.

The scream was coming from the animal pen—the pen where Jaune and the kids were working.

It wasn't far. But just knowing that the peace she didn't deserve was breaking, that something was about to snatch away the first person she'd started to care about since her childhood—it sent a shiver of dread through her.

Every step felt too slow, every motion too clumsy. She didn't remember activating her Aura, but she must have, as she found herself gaining a lead on the others. Her legs surged with strength, propelling her forward.

An adult Boarbatusk was tearing through the horse pen, its tusks swinging as it charged wildly. It seemed intent on running something—or *someone*—down. Nearby, a smaller one, likely its offspring, was caught in the barbed wire, thrashing against the restraint, leaving a gaping hole in the fence.

Infant trapped, adult on the loose. Prioritize the larger threat. Engage while others handle the smaller one.

“You take care of the one in the fence!” she shouted over her shoulder to the men. *Always diminish enemy numbers when given the chance*, she reminded herself. And it wasn't like they could do much against the larger Grimm anyway. “Get me a weapon! Or find the kids and get them to safety!”

Then, she heard it—a sickening thud as flesh and bone collided with stone. Her heart pounded. Whatever the Boarbatusk was hunting, it had reached its target.

The girl screamed again, but it was a scream of terror, not pain. Relief and dread clashed in her chest, mixing into a sickening churn. She knew exactly what— *who* —the Grimm had hit.

Jaune lay on the ground, the smaller form of Emily beside him, desperately shaking his shoulder. His eyes fluttered, and she was practically sobbing his name, but it was clear that he wasn't fully conscious.

The Boarbatusk had stopped spinning in its erratic fury and was now stalking towards them, its tusks glinting bone white under the fading sunlight.

Cinder sprinted, her focus solely on the Grimm. Fighting Grimm unarmed is stupidity at best and suicidal at worst, her instincts told her. But it doesn't matter. This was no time for hesitation.

Boarbatusks were heavily armored beasts, their thick bone plates shielding them from most weapons. The only way to harm them was to aim for their slightly softer underbelly — though even that was tougher than treated leather—or to use a bludgeoning weapon strong enough to crack their plates. Cinder, however, wasn't aiming for either.

Normally, going for a Grimm's eyes was a futile effort. They were protected by heavy plating; a missed strike would be repelled by its thick plate and leave you close to its snapping jaws and jagged fangs. And with a Grimm like this one—with four eyes and multiple tusks— that risk only multiplied for an even less benefit. All it would do was anger the beast, but that was exactly what she wanted. She needed its undivided rage and attention.

She had no weapons at hand, and sprinting to grab one of the broken stakes would take too much time. So she flattened her hand and drove it straight into the beast's lower eye. The wet, sickening *pop* echoed in her ears, and she felt the eye burst beneath her fingers. And before she could withdraw her hand, Cinder ignited her Semblance—a spike of searing flame shot through the now burning socket.

The Boarbatusk screeched, thrashing violently as it tried to skewer her on its tusks. She barely leapt back in time, feeling the rush of air as the tusk missed her by inches. But she knew she had its attention now, its complete and undivided attention.

She darted away, making sure it followed, and headed for the barn. *There's a rifle in a locked box there, a scythe, and a pitchfork.* She had mapped out the farm thoroughly—she made it a point to know where anything that could be used as a weapon was. One can never be too prepared after all. The rifle probably had standard bullets, which wouldn't do much against an adult Grimm but could be useful against the smaller one. The scythe? She wasn't skilled enough with it. *Pitchfork to the gut it is.*

Jaune's scream broke her focus. She dodged another charge and turned to him, catching her breath.

“Newt's in the barn!” he shouted, his voice hoarse and pained but clear.

Damn it. She cursed internally. *Stake it is, then.* She'd have to use blunt force. She didn't notice the way her mind shifted, instinctively preferring to keep risking her own life rather than risk putting Jaune's opinion of her—or the Florentias—in jeopardy.

She sidestepped another charge and scanned the area. The men were still fighting the smaller boar, beating it with wooden poles while one of them rushed inside the house. Lucia was already sprinting out, holding Jaune's sword in one hand and what looked like a sawed-off shotgun in the other.

I need to buy time—maybe a minute or two.

The Boarbatusk charged again, and she let it rush past, grabbing one of its tusks. Using its own momentum, she twisted, throwing the beast off-balance and sending it skidding into the dirt. As soon as it crashed, she delivered an Aura-empowered kick to its side, aiming for its stomach. She gritted her teeth. *Damn it, I used too much Aura reinforcing the fences.*

The Grimm struggled to rise, turning its head to face her with three burning eyes. The fourth was a ruined, oozing mess, thanks to her earlier attack. It pawed the ground, hatred emanating from it. She needed to inflict more damage—maybe gouge out another eye—but getting that close again was risky. She could probably take three or four hits before her Aura was depleted, but without it, she'd be as vulnerable as anyone else—a death sentence against a Grimm like this.

The sudden stab took them both by surprise. The Boarbatusk, focused entirely on her, didn't see it coming. And she wasn't prepared for the blonde idiot to rush at an adult Grimm with nothing but an old heirloom sword.

Jaune Arc wasn't an idiot—well, not entirely. She knew he had a sharp mind, but it was hard to see that when he charged a fully grown Grimm *without Aura*. To his credit, he managed to wedge Crocea Mors between the plates on the beast's side. But then, he lost his grip as the creature thrashed. Again, to his credit, he jumped back quickly, avoiding the deadly tusks. And again, to his discredit, one tusk still grazed his arm, leaving a gash that started to bleed immediately. Cinder felt a mixture of pride and exasperation. *If he dies here, I'm killing him.*

But an opening was an opening. The Grimm's attention was on Jaune now, twisting to gore him. Its side was exposed, the same side she had already damaged. She didn't hesitate, darting in and striking at the remaining eye furthest from its mouth. The Grimm roared, turning its head as she'd anticipated.

She vaulted over its head, a quick somersault that landed her on its opposite side. With a swift Aura empowered kick to its hilt, she drove Crocea Mors deeper into its body. The blade slid further inside, the metal screeching against bone, until the tip pierced through the underside of the beast.

Even impaled and missing half its eyes, the Grimm continued to move, though its pace was sluggish and labored—a creature clinging to life with nothing but hatred as its fuel. It still aimed to gore her, its tusks dragging through the dirt as it tried to charge.

Cinder grabbed one of its tusks and yanked it sideways, using her strength and its momentum to pull the beast off balance. It crashed to the ground, slamming into the hilt of the sword, and a wet, gurgling noise emanated from its mouth.

Gunshots rang out behind her, but she didn't turn. Focusing on anything other than the main threat was an easy way to get killed. But when she glanced up, she saw that Lucia and Mike had dispatched the smaller Boarbatusk, and the other men were rushing to the barn to check on Newt.

The tusk she held started to shift in her grip as the Grimm's body began to dissolve, its black essence crumbling into dust and black ichor. She let the drying bone slip from her fingers and turned her attention to Jaune, who sat a few paces away, clutching his bleeding arm.

“Why didn't you run?” she demanded, her voice hard.

He was pale, his arm slick with blood. He looked up, tired and embarrassed, but there was no regret in his eyes. “Emily tripped when we were running... I had no other choice.” *You did*, she thought. *You could've left her.*

The Florentias were approaching now. Maggie was already moving to tend to Jaune's wound, but Cinder threw out an arm, stopping them all in their tracks.

“Now you've seen twice what weakness and being unprepared will cost you.” She fixed her gaze on Jaune, her voice sharp. “Do you still want to be a Huntsman?”

“Yes.” His voice was solid, unwavering—even after nearly dying again.

“What will you do if your Aura is too weak? What if you don’t have enough to protect even yourself?” she pressed, her voice rising. “What then?”

“I’ll train harder to make every drop of Aura count,” he said, his voice full of conviction. “And even if I don’t have Aura, I’ll still find a way to help people. I won’t be useless ever again.” His eyes burned with determination, and his words carried the strength of steel behind them.

“Then your choice is made.” She placed her hand on his head, feeling the steady beat of his pulse. Her eyes closed as she summoned her Aura, letting its heat flow through her hand. “In embracing your fire, you seize true power.” Her Aura flared, extending around her like a halo, the air shimmering with heat. “Through the power of our desire, we rise, even when the world tries to break us.”

Jaune’s eyes widened as he felt the warmth surge through his body, igniting from within like a spark turning into a blaze. The sensation was foreign, overwhelming, and unstoppable.

“Endless in ambition and unyielding in will, I ignite your soul, and by my hand, I bind it, and bestow upon you your flame.” She could see his posture change, his face reflecting the awe and intensity of feeling Aura for the first time. Jaune Arc had Aura after all.

“You are the spark, and I am the inferno.” With the final verse, his Aura exploded outward, a radiant golden glow enveloping his body. She withdrew her hand, now offering it palm up to help him stand.

“Rise, Jaune Arc. And carve your place as a Huntsman.”

Chapter End Notes

I really love the idea that the Aura unlock vow is something specific to each person. I made Cinders based on how I see her for this story and some versions I've read in other fics here.

I also had never noticed how much Pyrrhas was a prelude to her death.

Hope you all like it! And I know I should've set up the boarbatusks and the fence problem earlier, but live and learn I guess.

Shouldn't it be easier?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay, had to re-write this one because it would screw with the pacing of the next one. And then I had to properly trace the next one because it will be literally the entire base for the Beacon Arc (at least the base for Cinder and Jaunes arcs going forward and the decision of the main Salem minion for it)

Jaune could admit it: Cinder's methods were... *creative* , to say the least.

Her training was harsh, sometimes bordering on brutal, but mostly fair. Sure, he got kicked around—a lot—but he couldn't deny that he was learning. Every bruised rib, every aching muscle taught him something new.

But now that he had Aura? He expected things to be *easier* . After all, Aura was supposed to give him an edge: He could tank hits better! Heal faster! And get tired slower.

It only made sense that Cinder would step up the intensity of their sessions. But getting the Florentia kids involved? That was something he couldn't have predicted in a *million years* .

The idea itself was deceptively simple, and Cinder had laid it out in her usual calm, matter-of-fact tone, as if she weren't suggesting something borderline absurd.

"The easiest way to take out a Huntsman," she explained, her eyes serious and unblinking, "is when they're out of Aura—or when they have it turned off."

Jaune had nodded along, already anticipating what she was about to say.

"And the easiest way to eliminate that weakness is to *always* have your Aura up. If you had a small reserve of Aura, we'd start with control and efficiency first. But since you have a... *decent* amount," she said, with a small smirk, "we'll begin with shielding. Then, we'll move on to control. Simply put?" She leaned in slightly, as if imparting a secret. "First, you'll grow accustomed to having your Aura active all the time—ready to defend you. Then we'll make sure you're not wasting too much of it while doing so."

Jaune couldn't argue with her logic. It made sense, and he appreciated that she wasn't treating him like a total novice anymore.

Still, he had questions. "But wouldn't having it always on become a crutch? Wouldn't I grow too dependent on the extra speed and strength?"

For the first time that day, she smiled—an actual, genuine smile—and then, of course, followed it with a snide remark. But Jaune was focusing on the positives today.

“If you always have it on,” she replied with a sharp edge of amusement in her voice, “the *only* way you’ll ever be without it is if someone *breaks* yours. And trust me, when that happens, you’ll have more pressing concerns than missing a little extra strength.”

Again, it made sense.

But—again!— *why* did she have to get the kids involved in this?

At breakfast that morning, Cinder had asked a seemingly innocent question: “Are the kids too busy today?”

She must have known they weren’t. After yesterday’s events, when Grimm had breached the farm, both Lucia and Jorge had decided the children needed a day off to relax and recover. Both Newt and Emily were still visibly shaken by the attack. So when Cinder suggested she had a “mission” for them, the adults around the table exchanged looks—skeptical at best, indignant at worst.

The Florentias trusted her, yes, but the idea of putting the kids to work after what they had just gone through? That was pushing it.

“What do you mean by *mission* ?” Jorge asked cautiously, his brow furrowed.

Cinder smiled easily, her voice calm and persuasive. “Do you think you can help me train Jaune?”

Newt’s eyes widened in awe, his fork clattering to the table. “ *Me?* Train a Huntsman?!” His voice was practically shaking with excitement.

Even Emily, who was usually more reserved, leaned in slightly, her interest piqued.

“I remember you have a sling, right?” Cinder asked Newt, her gaze steady. He nodded eagerly, practically bouncing in his seat. “And if I recall correctly, I’ve seen you go three for three hitting those mounted bottles.”

Emily gave a small, proud nod, confirming her brother’s skill.

“Well then,” Cinder continued, her tone almost playful now, “today, you’ll be shooting Jaune!”

Silence.

Every set of eyes at the table widened in shock, jaws dropping in unison.

“You’ll help make sure he doesn’t slack off by keeping him on his toes,” she added casually. “He needs to keep his Aura up all day, and I want you two to make sure he does while I go hunting.”

The table erupted.

Jaune froze mid-bite, his mind racing. *Wait—what?!*

Maggie's eyes narrowed with a mix of concern and disbelief. "You're *what*? You can't go hunting, not in your condition!" The older woman's tone was stern, her words slicing through the noise.

Lucia and Jorge exchanged furious glances. "We don't *shoot* our guests, Cinder!" Lucia snapped, her voice rising. "And after yesterday? You think it's appropriate to have the children—"

Newt and Emily, on the other hand, were practically vibrating with excitement. The chance to help train a Huntsman was the coolest thing they'd ever heard.

Mike and Peter? They just burst into laughter, slapping the table like it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen.

Joshua, always calm and practical, simply nodded. "Just make sure they don't use the metal ball bearings. Stick to wood and stone." He said to the children.

Cinder raised an eyebrow, the barest hint of amusement on her face. She lifted her hand, a quiet yet commanding gesture that somehow brought the chaos to a halt. "One at a time, please." Her tone was calm, but there was an unmistakable authority in her voice.

She turned to Lucia first. "Lucia?"

The matron didn't hesitate. "You can't just *ask* children to shoot him!" She gestured sharply toward Jaune. "What if they start shooting each other? Or worse, what if they hit another kid? They could hurt themselves!"

Cinder's gaze shifted to the children, her expression growing serious. "Newt. Emily." Her voice softened slightly but carried a weight that made both children sit up straighter. "What I'm asking you to do is special. You must *never* do this to anyone else. Jaune knows my methods and has Aura to protect him. But if you shoot each other—or anyone else—they could be seriously hurt."

She reached up and pulled back the hair covering the burned side of her face, revealing the scars beneath. "You could blind someone. Or worse." Her voice was steady but heavy with meaning. "Trust me—it's not something you want to cause or force someone to live with."

Both children started, their wide eyes filled with both curiosity and fear. They nodded vigorously.

"Only aim for his body," Cinder added, letting her hair fall back into place. "Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they said in unison, their voices small but resolute.

Cinder turned back to Lucia, offering a small, satisfied smile. "Does that settle things?"

Lucia squinted, clearly still uncomfortable but recognizing the seriousness in the kids' responses.

“Children,” she added, her voice sharp again. “If you hit anything or anyone else without my or your mothers permission, *I* will take your slings away. And since I’m in need of weapons, you can be sure you won’t get them back.”

The kids nodded again, a bit more solemn this time.

Lucia, though not entirely happy, sat down. Not completely happy that the children listened so promptly to someone else, but proud they did.

“Maggie?” Cinder turned toward the older woman with a raised eyebrow, knowing exactly what was coming.

The elderly healer cleared her throat, fixing Cinder with a stern, no-nonsense glare. “You ain’t going anywhere until I review your wounds. You did well against a lone Grimm, but you’re not at 100% yet. And I’ll be damned if I lose a patient just because she thinks she can take on a Beowolf pack all by herself!”

“That doesn’t sound like a vet, dear,” Cinder replied smoothly, her voice calm but with just enough smugness to make Jaune wince. *Gods, she can be too smug for her own good.* He half-expected Maggie to retaliate with her cane to the shin.

Before the old woman could deliver her signature verbal—or physical—rebuke, Cinder raised a hand in a placating gesture. “I have no intention of actually fighting. I’ll be doing reconnaissance, nothing more. I’ll only engage if I find stragglers or packless Grimm. If I run into anything bigger than a lone Beowolf, I’ll head back and help you report it to the Huntsmen in the nearby village.”

Maggie’s lips pressed into a thin line, unconvinced. “You *better* .” She crossed her arms. “Better yet, let’s just call the Huntsmen now! They can start clearing out the area earlier.”

“And how fast can they mobilize?” Cinder shot back, her voice patient but firm. “How long until they finish with the areas around the village and have time to come out here?”

Maggie didn’t answer immediately, clearly weighing the logistics.

“And,” Cinder continued, her tone soft but insistent, “what difference does it make if I scout the forest, wounded or not? It’s what I *do* .” Her eyes gleamed with quiet confidence. “I’m a Huntress. If I tell them this farm needs priority—and give them the right reason—they’ll come. They won’t have a choice.”

There it is again, Jaune thought, watching her. *That smile.* Confident, smug, and filled with a kind of energy that made you believe she could bend the world to her will. *One of these days, Maggie is going to whack her across the shins with that cane.*

Maggie sighed, finally sitting down, though not without a final warning. “Only scouting, then! And if you get hurt out there, don’t come crying to me for more stitches.”

Cinder chuckled softly, but Jaune knew Maggie would be the first to run into the forest if something happened.

Cinder turned to him next. “Jaune?”

He sat up straighter, already knowing she had a plan but feeling the need to voice his concerns. “You’ve beaten me enough in training to know what you’re doing. But... what about weapons? Or support?”

“I can’t afford to wait for someone to catch up if things go south,” she replied simply. “And any decent weapon can be made effective with Aura reinforcement.”

“And what weapon are you planning to take?” Jaune pressed.

“The shotgun and the scythe,” Cinder answered, glancing toward Joshua. “If you don’t mind, of course.”

The older man nodded without hesitation. “Take what you need.”

Jaune hesitated, then spoke quietly. “What about *Crocea Mors*?”

Cinder blinked, momentarily caught off guard. “That’s your weapon. A legacy blade. You can’t just lend it out—not after everything you’ve told me about it.”

Jaune smiled softly. “It’s my blade, and I trust you with her any day.” His voice was steady, though his thoughts briefly flickered to his father. *Dad would cuff me for lending it out. But... he’d cuff me even harder if I let a woman go unarmed into a Grimm-infested forest.* He chuckled internally. *Come to think of it, I’d probably get cuffed anyways for running off with it in the first place.*

He met her gaze. “It’s made to channel Aura, it’s in better condition than any blade we have here, and I know you’ve trained with swords before. What do you think?”

Cinder stared at him for a moment, surprise flickering across her face. She didn’t seem accustomed to this kind of trust. “If you’re willing to lend it, then yes. It would be my preference.” Her voice softened slightly. “I swear I’ll bring it back in the same, if not better, condition.”

She always gets like this, Jaune thought, watching the subtle shift in her demeanor. Serious, almost formal, whenever he showed her genuine kindness. *She probably hasn’t had many people willing to help her without expecting something in return.* Solo Huntsmen often walked lonely roads, and Cinder, more than most, seemed to know that isolation well.

And that was how he found himself outside, cutting and hauling wood while Newt and Emily took turns pelting him with pebbles and small stones from their slings.

At least they were considerate enough not to shoot again if they didn’t see his Aura flash. *Cinder wouldn’t like that,* he thought, imagining her calling it “going too easy” on him. But Newt and Emily weren’t trying to hurt him—they just wanted to help. He doubted they would’ve agreed to this if they thought they’d actually hurt him.

It was almost dark now, and despite his growing fatigue, Jaune couldn’t shake the unease gnawing at the back of his mind. He knew Cinder was more than capable of handling herself,

especially with proper weapons and her Aura. But something about the fading daylight, the whispering shadows, kept him from fully relaxing.

How does she keep her Aura up all the time? He clenched his fists, focusing on the glowing shield that flickered around him. *I'm concentrating as hard as I can, and I still can't maintain it across my whole body while moving.*

The day had been straightforward. Joshua and Jorge had kept him busy with physical labor: chopping wood, hauling supplies from the barns, hammering stakes into the fence posts—anything that required brute strength. The work wasn't just about training his body; it kept him and the kids distracted from yesterday's Grimm attack.

To make things more engaging for Newt and Emily, Jaune had turned the shooting into a game. "Whoever hits me the most without getting seen gets my dessert tonight," he had announced with a grin.

They had loved the idea, and it had kept him on his toes, forcing him to maintain his Aura over more than just a single spot.

Newt is winning by two. Jaune smiled. *Never thought he'd be that good at hiding.* He made a mental note. *I should make strawberries with cream and sugar for dessert. That way, Emily still gets her favorite, even if she loses.*

Just as the last light of day faded, Cinder returned.

She walked up to him, holding *Crocea Mors* with care, showing it off like a prize. "See? Still in perfect condition." When she tried to hand it back, Jaune shook his head and pushed it gently back into her arms.

"As long as you're going out there, it's yours." His voice was calm and confident, though a part of him ached to join her. He wanted to be out there, to help, to protect. But he knew—Aura or not—he'd only slow her down.

Cinder nodded, her expression unreadable, and they walked back toward the house together. The kids raced ahead, eager to clean up before dinner.

"So... is everything fine?" Jaune asked after a moment.

Cinder nodded. "A few strays. The biggest threat I found was a small flock of Nevermores flying along the west side. Nothing we can't handle." She paused, considering. "We probably won't need the village Huntsmen. But I'll speak with Maggie about letting me take care of the weaker ones."

Jaune blinked in surprise. He had expected her to clear out every Grimm she encountered. "You didn't just... exterminate them?"

Cinder grinned. "Not yet. I took care of a few lonely creeps, but left Beowolfs and the flock alone as I promised"

As they reached the house, Cinder glanced at him. "What's for dinner?"

“Lucia’s making some kind of pasta with sausages,” Jaune replied. “And I’m making Em’s favorite dessert.”

“Emily’s favorite?”

“Strawberries with cream. I added a bit of crystal sugar for some crunch too.”

Cinder’s eyes lit up slightly. “The girl has taste. I’ll give her that.”

“You like berries and cream?”

“I’m partial to strawberries,” Cinder admitted with a rare softness. “I adore their sweet and sour balance. They pair well with almost everything.”

They cleaned up and sat at the dinner table, the scent of fresh pasta and herbs filling the cozy farmhouse. The Florentias were already seated, and Lucia was distributing spoonfuls of pasta onto the plates with practiced efficiency.

“Took ya guys long enough!” she said jovially. “Come! Sit, sit. Maggie told me that Aura needs proper fuel to regenerate right.”

“Ah said broken Aura consumes lots of calories. Keeping it up does too,” Maggie corrected, smiling sardonically. “That’s why ya rarely see fat Huntsmen.” She chuckled lightly, her sharp humor earning a few chuckles around the table.

Dinner went on as usual, with each member at the table talking about their day. The warm hum of conversation filled the room, blending seamlessly with the clinking of cutlery against plates. The only difference was Cinders’ little retelling of her scout mission. Which didn’t actually cause as much a stir as Jaune had expected. *Maybe because she actually didn’t go hunting like we all thought she would. I bet no one expected her to not hunt as many Grimm as possible while out.*

“And children? Did you make sure that Jaune didn’t turn his Aura off?” Cinder asked, her voice calm yet inquisitive, her eyes glinting with curiosity.

Newt seemed eager to please the older Huntress but didn’t want to tattle on Jaune for the few times his Aura had failed. His hands fidgeted with his fork, betraying his thoughts. Emily was much the same, stealing glances at Jaune as if waiting for him to explain first.

“They did a great job, Cinder,” Jaune said quickly, sparing them both. “But I wasn’t able to keep it up the whole day. For some reason, if I got too absorbed or lost concentration, it would just turn off.” He glanced at Newt with a grin. “This guy caught me quite a few times with my pants down, right, buddy?”

“Three times!” Newt declared proudly, his eyes lighting up with excitement. “And Ems got him twice! I won!”

“Won? Won what, son?” Jorge asked, raising an eyebrow as he leaned back in his chair. He wasn’t all on board with the shooting Jaune idea, but acquiesced when she had explained why it was so important.

It was Emily's turn now. She straightened, her voice eager. "Oh! Jaune made it a game for us! We had to hide and get him before he spotted us or could point us out. Double points if we got him without Aura." She deflated a little, her enthusiasm fading. "I lost... Newt kept climbing on trees, and Mom says I can't do that in a dress..."

"I suggest you wear pants tomorrow then," Cinder said with a small smile, her tone teasing but thoughtful. "Also, boots and green clothes. You need to prepare if you want to win."

"No fair! You can't help her!" Newt bemoaned, his face scrunching up in mock outrage.

"Nothing's stopping you from copying your sister tomorrow, Newt," she added simply, her smirk widening just a little.

"And now for your prize," Jaune said theatrically as he got up and strode to the kitchen with a playful flourish.

Moments later, he returned, balancing various cups filled with strawberries and covered in cream. He placed one in front of each person before sliding his to Newt.

"Now for the secret touch." He held up a small jar of crystal sugar and sprinkled a delicate layer over the cream of every cup, making the surface glisten in the soft light. "Dig in!"

He didn't completely go without dessert, though. He took a few strawberries for himself, knowing he had promised his dessert to Newt, but *technically* not that he wouldn't eat some of it.

Cinder had always eaten plenty, especially when Jaune cooked. He'd noticed she seemed to enjoy the food more when he was the one behind the stove for some reason. But tonight? Her reaction was different. Nothing compared to the delight on her face now. She savored each bite of the simple dessert, clearly trying not to make a sound but utterly failing to hide how much she *adored* it.

Okay... she really likes strawberries. Jaune made a mental note. I need to look up some extra recipes. We still have a bit left—maybe a strawberry meringue cake? We've got cream, sugar, and strawberries... but I don't have anything for the base vanilla meringue. He frowned slightly, his mind racing. I could just make strawberry meringues, but those are so boring compared to the cake...

"What are you thinking about, boy?" Joshua's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Huh?" Jaune blinked, realizing he'd been absent-mindedly gnawing on his spoon.

"You've been gnawing at that spoon for like three minutes," Maggie sassed. "And if you stared any harder at that strawberry, it might just explode."

Jaune chuckled, setting the spoon down. "Do you think we can make meringues, Lucia?"

"No clue, hon. What in the Light's name is a meringue?" Lucia asked, looking genuinely curious.

Before he could explain, Cinder interrupted. Her voice shifted slightly, her eyes brightening. “Imagine this: a delicate, airy shell that’s just barely crisp on the outside but soft—almost melt-in-your-mouth—on the inside. That’s the meringue.”

She leaned forward slightly, her excitement palpable. “It’s so light it practically dissolves the moment it touches your tongue. Sweet, but not overpowering. And then,” she continued, practically glowing with enthusiasm, “there are strawberries. Not just any strawberries, but the juiciest, ripest ones you’ve ever tasted. They’re sliced thin, so the juice just mingles with the meringue perfectly.”

She held up her fingers, pressing them together in emphasis. “When properly made, it’s like biting into a fluffy cloud bursting with strawberries. And if you’re lucky, there’s a drizzle of strawberry sauce—fresh and a little tart—that ties it all together like a dream. It’s a dessert you don’t eat—you *experience* it.”

Jaune couldn’t help but smile. *No choice now—I’m making a meringue cake...*

“I was thinking of a strawberry meringue cake, Cinder,” Jaune admitted. “But if you prefer, I can just make the meringue.”

“Cake?” She raised an eyebrow skeptically. “I don’t believe the texture of a cake would go well with it, Jaune.”

“Ya can’t even properly boil an egg, girly,” Maggie interjected, smirking. “If the kid says cake, I trust him. He’s added more recipes to the family book during his stay here than me and any of my siblings.”

“And me,” Lucia grumbled, crossing her arms.

Jaune grinned. “How about this? You have to report about the Grimm at Ravenwing anyway, right? I can go with you and grab a few extra things. Then I’ll make the best dessert the Arcs have ever made for you all.” His chest swelled with pride. *Mom might still be a better cook, but I’m the second best in all Doremi.*

“I’m game as long as you leave the recipe for me,” Lucia said with a mischievous smile.

“Planning on stealing an Arc recipe, Lu?” Jaune teased back.

“You’re going to need to pay for your stay somehow, boy. I think a little recipe trade is a fair price.” She matched his playful tone.

“Jorge! This is extortion! She’s demanding my most important recipe! It’s priceless, I tell you!”

Jorge chuckled, clicking his fingers. “The missus gets what the missus wants, boy. The room’s price just went from free to priceless in an instant.”

“And *that*, ” Mike added with a grin, “is how you stay married.”

“You’re single, Uncle,” Emily said deadpan.

The table erupted in laughter.

“Et tu, Ems?” Mike clutched his chest in mock betrayal. “You’re too young to have such a sharp tongue!”

The dinner carried on in a jovial atmosphere, the group laughing and bantering as they planned their trip to the nearby village. Between bites of food, they jotted down a list of supplies: basic necessities, replacement equipment, and a few tools Jorge insisted were non-negotiable. After some deliberation, it was decided that Jaune and Cinder would accompany Jorge and Lucia on the journey to Ravenwing to fetch what they needed.

But one seemingly innocent comment from Cinder would haunt Jaune long into the night, turning what should have been a simple village visit into a source of dread.

“Is there a good CTT connection in Ravenwing?” Cinder asked, her tone casual as she leaned back in her chair. “Or at least a way to send messages to Vale or Mistral?”

Lucia, still working through her second plate of pasta, waved her spoon in the air. “Yup. They’ve got a receiver-sender for the scroll network. Not a big fancy tower like in the capitals, but it does the trick. You can make calls pretty much anywhere—if you can pay for it.”

“Expensive?” Cinder pressed, raising an eyebrow.

“If it’s not Vale? Oh yeah, big time.” Lucia grimaced as though the memory of the fees still stung. “But there’s always the delay message system. It’s free. Takes longer to reach wherever it’s going, though.”

Before anyone could move on, Mike chimed in, his voice casual but enough to hit Jaune like a gut punch. “Thinking about sending a hello to your family or team?” he asked Cinder. Then, with a glance Jaune’s way, added, “If they aren’t too far, I could spot you a few lien.”

Cinder smiled faintly. “Most kind, Mike, but I don’t think it’ll be necessary. If I can get a decent connection there, I’ll just debit it to my personal account. Otherwise, I’ll use the free option.”

Mike shrugged, then turned his attention fully to Jaune. “Offer’s on the table for you too, Jaune! Yer probably need to let your folks know you’re still kicking, right?”

The room quieted, and all eyes turned to Jaune. He forced a smile, one he prayed looked more natural than it felt. “...Yeah, that’s a great idea, Mike. Thanks.”

He hoped the words sounded as nonchalant as he intended, masking the churn of unease in his stomach. The thought of calling home made his chest tighten. He hadn’t contacted them—not once—since running away to Beacon. More than a month and a half had passed since he should have arrived at school. What had they thought? That he was missing? Hurt? Dead?

Or maybe they just think I’m a coward, Jaune thought bitterly, picking at the edge of his plate. And they wouldn’t be wrong.

It wasn't as though he hadn't had the opportunity. All that time with the Florentias, not once had it occurred to him to send a letter or visit a connected village to make a proper call. What excuse could he offer now that wouldn't sound hollow?

"So, time for bed, everybody!" Jorge's cheerful voice broke through Jaune's spiraling thoughts. "We're heading out early tomorrow. Don't want to be caught tracking back at night. Plus, we've got chores to finish after Ravenwing!"

Jaune was grateful for the distraction. He jumped to his feet, eager to focus on something—anything—other than his own turmoil. Together, they dismantled the table, cleaned the dishes, and prepared for the next day. Yet even after bathing and changing into fresh clothes, Jaune mind wouldn't leave him alone. Lying on his bed, staring at the dim ceiling, his thoughts churned with morbid anticipation.

How angry are they going to be? Would they even want to hear from me after what I did? Maybe I shouldn't call them. Maybe it's better if I just... don't.

The hours dragged on, the night offering no comfort, only the relentless hum of anxiety. His heart pounded as though each beat was counting down to an inevitable confrontation. He hadn't even decided what to say—if he could muster the courage to say anything at all. *What kind of huntsman hides from his own family?*

As the first rays of sunlight filtered through the windows, Jaune sat up, groggy but resolute. He hadn't slept much—barely at all—but in the stillness of the early morning, he'd reached a decision.

It wasn't one he felt confident about. It wasn't one he was even sure was good. But he thought of Cinder's vow, her words ringing in his ears. *To rise as a proper huntsman, that power came from unyielding will.*

If he couldn't face his family now, after all he'd been through, how could he ever face himself?

He would make the call. Even if it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Path to Ravenwing

Chapter Summary

Sorry for the delay, but this chapter was at 12k and I was still adding stuff to it.... So i decided to break it up into 2~3 chapters. Just so it doesn't get too tedious or big to read at a time.

Since the next one is basically done it shouldn't take long, again sorry for the delay and lets get onto it!

There was something... wrong. Not with her, of course. Cinder Fall didn't do wrong—not in the way most people thought. She had made her choice already; there was no room for doubt. And yet, a strange discomfort lingered at the edges of her thoughts, like an itch she couldn't quite reach.

She had no other choice, really. She was already tempting fate by staying radio silent for so long. Salem was many things, but forgiving was never one of them. And seeing as she just proved herself useless and failed the one goal set for her before the Fall plan — the retrieving of the Spring Maiden's power being a complete botch job . Now, only the capture of Beacon's relic, the destruction of the huntsmen academy and the assassination of Ozpin remained. And if she didn't present herself before Salem's inner circle soon, Tyrian would be sent to find her.

Tyrian wasn't just Salem's enforcer; he was a rabid animal on a very loose leash. An almost supernatural tracker, a sadistic infiltrator, and a butcher in the truest sense of the word. If he caught her scent, he'd inevitably find his way here, and if that happened? She didn't dare imagine what the mad Faunus would do to Jaune or the Florentia family.

She would admit – only to herself of course –to a small weakness for Jaune and the Florentia family.

She hated to acknowledge it, but she had developed a small set of *feelings* for them. They were... warm. Kind in ways she hadn't experienced in years. Even if she left now, Tyrian would sniff out her trail, and when he found them, he would *play* with his prey. She'd seen his handiwork enough to know exactly what that would mean. And she couldn't let that happen.

So, the only choice was to make today's call.

Cinder chuckled softly to herself as she watched the early morning sunlight filter through the kitchen window. Her reflection in the glass offered a smirk to match her own. *Only choice, huh? Since when do I care about what I leave behind?*

Still, she knew the feeling that was bothering her wasn't tied to the decision. She could face the music when necessary—no one survived a deal with Salem otherwise. That much had been painfully ingrained into her.

It wasn't Jorge and Lucia, either. Both were as jovial as ever, their small moments of affection filling the house with the kind of warmth that she had grown strangely accustomed to. The way Jorge kissed Lucia's cheek before setting the table, the way Lucia ruffled Newt's hair while balancing a plate of food—it was sickeningly sweet in a way that should have annoyed her. But it didn't.

No, it was Jaune.

The blonde knight had always worn his emotions on his sleeves, and it was clear that something was weighing on him. He was dreading the visit—probably had been since the moment she mentioned it. He'd clearly lost sleep over it, his usual clumsy charm dulled by fatigue. Oh, he tried to mask it, chatting lightly with the others and keeping his voice steady, but it was painfully obvious to her.

Pretty much all the adults noticed. They were polite enough not to comment during breakfast, but the silence was telling. Maggie, of course, had pulled her aside afterward, her sharp eyes narrowing as she issued her decree.

“You keep an eye on that boy, girl,” she'd said, her tone leaving no room for argument. “If something's wrong, you deal with it—or I'll deal with it myself, cane and all.”

Cinder arched a brow at the old woman's audacity but didn't argue. There was no winning against Maggie once her mind was set.

The kitchen table was alive with the sounds of breakfast, a symphony of clinking utensils, quiet laughter, and the occasional clatter of plates. Lucia had outdone herself again, piling the table high with scrambled eggs, freshly toasted bread, and thin slices of salted ham.

“Ma, can I have some more eggs?” Newt asked, holding out his plate.

“You better eat what's already on your plate first,” Lucia replied, though her tone was more amused than stern. She handed him another scoop anyway, ruffling his hair as she did. “Growing like a weed, this one.”

“Not too much,” Maggie cut in, pointing her fork. “You'll be dozing off halfway through chores if you stuff yourself.”

Jaune sat at the corner of the table, his fork idly pushing scrambled eggs around his plate. He smiled faintly at the banter, but his mind was elsewhere. His eyes carried faint shadows, and his usual energy seemed to have been sapped overnight.

“Something wrong with the eggs, kid?” Jorge asked, his voice carrying a note of concern.

“Huh? Oh, no! They're great,” Jaune replied, sitting up straighter. He forced a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. “Just a little tired, I guess. Didn't sleep much.”

Cinder observed him from across the table, her eyes narrowing slightly. *He's a terrible liar.*

"Maybe I pushed him too hard yesterday," she offered casually, breaking her own piece of toast in half. "Keeping your Aura up all day for the first time isn't easy."

It was an excuse, and everyone on the table knew it. But all let it pass since the blond clearly didn't want to talk about whatever was troubling him.

Lucia glanced between the two of them but didn't press further. Instead, she reached for the butter and passed it to Emily, who was intently buttering her toast with more precision than necessary.

Maggie said nothing, but the way her eyes lingered on Jaune made it clear she'd noticed, too.

After breakfast, Cinder made her way to the door, her hand brushing the frame as she paused. Maggie's voice rang out behind her.

"Remember what I said, girl."

Cinder turned her head slightly, catching the old woman's sharp gaze.

"I'll keep an eye on him," she replied smoothly, her lips curling into a faint smile. "No need to raise your cane just yet."

"Good." Maggie's tone was firm, but there was a flicker of approval in her expression.

Jorge brought a beaten up blue pickup around to the front of the house.

"Its two hours to the village by car. We can fit three in the front if you guys don't mind squeezing in."

"I think me and Jaune will go on the back, if you don't mind."

"MInd? I actually prefer not having to go all boxed in! But are you sure? The ride is kinda bumpy and the back isn't exactly comfortable." He said cheaply.

"I see no problem. It also gives me time to properly train Jaunes focus."

"Not gonna give the boy some down time?" Lucia asked while entering the passenger side of the car.

"Any extra time not expended on training is lost time. Well at least when there isn't anything better to do."

They each went to their place. Jorge at the drivers and by his side Lucia on the passenger seat. Cinder sat at the back just behind Jorge, her one remaining hand over the pickups side and close enough to the metal protection on the rearview window in case she need something to grab and stabilize herself. Jaune sat in front of her, back to the closed door of the trunk.

“Lets see if we can get your control up shall we?” She didn’t actually expect any massive improvement in two hours of training on a bumpy ride without even the barest of equipment. But teaching the basics so he could train in the future made sense. Also, the training for control required meditation, meditation required peace of mind, peace which he didn’t have right now, so he would fail and that gave her an opening to question what was wrong and extract the information from him. It was a lovely feeling when a stone could be used to bludgeon two targets at the same time.

She waited for the pickup to be on the way before starting.

“Since we can’t really train to maintain your aura we will focus a bit on how much you let out, okay?”

He nodded. She suspected that no matter what training, be it real or completely fake he would just go along with it.

“First I need to see how much Aura you are expending. Force her to be visible.”

He did. A soft and warm golden glow pulsed around his body.

“Just by looking I can see it dissipating.” She tsked. “It is to be expected when you force it out, but the quantity is alarming to say the list.”

She had told the boy that his Aura reserve was *decent*. That was a lie, he had frankly ridiculous amounts of Aura, something almost reaching Hazel. And even him had years of practice and trained to properly increase his Aura. Jaune simply had started in front of 90% of the huntsmen population. Which meant absolutely nothing if he didn’t learn to control it. As he was now he would probably lose between 10~20% of his Aura to his poor management during any type of combat.

“Close your eyes, focus on your breathing.” He did so. “I want you to try feeling your Aura. It should be a pulse like your heartbeat. If you can’t feel it then force it out again.”

He tried, and she let him keep on it for half an hour or so. She had to make it believable.

“You seem to not be relaxing Jaune.” She said smirking.

“Hard to do on a moving truck..” He said, eyes still closed trying his best to properly get a feel for the exercise.

“True, but I think it is more than that.” She knew it was. “Would you like to talk? I’m by no means good at comforting but you’ve told me enough times that just talking helps that i’m willing to try.” Simple really, use his words against him while creating an environment he wouldn’t feel stiffened while having no other choice but to talk. Well, no other choice he would choose, he could just say no and keep quiet until they arrived at Ravenwing, but the boy was too awkward to do so.

He let out a heavy breath, his hands coming up to cover his face. “It’s dumb...”

Cinder remained quiet, watching him carefully. Maybe he was right—maybe it was dumb—but she wasn't one to pass judgment until he explained himself.

He let his hands fall back into his lap, his shoulders slumping as if the weight of whatever he was carrying was dragging him down. Still, he didn't look at her.

“It's my parents—”

A million thoughts flashed through Cinder's mind at once. Runaways. Mistreated children. Cruelty hiding behind closed doors. She had seen it all before: the haunted eyes of those who had fled abuse, the raw anger that came from betrayal. For a moment, she wondered if Jaune had endured something similar to her.

But it didn't make sense. He always spoke warmly of his sisters, his stories filled with laughter and affection. And while he rarely talked about his parents, there was no bitterness or rage in his tone when he did. The most she'd ever seen from him was a quiet, faraway sadness—a stark contrast to the burning hatred she herself had carried for so long. There was no chance they were anything like the Madame or her children.

Her thoughts snapped back to the present when Jaune continued, his voice quieter now.

“...I haven't talked to them since I left Doremi. We had a fight... and I ran away.”

The words came out haltingly, as if each one weighed more than the last. His shoulders tensed, his face flushed slightly, and he couldn't seem to meet her gaze. He looked like a boy confessing to a crime, shame curling around him like smoke.

Cinder raised an eyebrow, tilting her head slightly. *That's it?* It wasn't nearly as bad as she'd imagined, though she knew better than to dismiss it outright. People carried guilt in strange ways, and it was clear this still gnawed at him.

“And I'm alive thanks to that.”

The sudden reply got him off guard. She narrowed her eyes slightly, searching his expression. “Do you wish to go back? Or that you had never left?”

The question hung in the air, heavy with meaning.

“No!” His response was immediate, almost desperate. “I want to be a Huntsman!”

The conviction in his voice was unmistakable, but there was something else there, too—something uncertain, like a shadow lingering just out of sight.

“And I wasn't wrong in running,” he added quickly. The words came out in a rush, as if he needed to say them before he lost the nerve. “I just... I just wish that it hadn't been needed. And— and I'm still afraid that they were right about me...”

“About what, Jaune?” Her voice softened, though her eyes remained sharp. Now she was sure he had suffered some kind of psychological damage. And she had a guess about what kind.

He shifted uncomfortably, his shoulders curling inward slightly. He looked even more ashamed now, like a kicked puppy trying to disappear into itself.

“That I’m not enough. That it’s all just a silly dream, and that I could never be anything. Never be trully useful to anyone...”

His tone was so hurt, so heavy with sadness, that Cinder felt a sharp pang in her chest. These weren’t his words. They were someone else’s—words that had been beaten into him, repeated and drilled until they had become his truth.

Her eyes narrowed, and her mind began to piece together the puzzle. His decisions and relentless drive finally made sense.

He had jumped on every opportunity to prove himself useful, even when it could have killed him. He had thrown himself into saving a stranger in a Grimm-infested forest, fought a pack of Creeps without Aura, training or hesitation, and refused to leave her even as he bled out. Barely healed, he’d started working on the farm, pushing his body before it was ready, not because anyone asked him to but because he felt he *had* to.

And then there was the Boarbatusk. When most people would have run, he had stayed. Even when he knew he wasn’t strong enough, even when it meant risking his life, he had stayed.

It wasn’t bravery, Cinder realized. It was desperation—a compulsion to prove his worth, even if it meant paying for it with his life.

She straightened, her voice calm but firm. “Do you trust me?”

Jaune looked up at her, confusion flickering in his blue eyes. “Of course I do,” he said immediately, as if the very question was absurd. His answer was so earnest, so sure, that it caught her off guard for a brief moment.

“Then trust me when I say this,” she began, leaning forward slightly to hold his gaze. “You can become one of the most brilliant Huntsmen I’ve ever met.” Her tone was unwavering, her words precise. “You are already one of the best people I’ve ever known.”

She hesitated briefly, then allowed herself a rare truth: “The actual best, in reality.” *Damn I’m going soft.*

Jaune blinked, stunned, but she wasn’t done. She didn’t look away, her gaze steady and unyielding.

“How can you not be enough when, thanks to you, I’m still alive? When two children are running and playing instead of lying dead in a Grimm’s belly? When their parents can hug them every night, all because of *you* ?”

His lips trembled, his eyes wide and glassy, brimming with tears. He didn’t try to speak, couldn’t even if he wanted to.

“Believe me when I say this, Jaune Arc.” Her voice softened slightly, but her conviction was unshakable. “You have a long way to go, but if you continue as you’ve been going, you’ll

reach further than most ever will.”

He rubbed his eyes, trying—and failing—not to cry. His breaths came shakily, his hands trembling slightly as he fought to steady himself.

It seems I've found a crack, her old instincts whispered. *A flaw. A vulnerability – A way in.* Cinder Fall had always been adept at finding the cracks in people, slipping into them like smoke and exploiting them for her own gain. Every conversation, every glance, every subtle movement could betray a person's desires and weaknesses. And now, she had confirmed Jaune's.

Strangely? She didn't care.

At this point, she realized she could have guessed this long ago. She could have extracted the information earlier, more cleanly, if she'd wanted. *Darkness below*, she thought wryly, *I could have unraveled far more of him if I'd pressed the right buttons.* But there was no need. The boy already belonged to her in every way that mattered.

And yet... she didn't want to push him further.

She was curious, of course—Cinder was always curious. But something deep inside her balked at the idea of pressing too hard, of risking the fragile bond they'd begun to build. Ha, *bond*. Relationship. She almost laughed at the absurdity of it.

His master that he so likes is a mask, and every bit of me that he adores is a lie.

That should have been enough to dismiss it. To dismiss him. But it wasn't. Because, somehow, it mattered. In a way no other fake personality or carefully constructed relationship ever had.

She let out a slow breath, letting the silence stretch before speaking. “I won't say I understand what you're going through, Jaune,” she said, her voice calm but carrying a surprising softness. “But face it with your chin up.” Her tone sharpened slightly, her silver tongue as precise as ever. “You are more than you believe.”

He nodded, swallowing hard as he rubbed at his eyes again, still trying—and failing again—to hide the emotions threatening to spill over.

“Now,” she continued, moving back slightly to give him space, “breathe deeper and try again.”

He straightened, inhaling shakily but obeying nonetheless.

She watched him carefully as he resumed his focus. The pretense of training would have to continue for now. She would give him a few more tries, allow him to stumble and fail a little more. Then, when the time was right, she'd offer him a shoulder to lean on—a safe place for his deeper problems. It was better this way. If she pushed too soon, it might look like manipulation, and she had no intention of giving him any reason to doubt her.

But as if to spite for her careful pacing, the boy actually began to make progress.

It wasn't much, but it was something. The flickering glow of his Aura became steadier, more controlled. The erratic dissipation slowed, like a leaky faucet he was slowly learning to tighten. It wasn't enough to form a proper Aura shield or stop all of his energy from flowing out, but it was a step forward.

She raised an eyebrow, her lips twitching into the barest hint of a smirk. "Not bad," she commented, keeping her tone neutral.

Encouragement came sparingly from Cinder Fall, but she allowed herself to offer a few pointed tips here and there. Each adjustment led to incremental improvements, and though the results were still miles away from perfect, they were steady enough to keep him going for the rest of the travel.

Admirable, she thought. But it was also absolutely frustrating for her plans.

A few more hours passed, and they arrived at the walled village of Ravenwing.

Which was a decent-sized settlement by frontier standards, its wooden walls sturdy and weathered, standing as a testament to the villagers' resilience. The front gates, flanked by two watchtowers, loomed above them, offering a clear view of the road and any approaching travelers.

Jorge rolled down the window and stopped at the small guardhouse by the entrance. "Morning," he greeted jovially, leaning out slightly.

"Morning, Jorge," the guard replied with a grin. His head drifted sideways to look at the unfamiliar faces in the back of the vehicle. "Few new faces with you today."

"Got me a pair of Huntsmen at my farm," Jorge bragged lightly, a hint of pride slipping into his tone.

The guard's smile widened. "Well, lucky you. Bet the missus feels safer with them around." He waved them in without further question, motioning for the gates to open.

Jorge pulled the truck into a designated parking area a few meters past the entrance, clearly marked for vehicles from out of town. He hopped out of the driver's seat, heading to the back to retrieve a few bags that had traveled with his guests. "I've got some things to bring to the barter," he explained, hefting one of the bags onto his shoulder. "But Lucia can show you two around before we start shopping."

"No need," Cinder replied, her tone calm and self-assured as she adjusted her coat, pulling it tighter to conceal as much of herself as possible. "I can see the tower from here. I'm betting the Guild is there too, correct?"

"Very much so," Lucia confirmed with a nod, glancing toward the tall structure that stood out against the backdrop of the village.

"Me and Jaune can make our way there easily," Cinder continued. "We'll report and make our necessary calls while Jorge and you resolve the rest."

Lucia tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her gaze. “Why the rush?”

“I dislike the idea of the children being alone right now,” she lied smoothly. Her tone was even, almost convincing enough to make her believe it herself.

The parents exchanged glances, clearly agreeing with her concern, and nodded. “Fair enough,” Jorge said, adjusting the strap of the bag on his shoulder.

After a brief round of goodbyes, Jaune offered Cinder his elbow.

Charming. Silly and unnecessary, but charming nonetheless. She allowed a faint smirk to touch her lips as she accepted, resting her remaining hand lightly on his arm. Together, they set off down what appeared to be the main road of the village.

The inside of the village was much like any other settlement Cinder had seen over the years. Small shops lined the main street, each specializing in something practical: travel supplies, basic lodging, equipment repairs, rustic clothing, and general maintenance. The streets were tidy but surprisingly full, with villagers moving about their day—some carrying goods, others chatting with neighbors or tending to storefronts.

Jaune glanced around curiously, his eyes lingering on a shop with neatly displayed tools and handmade goods in the window. Cinder, however, quickly scanned the area with practiced efficiency. There were no signs of a dust shop or Huntsman-grade weaponry suppliers, which wasn’t surprising but still mildly disappointing. The lack of proper resources was a reminder of just how far they were from the comforts of the larger cities.

Still, she reasoned that the Guild would likely have a stock of basic dust and gear for sale—perhaps even a few mechashift weapons, if she was lucky. Huntsmen Guilds often doubled as supply depots in smaller villages like this, ensuring local Huntsmen had access to what they needed.

As they walked, she allowed her eyes to linger on the surroundings longer than she probably should have. The cloak she wore concealed most of her body, and the change in her hairstyle, combined with the bandages covering part of her face, made her far less recognizable. But she still felt the familiar twinge of paranoia creep in.

They passed the village’s *wanted* board, and she glanced at it discreetly. No posters for her. No signs of her—probably captured—team, either. It seemed the authorities had yet to connect any dots leading to her presence here.

Good. That meant complications should be minimal.

There might still be issues at the Guild—bureaucracy and nosy personnel were inevitable—but nothing that couldn’t be handled with a well-placed bribe or, failing that, concealed force.

With the tension easing slightly, she allowed herself to relax, even if just a fraction. The outing was proving to be tolerable, if not enjoyable. The company, at least, was pleasant.

Jaune glanced over at her, a small smile playing at his lips. “Who are you calling?” he asked, breaking the silence.

“My boss,” she replied dryly, though her tone lacked its usual bite. “I’ve been away for too long, and I don’t want them getting... *preoccupied* .”

Murderous would have been a better word, but Jaune didn’t need to know that.

“Let’s just hope I can properly connect to my accounts,” she added, exhaling softly, her gaze flickering toward the distant Guild tower.

“Can’t you just connect them on my scroll?” he asked, pulling the small device from his pocket and holding it out to her with a casual shrug.

If the scroll were hers—or one of the secure versions Watts had made for her—then maybe. But Jaune’s scroll? That was out of the question. She had dozens of fake IDs, accounts, registrations, and licenses stored in her systems. Even if Jaune wasn’t the snooping type—and she knew he wasn’t—it would only take a glance at the wrong file for him to start questioning why his new *friend* had a dozen aliases.

“I need a new scroll anyway,” she replied simply, brushing off his suggestion. A smirk tugged at her lips as she added, “Besides, I wouldn’t want my little prodigy fancying my bank accounts.”

Jaune grinned, leaning into the banter. “I promise I’d only buy the most expensive useless stuff I can find,” he quipped, his voice full of cheeky charm.

That earned a snort from her, one she couldn’t entirely suppress. She’d half-expected him to get flustered and start sputtering out excuses, but instead, he matched her stride for stride.

“If I remember my account balance well,” she lied smoothly, “you wouldn’t be buying much.”

The truth, of course, was far different. Pulling all her accounts together, Cinder could probably live the rest of her life in comfort—in isolation—in some hidden corner of the world. But instincts told her never to count on money that wasn’t directly in hand. And there was no way she’d let anyone else know how much she had stashed away. *Besides, Watts could freeze every last one of my accounts with a flick of his scrawny fingers.*

Jaune flushed slightly, scratching the back of his neck. “I don’t really have much in mine,” he admitted with a sheepish chuckle. “But you can borrow what you need.” Then, with a mischievous grin, he jiggled his scroll. “Just don’t expect anything better than last year’s models.”

Cinder raised an eyebrow, feigning indignation. “How very noble. Is that how you treat your dear mentor?” she asked, her tone dripping with mock offense. “I spend my blood and sweat to make you a proper Huntsman, and you relegate me to old and second-hand gifts?”

He laughed, a bright and genuine sound that momentarily lit up his face. “Blood?” he teased. “I barely even got a hit in! Sweat, maybe—but let’s be honest here, that’s mostly the sun doing all the work.”

Wrong. The boy was more of a workout than he realized, even if she held back most of the time. Crushing him outright would be easy, but playing with him—testing his limits—was far more fun in its own way.

“But let’s make a deal,” Jaune added, his tone shifting. His eyes gleamed with the spark of an idea, and he grinned up at her like a kid who had just thought of the best plan ever. “As soon as I get my first commission or payout, I’ll buy you the most expensive, completely useless gift I can find!”

She grinned back. “I will hold you to that Arc.”

They spent the rest of the walk in companionable silence.

A call, a question and an answer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Huntsmen Guild of Ravenwing wasn't particularly impressive—at least, not to Cinder. To her, it was just another rustic building in another rustic village, functional but painfully unremarkable. But Jaune, walking beside her, looked like a child ready to step into a candy store for the first time. His eyes lit up as they approached the structure, his steps almost eager.

Like most of the buildings in the village, the Guild Hall was made of solid, dark wood, its sturdy frame weathered by years of use. Above the entrance hung a carved wooden plaque, painted in red and emblazoned with the words “Guild of Vale.” The green of Vale’s sigil stood out sharply against the crimson backdrop, the axes and laurels design simple yet commanding in attention.

Cinder’s eyes shifted to the entrance itself, and she suppressed a snort. The doors were the kind you’d expect to see in some old western movie—a pair of small, saloon-style doors that even creaked loudly as they swung inward. The sound was almost comical, and she couldn’t help but think of how impractical they were in a place supposedly meant to house Huntsmen.

Of course, she thought dryly, leave it to a Guild in a backwater village to have flair over function.

The interior, however, was a pleasant surprise.

Though antiquated by her standards, the space was meticulously maintained. The wood inside gleamed with a polished sheen, as though freshly cleaned. The seats scattered around the hall were plush and well-kept, their dark green upholstery showing minimal wear. Even the air carried a faint scent of pine and lemon oil, hinting at the care taken to maintain the space. Most surprising of all, however, was the receptionist. She was sitting upright at the front desk, alert and attentive—a rarity in Cinder’s experience. Most receptionists she’d encountered were half-asleep or indifferent, but this one seemed actually ready to work.

Cinder’s gaze naturally gravitated toward the large board beside the desk, taking in its contents with a practiced eye. The board was filled with a variety of requests—hunts, escorts, and bounties, each carefully tacked up for independent Huntsmen to browse. She was certain, though, that the more lucrative or sensitive jobs were kept behind the desk, available only to official Guild members.

Jaune, meanwhile, looked around with wide-eyed astonishment, his head swiveling as he tried to take in every detail at once. His sheer enthusiasm was palpable, and for a moment, Cinder allowed herself a small, private smile. *It’s oddly endearing, seeing someone so genuinely captivated by something so ordinary.*

With a quiet sigh, she took the reins of their little excursion, using her hand on his arm to guide him toward the reception desk.

“Hi! How can I help you today?” the tanned receptionist greeted, her tone cheerful and well-rehearsed. It was the kind of greeting that had likely been repeated hundreds of times, yet she delivered it with professional polish.

Cinder stepped forward, her posture poised and commanding. “We need to use the call and mailing system,” she said evenly, her tone calm but assertive. “But first, I’d like to see the prices and—if possible—find a secure system to connect to my account.”

The receptionist nodded briskly, her hands already moving to pull up the relevant information. Cinder’s sharp eyes caught the faintest flicker of curiosity in the woman’s expression, but she didn’t let it linger. It made sense after all, Huntsman were a varying and interesting bunch by definition.

Behind her, Jaune shifted his weight, glancing back toward the job board as though unable to completely ignore the allure of the requests pinned there.

In a few seconds, the receptionist opened a sleek black menu containing the prices for the call system. She tapped it lightly, pointing toward a set of three computer monitors on the far side of the room. “Here are all our prices,” she explained with practiced ease. “And those are our public-use computer systems.” She smiled a bit awkwardly. “They aren’t the fastest things around, but they are fully connected to the scroll network of Vale.”

Cinder nodded a silent thank-you, her hand briefly slipping away from Jaune’s arm as she accepted the menu. Without missing a beat, she made her way toward the machines, the soft sound of her boots against the polished floor punctuating her movements.

“Do you mind waiting a second while I try to connect to my bank and Huntsman account?” she asked, glancing over her shoulder at him.

“Oh?” Jaune blinked, clearly still distracted by his surroundings. His eyes darted toward her, and then back to the job board before a faint blush crept across his cheeks. “Yup! I mean, no! No problem at all!” he stammered, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m just going to take a look at the board. I was never allowed near the Guild back in Doremi. I’m really curious about it!”

Cinder watched him wander off, a small smirk tugging at her lips. *Kid in a candy store, I swear.*

As she reached the touch display of one of the monitors, a question formed in her mind: *Who exactly was going to check in at Ravenwing?* Using her real credentials was, of course, out of the question. *Atlesian ones? Far too suspicious, especially with most deployed troops en route to Vale.* She couldn’t be sure that they were tracking their own huntsmen in Vale but there was no need to risk it. That left Mistralian or Valean.

Valean it is, she decided, playing it safe. Watts had prepared a selection of aliases for the Beacon infiltration—most of which she hadn’t even used yet. Since she and Watts were the only ones aware of these IDs, they should also still be secure.

She entered the name Ashlyn Vale, and despite her years of dealing with his ingenuity, she still rolled her eye at the pun. For all of Watts' brilliance, he wasn't above cobbling together silly names as some kind of private joke—likely a way to amuse himself while poking fun at the Inner Circle. It was both petty and oddly fitting for the man.

Such a sad little genius, she mused, her fingers dancing over the screen. Watts was undoubtedly intelligent, but his physical frailty made him laughably easy to overpower. She allowed herself a brief, amused snort. *One arm, one eye and I could still beat him into the floor.*

Moments later, the account processed smoothly, granting her access to a comfortable amount of lien. She clicked through a few options before glancing over her shoulder. “Jaune!” she called out.

The boy startled visibly, flinching slightly as his head whipped toward her. He had been chatting with the receptionist, and from the way the petite brunette leaned toward him, it was clear that flirting had been involved. At least on her part.

Cinder's gaze narrowed ever so slightly. *She has good taste*, she thought dryly. *It would be a shame to burn her into her proper place...* A pause. *It wouldn't.* Her lips curved into a faint smirk, though her mind held a far more dangerous thought. *You do not touch what belongs to Cinder Fall.*

Not that it seemed necessary. Jaune, oblivious as ever, hadn't even noticed the girl's attempts. From the way the receptionist's smile faltered slightly, it was clear she realized her efforts were wasted on the blonde.

Too pure for this world, Cinder mused. *And for me.*

She shook her head at that last thought, dismissing it. Cinder Fall deserved whatever she desired, and that was how it always had been—and how it always *had* to be.

When Jaune finally approached, his steps slightly hurried as though sensing her impatience, she straightened and gestured to the monitor. “One of my associate's accounts is active,” she said smoothly. “We can use the scroll network and still have enough left for supplies.”

The explanation was necessary; if Jaune spotted the name ‘Ashlyn Vale’ on a receipt, it would make sense as part of her ‘associates.’ Still, she chided herself for not insisting Jaune and the Florentias use one of her aliases when they arrived in town. *It's likely too late now.* The Florentias had probably told half the village they were hosting Huntsmen by now, and it likely included her real name in the process.

Not that it matters, she thought, brushing the concern aside. If there were a bounty on her head, posters would be plastered everywhere. Right now her only priority now was ensuring no digital trail linked her real identity to Ravenwing. Automated search systems could flag purchases, but no one would bother to send a team to interview random receptionists in a backwater village like this.

“Supplies?” Jaune asked, blinking in confusion.

“I need a sword,” she replied, her tone casual. “I can’t keep borrowing yours all the time.” She allowed herself a small smile, tilting her head slightly. “We also need something for range—both for you and for me. I can’t exactly use a bow anymore.” she used her remaining hand to gesture at the hidden stump.

“Miss?” Cinder called from the other side of the room, her voice calm but commanding.

“Yes?” replied the receptionist, perking up slightly. Cinder hadn’t bothered to learn her name—she didn’t matter after all.

“Please start a tab. We will both be using the CCT for direct, real-time calls,” she said smoothly as she walked back toward the desk. She handed over the small black menu, the gesture deliberate and precise. “I’ll also need a Huntsman-grade scroll, and I’d like to take a look at the weapons you have in storage.”

“Can do!” the receptionist chirped, standing and moving around the desk. Her enthusiasm grated on Cinder slightly, though she said nothing.

“I’m sorry for asking,” the receptionist added, her tone more hesitant now, “but I’m obligated by the Guild to confirm—will you be paying in cash or by direct transfer?”

Cinder raised an eyebrow. “The Guild doesn’t take cards anymore?”

The receptionist fidgeted, her gaze shifting awkwardly to the side. “We haven’t been able to get proper service for more than two months now…” she admitted, trailing off.

Cinder let out a small sigh but nodded. “Not a problem,” she replied nonchalantly. “I can easily arrange a transfer after we close the tab.” Though internally, she made a note of the inconvenience. She would have preferred to pay in cash—it left less of a trail—but this was going to be an expensive transaction. Even if Ravenwing had a functioning bank, she wouldn’t risk the gossip that would inevitably follow if she withdrew a significant amount of lien all at once.

The receptionist nodded, visibly relieved, and gestured for them to follow her. She led Cinder and Jaune up a narrow staircase and into a corridor lined with numbered doors. The wood creaked faintly under their footsteps, the sound echoing slightly in the quiet space.

“Rooms 2 and 6 are set up for inter-kingdom calls,” the receptionist explained, motioning toward the doors. “Will you be using the same booth, or separate ones?”

Cinder gestured toward the door marked 6, silently directing Jaune toward it. “Separate,” she answered smoothly. “Please add the time for both booths to my tab.”

She turned to Jaune, her lips curving into a faint smile. The kind of smile that held just enough warmth to disarm but not enough to invite argument. “Take the time you need. We can talk about the price later.”

Jaune opened his mouth as if to protest—likely about her footing the bill—but seemed to think better of it. Instead, he closed his mouth and nodded, a silent thank-you flashing in his

eyes before he disappeared into the booth.

Inside her own booth, Cinder took a moment to study the setup. The console was simple, built for function over form, with a touchpad and a faintly glowing screen. The wood-paneled walls did little to dampen the faint buzz of machinery in the room, but it would be enough for this call. She sat down gracefully, her movements controlled, and tapped the screen to bring the system online.

The first thing Cinder did was make sure the door was properly closed before she started to input the scroll ID for the call. The ID was, of course, false—one of many crafted for her by Watts. It was the first step in a series of redirects and confirmation bots that would scramble the origin of the call before it connected to Watts or whoever was manning Salem's castle communications for the day.

Three minutes ticked by, each second dragging as the screen displayed a spinning symbol. Finally, a small dot with the letter W appeared on the screen, accompanied by a green indicator light. The call had connected.

Cinder's posture straightened slightly. Her voice was calm but tinged with calculated politeness as she began, "Ashlyn Vale calling in. There were some unforeseen circumstances in my mission."

The use of the alias was deliberate. It was her way of signaling to Watts that the line wasn't as secure as it should be—coded language would be necessary for the duration of the call.

"Well, well," came Watts' smarmy reply, his tone practically dripping with mockery. "Our employer will be *thrilled* to know you're still on the board, dear."

Cinder's lips thinned slightly, but she said nothing, letting him continue.

"We've been keeping an eye out for you since the end of your little *debacle*." He paused, the faint sound of tapping keys coming through the line. "Good thing we didn't have to come collect you ourselves. That would've been... inconvenient."

Cinder allowed herself a brief, humorless smirk. "I'm sure you would have sent Scorpio for such a delicate rescue," she replied dryly, her tone sharp enough to cut.

Watts let out a chuckle, clearly amused. "Oh, *absolutely*. But it seems you've spared us the trouble. How thoughtful of you." One thing she could give the professor was that even he wasn't thrilled to work with Tyrian.

"Please report to the boss that there was an information leakage," Cinder began, her voice calm but edged with the weight of accusation. "And that we sent our team into a trap. We were fortunate enough to have Atlesian troops and Vale's best close enough to help."

"Impossible!" Watts screeched, his voice cracking with indignation. The venom in his tone was almost palpable. "The leak must have come from *your* team's side."

“Professor,” Cinder replied, drawing out the title with a heavy dose of sarcasm that bordered on mockery. Her amber eye narrowed as she leaned slightly closer to the screen. “My team couldn’t have leaked the information when all our scrolls were sanctioned by our IT team—” She let the words hang, knowing full well he would recognize the implicit blame. The IT team was just one man after all—and we had no extra backup or support. Either *your* side had a leak, or the informants were in on it.”

The last part was risky. She was treading dangerously close to the truth, and an astute listener could start piecing together what had really happened. But such a revelation would require knowledge of the assassination attempt, and every official report thus far blamed the presence of Atlasian forces on the awakening of an elder Grimm. Ozpin's cover story was working in her favor now.

“Be that as it may,” Watts ground out through clenched teeth, “I will report it and begin the cleaning process to search for your so-called ‘leakage.’” His begrudging tone made it clear he intended to spin the narrative to his advantage when reporting to Salem. He wouldn’t outright lie—Salem would see through that—but nothing said he couldn’t manipulate the story to ensure his side looked cleaner than hers.

“Are there any orders left for me to know?” Cinder asked, though she already dreaded the answer. Her stomach churned, her instincts screaming that the answer would be far from what she wanted to hear.

“Not directly,” Watts replied. His tone was almost flippant, as if he enjoyed stringing her along. “The Mistress wasn’t sure you had survived, and the placement of the rest of your team suggested that we would have to come fetch you before long.”

“Placement?” she asked sharply, her curiosity piqued.

“Both your prodigies seem to have been wounded and are recuperating under the attention of the Atlas military in Vale.” he mocked.

They actually survived, huh. Cinder’s expression remained neutral, but her mind flickered over the implications. Mercury and Emerald posed no real threat when it came to betrayal. Neither of them knew enough about her or Salem to cause significant damage. At best, they could give Atlas her name and the locations of old safehouses. *Inconvenient, but hardly worrying.*

“For now, meet with Mr. Brown in Vale,” Watts continued, his voice taking on a mocking edge again. “Your main mission has been reassigned to him.” He paused, and Cinder could hear the faintest smirk in his voice when he added, “How much longer should I inform the Mistress that you will be indisposed for?”

Bastard. Cinder clenched her jaw, forcing her irritation into check. At least the Vale plan was with Hazel now. He was far preferable to the other two Inner Circle members.

“I will make my way to Vale as soon as possible,” she said evenly, though she allowed a hint of frustration to color her tone. “But I will have to go by foot, as I currently have no other

option.” *He doesn’t know I’m not actively being searched for*, she thought. *Maybe I can buy myself some extra time.*

“Understood,” Watts replied dismissively. “Will this line be used for further communications?”

“No. I intend to purchase a new scroll later today,” she explained. “Please send the corporate security package to my contact ID so I can have it installed.” At the very least, this would ensure her new scroll would be secure, untraceable, and equipped with the necessary applications for her various aliases and licenses.

“Understood,” Watts said, though his tone made it clear he wasn’t paying much attention. Then, as if an afterthought, he added, “Oh, Ash. The Mistress had a question for you—in case you were still kicking, that is.”

Cinder’s breath hitched slightly, her muscles tensing. She waited in silence, bracing herself.

“Will you fail me again?” Not even Watts dared use Salem’s question as a form of mockery or ridicule.

Her blood turned to ice. Every scar, every burn on her body seemed to ignite with phantom pain at the memory of Salem’s punishments. Death would be preferable to failing Salem again. And yet, here she was, walking the razor’s edge of her second chance. She knew that if she failed again, she wouldn’t survive the Queen’s wrath. Cinder knew she had to either succeed or make sure to die before ever meeting Salem again.

“Never,” she whispered, her voice soft and trembling. She tried to force steadiness into her tone, but the fear bled through, leaving it a shaky promise.

Her remaining arm shivered, trembling slightly as the call disconnected.

Watts had shown remarkable restraint by not taunting her further after relaying the question. But Cinder wasn’t foolish enough to think it was out of kindness. No, if she were truly gone—dead due to an information leak that could be traced back to him—Watts’ place within Salem’s council would become far less stable. He had no doubt realized that keeping her alive served his best interests.

Of course, she didn’t trust him. But as long as keeping her alive aligned with his goals, she knew he would lend his begrudging assistance.

While being a condescending prick along the way, she thought bitterly.

She took a moment to recenter herself before stepping out of the booth.

Her mind raced, though not with plans to get the Fall Maiden power back or schemes to spin this mission into a pathway for reclaiming her former glory. No, her thoughts were oddly preoccupied with something far more mundane: how to broach the idea of leaving for Vale with Jaune.

He’ll probably follow me anyway, she thought. But what would she tell him?

She trusted him—more than she trusted most—but she also knew enough about him to understand his limits. Jaune Arc would never willingly participate in a plan that involved the sacrifice of innocents. He would balk at even the suggestion. How far was she willing to drop the mask around him? How much of her true self could she reveal without driving him away?

She wasn't going to leave him behind. He belonged to her after all. But cooperation and keeping a good relationship would be for the best now.

Her thoughts churned as she made her way down the narrow corridor. The walls were old and thin, the kind that couldn't quite mask the muffled sounds of conversations happening in nearby booths. The realization fed her paranoia, making her grateful for having spoken to Watts almost entirely in code.

As she passed booth number 6, something caught her attention—a door left slightly ajar. Her sharp eyes immediately noticed the crack, her instincts prickling with unease. She paused, her breath catching as the faint sound of raised voices filtered through the gap.

Curiosity—or perhaps something deeper—drew her closer.

Jaune's call wasn't going as well as hers had. Which was bizarre, considering Cinder's own had ended with an implied death threat. And yet, the tone of this conversation... it was different. There was venom in the air, a tension that made her steps instinctively quieter as she neared the door.

She leaned toward the crack, her body taut like a predator stalking prey.

Through the thin walls, she could hear the unmistakable sound of an older man's voice, distorted by the volume and the unreliable connection to the CCT. His words were harsh, cutting, and fueled by anger. A softer woman's voice tried to interject, but it was too faint to make out clearly—drowned out by the man's tirade.

The man was shouting about bringing Jaune home, about dragging him back by the neck if necessary.

Cinder's fist clenched.

Threats never bothered me before, she thought, her mind flicking back to memories of powerless men and women trying to intimidate her with empty words. Sometimes, she had even enjoyed it—loved the futility in their voices, the way they postured with no real means of control.

But now? Hearing someone speak to Jaune like that, he—whether he realized it or not—now belonged to her?

Her fire stirred, coiling deep in her chest, and with every passing second, it burned hotter. When the man's final words hit her ears, it took everything she had not to break the door down.

“You know you can’t be a Huntsman!” the man roared. “You’re going to get yourself killed! Worse, you’re going to get other people killed!”

There was desperation in his voice—a raw, almost pleading undercurrent—but it was buried beneath layers of anger and frustration.

And in that moment, Cinder understood.

This was the voice. The voice that had planted the seeds of self-doubt in Jaune. The voice that had nurtured his lack of self-worth and cultivated it into something almost crippling.

Her traitorous mind whispered a cruel question: *Does it hurt more when the words come from someone you love?*

She had heard phrases like that plenty of times in her own life. From the Madame. From strangers. Even from Rhodes. But never from someone she cared about. Never from someone who was supposed to love her back.

Rhodes had called her a monster once, and it had cut deeper than any physical wound. The pain of that word had taught her a lesson she carried to this day: caring only brought pain. Her clenching heart, tightening now at the thought of Jaune’s pain, only reinforced the truth of that lesson.

Her thoughts snapped back to the present as a quiet, shaky reply reached her ears.

“I will be a Huntsman...” Jaune’s voice wavered, soft but resolute. “What you think doesn’t matter anymore.”

There was a harsh click as the call disconnected, though the man’s voice could still be heard shouting on the other end, now to dead air.

Cinder’s eyes went wide. The force of his words, the quiet defiance in them, left her momentarily stunned. She took three quick, silent steps back, carefully positioning herself as though she had just stepped out of her own booth.

When the door to booth 6 creaked open a moment later, she was already adjusting her coat, her expression carefully neutral. Hand closing the booth door and just about glancing to the corridor.

She planned to just glance in his direction—maybe let out a soft gasp and use it as an excuse to ask if he was okay. But the moment her eyes landed on him, her plan crumbled to dust.

Jaune was clearly trying to hide the impact of the call, but it wasn’t working. His red-rimmed eyes glistened, threatening to spill over, and his whole posture—the soft confidence she had painstakingly nurtured since their training began—was gone. He looked small now, almost hunched, as though he were trying to fold into himself. Every bit of assurance he had gained had been stripped away, leaving behind a shadow of the boy she had started training.

Cinder mentally cursed whoever had been on the other end of that call. They had undone weeks of her work in a single conversation, smashing through the fragile foundation of

confidence she had built for him.

Who says words don't leave scars? she thought bitterly.

Cinder Fall knew how to be seductive, manipulative, and commanding. But comforting? That was entirely foreign territory. And—again, for the first time—that bothered her. The frustration gnawed at her, leaving her uncertain, a feeling she despised.

She strode forward, her movements deliberate, and without overthinking it, she brought him into a one-armed hug.

It was awkward. For one, she was just a bit taller than him, and for another, one arm wasn't exactly ideal for a proper hug. The angle was strange, and it felt more like an experiment than an act of comfort.

Are hugs even comforting? she wondered, second-guessing herself even as she held him.

But it seemed she had made the right decision. Jaune's arms circled around her, pulling her into a tight embrace. She felt his body shudder against hers, heard the choked sob that escaped him despite his efforts to hold it back. His breathing was ragged, uneven, as he fought to compose himself.

Her chest tightened at the sound, an unfamiliar pang of... something stirring within her. Sympathy? Anger? She couldn't—or wouldn't—define it.

Jaune took a deep breath and, after a moment, broke the hug. He stepped back slightly, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"...Thanks," he said, his voice soft and uneven.

She hesitated, unsure of how to respond, before deciding to take another gamble in this unfamiliar realm of consolation. With her one hand, she reached up and tousled his hair, making a deliberate mess of the golden locks.

"Always, kid," she said, her voice softer than she intended. She let her hand linger for a moment before stepping back. "How about we go pick out a few guns? And if you feel up to it, we can talk about it later?"

She watched him carefully, gauging his reaction.

He nodded, managing a faint smile. It wasn't much, but it was something.

Cinder knew she should strike now.

She had the perfect opportunity—one she could create herself. By being the one to comfort him, to pick him up when he was at his lowest, she could deepen his dependence on her. A few gentle nudges, the right words at the right time, and she could have him spilling every detail of that call. She could bring him to the small sofa at the end of the corridor, coax the full story out of him in a matter of minutes. With that knowledge, she'd know exactly which

buttons to press to secure his undivided loyalty. Cinder could make him hers in every way that mattered, just as she had done with Emerald.

It would be so easy. So very simple to do.

And yet, she didn't.

She didn't push, didn't pry, didn't strike while the iron was hot. For a reason she didn't care to examine too closely, she let the moment pass.

What mattered now, more than anything, was getting his confidence—and his smile—back. The rest could wait.

Chapter End Notes

Just a few extras in case I couldn't pass them well enough in my writing.

Jaunes parents aren't bad people, they just don't have any idea what they inflicted on their son with their lackluster protectiveness. Yes, I will explain why in the future, this is just the start of his backstory.

Cinder is possessive of Jaune for now. She hasn't had any proper relationships with anyone so she has no idea what familiar, friendly or love affection truly are. She knows she wants him around and that she wants him well, but it's gonna take sometime until she stops being an emotionally constipated pyromaniac. Also, just cuz she likes the Florentias and Jaune it doesn't mean that she is nice now.

New gear and an Invitation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Cinder hadn't expected much variety, and in some ways, she was right.

When it came to scrolls, there were exactly two options: civilian basic and Huntsman basic—and even those were a few years out of date. She highly doubted there was any real difference between them beyond durability and capacity for heavier Huntsman apps and GPS tracking.

First thing I do in Vale is buy a proper one.

She reconsidered a moment later. *No. Clothes first, then weapons, then the scroll.* Money wasn't an issue after all.

Without hesitation, she requested the Huntsman-grade model and asked the receptionist to add a full charge to it.

“Am I allowed to use the CCT connection to download and update the necessary apps and systems?” she asked coolly, keeping her tone professional.

“Yup! The use of the internet CCT connection is limited to registered Huntsmen or patrons. Both apply here.” The petite receptionist—the one Cinder still refused to bother learning the name of—replied with a bright smile.

Cinder nodded. “Two Huntsman-grade scrolls,” she added, a new idea taking shape in her mind.

She turned toward Jaune, who had been idly glancing at the job board again. “We'll have to migrate the contents of your scroll to this one.”

“Uh?!” He blinked, clearly caught off guard. “Why? My scroll is still good.”

“Mostly so we can install the Huntsman-only apps,” she lied smoothly. “You can keep both, of course, but having one tied to your new training ID—with the exclusive apps—will be way more useful.”

That part wasn't *entirely* a lie.

The real reason, however, was far less innocent.

With Watts' software installed, she could have full access to it—track its location, monitor messages, and keep an eye on anything that might pose a risk. It wasn't a matter of *trust*—not exactly. Cinder Fall hadn't survived this long by taking unnecessary chances.

And, if she was being completely honest, it would also make finding her blonde much easier. Some deep, nagging instinct told her that Jaune Arc was the type to get lost in a supermarket

given enough of a leash.

For some reason, though, he seemed uncomfortable with the idea.

Cinder narrowed her eye slightly, analyzing his reaction. Was it just a matter of pride? The model *was* outdated, and perhaps he found the idea of accepting a second-hand scroll unappealing.

She exhaled softly through her nose. *Maybe a decent knife will have a better reaction.*

It had worked on Emerald and Mercury, after all.

Well, she mused, anything given by me worked on Emerald. And Mercury wasn't really a model for anything.

“And the weapons?”

The receptionist led them through a reinforced wooden door, motioning for them to follow. The armory was noticeably more secure than the scrolls, with a thick iron lock bolted onto the entrance.

Inside, the air carried the distinct metallic scent of oil and polished steel. Weapons lined the walls—mostly simple, sturdy designs with no mechashift capabilities. Still, the variety was greater than Cinder had expected. Polearms, swords, axes, lances and even a warpick were displayed and mounted on the walls.

Behind a wide wooden counter stood a tall, tanned man, his arms crossed over his chest. His sharp, appraising gaze flicked over them as they entered, but his grin was easygoing.

“Morning, Missus!” he called, his thick accent rounding out the words. “What can I get for ya?”

“Simple sword, median length” Cinder replied, scanning the racks behind him. “Saber, dao—any curved blade will do.”

“No shift?” he asked, raising a brow.

“For this one, no.”

She had no use for a transforming weapon right now—not unless it had a design that actually suited her style. Most sword-based mechashift weapons turned into rifles or shotguns, and in the case of her last one, a bow. None of those would serve her in close combat, and even if she had both arms, a cumbersome firearm form wasn't her preference.

The armorer nodded, moving around the room with practiced efficiency. He pulled a few swords from the racks, setting them down on the heavy wooden counter for her to inspect.

Cinder's fingers brushed over the handles, weighing each weapon carefully. There was no dao among them, but her eye caught on a falchion-like blade—slightly longer than what she was used to.

She lifted it, testing the weight. Heavier than her old one, with a balance that wasn't ideal. *A bit unwieldy... but nothing Aura can't compensate for.*

"Aura steel?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Low grade, but yeah," the man confirmed with a casual shrug.

It would do. She wasn't about to find dust-forged or infused metal this far from a proper city.

"We do have an electric and fire-reactive dust coating," he added, nodding toward the scabbards hanging on the side. "But the blade needs to be resheathed every few hits to reactivate it. You'll also need type C or D refined dust casings."

Cinder barely resisted the urge to scoff. *Useless.* Type C and D fire dust was *weaker* than the heat she could generate with her semblance. Still, the fact that the blade could withstand dust activation meant it would likely handle her flames without losing its edge too quickly.

It also fit nicely with her *fake* semblance of supercharging fire dust.

She gave a short nod, setting the sword down. "I'll take it."

She paused, glancing back at Jaune. For some reason, the idea of him being unarmed—even temporarily—bothered her. And together they both lacked ranged options. What Cinder wouldn't give for her sand infused dust. Making her own glass knives and even adding the extra explosion when hit would be far better than any throwing knife she could find here. Not that having them would resolve their lack of range, it would just brothen hers a bit.

"Also," she continued, looking back to the armorer, "a mechashift sword-rifle and a Huntsman-grade pistol. Standard, high-caliber rounds."

The man grinned at that, already moving to store the unchosen weapons and retrieve the requested ones.

"Want some dust rounds?" he asked, stacking the extra swords back onto their racks. "We had some shipped in with all the elders awakening close." He shot her a knowing look as he dusted off a case. "They ain't cheap, but for the first time in a while, we actually *have* them in stock."

Cinder tilted her head slightly. *Interesting. So the villages were being supplied, but there was no sign of extra protection.*

"No need," she replied smoothly. "Your Huntsmen probably need them more than us."

"Nah, Chad and Clovis got conscripted to help with the cleanup." The man waved her off, his tone casual. "They're getting their gear from the Atlas boys or straight from Vale's main guild." He set a few handguns on the counter alongside two mechashift swords. "These girls can take normal and low-grade dust calibers—just in case ya change your mind." He shot her a crooked grin.

Cinder barely paid attention to the offer, her little bait had been more than useful. Ravenwing was unprotected, at least without Huntsmen. That made her being recognized or that there was a trap being set outside even less likely. She let her eyes sweep over the new weapons.

She was never particularly fond of guns. They felt too *pedestrian* for her, so inelegant. Any two-lien crook could threaten someone with a pistol. They lacked finesse, lacked *presence*. A bullet was just metal—it killed efficiently, but it carried no weight beyond that.

But an arrow that turns you to burning ash if not removed in time? That left a lasting impression. A dagger of pure, superheated glass forming just under your chin? That inspired fear.

A gun was just a tool.

So, no—she had no real preference when it came to handguns. It wasn't a weapon she had ever needed to master. But that didn't mean she would ignore its practicality.

Her fingers brushed over the grips until she settled on one. It was long, sleek, and black—just like the rest—but it fit comfortably in her hand. The weight was solid, balanced, nothing extravagant but serviceable.

“Nice pick, miss,” the armorer commented, tossing a few packets of bullets to the side. “Got a decent kick for a civilian, but shouldn't be a problem for a Huntress.”

Jaune blinked. “You want a handgun?” he asked, sounding genuinely surprised. He had been silently observing until now, his attention drawn more toward the larger swords mounted on the walls.

“I need extra range and don't have many options,” Cinder replied smoothly, inspecting the side of the pistol before setting it down. Then, before he could question further, she added, “I also want *you* to have a gun. Just in case.”

Jaune tensed slightly. “I've never shot a gun before.”

“And you'd never killed a Grimm until a few weeks ago,” she countered without missing a beat. “I fail to see the issue.”

He hesitated, clearly unsure, but she pressed on before he could protest further.

“But for you, we're going for rifles.”

That made him pause. His brows furrowed slightly, and she could *see* him trying to work through the logic in his head.

She could have taught him archery instead. It would have been easier for her—she had ample experience with bows, and it would have allowed Cinder to *demonstrate* her skill rather than rely on secondhand instruction. But a bow was completely useless for someone with only one arm.

I need to get a proper prosthetic once I reach Beacon.

The thought had crossed her mind before, but now it settled with finality. She was strong, resilient—but even she knew she couldn't afford to be crippled forever.

She *could* have requested one from Watts. In fact, he would probably take it as an opportunity to flaunt his so-called genius and high reach, shipping her the latest model straight from Atlas' top laboratories.

And she would never, *never* trust it.

Her fingers curled slightly at the mere thought. The moment she strapped on one of his creations, her arm would no longer be her own. Watts wasn't a fool—he would embed *something* into it, whether it was a tracker, a failsafe, or a way to disable it at the most *inconvenient* moment possible.

At best, he would install a kill switch and tracker.

At worst, the damn thing would have a self-destruct function laced with enough refined dust to take the top of her body with it.

No. She would find her own replacement. One she could trust. One she could control. One that was *hers*.

“You need at least one ranged option,” she explained, “and *you* are the only one who can use one effectively right now. So take a good look and choose wisely.”

His eyes widened slightly at the responsibility she was placing on him. Then, with a determined nod, he turned to examine the mechashift swords.

Cinder watched him for a moment before adding, “Why mechashift, though?”

Jaune grunted slightly as he tried to lift a claymore that was a bit too heavy for him. He struggled for a few seconds before setting it down with a huff. “Yeah... not that one.”

Cinder smirked but answered his original question.

“Crocea Mors is impressive in its own right,” she admitted, though more for its resilience than anything else. “But you need range. Nevermores are a plague this deep into Vale's territory, and you won't be able to hit one with her.”

She leaned slightly against the counter, watching his reaction as she continued.

“A weapon you're *somewhat* familiar with is best. It'll also help you understand how Huntsmen think.”

Jaune frowned. “What does mechashift have to do with that?”

“Every Huntsman worth their lien is specialized in at least two forms of combat,” she said matter-of-factly, “and is capable of switching seamlessly during a fight.”

“Imagine this,” Cinder began, her voice smooth and deliberate. “You’re fighting a rogue Huntsman or a bandit with training. So far, he’s using a massive sword, a claymore. The weakness? Speed and limited close-range versatility. You take a step in, thinking you’ve found an opening—”

She loudly snapped her fingers.

“—only to get a chest full of lead.”

Jaune flinched slightly at the imagery.

“The claymore transforms into a shotgun, compensating for its weakness at close range. That’s the *basic* principle of mechashift.” She paced slightly, watching his expression shift from confusion to realization. “Now imagine that same sword can also transform into a scythe—suddenly, he has a weapon that excels in mid-range engagements. So now, he has three styles at his disposal: a massive two-handed blade for raw power, a shotgun for close combat, and a fast, unpredictable scythe for sweeping mid-range attacks. All at a seconds difference. All with different styles, strengths, and weaknesses.”

She stopped and turned to him.

“How do you fight him?”

Jaune looked properly overwhelmed.

His brows furrowed, eyes flickering as if running through potential counters. But each answer he seemed to come up with collapsed under the weight of the next problem.

Maybe it’s unfair to use Ozpin’s little crow as an example, she mused. Very few Huntsmen operate at his level. But Qrow is the perfect demonstration of how versatile a real treat can be.

“And that’s before we even add Semblances and Dust into the equation,” she added casually, throwing more fuel onto his spiraling thoughts. “If you learn how to flow seamlessly between different styles and weapons mid-combat, you’ll understand how to counter someone who’s doing the same against you.”

Not that it makes the fight any easier.

She watched as Jaune’s shoulders tensed slightly. The weight of realization was settling in now. This wasn’t just about swinging a sword well. It was about adaptability, prediction, and counterplay.

And Cinder was a specialist in it. She had been trained by two of the strongest Huntsmen living and had to perform under Salem herself during Grimm training. Be it Grimm or Huntsmen, Cinder was ready.

The armorer let out a chuckle from behind the counter.

“Listen to yer lady, boy.” His rough voice cut in. She didn’t particularly appreciate the interjection, even if he was technically reinforcing her point. “You Huntsmen are crazy versatile. That’s why we count on ya.”

Jaune nodded, his usual casual demeanor replaced with something more serious. He turned back to the weapons, considering them with fresh eyes. There was a new intensity to him now.

hook line and sinker. She smiled to herself. It seems that guns were indeed the right gift to get the kids' minds from the earlier call.

She could see it in the way he moved. He picked up each option carefully, testing the length, weight, and grip. He even shifted between basic two-handed and one-handed stances, as if instinctively comparing them against his existing style.

Cinder had no doubt that, had the space allowed, he’d be running through drills with each blade right here in the store.

He took his time, but eventually, his attention settled on a bastard sword with a half-arc'd guard. It was a simple, practical design—nothing extravagant, but efficient. Silvery and with blue bindings with a pear shaped pommel.

Cinder studied his choice for a moment before giving a single, sharp command:

“Shift it.”

Jaune blinked, looking at her in confusion.

“The pommel, kid. Twist and push up.” The armorer chuckled. “Make sure yer hands ain’t gripping the blade or guard when ya do it.”

Jaune hesitated for only a second before following the instructions.

With a sharp click, the blade split down the middle, revealing a barrel embedded between the halves. The guard tilted, sliding further into the blade’s design—one side aligning as a sight, the other forming an angled grip for stability. The handle itself thickened and adjusted, locking into place as a reinforced stock.

Jaune stared, wide-eyed, at the transformed weapon now resting in his hands.

Cinder couldn’t help but smirk.

“The blade’s still longer than the barrel,” she noted, tilting her head slightly. “Was that intentional? Is it meant to be used as a bayonet, or is that just a limitation of the shifting mechanism?”

The armorer grinned, clearly pleased with the question.

“Bayonet!” he confirmed, slapping the counter lightly. “Between us? I think the designers did it ‘cause collapsin’ segmented blades is complicated as all hell. But it works as a bonus to the

rifle mode.”

Cinder hummed in understanding. That was disappointingly practical. But it wasn't like she could ask for more.

“How many bullets?” she asked, shifting into business mode. “And what's the reload type?”

Jaune was still admiring the weapon—and in truth, he probably wouldn't even know what questions to ask here.

So she asked for him.

“Basic marksman rifle,” the armorer explained, tapping the weapon's frame with a calloused finger. “Standard magazine of ten—it uses the Riflemen Type C mags. Can't take extended ones, though.” He gestured toward the now-visible magazine hanging just in front of the trigger.

“If ya try to load an extended mag, it won't be able to shift back.”

Cinder's lips curled slightly. A design flaw, but not an uncommon one for transforming weapons. The shifting mechanism needed space, and an oversized magazine would disrupt the balance.

“Detachable box magazine,” the armorer continued, “but ya can also load it with an internal mag and stripper clips if ya run outta spares. *Not* automatic, either—shoot, eject, fire.”

Cinder nodded, filing the information away. *Not perfect, but it'll do.*

“And the handgun from earlier,” she asked, glancing at the counter, “can it take extended mags?”

“Yup.” he said popping the p slightly.

“Then swap those in instead of the standard. Four non-dust. Also, add seven extra mags for the rifle.”

The armorer grinned. “Got it.” He moved efficiently, stacking the requested magazines onto the counter.

Cinder turned toward Jaune. “Jaune?”

He jolted slightly, half-startled. “Yes?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Do you need anything else?”

He hesitated. His weight shifted slightly, and he fidgeted with his hands—clearly uncomfortable with the amount they were already spending.

“I'm not sure?” he admitted. “I don't even know if I *really* need the scroll and sword...”

Cinder barely held back a sigh. *He's too soft.*

“Then trust me when I say you do.”

She would convince him. *Guilt him into it if necessary.* That part would be easy.

She studied him for a moment, her gaze flicking over his worn hoodie and simple jeans. *He also needs proper Huntsman attire.*

The hoodie was... cute, but hardly practical— not for travel, not for presentation and *definitely* not for combat as the pack of creeps had demonstrated earlier in the month. A Huntsman should *look* the part. That got her thinking.

Vale had plenty of high-end shops.

And since she was already planning to replace her own wardrobe, adding a few things for him wouldn't hurt.

Jaune, oblivious to her scheming, was still frowning at the cost of their purchases.

It took a few more minutes before they were finished.

By the end of it, Cinder had a proper travel bag, survival and med kits, MREs, the two new scrolls, and the weapons. The total came out to be a bit more than she expected, but she barely gave it a second thought. Ashlyn Vale's account had more than enough for it, and if not she had half a dozen more that would cover for it.

Jaune, on the other hand, looked outright *distressed* by the amount of lien changing hands.

She arched an eyebrow at him. *He probably had no idea how expensive Huntsman gear really was.* She thought.

This wouldn't even cover the cost of her old dust-infused dresses and sand-dust vials. Huntsmen weren't paid well just because their job was dangerous — aside from the whole life-or-death thing — they were expensive to maintain. Most of that money went right back into *staying alive*. Proper weapons, armor, and supplies cost more than most civilians earned in a year.

Jaune had better get used to it.

“Come on, let's update the scrolls and find the Florentias.”

Cinder reached for the bags, but before she could grab them, Jaune quickly moved ahead, snatching them up before she could.

She arched an amused eyebrow at him.

“Good strength training?” he quipped, flashing a cheeky, lopsided grin.

She huffed but didn't argue. Let him carry them. It was adorable how he framed it as 'training' rather than just an excuse to lighten her load.

They hadn't spent more than an hour or two shopping, but now she had everything she needed to make her way to Vale.

All that was left was convincing him to come with her.

Cinder stole a glance at Jaune as they walked. He was completely absorbed in his new scroll, scrolling through what she could only assume was some Huntsmen database.

She didn't get the appeal. Yeah, the Grimm encyclopedia was useful, but did he really need to download every single recommended app?

He probably *would* have, too, if the CCT connection here wasn't absolute garbage. Instead, he had to settle for the advanced mapping system, the Grimm-pedia, and the 101 Manual for Valean Huntsmen.

At least he was taking it seriously.

They met the Florentias by the pickup truck, the bed already loaded with various supplies and trade goods. Looked like the bartering and shopping had taken roughly the same amount of time.

"Done already, guys?" Lucia called as she adjusted one of the bags.

"Yup!" Jaune replied cheerfully, already moving to place their bags and weapons in the truck's cargo area.

Jorge turned toward Cinder, arms crossed. "Any word on how long it'll take for Chad or Clovis to start culling near the farm?"

"Longer than we'd care for," Cinder replied coolly, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. "Looks like *every* Huntsman in the area got sent to deal with the hordes the Elders started—" *Technically, that I started.* "—so for the time being, the Ravenwing guild is completely out of commission."

She could see the tension in Jorge's posture, the way his jaw clenched slightly at the news. It was exactly what she expected. It was highly unlikely that a settlement would have free huntsmen running around with all the problems the Elders had caused.

So she made sure to add, with an easy, lazy smirk—

"Luckily, I know of a Huntress and her apprentice who are *free* for the day."

She unsheathed her new sword with a flick of her wrist, letting the polished blade catch the sunlight as it slid free from its scabbard. With a casual flourish, she flipped it once, then again—catching it by the hilt as if it weighed nothing.

Jaune, still perched in the back of the truck, froze.

Then, his eyes went *wide*.

Excitement practically exploded across his face.

Lucia, meanwhile, didn't look quite as convinced. "...You sure?"

"Only choice, really." Cinder shrugged. "Even Maggie can't complain now."

Then, she turned fully to Jaune. Her amber eye gleamed, her smirk sharpening into something dangerous and full of promise.

"So," she drawled, leaning against the truck's frame. "Up for some *actual* Huntsman work?"

The way his face lit up was almost comical.

She had him.

Chapter End Notes

We going hunting next boys!

I'm not going to spend a lot of time describing the new gear here since they are getting better stuff when they arrive at Vale/Beacon.

Also new apps for Jaune to have fun with.

Morning Hunting

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Surprisingly, Maggie didn't put up much of a fight about Cinder and Jaune setting out to clear out the Grimm around the farm.

Oh, she had demands—and quite a few threats—but in the end, she didn't stop them.

The first set of rules was expected:

1. No fighting packs.
2. No letting their Aura break.
3. No taking unnecessary risks that could reopen any wounds.

Reasonable enough. Even Cinder had the sense to nod along.

The second rule? They had to be back before dinner.

That one got an actual snort out of Cinder. "I was never good with curfews."

Maggie simply raised an unimpressed brow. "If ya think I'm lettin' you frolic around alone in the woods with the boy at night, you're insane."

Jaune nearly choked on air.

Cinder, for her part, narrowed her eye at the diminutive vet.

Oh, she definitely said that just to mess with her.

But the third rule? Oh, Maggie was downright smug about that one.

"The meringue cake," she declared, arms crossed and chin lifted, "will *only* be made *after* you come back and the Grimm are dealt with. Not sooner. Not later."

She punctuated the statement with a pointed look at Cinder.

Cinder scoffed, clearly unamused, but Jaune couldn't really argue. If anything deserved a reward, it was clearing out the last of the Grimm.

Still, Jaune had a sneaking suspicion that the rule was less about keeping them motivated and more about Maggie winning a petty victory.

It was clever, though. Really clever.

Strawberries wouldn't stay fresh forever. Maggie had set a deadline without actually setting one. If they took too long, the strawberries would be overripe, and *no one* wanted to eat

mushy fruit in their celebratory dessert.

Jaune sighed. *Smarter than a fox, that one.*

Cinder didn't seem to like all the rules, but she had no real choice other than to accept all of them.

That said, he was pretty sure she didn't fight as hard as she could have.

If she really wanted to, Cinder could have argued the whole plan into the ground. But she didn't. *Why?*

Because she knew the truth as well as he did.

This wasn't about the Grimm. Not really. The threat was *minimal* now. This was for the Florentias, for their peace of mind.

And the fact that Cinder was willing to go through with it, without much complaint, just to make sure they felt safer? And Jaune found himself regarding the Huntress even more knowing she would go so far for other people.

So, they spent the rest of the day preparing their packs and getting comfortable with their new weapons. It's not like they could just head inside the forest after coming back from Ravenwing. So they did the second best thing possible – the first in Cinders opinion was the damn cake, but she wasn't going to fight the old lady on that one.

Jaune wished they had more time. Or that he was a bit more coordinated with his new weapons.

His rifle-sword combo was still a nightmare to handle—he barely had enough time to learn how to properly aim, let alone avoid getting his finger caught in the shifting mechanism. Half the time, he missed the tin cans he was using for target practice. *And the damnable things weren't even that far away....*

Cinder wasn't faring much better—at least, not at first.

She was still adjusting to her new depth perception.

Jaune had never really thought about what losing an eye meant for shooting, but it became painfully obvious when Cinder misjudged the distance of her first few shoots.

She covered it well—too well, actually. If he weren't paying attention, he wouldn't have even noticed the small miscalculations. But she noticed. And *that* annoyed her more than anything else.

They then had a simple spar. One focused on movement and blade engagement. Not on Aura hits or even tanking any attacks. It was a simple exercise to learn the weight and reach of their new melee weapons.

He understood why Cinder had brought him a mechashift weapon. And he was really thankful for it too! But he was barely passable with Crocea Mors, and she wasn't even mechashift! He would learn how to use it properly. He also needed to name it. He just wasn't sure how to choose a name. It was a gift from Cinder so maybe she should name it? He had to at least make the name reflect her, right?

What did gramps say Crocea Mors meant? He thought as he repeated various sets of movements and thrusts.

When dinner finally came they were tired but not exhausted enough to hinder their next day.

Cinder made sure he had everything packed and ready. They were setting off at sunrise and she made it very clear that she wanted to cover the entire three kilometer range around the whole farm in a day.

Maybe teasing her about how quick the strawberries would expire wasn't the best idea....

Farms tend to start early, anyway.

By the time they set off, it wasn't even nine in the morning.

Cinder led the way, keeping a steady pace, while Jaune followed a few steps behind— his new weapons secured at his side and back, his Aura full and already up.

He wanted to have his sword and shield fully deployed in hand. It felt safer. Smarter. But Cinder had shot that idea down before they even left.

"You're not used to walking with your shield open," she pointed out. "You'll make noise, snag it on branches, or worse—trip over yourself."

He had opened his mouth to argue, but she wasn't done.

"And while your Aura means you won't *tire* from lugging the sword around all day, it'll still drain your reserves. Best to keep them holstered until needed."

Jaune had reluctantly agreed. Still didn't like it, though.

They walked in relative silence for a while, the morning air crisp and cool. Then—

"Jaune?" Cinder called from ahead, glancing at him over her shoulder.

"Yeah?"

"What do you know about the area's Grimm?"

His stomach dropped.

Brothers... I knew I should've brushed up on Grimm studies.

It wasn't like he hadn't been studying. Jaune still listened to the Huntsmen preparation courses on the training app, and he'd even downloaded the Grimm Encyclopedia back in Ravenwing!

He'd meant to read it—he really had.

But in my defense, it was a ridiculously large file. If it took forever to download, it's probably, like, a massive book...

He cleared his throat. "Uh, well... The most common ones around here are Beowolves, Boarbatusk, Nevermores and Creeps. Boarbatusk are the only ones that don't work in packs—at best, they form small groups when newly formed ones meet older versions."

Cinder hummed, clearly expecting more.

She didn't slow down.

"What's the usual size of their groups? And what about the bigger Grimm in Vale?"

Jaune scrambled to recall what he had actually read.

"Uh, Nevermores tend to travel in groups of at least four. Beowolves... anywhere from five to twelve? And Creeps..." He hesitated. "Maybe four?"

"If you don't know, don't guess." Cinder's voice was sharp but not unkind.

"Guessing is only useful when you have enough information to be sure your guess is as close to right as possible." Then, after a beat, her tone softened. "What was the size of the group that attacked you before?"

"Five," Jaune answered immediately.

"From there, you can make an *educated* guess—Creeps probably form groups around five. That's a decent assumption."

"...Or I could just ask you instead, right?"

Cinder smirked. "Not when I'm the one asking you."

Jaune sighed but nodded, accepting the lesson.

"Now again—what are the bigger Grimm in this region?"

"Ursas, Deathstalkers, King Taijitus, elder Nevermores—" His eyes suddenly widened.

Oh!

That's what she was really asking.

She wasn't just testing him on the ones she mentioned during dinner—she wanted him to think, to recall all possible threats in the area.

"Oh! And Drakes!" he added quickly. "We also have Griffons up north, and Geists can appear pretty much anywhere on Remnant."

Cinder gave an approving nod.

"And which of those work together?"

Jaune frowned.

That had to be a trick question.

All Grimm worked together when hunting humans and Faunus. When in hordes, they even coordinated with species outside their usual territories. *So what's the catch?*

He could guess, but he just got scolded for it. He could ask for her to clarify, but if it really was a trick question that would be the same thing as being wrong. Cinder did love her little tests.

Come on, think!

There were two possible answers he could think of. Choosing between them would be guessing—but combining them? That might be the real answer.

"Tricky question," he started, making sure Cinder knew he understood the underlying idea. Even if he answered wrong, he wanted her to know it wasn't just a random guess.

"All Grimm work together when in a horde. We don't fully understand why, but Elder Grimm seem to have the ability to force them into a kind of symbiotic cooperation—"

He hesitated.

Was that the right term?

Jaune vaguely remembered reading it in the app. Probably should've double-checked before saying it out loud, but it was too late now.

"—While attacking people, most Grimm will fight in groups, but they aren't necessarily coordinating. They move around each other, not with each other. Creeps, for example, are opportunistic—they'll attack any perceived weakness, but they aren't really 'working together' with Beowolves or Nevermores. It still counts in a way, though."

He glanced at Cinder.

She was smirking.

That was a good sign.

"I see those apps are actually useful after all," she mused.

"Hey! No badmouthing my apps!" Jaune shot back playfully, grinning.

He knew he probably spent too much time on his Scroll, but in his defense, the thing had literally saved both his and Cinder's lives. Plus, it had so much cool information! And games. Not that I've played any in a while... actually had to delete a few just to fit all the Huntsmen training apps.

Before he could say anything else, Cinder's arm shot up, blocking his path.

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

"Grimm ahead."

Jaune's breath hitched.

This is it.

"This is your show, Jaune," she said, stepping aside. "What do you do?"

His heart pounded.

Jaune swallowed and took a careful step forward. With a slow, deliberate motion, he unsheathed Crocea Mors.

Stick to what you know.

The new rifle-sword would take too long to get used to. Crocea Mors was faster. Safer.

He flared his Aura, making sure it was fully active—tight around his body.

"Wrong choice."

Jaune blinked, turning toward Cinder.

"Wha—"

A growl.

A blur of movement.

The words died in his throat as a Beowolf lunged at him, claws raised.

The only reason Jaune managed to block in time was Cinder's training.

His shield caught the Grimm's strike with a sharp clang, the impact rattling up his arm. The force nearly knocked him off balance, but he held firm.

Cinder was already moving.

She sprinted forward, her falchion already in hand.

She's going after the rest of the pack.

Jaune barely had time to register that thought before the Beowolf snarled and slammed another claw against his shield.

He gritted his teeth. He had to end this quickly.

Cinder was strong—stronger than him by far—but she wasn't used to fighting with just one arm.

He knew how it frustrated her.

She never said anything – to proud for her own good – but he saw it in the small moments. The frown when she struggled to do simple things—cutting food, tying a strap, putting on certain clothes. There was a reason he started cooking meals with smaller portions, and why he had Lucia help refit some of her outfits to be easier to put on.

She'd never ask for help. But as long as he could offer it, she wouldn't need to.

Which meant he had to finish this fight—fast.

Beowolves were one of the most common Grimm in Vale. This one wasn't an Alpha, wasn't an Elder.

It should be easy.

But nothing in training prepares you for your first real fight.

The panic hit him first. There was no classroom. No tutorial. No safety net.

There was only him—and a creature of pure malice, hunger, and hate, inches from his face.

It slammed its bone claws against his shield again, harder this time. His arms trembled from the force.

Jaune tried to move. Tried to swing. But his body wasn't responding fast enough.

Brothers, it's fast—

Slower than Cinder. But still faster than him.

Move. Move, dammit! His stricken mind ordered.

Instinct. Training. Or sheer dumb luck.

Jaune lunged forward.

A simple thrust from behind his shield— a movement he was forced to repeat to a nausion by Cinder – straight into the Beowolf's side.

The blade sank, piercing the creature's obsidian fur and skin easily.

Too easily. Young Grimm skin was as tough as leather, but anything pointy enough would pierce. But it wasn't their skin that made them creatures of Grimm truly resistant.

He tried to rip it free—twisting and slashing sideways, like Cinder taught him—but it was stuck.

Ribs. It's caught between the ribs. The Beowolf didn't even react to the pain.

The bone plating was a hallmark of the Grimm—pale, unnatural, and in some cases hard as reinforced steel. It formed an exoskeletal armor over their most vital areas, acting as their primary defense against blunt force and direct trauma. Though not as resilient against cutting or piercing attacks, the thick plating could still deflect weaker strikes and absorb heavy impacts. In this case it had bound his blade in between them.

Beneath the armor, their black, sinewy flesh pulsed with barely restrained malice, shifting unnaturally as if it wasn't meant to exist in this world. Etched across their bones were deep red markings—glowing, jagged lines that twisted like veins of raw hatred. Some believed these markings were a byproduct of the Grimm's connection to darkness, a manifestation of their predatory nature. Others theorized that they served as a form of communication, a sinister script written in blood-like embers.

Regardless of their purpose, one truth remained—the longer a Grimm lived, the more intricate its markings became, as if the creature itself was growing more cursed with time.

What the apps didn't say and Jaune had just discovered was that they pulsed. As if with a dark glee the blood markings pulsed every time the creature moved. With every impact or growl of rage that the creature emitted they pulsed. As if spurring the monster on.

Instead of trying to free itself, it reared forwards— driving the blade in deeper —and opened its massive jaws.

Jaune's breath hitched.

It was going for his throat.

No thinking. No hesitation. In a stroke of pure instinct and Aura filled strength Jaune wrenched the blade sideways, tearing two ribs free in the process.

The Beowolf collapsed, its body twisting in an unnatural spasm. But it was still moving.

Jaune didn't stop. He reverse gripped Crocea Mors. And with one hands on the pommel, he drove the blade down, putting his full weight into the strike—

—straight into the Beowolf's neck.

A snap.

The body went still. Unbeknownst to him he had completely severed the creatures spine.

Then, it started dissolving.

The fight couldn't have lasted more than half a minute.

Jaune felt like he'd just gone through a full hour-long training session.

His chest heaved, arms trembling.

He killed it.

I killed a Beowolf!

The thought barely had time to settle before it unraveled.

I killed *a Beowolf*.

He stumbled forward, legs clumsy and unsteady, ready to rush to Cinder's aid—

Only to stop dead in his tracks.

She was standing just a few feet away.

Three disintegrating Grimm lay around her.

Her expression was flat.

"Congratulations," she said in a deadpan tone.

Jaune swallowed, still catching his breath.

"You killed your first Beowolf."

A beat.

Then—

"So what did you do wrong?"

She knelt down, wiping her sword clean against the dissolving corpse of his Beowolf. He felt like it was more of a display of nonchalance than an actual necessity. Cleaning and maintaining one's weapon was, of course, a top priority for any Hunter—especially due to the complexity of mechashift weaponry. But Cinder's sword was simple, a single solid blade with no intricate mechanisms. One she had obviously reinforced with her Aura during the fight. Considering that most Grimm dissolved into nothing but black ash and brittle bone, wiping it down seemed unnecessary at best—yet she did it anyway, as if to make a point.

He let out a breath, steadying himself.

"I let it dictate the flow of the fight..." That was one of the first lessons she had beaten into him — literally, in most cases. A Huntsman should always control the fight. Being forced into a defensive stance, chasing after an opponent, or wasting stamina on unnecessary movements or Brothers forbid, actual Aura? That was a recipe for death. "I almost panicked too. I got in a strike I thought was a killing blow and almost got my sword stuck."

“Very good points,” she acknowledged. But then her gaze sharpened. “But I’m referring to earlier. What was your first mistake?”

He frowned. What had he done first?

Did he make too much noise unsheathing *Crocea Mors*? No, the blade was well-maintained and oiled — so the unsheathing was as silent as ever. Was choosing *Mors* the mistake? No, he had a reason for it. And truth be told, without the shield, the fight would’ve been much harder. He was certain he wouldn’t be standing here unharmed without it. Was it because he chose his weapons without knowing exactly what he was up against? True, if they had been *Nevermores*, he would have been in serious trouble, but that seemed like a stretch. Maybe it was—

“The Aura flex, Jaune.”

He blinked, her words catching him completely off guard. “What?”

She let out an unimpressed sigh. “How do Grimm find people?”

Jaune instantly knew she was leading him toward the answer. Cinder rarely, if ever, gave him information outright. She believed making him work for every answer was its own form of training.

He cleared his throat, repeating what he had read from the *Huntsmen* app. “Most people believe, and it has been proven to a certain degree, that Grimm are capable of sensing the negative emotions emitted by people.”

She simply stared at him, expression unreadable. Then, with a small wave of her fingers, she motioned for him to continue.

And then it hit him. *Oh, for the love of—* of all days, why couldn’t he think properly today?

His shoulders sagged slightly. Dejected, he continued, “They can also sense Aura to a degree. That’s one of the reasons why no Kingdom or settlement just awakened everyone’s Aura by default. If not properly trained, Aura tends to leak out like a beacon, practically shouting for nearby Grimm to come take a look.” He exhaled heavily. With a sigh, he collapsed his shield and sheathed his sword.

“My little flex to make sure my Aura was up was the equivalent of waving a giant torch in their faces.”

She nodded, clearly satisfied with the answer. “That’s one more reason why I told you to always have it on. When kept tight around your body, it won’t make you any easier to detect. But if you suddenly activate it in the middle of a fight? You’re basically setting off a signal flare.”

She crouched down, reaching toward the *Beowolf*’s half-dissolved corpse. With casual ease, she plucked a fragment of its bone jaw from the ashes.

“Every movement during a hunt is a choice, Jaune. No matter how small, you need to make sure it’s always the best one you can make.”

She crushed the brittle mandible between her fingers, black dust scattering in the air. Grimm bones were notoriously weak after death—except for Elders and Alphas.

His lips pressed together slightly. Damn... it was young too. Not fully developed. That meant there were likely stronger ones nearby. And that he was struggling with possibly the weakest of the pack.

She shifted through the fragments and picked up a sharp fang that had survived her grip. Then, with an almost amused smile, she held it out to him.

“You’re a Huntsman now,” she said. Her voice was calm, but there was something in her tone—something weighty.

Jaune stared at the fang, then at her, uncertain what to feel.

“How does it feel, having truly hunted your first Grimm?”

That was the million-Lien question, wasn’t it?

How did he feel? Excited, maybe? His heart was still hammering in his chest, his veins buzzing with the lingering rush of adrenaline. But deep down, he knew this wasn’t really a hunt. Not a real one, anyway. He took down a single Grimm—while Cinder handled the rest. All of them.

Wait.

His brow furrowed as he did a quick mental count.

“Shouldn’t there be more?”

Cinder tilted her head slightly, regarding him with a knowing look. “There are plenty of smaller packs and other species still around. But answer the question.”

“No, I mean—” He gestured vaguely toward the remains of the fight. “Aren’t Beowolves supposed to travel in packs of five to twelve?”

She sighed. Not irritated, but as if she had been expecting the question. “That’s just the common pack size. But packs aren’t uniform. An Alpha could have twenty or more under him. Beowolves that haven’t developed their bone armor yet? They tend to group up in even larger packs.” She nudged one of the dissolving skull fragments with the tip of her boot. “These ones? They were stragglers—leftovers from the Elder’s call. Same as pretty much every Grimm we’ll be hunting today.”

Then, she took a step closer to him, her single amber eye locking onto his. “Now—answer the question, Jaune.”

His hand drifted to his neck in an awkward motion, fingers brushing against the damp collar of his hoodie. “I guess... good?” he tried, though even he wasn’t convinced by his own answer. “I’m not really sure. I mean, I’m happy I was able to take it out on my own, but it felt more like a reflex than anything else. I wasn’t really thinking—I just reacted.” His grip tightened on the strap of his shield, the weight grounding him. “And I left you with the rest of the pack...”

That got a raised eyebrow from her. She didn’t look particularly bothered by the fact that she had handled the other two Grimm alone. *Probably because she’s an A- or S-rank... those weren’t even worth being called fodder, were they?*

He exhaled. “I wasn’t able to support my partner, and I blew our ambush...”

She waved a hand dismissively. “You’re beating yourself up over mistakes anyone would make. And you’re not even giving yourself credit for the mistakes you didn’t make on your first hunt.”

He blinked, confusion clear on his face.

“Talk and walk, kid,” she said simply, already setting a steady, unhurried pace as they continued down the narrow woodland trail.

Jaune hurried to match her stride, still puzzling over her words.

“For starters,” she held up a finger, “you didn’t freeze. Most people do. Even Hunter trainees freeze the first time they come face-to-face with a real Grimm.”

That was... true. He hadn’t thought about it before, but despite his nerves, he hadn’t completely frozen up. At least not like he had with the Creeps. The thing that had gotten him to move then was simple unadulterated panic and pain from the biting he had received.

A second finger. “And you’re wrong about the ‘not thinking’ part.” Her lips curled slightly, almost like she found his reasoning amusing. “The whole point of training—why we drill the same movements and attack patterns over and over—is so that when the time comes, your body already knows what to do. You’re not supposed to be thinking about when to lift your shield, what the best angle is, or how much it blocks your vision. You just think ‘defend,’ and your body takes care of the rest.”

Jaune mulled that over. She was right. It was like walking—he didn’t think about every individual step he took, he just... moved.

But for some reason, he always imagined fights were supposed to be different. That he should be planning every strike, every dodge, like in those old Mistralian action cartoons where the characters narrated their every move before executing it.

He suddenly felt very stupid.

A third finger. “And finally,” she continued, her voice dropping just slightly, “you forgot the most important thing in a fight. As long as you’re still standing at the end of it, you’ve won.”

Her gaze was steady, unreadable.

“No one can hurt you when they’re dead,” she said simply. “And as long as you survive, you can always get stronger.”

Jaune swallowed, shifting his grip on his sword.

Sometimes, he got really scared thinking about how Cinder sees the world.

He supposed it made sense. She was a bounty hunter. Working alone made survival harder, and that probably shaped the way she thought.

But what had happened to make her think like this?

“Now. Your choice of weapons and even tactics—” He barely held back a snort. He knew she was being nice with that one. Letting himself get punched until he found an opening? That wasn’t a *tactic* or a *strategy*. That was just being stubborn with extra steps.

“—were right for Beowolves, Boarbatusks... even an Ursa.”

She turned, her single amber eye locking onto his. Her expression was unreadable, but there was something weighing behind her gaze.

“But what if it had been a flock of Nevermores?” Her voice was steady, but her tone sharpened ever so slightly. “Or a King Taijitu?”

Jaune’s breath hitched for just a second at the thought. His grip instinctively tightened around the hilt of his sword.

He took a second to think. No guessing. Just logic.

“I could tank their feather arrows and try to get closer... if they’re within reach,” he reasoned, thinking aloud. “If they’re too high, I’d have to defend until I got my rifle out. Then I’d try to take a few potshots...” He trailed off before hesitantly adding, “Do they ever run out of feathers to fire?”

“Yes.” Her lips curled slightly at the question, but not in amusement. “But that just means they’ll stop firing—so they can swoop down and peck your eyes out.”

She tapped the side of her scarred eye, her tone eerily casual.

“They tend to go for the face. Eyes, in particular.”

Jaune swallowed hard. A cold shiver ran down his spine as he pictured it—the sharp snap of a Nevermore’s beak lunging straight for his vision.

Cinder had already turned forward again, resuming their steady walk through the woods. She either didn’t notice or didn’t care about the way he stiffened behind her.

“You’re not good enough of a shot to hit a moving target yet, Jaune,” she continued evenly. “So what would you do if you couldn’t land a shot?”

“I *did* say potshots,” he admitted. His voice was quieter now. “I’d mostly be a distraction so *you* could shoot them out of the sky.”

She gave a small nod of approval.

“It’s always good to know one’s place.” Her voice wasn’t mocking, but blunt. “Knowing your limitations is what keeps you alive. Never overestimate yourself in a fight. That’s how people die.”

She hummed softly in thought, tapping her chin with delicate fingers.

“You have more than enough Aura to learn an Aura Slash.” She mused aloud, as if considering it seriously. “That would be an interesting way to give you more range. Even without a gun.”

Jaune nearly tripped over his own feet.

“Aren’t those, like... super advanced techniques?!” His eyes practically lit up.

Just how *cool* would it be to learn an Aura Slash?! Maybe it was his childhood of watching too many Mistralian cartoons, but that and energy blades were some of the most badass things he could think of!

Cinder merely waved a dismissive hand, her expression unimpressed.

“Anyone with Aura can learn them,” she said simply. “All you need is good control and a decent-sized Aura pool.”

Then, her gaze flicked to him again, and she smirked just slightly.

“Jaune, what are the main uses of Aura?”

Back to the quiz, then.

At least she always gave him time to think. He knew of three main ones. But chose his words carefully in case there were more.

“The main ones are defense, semblances, and attacking.” He tried to keep his voice as firm as possible, even as his mind raced, making sure he wasn’t forgetting anything. “We can use our Aura as a shield around our body, as a way to activate a semblance, and to enhance both our body and weapons.”

Cinder nodded along, but there was no hint of approval or disapproval. Just expectation.

Then, without missing a beat—

“Pack of Grimm in front.”

Jaune's breath hitched slightly, but he didn't hesitate. He didn't need to be told twice.

This time, he focused on doing it right. First, he positioned himself to *see* the targets. His feet moved carefully, keeping his stance firm as he scanned ahead.

It was a small pack of Creeps. Four in total.

Jaune started to signal to Cinder, instinctively wanting to coordinate—only to freeze mid-motion.

Wait.

They had never discussed signals. Or hand signs. Or how to communicate in silence at all.

Shit.

Every little thing about this outing was proving to Jaune just how much he didn't know. How much he hadn't even thought about before.

Brothers... I would be a shit leader, wouldn't I?

Cinder was watching him. Patient, but waiting.

No time to dwell on that now.

He settled into his stance, exhaling sharply before drawing his mechashift sword. This time, he kept his movements deliberate. Measured. No wasted motions.

Then he nodded to Cinder.

She barely dipped her head in response, but it was enough.

Jaune wasn't a great shot. They both knew it. But this was the best opportunity he was going to get to test his new weapon in a real fight. The Creeps were bunched together, sluggish in their movements. Small, weak, and utterly unaware of the danger about to befall them.

If he couldn't hit them now, then when?

Creeps were small, reptilian-like Grimm.

They weren't bigger than a medium-sized dog. Short, hunched creatures, no bigger than a hunting hound, but with thick scales and jagged bone plating running down their backs. They were low-tier Grimm. Weak and opportunistic hunters, lurking on the fringes of fights and waiting for easy kills.

Jaune exhaled slowly, shifting his grip as he engaged the mechashift.

With a smooth, swift motion, the sword split apart, gears clicking into place as the barrel extended forward.

The noise was minimal—but just enough.

One of the Creeps froze, its skull-like face snapping toward him.

Well. That made choosing a target easy.

Jaune squared his stance, lifted the rifle, and held his breath.

He lined up the sights on the Creep that had risen onto its hind legs. It's two short limbs barely kept its skeletal frame balanced, but it lifted itself anyway, snarling in an attempt to make itself look bigger.

Big mistake.

Jaune pulled the trigger.

The Grimm exploded in a spray of black gore.

Its broken form barely had time to hit the ground before dissolving.

Jaune barely registered it.

The Creep's plating had been its only real defense, running along its back like a natural shield. But in its attempt to appear bigger and more threatening, it had exposed its soft, vulnerable underbelly.

A fatal mistake.

He didn't stop to think.

His hands moved on instinct— ejecting the spent casing with a smooth click, chambering a fresh round as fluidly as if he'd been doing this for years.

He was done being useless.

The Beowolf fight had been a disaster. A complete shit show, in his opinion.

Sure, Cinder had been nice enough not to berate him for it. But Jaune was painfully aware of the truth. He probably looked like a kid playing pretend.

She was a high-ranking Huntress.

And he had barely handled one Beowolf.

This hunt had to be different. He had to prove he was *worth* training.

The second shot fired, but something went wrong.

The bullet hit its mark—but scraped uselessly against the Creep's bone-plated skull, deflecting off at an angle. Luck was on his side, though. The shot lodged itself into the Grimm's leg instead, crippling it.

Jaune remembered Creeps as fast, skittering little things.

But now?

They seemed almost sluggish.

Maybe it was Cinder's influence. Maybe it was his Aura-enhanced reflexes sharpening his perception. Whatever the reason, he could track their every movement, every frantic claw scrape against the dirt.

The two remaining Creeps were closing in fast.

He could fire once more—but that would leave him vulnerable.

He chose the safer route.

With a swift motion, his rifle collapsed back into his sword.

Jaune exhaled sharply, planting his foot forward before swinging in a controlled arc.

His blade cut clean through the first Creep—shearing off its lower jaw and cleaving through its torso in one swift, Aura-enhanced strike.

The second Creep—smarter than its fallen kin—leapt mid-swing.

Its tiny maw unhinged, rows of needle-like fangs bared—aiming straight for his face.

Jaune didn't hesitate.

His fist shot forward, Aura coiled around his knuckles as he delivered a solid, bone-crunching punch.

The Creep never even landed.

It was sent hurtling backward, crashing against a nearby tree.

The impact was enough to splinter the wood, black ichor spraying from the Grimm's ruptured body.

Jaune stalked forward.

With one final downward thrust, he buried his sword into the twitching twitching form of the Creep he had crippled earlier.

And just to be sure, he walked to the one he had almost put through a tree.

A soft whistle came from his side.

"Much better." Complimented Cinder.

Jaune felt his cheek redden.

Cinder's voice cut through the quiet. "You chose the mechashift this time."

It wasn't a question. But he still felt the need to explain.

"I need to get better with it," he admitted, shifting the weapon in his grip. "And a shield isn't really that useful against Creeps. At least... not now that I have Aura."

Cinder gave a small nod. "Good point."

For a second, he thought she might actually be *pleased* with his performance.

"I'd call it a perfect job... if not for one small thing."

Jaune stiffened.

What did I screw up this time?

Cinder tilted her head. "Did you reload after the second shot?"

...Oh.

Oum dammit.

His stomach sank.

Without a word, he shifted his weapon back, ejected the spent casing, and chambered a fresh round. This time, making sure the next shot was ready before he needed it.

Cinder crossed her arms. "Your weapon—every tool, every trump card—needs to be ready at a moment's notice. Make a habit of keeping track of your bullets."

Then, almost as an afterthought, she added, "Also, grab the casings. You never leave proof behind."

...Proof?

Jaune frowned slightly but didn't argue.

Technically, he *wasn't* supposed to be exterminating Grimm with Hunter-level equipment. But who in the Light's good name would actually give him a hard time about it?

Still.

Cinder told him to do it, so he did.

Maybe she's just eco-friendly?

Jaune shook his head and focused back on the path ahead.

The day had barely started.

They'd already taken down two small packs.

And he was sure—before dinner came around—he'd have plenty more chances to prove his worth.

Chapter End Notes

Gonna have to split this chapter in two.

It's already a few words short of 6k and I barely got started on what I wanted to do with this one.

I would love feedback on the fight scene. It's pretty much the first I made. I wanted it to show that Grimm are indeed dangerous, and having a bit of training may get you up to fighting the smaller weak ones (Creeps), but the more common (Beowolfs) are still very much a treat to Jaune.

P.S: I like the idea of having an elder Creep at some point. One that is actually dangerous, what do you guys think? To silly?

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