

Dinner with Nemesis

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Dinner with Nemesis

by [fictetus](#)

Summary

Jaune's trip to Atlesian restaurant takes the turn for the worse when he accidentally stumbles on disguised Cinder Fall. Now, stuck with her for the rest of the evening, he becomes curious what truly lies in the heart of his enemy.

Notes

My first work. Had a bizarre idea and I knew none else would post something like this.

Aperitif

Jaune was bit nervous. Alright he was really nervous. He was standing in the lobby of Atlesian restaurant in Vacuo. When he entered the room he felt like he traveled through portal back in time. Time before Salem attacked, before they lost the Relics, before he killed Penny, before he fell. It was definitely Atlesian, that's for sure.

It was a large circular room with large double doors leading forward, presumably to the dining hall. On his side was what looked like large reception desk with several elevator doors next to it. Room had beige colored walls, adorned with rectangular Dust wall lamps. Beneath each lamp there was a painting, some portraying tundra landscape of Solitas, other portraying Atlesian landmarks and its famous historical figures. He felt like a fish out of water there.

However, there was another reason he was nervous and that was Weiss. Going out for a dinner in this extravagant restaurant was her idea. "It'll be like going out to see the movies with Oscar, bit of a hanging out with friends." When she said that, he expected they'll go to some local Vacuan diner, not... this. And plan was quickly falling apart. It was suppose to be Weiss, Ruby and him just hanging out, but Ruby cancelled just an hour ago. Mandatory weapon maintenance she said... it's gonna take entire night she said. Maybe Ruby chickened out when she realized where was Weiss bringing them.

Unfortunately for him, he was an Arc, so he had to keep his word. So high end Atlesian restaurant or not, he was gonna hang out with Weiss. He dressed as fancy as he could, which in his case was short sleeved orange dress shirt tucked into dark blue trousers. He wore dark leather belt with crescent moon buckle. It's funny, he tried to ask Weiss for a date so many times during their time in Beacon and this was as close as it was gonna get. Dinner between friends derailed by Ruby's absence turning into pseudo date. He cringed thinking about it, it must be awkward for Weiss.

Speaking of Weiss, she was still absent. They were suppose to meet at 8 o'clock and looking at his scroll it was ten minutes past 8. Of course, lady cannot really be late, he just arrived early he supposed. He felt awkward looking at people passing by him. There was a surprising number of people in the hallway. He recognized some as Atlesians, probably yearning for familiar flavors of their cuisine. Others were Vacuans and Valeans. They wanted to feel what is like to be an Atlesian for a night, cynical part of him thought. More likely just curious about fabled Atlesian cuisine, varied and extravagant. Some walked directly through the double doors while others spoke with the staff at the reception desk before going up the elevator. There were probably more dining halls on the upper floors.

Maybe he made some kind of faux pas, he didn't know Atlesian restaurant etiquette. Maybe he was already suppose to be in the dining hall and secure the table. Maybe Weiss was already there waiting for him. Weiss would have likely contacted him if she was already in the dining hall, but then again maybe she assumed he understood how it worked.

Just as he was about to torment himself with more worst case scenarios he saw a glimpse of white ponytail in the crowd of people entering the building.

"Weiss, over here!" He half shouted. She ignored him. Yup, he definitely unknowingly made some kind of faux pas. He half shouted her name again only to be ignored again.

She confidently walked towards the reception desk with her back turned towards him. Was that something he was suppose to do before she arrived? Was he suppose to secure the table there? If that's the case it was definitely a mess up on his part. Although how was he suppose to know that, he had never been in Atlesian restaurant. She was definitely acting childish.

He hurriedly approached her. She wore a dress different than usual. Instead of her usual white, she was wearing a long black dress. It had short, somewhat puffy sleeves. She had long dark blue silk gloves, although they differed in size. Right glove reached up to her elbow and ended with decorative flower cuff. He wasn't quite sure what kind of flower it was, it kind of looked like a lily. However, her left glove completely covered arm, ending somewhere beneath the sleeve of the dress. There were several dark blue sashes wrapped around her stomach, ending with thicker sash at her waist. Looking closely at her now, she also wore a different hairpin. It was similar to her usual snowflake, but now black and glassy instead of white. No wonder it took her so much time to get ready, this was a completely new side of her.

He grabbed her left arm. "Come on Weiss, don't be like that. I didn't know I had to make a reservation." Something didn't feel right. Sensation under his finger was foreign to him. Instead of feeling human warmth beneath the glove, it felt rough and cold, almost as if he grabbed a tree branch. It reminded him of Grimm skin. He quickly noticed another discrepancy. Instead of having Weiss' diminutive stature this person was at most few inches shorter than him. No amount of high heels would make Weiss that tall. Situation was definitely taking a turn for the worst, he just grabbed someone else thinking it was Weiss.

Not Weiss then turned around and situation somehow got even worse. Her eyes were bright orange, but color texture of her iris kept changing. He felt like was looking at flowing lava, brightness of her orange rippled with golden yellow. Her eye hypnotized him, peeling away his psyche and bringing to surface some memories he suppressed during the decades he wandered the Ever After. He remembered that eye looking back at him with apathetic gaze. He remembered looking up to it as he laid down on the floor. He remembered the destruction it wrought and power it held. There was no doubt in his mind, no matter how hard she tried to disguise it, Not Weiss was Cinder Fall.

Her brow was furrowed and jaw clenched. She was clearly annoyed at his act but desperately tried to keep her composure. Upon looking closely at her face to face he noticed that her neck was covered by silk dark blue choker and the left side of her face was fully covered by her white bangs. Latter further confirming his suspicions about her true identity.

"I would appreciate if you let go of my arm Sir" She asked with fake politeness, hiding her annoyance as best as she could.

"I don't think that's happening Cinder" Her eye widened, she didn't expect him to recognize her so easily.

However, her momentary shock quickly turned into her signature smirk. "So what is the big plan? Are you gonna shout that nefarious Cinder Fall is in the room and hope someone

believes you? Or maybe challenge a Maiden to a fight with your bare hands? I do wonder why did Ozpin make you a Team leader with decision making skills like that."

She was right, he really didn't think this through. Any attempt to challenge her would result in him either looking like a lunatic or ending up dead. At best he could bargain with her somehow. Why would Cinder Fall turn up in Atlesian restaurant in the middle of Vacuo? What would make her risk coming into enemy territory? "It has to be a meeting of some kind, she is here to rendezvous with escaped Crown members." He thought to himself. That meant that he can still somewhat turn this around by ruining that meeting.

"Tell me what would happen if I took off your glove and revealed your Grimm arm to everyone present?" He challenged her, grasping the tip of her glove between his fingers. It wasn't the brightest idea, but it was his best bet in the current situation. She could either let him leave or risk her meeting being compromised if she attacked him. Whichever option she chose, her plan for tonight would be foiled. Worst case scenario, he'll die but at least others will know Cinder infiltrated Vacuo.

"Ma'am is this person bothering you?" Receptionist asked, unaware of their current standoff.

"Come on Cinder, what is gonna be?" He whispered to her.

She smirked. "Of course not, this gentleman is my partner for tonight. He is just bit clingy, It has been a while since we last met." She gestured at him with her right hand, de-escalating the situation. What was she doing?

"Reservation for two on the top floor under name Regen." She added. Receptionist looked down to his computer to check the list of reservations. She roped him in. He was tempted to take off her glove and end the charade right there and then, but he felt circumstances were still in his favor. If they were in crowded restaurant she couldn't attack him without someone else noticing and if he was with her then she couldn't meet whoever was she suppose to meet if was a reservation for two.

"It's a valid reservation, can I see your scroll ID Miss Regen?" Receptionist asked, upon which Cinder gave him her scroll. Of course Miss Regen probably didn't exist, but creating a scroll with fake identity would probably be a child play for someone like Watts. There was a also a possibility that Cinder killed someone and stole their identity.

"Miss... Bleiss Regen... proceed to the last elevator to the left. I hope you and your partner have a pleasant evening" Upon hearing that Jaune chuckled. Unbelievable, his nemesis was dining in the heart of the city while introducing herself as Lien store Weiss. Although more absurd part was that he was her reluctant partner for the night. They walked up to the elevator they were instructed to, Jaune still holding her left arm. Cinder took her scroll and held it in front of elevator's console, upon which elevator door opened. Must have been some kind of authorization to once again confirm her identity. Security in this place seemed bit excessive.

They walked into the elevator and after elevator door closed he felt a burn on his fingers holding Cinder's left arm. "I would appreciate if you kept your fingers to yourself for the rest of the night." Fake pleantry masking a threat. He let go of her arm. He looked around the elevator, in top corner there was a camera giving him at least semblance of safety.

Elevator door eventually opened, but instead of revealing a busy dining hall it was an empty room. In the center of it was round dining table, less of a traditional table and more of a metal cylinder. Next to it there were two chairs, they were white with tall splat. Above the table there was a large circular Dust lamp, giving the room some dim light. Three walls of the room were beige similar to lobby he was in minutes ago. However, instead of a regular fourth wall, there was a glass wall, giving them magnificent view of the city of Vacuo and desert beyond.

Jaune then heard the noise of elevator doors closing behind them and that was when he realized his miscalculation. He thought they were gonna dine in crowded hall, where he could put her in unfavorable position with his presence. Situation was quickly getting out of his control.

"I can sense your confusion. You have clearly never been in Atlesian restaurant." Cinder remarked while walking towards the table. "Unlike Vale, where going to restaurant is family activity, in Atlas it is more of an extension of business aspect of the city." Jaune started panicking, this was not suppose to happen. He tried to press the console of the elevator, but it didn't respond.

"Have you forgotten how we got here? Only way in or out is with my scroll's ID. I suggest you sit down." He turned around to see Cinder already seated. It appears he didn't have much of a choice. Walking towards his chair he glanced around the room. Unlike in elevator, there were no cameras visible in the room.

"As I was saying, restaurants in Atlas were used as a place to meet business partners or negotiate potential deals. To ensure secrecy of those meetings, restaurants in Atlas gradually developed special rooms for such clientele. What you saw on the ground floor is regular restaurant while special rooms are on upper floors." Cinder explained. "At the end of the day, it is Atlas. Powerful stay on the top while the rest huddle at the bottom." She finished, vitriol present in her tone. Although he had to agree, this restaurant truly was miniature version of Atlas.

If it was a room to ensure secrecy, then it probably meant it was cut off from the rest of the world. He was curious how screwed he was. "So there are no cameras and I assume room is soundproofed and scrolls cannot be used to communicate with the outside?" Jaune asked her.

"You are catching on. Also glass is one way mirror. Minimal surveillance from the outside, but that is why it requires several ID checks to know who is inside of the room." She continued. It made sense, of course Atlesian big shots would want to prevent details of their business deals getting out. Which left one more question about this place.

"How do we get food in here?" If there is a way for a waiter to enter the room he could still try to escape or at least raise an alarm.

Cinder then plugged her scroll into the side of the table. After a bit of delay hardlight screen showed up in front of both of them. "By plugging registered scroll into restaurant's network. Using this screen you order a dish or drink..." She then pressed several buttons. "Which sends the signal to the kitchen and then they send us what we ordered once it's done." As she was saying that table opened up revealing a small elevator shaft beneath it. Inside of it, serving

platter slowly rose up carrying a bottle and two glasses. "Voila, Atlesian gin, straight from the ground floor." After removing it from the platter, it moved down the shaft while table returned to its original state. Fully automated service. So that was another one of his plans out of the window.

She poured two glasses of gin, keeping one to herself and handing other to Jaune. "So, what brings you here Arc? Is your side getting so desperate that you are now patrolling restaurants in hope of catching me? If I went to Mistrali restaurant instead, would I have ran into Little Red?" His eyes rolled at her droll.

"Merely a joke. I know you are here because of a date with Schnee. I gathered that much when you grabbed my arm like a gorilla." Jaune cringed at her remark. Maybe it was for the better that person he grabbed wasn't Weiss. She would probably think of him as a caveman if he did that to her. But Cinder's assumption was ridiculous, it was clearly not a date.

"For your information, it's not a date and Ruby was suppose to join us." Then he realized something, Weiss was probably waiting for him in the lobby, worried about his absence. Jaune pulled out his scroll and went through the messages.

"My my my, throwing a Schnee under the bus like that. How devious Arc. Although, perhaps not a bad idea." She continued her ridicule while he frantically checked the messages.

"8:15 PM Weiss: Jaune, I'm afraid I have to cancel. It appears I have some kind of food poisoning. Lousy Shade Academy health and safety standards."

"8:16 PM: Weiss: I'm sorry for not informing you bit earlier. I've been in compromising position for the last ten minutes. Yang said we are now basically a couple because of it."

"8:17 PM: Weiss: Hopefully there'll be another opportunity for two of us to go out."

"8:17 PM: Weiss: As friends of course."

He breathed a sigh of relief. At least Weiss wasn't pointlessly waiting for him. Perhaps that was to his detriment. If Weiss was actually in the lobby she might have enquired about him and realized he was taken by supposed Miss Regen. Or maybe not, there would be no reason for her to assume tall white haired woman was actually Fall Maiden in disguise. She would have probably assumed he was a shitty friend that ditched her as soon as she was ten minutes late. Maybe he truly was devious.

At least that was one loose end tied up, which left him with much bigger issue: He was still stuck in the room with Cinder Fall. He didn't know what she wanted and why was she even humoring his presence instead of disposing of him as soon as they entered the room. All he could do now is bide his time. Best case scenario, she would let him go when the night is done and he would relay any useful bits of information he learned to his allies. Worst case scenario, he won't even make it to the appetizer.

His musings were interrupted by clank of glass. Cinder clanked her glass of gin with small black glass rod to draw an attention to herself.

"I assure you, scheming will do you no good Arc. Your scheming is the reason you are stuck here with me in the first place." She smirked at his unease. "You cannot defeat me, you cannot outsmart me, most you can do is the same thing I am doing, trying to enjoy this night however bizarre it is." Upon which she rose her glass "Cheers Arc." As arrogant as ever. But she was right, he was running out of options.

He looked at his glass of gin, reluctantly raising it. "Cheers." Stating with exasperated sigh.

Jaune pressed his lips against the rim of the glass, before putting it down without taking a sip. Why would she want him to drink with her? Was this some kind of plan to lower his guard and get information out of him? She took a big sip of gin before looking at him inquisitively.

"What is it now? Do you think I poisoned the gin? If so, I assure you..." She took another sip. "...I neither have poison immunity nor interest in getting rid of you that way."

He gave her distrustful look. "I don't understand why do you want me to drink it? What do you gain out of it?"

"Gain out of it? Oh Arc, you watched too many movies. Alcohol merely lowers inhibitions, it cannot make you do something you are opposed to. While it would be amusing if you told me the identity and location of Summer Maiden, I highly doubt it will happen even if you drank the entire bottle." She took another sip.

He looked down at his glass, surface of the transparent liquid was subtly rippling, miniature sea within the grasp of his hand. Slowly he lifted the glass and once again pressed its rim against his lips, this time letting the clear liquid pour into his mouth. At first he tasted nothing, for a second he thought Cinder had pranked him and poured him a regular glass of water. Then the flavors started pouring in, he felt tinges of bitterness mixed slightly stronger herbal flavor. In the background he felt piney flavor mixed with bit of sweetness. Overall it was an interesting flavor, like someone distilled the scent of forests of Anima's far north into the drink. Jaune took another sip, much to Cinder's amusement.

"So, is it to your liking?" She asked him. Jaune looked back at her. Cinder's half full glass was on the table while she was resting her chin on her right hand.

"It's interesting, I can see why Qrow drinks."

She chuckled at his remark. "Do not get used to it. What you drank is one of the finest Atlesian bottles. Almost a relic considering Atlas is now a rubble." He flinched at her Atlas comment. "On the other hand, stuff Branwen drinks might do him in before any enemy manages to do so." She then licked her lips. "It is simply incomparable." This whole thing was just a massive power trip for her. She had him seated in front of her and he couldn't do anything about it. All he could do is listen to her endless gloating and insults. No, Jaune wasn't gonna dance like the puppet on the strings.

"Is taste of power that intoxicating to you? Is this why you go to such lengths to taste it?" Jaune glared at her. Cinder's features quickly hardened, going from flirty and relaxed to tense, almost ready to pounce.

"It is a path I was put on Arc, do you bother other people with choices Destiny made for them?" Cinder bit back.

"Don't you dare pin this on Destiny!" Mood quickly soured between two of them. It was inevitable, there was too much bad blood between them. Destiny served as a reminder what she took away from him.

"Oh I see, Nikos. Do you really think Destiny only serves as a force of good? Just as Nikos was put on her path to serve justice, I was put on my path to seek power." Excuses, more crappy excuses.

"So that's it? You get to do whatever you want and then blame it on Destiny?!" Jaune was growing agitated. He wanted to believe there was some reason to her madness, that she didn't just seek destruction.

"I don't blame it on Destiny, I simply accepted it as the only path I can take forward." Jaune was done with her cryptic nonsense. He wanted to see what was beneath the surface. And to do so, he was gonna have to scratch her a bit.

"Look, I'm sorry you mommy didn't hug you as a kid, but could you stop killing people?" He sneered at her. Bad choice of words. Just as he said that her left glove was torn to shreds by rapidly extending Grimm arm. She grabbed him by the jaw and slammed him to the ground, toppling the chair. He felt the rough texture of her Grimm arm against his skin.

Jaune momentarily blacked out from the shock of the impact. When he opened his eyes Cinder was standing above his prone body in domineering position, right eye flaring with Maiden fire and Grimm arm still latched to his jaw.

"I don't know is it sheer stupidity or foolhardiness that compelled you to say something so utterly idiotic." She spewed venom with every word. Fingers of her Grimm arm started raking his jaw while arm was slowly retreating back. "Please tell me which one is it Arc? Are you really such a failure with the death wish that you want me to murder you right here?" She asked him with a wicked grin. It was as real as her pleasantries in the lobby. So he really did hit some kind of a sore spot.

Jaune touched his jaw feeling tingling sensation left by her talons. He slowly rose up. "Maybe I am, but how long is this charade gonna last? You have no interest in answering any of my questions. Just kill me and get on with it. Bon appetit, or whatever they say in Atlas." He looked in her direction only to realize she was returning to her seat, arm fully retracted and Maiden fire in her eye extinguished. Shredded ribbons scattered across the floor were the only thing remaining of her left glove.

"I did not put you out of your misery when you denied me Winter Maiden power, you really thought this childish jab was going to work?" She sneered at him. That was surprising, for one reason or another she kept him alive. It made some sense, easiest way for person to feel powerful was to have someone weaker next to them. He was a glorified punching bag.

"Yet you lashed out at it anyways." Jaune stated while slowly rising to his feet.

"What can I say, I have low tolerance for buffoonery." She was clearly dodging the subject.

"Then you won't mind if I continued prodding at your past?" He lifted his chair from the ground and put it back into its original position before sitting down. No, Jaune wasn't gonna accept being a punching bug.

"What is in for you anyways? It will not change anything. At the end of the day I will still attempt to seize all Maiden powers and you will still attempt to stop me. I walk my path, you walk yours." Jaune adjusted his hair and looked at Cinder. She was surprisingly somber. Her mood drastically shifted during their altercation. She took another sip of the gin.

She was partially right, there was no point in pressing her... yet. But his cheap jab did somewhat nick her mask of superiority. Instead of using her usual clever insults, she resorted to physically overpowering him. She seemingly had no interest in killing him, at least for now, giving him some leeway. He finally got a purpose to fulfill during this dinner. Instead of simply sitting and hoping for the best, he was gonna peel away her mask completely, bit by bit. Jaune took a large swig of gin before jokingly remarking.

"So, shall we continue our dinner?"

Appetizer

Chapter Notes

Well, here is an update. I'll try to get chapter 3 released next week, although it's not going as smoothly as previous two chapters.

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

"So, shall we continue our dinner?"

"Surprisingly jovial Arc. Perhaps you hit your head bit too hard when I slammed you against the floor." Cinder tapped a button on her hardlight screen. "But I do agree, let us proceed."

Options on his screen changed as well, offering a selection of appetizers. Every item on the list sounded like an Atlesian word soup to him. He probably could have asked Cinder what each item on the menu was, but he didn't want to admit his cluelessness.

Eventually, Jaune gravitated towards something he recognized. He could recognize a word for potato in any language of Remnant. You can't go wrong with anything potato related. He pressed the button for Kartoffelpu... whatever.

He glanced back at Cinder, it seemed like she finished her order as well. He wondered what she ordered. Well unlike him she probably knew what those word soups actually meant.

He started wondering a bit about his unlikely dinner companion. What was she doing here? His initial assumption was that she was using this dinner to meet with her Vacuan allies and hatch some evil scheme to seize Relic and Maiden powers. Her fake identity and secretive nature of this restaurant played well into that hypothesis. But it didn't make sense with her demeanor, there was no way she'd be this flippant if this dinner was part of some kind of major plan. Yes, Fall Maiden was unpredictable foe and she did previously underestimate him, but still.

"Why didn't you kill me? Nobody outside would have known it happened." He prodded.

"What is with you obsession with death Arc? Is it not instinct of all living things to preserve their life? It appears you are defective goods." Nothing new it seems, she disguised her motives with petty insults. There was probably some much grander plan beneath the surface and she of course wasn't inclined to tell him the details.

Then he got a ridiculous idea, maybe there was no plan. It sounded so silly, but it somehow made sense.

"This was dinner reservation for two." Jaune asked her carefully.

"Two chairs, two people. Am I suppose to praise your first grade math skills?" She mockingly retorted before making a several slow claps.

"It's nice to be appreciated." He played along with her droll before continuing. "It's a reservation for two, yet there was nobody there with you in the lobby." Jaune eventually concluded.

"I see. Enlighten me Arc, who is my mystery partner who's spot you took?" Air of mockery still present in her voice, although she seemed genuinely interested in his answer.

He went through the list of potential candidates in his head. They were informed about notable Crown members by Team CFVY and SSSN and he had some knowledge about other members of Salem's inner circle.

"I don't think it's either of Asturias siblings. They hate technology and all things Atlesian. There is no way they'd accept a meeting in high end Atlesian restaurant that requires excessive use of scroll." She nodded at his reasoning.

"Correct. Although a bold assumption I would tolerate those brats in any setting." Interesting, she seemed to dislike Crown leaders. Although perhaps not so surprising. There could be only one Queen and there was no way Cinder was gonna allow Gillian to take that role.

"Meeting Tyrian here would be ludicrous idea."

"Both ludicrous and one of the least likely individuals I would meet up with in general." So she dislikes Tyrian as well. Jaune assumed they would at least somewhat bond over their penchant for destruction. Maybe they weren't so similar.

"I don't see you meeting Mercury here either. You weren't... the kindest towards Emerald and I doubt you play favorites." Her lips subtly curved downwards at the mention of her former subordinate's name. However, they quickly shifted back to her signature smirk.

"Pawns and Queen are not in the same row in chess. I know my place, they know theirs." At least they knew. Emerald shifted her place to the other side of the board.

"Watts might fit in this setting considering he is Atlesian. But I don't think you'd meet with him this way. Blake told us you had a scuffle with him on the rooftop back in Atlas." Cinder's eye widened at his remark.

"What else did she tell you?" Both of her hands were grasping the edge of the table and she angled herself forward. Talons of her Grimm arm leaving small dents.

"Not much besides that." It was clearly somewhat of a touchy subject, although he didn't understand exactly why.

"I see, so it appears you've ran out of candidates. While not terrible as your math or planning skills, your deduction still has ways to improve." Cinder reclined back into the chair returning to her confident persona.

"I didn't say I was done. I simply eliminated all known candidates. That either leaves me with unknown candidate or my final guess."

"Which is?"

"There is nobody. You for whatever reason reserved a table for two." She bit her lower lip. She seemed almost... nervous.

"And what if I did?" She asked while taking a sip of gin.

He internally facepalmed himself. There was no grand plan or scheme. He wanted to play a hero and accidentally got roped into whatever this was. He could have been back in the Shade Academy dorms if he minded his own business. Although how was he suppose to know that Cinder Fall of all people has a bizarre fantasy of dining in high end Atlesian restaurant with non existent partner.

Sound of table opening up interrupted their exchange. Two plates on platter slowly rising up. On one there were pancakes of some kind, while the other was predominantly green. Cinder grabbed the green dish, which left him with the pancakes. Platter then sank down and table's shutter closed.

Jaune finally realized what he ordered, those were potato pancakes. It honestly surprised him that fancy Atlesian restaurant was offering something so ordinary. Jaune remembered his childhood, it was one of his comfort foods, usually with bacon and eggs. It was nice to be able to unearth some pleasant memories, he felt like his stay in Ever After washed away everything except guilt and regret. Ultimately it was all still there under the surface, both good and bad memories.

"For your information it is Guten Appetit." Cinder interrupted his musing.

"What?"

"When I slammed you against the floor you said "Bon Appetit or however they say it in Atlesian." In Mantle they say "Mahlzeit" instead." She was clearly dodging the subject with her trivia. It's fine, he would eventually get to the bottom of it.

He looked down at his plate. Yeah, they were potato pancakes, but they looked different. Instead of them being stacked on top of each other, each one of the three pancakes was separated and lined up over the length of the elongated rectangular plate. Each one seemed to have a different topping. On one hand, they weren't just serving him quick and cheap meal that would inevitably be worse than his mother's version. On the other hand, he had no idea what to expect.

First pancake was topped with spoonful of white and yellowy sauce on top of it. He assumed former was cream, while not being sure what exactly was the other sauce. He scraped a bit of yellow sauce with the tip of his fork and licked it. It was both sweet and bit sour. He sensed hints of various spices, on top of his head, ginger and cinnamon. It gave him similar feeling as his mother's apple pie, although different in many ways.

Cinder looked at him intently, almost as if she was trying to decipher what was he thinking about.

"Quince." She finally remarked.

"What?"

"Sauce you are eating is made out of quince." It made sense. He only remembered eating quince once or twice during his childhood. Saphron made a quince cake when he visited her in Argus for the first time. Those were simpler times, significantly easier circumstances than during his last visit.

"How can you be so sure that it's quince?" Jaune asked, pointing his fork towards Cinder.

"I have seen that sauce served several times." Her answer somewhat bemused Jaune. She never directly stated that she ate it, only that she saw it served. Despite her seemingly vast knowledge, he wondered how truly familiar was she with eating in Atlesian restaurant. He slowly shook his head. He was probably reading too much into a throwaway line. She probably never ate it because it was not to her liking.

He looked more closely at her plate. It was a swirl of greens topped with large poached egg. Egg was covered with glistening red sauce with small scarlet red pieces within it. She gently sliced across the egg, revealing its runny inside. Red liquid combined with the rich yolk, slowly bleeding over greens below. She stuck her fork in the greens soaked with the yolk and red sauce and brought it to her mouth. Her facial expressions subtly changed, blanking out for a moment, almost as if she was reminiscing something. He was curious what her dish was.

"What are you eating?" Jaune asked point at her plate.

Cinder smiled, bit softer than usual. "It is called Entennest, it means duck's nest in Atlesian. It is blanched dandelion greens." She then poked the poached egg with her fork. "Not sure what kind of egg this is, definitely not duck's egg. Based on its size probably a goose egg." She then licked off the residue from the fork. "Some kind of chili and garlic sauce."

Jaune finally cut the first pancake apart taking a small bite. He was right, white sauce was cream, balancing out sweet, sour and spicy with quince sauce. Pancake was crispy on the outside, but soft in the middle. It was as good as his mother's potato pancakes, as much as he hated to admit it. He quickly took another bite and another, making the short work of the first pancake.

"That was quick, I presume it is to your enjoyment." Jaune looked back at Cinder. She seemed amused, although her expression was without her usual malicious edge.

"It is, it reminds me of my mom's pancakes. You needed to be pretty fast if you wanted to eat them in Arc household." He chuckled reminiscing about his childhood. Mom would wake up early in the morning during the weekends and make a large batch. When Saphron was still living with them, she would grab two of them before going out. But after that, it was almost a free for all. Everyone would eat them as quickly as they could so they could eat more of

them. He remembered once Jasmine shoved so many of them down her throat in quick succession that she had a stomachache for the rest of the weekend. Iris would shove one or two in her pockets while nobody was watching so she could secure them for later. Sandy would chew as loudly as she could to spite him. At most, Dad would intervene if things got too chaotic.

"Oh I see. Brothers?" Cinder asked.

"No, worse, sisters... seven of them."

"Of course." He sensed some sympathy mixed with melancholy in her remark. She took a last swig of gin, emptying her glass.

"It wasn't like that, they were just tiring sometimes." He wished he could see them or talk to them. Ironic part was that woman in front of him was one of the main reasons he couldn't. At least they were safe, he got a message that his family fled to Anima when Salem attacked Vale. He drank the rest of the gin from his glass. It was somewhat soothing his anxiety.

"What about you?" Jaune tried.

"It is... complicated."

"I meant are you enjoying your meal, not... siblings." Jaune was curious about her thoughts. It was a minor thing, but she seemed more genuine when talking about the food. Naturally she avoided the question when it touched the subject of her family. Best he could surmise was that she also had sisters and that unlike him she doesn't have much fond memories of them.

She seemed bit hesitant to express herself. "It is... familiar." Cinder drawled before continuing. "It is bitter, mixed with rich and savory." She described before cracking a small smile. "I like it."

"You enjoy bitter food?"

"It is... an acquired taste." She took a forkful of greens, sheen of yolk and sauce making them glisten. "Besides, it builds an appetite."

He looked at his other pancake. It had a different topping than the first one. It looked like a thick rectangular meat slice, but very light in color. He prodded it with his fork. It was simultaneously both firm and smooth with small bits of something else inside of it. On top of it there were crushed almonds. Overall, compared to relatively ordinary first pancake this one was weird.

Well, it was not gonna eat itself. He sliced it up and took a bite. It was definitely weird, but in the good way. His brain seemed confused what he was eating, it had a texture of custard but taste was meaty and buttery. He felt crunch of almonds and of those small bits he saw earlier, now realizing it were small pieces of dried fruit. And all that combined with crunchy and savory potato pancake.

"It's delicious, what is this?" Jaune pointed at his plate.

Cinder tilted her head to get a better look. "I would say that is liver pate. Atlesians usually spread it on their toast." She remarked before shifting back to her natural position.

Jaune's eyes widened. "Wait, really?" She nodded. "I hated eating innards as a kid, this is so good." Well it probably had something to do with it being prepared by some of the finest chefs in all of Remnant. When Jaune was growing up, they would occasionally have innards for lunch, usually either tripe or sliced liver. He hated both. His father would encourage him to eat more of it. "Best Huntsmen were all raised on liver" his father would say. Who knows, maybe his younger self refusing to eat liver was one of the reasons he was such a lousy Huntsman.

He would eat a bit of it before returning it to the pot while nobody was looking. Then he would pretend he ate his share. He would then scavenge through the fridge for the rest of the day to compensate for not eating the lunch. Sandy would occasionally snitch on him. She really did everything she could to spite him.

Cinder's voice interrupted his reminiscence. "Why am I not surprised you were a picky eater as a kid?" He chuckled at her jab. He wasn't really a picky eater, he just disliked innards. Jaune took another bite of the pancake.

"Unlike you?"

"Yes, unlike me." She shot back defiantly before taking a bite of her greens. So Cinder wasn't a picky eater, or at least would never admit to be one. He quickly finished eating second pancake as well, leaving him with the last one.

Third pancake had a thin layer of what he presumed to be cream cheese on top of it. Layered on top of it were several tin slices of smoked salmon with small garnish of chives.

He only had salmon once before, and that was during his family's camping trip to Anima. His dad caught a large salmon in the river and had it filleted. They then roasted it over a campfire.

He took a bite of his pancake and it almost brought him back in time. It had similar strong smoky aroma, but it was balanced out by cream cheese and potato pancake. Jaune remembered skewering the remaining half of his fillet and putting it back on fire to get even better flavor. It was terrible, he burned it almost to the crisp. His instincts around fire were terrible, always too close, always too careless.

Cinder took another bite of her meal. She still puzzled him. She was responsible for most tragedies that happened to him. Fall of Beacon and Atlas, Pyrrha's death, Penny's de... no, that was his fault. And despite all that, she was sitting on the other side of the table, enjoying her meal.

Maybe the thing that puzzled him even more was he himself. He was surprisingly calm, somewhat content to enjoy the dinner instead of trying to find a way to hurt her. Part of Jaune screamed inside of his head, urging him to attack her. If someone asked him why he didn't do it, he'd probably excuse it on their power difference or gin numbing his body. But deep down he knew that both of those excuses were lies. Despite everything, he wanted to know more

about her. Maybe as morbid curiosity, maybe to familiarize himself with his enemy, maybe something else.

Jaune only worked with fragmented pieces of Cinder's story and he'd have to pry every new piece from her clenched fists. He'd have to get creative in order to get more of the pieces. He had a weird idea.

"So, who is Bleiss Regen?"

Cinder looked tad confused. "It is a silly alias created for infiltration. Are you implying I murdered some poor girl to steal her identity?"

"Would that really be surprising?"

"I suppose not. But no, Miss Regen is entirely made up." So it was an identity she created. That worked well with what he planned.

"Can you tell me more about her?"

Cinder was growing more confused. "Why does my made up identity interest you? For all I care, she is a thousand year old fairy princess living on a unicorn ranch."

"Fairies and unicorns? Come on, those aren't real." She was masterfully avoiding playing his game.

"Up until recently you thought magic did not exist as well, yet here we are." Upon saying that she raised her Grimm arm and flared up her right eye with Maiden fire. He wouldn't allow her to distract him so easily with bait like that. For the sake of his plan he ignored her pinch of salt on his wounds.

"We are having a pretend dinner. You cannot be Cinder Fall, I cannot be Jaune Arc. They are enemies who don't spend their night dining together in Atlesian restaurant. You are Miss Regen and for the sake of this evening I'd like to know more about her." Jaune explained his reasoning. Hopefully she took the bait.

"Fine, let me think about it for a bit." Cinder decided to humor him. She slowly tapped her lip with the finger of her right hand, musing about it. When people lie they tend to base their lies on some truth. So if Bless Regen was truly made up identity Cinder should have nothing to base her on. His best bet was that she would at least somewhat base it on herself. It was far fetched, far cry from his usual output, but it was his best idea in his current mildly inebriated state. But then again, Cinder was in similar position, so perhaps she wouldn't see through his bizarre charade.

"So Bleiss Regen... she was born to prestigious noble family. However, her mother died when she was young. Bleiss' father was worried about her dying as well so he locked her in the tow..." That was literally just Salem's story. She clearly wasn't putting that much effort in it. Maybe his plan was doomed to fail.

"Really? Is Miss Regen perhaps Queen of Grimm in disguise?"

"Oh, so you know she was the Girl in the Tower. Many knights tried to save her from her captivity but..." Cinder continued.

"Aw come on. You can't just plagiarize Salem's story and sell it as your own. Would you put more thought into it, pretty please?" Jaune mockingly pressed his hands together and did a small bow with his head.

"Why not. I could be the Girl in the Tower and you could be the knight that saved her. You could certainly give old fool run for his money with your persistence. Brought together but split apart by Destiny. What do you say?" She extended her gloved hand with knuckles facing forward, as if she expected for him to kiss it.

"Why repeat their story? You know it didn't end well." He had to reject her offer. Jaune hated tragedies. Why would he roleplay a tragedy when it could be given a happy conclusion.

"Fine, let me rethink it a bit." Said Cinder, retracting her arm, rescinding her offer. Jaune had fingers crossed that she wouldn't plagiarize Emerald's story next.

"Bleiss Regen was... raised in orphanage in Mantle. They told her her parents abandoned her when she was born." Cinder started narrating.

"Others in orphanage hated her, although she never understood why. They would often pull her white hair and call her pale freak." She looked up, seemingly musing about the story she was telling. Jaune wasn't sure was it to think up new details or was she just recounting some fairy tale he wasn't familiar with.

"One day, when she was around ten years old, she was adopted by wealthy Atlesian family. She thought she would finally be loved, but they only adopted her for their own interests. Adopting an orphan was seen as a good way to enhance your public image. So they kept her as a pet." Jaune nodded as she narrated.

Atlas seemed to be the common thread regarding Cinder. Her vitriol when they fought against her on the bridge, him finding her in Atlesian restaurant and now she was telling a story how her alias grew up in Atlas. Maybe she really grew up there. It would make sense, she seemed exceedingly familiar with their customs.

"Every moment she spent in that mansion as their pet was agonizing. She only had a single friend, family butler who would occasionally take care of her when family wasn't around. Eventually she decided to escape the mansion. However, when she tried to do it, butler stood in her way as he was worried about her. That day she awakened her Semblance and with it she escaped all of them." She took a bite of egg as she finished the part.

"What was her Semblance?" Jaune asked.

She pondered for a moment before creating faux glyph out of Maiden fire. "Schnee Semblance." Jaune should have seen that coming considering her alias' name felt almost like a mockery of Weiss. Although he was certain real Cinder didn't have another Semblance up her sleeve. "As it turns out, Bleiss was illegitimate daughter of Willow Schnee. To cover it up, Schnees left her at orphanage."

"So kids in orphanage abused her because she looked like Schnee?" Jaune was getting way too worked up over that silly twist. He blamed it on gin, although perhaps he was a theater kid deep down.

"Indeed. But her suffering was for the greater purpose. She had the same gift as they did but her experience made her stronger than them. And eventually she would come to take what was denied from her." Cinder finished the story, dramatically clenching her fist.

"What did she want to take?"

"Everything. She eventually took over Atlesian underground, slowly building herself up so she could one day take everything." After saying that, Cinder finally ate the last bits of food remaining on her plate. Jaune felt like her story shifted back to familiar territory. Cinder Fall desiring everything, how original. Although it intrigued him. Did she seek it because she always had it and wanted more of it at any cost? Or did she do it because she was powerless? It was hard to tell which parts of the story were Cinder's and which parts were original creation. Maybe she was right when she said it was pointless, no matter why she did the things she did, they would eventually fight again. No, he had to know, if anything Jaune was annoyingly persistent.

Jaune took the last bite of his pancake. He was pleasantly surprised, each one being excellent in their own right.

"What about you? Who are you tonight?" Cinder asked him. That's right, he said he wasn't Jaune Arc tonight. He didn't really think that far.

"Naming things has never been my strong suit. Could you come up with name for me?" Jaune awkwardly scratched behind his ear.

"Let me see... perhaps Herbert. Tonight you are Herbert Ritter." She declared. "Now, tell me more about yourself Herbert."

Jaune probably could have made something up on the spot, but why bother. When they fought in Haven Cinder couldn't even bother to remember his name. Tonight was the first time she even properly addressed him. So she wouldn't notice if he just told her his story without bells and whistles.

"Herbert was born in Vale as member of famous Ritter family. His father and grandfather were famous Huntsmen so Herbert wanted to live up to their legacy." Jaune started narrating.

"Astounding." Cinder interrupted. "You called my first story plagiarism, and here you are, plagiarizing yourself. Put more effort into it Herbert." Jaune was genuinely surprised, she knew more about him than he expected. She probably read his file when she infiltrated Beacon. Well in that case his original plan fell apart, he was gonna have to get creative.

"Fine. Herbert was born into clan of assassins living on the periphery of Kingdom of Vale. They were feared, so when he eventually left his clan to travel to the City of Vale people assumed he was a great fighter as well. But he wasn't, he was a fraud. He embellished his

feats leading to many people hiring him to protect them." Jaune started Herbert's story from the beginning. Perhaps Cinder didn't know this side of him.

"What made his clan so feared?" She asked him. Of course that part would interest her.

He had to think about it for a bit. What power would make someone feared. He focused on Cinder for a bit. Is it her overwhelming firepower? Is it her monstrous appendage? Is it her versatility and ability to create weapons on the spot? Last idea appealed to him the most. "Ritters were capable of shaping their Aura into weapons on top of having a Semblance. That made them unpredictable and capable assassins." Jaune answered her question.

"However, Herbert was unable to wield his Aura that way, in fact it wasn't even unlocked. People that hired him assumed he was just very confident when he didn't use his abilities. And his enemies feared his clan's reputation and wouldn't engage him in combat. He gradually became affluent." He continued. Cinder seemed genuinely interested in his story. "One day, he was hired to lead an expedition deep inside Grimm infested territory."

"And Grimm do not fear overconfident fools." Cinder remarked.

"Grimm tore into people he was hired to protect and he was powerless to stop them. Herbert came back as one of the only survivors. Nobody would blame him but he knew it was his fault." It pained him to say it even this way. He was barely any better than Herbert.

"So, what did he do after that?" She interjected again. Her amber eye solely focused on him. Was she seeing through his story? Probably not. Jaune remembered Haven, she mocked powerlessness, she didn't sympathize with it.

"Herbert decided to genuinely help people instead of being a fraud. He started extensively training, eventually awakening his clan's abilities. He also donated his massive wealth to people who truly needed it." Was Herbert redeemed? Jaune wondered. Was this enough for the people he failed to save?

"I see, so how does Herbert fit into Bleiss' story?" Cinder asked rhetorically. "Perhaps he was hired by her enemies to assassinate her, his employers not realizing his deceit." She offered.

"Or maybe he wanted them to work together, to help others with their status and wealth." It was silly, but he wanted both of their made up characters to find peace.

"Ah, ever the optimist. But why would Miss Regen do something like that?" Cinder asked him. Would it really make sense for someone like Bleiss Regen, ruler of Atlesian criminal underworld to help others out of goodness of her heart. Maybe it really was wishful thinking. But then again, he has seen it before. Good people doing horrible things, bad people doing good things, allegiances turning almost on a dime. Why wouldn't it be possible for Bleiss to turn things around as well.

"Maybe Miss Regen had a change of heart. Realizing that instead of using her power to hurt others she could use it to help those in need. To prevent tragedies like hers from happening again." Jaune tried. Maybe it was boring and bit cliché, but why not, it was their shared little story.

Cinder laughed. It wasn't her usual laughter, it had almost manic energy to it. Jaune wasn't sure what to expect. Eventually it died down. "Ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous. But so be it." She grabbed the bottle of gin before emptying it into their glasses. Cinder raised her glass high with Jaune mirroring her gesture.

"For Bless and Herbert, may their cooperation bring prosperity to the world!" Cinder proposed a toast. It was a phoney toast, but so was this entire dinner. And what else would they propose a toast to? What they truly wanted were conflicting things. So why not propose a toast to their silly characters.

"For Herbert and Bleiss, Remnant's unlikeliest power couple!" Jaune one upped her toast. Cinder let out small disbelieving laugh at his toast before downing an entire glass. He didn't expect that. Something irrational compelled him to do the same. He angled his glass taking in more and more of transparent liquid.

It was a different sensation compared to when he drank it in sips. Initially it felt similar, but then he felt the burn as if he drank liquid fire. His lips, his mouth, his throat all felt burning sensation. Eventually it he felt like core of his being was set on fire. But instead of it being painful, it was soothing. Warmth was spreading from his core to every corner of his body.

Jaune looked across the table and noticed a light flush in Cinder's cheeks. She licked her lips, savoring few remaining droplets of her drink. It was intoxicating. He tapped the button of his menu console, returning it to aperitifs. Jaune wanted to feel that sensation again.

Chapter End Notes

Some headcanons:

1. Jaune has excellent deduction skills, but he cannot deduce things he finds illogical. Hence why he never figured out Pyrrha had a crush on him.
2. Neither Jaune nor Cinder are picky eaters. Jaune grew up in household with seven sisters and as a result his mom rarely played favorites when it came down to food. Cinder is not a picky eater for obvious reasons. Difference is that Jaune also has a food he really enjoys, while Cinder doesn't, she is starting to discover things she likes.
3. Jaune can only speak Valean, which I imagine as lingua franca of Remnant. Cinder is polyglot, she can speak Valean, Atlesian, Mistrali, Ancient Valean and can speak a bit of Vacuan.
4. Due to Atlas' wealth and power, Atlesian cuisine has ingredients from all over the Remnant.

Dish Cinder ate is something I've entirely made up because I wanted her to eat bitter food. What kind of egg do you think she ate?

Intermission

Chapter Notes

Originally wanted main course to be one chapter, but then I realized I was at 4k words without dish even arriving. So for the sake of even pacing, I decided to split the main course into two chapters. Hope you enjoy it.

M rating just to be safe. I am flirting with alcohol way too much in this fic.

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

Jaune went through the aperitif menu. Luckily for him, for the most part aperitif names were universal between the languages. He was tempted to order the same gin they just finished drinking, but decided against it. It's not every day that you end up in luxurious Atlesian restaurant with person across of you paying the expenses. Well at least he hoped Cinder was covering all expenses. Jaune wanted to try something new. Whiskey caught his eye, he was curious what it tasted like. Jaune pressed the button on the screen before glancing at his dinner companion.

Cinder seemed amused. "I see you are taking an initiative." She remarked. As she was saying that, familiar sound of table opening could be heard. Platter rose up revealing a transparent bottle decorated with black maple leaf imprint. Inside of it there was a radiating amber whiskey. Cinder picked up the bottle, inspecting the label.

"Immerherbst whiskey, unorthodox choice." She concluded after quick inspection before pouring them both a glass.

"Very pricey choice as well. Hopefully your wallet can take a hit better than you can Arc, otherwise you are going to have an awkward conversation at the reception desk." Cinder smirked. She had to be joking. If not, this was a fairly cruel thing to do. They didn't talk about it, but he assumed she was paying the bill considering this was her idea in the first place. Well, it was Cinder after all, what else did he expect. If she doesn't, then seeing that receipt might actually kill him. Hopefully Weiss bails him out, well if he even gets that far. Who knows what else did Cinder have in store for him.

Jaune's silent grumbling was interrupted by Cinder's loud laughter. "Kidding, kidding, kidding. You should have seen the look on your face, like some kind of angry rodent." Small sigh of relief for Jaune. Although he was still somewhat annoyed at her childish antics.

"Don't worry about the receipt. Due to arrangements of my reservation all fees are subtracted directly from my bank account." Cinder explained. If so, then Jaune had a clever idea. He pressed a random button on aperitif menu, ordering another bottle. Table opened up once again. Cinder groaned at this.

"Fine, you get this bottle as a payback for my prank." She quickly grabbed the additional bottle and removed it from the platter without even inspecting it. To his surprise, she put it down on the floor near her legs.

Jaune tilted his body to the left to see what the bottle even was. He couldn't quite see the label, but he did get a good glimpse of Cinder's legs. They were bare, without stockings. Her feet were adorned with black cone heels. They had a perfectly smooth surface, almost like a dark mirror. Their edges shone with dark glint. Initially Jaune assumed they were made out of polished leather, but quickly corrected himself. Cinder was wearing glass heels. Bizarre, yet perfect item choice to complete the look of disguised Fall Maiden.

Cinder matched his posture, tilting her body to the right observing him curiously. "I see, peeking to see your little vendetta bottle. That is for later." Cinder smiled at him. Funny way to call it, vendetta bottle. Was that all he was ever gonna get? Did his vengeance against Cinder only amount to a single bottle? Jaune glanced back at Cinder. When she tilted her body, white bangs covering left side of her face parted revealing to Jaune what was behind her usual black mask. Maybe Cinder was already in a way paying a price for what she's done.

Cinder noticed him shifting his gaze towards her face, quickly realizing her scar was uncovered. She hurriedly covered her face with Grimm arm before returning to her original sitting position. Her other hand sloppily fixed her bangs so they once again covered left side of her face.

"Do not expect an explanation how Miss Regen got these scars." Cinder was clearly trying to hide her embarrassment. While he never paid much of an attention to Cinder during their Beacon days, he knew her face was unblemished back then. When they clashed in Haven, she wore her signature mask. So Jaune assumed scar was either aftermath of Ruby's silver eyes awakening or something Salem has done to her. Former more likely considering her bitter hatred of the reaper.

"Why do you hide it?" It was a dumb question. Be it vanity or some sense of shame, she wouldn't admit it either way.

"Do you think I should embrace it?" She lifted her bangs with pointer finger of her Grimm arm. Her closed eye was framed by talons of her middle and ring finger. "Embrace I am a monster." Her Grimm arm moved, letting the white bangs cover her left side again. "Perhaps a dragon, devouring everything, yet always hungry for more."

Even with the scar, there was something breathtaking about her look. It wasn't really about her glossy dark hair, currently hidden behind the wig. It wasn't really about her eye, although it was incredibly captivating. What he truly liked about her was her smile. And not that mean smirk she struck while she taunted him, he meant her genuine smile. Small, yet beautiful.

It was a shame she never showed this side of her before. After the dinner was finished, it was also unlikely he was gonna see this side of her ever again. Cinder would go back to her quest, inevitably hurting people around him. It was sad, but in a way also comforting. He got to see human side of his nemesis.

Cinder caught him staring at her. She seemed puzzled as to why. Jaune was hesitant, before finally saying it. "Your scars don't make you a monster. You are... you are still beautiful." It was definitely an odd thing to say to your enemy. But it was true. Her scars were superficial and couldn't take away from her real beauty.

What made her a monster had nothing to do with her appearance. Although Jaune wondered what being a monster even meant anymore. Part of him died the moment he killed Penny, maybe it was a piece of his humanity shattering. Was he a monster like her? Or maybe it was the opposite, scarier possibility of both of them being just human.

"I am not so vain to deny the reality for cheap comfort." Cinder retorted.

"Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Because unlike you, I know what I am." She refused to see herself as anything other than dragon.

"You could be wrong." Why was he even bothering to correct her?

Cinder looked at him, contemplating her next sentence. "Fine." Her fingers unclasped the black snowflake hairpin, letting the bangs of right side fall over her face. She then lifted her left side bangs and pinned them upwards with the hairpin. Her scarred side now fully revealed.

"I want you to look me in the eyes for a minute, without blinking or flinching. If you can say "You are not ugly" after that, I might believe you." Cinder demanded.

Jaune finally took a swig of the whiskey. It was significantly different compared to gin. It had a rich aroma with intense flavor of alcohol. He felt subtle notes of various flavors like vanilla and cinnamon. But most distinct were two flavors. He felt smoke. Unlike more subtle note of smoked salmon, this felt like the smoke he inhaled liquified itself inside of mouth. Other thing was sweetness of maple syrup. Neither flavor was overwhelming the other, they were combined as one. If gin tasted like forests of Northern Anima, then this whiskey tasted like those forests set on fire.

"Fine." Jaune finally accepted. Cinder shifted forward, resting her chin against the fingers of her right hand. Meanwhile her left arm was flat on the table, its pointer finger tapping against table's surface. Her hands were giving off mixed signals, confidence on her right while nervousness on her left. It could be because of the alcohol, but Jaune felt excitement coursing through him. Silly challenge or not, it was one of the rare instances he felt confident he could defeat Cinder.

He finally looked her in the eye. Part of it was now obscured by her white bangs after she shifted the position of her hairpin. It still captivated him. Sphere of bright orange light clashing with icy wave of her hair. Jaune was reminded of sunrise over Solitas' tundra back when they were in Atlas.

But both of them knew he couldn't just focus on her amber eye if they wanted to make it a fair challenge. He had to focus on what she hated, her ugliness. Jaune's eyes shifted towards

the left side of her face. Most of it was scarred, damaged skin extending even over the ridge of her nose. Edges of her scarred patch were jagged, almost as if it was a plaster on decaying building. In the middle of it was closed left eye. It looked uncomfortable.

Cinder's must have sensed unease in his expression, cracking a small smile. It wasn't a genuine smile, it was one of the mean ones. She was smiling because she thought she was winning, confirmation she truly was a repugnant monster. She misread him. Jaune didn't feel unease because he thought she was ugly, he felt unease because she was in pain. Cinder was rebelling against all of her body's instincts to push forward. And for what? What could drive someone to do the things she has done?

Jaune kept looking at her face, unflinching and unblinking. Cinder closed her eyes, but it wasn't out of resignation. She realized her face alone wouldn't be enough to make him back down. When her right eye finally opened it did so together with the left one. Jaune wasn't sure was her eyeball missing or was it replaced by pure darkness. It felt unnatural, like it was draining the light around her. He couldn't even describe it as being black, it was an antithesis of color. Perhaps that was her answer to the question he had in his mind. What drove her forward? Pure emptiness. It terrified him. Were his eyes like this when team RWBY found him in Ever After. But there was no backing down, especially now. Besides Cinder he was now also facing down his past self.

Cinder tried one last trick to unnerve him. Jaune heard tapping sound of her left hand slowly approaching closer to him. Eventually tip of its talon touched his chest, before scrapping down. It was an odd sensation. Her movement felt more gentle and careful, unlike when she raked his jaw at the beginning of the dinner. And yet, it felt stronger, like a small ember touched him. It didn't burn, it just felt warm. She must have expected him to freak out, but it achieved the opposite effect. He felt he was no longer fighting alone. His eyes steeled, intensifying his focus.

She was shocked by his lack of reaction to her Grimm arm. Both of her eyes were slowly closing. Jaune could have sworn gold in her eye lit up for a moment. She took a deep breath before opening her right eye and somberly declaring: "You win Jaune."

Jaune flinched. For the first time he managed to defeat her. It was a small thing, variation of silly school game, but it was a victory nonetheless. But more bizarrely, he was shocked she addressed him by his name. She wasn't feigning ignorance of his identity, she wasn't using some derogatory term, she wasn't using his last name. Ordinarily, this would be even less significant victory than their little standoff, but to him it was as if he got a delayed victory for their fight in Haven. Cinder finally acknowledged him in some way.

Outside of his internal victory parade, room fell silent. Both looked down at their empty plates, contemplating what to say next. Liquid courage he got from whiskey seemed to have been expired. Jaune was confused at his actions. Why was he so insistent on refusing to see her as a monster.

"I want us to order a main course." Cinder finally broke through the silence. She seemed equally confused about what just happened. It was perhaps for the best if they just moved on. Jaune nodded at her request.

Both then looked down at their menu screens. Quick tap brought Jaune from aperitif selection to main course. It was a fairly wide selection of to him now usual Atlesian word soups. He wasn't even gonna bother with this one. Jaune pressed a random button, ordering his main course.

Jaune glanced at Cinder. She seemed... happy. Her lips curved into a small smile. Was she smiling at something she was at screen or his cluelessness? He had no idea. She then pressed a button, confirming her order.

Awkward silence ensued again. Cinder took a sip of whiskey. She lacked her usual confidence, her eye filled with unease. He had no idea what to talk with her about.

They could continue their little roleplay, although he felt that story was already concluded. That left him with either asking her serious questions, or pointless small talk. Former would be terrible ice breaker, so he went with the latter.

"You said there is a minimum security from the outside because scroll ID gets checked instead. But they never checked my ID." He decided to ask her some things about the restaurant. Previously she revelled in flexing her knowledge.

She smirked before answering. "When you reserve one of these rooms you first choose what type of arrangement you want. Perhaps I omitted some things. They were used by business partners, but they were also used by..." Cinder paused before letting out a small chuckle, like she was laughing at her own joke. What was the big deal? "They were also used by lovers." She momentarily stopped chuckling before doing it once again. He had to admit, that was kind of funny.

"So custom was created that in case of such an arrangement, only one partner would give their ID." Cinder continued.

"Because if both gave their ID then affair would be obvious and it would give restaurant staff prime blackmail material." Jaune concluded. Cinder's nod confirmed his claim. However, some things still didn't make full sense to him. "But wouldn't the fact that someone is asking for such an arrangement already be sufficient blackmail material?"

"No, because having a lover is fairly common thing among upper class Atlesians. It is an open secret that most of them have lovers. Issue is when details of affair go public, it shatters a fragile illusion of functional family." She explained before continuing. "And that is an essence of Atlas Arc. Its foundation was set on pile of lies and secrets. They are aware of them, but they never cared. Their biggest concern was and will always be how those secrets reflect on them." Venom returned to her voice.

Jaune didn't fully disagree with her sentiment. Atlas was plagued by plethora of social issues before its collapse. But Atlas was also more than that, there were plenty of people just living ordinary lives. Cinder's hatred of Atlas ran deep. Jaune previously assumed she was Atlesian, now it seemed increasingly likely she once lived at the rock bottom of Atlesian society. Bleiss Regen was bastard child of Schnee family, perhaps real Cinder also had some attachment to them. Highly unlikely she was some long lost Schnee. Maybe she worked in

SDC mines, that would be an easy way to develop a grudge against Atlas as a whole. It was hard to say.

While Jaune mused, room sank back to awkward silence. His attempt at small talk got derailed by much heavier topic. Cinder took a sip of whiskey. He tried to once again salvage the mood, this time with something more lighthearted.

"Do you think Bleiss was conceived in one of these rooms?" Such an absurd thing to ask, this must have been liquor talking. Cinder looked at him incredulously. Her cheeks puffed up, almost as if she was gonna spit her drink out of sheer idiocy of his question.

"I'm sorry, you want details on how she was conceived? Do you have some kind of weird Schnee fetish? You obsess over the younger one and now you want to talk about how... how her mother copulated?!" Jaune laughed at Cinder's outburst. Although it was truly an outrageous question, her reaction somewhat surprised him. From her appearance and interactions he had with her, Jaune perceived her as flirty and more... open minded individual.

Jaune expected her to roll with his dumb question, perhaps throw some jab regarding his love life. He didn't expect her to go on defensive. One of the rare times he felt like he had an advantage during the exchange. Current situation entertained him, he wanted to push it bit more further to see more of her reactions.

He hoped for his own good that this room was truly soundproof and unsupervised. Because there was no way he was gonna survive if either Weiss or Winter ever found out contents of this conversation. He suspected even Whitley would be able to kick his ass.

"Think about it. They had a dinner, got drunk before succumbing to their..." Jaune continued.

"Stop, stop, stop!" Cinder's hands were cupping her face, covering her eye. She was embarrassed, yet she was clearly laughing. "No, just no. Your mind is in gutter" She let out small giggle before continuing. "For the record, they use hotels for that. Hotels also have secret rooms." She finished, finally putting her hands down.

"Sorry, my bad." Jaune insincerely apologized before continuing. "After they had dinner and got drunk, they went to the hotel before..."

"I propose a toast!" Cinder shouted, interrupting Jaune's attempt to continue his dirty story.

"What?" Jaune was caught off guard. However he relented. Cinder essentially admitted another defeat. "Fine, toast to what?"

She mused for a moment before raising her glass and proclaiming. "To Willow Schnee's love life, may I never hear about it ever again!"

Jaune raised his glass before downing it together with Cinder. He felt fire again, but different than the last time. Jaune felt less burn and more warmth in his body. Additionally it emboldened him, he wanted to poke her again.

"So just her, others are fair game?" He continued his provocation.

"Why not. Shall we discuss the love life of one Jaune Arc?" Ah, there it was. Perhaps he wasn't the only one emboldened by the whiskey. This might be disastrous.

"Ah, I hate to disappoint you, but there are no interesting stories about him... doing it in restaurant. Or hotel for that matter." Jaune tried to steer away the conversation. Hopefully lack of spice would disinterest her.

"Oh don't worry Arc, I am under no delusion that you are some kind of magnet for female companions. But sometimes absence of object is more interesting than object itself" Oh, she wasn't interested in spice, she was interested in taking shots at him.

"For your information, I do attract female companions. Back when we were in Mantle, I had several women asking for my scroll number. One even gave me a casserole." Jaune had to defend his honor, although there wasn't much to defend.

"I'm sorry, is that some kind of slang I am unfamiliar with?" Jaune chuckled internally at her question. As much as it would be funny to pretend he had an affair, he knew there was no way Cinder would believe him.

"No, actual casserole." He proudly proclaimed. It was silly, but it was also a fond memory. He wished things could return to simpler days when he was just monitoring the crosswalks.

"Well in that case your love life certainly improved compared to your Beacon days." Cinder retorted. Jaune was curious, how much did she know about his Beacon days.

"What are you talking about? I was doing fine back then." Was it the dress incident? Between infiltrating Beacon and collecting information about teams and Amber, there was no way she had a time to keep up with his misadventures. It had to be the dress incident.

"Really? Endlessly chasing the tail of your Snow Angel is something you define as fine?" Oh, so she knew about that. Cinder continued. "Annoying her in cafeteria, endlessly asking her for a date, not to mention that crime against the sound you've committed."

"You mean the serenade?"

"I know what I have said." She even knew about that. Was her information gathering about team leaders that thorough that she knew every embarrassing thing he did during his time in Beacon.

"And saddest part is that because of that, Jaune Arc never realized that hi..." Cinder halted before she could finish the sentence. She went silent for a moment before continuing. "Also that dress thing at the dance, what were you thinking?"

Ah there it was, dreaded dress. Although Jaune was curious what was she about to say before she pivoted towards the dress fiasco.

"Dress definitely wasn't my first choice for the outfit. I've made a bet with Pyrrha that I would wear a dress if she didn't find a dance partner. How was I suppose to know she

wouldn't find a partner?" Jaune explained before realizing what was Cinder about to say before she made fun of his dance outfit. Jaune Arc never realized that his partner had feelings for him. And she was right, it was sad. It was such a minor thing for him to do, and he failed. All he had to do was notice her, shoulder her burden for a bit. Pyrrha did so much for him and he did nothing for her in return. Perhaps Destiny truly did exist and his Destiny was to endlessly fail other people. He failed Pyrrha, he failed Penny, he failed Alyx, he failed Ruby, everything he ever did ended in failure. What usually held him together was rage, rage against Cinder, rage against Cat, but now he was falling apart. It was all excuses, in the end it was his fault.

Jaune then grabbed the bottle of whiskey before pouring the full glass of it. Drops of it spilled around as he poured. Just as he was about to grab the glass Cinder's Grimm arm extended firmly grabbing his wrist to stop him.

"What the hell are you doing?" Cinder glared at him.

"I was just pouring the drink." He really was, although he omitted why.

"When you pour a drink you pour it to me as well. But that is beside the point, you are thinking something idiotic" Jaune let go of his glass, upon which Cinder eased up her grip. With her other hand she poured the glass to herself.

"Just a sip, don't overdo it." Cinder instructed him. Both then took a sip before putting their glass down. Why was she worried? Was he ruining the mood?

"How does "thinking something idiotic" face look like?" It was all likely just a jab on her part. He assumed every face he made qualified for that.

"You had the same expression you had back in Haven." Cinder vaguely explained.

"Anger?" It was either that or grief.

"In a way, albeit misplaced one." How could his anger at her back in Haven be misplaced? Then he realized what she meant.

"It's not misplaced. Every day I get vindicated that it's not misplaced." What did she know about it anyway. Even if she was at the bottom once, she was powerful now. She couldn't fathom what it felt like to constantly be a burden to others.

"You are wrong Arc. Tell me, who murdered Pyrrha Nikos?" She stopped playing around the subject. "Was it perhaps your arrow? Perhaps your fire? No, that does not sound right." Upon finishing her sentence her eye flared up with Maiden power.

"I failed her in different ways." Pyrrha wouldn't have even been in that position if he wasn't so useless.

"Really? Do tell. Trained Huntsmen and prodigies were falling like flies that night. Raven's brat lost her arm. Oh so precious Little Red needed a miracle to survive. And yet you think you could have turned the tide of the battle if you... trained a bit more? Such arrogance Arc."

"So I'm suppose to excuse myself because I wouldn't have mattered either way?!" No, that was idiotic. Only reason they even got this far was because they refused to give up even when everything seemed hopeless.

"No. What I am saying is that it was all Destiny. My quest for power is Destiny, Nikos' sacrifice was Destiny, tragedies you suffered are also Destiny. You shouldn't blame yourself for something that was preordained." No, no, no. She was using Destiny as an excuse once again. He wouldn't have it.

"Stop using her against me!" Jaune screamed.

"No Jaune, you are using her against yourself!" Cinder shouted back. "You blame yourself for something I have done. Stop hating yourself, hate the world, hate ME!"

"Why do I need to hate you?!" Why does she insist on being monster of his story? Why couldn't they understand each other?

"Because otherwise you will crumble. You keep trying to find beauty in this ugly world. You will endlessly disappoint yourself. Girl in the Tower wasn't saved by the love of her savior. Hate is easier, it is safer. As long as I live you will have a purpose." She was trying to help him in her own twisted way. But he couldn't accept her advice, he would rather crumble than reduce his purpose to revenge again.

"No, I've already spent a decade hating someone. I felt empty, there is no purpose in hate." Jaune couldn't afford to sink back into emptiness he saw in her eye. He refused to blame others or accept any other easy solutions. Penance was the only choice.

"Decade? What the hell happened to you?" Cinder was genuinely confused. Jaune silently looked down. It was all he could muster. "I see, fair enough." She interpreted his silence. He kept his secrets, she kept hers.

They reached a stalemate, neither side willing to budge.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanons:

1. Jaune and Cinder are both self loathing individuals, but in different ways.

Cinder believes in predetermination which invalidates her choices. So she doesn't blame herself for what happened to her and what she has done., but she accepted her Destiny is to be loathed by others. So in indirect way she hates herself.

Jaune on the other hand is opposite. He believes everything is in choice and to some degree detests Destiny. So he interprets everything bad that happened to him as consequence of his choice, and so hates himself.

2. Both are massive hypocrites in that regard.

Cinder thinks Jaune's self loathing is idiotic since what happened wasn't his fault and it was predetermined. You shouldn't blame yourself for something that was out of your

control

Jaune thinks Cinder's self loathing is dumb. Jaune is willing to extend his hand to everyone except himself, so he refuses to accept others hating themselves.

Main Course Part 1

Chapter Notes

Me: *with exaggerated German accent* Remember when I promised main course was gonna be two chapters?

Readers: That's right fidgetus, you did!

Me: I lied

cuts main course into two more chapters

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

"Can we talk about something different?" Jaune eventually broke the silence. Ironic, this time he was the one dodging the subject.

Cinder gave him a long look. "Fine." She eventually concluded. It was for the best if they avoided heavier topics for now. Their shouting match ended and fragile peace was restored once again.

"What about love life of Cinder Fall?" Risky topic to reinitiate the conversation, but Jaune felt he had a right to ask her that after she made fun of his love life.

Cinder was momentarily surprised before smirking at his question. Question didn't carry the same weight since unlike her with his, he was unfamiliar with her exploits. Best he could do was assume things. Still, why wouldn't he have some fun with it. Jaune took a swig of whiskey.

"Miss Fall has healthy love life, thank you for your concern." Condescending answer, he wasn't buying it.

"Really? I don't remember ever seeing you with anyone."

"You underestimate both my feminine charms and discreetness Arc." Cinder continued smirking. Even with her aggravating personality she was definitely attractive. He might have believed her if her plan for tonight wasn't a diner reservation for phantom partner.

"You are clearly not using them well considering your partner for tonight is yours truly." Bit of self deprecation on his part, but it stung her more.

"One night does not indicate anything. Fox would not be considered a herbivore if it failed to catch a rabbit one day." She quickly retorted. Fox, that comparison suited her nicely. Would he be the rabbit in this analogy? Maybe he was, long time ago, now he was tainted.

"But you weren't hunting. You yourself admitted that there was no partner for tonight. How herbivore of you." Jaune went along with her analogy.

"What is your point?" Cinder glared at him.

Jaune started connecting the dots. Cinder had some ties to Atlas, probably growing up at its societal bottom. She decided to spend a night in Atlesian restaurant, dressing and acting like a Schnee. Despite despising them, she wanted to be like them. She had no partner, yet she reserved a table for two, lovers arrangement. She was familiar with dishes, but always gave almost outsider perspective. She showed genuine joy when she ate. It all finally clicked, this was her wish fulfillment.

"This dinner... it was your fantasy growing up, wasn't it? Jaune finally asked. Cinder's eye momentarily widened before giving an almost a resigned look. Silence was an answer in and of itself, he was right. Despite being in the right he felt awkward about it, almost as if he read her diary or something.

And if this was indeed her childhood fantasy, then there was no way she would have picked him to be her partner. She was alone in the lobby, there was nobody there with her. Everyone who he associated with her had gone their separate way. Emerald joined their cause, Mercury now worked with Tyrian and Asturias siblings, Neo remained in Ever After. Cinder Fall was truly alone.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of table shutters opening, revealing the platter with the main course. He had no idea which main course was his considering he randomly chose it. Jaune waited for Cinder to take her plate. She picked a plate with assorted selection of meat, which left him with fine piece of meat with reddish sauce.

Then he was right, she was bluffing when she talked about her love life. "So, in regards to love life, you are just as lame as me, aren't you?" Jaune tried again with bit of self deprecation.

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far. At least my love life isn't the world's lamest courtly love novel." Cinder went along with it.

"Perhaps, but you also never got a casserole, or anything for that matter." Jaune retorted.

"What is that suppose to mean? Is my worth as potential partner measured through amount of hearty dishes received by admirers?" She was playing dumb. He had to take more direct approach.

"No, what I'm saying is... you are a loner."

"Perhaps I prefer being alone, that doesn't mean I can't get a date." Cinder took an offense at his assumption.

"But if you could, you would, at least for tonight." Jaune continued.

"I CAN, but..." Cinder started defiantly before trailing off. She could but there was nobody, Jaune assumed. After a brief silence she continued. "You know what, this is stupid. One more reference to my love life and I'm taking a bite out of your roast!" Cinder threatened.

"Why are you so afraid to admit you are alone?" Jaune asked her and true to her word she leaned forward, cutting through his roast with her fork before swiping a piece. It had to be incredibly tender for her to be able to do so.

"Really?" Jaune asked in disbelief. She resorted to something so incredibly childish to dodge the topic.

"I did warn you." Cinder smirked while chewing, trying to establish back some dominance. She seemed to enjoy it, licking her lips. Well at least there was no doubt about quality of dish he ordered.

"Tenderness is exquisite, what did you order?" Cinder asked him.

"No idea, I just pressed a random button." Jaune admitted.

"Is this some kind of joke or..." Jaune awkwardly smiled at her inquiry. Cinder quickly deduced it wasn't a joke. "Seriously Arc, I know I made fun of your math skills, but are you perhaps illiterate?" Well, she didn't take a jab at him in a while.

"Rest assured, I was spelling bee champion back in the first grade." He had to defend his honor on this one.

"My, my, such achievement must have compelled Ozpin's to make you a team leader." Cinder joked.

"No, some other things did." His forged transcripts for example. "I.. can't read Atlesian, only Valean." Jaune was bit embarrassed.

"Really? Never read Atlesian literary classic like Fern?" Cinder inquired.

"Fern? Some kind of gardening book?" It didn't ring a bell.

Cinder sighed. "It is a story about Atlesian scholar Fern who ends up making a bargain with Goat Faunus, but that's besides the point. Has it perhaps occurred to you that your Snow Angel would have appreciated you bit more if you read some Atlesian classics?"

"What can I say, I'm a country bumpkin. I've never read foreign classics, but I did read all the fairy tales." He even lived one of them.

"Ah, fairy tales. If only you knew the truth about them when you read them as a kid." Cinder remarked. It was ironic, fairy tales used to comfort him. But ever since his life became one big fairy tale collection they only disturbed him. Magic is real and it gets people killed, Girl in the Tower is hell bent on destroying the world, Infinite Man is a fraud. Knowing his luck, Indecisive King is probably a mass murderer.

Cinder sensed his unease and shifted conversation back to the original subject. "So, randomly ordering dishes in Atlesian restaurant. You know you could have asked me for a translation?" That was true, it was such a minor thing to ask. Maybe it was their shared history that made him hesitate, maybe his pride.

"It wasn't fully random. I knew appetizer was potato related when I saw word Kartoffle."

"Kartoffel." Cinder corrected him before looking down at her screen and pressing a button. She was looking for something.

"Found it." She finally declared. "You ordered Saurefreude." Well, that didn't ring any bells. "It means sour joy in Atlesian." Cinder added realizing his confusion. That was certainly an interesting name.

"That is your flaw, you know that." Cinder remarked after brief silence.

"Not speaking Atlesian? They speak Valean pretty much everywhere, knowing Atlesian is hardly a necessary skill." Was she gonna continue making fun of him because of that.

"Oh, not that. While your knowledge of foreign languages and literary classics is dreadful, I am referring to your refusal to ask for help." Jaune didn't expect that.

"Refusing to ask you to translate Atlesian for me doesn't mean I refuse to ask for help in general." Bit of a weird extrapolation on her part. "I'm a team leader, asking for help is in my job description." It was downright bizarre assumption, everything he accomplished was with the help of others.

"You have a team?" She sarcastically asked. "I do not remember seeing them any time we fought."

"Well, Nora is on the shorter side. Although not sure how you didn't notice Ren." Jaune jokingly remarked. What was she aiming at.

"Oh, believe me, I know who Nora Valkyrie and Lie Ren are. Which once again begs the question, why are you always facing me alone?" Cinder repeated her question. She didn't truly understand what being a team leader meant.

"Sometimes leader has to take the burden for others." Jaune muttered.

He looked down at his plate. In the center of it was slice of roast covered with thick burgundy sauce. Next to it there were wide ribbonlike hand torn noodles and what looked like caramelized small dark berries. Bite of it was missing thanks to Cinder's childish antics. Jaune effortlessly cut through the roast, it was extremely tender.

"But it is their burden as well, is it not?" Conversation shifted back to Pyrrha. "And I will take a bite out of your roast again if you dare to blame yourself for Nikos again."

"I don't wanna put them in danger." As he was saying that, Cinder lunged forward with the fork. This time Jaune was able to parry her with his fork. "I didn't even mention Pyrrha." She was starting to annoy him.

"Not directly, but the same dumb idea was present in your sentence. You do not want to endanger them, yet you want to endanger yourself. They are Huntsmen as well, they carry the same conviction as you to end this war. Use it, use them!" She pushed his fork back.

"People are NOT tools!" Jaune growled, pushing her fork back. It was inevitable their views on teamwork would differ.

"Maybe, but at least I am using my teammates well."

"At least my teammate didn't join the enemy." Jaune bit back. He assumed Emerald's desertion was still something fresh on her mind. Surprisingly she didn't answer with some snarky remark. She retreated her fork from his plate. He didn't expect his low blow to be this effective.

Jaune then raised his glass, before proclaiming a toast: "To our failure." He tried to raise a mood a bit with more self deprecation.

Cinder gave him a confused look before mirroring his gesture. "To our failure." She cracked a smile after repeating his toast. Both then took a large swig of whiskey. He once again tasted its smoky and sweet flavor. That reminded him of something.

"You said it was an unorthodox whiskey, why?" Jaune was curious. It was also a way for him to change the subject.

"For the most part it is a regular Atlesian whiskey. Difference is that it matures in wooden barrels that were previously used to store maple syrup. Immerherbst means forever fall in Atlesian, it is a whiskey that tastes like fall." Cinder explained. It seemed like she enjoyed talking about food and drinks.

Both turned their attention to their plates. Jaune finally pierced the piece he cut off earlier and took a bite. As expected, incredibly tender piece. It went beyond his expectations, meat was almost falling apart in his mouth without him even chewing it. But it wasn't even fat, meat was almost fully lean. He wasn't sure what kind of meat it was. His first guess was beef, but it had a rich intense flavor, unlike any beef he ever ate. It's flavor was more akin to chicken than beef. However, there was another deep flavor and it was bit sour. It was probably cooked in the sauce for a long time for the flavor to penetrate meat fibers that thoroughly. Vinegar sauce maybe? It was a fancy restaurant, more likely a red wine. It was delicious, but it wasn't fully to his liking.

"Mister Picky Eater at it again." Cinder joked at his musing. Not the picky eater accusation again.

"No, I like it, it's just bit too sour."

"Maybe do not order a dish that has a word sour in its name." She took another jab at his random food order before continuing. "It is bit too sour because you are eating it the wrong way." Cinder explained.

How was he suppose to eat it? Jaune gave her a puzzled look. Cinder sighed before gesturing to his plate. "Just combine it other things on your plate."

That made sense. Jaune cut off another piece before layering it with some noodles and berries. When he took a bite this way it was a different story. Sourness of meat was balanced

out by sweetness of the berries and buttery flavor of noodles, all melting in his mouth. It was fantastic.

Cinder sensed his joy, smiling before remarking. "See, told you so."

"Never ate the meat like this before. It was probably cooked for a long time in the wine sauce. It's so tender." Jaune commented.

"Indeed. Maybe meat was marinated in it first, flavor of wine in it is very intense." Cinder speculated.

Meat spending days soaked up in the wine, until it's tender and full of its flavor. That was an interesting idea, definitely possible in decadent Atlesian restaurant. It was also a very lean cut, so it needed to be tenderized. What kind of meat would require such a process?

"What kind of meat do you think it is?" Jaune asked her. Cinder seemed fairly knowledgeable in regards to Atlesian cuisine. Well, she also took a bite of his dish.

There was no immediate answer, she seemed unsure. After a bit of musing she concluded. "I first thought it would be some kind of beef cut. But flavor is different, almost like poultry. It also has fairly sharp flavor, so probably a game meat." Cinder concluded.

Game meat, Jaune didn't have much experience with game meat. Well besides his grandfather occasionally going on a hunt with his Huntsmen buddies and bringing a catch home. It was usually a wild boar. Well either that or they would just crack a few beers in the forest. It made sense, Mom would make a boar stew with lot of herbs and spices, clearly to mask its strong flavor. But this wasn't a boar meat, boar meat was much fattier.

"Pheasant, grouse, buffalo, venison... hare?" Jaune tried.

Cinder chuckled. "Your guess is as good as mine. Probably not buffalo, I assume that's just a bigger cow flavor wise." They were stuck. Well as long as it wasn't human meat it was all the same to him. Although, could it be human meat? No, that would be silly, humans had to be fattier than this.

Jaune glanced at Cinder's plate. It was four different meat cuts, all lined next to each other down the length of silver rectangular plate. Next to the meat there was some kind of sauteed vegetables, possibly Vale sprouts.

Cinder sliced the first cut in half. Looking at it closely, it seemed like a slice of beef, thin brown crust on the outside with juicy pink interior. Center of it had even more intense rosy color, shaped almost like a heart. Transparent meat juice dripped from both halves as well as Cinder's utensils. It was the juiciest piece of beef he ever saw. Cinder finally took a bite, drop of juice glistening on her lips. It looked different, as if she wasn't even dining in the restaurant. She looked like she was a vicious predator in the wild, biting off a chunk of her prey. She licked her lips, before expressing a joy at the flavor. She then quickly took the remaining bite, now combining it with vegetables. She looked feral, like she discarded all facade of elegance to indulge herself in meat's divine flavor. Cinder licked her lips again to

savor the remnants of flavor. Haunting scene, as if he saw her devour it alive. Haunting, but also captivating.

Cinder finally glanced at Jaune, he could only assume he looked like a drooling idiot watching her eat her steak.

"My, my, turning into bit of a voyeur Arc. Is it my dish you are after, or perhaps lusting after a fair maiden like me." Fair maiden, as if. Both knew that was a farce. However, there was no honest answer he could come up with. Yes, he was looking at her dish, but her was also looking at her. She was feral, vicious, yet also elegant and beautiful. She both ridiculed him and laughed with him. She was making him feel uncomfortable things. No, it had to be alcohol messing with his head.

"It is called Garten der Königin, it means queen's garden." Cinder described her dish. She probably didn't pick up on his embarrassment, or was at least merciful enough not to tease him about it. "It has four kinds of meat: beef ribeye steak, duck breast, venison strap and lamb loin chop." She continued.

"What about the vegetables?" Jaune asked. Although vegetables were entirely secondary to juicy cuts she had on her plate.

"Sauteed artichoke hearts." Cinder stated before shoving them bit with her fork. "I'd say with garlic and olive oil. Although they are bitter, people say everything tastes tad sweeter after you eat them." She said the similar thing about bitterness of dandelion greens. More she talked about the bitter food less he believed she actually enjoyed eating it.

Something occurred to Jaune. Cinder seemed happy when she was ordering the main course. And unlike his dish, she knew all the main ingredients of it without even tasting them. If this whole dinner was her childhood fantasy, then it this dish was likely realization of it. Jaune imagined young Cinder observing people in the restaurant eating this dish. Maybe with her cheeks pressed against the restaurant window looking from outside. Or maybe from inside, scrubbing the floors of the restaurant while wealthy patrons were dining in her line of sight. It was both an innocently sweet fantasy as well as something depressing. But at least it was a fantasy they didn't have to fight over. Perhaps they were similar fantasies, one to sate physical hunger, other to sate inner hunger.

"Why do you want Maiden powers?" Jaune eventually asked her. From her perspective it probably seemed like a massive non sequitur.

He heard small crack as duck's fried skin shattered under her knife. After that, knife easily tore through soft blush meat. Not as juicy as ribeye steak, but still tantalizing.

"I presume this is a rhetorical question. You already know why, Arc." She gave him a vague answer, the one he supposedly already knew. He did, powerless person seeks power. Jaune knew that well, all the hours he spent training both during and after Beacon. He cursed his powerlessness. But his quest for power never drove him to do things she did. How deep was her hunger?

"You seek power because you were powerless once."

"Bravo Arc." She mockingly complimented him before stabbing the cut of duck breast with fork. She was hoping to end their little exchange almost immediately, but Jaune persisted.

"But why? I seek power to protect others, why do you want it?"

"Would you believe me if I said I want to rule this world as its Queen and purge it of flaws that plagued it for centuries?" He would have believed her long ago, he knew better by now.

"No." Jaune simply answered. "You don't care about others, there is no some greater good behind your actions. You want power for yourself."

Cinder was growing annoyed. "So? Am I not allowed to sate my hunger or should I just starve to death?" More vague answers. Although it did confirm some of his suspicions, she was starving. Starving for something to fill the void she had, that endless abyss he saw in her left eye.

"Why does it have to be Maiden powers?" Jaune tried.

"Because they are MINE. Only they can satiate my hunger." Cinder growled before continuing. "You felt hunger Arc. And I don't mean physical one, true hunger, one that can never go away." She regained some of her composure.

Jaune merely nodded. Every day in Ever After he felt emptiness. No, even before that. Ever since she died he felt emptiness. Maybe he hungered just as much as Cinder did, but not for power. He knew that was an empty pursuit. As Rusted Knight he was more powerful than ever before, yet even more hollow. It wasn't power, it wasn't revenge, he needed something different to fill the hole of his existence.

"You see both power and revenge as pointless goals. Then what do you desire Arc? What can sate your hunger?"

What did he desire? "I want the world to be safe and for this war to end." Jaune tried. That was his purpose, protect others. His hunger would end once they somehow defeated Salem.

"No, that's not your desire. You took Ruby's naive ambition as your own. Even if your side somehow won this war, you will pointlessly wander the world, hungering for something else." She saw through him. He always just followed Ruby, she knew better than him. If that wasn't his true desire, then what was? Was he truly just a hollow husk? She cornered him and he had no answer. He had to go on a offensive.

"What do you desire?" Jaune asked, already knowing the answer.

"I thought we already went over this. Maiden powers, all of them."

"What if they can't fill your void?" He tried to use her logic against her.

"They will." Cinder simply answered.

"Will they though? You got one of them. You got to see Atlas go down in flames. You even got to see Ruby and her team seemingly die. Yet you are just as hollow as me." Emptiness her

saw in her was endless, he wondered if anything could sate her hunger.

Cinder's right eye flared up with Maiden fire at his comment, flames surging upwards. Her nostrils flared up and breathing quickened. "Do you want me to sit down and give up?! Give up because of an assumption I will remain hungry even if I win?!" She shouted.

"You did the same thing to me!" Jaune shouted back.

"Because YOU are empty! Every time I see you, you are more and more miserable! Your hunger is not getting sated, you are getting hungrier! You are refusing to accept the universe's lifeline! Hate me and sate yourself!" Cinder almost ran out of her breath by the of her tirade, her face was flushed.

"I can't hate you, I told you that's pointless! You are afraid to admit you are broken deep inside and that magic powers won't fix that!" Jaune shouted before somewhat calming down and continuing. "When I looked at you, you reminded me of my own emptiness. You said I wasn't getting sated, neither are you. You just hide it better than me!"

Cinder was stunned. "Then enlighten me Arc, what is my desire? What is my purpose?" She growled through gritted teeth.

"I don't know." Jaune admitted. "That's something you need to find out for yourself. I don't know my true desire either." Maybe there was no answer. Maybe they were both broken beyond repair. She looked him in the eye hoping to find an answer. Her eye was saddened, yellow within her amber iris pouring down like a rain. He wondered what she saw.

"How does my emptiness look like?" Jaune asked her. Did it look like hers? He wondered what others saw when they found him in Ever After, when he came to Vacuo.

Cinder wondered for a moment, trying to find words to describe it. "It's like sea at night. Your eyes are dead calm and lifeless. They were..." She trailed off, before eventually continuing. "They were vivid blue, rippling like waves. You had a spark in them." He had a spark in his eyes? Jaune no longer remembered it. How was she so familiar with what his eyes looked like?

They made a silent agreement, both reaching for their glass of whiskey and quickly downing it. It wasn't gonna sate their hunger or fill their void, but that didn't matter. For a moment Jaune felt warmth, that was all that mattered.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I was gonna be able to wrap up the main course within a chapter, but they have so much baggage. Some things also changed as I was writing it. Jaune was originally suppose to eat a beef cut, dish similar to German Sauerbraten. As usual, both dishes represent Jaune and Cinder as individuals.

Main Course Part 2

Chapter Notes

Oh shucks, it appears I won't be able to finish main cours... Just kidding. Dessert hopefully next week.

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

Both turned their attention back to their plates. Jaune cut another piece of the roast before combining it with noodles and berries. Flavor was incredible. He licked the tip of his fork, mostly tasting syrupy goodness left by caramelized berries. He was curious about their flavor on their own. His fork pierced through the small berry before taking a bite of it. Jaune expected it to taste something like blueberry, but it was different. It had sweetness and tartness he would associate with forest berries, but there was also a piney aroma in it. It reminded him of gin he drank earlier this evening.

Cinder was chewing the piece of duck breast she cut off earlier. She was not as enthusiastic as she was with beef steak. Perhaps he soured the mood with discussion about their desires.

"Do you like it?" Jaune asked inquisitively.

"I do, but it's not as good as beef was. I expected it to be more tender." Cinder explained.

"Maybe it was an older bird."

Cinder chuckled before giving an exaggerated gasp. "I got scammed by this fine establishment! What a horror!" Cinder proclaimed with exaggerated posh accent. Jaune laughed at her theatrics. She held back her laughter for few seconds before joining him. He wasn't sure why either of them laughed. It wasn't even a good joke. Maybe that was the reason, she was one of the last people he expected to make a silly impression. He felt warmth coursing through him as he laughed. Alcohol was holding the pieces of his broken self together.

Cinder's laughter eventually stopped before asking him: "Did you know male duck is called drake?" That was a random question.

"No." To Jaune they were male and female ducks, no special names required. "But if male ducks are drakes, then what kind of creature are male geese?" Jaune rhetorically asked. Male geese were maniacs.

"Male goose is gander." Cinder remarked before realizing what he meant. She started laughing again. "Come on Arc, geese are not that bad."

"You are clearly a city girl, nobody from countryside would say something so outrageously wrong." He got attacked by a goose when he was a kid. Nothing too serious, no scratches or bites, but it was a scary encounter. You don't mess with geese.

"For your information, I have spent my early childhood living on a farm. Although there were no geese there." Cinder defended herself.

That was something new, she grew up on a farm. He thought she was born in Atlas or perhaps Mantle. There were no farms in Solitas. Where did she come from? Vacuo is barely hospitable, so it was unlikely she was from there. It had to be either Anima or Vale. Although, now that he thought about it, it made sense. She said Bleiss was adopted by Atlesian family, perhaps she was also born somewhere else before being adopted by Atlesians.

"Thank you for your valuable insight, city dweller." Jaune sarcastically replied. "Only difference between Grimm and geese is that former is black while latter is white." He continued to complain.

"Oh really, do they also attack people when they sense their negative emotions?" Cinder went along with his complaints.

"Of course. Humans, Faunus, Bullheads, they attack everything." She giggled when he finished his sentence.

"Scion of mighty Arc family, defeated by an oversized chicken." Cinder smiled as she mocked him.

"Are you even listening to me? Chicken is an animal, goose is a nightmare creature. You can't compare them." Both started laughing at his exaggerated claims. "Besides, I was 10, so barely any size advantage. I'd like to see 10 year old you take on a goose." Jaune jokingly challenged her.

"You know, I've kicked older boys' ass when I was 10. But perhaps I wouldn't be able to defeat that..." She unsuccessfully tried to keep a straight face before she once again burst out laughing. "Sorry, sorry." After regaining bit of composure she tried again. "Perhaps I wouldn't be able to defeat that feathered creature." She was definitely making fun of him, but he decided to play along with it.

"Thank you, it means a lot to me."

"I liked geese when I was growing up." Of course she did. He could probably go through the list of animals he disliked and all of them would be on her list of favorites.

She looked him in the eye before continuing. "Not because they were vicious, or some kind of nightmare creature. I liked them because they were free." He didn't expect that. Her gaze shifted downwards, almost as if she wondered should she continue her story. "Each fall they would leave Solitas for Anima, they could leave that frozen wasteland. But each spring they returned, it was comforting to see them on horizon." Cinder finished her story. Gold of her amber iris poured down like a raindrop. What the hell happened to her when bird migration

was her comfort growing up. Gold in her iris jolted as she realized she said too much. Her sullen expression changed into panicked one.

"What changed your mind?" Cinder was confused at his question. She was still tense. Her eye carefully observing him, trying to figure out what he wanted from her.

Eventually she softened, reclined herself back into her chair, her gaze shifted towards the ceiling. "I realized they weren't free, nobody was." Cinder gave a cryptic answer. Whenever she gave a cryptic answer it usually meant one thing.

"Destiny." Jaune somberly stated.

"They don't fly away because they are free. They fly away because of something that was out of their control." She continued, gaze still fixed at the ceiling.

"It's choice, not Destiny." Jaune retorted. He refused to believe in it.

"Choice?" Cinder gave him a dark chuckle. Her posture shifted back into its original position. "What choice Arc?" It was a rhetorical question. "Each year they have a choice between freezing to death and fleeing. That's not a choice."

"But we are not animals, we always have a choice." He refused to believe everything was predetermined, that game was already rigged.

Cinder's face was flushed. She was about to say something but decided against it. She already said too much. Her eye closed as she took a deep breath. After regaining some composure, she finally spoke again.

"What is my wayward goose up to?" What was she alluding to? Oh, it was about Emerald.

"Emerald?" Cinder nodded. "She is doing fine, she is getting used to being a Huntress." That was as far as he knew, they didn't interact much.

"I see." Cinder simply remarked. She seemed hurt.

"You care about her?" Jaune tried. To some degree she had to.

"I don't. I was just curious what made her switch sides." She refused to admit it.

"You are gonna have to ask her that yourself. It was her choice." It wasn't his story to tell. It seemed like Cinder didn't want to confront her former subordinate.

She let out another dark chuckle, as if she was mocking the idea of choice itself. "It's funny how that's the one choice everyone always makes." She finally remarked.

What choice was she referring to? Emerald's choice was to join their side, she left Cinder. So everyone made a choice to leave Cinder. Was he like her? Pyrrha pushed him aside in the end. No, she offered him her hand countless times before that. It was simply the choice she had to make, he was useless. It wasn't her fault, it was his.

Jaune took a bite of his roast. It was sour, he forgot to add berries and noodles. Cinder took a final bite of the duck breast. She then sliced venison apart.

Why was he even alive. She killed Pyrrha, she killed countless other people, yet for some reason he always survived. Even tonight, there was no good reason for her to tolerate his presence.

"Why didn't you kill me?" Jaune eventually asked.

"I am not going to humor your self loathing Arc." Cinder ignored his question.

He eyed sliced meat on her plate. It was a childish idea, but it was bound to grab her attention. Jaune lunged forward with his fork, taking a piece of her venison before shoving it in his mouth. Cinder's eye widened, it was probably one of the last things she expected. Venison piece was juicy, it somewhat reminded him of beef. However, flavor was bit different. It had a hint of bitterness and flavor he could only describe as mossy.

"Stealing my food, you can't be serious Arc." Cinder let out exasperated sigh.

"What can I say, I learned from the best." Jaune joked, referencing what she did earlier this evening, before continuing "It's bit bitter." It wasn't some sauce or anything, meat itself had subtle bitter taste.

Cinder took a bite as well before commenting. "Only tad. I have read about this once, it has to do with adrenaline. When roe is injured it releases lot of adrenaline, giving meat a bitter flavor. To prevent that, hunter needs to land a clean shot and kill the animal on the spot. The fact you can taste some bitterness means animal survived a bit before being put down." She eventually explained.

What a morbid explanation. He imagined a hunter wounding the roe with a rifle, only for it to desperately limp away. Eventually another hunter showed up, putting it down. Jaune felt light tingles in his right arm, what an unpleasant vision.

"Care to explain why you pulled this little stunt?" Cinder asked him.

"You didn't answer my question. Why didn't you kill me?" Why was he the only granted that privilege.

"You said it yourself, this dinner was my fantasy growing up. Why would I want to dine in the same room as a dead body?" It made sense, she couldn't have killed him in the lobby or inside of the elevator. But that wasn't what he was aiming at.

"Not tonight, I meant in general. You could have killed me back in Beacon Vault, you could have killed me in Haven, you could have killed me on the bridge." Jaune elaborated. "Why do I always survive?" It pained him to even ask this.

Cinder looked him in the eye. She was silent. Each second that passed felt like a small eternity. Why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why? Eventually, she muttered something. He couldn't quite make it out what she said.

"What?" He needed to know.

"I..." She raised her voice before trailing off.

"Come on already!" Jaune was growing impatient.

"I don't know." Cinder eventually repeated it. He must have misheard her. There was no way she said that.

"What do you mean you don't know?! How the hell you don't know something like that?!"
Jaune yelled at her.

"I DON'T KNOW!" Cinder yelled back. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I didn't kill you." It was bizarre, she apologized for not knowing why was he even alive. Perhaps she knew that staying alive while others died was the worst thing that could happen to him.

"Do you want me to lie to you? Say that I didn't kill you because of my arrogance? Maybe sadism? Maybe some kind of twisted compassion? I'm sorry, there is no answer to what you want to know." She continued. Would he feel better if she lied and said she left him alive because of sadism? No, he would still feel empty. He would still hate himself.

"You focus on pointless questions instead of moving forward." She eventually accused him.

"What the hell can this be a pointless question?!"

"Because it doesn't matter! It doesn't matter why are you still alive, be it Destiny or choice I made. You are stuck in the past." Maybe he was, maybe the past was all he had left.

"IT MATTERS! It's all I had! You don't know how it feels to lose something because you never had anything to begin with!" Jaune screamed at her, his eyes watering. He made a bold guess, but it was a logical end point of his deductions. Cinder was someone who never had anything.

"You said I was broken, you said I was empty! I AM! So tell me, how would a person who never had anything feel listening to someone's self flagellation, someone who still has so much!" Cinder screamed back. It was an interesting question. Who was more miserable? Person who never had anything or person who had something and lost it.

"It's not self flagellation! It was my fault!"

"I killed Pyrrha, stop taking blame for something I did!"

"What about Penny?! That was me!" His sword, his stained hands.

"That was also me. What choice did you have?"

"I could have saved her!" What was even the point of his Semblance. When it mattered the most he did nothing with it.

"No you couldn't. All you could do was either let me take the power or let her choose. There was no option in which she survived."

"There is always another choice." Jaune tried, barely holding back tears.

"Sometimes there are no good choices." Cinder offered.

"No, no, no. There had to have been a way for her to survive. I killed her." Jaune felt a wet sensation sliding down his cheek. He was crying. His emotions finally overflowed, he had to let it all out. As he was crying, she approached him. Not to console him of course, she looked him in the eye and grabbed him by a collar.

"It wasn't your fault." There was a small pause between each word.

"No... no..." He was barely forming words. Grip on his collar tightened, talons of her left arm digging into skin of his neck. She was running out of patience.

"Girl gets enslaved and nobody is coming to save her..." She started a story. He had no idea what was she talking about.

"What?" Jaune interrupted her.

"Don't interrupt me!" She gritted through her teeth. "She is given a choice to either kill her captors and escape or spend the rest of her life as a slave. What choice should she make?!"

"She..." Jaune tried. Cinder didn't even bother letting him finish.

"She kills her captors and thinks she is free but Huntsman catches her and doesn't believe her. She can either kill him or spend the rest of her life as a prisoner. WHAT choice should she make?!" She screamed out once again. Her face was flushed, she was barely catching a breath. Her right eye which was usually bright was muted, almost as if fire in it was doused.

Jaune calmed down a bit, tears still streaming down his face. "There is no good choice." He eventually muttered.

"Why can you recognize that here but not in your life? Why do you condemn yourself but not this girl?" She was no longer angry, she was almost agonized. Gold in her amber iris was turning into cloudy shapes.

Why did she care so much? Why did she deny existence of choice? Why did she believe everything was predetermined? Why was she so empty? It all finally clicked.

"You are the girl in the story." Jaune looked her in the eye. Tears dripped down his cheek. This time they weren't his. Clouds in her eye burst open, she was crying. Their tears mixed together.

Her eye widened, she must have noticed she started crying as well. Disbelievingly she touched her cheek, at the tip of her finger was a round tear. Quickly, she covered her eye with the palm of her Grimm hand and retreated back to her seat. She couldn't afford to show

weakness in front of him. She reached for the bottle of whiskey only for him to stop her by grabbing her hand.

"Don't." Jaune muttered through tears. Cinder slightly lowered the palm of her Grimm hand to see him. It must have been the most pathetic sight she ever saw. He was bawling his eyes out, telling her to stop. Pointer finger of her Grimm arm was glistening with tears. She said something he couldn't quite make it out. Once again she tried to reach for the bottle, but his grip tightened.

"Don't." Jaune repeated. "Let it out."

"I... I'm fine, leave me alone." Cinder once again covered her eye with the palm of her hand.

"Leave me alone!" She repeated. This time she used Maiden fire to burn his hand, but it lacked direction. Heat she released was uneven, nothing he couldn't handle with his Aura.

"No." Jaune simply replied. It would have been much more threatening if he wasn't crying.

"I... I... I overcame all of it! I don't need this! It's your stupid self loathing, it's... it's... it's not me." Her voice was choked, words were barely coming out. Jaune didn't say anything. He released the grip on her right arm, gently clasping it instead. His other hand joined it, caressing her hand. Despite it being covered with glove he felt its warmth as if it was naked skin.

Finally she let it out. Loud howl, she sounded almost inhuman. Tears started streaming down her cheeks, her palm no longer able to hold them. She realized futility of it and lowered her palm, revealing a puffy teary eye. Her usually rosy cheeks were much darker now, taking almost vermilion color. Her Grimm hand moved over his hand, its cold and rough texture contrasting her human hand. She gripped his hand, almost as if she was anchoring herself to him. Talons of her Grimm hand were pressed against his wrist, but they weren't hurting him.

She looked him in the eye and continued crying. He saw himself in fiery mirror of her eyes. He looked pathetic, but he didn't care. No matter how much he cried, he didn't feel emptier. It was a weird sensation, he felt like some of his cracks were getting filled up. He wondered if she felt the same thing.

Time passed, he had no idea how much. Seconds? Minutes? Hours? It didn't matter, they cried together. Eventually, they slowed down. Not because they've found some solace, but because they've ran out of tears. Cinder's eye was bloodshot, but despite that it regained its clarity. Her nose was scrunched up with snot hanging out. He imagined he looked just like her, albeit more pathetic.

She wiped the remaining tears with napkin before emptying her nose into it. Definitely not the most ladylike thing, but he doubted she cared at the moment. Cinder took a deep breath, finally regaining some of her composure.

"Now you know why I don't believe in choices. I can't go back..." It was the first thing she said after a while.

"No..." Jaune muttered.

"Why can't you understand?!" She was agonized.

"No, I understand you. I'm sorry you had to do it... I'm sorry you had to kill someone while you were probably just a kid. I'm sorry for being a hypocrite and beating myself over Pyrrha and Penny. But I still believe choice does exist."

She was confused. "How can you still believe in it after everything?" Cinder asked him.

"Because it exists. Yes, you are right, sometimes there are no good choices. But our choice can still make a difference. I... I hated you. I hated you so much that I couldn't even describe it. I would dream about running my sword through you, watching you die a painful death." She was observantly listening to him.

"Yes, you are right, I also hated myself. I... I still do. But that didn't change the fact I wanted you dead. When I fell... I felt similar thing again. I would practice with my broken sword, I would imagine myself stabbing you. Eventually, everything I was faded away. I somewhat forgot about you. I remembered everything tonight, when I saw your eye." Jaune continued.

"What happened to you?" She looked saddened.

"It's a long story. I could have continued hating you, but I chose something else. I chose to want to understand you instead. It's not some kind of Destiny, it was my choice." He eventually finished.

"But that was only because you fell. If you didn't, you would have still hated me. It wasn't your choice." She retorted.

"No. As I said, I could have continued hating you, but I didn't."

"How?" She softly asked. "How do you do something like that?"

"I don't know. One day I simply chose a different path." It was a weird thing to describe.

She smiled. It was a pained smile, but beautiful one nonetheless. "Alright, now wipe your nose before you become Snot Boy." Jaune reflexively touched his philtrum, feeling a large piece of snot. Of course. He took a napkin and wiped it away.

"Snot Boy? You know about Vomit Boy nickname or was that just a coincidence?"

"Who knows." Cinder smiled. Of course she knew about that as well. He wondered how much did she truly know about him.

Jaune took a bite of his roast, combining it with noodles and berries. It tasted sweeter for some reason. Meanwhile Cinder took the remaining bite of her venison, together with forkful of artichokes. That meant only one piece of meat remained on her plate, lamb if he remembered correctly. Juices started pouring as she sliced the piece in half. It was a thicker piece, its inside was rose colored. She took a generous bite. She looked happy, although not as ecstatic as she was when she took the first bite of the beef. He gave her puzzled look.

She smiled at his reaction. "It's good, just not as good as beef." It seemed nothing compared to that steak. "Were you hoping I would dislike it so you can tease me about being a picky eater as well?" He wasn't, he was just curious did she enjoy it. He kept making fun of him for supposedly being a picky eater.

"Can I get a nickname that isn't just an insult?" Jaune whined.

"What do you mean?"

"Well there is Yellow Pants, Goose Fodder, Vomit Boy, Jaune..." Somehow Jaune felt most insulting considering Cardin came up with it. "And now Picky Eater and Snot Boy" He listed her nicknames as well.

"What do you mean? Goose Fodder and Vomit Boy all pertain to something that happened to you. Hardly an insult." Jaune frowned at her joke. He should have known telling her about goose was a mistake.

"Fine, fine, fine. How about Prince?" Cinder offered. He was confused. Where did that come from?

"You are a team leader, but you can't be King, too much of a baby face. Also, you are my partner for tonight, since I'm Queen, you have to be Prince." She explained. It felt weird to receive a compliment from her. It was probably a backhanded compliment, but he would roll with it.

"Thank you Your Highness." Jaune mockingly declared.

Jaune took one last bite of his roast, dipping it into remains of the burgundy sauce. Similarly, Cinder took one last bite of her lamb shank and artichokes. They set their empty plates aside.

"Dessert?" Jaune asked, Cinder nodded.

He opened the desserts menu. As he expected, it was all written in Atlesian. He was tempted to once again press a random button, but decided against it. He looked at Cinder who just finished her order.

"Could you... translate it for me?" Jaune asked her. It was silly how long did it take for him to ask her something so simple.

Cinder smiled. "Sure. I'll read it for you from top to bottom." Jaune focused on the list in front of him.

"First is Hummelstich. It means bumblebee sting. It's made with roasted almonds, vanilla and honey." It sounded really sweet, maybe bit too sweet for his liking.

"Second is Seerosa. That's a word play, you see. Seerose means water lily and Rosa means pink. So it's basically pink water lily. If I remember correctly, this one is from Anima. They soak biscuits in green tea. Between each layer there is a cloudberry jam." That one was bit too weird.

"Third is Dämmerungstorte. Dämmerung means both twilight and dawn. It's dark chocolate biscuit topped with banana cream. They call it that way because it has both dark and li..." She explained.

"That one. I want that one." It appealed to him the most. It was sweet, but its sweetness was balanced out by dark chocolate. He also liked bananas, so that was other plus in his book.

"You can't pick that one. I picked that one." What kind of logic was that?

"Can't you accept we like similar things?"

"No. Fourth one is Rosenstock. It means Rose bush..." She continued her explanation, mostly ignoring him. Jaune simply smiled. It was fine, he would choose another one eventually.

Chapter End Notes

That's all for this one. It went from therapeutic screaming to therapeutic crying.

As for the dishes. Jaune is eating hare meat. Berries in question are juniper berries. Cinder with selection of beef, duck, venison and lamb. This one is coincidental but lamb as the last cut of the meat fits nicely with my current headcanon of Summer Maiden being a child. Main course represents the present (in this case from V1 onwards), appetizer was past.

Not sure how subtle I was with desserts selection at the end. I find the fact twilight and dawn are the same word in German to be cute in context of Knightfall. Yeah, night is falling, but nightfall is also a dawn for them.

Dessert

Chapter Notes

Bit earlier than usual.

Readers: Say the line ficretus!

Me: sigh... dessert is being split into two parts

Readers: yayyyyyy

I had a fun writing this chapter, although I think this one is bit on a weaker side.

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

Jaune eventually ordered his dessert. Cinder insisted on going through the entire list of desserts, top to bottom. At some point he was tempted to just order his original pick, Cinder's childish tantrums be damned. But his patience paid off, last item on the menu seemed interesting. She described it as chocolate cake, crusty on outside, melted inside. It sounded so decadent and unnecessary. But counterargument, it was chocolate with more chocolate. As for its name, well... it was in Atlesian.

"Remind me, what's the name of my dessert? Donkey...?" Well no way it started with donkey, but it sounded similar to that.

"Dunkelofen." Cinder corrected him. "Just say its translated name, dark furnace. Don't bring donkeys into this. Only donkey here tonight is you."

"I thought I was Prince." Jaune reminded her of little nickname she gave him earlier.

"Not mutually exclusive. Even donkey can sit on a throne." Well, it was good while it lasted.

"So, Her Highness is going on a date with a donkey?" Jaune quickly countered.

"Date? As if."

"Then define what this is." She was right, it wasn't a date, that would be ridiculous. But then again, dining for hours with your enemy in luxurious restaurant was already ridiculous in and of itself.

She was pondering for a good bit. There were no usual witty response. Eventually she concluded. "You know what, I'm restoring your humanity back. You are back to being just Prince." It seemed like she didn't have an answer either. Well, at least he wasn't donkey anymore.

"Why Prince?" That nickname still felt random even with her explanation.

"I went over that earlier."

"I know, but still. I don't see why being a leader of Huntsman Team would make me Prince. At the end of the day, we are more like soldiers." Jaune explained.

"You want me to call you Knight? Perhaps White Knight." Cinder offered.

"No." Knight hit bit too close to his name in Ever After.

"See Jaune, this is why those kids called you Goose Fodder. You can't take a compliment when you receive one." She said his name. It still felt unreal. He almost ignored she brought up the goose story again.

"You know what, I might tell you latter why I called you Prince." So there was another reason for that nickname. "But in exchange you'll tell me what happened to you."

It was inevitable. This whole evening he was trying to figure out what was behind her mask. Now he knew, but he had to pay a price for it. When he asked her who Bleiss was, he had to answer with who Herbert was. Where would he even start? So many things happened to him there, some he only vaguely remembered.

"You know what, forget it." She changed her mind.

"No, no, no, it's fine. I just don't know where to begin."

"How about beginning. How did you even end up there?" Cinder asked him.

"After we fought... I ran for the exit portal. After you used the Relic, bridge started fading away. I... I didn't make it." Jaune started.

"I remember that. I thought there was enough time for you to escape." Cinder commented.

"There probably was enough time, I just couldn't do it. I... I felt part of me was holding me back. As if part of me wanted me to fall." When he made that final jump he felt like his legs were shackled to the ground. His other self wanted him to suffer, wanted him to repent for Penny.

"I see. There is an old folk tale. It says when you kill someone your soul splits in two." Cinder added.

"Do you think it's true?" Way too many folk tales turned out to be true.

Cinder chuckled. "No. It was probably just a way for common folk to explain people with split personalities. Perhaps also a way for them to explain your good old headmaster. Your soul doesn't split when you kill someone, if it did, mine would have been shattered in pieces." Cinder explained. She was probably right, although not reassuring coming from her.

"How did you deal with... you know... when you murdered someone for the first time?" It was an odd thing to ask, but he needed to know.

"I... I don't remember all of it. The moment I grabbed the sword I felt like I lost consciousness. There was a fire coursing through my veins. When I woke up, they were all dead." Cinder paused before continuing. "Just as I sobered up, Rhodes... Huntsman that taught me how to fight, showed up. I... I felt similar sensation, but it was all bit clearer this time." She looked down.

"You wanted to know what happens when you kill someone? Part of you accepts it, part of you rejects it. And more you do it, less the latter happens. Eventually you end up like me. You see yourself as a monster over what happened, DON'T." She gritted her teeth at the last word. "Take comfort in knowing you still have a part of you that rejects it."

"You still do as well." Jaune retorted.

"I don't. You said it yourself, I do it with smile on my face." She remembered his rant from back in Haven.

"If you didn't have it, you wouldn't have cared about what I've said back then. Besides, I can be wrong about things, I often am." He had a wrong read on her back then. Now he understood better what was behind her mask.

"That's true, you are often wrong. You are wrong right now, but that's besides the point. Continue your story." She wasn't ready to face that.

"I ended up in magical dimension, the one where Gods came from. I messed up, so I got stuck there for years." Jaune went back to his story.

"What did it look like?" She asked him.

"Really? You are gonna skip over the whole "dimension where Gods came from" part?" He was certain it would interest her.

"You fell into the void created by their Relics, the fact it was their dimension is not that shocking." She explained.

"Really, just like that? Not gonna even ask about them?"

Cinder rolled her eyes before putting on a fake smile. "Wow, that sounds so exciting. Have you perhaps ran into Gods, Jaune?" Her voice was dripping with fake glee. Still, he liked when she said his name.

"Kind of. Not God of Light and God of Darkness, but we did see sort of creator god. They are called Blacksmith."

"Can't say I expected that. So another one of them exists." She was not particularly enthused.

"This one is bit different. They helped us return and restored me back..."

"No jumping ahead" She interrupted him. "Now back to my question. What was the place like?"

How would he even describe Ever After. "It was... weird. It's not a place like Vacuo, something you can describe with few words. First of all, it had two suns. There was a tree in the middle, absolutely massive tree. Other than that, there was bit of everything." She was listening to him inquisitively. "There were acres with themes with no rhyme or reason. There were cities, meadows, jungles, wastelands, volcanoes, beaches. There was even an acre made out of paper." His old home. She offered not additional commentary so he continued.

"I wandered aimlessly for years, waiting for others to arrive. I was angry... at you, at myself. Eventually I saw someone arrive. They were siblings, Alyx and Lewis."

"People I knocked off the bridge?" She asked.

"No, they were from distant past. It gets weird." Jaune explained.

"Alyx, from distant past, weird dimension." Cinder mused for a bit. "Let me guess, that was Girl Who Fell Through the World, or at least person she was based on." She guessed correctly, Jaune's nod confirming it. As crazy as it sounded it was a logical assumption based on what he told her.

"Bit of both, it was really her, but... she was different than in the story. Her brother Lewis was the one who wrote it."

"Personally, I've never liked her anyway, so it hardly matters to me." That was ironic considering they were similar in some regards. "How do you fit into the story?" Cinder eventually asked. This was gonna be entertaining.

"I was Rusted Knight." Cinder groaned.

"Great, that's another fairy tale ruined for me." Jaune chuckled at her response. At the same time, it was somewhat sad. Finding out that figure you admired throughout your childhood was actually your incompetent adversary all along.

"Come on, I'm not that bad."

"You are not. Don't joke about that." She was surprisingly serious. "It's ruined because it's no longer just a story. I liked it because it was just a silly story about girl being protected by a brave knight." He understood what she meant. Fairy tales were certainly more enjoyable when they were just fairy tales, not stories with real life consequences. "Please continue the story." She eventually added.

"She was... annoying. She didn't care about anyone or anything. She wanted to leave that place at any cost. Eventually she lost her faith in me and poisoned me. When I woke up I was in village of paper creatures, Paper Pleasers if you will. I was saved by a jackalope, Juniper." Jaune continued the story.

"You were definitely right about story getting weird." Cinder commented.

"I took care of their village, protecting them from fire and water, cause you know... paper. Eventually I ran into others."

"How long did you stay there? You said decade earlier, but you seem unchanged." Cinder asked.

"I don't know. I assume decade, maybe more, maybe less. It's hard to keep track of time when there are two suns and technology doesn't seem to work. I'll get to that part." Jaune answered. "So the Tree I mentioned earlier was actually the exit. I originally didn't believe in that, thought it was a trap, tree that devours souls. We got to the Tree, well without Ruby, she ran away after we had a falling out." Cinder smirked at the last part. "Not funny." Jaune added seeing her reaction.

"When someone burns away half of your face and arm, trust me, it becomes funny." But it wasn't, she was masking it with her usual smirk.

"How did you feel when you thought Ruby was dead?" He was curious.

"Ecstatic, I was throwing a party. Not many people were invited to it though." She joked. Jaune looked at her with penetrating gaze. "Oh stop looking at me like that. Why do you even bother asking when you already know the answer." Cinder snapped at him.

"I want you to say it."

"I was empty! Happy now? I was empty because part of me knew it was too easy and brat survived somehow. And would you look at that, she did." That wasn't the reason, but he wouldn't prod her further. Neo also thought she'd be happy once she killed Ruby. It was all pointless, there was no fulfillment in revenge. Speaking of Neo.

"Anyway, there was this creature I forgot to mention earlier, Curious Cat. They were a guardian of that place and wanted to leave it. So they made a deal with Alyx originally, but Alyx went back on her word." Jaune continued the story.

"Hardly a surprise, she poisoned you after all."

"I hated her for so long because of that. But this was different. She had an epiphany. Instead of leaving that place, she wanted to fix it, undo the damage she has done. As a consequence, Cat killed her. After Lewis left that place there was nobody to protect her. I... I failed." Failure was hardly something new for Jaune. Even in another world, he couldn't save anyone.

"Once again, not your fault." She interrupted his musing.

As she said that, table shutters opened, revealing two desserts on the platter. They swapped used plates for new ones, both taking their respective dessert.

His dessert was brown circular biscuit, topped with thinly sliced strawberries and some whipped cream on the side. Edge of it was cracked and round, it looked like some kind of volcanic rock. According to Cinder's description, it should have melted creamy chocolate core. He pressed the side of his spoon against the biscuit, slicing through it. Melted dark chocolate poured out of both halves. It was mesmerizing. He wasn't the only one impressed by it, Cinder was also looking at his plate, her mouth watering.

"My, my, is it my dish you are after, or perhaps lusting after fair Prince like me." Jaune tried his best to imitate her. Keyword being tried, he cringed internally. Fair Prince, as if.

Cinder blushed. "Oh shut up. I didn't know it would have strawberries on it." She explained.

"You like strawberries?" Jaune enquired. It wasn't that weird, but she did pride herself in enjoying bitter food earlier.

"I do, kind of... I don't know." Now she was just confusing him. "I tried them few times in Vale, but those aren't the same strawberries. Strawberries grown in Northern Anima and Solitas are different... they are sweeter."

Jaune sighed. Well, if she wanted those strawberries so badly... He spooned a bit of cake with pieces of strawberry on it before offering it to her.

She looked at him incredulously. "What are you doing?"

"I'm offering you a bit of cake so you can stop starrng at it." He moved his spoon towards her as he was saying it.

"What? You are... just like that? Cinder was confused. Jaune nodded.

She leaned forward, seemingly to take a bite. "That would be bit too weird. Let me just take it this way." She took a bit of his cake with her spoon, making sure to dip it into whipped cream before taking a bite. Cinder was overjoyed, she didn't seem this happy even when she ate that steak. He had to try it for himself.

Jaune added bit of whipped cream to his full spoon of cake. It was an interesting sight. Cragged surface of biscuit with soft spongy inside. On top of it there were ruby red slices of strawberry and swirls of whipped cream. All of that floating in pool of dark melted chocolate. Jaune finally took a bite. It was absolutely magnificent. He immediately understood her reaction. Chocolate was rich and velvety. It wasn't the usual milk chocolate, it was nuttier and tasted tad bitter. It's flavor was balanced out by sweetness of fresh strawberries. She was right, they were different than strawberries he ate in Vale. All of it combined with whipped cream. Of course, it wasn't the usual whipped cream. It had some vanilla mixed in as well as some kind of liquor based on the subtle aroma he felt in the background.

Cinder licked her lips before looking at his plate again. Jaune was bit conflicted. While he very much enjoyed his cake, he also liked seeing her happy. He couldn't quite understand why, but he felt like he saw more genuine part of her when she was happy. Jaune stood up and walked up to Cinder, taking his plate with him.

"What are you up to now?" Cinder was confused.

"You can have a half of it, I see you like it." Jaune tilted his plate, transferring half of his cake to her plate.

"Wha... Why would you do that? I know you like it as well." Jaune just smiled and was about to walk away but she lightly touched his hand. "Wait." She pleaded. Jaune turned around and

looked at her face. Cinder had a light blush. She looked hesitant to say anything. "You can..." She trailed off before continuing, this time with more resolve. "You can take half of my cake. I know you wanted to order it, so it would be a shame for you not to try it."

"Really?" Jaune was surprised as he was watching her slice her cake in half.

"Yeah, just take it before I change my mind." She raised her plate before tilting it so the piece of cake could slide down to his plate. Jaune triumphantly returned back to his seat. It was definitely one of the weirdest things that happened tonight.

He immediately took a bite of the cake she gave him. His initial instinct regarding it was right, it was definitely something he would have enjoyed. Biscuit seemed similar to his own cake, but bit denser and heavier. Flavor of chocolate was slightly more bitter, but it was balanced out by dark sugary aroma of rum. Banana cream was light and frothy. Flavor of bananas was amplified by dash of vanilla and squeeze of either lemon or lime. Darkness of biscuit was balanced out by lightness of cream. He understood why they called it nightfall cake. Or was it twilight?

"You know, you didn't finish your story." Cinder reminded him while taking a bite of her cake.

"Where was I?" He kind of forgot.

"Alyx dying, Tree, you blaming yourself..." She added.

"Right." Jaune mused a bit before continuing. "We went to the Tree where we found Ruby, she was turned into a statue. Neo forced her to erase herself. We fought Cat, who fused with Neo and then Ruby came back and eventually we defeated them. Well Neo did, they split during the fight."

"So, Little Red survived once again, of course she did." Cinder complained before taking another bite of the cake. He mostly ignored her and continued.

"We then moved to the Tree and were allowed to go back home. Except Neo, she stayed there. I was given Alyx' dagger by Blacksmith and it gave me back my youth because Alyx wanted me to be a hero." He was hoping he wouldn't fail her again, although that was almost inevitable.

"Neo didn't return? That's one headache less for me. What happened to your paper friends and rabbit?" Cinder asked him.

"Juniper stayed there, she teamed up with Ruby's mouse friend, Somewhat..." Cinder groaned.

"At this point I wouldn't be surprised if you were just making things up to make fun of me." It was a fair point. But sometimes reality is stranger than fiction.

"All of this happened, I wish I was making up some of these things." Jaune elaborated before continuing. "As for the Paper Pleasers, they were wiped out by a flood. I was protecting them

for years, so when it happened... I blamed Ruby for it, that's one of the reasons she left. However, by Ascending, they became better versions of themselves. Oops, I forgot to mention Ascension. So basically..."

"I'll figure it out, just continue." Cinder interrupted him once again. Well, she was clever so he assumed she could piece things together.

"They became better versions of themselves. By protecting them all those years I was curbing their potential. By letting them go, I was able to move on." He was able to let some things go, some he couldn't.

"I see. That certainly was an adventure." She remarked. Although he could see through her nonchalance, she was thinking about something.

Jaune looked at two of his cakes, he had a silly idea. "What do you think would happen if I mixed these two cakes together?" He asked her rhetorically. There was no way it could go wrong, one cake is chocolate and strawberries, other is chocolate and bananas. All of that goes well together.

"I'm starting to regret giving you my cake." Just as she said that, Jaune started mixing cakes together with his spoon. Whipped cream, banana cream, melted chocolate, two different chocolate biscuits, strawberries, it all became a big pile of mush. Cinder's mouth was agape, shocked at what he just did.

Jaune smirked at her reaction. "So, how would you call this creation?" He smugly asked.

"Prison food, which is coincidentally what you'd be eating shortly after security dragged you away for doing that." He had to admit, that was witty. Jaune imagined himself getting dragged away by Winter and Ace Ops for daring to desecrate Atlesian cuisine. He took a spoon of his creation. Of course it wasn't bad, it had bit of everything in it. He wouldn't mind eating this as a prison food.

"There has to be a better name than that. How about naming it after me, its creator. Or maybe after both of us. After all, you donated half of it to me."

"Keep my name out of that monstrosity." Cinder pleaded as she laughed.

"Oh now you have to be in its name. Maybe Jinder cake." Jaune offered.

"Absolutely not, that sounds awful. Try again." She was smiling.

"Caunder? Jaunder? Caune?" Each suggestion more awful than the last, much to Cinder's chagrin.

"Stop, stop, stop. All possible combinations of our names sound awful together. Try last names instead." Her smile turned into a giggle.

"Arcfall cake?" It did sound more reasonable.

"That's tolerable. Let me Atlasize it a bit. Maybe Arkfallentorte." She suggested.

"I'd like to be able to actually pronounce it, how about Arcfall Torte." Jaune tried his best to properly pronounce Torte.

"Sure." Cinder said as she took a spoonful of cake. Jaune took one bite of his creation. Most of the bite this time was banana cream and melted chocolate. It reminded him off chocolate bananas he ate as a kid.

"You should try it." Jaune told her, referring to his creation.

"It's bad enough one of us is eating that slop."

"Come on, it's not that bad. How about this, mix spoonful of each cake together." Jaune suggested.

"Fine." She combined both cakes in her spoon before taking a bite.

"So, do you like it?" Jaune enquired.

"It's decadent, overly chocolatey, with many clashing flavors. Overall, it's dumb, but at the same time, as much as it pains me to admit... delicious." Jaune chuckled at her remarks. Eventually they finished eating the dessert.

"I'm starting to understand how your mindset changed in that dimension Jaune." Cinder said, interrupting the silence. It interested him what she meant so he let her continue.

"You developed an extremely naive outlook on life. Because of Alyx, you think everyone is capable of change. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I cannot change." Cinder explained.

"Why not? Why do we have to be enemies?" It wasn't just Alyx that changed, for better or worse.

"You know very well why. You may pretend you moved on, but eventually we'll fight again." Why did she insist on them being enemies.

"I don't want us to fight. You know that what you fight for won't make you happy."

"I could say the same thing about you." She was right, they were both empty. But that didn't mean he would give up.

"Well, at least one of us is not helping to destroy the world." He wondered how much did she know about Salem's grand plan.

"I see, so you heard that as well." Her deadpan response surprised him.

"Then why the hell are you helping her?" He couldn't help but feel annoyed at her nonchalance.

"Because it's just an assumption. It's possible she wants to destroy the world, but at the same time, maybe she wants something else. Salem's victory means I have a chance, your victory means I'll be chained." Cinder explained her reasoning.

"Why are you so sure we cannot work together?" She was more willing to risk the world ending than help them.

She opened her left eye revealing it's endless darkness. "Because it wasn't Salem who did this to me." She touched the forearm of her Grimm arm with her right hand. "It wasn't Salem who did this to me. And it wasn't..." She was about to lower her silk choker, however she seemingly changed her mind. "That night Destiny decided we can never be on the same side." He wondered what night she meant, night she murdered her slavers or Pyrrha.

"You couldn't choose back then, but you can choose now." It all came back to their debate about Destiny and choice.

"What makes you think now is any different? What you want is another chain for me. For you to have another Maiden to fight Salem in this war." She raised her voice.

"You don't have to fight her if you don't want to. I just want you to not fight us anymore." Jaune explained.

"What? So I just get to walk away after everything? What sense does that make?" Cinder was confused at his offer.

"It's the matter of choice." If they forced her to fight against her choice then they would be hardly better than slavers she killed. She had to make that decision herself.

"So what, you'll walk up to your friends and vouch for me? And in exchange I get to walk away and not even help them? Explain me what sense does this make Jaune?"

"Yes. It doesn't have to make sense. Things stopped making sense long ago." How did his life go from enrolling to Huntsman Academy with forged transcripts to fighting on a front line of centuries old war with fate of the world at stake.

"You can't be serious!" Cinder exclaimed. She then closely observed his features, he was dead serious. "You are crazy." She added.

"Maybe I am, but you are scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Scared of making a choice. You are more content pretending everything is predetermined than to choose for yourself." It was ironic, she was fearlessly pursuing her goal, but at the same time she was scared of change.

"It's easy for you to lecture me about that. It's not possible for me to make a choice like that from my position!" She was getting agitated.

"But there are people who were in your position. Emerald made that choice."

"You CAN'T compare me with Emerald! There is no blood on her hands, everything she has done was because of me!" She was wrong. Emerald wasn't tool, she was also a human being who made her own choices. "And what about people who made the other choice? What about

Salem or Ironwood?" She really was afraid. She was afraid she was gonna make a wrong choice.

"You are still stuck back there." Back in Atlas, back in the place where she was enslaved.

"I'm not, SHUT UP!" She screamed. Jaune then lightly grabbed her Grimm hand, much to her surprise.

"It's fine. I'm not blaming you for it. Back then, you didn't have a choice. But you can't live in a fear of making a choice your entire life." He gently caressed her monstrous limb. She was about to pull it back, but ended up changing her mind. His touch soothed her.

"How can you know it will be the right choice?" She asked him with pained voice.

"I don't." She looked down, disappointed by his answer. "But you need to continue on, you need to live. If you ever make that choice, know that I will be there for you." Cinder raised her head, her eyes tearing up again. However, instead of pained, she had a content look on her face. He didn't want her to share Alyx' fate.

Jaune poured them last bit of whiskey. They didn't make a toast, it was unnecessary. They drank for the future, or at least, hope for a better future. Both downed their glass. Jaune barely felt the burning sensation anymore, it was almost completely replaced by sweetness of maple syrup and smokey aroma. He felt warmth once again. Room fell into silence.

Eventually, Cinder pressed several buttons on her scroll. He heard the noise of elevator doors opening. At the same time, for the first time tonight he noticed there was a similar console near the glass wall.

"Jaune..." Cinder softly said before trailing off. "You were an excellent partner for tonight, you are... you are free to go now." Pain returned to her voice.

Jaune stood up and walked around the room. He wasn't interested in leaving just yet. She wasn't even looking at him anymore, her gaze fixed at table. What interested him the most right now was the console he saw earlier near the window.

"What does this console do?" Jaune asked her. Cinder jolted upon hearing his voice, surprised he didn't leave.

"It's... probably an access to roof terrace. We are on the top floor." She explained.

"Wanna see what's up there?" Jaune offered.

She was dumbfounded, but after a brief delay she disconnected her scroll from table and walked up to the console. She didn't say anything, she didn't need to. Press of her scroll opened one of the panels of glass wall, revealing a ledge with stairs leading upward. Chilly night breeze blew over Jaune's skin, but he barely felt anything. All he felt was warmth. Behind them, elevator doors closed on their own, almost forgotten by both.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I did cram all Jaune/Cinder ship names as cake names. Cinder's cake is (K)nightfall cake, Jaune's is (D)ark furnace (if yugioh taught me anything adding D in front of ark automatically makes it cooler). Nothing too crazy for desserts, Cinder is eating a simple biscuit cake while Jaune is eating lava cake.

Regarding some earlier dishes, egg Cinder ate in her appetizer was swan egg. Google claims they are similar to goose eggs but with richer aroma so it's reasonable Cinder would mistake it for goose egg. And you know... swan egg in duck's nest.

Headcanons:

Cinder was jealous of Alyx because unlike her, she had a knight that protected her.

Due to her belief in Destiny, Cinder is resistant to change.

Cinder likes strawberries, bit of a parallel to Ruby. She tried to eat a strawberry in Glass Unicorn flashback so it isn't farfetched. She would never admit that if she knew Ruby liked them as well.

Ending bit accidentally turned into Indecisive King story, which is a neat coincidence.

Aftertaste

Chapter Notes

Well this is unexpected. Two reasons for an early update. One, really enjoyed writing this chapter so it was done extremely quickly. Two, I might be busy doing something else this week so I wanted to get this done today.

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

Cinder took an initiative and went ahead first, Jaune following behind her. He looked over the fence, down into Vacuo. It was sea of darkness lit up by small dots representing streetlights and residential buildings. Up in the distance there was a shadowy silhouette of Shade Academy's ziggurat. It was as if he was looking at another night sky, but this one was below him. He wondered how high they were. Back when they were in elevator he was only thinking about the next step of his plan, he had no idea on which floor they were. As far as he was concerned, they were on the edge of universe.

He tightly held onto wrought iron fence. Fence itself was a work of art, railings were made to look like Atlas' emblem. Even though they were in desert, stairs were covered with thin layer of dew. In his current inebriated state he didn't want to take any risks. It was unlikely anything would have happened to him if he fell down the stairs, he had Aura after all, but still.

Suddenly he heard the sound of glass shattering. Cinder stumbled backwards, losing balance on the stairs. He caught her in his arms before she could fall further down. Cinder was in his arms, her back pressed against his chest, her scalp under his chin. She smelled nice. It was a complex scent, it was soft and sweet but also earthy and spicy. He wondered what was her perfume.

Cinder was initially shocked but quickly accepted his embrace. He felt her lean back more into his embrace, movement of her hips was putting him into awkward position. Jaune tilted his head to see her face, he wondered what was she up to. Before he could do that, she looked away and moved out of his embrace.

"Don't... mention this." She saw a light blush on her face.

"Mention what? The fact you slipped on the stairs or that you..." Jaune teased her.

"No." She immediately interrupted him. Her left foot was naked and glowing with Aura. Under it there were shards of glass of various sizes. She probably fell because her heel shattered. He was about to pick up one of the shards but she moved his hand away.

"They are not the most practical footwear." Cinder stated as her eye flared with Maiden fire. She quickly burned away all the glass shards covering the stairs. Shards turned into drops of

searing orange liquid before dissipating into smoke.

"Then why do you wear them?" Jaune asked.

"Glass heels." Cinder simply stated. As if that was all she needed to say. She then sat down, taking off the other shoe. It was still intact, but he imagined it was uncomfortable to walk with just one heeled shoe. She handed him her right shoe. "Here you go. Just don't do anything weird with it." What was he suppose to do with her glass slipper anyway? Jaune silently accepted his new duty.

Eventually both reached top of the stairs. He expected a plain empty rooftop, similar to ones he saw back in Atlas. Instead, he was greeted by a well furnished terrace. In the middle of it was wooden large wooden pergola. Raft and posts of pergola were decorated by various climber plants. They were in bloom, he saw yellow, blue and purple flowers. He recognized some from his mother's garden, lilacs and jasmines. Under the pergola there was a small round table surrounded by several garden sofas. Around sofas there were several conical machines.

"Welcome to the rooftop Prince." Cinder welcomed him. Upon pressing several buttons on her scroll, conical machines were turned on. They were heating devices. It made sense, cold night air of Vacuo was hardly pleasant. She then sat down on one of the sofas. Where was he suppose to sit? There were three sofas. Was he suppose to give her some room or was he suppose to sit with her as her partner. Jaune went for latter option, sitting right next to her. He left her shoe on the table.

"Really, out of all sofas, you sat right next to me?" She asked him incredulously.

"Do you want me to sit somewhere else?" Cinder simply shook her head at his question. She then lifted her naked feet off the ground, sitting with her knees drawn up. Jaune leaned against the white cushions. They were incredibly soft.

"Where do you even get stuff like that?" He pointed at her glass shoe.

"I made them." She simply explained. It was one of the rare times he saw non destructive aspect of her abilities. He had to admit, they were well made. "It's hardly different than weapons I usually create." Cinder added.

"They are impressive. How do you shape something like that?"

"Lot of practice." Upon saying that, she picked up the shoe he and started heating it up. Structure of shoe started falling apart, turning into bright melted goo. She started shaping it with her hand, Aura serving as a buffer between her hand and the glass. "I use Aura as additional limbs... I guess more accurately additional fingers to shape it." There were small protrusions in her Aura, helping to shape it.

"I had a mentor in Ace Ops, Vine, he could use his Aura as additional limbs." Jaune reminisced about his time in Atlas. Things were much more simple before Salem... and yeah... Cinder, attacked.

"It's an advanced technique. I can only morph my Aura into additional fingers, not many combat applications of that. Although I'm surprised you can't do it." Cinder commented. Heel of the shoe was now thin and elongated. He wasn't sure what was she shaping out of melted mass.

"What do you mean?" If it was indeed advanced technique, why did she think he could do it? He wasn't like Ruby or Weiss, he wasn't a prodigy.

"Your Semblance, you can manipulate Aura with it. Correct?" Cinder asked. Thin shape she formed was rapidly changing, she was now adding upward protruding blades to it.

"I can boost other people's Aura, hardly a manipulation." Jaune corrected her. She was making out his Semblance more impressive than it actually was.

"That's how you perceive it. But boosting Aura is also a form of manipulation." She explained. Soon she added another bladed protrusion to, bit higher and on the opposite side of the first one.

"I was never able to do something like that." Jaune said and continued observing her creation. She was adding another bladed protrusion, once again, bit higher and on the opposite side of the previous one.

"Because you subconsciously awakened it. When I impaled Schnee you desperately wanted to be able to save her. So you boosted her Aura. After that, you never questioned it. You just assumed that was an extent of your abilities." He vividly remembered that moment, even though it happened more than decade ago. He lamented his powerlessness, but that time his body listened to his pleas and allowed him to save someone.

"So you are saying I'm using my Semblance the wrong way?"

"No, just not using its full potential." Cinder explained. She added a bulbous tip to her creation before returning to the bladed protrusions. It seemed like she was shaping some kind of flower.

"How... how do you manipulate your Aura?" Jaune hesitantly asked.

"It's all in your head. Imagine it as part of your body." Cinder instructed him. She dulled the edges of protrusions. After that, she slowly started engraving small marks on them, giving them appearance of leaves.

Jaune closed his eyes. He tried to follow the instructions she gave him, imagining his Aura as part of his body. He didn't feel anything different. Aura around his body was still. It didn't work. When he opened his eyes he saw her focused on her creation. She was adding more details to the leaves.

Jaune closed his eyes again. This time he tried something different. She said Aura manipulation was tied to his Semblance, so he activated it. He tried to dull all of his other senses and only focused on his Aura. Flickers of light he saw started disappearing. Soft sensation of cushions was slowly fading. He was entering self induced trance.

His eyes subconsciously opened. He wasn't on the roof of the restaurant anymore. It was a beach. Not the one he was washed away on during his stay in Ever After. It was an endless beach during the nightfall. Bright orange sun was setting on horizon, sinking into the dark blue sea. Its last radiant rays reflecting on grains of sand. Sea was dead calm. Jaune took a breath. He heard the waves crashing onto the sands. He took another breath, which was followed by another wave crashing. Each time he took a breath, wave would crash bit sooner. Eventually, noise of waves synchronized with his breaths.

Something pulled him out of trance. When he opened his eyes this time, she was looking at him, smiling. It was more radiant than the ones he saw before. Even with her scars, she was more beautiful than she could have imagined.

"Your Aura was vibrating, you are making a progress." Cinder remarked. So sensation he felt wasn't just in his head. He briefly glanced at her creation. Bulb of the flower was fully formed. She was now taking small chunks of the molten mass, likely to form petals.

Jaune once again closed his eyes and used his Semblance. He was once again on the beach. His breath synchronized with waves much quicker this time. Jaune knew he didn't have much time, so he tried to do something different. He slowly raised his hand, movement of waves slightly shifted. He tried again, it shifted bit more this time. He was making a good progress, albeit he was only influencing a small area of the vast sea. Cinder once again smiled at him. She was right, he could do it.

He was making a progress, but constantly going into a trance was also quickly tiring him. Jaune resolved to try it one more time. He was back on the beach. Once again he synchronized his breaths with the crashing of the waves. Movement of waves matched the movement of his hand. Now back in the position he was last time he tried something new. Cinder said his Aura vibrated when he synchronized his breath with the crashing of the waves. That confirmed that movement of the sea matched the movement of his Aura. He imagined his hand was the entirety of vast sea and started slowly raising it. Instead of small waves, this time his hand created a massive tidal wave. His hand felt heavy, but he persisted. Wave was rising higher and higher, eventually it was so high it reached the sun and obscured it.

He felt warmth. However, it wasn't on his hand, it was somewhere else. Jaune jolted awake. Cinder was looking him in the eye, both her eyes were open. What happened? He noticed that his Aura was extended into a small hand, caressing Cinder's left cheek. His Semblance was pulsing through the small Aura limb. Maiden fire in her right eye flared up, he even saw a small ember in her left eye. Her skin went from warm to burning hot, but he didn't feel any pain. He must have accidentally given her boost. Eventually Aura limb disappeared, stopping the process.

Jaune felt awkward. He accidentally touched her while he was in trance. "I'm sorry." He tried, but she interrupted him.

"No, I'm sorry. I lost control of my powers for a moment. I... I didn't expect you to use your Semblance." Cinder was blushing, clearly embarrassed at her loss of control. Both looked down and noticed her molten creation was destabilized due to her lapse of concentration.

Cinder quickly diverted her attention to it to prevent its collapse. "You've made a surprising progress in such a small amount of time." She commended him.

"It's not that impressive. I need to be in state of trance to accomplish anything. Hardly an applicable skill."

"Don't belittle yourself. Not many people are able to do even that. With some practice, you'll be able to do it fully conscious." It was ironic. She often made fun of him, but she didn't allow him to make fun of himself. "Your Semblance... it's warm." She added. Her breathing quickened

"Really. Nobody ever told me that." It didn't really make sense, he only boosted people's Aura. Maybe he also manipulated it, but still. None of that should be able to warm people up. Jaune looked back at Cinder. She mostly stabilized her glass flower and was now adding petals to it. However, she was shivering and her face was flushed. She must have been cold. He had a plan.

"I'll get us something to drink." Alcohol could help here.

"I disconnected my scroll from the table. I'd need to reconnect it for you to order anything." She briefly looked at him. There was no need for them to order anything. He remembered ordering an additional bottle. It was to spite her, now it could come in handy.

"No need. I ordered another bottle, remember. I'll go pick it up." Jaune quickly explained.

He left the comfort of sofa and went downstairs. Cinder looked like she was about to say something but decided not to. Jaune carefully walked down the stairs. As seen with Cinder earlier, slippery stairs were no joke. Glass panel was left open so he walked into the dining room without an issue.

On the floor there was her torn glove. He remembered her Grimm arm tearing it apart so she could grab him. He felt like that happened ages ago, when in reality it was at most few hours ago. Jaune crouched down and picked up the torn pieces. He imagined it would make it easier for person cleaning the room in the morning.

If his memory served him right, she hid the bottle next to her seat. He walked up to what was her seat and there it was. Bottle was reddish pink. He looked at the label, expecting it to be in Atlesian. But to his surprise, it was in Valean. Label read Rose's Light. It was some kind of rose liqueur.

Jaune picked up the bottle and their glasses and headed back to the terrace. To his surprise, on the ledge there was a dark silhouette. It could only be one person. She followed him bare foot, still shivering. In her right hand she held her still unfinished flower sculpture. Why did she follow him? He only left for a moment. Then he remembered what she said: one choice everyone always made.

"I...I..." She stammered, embarrassed he saw her follow him.

"It's fine, I picked it up. Let's head back to the terrace." Jaune reassured her as he walked up to her. This time she let him go first up the stairs while she closely followed him. Soon, they were back on the sofa.

She went back to her glass sculpture. There were now three large petals added to the bulb. Each one sloping down. While she was working, he poured them a glass of rose liqueur.

"You know alcohol doesn't warm you up? It just gives you an illusion of warmth by redirecting some of the heat to your skin." Cinder explained. Maybe it was an illusion, but it would do for now.

"So you are not gonna drink it?" Jaune asked her. It was a rhetorical question, he already knew her answer. Illusory warmth was better than emptiness. He passed her her glass, now filled with pink tinted translucent liquid. Cinder held it with her Grimm arm while still holding the flower in her right hand.

"Cheers." Both remarked before taking a sip of the liqueur. It was slightly chilled. Unlike whiskey's more subtle note, it was incredibly sweet. Besides what he imagined was flavor of roses, he also felt sweetness of strawberries and apricots. There was only a bit of sharpness of alcohol. It was more like a syrup than actual liquor. Still, it was enjoyable. It was a bold drink to finish the night.

Cinder didn't share his opinion, she was frowning. "What the hell is this? Did you accidentally order a fruit juice?" She didn't seem to like it.

"It's a rose liqueur." Jaune explained, showing her label. "We just had a maple syrup flavored whiskey, what's the big deal?"

"You can't compare those two things. This is sickeningly sweet." She took another sip after saying that. "Too weird." Jaune chuckled at her critique. She put her drink down and focused on her glass flower again. Jaune on the other hand drank all of it, putting down the empty glass. He wanted to ask her something.

"Why did you teach me how to manipulate my Aura?" It made no sense. As much as he hoped they would never fight again, there were no guarantees.

"You are empty, but you... you don't wanna hate me. We might fight again some day. I made you empty enough already... I don't want you to feel emptier. Maybe you'll find it useful, maybe you'll save someone so you don't..." Cinder stammered. She didn't want him to hate himself. It was her way of apologizing to him.

"Thank you." He would make sure it was put to good use.

She shaped three more petals, this time they were bit thinner. They were added to the center of the flower. But unlike previous drooped petals, these ones were jutting upwards. It was becoming more clear what was she shaping. At first he thought it was some kind of lily, but now it appeared to be something he recognized from his mother's garden.

"Iris?" Jaune asked pointing at her sculpture.

"Surprised you recognized it." Cinder answered. Jaune internally smiled, he was correct.

"My mother liked growing flowers. We had a large garden around the house. Irises were some of her favorites, yellow ones. She even named one of my sisters Iris... and one of them Jasmine, but that's besides the point. Occasionally I would help her in the garden." Jaune reminisced.

"Yellow ones? Mine were blue and purple. They grew on a field across the orphanage I was raised in. They were close enough for me to see them, but never close enough for me to pick them." Cinder also reminisced. She said blue and purple. It reminded him of something, her brooch.

"Farm?" He was curious where did that part of her childhood fit into the timeline.

"Orphanage was the farm. It was fairly generous of me to call it that." Cinder explained.

"Now it's a black iris." Jaune referenced her glass creation.

"There are black irises growing in the desert. Fitting creation." He didn't know that. But then again, he only recently arrived to Vacuo. She dulled the edges of glass petals before carving out some additional details.

Eventually, she carefully put it down on the table before using some of her Maiden powers. First she seemingly removed the air around it using the wind manipulation before touching it with ice encased hand. Jaune looked at her work in awe. Molten mass rapidly cooled down, revealing shining black glass flower. Desert iris as she called it.

"It was a necessary step so it doesn't shatter." She explained the process she just did.

Cinder then held the glass iris between the fingers of her Grimm arm before she tucked it behind his ear. As she did that, cold palm of her left hand touched his cheek. It was an odd sensation, but he didn't mind it. She gave him one last caress before pulling back her arm.

"You know, Prince is suppose to give a flower to the Maiden, not the other way around." Jaune remarked. It was hardly the oddest thing tonight.

"Well, Prince didn't have any flowers to give. Besides, Prince also wore a dress at one occasion." Cinder referenced his dance outfit again. Maybe it was opposite, maybe he was the Maiden and she was the cursed Prince.

"You said you were gonna tell me why you called me Prince." Jaune reminded her.

"Of course you remembered that part." Cinder rolled her eyes. Well, he didn't force her to promise that, that was her fault.

"Fine." She relented. "Back when I was in orphanage, we had a fairy tale book. Before you ask, I don't know which one it was. I couldn't read at the time and book was old and many of its pages were torn. So I would look at illustrations instead." Cinder narrated. It somewhat reminded him of his childhood. He still couldn't read well, so Saphron wouldn't let him near her fairy tale books. "You'll just tear them apart", she would say. So when nobody was

looking, he would sneak out with one of the books to the attic. He mostly guessed what happened in the story based on illustrations.

"Thing I still remember about the story was Prince. He had blue eyes, blond hair and wore white set of armor. I never managed to find out what story it was." Cinder concluded.

"So you called me Prince because I reminded you of Prince in the story?" Jaune asked.

"Yes." She awkwardly admitted.

"Cinder Fall fantasizing about me, I feel violated!" Jaune mockingly exclaimed, doing his best to imitate her fake outrage from earlier.

"It... it wasn't like that..." She was about to defend herself, only to realize she said too much. Jaune burst out laughing.

"Seriously, fantasizing about me. You could have picked Sun, he also has blue eyes and blond hair." Jaune said that and then continued laughing.

"Oh shut up, he doesn't even wear an armor." Jaune chuckled at her response. This time she laughed with him.

"Just to be clear, it wasn't some kind of a dirty fantasy. You just reminded me of more innocent part of my childhood." Cinder clarified. "You arrived just as I lost all hope my Prince would ever appear." She added with heavy sigh.

"Well now I'm here." Jaune said as he looked her in the eye.

"It's too late, I'm a... monster now. But that's not your fault." Cinder looked down, avoiding his eyes.

"You are not a monster."

"What do you think would happen if I walked into the lobby with this uncovered." Cinder said, slowly raising her Grimm arm. She reminded him of threat he levied against her. "Speaking of which, you made me lose my glove." She accused him.

"It was your decision to lash out." Jaune smugly pointed out before remembering what he told her back then. Back then, as if it wasn't merely few hours ago. "I'm sorry I said that." He added.

"Don't apologize, you couldn't have known what I've went through. And you cracked my mask, we wouldn't have been here if you weren't crazy enough to say that." She said before continuing. "Besides, talk is cheap. What you did for me tonight means more to me than a lousy apology." Cinder finished, looking him in the eye again. Her eye shone with determination. She didn't want him to feel like a failure. She wanted him to know he could help people.

"Can't you use the other glove?" Jaune quickly derailed the conversation.

Cinder smiled. "Have you ever matched shapes as a kid Jaune? This glove doesn't fit." She mocked him. To demonstrate it, she took off her right glove and put it on her Grimm hand. Around two inches of rough darkened skin were still visible.

"See." She pointed to the gap with her other hand. However, that's when he noticed something on her now uncovered right wrist. There was a shallow cut across it. Its edges were mostly faded, so he assumed it was from long ago. She noticed what he was looking at and momentarily panicked. Her wrist was scarred, scarred long ago. Was it something that happened to her while she was in orphanage? Maybe while she was a slave? Did she...

"It...It's not what you think it is." Realizing it wasn't something she could simply brush off, Cinder continued. "When I was enslaved in Atlas, it was in hotel called Glass Unicorn." Hotel? So that's why she was so familiar with Atlesian etiquette and food. It also made her story somehow even more disturbing. When he figured out she was a slave, he imagined her working in a mine, out of sight. But no, she was there the entire time. She was held as a slave in plain view.

"Lady who adopted me, Madame, she had two daughters. She made me wear a shock collar and abused me with it every time I failed. They... reveled in my failure and would occasionally go out of their way to make me fail. I hated all of them." Cinder continued. Deep inside, Jaune was fuming. Cinder called herself a monster, yet people who shaped her were hardly better than animals. Why the hell would someone abuse a child like that. His fists were clenched.

"Madame would abuse me, but she was... different with them. One day, my stepsister scraped her knee. I still remember it. Madame was gentle with her, careful to not hurt her. She cleaned up the wound and applied some ointment on it. She then sent her to her room, so she could rest. I wanted that... I wanted her to be gentle with me as well." Cinder's eye was tearing up. Jaune unclenched his fists. There was no point being angry right now, he needed to be here for her sake.

"One day I was peeling some vegetables in the kitchen. Knife slipped and I accidentally cut my wrist. I ran to Madame so she could see my wound. I..." She was starting to cry now. "I was hoping she would help me... that she would..." Her breaths were now heavier, instead of words, only thing coming out were sobs. Jaune scooted closer before embracing her. He didn't need to hear the rest of the story, he could piece it together. Wound like that could never leave a scar, unless it was left untreated. Cinder tried to move away, but Jaune simply tightened his embrace.

"Shhhhh." Jaune reassured her, feeling his eyes tearing up as well. She accepted his embrace, sobbing against his chest, her tears wetting his dress shirt. Jaune moved one his hands and gently touched her limp right arm. After caressing it for a bit, he used his Semblance on the scar. It wouldn't fix anything, but she said his Semblance felt warm. He would do something Madame never did. Cinder raised her head for a bit, looking him in the eye. Her eye was still teary, but no longer pained. His Semblance soothed her, so he extended it to the rest of her body. Unconsciously he created five small Aura arms that embraced every part of her body he couldn't. Jaune wanted to make sure she never felt cold again.

Cinder rested her head against his chest. That was the last thing he remembered seeing. Use of his Semblance must have drained the rest of his energy. He sank back into the cushions with her in his embrace. Her warmth against his body soothed him as well.

Jaune woke up. Well, hardly woke up. He barely kept his eyes open. What woke him up wasn't morning light, after all, it was still dark. Warmth he felt against his chest was gone, Cinder was gone. Black glass iris was still tucked behind his ear. He looked around. Bottle of rose liqueur was almost completely empty and her glass was missing. So much for her hating it. He pressed the neck of the bottle against his lips, savoring last few drops remaining.

He walked towards the ledge, out of shelter of pergola. That's where he saw her, she was looking over the fence into the distance. She was bare foot, her dress blowing in the cold night breeze. Glass was in her Grimm arm, she was slowly sipping the liqueur.

"I thought you hated it." Jaune said referring to liqueur. Cinder turned around after hearing his voice. She left her glass on the railing.

"I learned to tolerate it." She remarked. It was an odd thing to say considering she drank most of the bottle.

"What are you doing here." He asked her.

"Sun will come out in few minutes, I wanna see it." That meant it was at least 4 AM. Jaune reflexively yawned.

"You could have woke me up as well." Jaune said as he yawned again.

"I think it's way past your bedtime." Cinder jabbed.

"You know Young Lady, I'm probably older than you after my stay in Ever After." Jaune jabbed back while playing with his white wisp.

"Oh, sorry." She mockingly apologized before throwing another joke at his expense. "Let's get you to bed Grandpa." Both laughed at her joke. She won that round. Cinder then looked him in the eye, quickly going from joking to somber.

"Sometimes I hate the fact you even exist." Cinder lamented. "For so many years I wanted someone like you to be part of my life, but when you finally arrived... Destiny placed you in my path just as I thought I had everything figured out." She was tearing up again as she was saying it. Jaune carefully wiped away tears from her eye.

"What about other times?" He asked her. As he was saying that, sun finally rose out of desert. Both turned their heads to see it. Its rays shone brightly over the dunes, creating an almost golden sea. Blinding light dispelled most of the darkness.

"Other times I'm grateful." Jaune looked back at her as she was saying that. "Grateful someone like you exists. Someone who found me while I was blindly following the pointless path." Sun was reflected in her amber iris, shining brighter than ever. She cupped his chin

with both of her hands and leaned forward. Just as their lips were about to touch, Jaune stepped back. It wouldn't be right if it happened this way.

Cinder took a step back as well, now clearly embarrassed at her failed advance. "I..." She was about to spout some excuse, but Jaune walked up to her and took off her wig. She was now even more confused.

"Wh..what are you doing?" Cinder stammered. Her dark glossy hair finally revealed. It was bit longer than he remembered it, now reaching her collarbone.

"I didn't want it to happen while you were pretending to be someone else." Jaune explained. "I want it to be you."

"So you can tolerate us being drunk and..." Cinder started some tirade, but he quickly shut her up with the kiss.

She momentarily froze at his sudden advance but quickly joined in. Her lips were soft, almost like flower petals. Sweet, she tasted sweet. And it wasn't just traces of liqueur on her lips, it was sweet even without it. And also smokey. It was the taste of Fall.

She deepened their kiss. Her gaze was hungry. Her hands that were originally caressing his chest were now firmly pressed against it. Movement of her talons was no longer controlled. They were clawing at his chest, as if she wanted to tear him apart. Fire in her eyes intensified. She put more force into her hands, knocking him down and breaking their kiss.

Cinder knelt next to Jaune before leaning over him. Her dark hair fell over him like a curtain. "You've made a mistake Jaune." Cinder ominously stated. Both of her eyes open. "I'm hungry, I can never be sated. And now that I've tasted you..."

"Devour me Cinder." Her eye lit up. He could have sworn he saw some light in her left eye as well. Jaune was barely keeping his eyes open at that point. Last thing Jaune remembered was Cinder leaning into another kiss. Taste of Fall.

Chapter End Notes

That's a wrap. Only thing remaining is short epilogue chapter. I'll likely write a shorter sequel fic after it.

Iris, iris, iris, lots of irises. For many reasons I headcanon iris as Cinder's flower. Perfume she used in this chapter was, you guessed it, iris.

Good old Ruby Rose appeared as a liqueur bottle. It's something I could imagine Ruby drinking (sweet with low alcohol content).

I wanted to do something else with Cinder's other scars. I generally agree with theories that Cinder has a scar on her right wrist considering that place is covered in all of her

main outfits. But logical conclusion of that ends up being that Cinder attempted suicide at some point. I don't find that particularly interesting and bit of cheap way of garnering sympathy.

As for the Jaune's Aura manipulation. That's something I consider to be plausible as his future ability. Jaune's Aura is symbolically an ocean, both on the account of it being vast and watery texture that appears when he uses his Semblance. Naturally, that makes him water to Cinder's fire.

Leftovers

Chapter Notes

And now epilogue, with perspective shift. This one is bit different than other chapters.

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

Cinder was bit annoyed. Alright, she was really annoyed. She couldn't sleep, sun was shining directly into her eye. Her eye opened, noticing a small gap between the curtains. Stupid curtains. She couldn't keep her eye open, sunlight was too strong. For some reason her eye was sensitive this morning. She turned around. No, it still annoyed her.

"Emerald." Cinder groaned, hoping her subordinate would close the curtains. No, she was alone. Emerald left her, everyone did. That left her no other choice. Cinder reluctantly got out of bed. Dark satin sheets slipped, revealing her mostly naked form. As she stood up, she felt intense headache. She couldn't remember last time her head hurt this bad. It must have been a rough night.

She walked up to the window to close the curtains. No. Cinder changed her mind, it was time to wake up. She was growing complacent. Things were hardly going in her favor. Salem promised Summer Maiden power to Asturias brat in exchange for her and her brother's cooperation. He was even worse, obnoxious ingrate. She was sidelined in favor of those pretenders, reduced to being a scout. Salem distrusted her, that was the only explanation.

So she bided her time, waiting for an opportunity to strike. Summer Maiden power would be hers eventually and so would other two as well. Raven was in Vacuo, all pieces were in place. But meanwhile, Cinder did what she could. She sewed, she read, she dined... She dined? That's right, she went to Atlesian restaurant last night. One last gift she could give to her younger self. It was a remarkable night, he was... He?

His blonde hair, his dark blue eyes... his lips. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no! Cinder ran back to the bed before burying her head in a pillow. Memories of last night were rushing into her head. It hurt even more now. Taste of his lips. Cinder screamed into the pillow. What was wrong with her?!

How the hell did that even happen? She remembered the kiss on the rooftop. Taste of his lips, they were sweet. Not just sweet, they were piney and fresh. Not cold, fresh. It was as if she drank the water from mountain spring on a hot summer day. No, no, no, that never happened. It must have been a dream. Yet another desire of her foolish younger self. She dreamt about him before, when she infiltrated Beacon as a student. Remarkably similar dream, him on the floor and her leaning in for a kiss. So that was all it was, a dream.

Cinder lifted her head, it still hurt. She needed to get dressed. She walked towards the dresser only to notice something. Her black dress was hastily thrown over dresser. Did she wear it last night? Was it all real? No, no, no, probably a coincidence, unless... Cinder searched for her silken gloves. Only right one was there, on a pile together with dress. She must have thrown the other one into one of the drawers. Cinder opened the drawers and quickly rummaged through them. It wasn't there, it wasn't there, IT WASN'T THERE. Her heels were also missing. It was real, it was all real.

She threw herself back onto bed, burying her head in the pillow again. Her left glove was thorn to shreds by her Grimm arm. One of her slippers shattered while the other became the flower she gave to him. She once again screamed into the pillow.

It was by sheer stupid coincidence they ran into each other. Him grabbing her hand, thinking she was that Schnee girl. If Weiss Schnee appeared earlier, they wouldn't have met. If Cinder wore a different wig, they wouldn't have met. If he wasn't such an idiot to mistake her for that white haired brat despite her being foot taller than a Schnee girl, they wouldn't have met. Was it Destiny then? Why would it be? What purpose would meeting between them serve? She already had her path.

No, in the end it was all her choice. She could have left the restaurant when her cover was blown, she could have knocked him out when they entered the room, but she didn't. Then why didn't she!? That made it all even more frustrating. She was still that little girl walking the halls of Glass Unicorn, hoping someone saw her wound. No, no, no, she was past that, she was a Fall Maiden. That girl died long ago, all she could do for that girl was occasionally leave flowers on her grave.

Then why did his touch soothe her?! Why did she feel like that little girl every time he touched her? Her scars... they no longer ached. She disbelievingly looked at her wrist. When her eye opened it was blinded by bright light. She drank too much last night. Her eye eventually adjusted to it. It wasn't there, it wasn't there... IT WASN'T THERE. Her scar was gone. No, that wasn't possible. His Semblance could manipulate Aura, it wasn't a miracle maker. Then where was it?

She touched her wrist with fingers of her Grimm hand as gently as she could. It was smoother, almost unnaturally smooth. Cinder raised her hand to observe the wrist more closely. What used to be scar now shone brightly under the sunlight. Inside of it, light rippled like waves. It was Aura, his Aura. So childish, he thought he could fix her by covering her wound. Cinder pricked it with talon of her Grimm arm, slowly absorbing away the Aura. Light was fading away, revealing all too familiar scar, all too familiar aching.

No! She pulled away her talon. She didn't want to go back to aching. Why didn't she? Pain existed as an eternal reminder why she couldn't go back. Besides, it was his Aura. It was just another leash, one that didn't hurt, but leash nonetheless. She flared up Aura of her right arm. It was HER arm. Flames of her Aura washed over her arm. It was still there, his Aura was still there, covering her scar. No, it was even stronger now. Warmth. When her Aura touched his, she felt warmth. It was his Aura, but it also wasn't. It was their Aura, he gave her little parting gift.

But why, why now? Why after all these years of pain did he finally appear now? Now it was too late. She remembered his touch last night. Every part of her body felt warmth. She once again remembered his lips, their sweet taste. No matter how much she use her Semblance or Maiden fire, she never felt warmth like that before. Perhaps it was for the best it was only one night, perhaps that was why Destiny matched them. To make her feel warmth for once in her life. Everything more than that would have been too much. She was hungry, she could never be sated, she would have drained him of all warmth he had. That's simply how she was.

She shifted her head, now looking at empty side of her queen sized bed. It was a sea of black satin sheets. She imagined him next to her. Instead of it being buried in the pillow, her head would be buried in his chest. He would caress her, her scalp, her face, her scars, her chest, maybe even.... no. Cinder smiled, she was now perverting innocent fantasies of her childhood. But that's simply who she was. There was no dream of hers she wouldn't pervert, no matter how innocent it started. She was right, anything more than one night would have been too much, no matter how much she desired him.

Cinder got out of bed again. She wanted to take a shower but changed her mind. His scent, his taste, his touch, she wanted to keep them to herself just a bit more. But she had to get dressed, she was having too many indecent thoughts. Cinder quickly put on a bra, followed by an azure sundress.

She then sat on the bed and opened her scroll to see if there were any updates regarding the plan. Asturias brats annoyed her, they saw themselves as being in charge. They were sowing seeds of discontent among the Vacuans. Salem let them indulge in their little delusions, for now. There were no updates. She was about to shut it down, but then noticed contacts were open for some reason. There was a new number added... Prince. Cinder groaned.

She remembered what happened last night after he fell asleep. Initially, she was tempted to just fly away and leave him sleeping there. For some reason she worried about him, worried he'd get sunburns in the morning. So she carried him in her arms to elevator, all the way to lobby. So much for him being a Prince. She then instructed staff to call his friends to pick him up. Only then did she slip away and left for the hotel. Then why did she have his number? She must have took his number while she was looking through contacts on his scroll.

So frustrating. There were no excuses now, she had his number. She was tempted to delete it, pretend she didn't see it, but she knew that was impossible. But so what? That didn't mean he felt the same way about her. Everyone left her, why wouldn't he. No, he could have left her, he had so many opportunities. Why didn't he? Why did he touch her? Why did he caress her? Why did he kiss her? She couldn't do it.

"You are scared." His voice echoed in her head. She was, she was afraid of making a wrong choice. Yet, when she fell he caught her, when she backed away he pulled her in, when she finally gave up he appeared. Whatever choice she made, he would be there for her. She was about to type a message but something irked her, name. Contact was quickly renamed from Prince to Jaune. He wasn't some kind of nameless faceless Prince she dreamt about as a child, he was Jaune. He was incompetent, stubborn and self loathing. Yet he was better than any Prince she ever imagined.

Her fingers shook as she finally typed out the message. "I wnt us to talk." Cinder cringed at it. She even managed to make a typo. Scroll was tossed aside. Maybe she was wrong, maybe he didn't feel the same way about her. Yet another false promise presented to her. No, Jaune wasn't like that. He would eventually answer.

Cinder stood up and walked towards the window. She opened the curtains to let sunlight in. Just as she did that, scroll vibrated. Cinder felt warmth just reading the message.

Yes, she was hungry. She thought her hunger could never be sated, but for the first time in her life, she felt content.

Chapter End Notes

That's all for now. As I said before, there will likely be a sequel fic.

As for headcanons:

Cinder is tsundere. We don't support yandere Cinder headcanons in this house.

Cinder is sexually inexperienced. Despite her sexually forward appearance, I find it unlikely she is promiscuous due to how touch averse she is in canon.

And yeah, that was a bridal carry, but with Cinder carrying Jaune. In the end he is Prince and she is Maiden, but she is also Prince to his Maiden (bit of Joan of Arcing).

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